Images of Hate: A Methodology for Analysing Visual Extremism
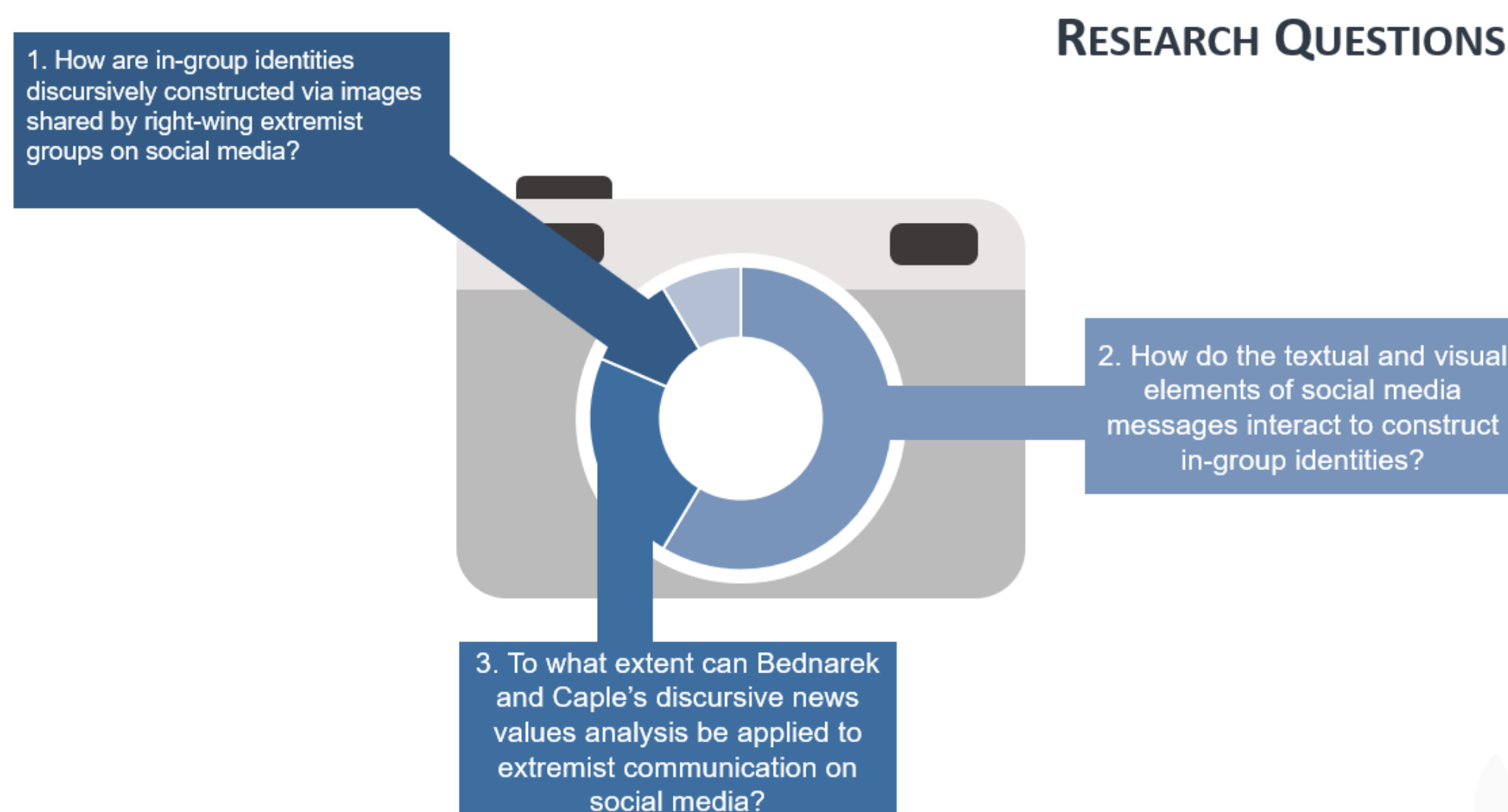
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Project Aim

To investigate the images shared on social media by right-wing extremist groups via a mixed methods study combining multimodality and discursive news values analysis (DNVA).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How are in-group identities discursively constructed via images shared by right-wing extremist groups on social media?

2. How do the textual and visual elements of social media messages interact to construct in-group identities?

3. To what extent can Bednarek and Caple's discursive news values analysis be applied to extremist communication on social media?
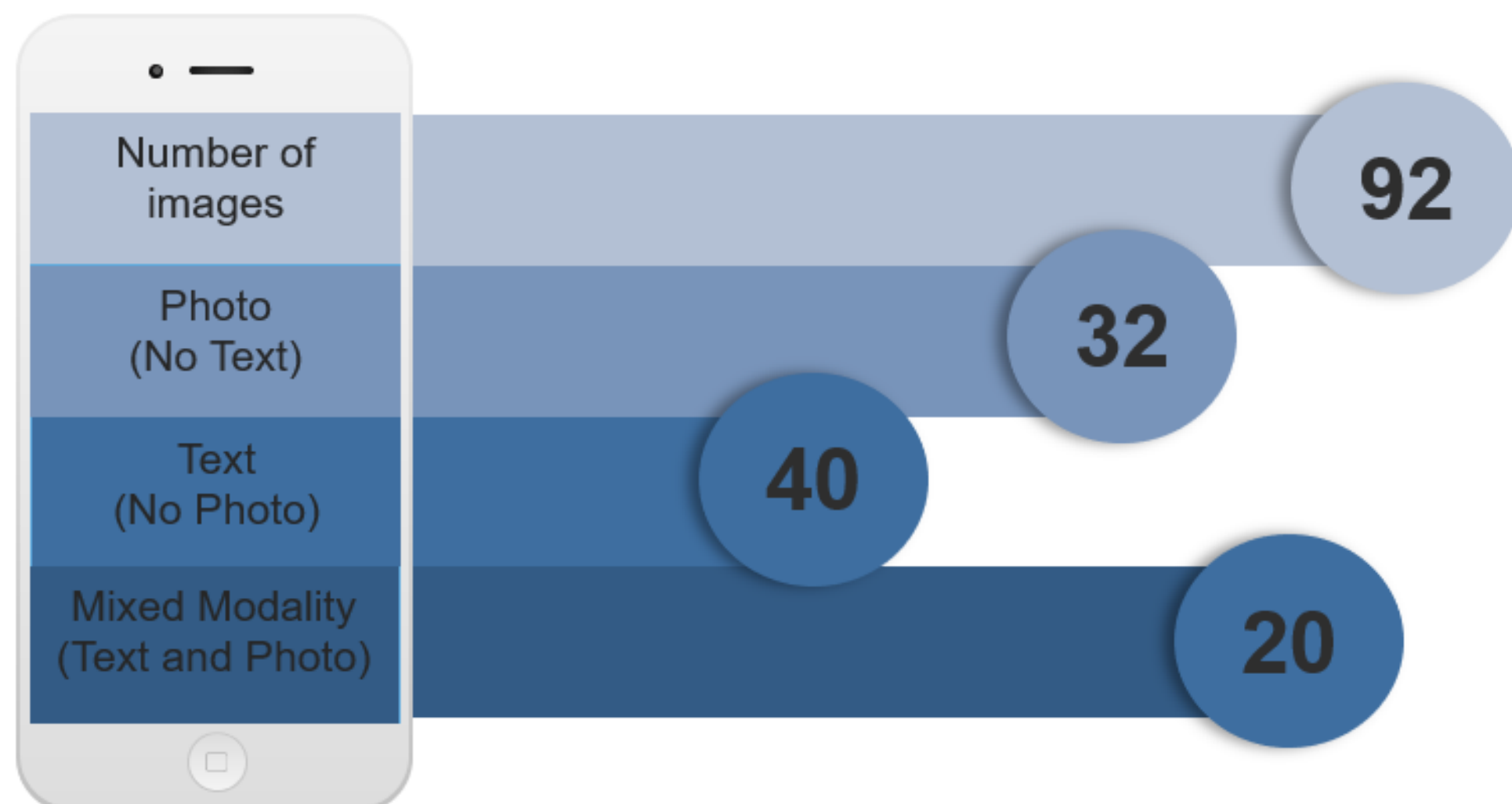
Background

- Extremist groups have become a pronounced presence on social media platforms (SMPs) where they have greater visibility (Galloway and Scrivens, 2018) and increased access to potential recruits (Clifford and Powell, 2019).

- Extremist communication on SMPs has become increasingly visual over the past decade (Conway, 2019).

- Images are powerful propaganda tools as they can attract and maintain interest, enhance recall and inspire stronger emotional responses than text (Winkler *et al.*, 2019).

- The construction of group identities is particularly salient in extremist imagery (Nouri *et al.*, 2020):
  - Group members are represented as:
    - Active, respected and fulfilled individuals (Macdonald and Lorenzo-Dus, 2019).
    - Victim to social inequalities resulting from multiculturalism/immigration (Nouri *et al.*, 2020).
  - Group leaders are represented as authentic and on familiar terms with group members (Nouri *et al.*, 2020).

- Extremist sympathisers lack a strong sense of identity, making them susceptible to the strong group identities present in right-wing imagery (Webber and Kruglanski, 2017).
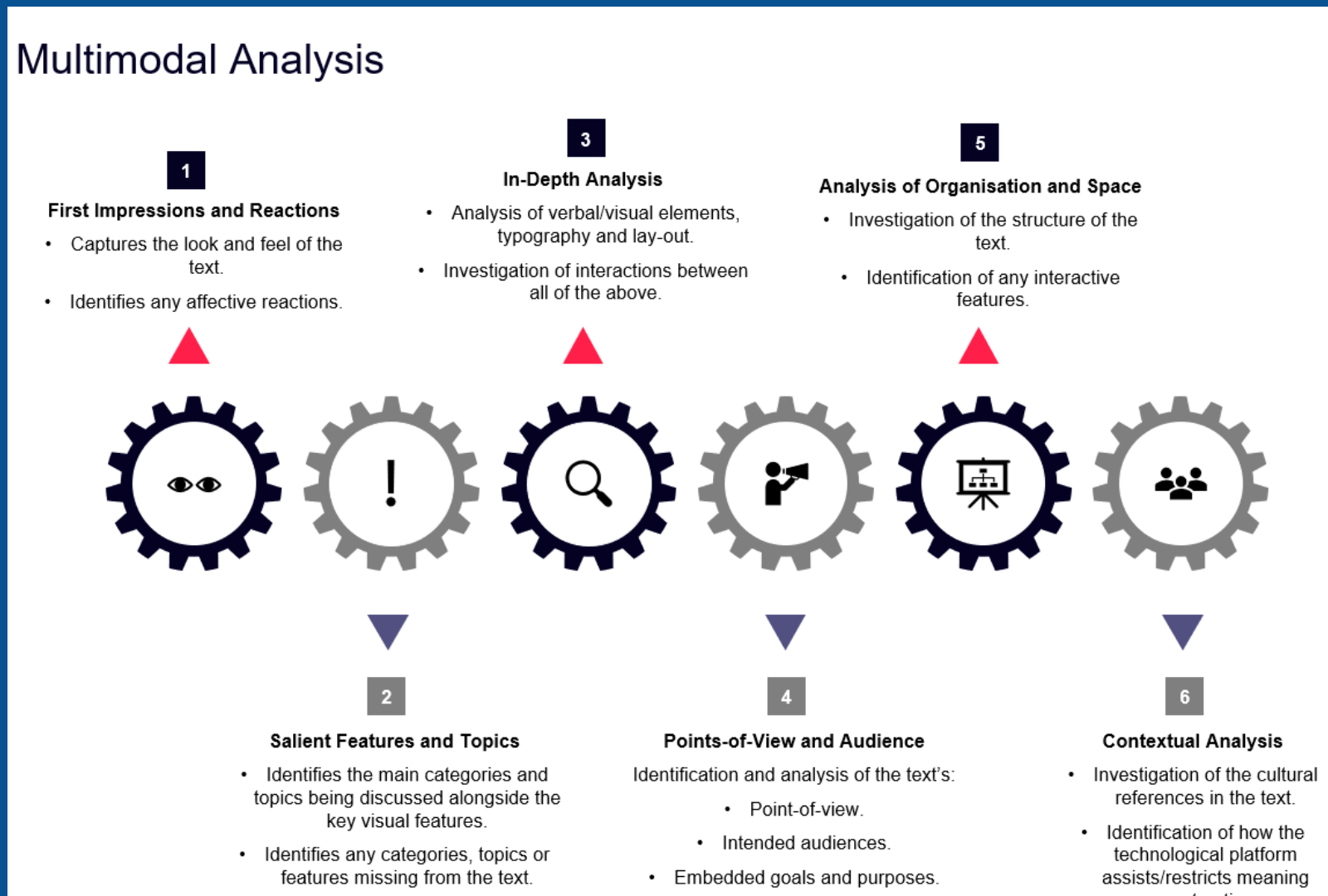
The Data

This study comprises one of three likely to be conducted:

- **Group Studied:** Generation Identity.
- **Social Media Platform:** Twitter.
- **Data Collection Period:** 12 months.

Number of images — 92
Photo (No Text) — 32
Text (No Photo) — 40
Mixed Modality (Text and Photo) — 20

Multimodality

- Multimodality "describes the grammar of visual communication" by examining how verbal and visual elements communicate "complex ideas about the nature of the world" (Machin, 2007: ix-21).

- This toolkit interrogates how different elements of a text interplay to construct meaning (Pauwels, 2012) and how these meanings "anchor who or what is depicted or what is symbolized" (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001: 7).

- Multimodal analysis seeks to identify three overarching meaning dimensions (Lemke, n.d.):
  - *Organisational Meaning*: how the text is structured and how meanings are distributed across it.
  - *Presentational Meaning:* the individuals represented and the activities they are engaged in.
  - *Orientational Meaning:* the relationship between text creator and text interpreter.

Multimodal Analysis

1 First Impressions and Reactions
- Captures the look and feel of the text.
- Identifies any affective reactions.

2 Salient Features and Topics
- Identifies the main categories and topics being discussed alongside the key visual features.
- Identifies any categories, topics or features missing from the text.

3 In-Depth Analysis
- Analysis of verbal/visual elements, typography and lay-out
- Investigation of interactions between all of the above.

4 Points-of-View and Audience
- Identification and analysis of the text's:
  - Point-of-view.
  - Intended audiences.
  - Embedded goals and purposes.

5 Analysis of Organisation and Space
- Investigation of the structure of the text.
- Identification of any interactive features.

6 Contextual Analysis
- Investigation of the cultural references in the text.
- Identification of how the technological platform assists/restricts meaning construction.

Multimodality and Extremist Discourse

Multimodality has been used to examine visual extremist discourse and has identified:
- Visual cues transcend national, cultural and linguistic boundaries (Doerr, 2017).
- Cartoons and memes are used by extremist groups to communicate culturally-coded humour (Doerr, 2017).
- The emotive power of images overpowers any negative connotations in the accompanying text (O'Halloran *et al.*, 2019).

Discursive News Values Analysis (DNVA)

- News values are the verbal/visual elements of a text that make the topic/event being discussed appear newsworthy – or important – to media audiences (Bell, 1991):
  - They can be "construed or established through discourse (both language and image)" (Bednarek and Caple, 2012: 104).

- DNVA applies a set of eleven values to a text to examine how the topic/event is mediated through language and image to make it newsworthy (Bednarek and Caple, 2017).

- In particular, DNVA facilitates the analysis of "how semiotic systems other than language construct news values and how they interact with linguistic resources" (Bednarek and Caple, 2014: 140).

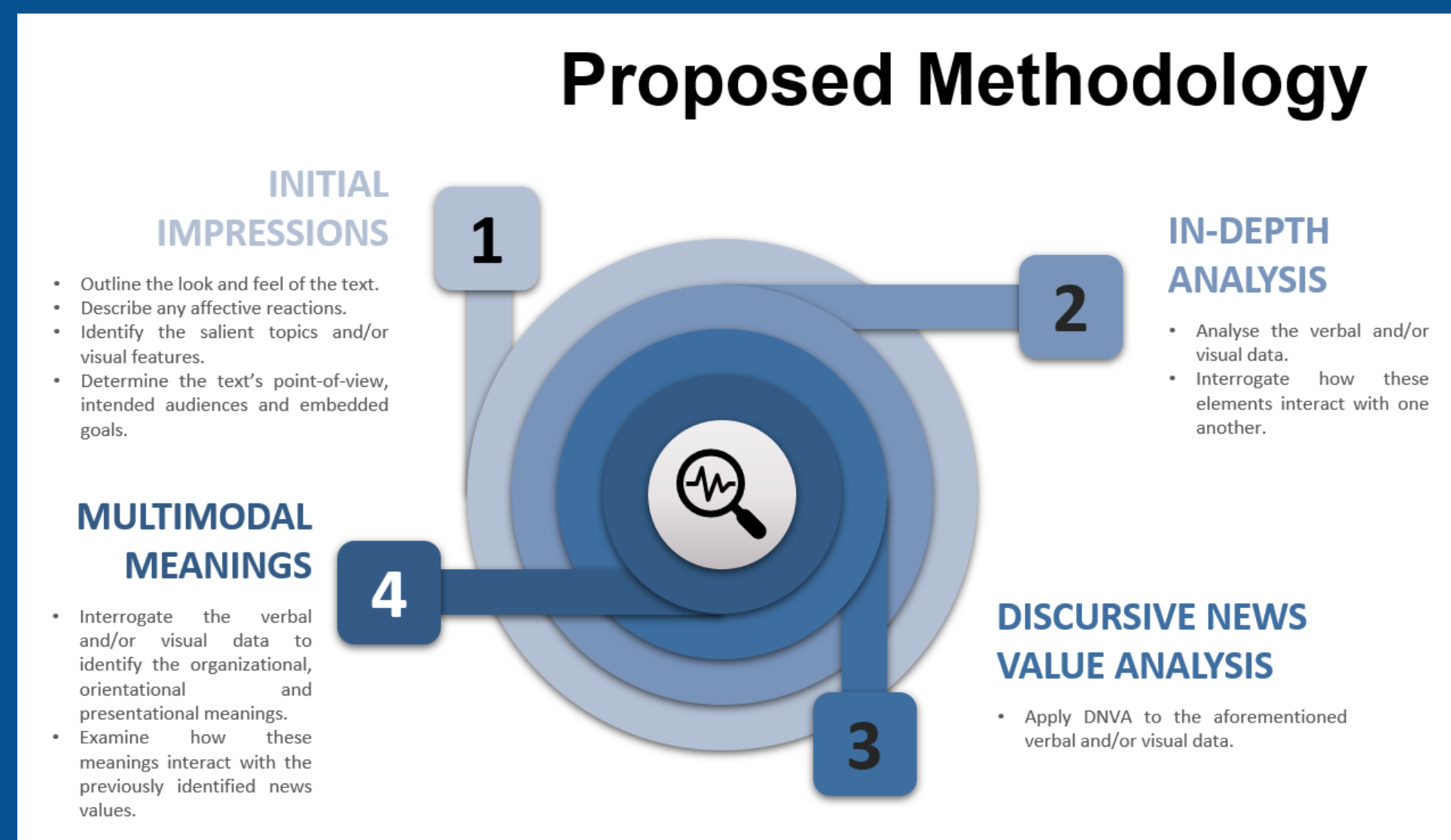| News Value	Definition
Aesthetic Appeal (Visuals only)	The event is discursively constructed as beautiful.
Consonance	The event is discursively constructed as (stereo)typical (e.g. in relation to news actors, social groups, organisations, or countries/nations).
Eliteness	The event is discursively constructed as of high status or fame as a result of, but not limited to, the people, countries, organisations or institutions involved.
Impact	The event is discursively constructed as having significant effects or consequences.
Negativity	The event is discursively constructed as negative (e.g. involving a disaster, conflict, controversy, or criminal act).
Personalisation	The event is discursively constructed as having a personal or 'human' face (e.g. including images of members of the general public).
Positivity	The event is discursively constructed as positive (e.g. showing images of people smiling, reporting on a heroic act).
Proximity	The event is discursively constructed as geographically or culturally near to the publication and/or target audience.
Superlativeness	The event is discursively constructed as being of high intensity or large scale.
Timeliness	The event is discursively constructed as timely in relation to the publication date (i.e. as new, recent, ongoing, seasonal or about to happen)
Unexpectedness	The event is discursively constructed as unexpected (i.e. as unusual, strange and/or rare).

(Bednarek and Caple, 2017: 55)

DNVA and Extremist Discourse

DNVA has been previously applied to visual extremist discourse to reveal:
- News values in extremist images vary according to the SMP used. While "aesthetically polished images" were used on Facebook, "unedited images" were used on Gab to facilitate "attempts at constructing authenticity and truth about the author of the images" (Nouri, Lorenzo-Dus and Watkin, 2020: 23).
- Ideology features as a key value in news reports about hate crime, giving "special attention" to "the motive of the crime" by associating it with "the tenets and advocates of white supremacy and nationalism" (Maklad, 2019: 39).
- Two news values were used in particular to depict children in Jihadist online magazines:
  - *Prominence:* images of children in military uniform to engage in "psychological warfare" by displaying "the brutality they have managed to instil and the children's ability to kill" (Watkin and Looney, 2019: 134).
  - *Negativity:* images of children killed during Western military attacks, demonstrating "the impact of Western-backed warfare" (Watkin and Looney, 2019: 131).

Conclusion and Questions

- This study proposes combining multimodality and DNVA to examine how group identities are constructed in images shared by right-wing extremist groups on social media.
  - Both multimodality and DNVA facilitate an analysis of the verbal/visual elements of the data.
  - The overlaps between the two analytical frameworks mean they can be combined with little to no repetition in analysis.
  - A multimodal analysis will help to identify how extremist sympathisers are oriented in relation to the wider organisation.
  - DNVA can uncover the ideological messages within the data, thus highlighting the key factors of right-wing extremist discourse that are central to their identity.

Proposed Methodology

1 INITIAL IMPRESSIONS
- Outline the look and feel of the text.
- Describe any affective reactions.
- Identify the salient topics and/or visual features.
- Determine the text's point-of-view, intended audiences and embedded goals.

2 IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS
- Analyse the verbal and/or visual data.
- Interrogate how these elements interact with one another.

3 DISCURSIVE NEWS VALUE ANALYSIS
- Apply DNVA to the aforementioned verbal and/or visual data.

4 MULTIMODAL MEANINGS
- Interrogate the verbal and/or visual data to identify the organisational, orientational and presentational meanings.
- Examine how these meanings interact with the previously identified news values.

- However, combining multimodality and DNVA may have its limitations:
  - The DNVA framework may not accurately encompass the values present in the data as social media communication is governed by different goal's than journalistic discourse.
  - While duplication can be limited, some analytical repetition may occur during analysis.

Questions:
1. How effective is the proposed methodology in analysing the collected data?
2. What alternative methodologies can be applied to this dataset?

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