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UNDERSTANDING HOW AND WHY STARTUPS EMBED HISTORICAL ELEMENTS INTO VISUAL COMMUNICATION ARTIFACTS

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Dedication

To my wife Michelle, thank you for your unwavering support for me in this very long journey. I cannot imagine anyone else who has the patience and grace to allow me to pursue this goal. You have been my bedrock throughout it all.

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Abstract

This research explores how and why entrepreneurial firms embed historical elements into their visual communication artifacts. New firms seek to attract stakeholders by reducing perceived risk and uncertainty. One way to achieve this is through connecting historical elements into their narratives to create a sense of legitimacy or authenticity. This work explores how historical elements are embedded by firms into their visual communication artifacts by conducting a semiotic analysis on the websites of new ventures found in the Start Alberta database. After analysing by sector, theme findings revealed that that rhetorical strategies of legitimacy of land, authenticity of human connection, reputation and status adoption, and skeuomorphism occur. An exploratory step to understand why entrepreneurs do this was achieved through semi-structured interviews with founders and entrepreneurs. The interviews confirm that in many situations, entrepreneurs are deliberate when embedding historical elements into their work. Analysis also led to a typology of entrepreneur intentionality including Aesthetic Delegation, Personal Symbolism, and Strategic Stakeholder Framing.

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Keywords: entrepreneurship, visual communication artifacts, rhetorical history, semiotics, visual communication

Preface

For much of my life, pursuing new ideas and opportunities have been a passion for me. In many ways, my life has been entrepreneurial. Whether starting new microfinance initiatives in Asia, pushing the boundaries on environmental sustainability within construction in Canada, or running one of the nation's largest impact investment funds, my interest has been on creating new combinations that have often not been considered. This entrepreneurial passion is coupled with my passion for the past. As a former social studies teacher, my interest in history and its uses was re-ignited when I first came across the concept of Rhetorical History. Through it, I saw a way for both of my interests to merge into one field of study. The focus on the visual applications of rhetorical history mainly came from my students and children. Getting the younger generation to read anything was increasingly more difficult as reliance on social media memes, reels, and stories became the new norm. Short and flashy visual representations often replaced the lengthier textual narratives. Initially, I wondered if I could somehow do a dissertation in one meme…but realized that this might be pushing the boundaries a bit too much.

For me, to do a doctorate has been a goal for many years. I do not see it as an end goal but as a challenge on how to combine academic theory with a practical application. I found the Athabasca Doctor in Business Administration program to be the pathway to help me achieve this goal. I am truly thankful for those who have invested time and energy into me as I completed this work.

I see the completion of the DBA as a starting point for future initiatives where I continue to find ways to bridge academia with real-world application for the entrepreneurship community. There is much to be learned on how rhetorical history can be applied in the startup space and I

look forward to continuing this exploration. As modes of communication continue to evolve, I see the continued need to explore this theoretically and practically.

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Chapter 1: Introduction / Research Question

1.1 Why This Study?

One could be forgiven for assuming that *understanding how and why entrepreneurial firms embed historical elements into their visual communication artifacts* is not likely the first topic of consideration that comes to the mind of entrepreneurs when they are thinking of new ventures. At first glance, this research question might seem a tad too theoretical for a doctoral program that focuses on the practical application of research to managerial settings. So why would I suggest this as my topic of focus? Through observation and personal experience in the sector, I have come to realize that while the practice may not necessarily be seen or described as intentional, entrepreneurial firms do embed historical elements into visuals much more frequently than many may initially assume.

I refer to embedded historical elements in visual communication as *visual communication artifacts.* One does not need to look far to see examples of how firms have embedded these artifacts into their visual designs and elements. For example, Starbucks uses a siren as a way to connect their product to their coastal hometown of Seattle, while also recognizing the company's global presence across the seas (*Who is the Starbucks Siren?*, 2021).

Figure 1. Alfa Romeo Logo

Sports car maker Alfa Romeo is more explicit in their use of visual communication artifacts (see Figure 1) by stating that "The future belongs to those who have a great history" when they describe how the symbols in their logo are connected to the city of Milan and the Viscounti family (*Alfa Romeo Logo*, 2021). Examples of embedding historical elements into visual communication artifacts can be found in almost every business sector: from past practices of the Hudson's Bay Company, use of historical items to project its importance in the creation of Canada as a nation (*A Gift to the Nation*, 2021), to the Canadian Pacific Railway claiming that its company was so foundational to the creation of Canada that the symbols of the beaver and maple leaf that the company uses in its logo would "later be officially adopted as Canada's national symbols" (City, 2022).

While numerous firms embed historical elements into their visual communication artifacts, my observation is that many follow the same as that of CP Rail and the Hudson's Bay Company: they use their own past as the reference point. The most common and obvious examples of the use of visual communication artifacts seem to be from firms that have existed for a lengthy period of time. Would historical elements be used in firms that lacked a lengthy past and if so, how? Some examples do exist in broader culture, such as with the organization Bluetooth. When the organization was founded, it was named after a Danish king known for uniting tribes, King Harald "Bluetooth" Gormsson, and the logo was designed as a rune depicting his initials (*Origin of the Name*, 2021). Studies, such as Garud et al. (2014), suggest that this type of use of the past may assist new firms in overcoming perceived risk and uncertainty in their endeavours by projecting a sense of legacy or perceived permanence, but there are not many empirical studies that have looked at how companies undertake this effort. This question became more relevant to me in my own experience of starting a new venture.

In the summer of 2020, I was invited to join other individuals in starting a new real estate development company that would focus on building highly energy-efficient and environmentally friendly residential buildings. Once agreeing to the scope of our company, my partners immediately jumped to determining the visual side of the company. More specifically, they wanted to select the name, logo, and colour scheme for the business. The discussions that occurred in the development of our final visuals revealed to me that embedding historical elements into visual elements does indeed occur at the new venture stage. In our case, my partners felt that it was important that we not only created a name that had deep significance to the geographic area where we were working, but also that the colours and designs were chosen because they linked to respected institutions with long legacies in the community. This process revealed to me that while the purposes and means may change, new ventures can be similar to established companies in their use of embedding historical elements into their visual communication artifacts. My question then evolved into better understanding how and why entrepreneurs are doing this.

The confluence of my academic research and practical experience highlighted to me that not only is my research question practice oriented, but it is also something that occurs frequently. Understanding how and why firms embed historical elements into their visual communication artifacts is a useful area for entrepreneurs seeking to acquire resources and for academics who want to further understand the intersection of organizational theory and visuals.

1.2 Why Study History?

Until relatively recently, most management research sought to develop theories that were to be regarded as valid throughout context and time. History and context might be modifying factors, but they were largely dismissed in theory building. However, since the “Historical

Turn," identified by Clark and Rowlinson (2004), greater attention has been paid to considering history in theory development (Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014; Maclean et al., 2016; Rowlinson et al., 2014). While researchers have explored the impact of historical events in numerous ways, there is a growing consensus that history is an important factor in how businesses function. Whether it is the view that one's past sets the course for one's future or that one's past can be refashioned to build a narrative that fits the needs of the present, the stature of history in management studies is growing in importance as both scholars and practitioners seek to understand how it influences perceptions or evokes action (Bansal et al., 2022; Suddaby et al., 2021). The use of history adds context and forces upon organizations that when recognized, the analysis of organizations can be improved (Maclean et al., 2021). For this reason, the often-overlooked use of history is now considered a critical component in the development and application of management theories and studies (Iglesias et al., 2020; Maclean et al., 2021; Rowlinson, 2020).

1.3 Why Study Visual Communication Artifacts?

Organizational research has largely focused on analyzing verbal texts or narratives of firms (Meyer et al., 2013). However, there is a growing understanding that contemporary organizations increasingly rely on images, logos, videos, and other visual tools and expressions to compete, communicate, form identity, and organize their activities (Boxenbaum et al., 2018). Visual communication artifacts have been elevated from "add-ons" to an elementary mode for construction, maintenance, and transformation of meaning (Meyer et al., 2013; Pauwels & Mannay, 2020). For the purposes of this study, I drew upon Arjaliès and Bansal (2018), Greenwood et al. (2019), and Hepworth (2016) to define *visual communication artifacts* to include items such as logos, drawings, images, videos and photographs. Admittedly, this definition is narrow as it assumes that visual communication artifacts are standalone objects

when in reality, they can be embedded or an element of other communication artifacts. Nevertheless, it is an accepted definition that allows for a clear way to approach the topic. My reason for focusing on visual communication artifacts is that they are often the first things that people see when they look at a document for aid in understanding complex messages (Meyer et al., 2013; Van den Bosch et al., 2005).

From a practitioner perspective, visual communication artifacts are augmenting, and perhaps in some cases replacing, narratives in organizational storytelling efforts (Boje & Smith, 2010; Lankow et al., 2012). From blogposts to Tiktok to Instagram, there is an increasing reliance on using images, symbols, colours, and design to convey story and meaning. One just has to think about the frequent use of memes or gifs in digital communications to realize this growing trend. In an interview titled *How to Become a Better Manager By Thinking Like a Designer,* Nancy Duarte states that thinking of the visual and design elements "aren't just visual guides, but guides to a state of being" (Guterman, 2009). Similarly, the practitioner-focused *Harvard Business Review* claimed that "visual communication is a must-have skill for all managers, because more and more often, it's the only way to make sense of the work they do" (Berinato, 2016). Another practitioner-oriented journal claims that what we see, versus what we read, affects us quicker than anything else so once a company decides how to market, the first step is to find photographs that tell that message in a clear and compelling way (Fitzhugh-Craig, 2020).

From an organizational research perspective, we are still at the early years of understanding how visual communication artifacts play a role in organizational theories, but it is evident that there is an opportunity to better understand the role of these artifacts within theory and practice.

1.4 What Is My Contribution to Research?

This dissertation advances the understanding of how history can be strategically employed in organizational settings by examining its rhetorical use not through language, but through visual communication artifacts - an area largely overlooked in existing management and entrepreneurship literature. Some studies have explored how visual communication artifacts may constrain the historical narratives being told (Blagoev et al., 2018) or how rhetoric is transmitted through visual communication artifacts (Lefsrud et al., 2015), but little research has explored how historical elements are embedded in visual communication artifacts. By extending the rhetorical history framework to visual communication artifacts, this study provides empirical evidence that early-stage ventures actively embed historical references into their visual communication artifacts, such as website imagery, to shape identity, signal legitimacy, and influence stakeholder perceptions.

This research contributes several theoretical advancements. First, it broadens the application of rhetorical history beyond text to include visual semiotics, revealing how visual cues such as skeuomorphs and symbolic imagery are used to communicate cultural familiarity, trust, or innovation. Second, it positions visual narratives as dynamic and temporally fluid, showing how entrepreneurs invoke both nostalgic pasts and aspirational futures to engage diverse audiences. Third, it offers a typology of founder intent, illustrating that visual strategies often emerge organically and are adapted across stakeholder contexts. Lastly, it supports connections between rhetorical history literature and the social evaluation literature.

Methodologically, utilizing the work of Greenwood et al. (2019), I contribute to how organizational scholars can analyse, explain, and critically interpret the role of visual rhetoric in organizational communication. At the time of starting my research, less than five empirical

studies have been published using this novel approach (Fiset et al., 2021; Tweedie, 2020). I see my research as providing more awareness of this methodology within management research and offering potential insights into visual methodology.

Practically, the research underscores that visual design in startups is not merely aesthetic—it is strategic. It can be used to shape the perceived legitimacy of a startup and help to mitigate its risk of newness. It suggests that entrepreneurial support programs develop and offer training to founders in visual semiotics and rhetorical history, equipping them to more deliberately construct meaning, build trust, and emotionally resonate with stakeholders through visual communication.

1.5 Limitations of Study

This study is geographically focused on the province of Alberta, Canada and involves startups listed on the Start Alberta website (https://startalberta.ca/). Because of this, my analysis cannot be applied universally, but it is context specific. Future studies that involve multiple geographic regions or nations may provide findings that could allow for broader generalizations. Ultimately, this work lays a foundation for future inquiry into the persuasive power of visual historical references in entrepreneurship and expands both the theoretical and practical understanding of how early-stage ventures use the past to shape their future.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 History in Organizational Theory

Most organizational theory has attempted to be ahistorical. Organizational theories such as Resource Dependence (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003), Organizational Ecology (Ruef, 2000) and Bounded Rationality (March & Simon, 1958) have attempted to describe organizations in timeless ways that span historical or social context. However, an emerging movement is occurring where a growing number of scholars attempt to integrate history into organizational studies (Harvey & Maclean, 2023; Maclean et al., 2021). Referred to as *historical organization studies*, this work can be described as "organizational research that draws extensively on historical sources, methods and knowledge to promote historically informed theoretical narratives attentive to both disciplines" (Maclean et al., 2016, p. 609). This historical turn takes a different approach to the dominant scientific paradigms in organization studies and provides a wealth of opportunities for understanding the theoretical and the empirical through a new lens (Clark & Rowlinson, 2004; Kieser, 1994; Suddaby, 2016; Van Lent & Durepos, 2019). Researchers now understand that applying a historical approach creates a richer understanding of the phenomena being investigated. By understanding the historical context in which something is occurring, greater insight can occur which can ultimately lead to more robust and nuanced theories.

Attempting to bridge organizational studies and historical studies involves overcoming significant ontological and epistemological divides that occur in both traditions (Suddaby, 2016; Van Lent & Durepos, 2019). This has led to the emergence of two broad approaches. The first is a functionalist approach which positions the integration of history into organizational studies as primarily a *scientistic* endeavour (Van Lent & Durepos, 2019). In this perspective, history is

integrated with the goal to uncover "facts" that confirms and refines general theories (Lawrence, 1984; Rowlinson, 2004; Üsdiken & Kieser, 2004). The functionalist approach is a means for uncovering "truth" or generalizable knowledge rather than playing a significant role in shaping context. Because of this, some argue that this approach is ahistorical (Suddaby, 2016).

A second approach encompasses a number of different perspectives that can best be described as influenced by institutional theory (Suddaby, 2016). This approach understands organizations to be shaped by the social context in which they exist (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Because of this, the use of history plays a greater role in understanding how social norms and expectations have influenced organizations to act or behave in ways that are not necessarily the most efficient or profitable (Scott, 2013). Institutional theory has expanded the importance of including history in theory.

One stream that developed from this second approach is referred to as rhetorical history. Rhetorical history is defined as the "strategic use of the past as a persuasive strategy to manage key stakeholders of the firm"(Suddaby et al., 2010). This approach is significantly different than the dominant view of one's history being a set of unalterable facts that lead a firm down some kind of inevitable path or direction (Hannan & Freeman, 1989; Stinchcombe, 1965). Rather, rhetorical history attempts to tease out a difference between one's past and one's history. While identifiable events or, according to Suddaby (2016), one's "brute facts" may be objective, one's history is the subjective and persuasive interpretation of those events (Suddaby et al., 2010). History, therefore, becomes an interpretive function.

Within the rhetorical history lens, history is not a grand narrative. Rather, history is created through the selection and curation of past materials. As Lowenthal (2015) states, "history is merely one among many versions of the past." History is created by the retelling or intentional

forgetting of one's past through ways including oral traditions, organizational accounts, the media or gossip, or through many other narrative forms (Clegg et al., 2020). History then becomes personal and dependent on whatever the conveyor decides to make it.

Because the rhetorical history approach views one's past as a malleable asset, it can then be considered as an asset used strategically for today's needs. While less tangible than a physical resource, it is something that can be employed for the firm's advantage. For example Foster et al. (2011) found that *Tim Hortons,* a coffee shop company popular in Canada, was able to successfully capture and employ *social memory assets,* or collective memories from society, for the use of a firm. More specifically, Tim Hortons employed both textual and visual narratives that appropriated imagery of Canada's national winter sport (hockey) and of the Canadian military. Similarly, Brunninge and Fridriksson (2017) found social memories are used to convey corporate responsibility in supply chain management. In both instances, elements of the past, both individual and collective events, are shaped to create a story that the firm wants to be told.

If firms determine how to employ history, they often do so with intended purposes. History therefore becomes strategic, a selection process where firms determine what historical elements to include or omit for their intended purposes. For example, Anteby and Molnar (2012) analyzed fifty years of bulletins from a French aeronautics firm to understand how the firm intentionally tried to "forget" contradictory elements of its past. Conversely, Maclean et al. (2014) analyzed Procter & Gamble and how they repeated company myths to ensure consistent sense-making with its employees.

The above examples demonstrate that if history is a strategic asset that can be manipulated and employed for strategic purposes, it should be able to be used to adapt to the changing needs or times of a firm. Decker et al. (2021) describe this as a *presentist* perspective

where “the past matters only in as much as it has relevance to the present.” Gioia et al. (2002) call it “revising the past” for the present-day context. Because of this, a rhetorical history approach means that there is less concern about the replication or verification of a historical narrative (Decker, 2016; Decker et al., 2021), rather, the approach emphasizes the narratives being told. Ricoeur (1983) summed it up as “history cannot depart from narrative without losing its historical character.” Thus, understanding how firms incorporate history into their corporate narratives is more important than ensuring accuracy of what is being said.

2.2 Visual Communication Artifacts

The Western world relies on linguistic modes of communication. Whether through written forms, such as books, or through verbal modes like speeches, the use of words is instrumental in the way that we transmit information. Because of this, it is no surprise that organizational researchers have also focused their analysis on discourse (Meyer et al., 2013).

Despite the linguistic prominence, there is increasing attention on the use of visual communication within Western society (Blackmore, 1999; Meyer et al., 2013; Waddock, 2016). Within scholarly literature, the concept of visual communication artifacts is very broad. For example, someone who focuses on the materiality of a visual communication artifact may narrow their analysis to things such as boardrooms, home settings, urban areas, and cemeteries as visual communication artifacts (Pauwels, 2019). Conversely, others argue that the study of visual communication artifacts is about visualizing the invisible and the (in)conceivable (Pauwels & Mannay, 2020).

Studying visual communication artifacts not only helps us understand the reasons an item was produced, but it also provides insights into broader and more profound aspects of society (Pauwels, 2019). Although never able to capture a full story, visual communication artifacts

provide a window into messages being conveyed. Hepworth (2016) argues that visual communication artifacts are never neutral because they contain rationalities and ideologies. As a result, they are "are always either reinforcing or challenging the established rationalities of the people surrounding them and the environments in which they are placed" (Hepworth, 2016). They embody discourses and employ methods and tools for rhetorical purposes to change attitude, behaviours, or intentions. Yet because the context and time period are unique whenever a visual communication artifact is engaged, so is the identification and interpretation of its message. It is a subjective endeavour influenced both by internal (attitudes, memories, stress) and external (environment, previous exposure) factors (Hepworth, 2016).

Within the organizational literature, research into the use of visual communication artifacts is seen as relatively young by some. Meyer et al. (2013), for example, sees the field as emerging and attempts to broadly classify this work into five distinct approaches: archeological, practice, strategic, dialogical, and documenting. There is agreement that this area of study has continued potential to expand and provide a rich understanding both on theory and in practice. For example, research suggests that it can be used for reputation (Van den Bosch et al., 2005), perception changing (Machin & Van Leeuwen, 2007; Schroeder, 2012), decision making (Arjaliès & Bansal, 2018; Mandel & Johnson, 2002), and for legitimacy purposes (Kassinis & Panayiotou, 2018).

Visual communication artifacts can provide us with a better understanding of how actors make sense, process information, and organize knowledge in ways that are simply not possible through discourse (Foss, 2004). Some researchers argue that visual communication is fundamentally different than verbal communication because it often combines rationality with more emotionality (Spencer, 2010; Vince & Broussine, 1996). This integration of emotionality

can be so powerful that it can evoke an involuntary reaction in the recipient (Blair, 2012). While all forms of communication can use emotions, the use of visual communication artifacts allows for a more personal and subjective interpretation of events. For example, Riley (2008) explored how emotional responses of seeing photographs of the crash of United Airlines Flight 93 (from September 11, 2001) influenced narrative and meaning-making formation of the event.

Visual communication artifacts also allow for broader interpretations because of how they communicate. In discourse modes, means of communicating are subject to stringent conventions and practices (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Even in more loosely defined ways, such as poetry, there is an expected structure or concreteness to how verbal communication occurs. Communicating visually, however, is a much different process. While conventions and practices may exist in the visual realm, there is a great level of flexibility. One cannot expect the same consistency of interpretation amongst society when looking at an image, logo, or photograph. As Blair (2012) states, "They might be moving, funny, clever, or beautiful (or their opposites), but to call them 'true' or 'false' seems to be, at best, using metaphor, and at worst, just inappropriate." Visual communication artifacts provide greater freedom for shaping interpretations of perceptions because of this. One example of how this has been studied is in the financial sector. Pollock and D'Adderio (2012) looked at how the use of charts were used to influence perceptions in rankings of products that led to the creation of market segmentation. Arjaliès and Bansal (2018) found a similar experience in stock market recommendations. In this study, emojis were used to "fill in the blank" on subjective criteria of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices in a company. Interestingly, by communicating the information in this way, Arjaliès and Bansal (2018) found that ESG goals were held in the same importance as

the financial metrics and were used in determining firm selection. This highlights the potential power of open interpretation when using visual communication artifacts.

Lastly, some studies suggest that visual communication artifacts may play a central role in enhancing legitimacy work (Christiansen, 2018). Within written text, various rhetorical strategies have been used to generate legitimacy including normalizing, moralizing, rationalizing, and by asserting authority (Höllerer et al., 2013; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). It has only been in the past few years where visuals have been explored within this process. For example, in their study on visual rhetoric used in the oil field, Lefsrud et al. (2017) identified that actors not only use verbal text but also use visuals in their legitimation efforts to promote or understand the industry. The use of visual communication artifacts can materialize an argument that cannot be verbalized as well as make it appear more factual (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005; Meyer et al., 2018; Oswick & Montgomery, 1999). Some researchers argue that due to contemporary culture, the use of visual communication artifacts is now more important and has greater influence in the legitimation process than oral, manuscript, or other written forms (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999; Puyou & Quattrone, 2018). Similarly, others suggest that efforts through discourse are no longer sufficient on their own but require the use of visuals in order to gain legitimacy (Clarke, 2011), while others go further and suggest that, in some situations, imagery or nondiscursive symbols are the only means of doing so (Boxenbaum et al., 2018; Foss, 2004). Because of this, the study of visual communication artifacts warrants greater exploration.

2.2.1 Visual Communication Artifacts and Branding

It is important to address the similarities between the construct of visual communication artifacts and the construct of branding within the marketing literature. There are key similarities, and it can be difficult to tease both constructs apart. I argue that branding falls within the

construct of visual communication artifacts but, because of its scope, it is only a subset of it. For example, both branding and visual communication artifacts intersect with areas such as communications, graphic design, corporate image, public relations, and strategy (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011). Like visual communication artifacts, branding also focuses on managing corporate identity and reputation (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). For branding, the focus is on creating a consistent and authentic message that stakeholders experience as they engage with the firm (Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Vallaster & Kraus, 2011). I argue that visual communication artifacts go beyond passive experience to potentially include action. In other words, visual communication artifacts are broader in scope, intent, and goals. Because of this, I suggest that the two cannot be considered the same thing. However, future exploration into the connection between branding and visual communication artifacts is certainly warranted.

2.3 Incorporating History with Visual Communication Artifacts

While the exploration of how organizations manage their historical narratives is growing, the emphasis has been largely on the verbal or written text. Much fewer studies have explored how history is being used within the visual space.

There are some researchers who have explored how rhetoric is embedded in visual communication artifacts in a small number of studies. For example, Lefsrud et al. (2017) have explored how Canada's oil industry has used images to portray itself as an ethical industry. Similarly, Höllerer et al. (2018) studied how the financial sector uses both verbal text and visuals in their sense-giving efforts during financial crises. Other research suggest that visual communication artifacts rhetorically act on one another, the spaces they occupy and on the people who view and use them (Hepworth, 2016). Numerous other studies have explored their

rhetorical uses including visual framing in alcohol-harm campaigns (Christiansen, 2018), conveying organizational identity of fashion agencies through job advertisements (Bullinger, 2018), and in international relations (Kirkpatrick, 2015; Miskimmon et al., 2014; Van Noort, 2020). While these studies do indeed explore how rhetoric is incorporated into visual communication artifacts, the inclusion of history into the research framework remains quite limited or even non-existent.

Other research streams have explored how history is incorporated into the material world. One such research stream has explored how the physical item serves as a mediator that can both limit and open opportunities for how historical assets can be used (Wertsch, 2008). For example, in their study of the British Museum's digitization efforts, Blagoev et al. (2018) found that inherited objects from the past constrained how actors crafted and managed their historical narratives. Another research stream has explored how material objects can be shaped in order to connect to the past. For example, the Carlsberg Group's use of the Latin phrase *Semper Ardens* (passionate, always burning) carved above the doors of its headquarters eventually become central to its identity (Hatch & Schultz, 2017).

Others research has explored how material objects are shaped to connect to the past through the use of skeuomorphs (Hargadon & Douglas, 2001). Skeuomorphs are elements of a design that appear to serve no objectively functional purpose but are essential to the public's understanding of the relationships between innovations and the objects they displace (Basalla, 1988). The concept is normally used within the design and technology sectors where design elements make new products appear familiar by introducing them in known shapes and forms (Wadhwani & Lubinski, 2017). Hargadon and Douglas (2001) illustrate an example from Thomas Edison. In the late 1800s, lights in cities were powered primarily by gas. As Edison

attempted to introduce lights powered by electricity, he faced many obstacles because the concept was so new. To attract acceptance, he framed his new electrical company within the "trappings of the old gas system" including using a design similar to gas lamps and measuring electrical usage through systems that looked similar to gas meters. He even went as far as registering his electrical company under the New York gas statutes. By framing his invention within existing structures and understandings, Edison was able to signal to society how his new product could be understood and how it could displace that which it attempted to mimic. While skeuomorphs have primarily been studied within the material world, the digital world has allowed it to be expanded into the purely visual side of logos, branding, and visual design. For example, the use of the trashcan symbol in Apple products helps users to understand the purpose of the folder (Payne, October 3, 2013) or by the Wells Fargo & Company use of the stagecoach logo as a way to demonstrate safety and consistency in a time of technological change (Keulen, 2013). These examples of skeuomorphs indicate one means on how organizations employ historical artifacts within their visual displays.

Bell et al. (2014) claim that managing visual communication artifacts involves "almost every aspect of organizational strategy, operations and communication." If we analyse this through the lens of history, we offer the potential to provide new insights into both management practice and the study of organizations. As such, I explored *how and why firms strategically embed historical elements into their visual communication artifacts*. However, within organization theory, the study of visual research is considered an area that still lacks a concrete framework for in-depth analysis of both the depicted and the depiction (Pauwels, 2019). This results in many visual studies being limited in the investigation of norms and values surrounding

the visual communication artifact. To address this, I looked to the field of semiotics and the framework of Greenwood et al. (2019) for additional insights.

2.4 Semiotics

When exploring the historical elements embedded in visual communication artifacts, the field of semiotics provides additional insights. Semiotics is the study of understanding how a group of people who are part of the same culture or society interpret an object or image as signifying something other than itself (Aiello, 2020). Its goal is to understand what constitutes a *sign* and then attempts to understand the meaning of the sign (Danesi, 2008). Concepts within this field of research may be helpful in the analysis of visual communication artifacts. More specifically, semiotician Roland Barthes claims that visual meaning can be articulated into two separate levels of analysis: denotation and connotation (Aiello, 2020; Barthes, 1985). Denotative analysis is at the primary level of interpretation where understanding represents something typical within a cultural context, such as a house (Danesi, 2008). It is the immediate meaning related to what the image presents. Connotative analysis, on the other hand, is much more complex because it seeks to understand historically acquired meanings that develop within social contexts (Danesi, 2008). Human interpretation can take on a large array of potential meanings through symbolic meanings that are "managed" through social interaction. Sometimes the object itself manages social understanding. Eco (1976) jokingly states that semiotics is understanding how objects can be used to lie, suggesting that if it cannot be used to lie, it cannot be used to tell anything at all. Whether or not the object is used to evoke meaning or are shaped by societal influences, the connotative interpretation of an object is normally connected to a sign or myth commonly understood by broader society (Aiello, 2020). Understanding how semioticians categorize this connection serve as a useful guide for addressing my own research question.

Understanding what kind of signs might be produced can be very diverse. For practical purposes, Sebeok (2001) developed six broad types which are considered the basis for analytical purposes: *symptoms, signal, index, icon, symbol,* and *name*. The categories of index, icon, symbol, and name are useful types for the purposes of my work with visual communication artifacts. Briefly speaking, *Index* refers to directionality, *Icon* involves the transformation of perception to representation, *Symbols* are more broad in scope and generally used to bring physicality to an abstract concept, and finally *Names* are identity signs that stand for a person, place, brand, animal, et cetera (Danesi, 2008). The final two categories of symptoms and signals are much more concrete in nature leaving little room for abstract interpretation (Danesi, 2008). These types may be used as standalone categories or superimposed over more tangible categories as exampled in Greenwood et al. (2019).

2.5 Stakeholder Enrolment in the Entrepreneurial Context

Entrepreneurs face many challenges in developing a successful venture. The entrepreneurship literature suggests that acquiring resources at the right time is vital for entrepreneurial success (Martens et al., 2007; Shane, 2003; Starr & MacMillan, 1990). Yet while many focus on the acquisition of resources in the early stages, recent research argues that new venture success is actually more dependent on involvement of key stakeholders who can help secure resources, foster connections, help find employees, generate social capital, or provide other benefits to a firm (Alvarez et al., 2015). Referred to as stakeholder enrollment, the development of deep bonds with stakeholders elicits actions where many "go above and beyond the call of duty" to provide resources, connections, or credibility to help ensure success of the entrepreneurial opportunity (Burns et al., 2016; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001).

Enrolling stakeholders is not only critical for the success of a new venture, but for its very existence (Mitchell et al., 2021). In many cases, however, stakeholders must make decisions before a company has yet to emerge, and stakeholders have little basis to assess the risk and certainty of the new venture. Their assessment can be influenced in several ways. For example, stakeholders can fill in missing gaps by using subjective feelings and beliefs about the future (Alvarez & Barney, 2007). Entrepreneurs can also influence stakeholder enrolment through the temporal horizon that they use and the shared vision of the future that they attempt to create (Clarke & Cornelissen, 2014; Suddaby et al., 2021; Zimbardo & Boyd, 2008). Mitchell et al. (2021) describe this as an iterative process where a common vision emerges as an entrepreneur conveys an imagined opportunity and stakeholders react to it.

This iterative dialogue process occurs within a social context where entrepreneurs use common understandings or experiences to frame the vision (Clarke, 2011; Kier & McMullen, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2021). Often this is done by connecting individual-level predispositions to collective or culturally embedded myths. Suddaby et al. (2021) outline a model for doing this where the use of historical tropes at the intradiegetic level and historical myths at the extradiegetic level are connected through historical reasoning to create a consistent view of the future. Suddaby et al. (2021) argue that, by doing so, stakeholders perceive a greater sense of agency of the future and may be more motivated for active participation in the entrepreneurial endeavour. This model assists in the framing of the analysis of my study. While developed for narrative analysis, the temporal horizon provides a framework fitting for visual analysis because of the focus on figurative or metaphorical uses. For example, the four historical tropes of nostalgia (a longing for an idealized past), postalgia (yearning for idealized future), dystopia (a future state of suffering), and dystoria (reflecting on a negative past) help to determine what

emotions are being evoked and temporal horizon are being used to influence me at the intradiegetic (individual) level. Further, Suddaby et al. (2021) provide a framework for connecting to the extradiegetic (cultural or collective) level to reach the widest possible range of potential stakeholders. Their model provides a means of doing so by combining several historical tropes into what they define as historical myths. Further, the model connects the intradiegetic and extradiegetic levels through a bridging mechanism that convey temporal and agentic continuity. This bridging mechanism means that stakeholders may be motivated to action and participate in the entrepreneurial endeavour. Suddaby et al. (2021) suggest that three bridging mechanisms may be employed in this manner. The first is teleological reasoning, which views the past and present through the lens of an idealized (visionary) future. The second is a presentist reasoning, which applies the cultural values and of the present on both the past and the future. The third is retrofuturism, which idealizes elements of an imagined future from an earlier era on both the present and the future. Identifying these bridging mechanisms within my dataset are more difficult because my focus is less on the narrative and more on the visual communication artifact.

While narratives are commonly employed to create a shared future vision by using the past, studies show that entrepreneurs also frequently employ the use of visual communication artifacts in their efforts to secure stakeholders (Clarke, 2011). The use of the visual within the entrepreneurial context, however, has not been explored empirically to any significant extent. In addition to exploring a relatively new area of research, I see three key reasons for studying how and why history is employed in visual communication artifacts within an entrepreneurial context. First, the field of entrepreneurship is an ideal place to explore the intersection of management and history. An entrepreneurship lens has been growing within academia of both fields and some suggest that it might now be the “central language” for understanding business (Wadhwani &

Lubinski, 2017). Whether or not it is actually centralizing, entrepreneurship is seen as a potential link for fostering greater connections between different academic fields; it can act as a bridge. Second, new ventures must be able to communicate a great deal about its business opportunity to internal and external stakeholders. The entrepreneurial process means that communication and storytelling is critical (Garud et al., 2014; Manning & Bejarano, 2017). Since new ventures by definition have no or a short history, their use of historical artifacts should be more pronounced and obvious in their use. In other words, examples of the use of historical elements in this area should be relatively easy to identify. Third, the entrepreneurship context provides an advantage to me because of personal interest. As someone who frequently interacts with new ventures in Alberta, I am particularly interested to explore this familiar context.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This chapter discusses how I approached studying my research question of *understanding how and why entrepreneurial firms embed historical elements into their visual communication artifacts*. With my focus primarily on the *how,* most of this chapter is focused on that section. The *why* portion is secondary in scope and while mainly exploratory, the chapter outlines the methods I used to explore it as well. I start by outlining my methodological approach and how it aligns with my ontological and epistemological perspectives. This is followed by details on the data site, the collection process, and the steps of analysis that I undertook in this research.

3.1 My Research Question Drives the Approach

I am interested in how and why entrepreneurial organizations strategically incorporate historical elements into their visual communication artifacts. Visual communication artifacts are used by firms to tell or augment their textual narratives, so it is important to understand how and why they are used to do so. This focus requires an understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which people act. For this reason, a qualitative approach is the best suited methodological approach (Myers, 2019).

3.2 Ontology and Epistemological Perspective

According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), there are four main paradigms which best represent the majority of epistemological perspectives: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivism. Each research paradigm comes with its own set of beliefs on understanding the world and the researcher's place within it. It is important for a researcher to identify the approach that they are taking in their work.

For this research, I took the view that reality is socially constructed and reality can only be accessed through language, consciousness, shared meanings, and instruments (Guba &

Lincoln, 1994; Myers, 2019). To understand the reality of my study participants, I must be situated within it to grasp the complexities and shared meanings understand by participants. A researcher must "already speak the same language as the people being studied…if he or she is to understand the data at all" (Myers, 2019). Being familiar with the context is critical to understand the shared meaning of the events, words, or items within the data. Because of this, I recognize that the researcher and those being studied are inextricably intertwined in a *subject-subject* relation, which means that findings will be *values mediated* (Giddens, 1993; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In other words, the findings within my study are shaped by my own perspectives, beliefs, and opinions.

Given my social construction perspective, a qualitative methodological approach is the most appropriate means to address my research question. Qualitative research provides the opportunity to understand motives, reasons, actions and context in an in-depth way (Myers, 2019). The challenge for me in this study is that while visual research has occurred for many years, there is no cohesive research agenda for it nor is there a well-developed methodological approach used within the field of organizational studies (Höllerer et al., 2013; Martin, 2014; Meyer et al., 2013). Within this field, some methodologies emphasize the collection of visual data rather than on the actual analysis of it and vice versa (Bell & Davison, 2013). Methodological approaches either take a heavily theoretical framework that lacks actual guidance on how to do the analysis, or they are procedure-driven quantitative approaches that lack the perspective of broader issues surrounding the actual content (Greenwood et al., 2019). These challenges affect the procedural importance of data collection and the theory-building component of analysis. However, recent methodological approaches proposed by Greenwood et al. (2019) provide an option forward that attempts to balance this theory-procedure divide and

allows for a socially constructed perspective. For the purposes of this study, I used Greenwood et al. (2019) as a guide while adapting it to further explore the "why" component of my research question.

3.3 Data Site and Collection

I decided to explore the new venture/entrepreneurial space as a data site because the sector is receiving a lot of attention both in academic and practitioner circles. It is seen as highly relevant and timely.

Second, new ventures must be able to effectively communicate their potential to internal and external stakeholders. The entrepreneurial process means that communication and storytelling is critical (Garud et al., 2014; Manning & Bejarano, 2017). Since new ventures by definition have no or a very short past, their use of historical artifacts should be more pronounced and obvious in their use. Additionally, since entrepreneurs necessarily need to self-promote in the early stages, I expected to not only have an easier time identifying their use of visual communication artifacts, but to also have a greater opportunity to connect directly with them during the final phase of my research (i.e., the interview stage).

Third, I selected this research site because of personal interest and familiarity. As someone who frequently interacts with new ventures in Alberta, I am interested to further explore this interest in greater detail. Through my understanding the context and cultural milieu of this sector, I believe that it provided deeper background and contextual understanding for the analysis.

I accessed data found on the Start Alberta database (https://startalberta.ca/). Start Alberta is a joint project involving three major players in Alberta's venture capital arena: Alberta

Enterprise Corporation, the Venture Capital Association of Alberta, and the A100 (a community of acclaimed tech and innovation leaders, founders and investors). Together, the three organizations created an open-source directory assisting entrepreneurs to connect with investors and other external stakeholders (*Start Alberta*, 2020). This database has become a default resource for all things related to the startup community in Alberta. At the time of my proposal, the database consisted of 962 Alberta-based startup companies looking for investments. The geographical similarity of these firms allows for a better understanding of potential cultural or societal cues that may be incorporated into the use of visual presentations.

One mentionable note is that the Start Alberta database originated with an emphasis on tech-based companies within the clean technology, life sciences, electronics, software, telecom, or other associated tech-based sectors. Although not limited to only these sectors, the dataset tended to have a greater proportion of such startups.

When starting the process to collect the data from the Start Alberta website, I clicked on their *Companies>>Startups & Scaleups* tab to see all of the new ventures. I then discovered that the Start Alberta database had expanded considerably to include 2,619,613 startups and scaleups. Since this study examines company homepages, I then added the filter "Has Website URL," which reduced the dataset to 1,669,043 startups and scaleups. To align with my proposal, I added a second filter to limit the dataset to new ventures (start ups) and remove any companies that would be considered scaleups or beyond the startup phase. Since opinions on defines a startup, I followed Milanov and Fernhaber (2009) to define startups as firms that have existed for three years or less. This meant applying a filter of companies founded between 2020 and 2023. The dataset was then reduced to 88,699 startups. I then realized that the Start Alberta database was no longer strictly for the Alberta market but had joined the global Dealroom database and included

companies from around the globe. For this study's focus on Alberta-based startups, I added a third filter to select only companies founded in the province of Alberta. This produced a total of 231 startups.

Table 1. Steps to Isolate Dataset

Step in Data Collection	Results Filtered Out	Total Remaining Results
Total database		2,619,613
Has website "URL"	950,571	1,669,042
Founded 2020 - 2023	1,580,343	88,699
Founding of company in Alberta	88,468	231
Websites no longer worked	35	196
Website redirection	13	183
Required website login	1	181

During the development of my proposal, I was able to download the company information (name, address, contact details, website, etc.) in an Excel spreadsheet. By the time of my data collection, Start Alberta has monetized their database. Opting for their free 7-day premium trial service enabled me to attain full access to the database.

Once I had the dataset, I then proceeded to capture the homepages of all 231 websites. The company website homepages were used as my primary data points. Websites are often the central point of contact for many organizations and are used for many reasons including expressing organizational identity or for reflecting relationships to the wider community (Powell et al., 2016). While these purposes are expanded out further over the entire website, homepages are the most prominent part of a website for visual identity and therefore have much importance. My assumption was that homepages would then also include the most visual communication artifacts to quickly capture a visitor's attention. A sampling of several websites confirmed that

the homepages have considerable visual communication artifacts and include expected items like logos, photographs, and icons.

I used Google *GoFullPage* extension for Chrome to capture and store screenshots of all homepages which maintained the formatting of the websites. No method could be found to capture and store multimedia and interactive elements of homepages, such as videos, frames, or sliders (an image rotation feature). As a result, my sample privileges static homepage imagery and likely under-represents startups that rely more heavily on video or other dynamic visual features. The findings should therefore be interpreted as capturing the rhetorical use of static visual artifacts on homepages rather than the full range of multimedia communication available to these ventures. In addition, because my sampling frame was restricted to currently listed Alberta-based startups with functioning public websites in the Start Alberta database, ventures that have failed, never established a web presence, or whose sites are now inactive are not represented. Finally, the database primarily includes for-profit startups, so nonprofit organizations and social enterprises, whose visual communication may foreground different goals or stakeholder relationships, are largely absent from this sample. Nevertheless, I proceeded with the coding knowing these limitations.

After capturing all 231 homepages, I found that 35 websites had closed or were no longer working and 13 websites redirected to different websites. In most cases, the redirect was to a spam-like page. In a few situations, such as Rieben Financial, their website redirected to a different company, which seemed legitimate. However, since it was not possible to verify whether the referred company was a startup venture, I removed all from the data set. One website, Just Cook Kitchen, had the same name but was redirected to a website that appeared to be slightly changed (from justcook.kitchen to justcookkitchens.com). This one webpage was

included in the dataset since it had the same name throughout. One website required a login account to access, so it was removed from the dataset. This left a total of 181 homepages from websites in the dataset. All 181 screenshots were then imported into NVivo for data analysis.

3.4 Analysis Approach

Figure 2. Overall Process of Analysis

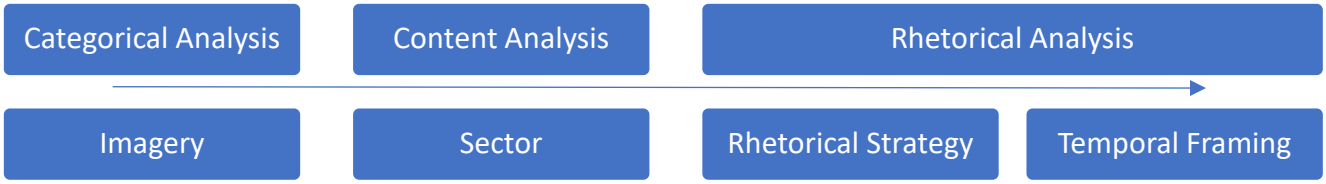
(Diagram derived, in part, from the work of Green et al. 2019)

My analysis followed the approach in analyzing visual rhetoric as outlined by Greenwood et al. (2019). This approach attempts to find a middle ground to bridge theory and procedure in the analysis of visual communication artifacts. Although the focus of that research was on corporate reports, the study also provides a fitting framework this study, particularly since there is little comparable research for website analysis (Kassinis & Panayiotou, 2018).

Greenwood et al. (2019) use a three phases abductive approach to analysis: categorical, content, and rhetorical analysis. I followed this structure, but I modified the third phase by adding a step of interviewing a select number of firms. Analysis and coding were conducted within NVivo 12 (upgraded to NVivo 14 partway through my research).

As a general overview of how I conducted my analytical process in determining *how* entrepreneurs embedded historical elements into their visual communication artifacts, Figure 3 provides a high-level summary showing the Greenwood et al. (2019) process overlayed with how it was practically applied in my work.

Figure 3. Overview of Analytical Process



Starting on the left side of Figure 3, I proceeded with a categorical analysis, followed by content analysis, and then finished with rhetorical analysis. Once I had completed this stage, I then moved on to my exploratory stage looking at *why* entrepreneurs were doing this. The following is a more detailed explanation of what I did during each stage of analysis.

3.4.1 Categorical Analysis

Figure 4. Categorial Process of Analysis

The first phase outlined in Greenwood et al. (2019) is categorical analysis, which uses commonly understood or used categories of description. This phase provides an overview of the document in terms of broad descriptions using commonly understood groupings. Using the Greenwood et al. (2019) study as a basis for starting, I first undertook a frequency count using five visual design elements: 1) photographs, 2) videos, 3) non-photographic images, 4) text in relation to image, 5) and graphics and numbers. I used these broad categories to create my own initial codes found in the Table 2. To allow for new or website-specific elements, I created unspecified category, which I used to allow for new categories may arise. For example, Greenwood et al. (2019) suggested that a new category may emerge around the concept of memes.

Table 2. Initial Codes for Categorical Analysis

Code Name	Description
Text-to-Image	Images that were closely associated (or overlayed with) text
Photo / Video	Real images or videos included. Photos and Videos kept in one category as screen captures might not allow for videos
Non-photo Image	Clipart, drawings, or other non-real depictions
Graphics & Numbers	Charts, tables, graphs or other numbers-related depictions
Other	To capture items that do not fit into the other categories

Prior to coding, I had not fully considered that websites would include designs and images that were either hybrids of the initial categories, were vague and unclear, or were so abstract that I would need to determine whether they could be categorized. Some elements were very vague but hinted at something, which required me to spend more time deciding how to code them. Other webpages were quite simple to code in terms of categories, but there might have been other questions that arose. For example, *Carbon Royalty* has its board and management depicted on their homepage. I then had to decide whether there was value in coding each photo of board member separately or not. Ultimately, I did code each board member separately because a number had interesting visual backgrounds such as a US flag. I also created several memos during this phase to capture a few of my observations, which I was not sure would lead to an additional code.

Since my research question was focused on the use of historical elements, I deemed it appropriate to then overlay the visual design elements with a temporal horizon of past, present, and future. Yet while Greenwood et al. (2019) suggest using categories derived from common

sense or typical practice, I took a more nuanced breakdown and used the temporal categories of Distant Past, Recent Past, Present, Near Future, and Distant Future which I thought were relatively understood by the general public. However, since these temporal orientations do not have a specific date or event to delineate one category from another, I used my own reference point as the basis. In other words, if it is something that I have seen (or could potentially see) within my lifetime, the event was coded as a recent past or near future event. This meant that there was some subjectivity and resulted in some arbitrary decisions on coding. I also left room for additional temporal horizons if something fell outside of any of my initial codes. After completing this, I did a preliminary categorization, looking for themes as well as what temporal horizon was being used. For example, using the query functions within NVivo, I cross-referenced which types of visual communication artifacts were used for each temporal horizon.

After completing this first iteration, I took an intentional pause to reflect on the data and how it was structured. More specifically, I reflected on two key items: researcher reflexivity and contextual expertise. As Pauwels (2019) notes, visual research is the "meeting of cultures" where the researcher, that being researched, and the cultural stance of the viewers or users of the visual communication artifact all shape and influence the research study. Because of this, I saw it as important for me as a researcher to be aware of, and acknowledge, my own cultural background, knowledge, and previous experience. Second, Gümüsay and Amis (2021) note that contextual expertise "requires an almost paradoxical proximity to and distance from the setting." By being so familiar with the setting, I can provide deep understanding of contextual specificities to help with analysis. Yet at the same time, I may be prone to overlooking key data points and their meanings because of any assumptions that I may make. McLaren and Durepos (2021) offer insights into how to address this by stressing the need to consider context. As a researcher and a

practitioner, I knew that I needed to contextualize myself to understand how my own position influences the knowledge that I am producing. This pause for reflection allowed for it. Ultimately, I came to the decision that my strong cultural understanding of the startup community in Alberta meant that a re-grouping of the data for categorical analysis would be more useful and insightful. I decided that it would be more insightful to look at the uses of temporal horizons if the data were clustered by product or service. Without a more focused approach by sector, I determined that the insights that could be gained from the data would be too vague or undefined for use in practice. Conducting my first iteration of coding led me to realize that companies that could be grouped by sector, so I decided to see what may surface by using this coding approach.

I then re-coded all data points several additional times with the intent of creating a new table in Microsoft Excel showing my data in a form that filtered out websites that did not have an obvious temporal horizon and then grouped together by common sectors or industries. I did this in three different steps asking a key question in each:

1. *Was there sufficient use of history and temporality?* To determine if it was a yes, I liberally decided if there was some kind of direct or implicit reference to a temporal horizon. If I determined that this did occur, even if loosely, I kept the data point in my data set and coded it by temporal horizon. If I determined that the temporal horizon in the data point was insufficiently present, I removed it.
2. *How can the products or services be clustered?* While I did an initial categorization, I realized that there were common categories starting to appear in my coding such as “medical services.” I evaluated all categories that I had created to determine if logical groupings of sectors, services, or products could exist. My intent was not to reduce the categories to the

smallest number. Rather, my goal was to determine whether products or services were similar enough that they could share a common category. Companies were grouped together to better identify the common threads. Groups were based on the sector rather than the product type. For example, many products were different software systems. Rather than group by software/non-software, I grouped based on what the target sector of the software would be used for. For example, gaming/entertainment products were groups together.

3. *What visual images seem to be central or important?* Most of the sites had multiple visual communication artifacts so it was not as simple as listing everything. I had to deliberately look at all items on the page and determine which ones were key. This specifically made me reflect on question #1 where the visual communication artifact had to embody or conjure some kind of historical orientation in me. In some, only one visual communication artifact was noted while in others, it was multiple. Collecting this information would be helpful for me later as I started to look for common themes.

3.4.2 Content Analysis

Figure 5. Content Process of Analysis

Following the methodological process outlined in Greenwood et al. (2019), I then moved onto the content analysis stage. This stage involved two different levels of content analysis: denotative and connotative. The denotative level answers the question "What is it?" and produces a simple description of the visual communication artifact. The connotative level differs in that there is an inherent element of subjectivity involved. The connotative level asks "What does it represent to me, make me think of or feel?" As such, there may be competing

interpretations of meaning. Greenwood et al. (2019) notes that this phase is strongly bound by cultural experience and being a member of the particular cultural group. Because of this, the validity of the interpretation then is reliant on providing a plausible, defensible, and authentic explanation, which requires researcher reflexivity throughout (Greenwood et al., 2019; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Pauwels, 2019).

Prior to completing my second iteration in the categorical analysis stage, I had a general idea of what grouping could be used for the denotative level of analysis in content analysis and had created an initial codebook using the codes of human-created objectives, humanity, fauna, flora, nature or other. However, after re-evaluating my work in the second iteration of the categorization phase, I then decided that a better path forward in the content analysis stage was to use the sector categories and further analyze what was being used and what kind of emotions or feelings were associated with it. I felt that the commonalities in each sector might better provide insights into what entrepreneurs in these industries were trying to convey through their visual communication artifacts. This meant that I re-coded the 181 companies remaining after the second iteration in the categorical stage. To do the coding, I used NVivo to review the companies in each sector and then Excel to record the common feelings or emotions being used or conveyed. More specifically, I reviewed each sector separately and then analyzed the visual communication artifacts within each to identify common themes when looking at any historical elements in them. The codes I used for themes were generated as I analyzed each sector and can be found in Table 9 found in Appendix A. In some sectors, there was often a group of images with a common theme or themes. Sometimes, there was an outlier that did not appear to fit the rest. In those specific situations, I reviewed them in detail to determine whether it was because it

came from a company that was loosely placed into the category, whether there was a new theme that could be considered, or whether it was an outlier that simply did not fit.

Once I had created the themes for the sectors, I reviewed them for a second time to ensure that I agreed with my initial analysis. After doing this, I realized that some sectors had less historical elements embedded within it than I had initially assumed. Because of this, I removed 7 sectors from my data leaving me a total of 10 unique sectors for further analysis. Table 7 includes my analysis of this section.

After exploring the 10 categories denotatively, I then decided to explore each category connotatively to further understand how the symbols in each category might be interpreted by their audience. Recognizing that this would involve interpretative licence, I intentionally proceeded through this section slowly to allow myself time to reflect on whether the interpretations were influenced by my own perspective rather than what the intended audience might be seeing.

3.4.3 Rhetorical Analysis

Following the methodological process outlined in Greenwood et al. (2019), the third stage is that of rhetorical analysis. My goal in this stage was to analyze the data to draw out themes beyond surface level understandings to understand the rhetorical functions. Each visual communication artifact is imbued with some form of rationality that shapes the truth as perceived by the artifact's viewers or users (Hepworth, 2016). A viewer is never neutral but has a persuasive, or even an argumentative, capacity that is continually shaping, reinforcing or challenging established rationalities (Blair et al., 2004; Hepworth, 2016). Hepworth (2016) notes that such interpretations are "summaries of the methods, values and knowledge applied by historians from *their* respective cultures, places and times" (emphasis added). While affirming

this, I also recognize that visual communication artifacts are not neutral and play a governing role in establishing individual and community-wide attitudes, behaviours, and intentions. This means that this process is a subjective experience on many levels and requires reflexivity throughout.

It is here where it is important to highlight the differentiation between rhetorical history and rhetorical strategies. In this document, I refer to rhetorical history as the theoretical framing for how organizations make use of the past to influence the present and future (Suddaby et al., 2010). Rhetorical strategies, on the other hand, are the intentional and applied instruments for influencing. While the two are distinct in concept, there is an assumed connection between theory and practice, which means that rhetorical analysis is inherently a space that will involve a muddling through both dimensions. Ultimately, my goal in this stage was to identify the practices (rhetorical strategies) and link them to the broader theoretical framing within rhetorical history. To do so, I followed Greenwood et al. (2019) where I took a critical view of the visual communication artifact to allow for meaningful interpretation connected to cultural understandings.

3.5 Exploratory Interviews

As an exploratory stage of my work, I planned to contact a handful of companies for short interviews to see if the insights obtained in the discussions added anything to what I had coded. This stage of my research went beyond the *how* and looks to the *why*. Fully understanding why entrepreneurs embed historical elements in their visual communication artifacts was not the intent of this process. Rather my hope was to gain preliminary insights and to better understand what future opportunities exist for me to expand this research. Additionally, upon learning of my research, many practitioners will undoubtedly wonder if entrepreneurs were even consciously

aware of what they were doing and, if so, why did they do this. As a result, I thought it best to add a small exploratory component to my work to address this. While exploratory, I saw it as a way to gain a richer context in understanding the environment and human systems in the creation of such visual communication artifacts.

To conduct this process, I first identified cases that looked interesting to me while I was coding in the categorical and content analysis stages. What was interesting to me was largely subjective and primarily based on unique visual communication artifacts on the homepage, some obvious historical element, or something that was unique and unusual. The actual sample size was based on what I determined to be pragmatically possible and what should be sufficient for interpretative quality (Maxwell, 1992). In the end, I had identified 21 companies which I thought interesting and worth a follow-up interview. For two companies, I knew the founders very well. While risk was minimal, I decided to exclude them as interview participants. I was concerned that the existing relationships could make it harder for them to say no or to feel fully comfortable during the interview process. The final result was a group of 19 companies from diverse sectors ranging from private blood testing firms to video game companies. While all similar in age, companies also varied in size as some were still quite small while others had grown substantially. My intent was to interview those based on availability but also on whoever has been actively involved in the creation of the company's website. This did not mean that I was looking for the actual website designer, but the individual within the company who was actively involved in shaping the company's image. As in many startups, I suspect that there would only be a handful of staff members, which meant that this individual would likely a founder or senior leader. The interviews followed a semi-structure guide (found in Appendix B) with my intent of focusing on

the visual communication artifacts to better understand the meaning or purpose of each element and what they hoped each particular element would achieve.

I reached out to all 19 companies with requests for interviews. Reception was considerably more lukewarm than I had expected. Some companies said that they were not interested to participate or had no time to do so. Many never responded. Others were willing to participate but told me that my requested 1-hour meeting was far too long for them. While I was able to interview two companies using my original length and depth of questioning, I realized that I need to make significant changes if I wanted to be able to interview more. I then modified my requests to participants and asked for shorter interviews (e.g. 10 – 15 min conversation) where I had to narrow the focus of the interviews much more. Even with the change in request, my original identified list did not prove to be very fruitful, so I had to expand the number of companies who I contacted. Ultimately, I ended up identifying a total of 40 companies that had some kind of interesting visual communication elements on their pages. I used all means of communication possible to reach these companies including email, LinkedIn messages, Facebook messages, phone calls, website "contact forms" and even tracking them down at an entrepreneurship conference. In the end, I was able to conduct interviews for 10 different companies.

The interviews all took place virtually using Microsoft Teams so that transcriptions could be captured automatically. Since this process was an exploratory component of my research, I had not considered many challenges that would occur and impact the integrity of the transcripts. For example, one interviewee had a disability and slurred when they spoke. Similarly, other participants were immigrants who did not speak English as their native language, so several had strong accents. These situations resulted in very poor transcriptions that required additional work

to clean up. In one case, the internet connection was poor, but the transcriptions made it easier to understand what the person was saying. Lastly, Teams upgraded their software while I was in the process of doing the interviews. Through Teams, written transcriptions were automatically created for most interviews which allowed for simple transfer to NVivo (only two videos required transcription).

With regards to how I analyzed these interviews, I saw this as exploratory and followed a basic qualitative review process where I pulled interesting stories from each interview. Each interview focused on specific artifacts on each homepage, which meant that the stories and intent would be unique for each company. To capture themes, interview transcriptions were imported into NVivo where I was able to read the transcripts and pull our key themes or comments in the interviews.

Table 3. List of Companies Interviewed

Company Description	**Illustrative summaries of founder discussions of visual communication artifacts on their websites**
A company that uses carbon waste to make construction products	Logo is the shape of an unfinished infinity symbol to reflect the continuous recycling of carbon reflecting their company's goal. Their website also has links to news articles to show that they were "hottest next thing." They are now replacing news links with customer testimonials to show that they are maturing as a company.
A drilling and exploration company	Logo is a representation of a fish that is found in the fossil beds where they mine. It was selected because the founders like fishing and it represented a segment in the rock where the fossils are often found. The founders also said that they were very intentional in designing the logo to attract investors beyond "white Western 55+ men."
A biotech firm focused on anti-aging processes	Logo uses images of a clock with DNA superimposed over it. Founders said clock symbolized the process of aging and DNA highlighted use of science to address it.

Company Description	**Illustrative summaries of founder discussions of visual communication artifacts on their websites**
A medical products company that is attempting to speed up healing process	Logo has two overlapping hexagons meant to look like items that are used for building things. It is mean to look like honeycombs that are the basis for building a beehive but also to show interconnectedness.
A company that uses carbon waste byproducts to produce new kinds of plastics	The logo is the same shape as the C02 molecule. Other images on the page are stock photos and used to give the impression of a "cool looking technology type feel"
A software that helps builders sell or rent homes	A company that has the logos of many builders. As a startup, they feel it is important to show that they have many customers including some large ones.
An app to help those in wheelchairs navigate areas	Uses only black and white images depicting regular day-to-day activities
A mobile high speed internet provider	Used images of forests on their website. This was to indicate to their primary target market (oil drilling companies) that their products can be used where they work.
An app that helps single parents connect	Photos used were stock images but were meaningful to the founders because they depicted their target audience and looked like the children of staff members.
An education company providing online training through a mobile app	The name of the company is the Greek god of security. Logo has an "S" on a shield to reflect their goal of creating a strong defence for companies against unsafe workplaces.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter discusses the findings from following the steps outlined in Chapter 3. More specifically, it highlights what key themes identified in the three stages of Greenwood et al. (2019) when exploring *how and why entrepreneurial firms embed historical elements into their visual communication artifacts*. Findings include both quantitative and qualitative reporting. Following this, I then highlight what I found during my exploratory stage when exploring *why* entrepreneurial firms embed historical elements into their visual communication artifacts.

4.1 Analysis Approach

4.1.1 Analysis

Figure 6. Categorial Process of Analysis

When conducting the categorical phase of analysis, I started with a frequency count of all visual communication artifacts. During this stage, I also created several memos to highlight a few observations and wondered if they would lead to additional codes. The following paragraphs highlight the memos which I created.

1. **Use of other company logos**

During my coding, I found 60 websites that utilized other company's logos on their homepages. The way that the logos were used varied. *Cherry Health*, for example, depicted its partners, while *Harvest Ventures* posted them as customer logos. *Cars Fast* highlighted news sites or awards where the company was featured. *Belongify* was more direct and represented its company as trusted by depicting logos of reputable Alberta-based organizations. Although

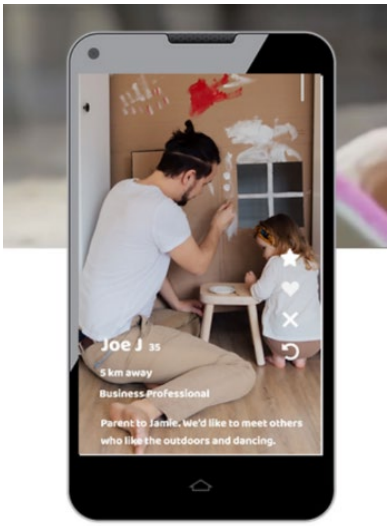
different in usage, it was clear that the company logos were used to project trust and confidence in the startup.

2. Symbols

I created a memo that I broadly called "symbols," which included other visual communication artifacts that emerged from the data. For example, the use of images of mobile devices was very prolific throughout the data (for an example, see Figures 7 and 8) In many observations, a mobile device was used to frame a product to highlight that it is an app or found online. Other sites had images of mobile devices that had no obvious connection to the company's content or products such as with *JustCook Kitchens.* Other websites had images that were framed within an image of mobile device.

Figure 7. Rocket First Labs Use of Mobile Devices for Framing

Figure 8. Single Parent Life Use of Mobile Devices for Framing



On a much smaller scale, other symbols were used including financial figures (*Credit App* and *Quickly* had symbols connected to money) and nationalistic symbols (*Local Shops* used a "Made in Canada" logo and *Carbon Royalty* has USA and Spanish flags in photos).

3. Skeuomorphism

Since skeuomorphs were something that I suspected would be in the data, I created a memo to track any observation related to this. Table 4 lists the examples that I found in the data. This does not include the commonly used mail symbol found on websites to indicate emailing. One example from the data was from *Slowdown*' which offers a product that treats early climax in men. To frame this new product as something known, the company used a fitness app framing as a way for men to understand and view it in the same way. In most cases, skeuomorphs were used to help new digital technologies to be better understood in simplistic terms.

Table 4. Use of Skeuomorphs.

Company	Skeuomorph	Connection
3edges	Fingerprint	Used to symbolize new authorization and authentication service
3edges	Magnifying glass	Used to represent new microservices that it offers
4 Technoze	Pencil	Transform company into something intelligent (attached wording has direct link)
Breeze Learn	Protractor	Used to represent technical skills that one can learn
Breeze Learn	Hourglass	Work at your own pace
Browse	Rabbit	Their AI has an easy set-up process
Browse	Globe and a pin	Their AI has Geolocation Based Data
Browse	Calendar	Their AI can be used for scheduling
Data Safeguard	Credit card with a lock and check mark	Their product is used to stop fraud
Delivery Domain	A grocer in a traditional apron holding a brown paper bag	Symbolizes local connection to grocer even though their product involves delivery of food
Slowdown	Diet app	Perhaps similar to someone who uses a diet app (e.g. weightwatchers) so that they can understand how the product is used

4.1.1.1 First Iteration

In my first iteration, I coded the visual communication artifacts identifying the temporal horizons which appeared to be used. Table 5 indicates the number of files and references for each coding category.

Table 5. Categorial Coding by Type and By Temporal Horizon

Code	Number of Files	Number of References
TEMP - Recent past	44	71
TEMP - Present	103	194
TEMP - Other	10	10
TEMP - Near Future	60	80
TEMP - Distant Past	126	274
TEMP - Distant Future	71	96
CAT - Text-to-Image	1	1
CAT - PhotoVideo	5	10
CAT - Other Companies	42	67
CAT - Other	0	0
CAT - Nonphoto Image	106	190
CAT - Graphics & Numbers	13	14

I then used the query function within NVivo to cross-reference which type of visual communication artifact was used for each temporal horizon. Some data items were not coded to a temporal horizon as there was no obvious connection, so some were not included in the breakdown in Table 6.

Table 6. Cross Comparison on Temporal Horizon by Categorical Type

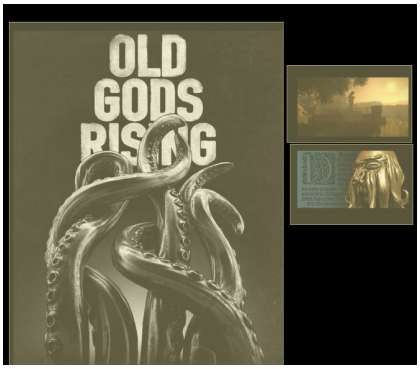
Code	TEMP - Recent past	TEMP - Present	TEMP – Other	TEMP - Near Future	TEMP - Distant Past	TEMP - Distant Future
CAT - Text-to-Image	1	28	0	12	1	0
CAT - PhotoVideo	6	113	0	33	4	0
CAT - Other companies	0	2	0	0	0	0
CAT - Other	0	0	0	1	0	0
CAT - Nonphoto Image	5	46	0	30	5	1
CAT - Graphics & Numbers	3	24	0	6	0	0

After completing this preliminary quantitative compilation, I then explored what kind of themes were starting to appear. The following three general themes were observed.

1. **General Observations on Use of Temporal Horizons**

Although many visual communication artifacts had no identifiable indications of temporal horizons, many did. When used, the different depictions of temporal horizons were not evenly distributed across all categories. For example, the use of the present and distant past were the most commonly used. *Memory Anchor*, for example, used tombstones of World War II veterans on its homepage. *Bad Blood Studios*, as another example, used images of ancient gods referring back to a very distant past.

Figure 9. Bad Blood Studios Use of the Distant Past



While less frequent than uses of the distant past, a significant number of companies embedded their visual communication artifacts with historical elements that pointed to the future. For example, *Serenity DTx Digital Therapeutics,* used images of the latest virtual reality (VR) technology to signal its ability to treat seniors with dementia. Similarly, other companies used a near-future temporal horizon in the visual communication artifacts including *BluesPoint* which images of warehouses and words like “future” superimposed over it. Other companies merged known items in new combinations in a skeuomorphic-like manner. For example,

Clockworkbiotech merged a cog with DNA in a homepage graphic that hints at how their new technology is stable and consistent while also expanding the possibility in human health (See Figure 10).

Figure 10. Clockwork Biotech's Use of the Near Future

One additional note is that while the majority of observations were focused on linkages to an external element within a temporal horizon, a small number of companies anchored theirs within themselves. For example, *Celezome* used their homepage to address name changes in their body lotion and *Luuze* showed differences between the past and present after using their product. Other websites, such as *Soteria*, used non-photo images to suggest how their model of workforce training was better than the "old" or traditional way.

Overall, uses of temporal horizons were used quite frequently within the data in a variety of ways. However, despite this observation, I concluded that there were limited insights that I could pull from the data on the uses of temporal horizons unless I was able to group it in different ways.

2. Themes within the Visual Communication Artifacts Used

I expected to see a variety of visual communication artifacts used within the websites. It was also not a surprise that the category most frequently used was photos / videos followed by

nonphoto images. Within each specific categorical type, the variety of images used was diverse, but I attempted to identify themes within each of them. Across the photos / videos and nonphoto image categories, I noticed a common occurrence in the data: the use of a mobile device image. I identified at least 30 occurrences of a mobile device and it being used in unexpected ways. For example, *Memory Anchor* used the mobile device as a frame for an image of gravestones (see Figure 11). While initially puzzling, I concluded that many companies used the mobile device image to show what their services or product would look when accessing it through mobile media. In other situations, the use of a mobile device appears to suggest speed and ease. For example, the website *Quickly* used a mobile device image to convey speedy payments (see Figure 12).

Figure 11. Use of Mobile Device of Memory Anchor website:

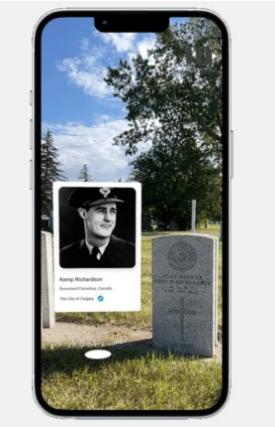
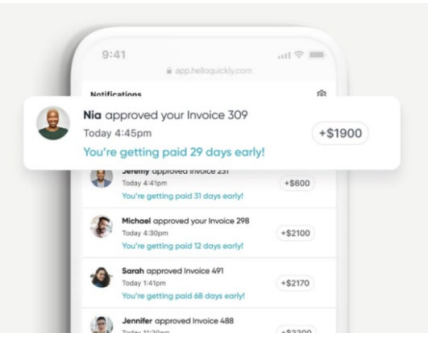


Figure 12. Illustration from Quickly Website on use of Mobile Device



3. Use of Other Logos

While coding in the categorical phase, I made several memos about many companies including logos from other companies on their homepages. Of the 181 websites in my dataset, I noted 60 companies that included or referenced other company logos. In many of these cases, the connection is for things like certification of product (e.g., *AI Shading*), featured on their news or events (e.g. *Bawse, Luuze*), membership in (e.g., *Carbon OxyTech, Cars Fast*), supported by (e.g. *Elev Homes*), how to access the app (e.g. *Flahmingo*), or trusted by (e.g., *Gridly, My Normative*). For these references, I acknowledge that the phenomenon existed in a noteworthy number of cases, but for this study, the use of other logos is outside of my core focus, so I decided to not include the information I gathered in my current research but to retain it for a future study.

4.1.1.2 Second Iteration

As noted in my methods section, I took an intentional pause to reflect on the data which led me to re-evaluate how the data should be analyzed and concluded that grouping by sector would be more appropriate. After recoding the data points, ensuring sufficient use of history and temporality, determining how they can be clustered by sector, and then identifying the central or important visual image, I was left with 181 datapoints broken down into 17 different sectors or industries. Several categories could further be grouped together but due to the size, I chose to keep them separate. For example, there were significant number of companies involved in the health and medical sector. A large number of these companies were technology-based while others were service-based companies. Despite the overlap in sector, I made the decision that technology-based products differed sufficiently enough to separate them from the service-oriented companies. Table 7 outlines the breakdown of the dataset at this stage.

Table 7. Sectors by Temporal Horizon

Sector	# of Orgs	Temporal Horizon					Images Used (Illustrative)
		Deep Past	Recent Past	Present	Near Future	Dist. Future	
Health and Medical Technology	11		2	3	5	1	Sperm/egg, parents / children
Medical and Health Services	6		4	1		1	Touching people or pets, kid drawings
Energy and Environmental	11	1	2		8		Nature, green flora
Beauty, Skin and Weight Loss	5		4	1			Young people
Entertainment (Software)	6	2	3		1		Octopus, monsters, hockey arena
Educational (Software)	4		1	1	2		Smiling children, cartoons
Financial, Cryptocurrency	7		3	2	2		Nature, forests, wheat fields
Agriculture, Biotech	5		2	1	2	1	Young crops (veggies), glass of beer
Connections, Relationships	2		2				Lake, lounge chairs, parents with kids
Operations, logistics, decisions	9		4	1	4		City, airport, mining, robots, nature
Communications software	3		1		2		Charts, children hugging, cat
Real Estate and Housing	5		4	1			Backyard, piggy bank, dog and house
Delivery Services	3		3				Farmer's market, brick building, robot
Security, encryption, data privacy	4	1	2			1	Fingerprints, magnifying glass, lock
Cleaning and Sanitation	2		2				Rubber gloves, scouring pad, vault
Office Support Services	4		2		2		Hand tools, ballcap, plants, lightbulb
Random	3		3				Battery, feminine product, delivery
Total	**90**	**4**	**44**	**11**	**28**	**4**	**181**

4.1.2 Content Analysis

Figure 13. Content Process of Analysis

Following the methodological process outlined in Greenwood et al. (2019), I then moved onto the content analysis stage where I looked at the data denotatively and connotatively. Since I was grouping by sector, I reviewed each sector separately and then analyzed the visual communication artifacts within each to see if there were common themes or used when looking at historical elements in them. The following provides a summary of each sector after completing both the denotative and connotative stages of analysis of the data.

Health and Medical Technology

The Health and Medical Technology companies comprised 11 different websites offering products using new technology to improve a health-related issue. In most instances, there were consistent images of people in intimate familial scenes. Whether depicted as a mother holding her young child, a healthcare professional offering comfort to an elder patient, or an educator fostering a supportive environment with students, the overarching message conveyed emphasized themes of care, intimacy, and platonic closeness. Notably, the visual representations on almost all of the websites were of women in roles ranging from doctors and educators to patients and support personnel. The one notable exception was found on *SlowDown*, which focuses on new technology designed for men struggling with premature ejaculation. In contract, every other site consistently represents women in caregiving capacities.

This imagery suggests that emerging healthcare technologies intentionally try to associate their products with the nurturing and empathetic qualities traditionally associated with females.

By aligning technology with these traits, these innovations seek to mitigate apprehension about unfamiliar medical devices by promoting a sense of warmth and interpersonal closeness.

Health and Medical Services

While similar to the Health and Medical Technologies category, Health and Medical Services were companies who focused mainly on non-technological services aimed at improving quality of life rather than doing the same through the advancement of new technology. The six companies in this category predominantly offered services related to mental health, detoxification, and caregiving. Visual communications on their websites conveyed two different themes.

The first theme closely mirrored the caregiving imagery found in the Health and Medical Technologies category, where women were prominently featured in nurturing roles, reinforcing associations with warmth and compassion. However, there were also subtle differences that suggested a greater emphasis on fond memories and emotional connections to the past. For example, images also included children's sketches, people hugging their pets, and multiple images of families hugging each other. This additional focus on warm memories of the past likely are intentional because of the nature of the services offered. Someone entering a detoxification program might be more inspired to do so by suggesting the possibility of returning to a more stable and fulfilling period of their past. While specific interpretations of each image can vary, collectively the images pointed to nostalgic moments or memories.

A second theme was that of scientific legitimacy. While healthcare services are traditionally associated with caregiving and support, some websites appeared to intentionally integrate scientific imagery to reinforce the credibility of their approaches. For example,

Medplant Science, a company promoting the use of psychedelics in mental health treatment, used a silhouette of a person with distorted lines representing the brain and fractures along the upper neck. This reference indirectly appeared to reference a well-known 1980s' anti-drug campaign, which used a frying egg to depict drug-inducted brain damage. Similarly, a medical clinic promoting a new integrated healthcare approach incorporated imagery related to science and astronomy suggesting a deliberate effort to align its services with innovation and empirical research. These examples illustrate how some health and medical service providers seek to position themselves not only as a source of caregiving but also as pioneers in treatment due to their scientific foundations.

Energy

Considering that the dataset is derived from the Alberta context which has an economy based largely on oil and gas, it is unsurprising that energy-related companies constitute one of the largest sectors in this data. This category includes 11 companies focused on energy production, alternative energy services - mainly hydrogen and environmental services linked to energy production. A consistent use of visual communication artifacts emerges from across these websites with imageries of blue skies, green forests and sunsets and bodies of water. Within both the Alberta and global context, energy extraction is widely recognized as an inherently disruptive and environmentally impactful process. Consequently, the visual communication artifacts employed by these companies suggest a deliberate effort to make a more imperative: that their products or services are not only essential for energy generation but also instrumental in environmental protection and sustainability.

One company in this category took a distinct approach by naming itself after an extinct specific of fish that once inhabited the region where it now operates. While maintaining the

broader environmental responsibility narrative used by its industry peers, this company leveraged the extinction of the species to create an historical connection, suggesting a legacy that extends beyond its short life. This strategy is unique as it reframes a historically negative consequence of the energy industry, the loss of biodiversity, as a foundation for the company's identity and commitment to responsible environmental stewardship.

Software - Entertainment

The six websites in this category clearly exhibited mythological themes. Images such as octopus tentacles looked familiar with depictions of the mysterious creature, the Kraken. This, alongside statues of ancient gods, goblins, and monstrous figures, all evoked imagery rooted in mythology. Most of these images were used by video gaming companies that also elicited responses of a battle or conquering ancient evil. Targeting what appeared to be a predominantly young audience, companies within this category attempted to link their new software to historical and mythical conflicts, implying a compelling need to participate.

Software - Educational

While the Software-Entertainment category primarily consisted of products that focused on enjoyment and entertainment, this category appeared to have a primary focus on education and instruction. The four products in this category were mainly aimed at children's learning and included many visual communication artifacts of smiling youth. The connection to a historical theme is less evident partly due to the limited number of companies in this category. However, the use of smiling children and cartoon imagery may subtly evoke a sense of nostalgia. It prompts one to reflect on their own childhood and the desire to ensure that their own children

can has similar experiences. In doing so, companies may be leveraging nostalgia to suggest that their products will contribute to creating similar meaningful memories for the next generation.

Financial / Cryptocurrency

All seven websites in this category focused on providing financial services through digital platforms (both the actual currency and services to manage currencies). A recurring theme across nearly every site was that of nature. Images of dense green trees, wheat, nature with moose, and a bull may hint at historical connections and narratives. Economies were traditionally rooted in agriculture and natural resource based. This is particularly true for economies in the Alberta region. Even in modern-day society, symbols such as the bull continue to reflect different elements of the market. By integrating these symbols, tech-based financial startups may be intentionally aligning themselves with the historical narrative of the relationship between economy and nature, positioning themselves as part of the next evolutionary stage in economic development.

Agriculture / Biotech

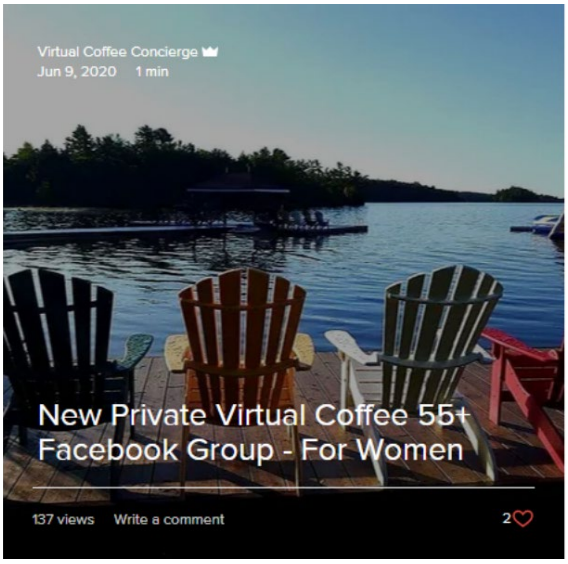
Whether it was water management, genetic modifications of plants, brewing, or the creation of biofuels, companies in this category had used new technologies to significantly alter current agriculture-related processes. In other words, the companies provided non-natural production of mostly naturally found products. Despite this, nearly every website in this category contains clear connections to historical agricultural practices. Imagery of a farmer standing over a field of crops, seedlings, and earth-moon system photos suggest that these companies may be employing skeuomorphism to link their innovative products to more familiar practices. Given that technologies like genetic modification and water management can be perceived as

controversial or scary, referencing to traditional farming practices may serve to mitigate concerns by framing these new technologies in a context that is more widely understood and less intimidating. In this context, traditional farming practices serve as the primary anchor for these skeuomorphic representations.

Software – Connections / Relationships

The category, although small, consists of companies focused on fostering relationships, either to find a partner or to connection individuals of similar age. With only two data points, my initial thought was to remove them from further consideration. However, the visual communication artifacts were interesting enough to warrant further exploration. For example, images included multi-colour Adirondack chairs on a dock beside a blue lake and a father with his daughter playing with dolls (see Figure 14). These images evoke themes of nostalgia and simplicity, appealing to a desire for connection - both with nature and with others - in a simpler and fulfilling manner. By doing so, these companies frame their technology-driven platforms within the context of a longing for a time in the past.

Figure 14: Adirondack Chairs on Virtual Coffeehouse 55



Real Estate and Housing

Similar to other categories, companies within the real estate and construction sector frequently incorporate elements of nostalgia within their visual communication artifacts. Across the websites, images of backyard scenes highlighting happy scenes with children or dogs, 1990s style claymation characters, and a piggy bank evoke memories of traditional family within suburban Alberta. Interestingly, even real estate companies that create small and compact garden suites link their memories to large homes with the big backyards as the symbol for stability and happiness. This suggests an intentional effort to align contemporary housing solutions with familiar, idealized notions of home and family life.

Security, Encryption, Data Privacy

Another relatively small category within the dataset consists of technology-based security and authentication platforms. Skeuomorphism was quite prevalent among the small number of websites. For example, a software authentication company incorporated fingerprint imagery within its visual communication artifacts to represent its technological capabilities while a data privacy company used a lock symbol to convey its security and protection. These companies deliberately employed familiar and historically recognized symbols to help one understand their advanced technological solutions. By leveraging well-established symbols, the companies were able to bridge the gap between complex unfamiliar technology and commonly understood physical security concepts to enhance user trust and acceptance.

Summary

The following table summarizes the overall findings that I identified in the Content Analysis phase of my analysis.

Table 8. Summary of Content Analysis for Each Product / Service Sector

Product / Service Sector	Image Used	Code(s)	Examples of Feelings or Emotions
Health and Medical Technology	Sperm & egg, parents & children, knitting, holding hands with elderly	Nostalgia Nurturing	Referencing empathetic qualities traditionally associated with mothers.
Health and Medical Services	Kid drawings of city, people hugging pets	Nostalgia Scientific Legitimacy	Feelings of warmth and compassion. Science legitimizes services or practices.
Energy	Aurora Borealis, Green pastures, plants, blue skies, sunrise, water, sunrise, traffic flowing on highway, piggy bank, extinct fish,	Nature	The need for environmental protection and sustainability.
Entertainment (Software)	Octopus, Greek god-like statues, monsters, goblins, hockey arena	Myths Dystoria	Negative feels of past events, myths, or conflicts.
Educational (Software)	Smiling children, cartoons, mobile device	Nostalgia	Memories of childhood happiness.
Financial, Cryptocurrency	Forests with dense green trees, moose, bull, wheat fields, young professionals dressed casually, stock ticker, related worker	Nostalgia Nature	Depictions of traditional agrarian economies.
Agriculture, Biotech	Seedlings, mature harvest, farmer bending down to look at seedlings, earth and moon, glass of beer,	Skeuomorphs Nostalgia	Positive imagery of traditional farming practices connected to technology of today.
Connections, Relationships	Adirondack chairs at lake, dad and daughter playing	Nature	Simplicity, calm and peace in a natural setting.
Real Estate and Housing	Calgary Tower, homes made in Claymation, backyard, mother and daughter, piggy bank, dog and house	Nostalgia	Idealized notions of suburban North American family lifestyle.
Security, encryption, data privacy	Fingerprints, magnifying glass, tombstone, lock, universe spinning, tombstone, credit card	Skeuomorphs Nostalgia	Positive connections referencing older technology.

4.1.3 Rhetorical Analysis

Following the methodological process outlined in Greenwood et al. (2019), the rhetorical analysis stage meant that I analyzed the data to draw out themes beyond surface level understandings to understand the rhetorical functions. Ultimately, my goal in this stage was to identify the practices (rhetorical strategies) and link them to the broader theoretical framing within rhetorical history. To do so, I followed Greenwood et al. (2019) where I took a critical view of the visual communication artifact to allow for meaningful interpretation connected to cultural understandings. Through this, I identified several different forms of rhetorical analysis being used.

Legitimacy of Land

If looking to the past or to the future, there is a common understanding that human connection to land represents an idealized state. Whether referencing ancestral origins, a newly purchased home, or a favourite vacation spot, this connection is deeply embedded in human identity. While urbanization has reduced direct interaction with the land, the connection remains – and companies are strategically leveraging this message in their identities.

Alberta's history as an agricultural and resource-driven province attracted immigrants, established industries, and created an economic system centred around land-based production. This narrative has shaped Alberta's identity. As a result, cultural institutions, traditions, and narratives – have reinforced this connection to land, seen in festivals like Farm Fair or KDays that celebrate agricultural heritage.

New technologies now reframe this connection in ways that align with evolving economic realities. Companies like *AG Gene* and *Farmers Legacy Bio* elicit the promise of

reconnecting people to the land (the base). Yet while doing so, they are also legitimizing new forms of production while carefully maintaining cultural continuity.

Additionally, some companies use the connection to land as a way to evoke fear, portraying environmental damage and degradation. *Kathairos*, for example, superimposes images of damaged landscapes with solutions that promise to heal nature. This idea aligns with a broader shift in social institutions where within an Alberta context, protecting land is seen as a moral duty and economic necessity. In recent years, for example, the fight over opening coal mining in the eastern slopes of the Canadian Rockies has created significant controversy among Albertans (Graney, 2024). In this way, Alberta-based companies are not just marketing products but are participating in the ongoing tension between economic forces and cultural narratives, adapting their messaging to reflect shifts in both the material base and the ideological superstructure (Vidal et al., 2015). By doing so, these companies attempt to legitimate their products by associating with the tension that exists between the actual and the cultural significance.

Authenticity of Human Connection

In addition to connections to land, an equally common lens employed was the value in human-to-human interaction. Whether is it a smiling mother holding her baby or a healthcare professional offering comfort to an elderly patient, the imagery emphasizes that touch and human connection are fundamental to well-being. Across health and medical companies, this message is especially reinforced through visual communication artifacts of women depicted in caregiving roles. This connects to, and reinforces, a cultural association between warmth, empathy, and trust with women in the healthcare sector.

Saussure's theory of signs can be helpful to clarify (Sanders, 2004; Weber, 1976) in the construction of meaning. In this framework, images of women in caregiving roles serve as the signifier. Within these images, significance is extracted based on culture and history. For example, in the health technology companies, images of a women with her child or a nurse with a patient serve as a recognizable signifier that suggest reliability, authenticity and nurturing. By embedding these associations in their messaging, companies reinforce the idea that their products are not just technological innovations but extensions of human compassion which is portrayed through women. Other companies employ isolation as a contrasting signifier. *Aphotix*, for example, depicts an individual struggling alone with medication, while *Medplant Science* uses images of solitary individuals battling mental health challenges. In these situations, isolation becomes a signifier that suggests vulnerability and disconnection. The approach strengthens the idea that human connection is not just valuable but essential.

Ultimately, these companies are not just displaying images but are also constructing meaning through signs that shape perception by using cultural ideas and norms. In this case, depictions related to the female gender are used to associate their products with specific ideas or emotions. By doing so, companies project authenticity as they make meaning.

Figure 15. Aphotix image depicting isolation and addiction

Status and Reputational Adoption

Other companies employ rhetorical strategies centred around status and reputation, especially in the Real Estate and Housing category. While the two constructs are different, there is a strong connection between what can be described as association with other entities, delivering quality over time (George et al., 2016). Within the data, a wide number of visual communication artifacts were used that included meanings associated with wealth, power and prestige. For example, in Western culture, a piggy bank often symbolizes the ability to save and manage money wisely. Concepts of wealth creation and financial management come to mind, underscoring ideas of power and status through savings. Similarly, the Calgary Tower serves as a symbol within Alberta of power and prestige. Opened in 1968, it was the tallest structure in Canada outside of Toronto (Moore, 2018). At the time of construction, oil was starting to boom, and the province was growing in economic and political strength within the Canadian federation. It was a symbol of Alberta gaining strength, status, and prestige across the nation. Association with other entities (status) is evident as well as implying that the connection to long-term delivery of services (reputation) are clearly seen.

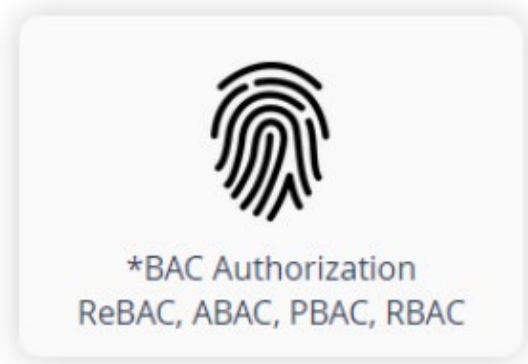
Similarly, one real estate company adopted the archetypal North American ideals of success and status: ownership of a large suburban home with a big backyard. This company attempted to attribute the same notion of success and status to their own product even though it contrasted with their idea of owning a compact urban residence. Similar to what was seen in the previous section, the uses of visual communication artifacts create a visual narrative that enhances the perceived status or reputation of a firm's product or service.

Skeuomorphs

The presence of skeuomorph-based designs was another phenomenon within the dataset and warranted some discussion. Hargadon and Douglas (2001) suggest that skeuomorphs play a crucial mediating role in the introduction of change, facilitating the adoption of new technologies by linking them to familiar forms. This process is particularly evident in industries experiencing rapid technological change, such as agriculture/biotech and security/data sectors. Given the complex and little-understood advancements in these areas, skeuomorphs serve as anchors that help an audience to comprehend and accept.

For example, within the security / data sector, visual representations of fingerprints, locks and magnifying glasses appear across company websites. The symbols are widely recognized, and their meanings – security, protection, and investigation – are understood by the general public. By incorporating such familiar imagery, companies not only orient users to the functions of the emerging technologies but also serve to facilitate the legitimization process. More specifically, it reinforces trust and credibility. The dataset shows a consistent patten of companies using skeuomorphs as a strategic means of easing the transition towards new technological innovations.

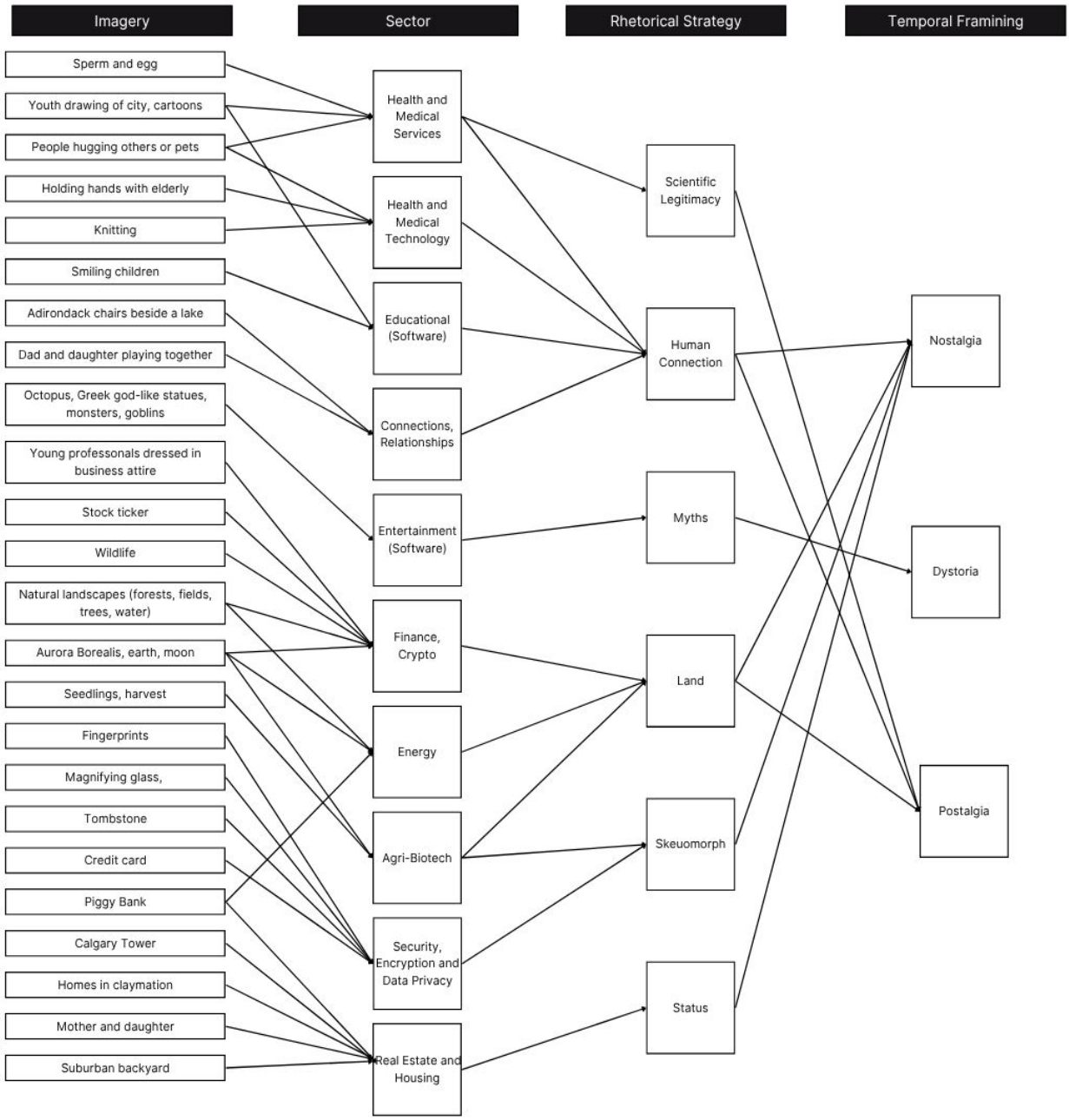
Figure 16. 3Edges Use of Fingerprints to Depict Security



Connecting the Relationships

With so many different findings across sectors, Figure 17 depicts the key connections and relationships among imagery, sector, rhetorical strategy and temporal framing observed and analyzed in the data. The diagram identifies key themes and pathways for how entrepreneurs are embedding historical elements into their visual communication artifacts. This can serve as a supportive structure to provide empirical support for theory building. It can also serve as a framework for entrepreneurs to readily understand the practical step-by-step process of doing the same within their own context. One note of interest is that the temporal framing of dystopia was not found in my data. This could be because of the uniqueness of companies found in my dataset, context of Alberta, or perhaps it is less often used in general. At this point, I cannot be certain why it is not present.

Figure 17. Relationship Within the Data in Study



4.1.4 Exploratory Interviews

As an exploratory stage of my work to begin to uncover the *why* behind the preceding findings, I analyzed the interview transcripts in NVivo to gain insight. My first goal was to understand whether entrepreneurs embedded historical elements intentionally or unintentionally.

Through the interviews, I found that intentionality and understanding varied among the different firms. Several participants told me that the creation of the website itself was used to project legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders. They were not particularly concerned with the specifics of the website design, but they felt that simply having a website was sufficient to prove that they were serious about their new venture. In these situations, the companies either used stock photos or hired a design company to make a website for them. This was evident when one interviewee was specifically asked about an image on their website when he responded, "Yeah, that's just a stock image…that's nothing what the app looks like…and when we redo the website, we're going to put some better images in there." (Software Development Company, Founder). Another interviewee said that they put little thought or attention into their visual communication artifacts because the company saw little value in worrying about it. "We just took a clip art and just threw it on there. It looked cool but then some people started saying well, there's significance to that photo" (Service Company, Founder). While interviewees claimed that any historical elements embedded were of coincidence, it does not necessarily rule out the subconscious activity of ruling out specific images or entering a search term to narrow the number of images to select. Nevertheless, the stated reasons suggest that in some cases, decisions were made subconsciously or without deliberate intention.

More commonly, I learned that entrepreneurs were more intentional in selecting what visual communication artifacts were on their homepage and what meaning it was conveying. In other words, the stories that they wanted to tell through their homepages took up a significant amount of time for many. It was these firms that could provide reasons on their motivations and reasoning behind this process. When I had asked them about why they selected their visual communication artifacts, I learned that the deliberate intentions were substantially richer than I

had first assumed. This led to a realization that the exploratory portion of my research had the beginnings for theory-building. More specifically, it hinted at a preliminary typology of founder intentionality. In developing this typology, I did not undertake a formal, iterative coding procedure. Instead, I relied on lifting and comparing illustrative stories from the interviews that spoke most directly to questions of intentionality. As a result, the categories outlined below should be read as preliminary and illustrative that offer a heuristic, early-stage framework rather than a comprehensive or generalizable classification. In conducting this process, I identified three different categories: 1) Aesthetic Delegation, 2) Personal Symbolism, and 3) Strategic Stakeholder Framing.

4.1.4.1 Aesthetic Delegation

As noted earlier, some participants chose specific visual communication artifacts not due to its significance but because of its visual or design appeal. In other words, their reasons were primarily for aesthetic delegation. Although this particular category perhaps has less overt connection to strategic purposes, it can still indeed provide insights into founder intentionality. For example, the types of visual communication artifacts chosen can possibly have connections to unconscious or unevaluated significance. Second, aesthetic design can come with cultural and historical meanings embedded within it. A rose in one country may mean something quite different to another, so it is possible that the cultural significance is so engrained in the symbolism and design that it remains known subconsciously. Lastly, the simple effort to consider aesthetics can leverage other cultural norms of appearing to be professional. As one interviewee noted, having a website in itself demonstrated a certain level of legitimacy (Blockchain Company, Founder). Thus, using visual communication artifacts simply for aesthetic design might not only indirectly hint at founder intentionality but also embed historical elements.

4.1.4.2 Personal Symbolism

For some participants, the historical elements used in their visual artifacts were so specific that they would only have meaning to the founders themselves, thus operating a personal symbolic level for the founders. For example, in one interview, I asked about an image of one of the founders coming out of an elevator. This elicited a strong emotional response from the interviewee. The image had a lot more meaning than I had assumed. The items in the photo, the location of the founder in the room, and even the facial expressions were all identified as very important in the selection of the image. It became clear that the actual story and events behind the image were very meaningful to the founders – perhaps more than to their targeted audience could perceive. The story to them was so important that the need to have it placed on the homepage was non-negotiable even if others did not understand why. In this case, the visual communication artifact was used more as a story cue for the founders when orally sharing the development background of their company. Similarly, in a different interview a founder talked about a still frame of a video on their website of a girl using the company's product. The founder responded, "Actually, I love that video because that she looked like one of my friend's daughters to a team" and had extra special meaning to her (Digital matchmaking platform, Founder). In both situations, the historical elements embedded in the images had more significance to the founder than it would to other potential stakeholders. In some ways, they were speaking to themselves.

4.1.4.3 Strategic Stakeholder Framing

Other companies were more intent on embedding historical elements to ensure that external stakeholders would understand. This seemed to be most evident when discussing company logos as historical elements were mentioned as being infused in nearly all of those topics.

4.1.4.3.1 Myths

One company was named and had their logo designed after the ancient Greek god of security. The founders assumed that this knowledge of Greek history would help make the connection to what they are trying to do with their new technology.

4.1.4.3.2 Historical Continuation

Similarly, a drilling and exploration company infused significant historical elements into their logo that was more than I observed with others. For some, their logo might look like a regular fish. However, the fish had multiple layers of historical elements embedded into it. First, the founders highlighted that the founders liked to fish and wanted to incorporate this into the logo. This is similar to what I mentioned earlier where the intent was more for the founders than other stakeholders. However, the interviewee also went on to say:

> *So we try to take the company logo…and make it a fish that understands itself in a school that swims with others in an environment that is an ecosystem with multiple other species and participants….to capture the ethos of what we're doing now, and the business that we're doing requires intense collaboration with First Nations, with land holders, with one another, with competitive industry*. (Drilling & Exploration Company, Founder)

They further added that they designed the fish logo in such a way to signal that it was looking for investors beyond their traditional base (which it defined as “white, Western, 55+ men” (Drilling & Exploration Company, Founder). The fish was softened and pastel colours used to make it more appealing to other types of investors. They wanted to be different and used historical elements in their logo to signal this to others. From this, it was clear that there was significant thought and intent with some companies on what visual communication artifacts were or were not included.

Figure 18. Fish image in Coelacanth logo

4.1.4.3.3 Skeuomorphic connections

Other companies were less philosophical in their approach but still embedded historical elements for different reasons. The concept of skeuomorphs was mentioned in several interviews. For example, one Biotech company wanted to convey their goal of modifying the aging process and decided to incorporate a clock into their logo to symbolize the inevitable march of time. This was overlayed with DNA to signal that their goal was to address time through the use of science (Biotech company, Founder). Another company, a navigation tool for those in wheelchairs, incorporated mapping and architectural concepts from the founder's profession directly into the font of the company's name. Their hope is that any architect looking at the company will quickly understand that their goal is to help make new spaces more accessible for people with disabilities (Wheelchair navigation website, Founder).

4.1.4.3.4 Place-based Positioning

Beyond logos, entrepreneurs were also very intentional in embedding historical elements into their visual communication artifacts to attract customers. For example, one internet provider used a significant amount of landscape images including dense forests. When asked why, they said that the landscape settings reflects where their target audience would be working and using their product. By connecting their product to forests, their hope was that their target market, specifically drilling companies, would understand that their product could be used in such locations (Internet service provider, Founder).

Figure 19. Pedesting Logo with "Nodes and Intersections" Woven into the Font

Overall, it was clear that many companies put thought into why they should embed historical elements into their visual communication artifacts. At this point, my understanding is that while it does occur, it is not done systematically, intentionally, or as strategically as I had hoped to see. This might be because the interviewees were from small startup companies who had to manage a lot of competing priorities with limited resources or perhaps this was representative of industry as a whole. Regardless, there is sufficient enough information to suggest that further research can provide insights into why companies are involved in this practice.

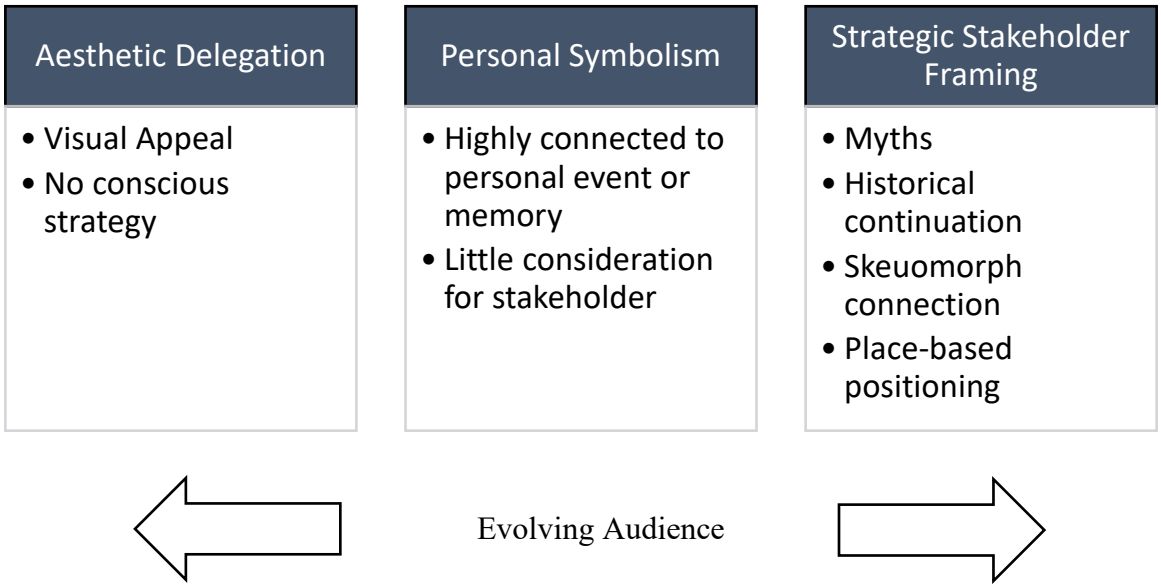
4.1.4.4 Evolving Audience

Lastly, several interviewees revealed that in the startup community, audiences change quickly, and that I should try to narrow the intent of the website (or target audience) more than what I had in mind. In one of my final interviews, I was talking with an entrepreneur who had recently changed their website. I was able to discuss both versions and why the changes were made (Workforce training company, Founder). This situation was not unique as about a quarter of the companies had modified their homepages from when I had initially screen-captured them a year ago. In this interview, I had commented that they had a number of links to new agencies on their original homepage but in the second version, they had swapped out the news stories for logos of their customers. The interviewee informed me that as a new company, their target audience changes quickly which means that they also need to update their websites to match the

change. In this particular situation, the company had created the website when they were in pre-seed (i.e., looking for early-stage investors) when they needed to look flashy and with a lot of potential. By the time I had interviewed them, they had their initial investors and were switching to attracting longer-term investors with deeper pockets. In this case, they needed to demonstrate that their product already was producing results and was more than just an idea. For this reason, they needed to underscore that the company has customers and is already generating revenue and therefore switched the news articles for customer logos on their homepage (Workforce training company, Founder). In another case, the interviewee said that their website was now misaligned with their company's goals. They had just launched before COVID in 2019 and had the goal of creating a community of disabled individuals, who would generate income through advertising revenues. Once COVID hit, the company had to pivot and focus on business-to-business revenue generation. The company has not had time or the resources to update this change to their website but intends to when it can (Internet Service Provider, Founder). Both of these stories revealed to me that early-stage companies change rapidly and that a three-year window is too long to assume that companies are still in their same relative stage of growth. Subsequent research would either need to take a longitudinal approach to understand how things change, or it would need to look beyond just the age of the company to better understand who the target audience is for their homepages.

This early typology, summarized in Figure 20, provides insights for further theory building into why entrepreneurs embed historical elements into visual communication artifacts. For practice, these early findings suggest that there is indeed a level of intentionality in this work, which can be further refined and clarified for application. This work will need to occur in subsequent research.

Figure 20. Typology of Founder Intentionality



Chapter 5: Discussion

By examining how and why entrepreneurial firms in Alberta embed historical elements into their visual communication artifacts, this research provides greater understanding in the entrepreneurial process relevant to both for theory formation and for practice. This chapter discusses how my study contributes to promising directions in conversations in both within the academic literature and within practice.

5.1 Rhetorical History as a Legitimacy Strategy

This empirical study provides support for the framework proposed by Suddaby et al. (2021) by demonstrating that embedding history elements is not only through language and textual narrative, but also through visual forms. Through analysis of visual communication artifacts on company websites, it is evident that early-stage ventures draw on the past to shape the individual and collective perceptions their legitimacy. Historical cues function rhetorically by anchoring startups in familiar cultural understandings. In this study, we saw entrepreneurs draw upon concepts such as pioneering, national heritage, scientific discovery, and craftmanship to frame their venture as legitimate. The purpose of doing so is to project a continuity of trusted traditions or institutions which mitigates the liability of newness and it offers stakeholders a recognizable framework to evaluate the new venture.

The field of semiotics provides insights in that historical elements embedded in visual communication artifacts operate as signifiers that anchor startups within collective cultural narratives (Campos, 2024; Smith & Anderson, 2007). Signifiers such as a piggy bank, a gear-laden DNA strand, or pastoral imagery can be used to link unfamiliar technologies to common cultural and social concepts (signified) such as financial security, scientific rigour, or pioneering. Yet this connection is arbitrary and context-specific (Badir, 2017; Holdcroft, 1991). There is no

inherent or logical reason why a particular visual communication artifact represents a significant meaning other than cultural context allows for it. Within my data, we are seeing the use of signs and symbols that are values-laden within an Alberta-context, and in some cases sectors, meaning. To better understand how this works, it is worthwhile to explore connections with the social evaluation literature. While hints of several different concepts were found in my findings, the literature on legitimacy looks more helpful.

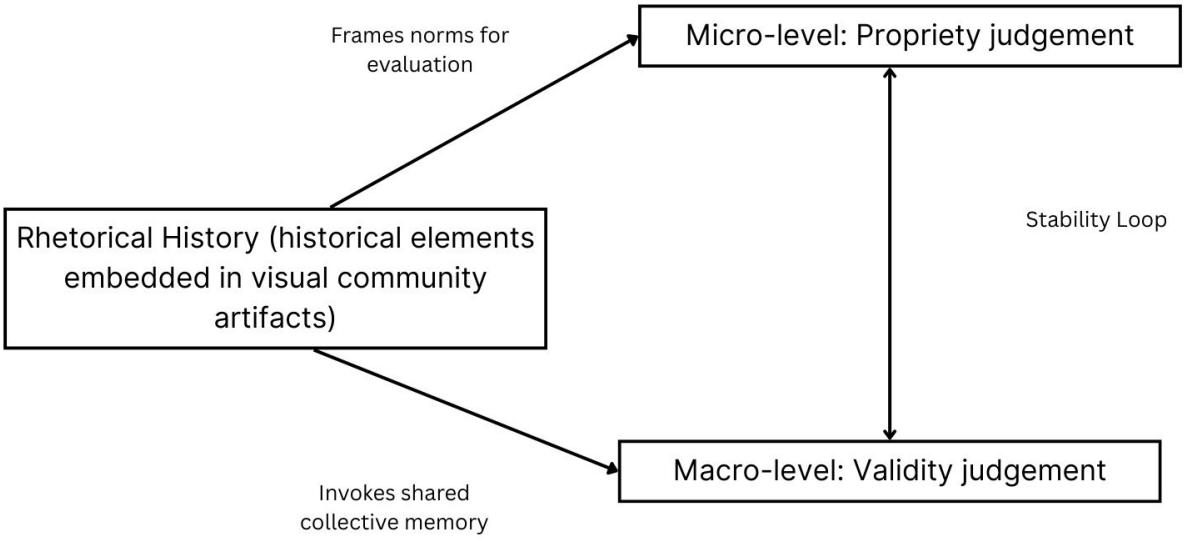
Well-studied in academic literature, legitimacy is recognized as important for the survival of new ventures for enhancing stability of an organization and for making it more competitive in acquiring resources and stakeholder support (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Baum & Oliver, 1991; Choi & Shepherd, 2005; Hannan & Carroll, 1992; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003; Singh et al., 1986). Legitimacy may be conferred by broader society or by specific sub-groups and communities (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). The process by which these stakeholders recognize legitimacy is by the organization creating a generalized perception or assumption that its actions of an entity are desirable, property, or appropriate within the norms, values, beliefs or definitions in society (Suchman, 1995). Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002) describe legitimacy as existing in the eye of the beholder.

Bitektine and Haack (2015)'s multilevel legitimacy framework offers a useful lens for understanding the findings in my study. At the micro level, historical elements embedded in visual communication artifacts shape propriety judgements, giving individual evaluators cognitive frames for assessing whether a startup's actions, practices, and values are appropriate. Practically speaking, this means in settings where things are changing or unknown, entrepreneurs can help shape how individual stakeholders (evaluators) come to understand and evaluate the new venture. In short, it can influence the norms used to assess the legitimacy of the startup.

Similarly, at the macro level, these same visuals can be used to activate validity beliefs by invoking collective cultural memories and connotations that suggest broad societal consensus. Throughout my study, we saw numerous examples of this being done where broader historical social understandings were being used to imply legitimacy.

Together, the micro and macro levels work together to reinforce what Bitektine and Haack (2015) refer to as the institutional stability loop where these widely recognized historical connections discourage stakeholders from questioning the legitimacy of the startup. For example, a renewable energy venture referencing environmental activism of the 1970s and 1980s signals continuity with a historically valued movement, supporting both micro-level propriety and macro-level validity judgements. Figure 21 below outlines the connection between how Rhetorical History acts as a mechanism for influencing the legitimacy process.

Figure 21. Connecting Rhetorical History Influencing the Legitimacy Process



5.2 Practical Implications

For practitioners, this study underscores that through carefully designed visual strategies that reference historical norms and collective memory, legitimacy can be cultivated. By anchoring their ventures in recognizable historical narratives, startups can reduce perceived risk and facilitate individual and collective approval. This is particularly important for new and emerging sectors where technology-focused firms often are found. In this situation, firms can help set the framework for understanding how to evaluate the sector and to determine what is means to be seen as legitimate. Uncertainty brings challenges in that stakeholders are not sure what to do with novelty. However, by using historically embedded visual communication artifacts, startups can strategically position itself to be seen as a legitimate entity. Startups can and should think two-fold in how they do such practices: first think broadly about what common cultural cues it can embed that would signal its legitimacy; and second, think on an individual level where different historical elements might resonate with different kinds of stakeholders that it is targeting. By approaching this strategic work from both angles, companies can influence and reinforce how legitimate it is seen within its sector.

Similarly, investors and entrepreneurship incubators can benefit from not only recognizing the importance of a startup spending time in its infancy ensuring that its visual communication artifacts are embedded with the right historical meaning for the intended audience, but is helpful in understanding which firms are willing to take actions to mitigate the risk of newness. By doing so, both investors and incubators can better identify which firms will likely end up being seen as more legitimate and, therefore, more successful. Entrepreneurial support programs are best to make this part of their ongoing entrepreneurship training programs. In many ways, with society's increasing preference for visuals, embedding historical elements

into visual communication artifacts may becoming the “elevator pitch” and critical for capturing the initial attention of potential stakeholders.

5.3 Future Research

There are a number of research directions that can evolve from this research including the following:

1. Longitudinal analyses of how visual communication evolves across funding stages or strategic pivots. This research focused on companies that started within a three-year period. It did not differentiate on what stage the company was in. As companies move from startup to growth and the funding levels along the way, there are likely greater nuances that can be identified in this process. Future longitudinal work could also track how shifting stakeholder groups (e.g., investors, customers, community partners) are reflected in evolving visual communication artifacts over time.
2. Propriety vs validity impact. This study notes that embedding historical elements into visual communication artifacts can help a startup be perceived as more legitimate by influencing both propriety and validity levels. Further work can be explored into how and why each level is targeted. This deeper analysis can provide greater value to entrepreneurs in determining how to balance cultural cues with the need to speak directly to targeted individuals. In addition to semiotic approaches, future studies could use experimental designs that introduce founders and different stakeholder groups to different visual artifacts, allowing researchers to identify how specific historical cues shape perceived meaning, propriety, and validity.
3. Cross-cultural comparisons to examine how symbolic imagery varies across national entrepreneurial ecosystems. The focus of this research was on a very narrow

geographic region (Alberta). This context is unique for many reasons. Studying across multiple geographic regions or nations may provide additional insights into what is commonly used and what might be used because of geographic variation. Such comparative research could also move beyond relatively static websites to include more dynamic social media channels (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) and short-form video, which now carry a significant share of entrepreneurial visual storytelling in many contexts.

4. Computational visual analysis to scale the study of rhetorical history across larger datasets using machine learning and image recognition. The growth of AI has opened up many doors for quantitative studies on large data sets. My data set of 181 companies is miniscule in what is possible if machine learning can be applied across all 2,619,613 start ups found on the Start Alberta website. When combined with computer-vision tools capable of handling images and video from social platforms, AI-driven approaches could support large-scale, cross-cultural replications of this study that include ventures which communicate primarily through social media rather than traditional websites.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

My research sought to understand how and why entrepreneurial firms embed historical elements into their visual communication artifacts. It was based on the assumption that it was actually occurring and was something that could be studied. My familiarity in the startup space made me comfortable knowing that this would indeed be the case. As I explored Alberta's startup community, I found that out of the 181 websites that I analyzed, all had some level of embedding historical elements into their visual communication artifacts. Some were very rudimentary and perhaps unintentional while other websites had a significant amount of thought put into it. Regardless, my assumption was correct and allowed for answering of my research question.

When exploring how entrepreneurial firms embed historical elements into their visual communication artifacts, there was considerable variation in how it was done. The primary means of doing so was through images and the majority of these took of "positive" lens through either a nostalgic or postalgic perspective reminiscing on a happy past or a paradise-like future. Additionally, these optimistic lenses adopted rhetoric around connections to land (particularly to farm land), relationships to others, or technology as the solution. All of these provide insights into what individuals in the Alberta context value. Connections to the social evaluation literature helped to explain how doing this kind of activity helped to influence and shape perceptions of legitimacy both at the individual and collective levels.

When asked through interviews why entrepreneurial firms are embedding historical elements into their visual communication artifacts, some are doing so unintentionally or with only superficial thought put into it. Those that did so intentionally normally focused on historical elements often thought about the significant to the founders of the company rather than to other

stakeholders. This suggests that there is opportunity to provide practitioners with insights on how to be more strategic. Some companies were already very intentional in this process and took much thought to consider how stakeholders would react or respond to the historically embedded visual communication artifacts. Firms who embrace such ideas serve as potential exemplars for the rest of the field.

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Appendix A: Preliminary Codebook

Table 9. List of Codes for Categorical Analysis Phase

Code	Definition	Descriptions and Examples
PhotoVideo	Photograph or video	An image or video made of a real item. For example, a photo of a sunset or a video of an airplane landing on a runway.
Nonphoto	Non-photographic image	An image created by someone to look like another item or concept but is not a genuine representation of it. For example, clip art or caricature art.
TexttoImage	Text in relation to image	An image that includes words. For example, an Alberta flag with "Alberta Proud" transposed on top of it.
Graph&Nmbrs	Graphics and numbers	Images that largely rely on numerical presentations. For example, a bar chart.
Other-Cat	Other Categorical	Any other visual communication artifact that does not fit into one of the above categories.
DistantPast	Distant Past	The image points to something that has occurred in the distant past. For example, an image of a knight in armour.
RecentPast	Recent Past	The image points to an event in the recent past. For example, a photo of the Twin Towers in New York on Sept 11, 2001
Present	Present	The image points to the present or "in the moment." For example, a photo of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.
NearFuture	Near Future	The image (or video) points to something that could occur in the near future. For example, a video of automated cars travelling down a highway
DistantFuture	Distant Future	The image points to something in the distant future. For example, a space colony on Mars.
Other-Temp	Other Temporal	An image that does not fit into a temporal horizon. For example, a sunset could be considered a past, present, or future event.

Content Analysis Phase

Table 10. List of Codes for Content Analysis

Code	Definition	Descriptions and Examples
Den-Obj-created	Denotative stage. An object that has manufactured	Something that is constructed by humans. For example, an airplane
Den-Obj-nature	Denotative stage. An object naturally made	Something that is found in nature. For example, a rock
Den-Live-human	Denotative stage. A human	Something that is related to the human person or body. For example, a photo of a young boy
Den-Live-fauna	Denotative stage. A living creature	A non-human creature. For example, a deer.
Den-Live-flora	Denotative stage. Vegetation	A plant or vegetation. For example, a tree.
Den-Nature-Other	Denotative stage. Other nature	Other elements of nature that do not fit in other categories. For example, the moon or the sky.
Den-Verbiage	Denotative stage. Words	Something that is primarily words / verbiage
Con-Nostalgia	Connotative Stage. Nostalgia	Positive emotive feelings or views of the past
Con-Postalgia	Connotative Stage. Postalgia	Positive emotive feelings or views of the future
Con-Dystopia	Connotative Stage. Dystopia	Negative emotive feelings or views of the future.
Con-Dystoria	Connotative Stage. Dystoria	Negative emotive feelings or views about the past.
Con-Other	Connotative Stage. Other	Other feelings that do not fit into the other categories

Table 11. List of Codes Generated in Content Analysis

Code	Definition
Dystoria	Negative emotive feelings or views about the past.
Myths	Connecting to traditional stories or narratives that explain natural phenomena, customs, beliefs, or historical events, often with supernatural elements.
Nature	References to the natural world, encompassing all living organisms, ecosystems, and physical phenomena not created or significantly altered by human intervention.
Nostalgia	Positive emotive feelings or views of the past.
Nurturing	Referring to the process of fostering growth, development, or well-being, typically through care, support, and encouragement.
Scientific Legitimacy	Eliciting credibility and validity through scientific principles, methodologies, and peer-reviewed evidence.
Skeuomorphs	Design elements of new products that imitate the appearance of older, familiar objects.

Appendix B: Semi-structured Interview Guide

The following outline was be adapted for each interview. The outline below is based on the questions that I would ask a member from the company. The subpoint questions are follow-up or probing questions to get the interviewee to elaborate on their responses.

1. Context
    a. Tell me about your company and products.
        i. What market are you in?
        ii. What are your main products?
        iii. Who are your competitors?
    b. Tell me a bit about the growth of your company. What stage are you at?
        i. Are you primarily looking to raise investors or grow customer base?
            1. What geographic region or market are you targeting?
2. Importance of Visuals
    a. Some might call it branding. Others might call it corporate identity or image. Regardless of the actual term you use, has your company put much thought or priority into this area?
        i. If yes, why?
            1. What do you see as your goals or approach in this area?
        ii. If no, do you intend to put much energy into this area? Why or why not?
3. Focus
    a. Visual Identity. How would you describe the visual identity of your company?
        i. How do you want your external and internal stakeholders to view you?
        ii. Have you mimicked, borrowed, or were inspired by others for elements of your visual identity?

b. Tell me about your company logo.
    i. How was it developed?
    ii. What does it mean? Are there elements of it that have specific significance?
c. I'm quite intrigued by your website. Who was responsible for its creation?
d. Looking at your homepage, what is the primary message that you are trying to convey through it?
e. I've looked at your website and was quite intrigued by X [e.g. all of the videos]. Can you talk about how you came to select this means of sharing your message?

4. Specifics
    a. Let's look specifically at some of the items on your homepage. Walk me through some of your specifics. For example, you have X [e.g. a video of a skyscraper on fire with the words "I hope everybody in the building got out safely."]
        i. Why did you choose this particular element?
        ii. What's the message that you hope is understood in this?
        iii. What specifically are you trying to accomplish with the use of this video and phrase?
    b. I noticed that you used a lot of videos. Was there any specific reason why you chose this form of imaging, and not photos, sketches, or some other type of visual element?

c. I noticed that the videos you used were all actual events from the near-past. Why did you choose to use past events that your company was not involved in rather than something else… such as potential future events (or even events that your company did monitor)?
d. Is there any other strategic reason why you selected this visual cue as opposed to something else? I'd love to better understand why this was specifically used.

I may ask additional questions depending on the flow of the conversation, but the above structure should provide an adequate format for informing my analysis.

Appendix C: List of Companies in Data Set

	Company Name	Start Date	Website
1	3Edges	22-Mar	https://3edges.com/
2	4Technoze	2020	http://4technoze.com/
3	A&D Medical Heart Track	2020	http://andhearttrack.com/
4	A-BaVi Protec	Apr-20	http://a-baviprotec.com/
5	Access ehealth	2020	http://accessehealth.net/
6	Afitlearning	2021	http://afitlearning.com/
7	AgGene	2020	http://aggene.ca/
8	AI Shading	2021	http://aishading.com/
9	Alberta Consulting Group	Nov-21	https://albertacg.com/
10	All Skin	Aug-20	https://www.allskinhealth.com/
11	Andau Medical	2020	http://andaumedical.com/
12	AphioTx	2021	http://aphiotx.com/
13	Arbor	Sep-20	http://arbordb.co/
14	Areto Labs	2020	http://aretolabs.com/
15	ATMA Journey Centers	2020	http://atmajourney.com/
16	Atom Health	Jun-20	http://atomhealth.ca/
17	Aurora Hydrogen	2021	https://aurorahydrogen.com/
18	AVA Industries	Jan-20	https://avaindustries.ca/
19	Ayrton Energy	2021	http://ayrtonenergy.com/
20	Bad Blood Studios	2020	http://badbloodstudios.com/
21	Bawse	2021	https://joinbawse.com/
22	Belongify	2020	http://belongify.com/
23	Biohubx	2020	https://www.biohubx.com/
24	Bison & Bird	May-21	https://www.teambisonandbird.com/
25	Blivemusic	2020	http://blivemusic.com/
26	Bluespoint	2021	http://bluespoint.ca/
27	BreezeLearn	2020	https://breezelearn.com/
28	Browse	2020	http://browse.ai/
29	Buoyancy Works Software	Mar-21	http://buoyancy.works/
30	Calefy	2020	http://calefy.ca/
31	Carbon OxyTech	2020	http://carbonoxytech.com/
32	Carbon Royalty	2021	http://carbonroyalty.com/
33	Caret	Jan-21	http://gocaret.com/
34	CARM&A Health	2021	https://www.carma-health.com/
35	CarsFast	2020	http://carsfast.ca/
36	Cherry health	Apr-20	http://cherry.health/

37	Circle Neurovascular Imaging	2021	http://www.circlenvi.com/
38	cirkuit	Dec-20	https://cirkuit.io/
39	Clinify	Mar-20	http://myclinify.com/
40	Clockwork Biotech	2021	http://clockworkbiotech.com/
41	Codo	May-20	http://codo.ca/
42	Coelacanth Energy	2022	http://coelacanth.ca/
43	Collegium	2020	https://collegiumbuilt.com/
44	Connectedhypglo	2021	http://connectedhypglo.ca/
45	Correct-AI	Feb-20	http://correct-ai.com/
46	Cratic Ai	2020	https://www.cratic.ai/
47	Creditapp	2022	http://creditapp.ca/
48	Crescendoroyalty	2020	http://crescendoroyalty.com/
49	Crowdblink	2020	http://crowdblink.com/
50	Cryptocachemini	2021	http://cryptocachemining.com/
51	Cultivatr	Jan-20	https://cultivatr.ca/
52	Cup Carrier Media	Jan-20	http://cupcarrier.media/
53	Current SCM	2020	http://currentscm.com/
54	Curvenote	Mar-20	http://curvenote.com/
55	Cyberbox	Jan-22	http://cyberbox.art/
56	Datasafeguard	2021	http://datasafeguard.ai/
57	DeepBlue Greens	Dec-20	https://www.deepbluegreensag.com/
58	DeliveryDomain	Jan-21	https://deliverydomain.com/
59	Dermazone Solutions	2020	http://celazomeskin.com/
60	Dianomix	May-20	http://dianomix.com/
61	DishHub	2020	https://www.dishhub.ca/
62	Effortless IVF	2021	http://effortlessivf.ca/
63	Elev	2020	http://elevhomes.ca/
64	Entropy	2021	https://entropyinc.com/
65	EOS Network	2021	http://eosnetwork.com/
66	Fairly Staffing	2020	https://www.fairlystaffing.com/
67	Farmer's Legacy Biotech	2020	http://farmerlegacybiotech.com/
68	FieldPro Software	2020	https://fieldpro-software.com/
69	FirstBase Skincare	2021	http://firstbaseskincare.com/
70	Flahmingo	2020	http://flahmingo.com/
71	FlowUp Automation	Jan-21	https://flowup.com/
72	GardenLoft	2020	https://www.gardenloft.ca/
73	Geoconnect	2021	http://geoconnect.energy/
74	Getadoseofhappiness	2021	http://getadoseofhappiness.com/
75	Gradient MSP	Oct-20	https://www.meetgradient.com/

76	Gridly	Nov-20	http://gridly.com/
77	Harpia Sports Development	Jul-21	https://harpia.ca/
78	Harvest Ventures	2021	http://harvest.ventures/
79	Healthyspace	2021	http://healthyspace.ca/
80	Helical Pile Solutions	Jan-20	http://hpspile.com/
81	Homestyle Selections	2020	https://www.homestyleselectionslp.com/
82	Houski	2021	http://houski.ca/
83	Ichor Blood Services	2020	https://ichorblood.ca/
84	Ignitecentre	2021	http://ignitecentre.ca/
85	Inflexion Games	Jan-21	https://www.inflexion.io/
86	InstaCare	2021	http://instacaretech.com/
87	Intrinsic Innovations	2020	http://intrinsicinnovations.ca/
88	Iron Goblin	2020	http://irongoblin.com/
89	IUVO	Jan-21	https://iuvo.ca/
90	JAMH	Feb-20	http://jamh.ai/
91	Job Shift	Jan-20	http://jobshift.com/
92	JustCook Kitches	2020	https://justcook.kitchen/
93	Kanin Energy	Apr-20	https://www.kaninenergy.com/
94	Kathairos Solutions	2020	http://kathairos.com/
95	Kerian Real Estate	2020	https://kerianrealestate.com/
96	Kettera	Aug-20	https://www.kettera.io/
97	KiwiMe	2021	https://kiwime.io/
98	Launch57	2021	http://launch57.com/
99	Laundrywell	2020	http://laundrywell.com/
100	Leafify	2020	http://leafify.ca/
101	Life Support Mental Health	2020	https://lifesupport247.com/
102	Llearner	Jun-21	https://llearner.co/
103	Local Shops	2020	http://localshops.com/
104	Lunar Water Supply	2020	https://lunarwatersupply.com/
105	Luuze	2020	http://luuze.com/
106	LyfeMD	2020	http://lyfemd.ca/
107	Mathemagician	2020	https://solvemath.ca/
108	Medplantscience	2021	http://medplantscience.com/
109	Memory Anchor	Apr-20	https://memoryanchor.com/
110	Menu Mandala	May-22	https://menumandala.ca/
111	Modern Mining	Jul-21	https://www.modern-mining.ca/
112	Mojow Autonomous Solutions	2020	https://www.mojow.ai/
113	Monark	2020	http://leadwithmonark.com/

114	Moneyprep	2020	http://moneyprep.ca/
115	My Fungi	2020	https://www.myfungi.ca/
116	My Normative	2020	https://mynormative.app/
117	Mycorize	Apr-21	http://mycorize.ca/
118	Myhealthjournals	2020	http://myhealthjournals.co/
119	Myzenbase	2021	http://myzenbase.com/
120	Naiad Lab	2020	http://naiadlab.com/
121	Nanode	2020	http://nanodetech.com/
122	NanoTess	Jun-20	http://nanotess.com/
123	Nexpro	2020	http://nexpro.io/
124	Norada	Jan-20	https://norada.com/
125	NovusTX Devices	Mar-20	http://novustx-devices.com/
126	Oco Company	Feb-22	https://www.ococompany.com/
127	OneVest	2021	https://www.onevest.com/
128	Ordr Technologies	Jan-20	https://www.ordr.io/
129	Orennia	Jul-05	https://orennia.com/
130	Outlaunch	Jan-20	http://outlaunch.co/
131	Ownly	2020	https://theownly.io/
132	Pateno Payments inco.	2020	https://www.pateno.com/
133	Pedesting	Jul-20	https://pedesting.com/
134	Phyto Organix Foods	2021	https://phytoorganixfoods.com/
135	Poutine Swap	2021	https://poutineswap.com/
136	pronto	Oct-20	http://shootpronto.com/
137	Propra	2021	https://www.propra.ca/
138	PulseMedica	Jun-20	http://pulsemedica.com
139	Quickly	Jun-21	https://helloquickly.com/
140	Raft Beer Labs	2020	http://raftbeerlabs.ca/
141	Rallie	Nov-20	http://werallie.com/
142	Re Waste	2020	http://rewaste.ca/
143	Represent	2021	http://representdao.com/
144	Righteous Gelato	2021	http://righteousgelato.com/
145	RocketFire Labs	Oct-20	https://www.rocketfirelabs.com/
146	Ruth	2021	https://www.getruth.ca/
147	SABI Mind	Oct-20	http://sabimind.com/
148	Samismed	2021	http://samismed.com/
149	Scription	2022	https://www.scription.ai/
150	Sequorum	Sep-20	http://sequorum.com/
151	Serenity DTx	Sep-21	https://www.serenitydtx.com/
152	Sharepointanalysts	2020	http://sharepointanalysts.com/
153	The Curvy Shop	2021	http://shopthecurvy.com/

154	Single Parent Life	Dec-20	https://www.singleparentlife.app/
155	Slow Down Health	Dec-20	https://slowdown.app/
156	Smobler Studios	2021	https://www.smoblerstudios.com/
157	Sniffy Pet	Jan-20	http://sniffypet.com/
158	Soteria120	2020	http://soteria120.com/
159	SpectrumH2	Sep-20	https://www.spectrumh2.ca/
160	Stream.ML	May-21	http://stream.ml/
161	Sylvester.ai	2020	http://sylvester.ai/
162	TapLabs	2021	https://www.taplabs.ca/
163	TeamCarePal	2020	https://teamcarepal.com/
164	Teser Technologies	Jan-20	http://teser.ca/
165	The Mothership Technologies	May-21	https://www.themothership.tech/
166	The Public Food Hub	Sep-20	http://publicfoodhub.com/
167	The Rubic	Jul-20	https://therubic.com/
168	Ti-DOX	2020	http://ti-dox.com/
169	Trex	2021	http://trex-ai.ca/
170	Truffle	Nov-20	https://zipscripts.app/
171	Veras Technologies	2020	https://veras.ca/
172	Vetsie	2020	http://vetsie.com/
173	Village Wellth	Jan-21	https://villagewellth.com/
174	Virtual Coffee House 55+	2020	https://www.virtualcoffeehouse55.com/
175	Visionary Gold	2020	http://visionarygoldcorp.com/
176	VOTO	2021	https://votoapp.co/
177	WaitWell	Oct-20	https://waitwell.ca/
178	Wave View Imaging	2020	https://www.waveviewimaging.com/
179	Webqit	Jan-20	http://webqit.com/
180	WordKit AI	Aug-21	https://www.wordkit.ai/
181	ZipScripts	Nov-21	https://zipscripts.app/

Note that as new ventures, it is likely that some of the above websites no longer work