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BRICS as formation to study visual online communication? A dialogue on historical origins, perspectives on theory and future directions

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Citation

Faust, M., Schneider, F. A., Herdin, T., Ji, D., Negro, G., Zhou, T., ... Oliveira Nascimento, A. K. de. (2018). BRICS as formation to study visual online communication?: A dialogue on historical origins, perspectives on theory and future directions. *China Media Research*, 14(2), 85-97. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3202753>

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BRICS as Formation to Study Visual Online Communication?: A Dialogue on Historical Origins, Perspectives on Theory and Future Directions

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Abstract: In this article, contributions from scholars working in the field of visual communication and/or online communication are gathered whose scholarly work falls into the BRICS countries realm. The interviews are framed by a brief sketch of the relevance of BRICS countries research in communication and media studies and some prospective comments on this novel field. The contributing scholars in this issue focus on China and Brazil in particular and work across the globe in Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, PR China, the UK and Brazil. They shared their ideas on the subject even though their scholarly roots lie in fields as diverse as regional studies, political studies, communication and media studies and educational studies. Their thoughts were collected through email interviews and they are presented here in form of a cross-disciplinary dialogue on the issue of visual online communication in BRICS countries and the De-Westernization discourse. Gratefulness goes out to all the ones who have contributed and hopefully this project will have a say in many future dialogues between scholars from across the world.

[Maria Faust, Florian Schneider, Thomas Herdin, Deqiang Ji, Gianluigi Negro, Tianyang Zhou, Maria Amália Vargas Façanha, and Ana Karina de Oliveira Nascimento (2018). **BRICS as Formation to Study Visual Online Communication?: A Dialogue on Historical Origins, Perspectives on Theory and Future Directions.** *China Media Research*, 14(2):85-97] 8

****Maria Faust****

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Introduction to Interview Questions and Current Directions

This article gathers scholars working in the field of Visual Online Communication, dedicated to one or multiple BRICS countries. In order to go beyond the case study articles in this special section and beyond the literature review, their focus will be on the following questions:

1. What theories as well as methods, models and frameworks are needed to study Visual Online Communication in the global academic research?
2. What paradigmatic assumptions of BRICS countries research are relevant in the global context?
3. Since initially dealing with research in Visual Communication and/or BRICS countries research, which remarkable shifts have occurred in the field? Please feel free to refer to biographical background of yours to underline your arguments.

4. Finally, which global contribution can this type of De-Westernized research make?

China, Brazil, India, South Africa and Russia are uprising global players: in economic terms the BRICS-formation has been widely acknowledged, not only from a research point (for a media perspective see Nordenstreng & Thussu, 2015, for a social science perspective see German Institute of Global and Area Studies 2017) but also in terms of international relations (ICP 2017). They constitute about 40% of the world population in 2017 (Bremmer, 2017). Moreover, they make up a huge share in the world wide internet population (Brazil: 102 million internet users, penetration rate: 58% (Agencia Brasil, 2017), China: 731 million internet users, penetration rate: 53% (China Internet Network Information Center, 2017, p. 39), Russia without Krim region: 78 million internet users, internet penetration rate: 53% (Yandex, 2017) India: 450 million internet users, penetration rate: 31% (Livemint, 2017), South Africa: 22 million internet users, penetration rate: 40% (World Wide Worx, 2017). Thus, the BRICS challenge the G8-states not only by non-digital economic power but more so in the increasingly important internet

sphere. Visual Online Communication – as has been highlighted in the first article of the special section – constitutes an emerging media market in the realm of digital cross-media markets.

The communicative rise of the BRICS is not only employed through the annual summits with the most recent one 2017 in Xiamen, P.R.C. (brics2017.org, 2017) and the upcoming one 2018 in Johannesburg, South Africa. Moreover, ever since 2015 the BRICS formation has established an institutionalized communication minister meeting spreading the word about ICTs, digital economy and the future of technologies and communication ("Declaration of the 3rd BRICS Communications Minister's Meeting," 2017). In 2017 China's news agency Xinhua established the first BRICS media summit, vowing cooperation with Brazil's CMA Group, Russia's Sputnik News Agency and Radio, The Hindu group of publications from India, and South Africa's Independent Media (Xinhuanet.com, 2017) with multimedia being essential, thus including visual online communication.

Academically, in August 2017 the China Communication Forum was held ahead of the BRICS summit under the title "Building on BRICS: Belt and Road Initiative and A New Global Communication Order?" at Xiamen University, P.R.C (China Communication Forum [CCF], 2017). Ever since Thussu's and Nordenstreng's initial publication on "Mapping BRICS media" in 2015 (Nordenstreng & Thussu, 2015), which Deqiang Qi and Tianyang Zhou, discuss in their respective interviews, Thussu has expanded the scope with his Routledge book series "Internationalizing Media Studies". Two publications in 2017 – "China goes Global" (Thussu, Burgh, & Shi, 2018) and "Contemporary BRICS Journalism: Non-Western Media in Transition" (Pasti & Ramaprasad, 2017) continue the research in the BRICS field. Both publications reveal the impact of digital culture and new media technology; with visual online communication being in focus on social media platforms e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Weibo, Youku, Mxit etc.

2018 now brings multiple opportunities for scholars to discuss the emerging realm of the BRICS: one being the 6th International Conference on Comparative Media Studies in Today's World in St. Petersburg, Russia in April. The focus is set on "Emotions vs. Rationality in Mediated Discussions" with Nordenstreng as one of the key speakers. Moreover, as China's Belt and Road Initiative has been in focus in 2017 in Xiamen, its exploration continues also in April 2018 in Astana, Kazakhstan during the 7th Workshop on EU-China Relations in Global Politics titled "European and Asian Perspectives on China's Belt & Road Initiative" and in September 2018 during the ECREA Pre-Conference - The "New Silk Road": Flow and Counter-flow of Information between Europe and China? in Lugano.

South America, and with it Brazil, is in focus during the "Second Spring School on Media Systems: comparative and transnational perspectives in Perugia, Italy in 2018. In all four events, political, economic and cultural factors will interplay with each other and offer opportunities to discuss visual discourses, frames and narratives.

So where do we proceed from here? Negro points out later in his interview piece that neither ICA nor IAMCR as key institutions of worldwide communication discourse have recognized the communicative or media aspects of the BRICS in a scholarly format. However, bringing these issues to the forefront with this special section not only highlights the acknowledgement of this research gap but moreover, if there are ongoing negotiations of other states such as South Korea and Mexico (both are OECD members), Indonesia, Turkey, Argentina etc. (Koenig, 2017) to join the BRICS, we must continue working in the field of the Global South. Thus, the interview pieces take a stance on these matters as can be found in the following.

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****Florian Schneider****

Leiden University

Coming from a tradition of political iconography and visual political communication, specifically the approach of the north-German art historian Aby Warburg and its contemporary application by scholars like Marion Müller (2015), I am partial to exploring how these systematic qualitative approaches and their strong focus on social contexts can be applied to online materials. Much of what we know about visual politics, for instance, still holds in digital spheres: visual materials are forms of social interventions, and they draw from shared tropes that can be deployed quite effectively by political agents to elicit an emotional impact, constructing a sense of community, or appeal to ostensibly shared sensibilities, memories, and experiences. The study on 'meme wars' in this special issue is a wonderful example of this. Tools for critically studying these processes are already available (cf. Van Leeuwen & Jewitt 2001): heuristic devices for interrogating images, techniques for forensically studying the origins of visual components, strategies for triangulating visual, verbal, and acoustic signs in media products, e.g., by creating visual protocols and adopting systematic coding strategies. These tools should serve academics well as they take their studies into the digital realm. And yet we also need to update our toolbox when visuality goes online. For instance, it will be a serious

challenge to come to grips with new forms of visual manipulation, which today are much more sophisticated than in the past. Video materials today can be altered to stunningly convincing levels, and in combination with advances in voice manipulation we are looking at entirely new levels of information manipulation and 'fake news'. What will count as a reliable visual source? Again, the forensic expertise of visual analysts could provide important cues for how to tackle these processes. Another challenge will be to figure out what happens when visual tropes 'travel' across digitally enabled societies, often at great range and with great speeds. Who is in a position to shape these flows of visual elements, and who has the power to connect them with shared meanings? What role does technology play as an enabler of such processes, but also as a filter? I believe that a promising approach for addressing these questions comes from network theory. Scholars like Manuel Castells (2009) have drawn our attention to the workings of networked societies, and social network analysts have provided methodologically involved ways to study how networks are structured and how power works within such structures (cf. Scott 2013). Similarly, in sociology and anthropology, actor-network theorists like Bruno Latour (2005) have provocatively suggested that we look at the micro-interactions between people and things as they act upon each other in social networks. I believe it will be fruitful to apply these rationales to the flow of visuality across different places and among different groups of people, especially in technologically enabled environments. We have excellent tools for exploring what images mean in their context. Now we need to come up with ways to study how these images become shared, whether certain patterns emerge as dominant, and what power relations were required to bring these results about.

I would say one position that is shared fairly broadly among area studies scholars, including those working in or on BRICS contexts, is that local knowledge matters. This is by no means a trivial point. It is a reminder that the theories and methods we use to make sense of the world are not neutral devices we can deploy uncritically; instead, we need to ask how the paradigms that are accepted in academia are themselves outcomes of complex processes and power relations, some of which may be presented as universal, when really they are deeply shaped by their own local rationales. In this sense, there is much to be gained from the kind of postcolonial scholarship common in area studies. That said, designing our research interests in the contexts of the BRICS concept also comes at a risk: we may well be constructing new categories and short hands that are ultimately problematic. We have to be careful, for instance, to not reify the BRICS countries as a unified region or to cast these diverse societies into the role of an exotic 'non-West', contrasting it with the equally problematic concept of the 'West'. Such homogenization does not do

justice to the complexities that take place ‘on the ground’. We should also be careful not to fall into the traps of methodological nationalism, where our research focuses primarily on phenomena we can observe at the level of different nation-states. Does it make sense to talk about visuality in Brazil, or would it be more prudent to ask how visuality works in the art scene of Fortaleza, or in tourism campaigns from Mato Grosso do Sul? Is there such a thing as a ‘Chinese’ online visuality, or are visual practices different on Sina Weibo than on Tencent’s Weixin platform? Do users from Guangdong use visual communication differently from users in Hebei province? In a way, the idea of ‘China’ or ‘Brazil’, and ultimately the idea of the ‘BRICS’, may well be enacted through visual discourses themselves, and we should focus on critically studying these processes rather than reinforcing them. Here, too, the strength of the area studies mindset promises to complicate research in useful ways.

To me, the most promising shift in visual communication research is technological: advances in digital methodologies push us to think differently about the questions we might ask of visual materials. This is not to say that careful qualitative analysis is no longer relevant, but such detail-oriented research can increasingly position itself within the ‘big picture’ of what happens visually in online spheres, thanks to new methods in media and computational studies. I have in mind Lev Manovich’s pathbreaking research on topics such as the construction of selfies, the patterns of Instagram visualizations, or the visual dimensions of US presidential campaign videos. In Amsterdam, Richard Rogers (2013) and his team at the Digital Methods Initiative have created a number of open-access tools that can be used to scrape the web and social media. It is great to see the contributions to this special issue blaze trails in similar directions, for instance by using methodologically involved approaches to study visual representations in large Facebook data sets. I suspect that research from and on BRICS contexts will matter a great deal as scholarship continues to extend these research trajectories. Dealing with data from South Africa, Russia, or India will raise questions that many scholars who focus on Europe or North America may not have encountered, and this may challenge how we think of the ethics of data access, how we deal with censorship regimes, what we make of different visual cultures as they go online, etc. There is much room for fruitful dialogue in this regard. Area studies scholars are well-positioned to interrogate accepted paradigms on visuality, explore which useful alternative theories and methods can be generated within the contexts they work on, and make visible that which is too often invisible in existing paradigms of social research.

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****Thomas Herdin****

Salzburg University

There is no doubt that social science is a product of the modern Western world and „has been Eurocentric throughout its institutional history” (Wallerstein, 1999, p. 168). This prevailing paradigm has had an impact on the canon of communication studies, and continues to do so. Over the last decade critical voices were raised and “de-westernization” “became a central theme in communication studies” (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014, p. 361). I totally agree with Wallerstein’s statement and hope that Waisbord and Mellado will be proven right in the near future, because the literature is still limited. Currently, it doesn’t seem that this topic is of prime interest, but nevertheless discussion about de-westernization does have its place in communication research today. If this issue is to be given greater prominence within the current debate, it will be important to clarify and define the concept from a theoretical as well as a methodological viewpoint.

It is of crucial importance to reflect on the term “de-westernization”. To de-westernize any paradigm in the sense of de-contextualization is not possible, because theoretical and methodological issues (the context) are always culturally embedded. We as socialized humans cannot develop a cultural-free approach. Our thinking, and as a consequence the whole field of social science, is always culturally entangled. Culture is inevitable and can never be eliminated from a discussion. It is possible only to deconstruct the context, which means to delineate as clearly as possible the cultural notion which envelops the canon. But if we take a closer look at the current literature, it seems that this would be quite difficult to accomplish, and the achievements would have limits. Furthermore, to de-westernize communication research cannot be achieved by individuals. To gain a meta-level perspective, we have to take a step outside of our own frame of (cultural, philosophical) reference because it is quite

difficult to understand our own culture from within. To facilitate this process, we should utilize cultural differences to reflect on our own cultural context. This will lead to a greater awareness of ourselves, as Ulrich Beck (2012, p. 1-2) postulates: “[W]e Europeans can understand ourselves only if we ‘deprovincialize’ – in other words, if we learn to see through the eyes of others as a matter of sociological method.” Therefore, a fruitful discussion will only be possible through close cooperation between people from different cultural backgrounds.

And here the BRICS come into play. The alliance of the BRICS countries clearly shows that the current world order is in transition – but not only from an economic and geopolitical perspective, but from a scientific point of view as well. The BRICS countries are very heterogeneous and general comments just lead to superficial statements. So let’s focus on Asia, especially on China, for two reasons. First, China is the second-largest economy in the world and accordingly has an important voice on the global stage. The second reason is related to my biography: I lived in Asia for seven years (1995–2001), and since my return to Europe I have been cooperating with Chinese scientists.

The People’s Republic of China is back on the global agenda. In the late 1970s, the process of modernization (reform and opening up under Deng Xiaoping) brought enormous changes to the economy, society and cultural landscape. The economic rise of China has a profound implication for science as well. After decades of stagnation (e.g. Cultural Revolution), new cultural concepts are slowly emerging in China to describe cultural characteristics, being applied to the field of communication studies. Through this process of indigenization and localization, the research – which may have been based mainly on Western theories (Sun, 2002) – is achieving a less Western bias. The development of culturally sensitive approaches based on ontological, epistemological and methodological perspectives (for a synopsis see Herdin, 2018) can function as a catalyst for a profound discussion about de-westernization.

But de-westernizing communication research must not mean to differentiate between different paradigms (e.g. a Western versus a Chinese paradigm), because this would be just another form of methodological nationalism. Cultural differences should be seen as sources for further development, as starting points. To understand ourselves, we always need a counterpart to uncover and to reflect our differences back to us in a constant oscillation between “Self” and “Other”. We need the Other to be aware of ourselves. The philosopher and sinologist François Jullien (2000) made a detour via Chinese philosophy to shed light on the role of Greek thinking in Western civilizations. He does not attempt a simple comparison of the two civilizations. The goal was in fact to facilitate new perspectives of thought. This kind

of detour is not exotic but methodical (Jullien, 2002, p. 171).

Interculturality can therefore be seen as a methodological approach as well (Elberfeld, 2008). It helps to illuminate blind spots in one’s own knowledge system which needs to be discussed. But this critical reflection on our own canon is possible only if alternative paradigms are available. This means that the BRICS countries are challenged to develop their own approaches from their own cultural perspectives. Only then, in a second step, can these ontological, epistemological and methodological principles contribute to a profound discussion from a meta-level perspective. To de-westernize existing paradigms, as a self-proclaimed goal, cannot be achieved from within a single western outlook on the world. This would run the risk of oppressing and further silencing the Other, who still has no voice. Thus different cultural approaches should function as catalysts to enhance theoretical as well as methodological developments in order to deepen our understanding of communication studies. The Other (e.g. China) as a consequence is no longer an external object which can be studied but becomes an active and equal counterpart. This *modus operandi* – of establishing a respectful confrontation [between cultures] – should lead to a dialogue amongst equals. Only by constructing this kind of an in-between-world (*Zwischenwelt*) does the Self become unfamiliar and the Other approachable. This *Zwischenwelt* is, according to Waldenfels (2007), an intersection between the home world (*Heimwelt*) and the alien world (*Fremdwelt*); he argues that “a dimension of otherness” pervades our inner world, stating that “the ‘alien’ begins at home” (Waldenfels, 2007, p. 36).

This procedural method can enhance and deepen the understanding of social sciences, especially communication studies. Continuing to do exactly what we have always done will lead to stagnation, as Wallerstein (1999, p. 168-169) argues: “[T]here is no question that, if social science is to make any progress in the twenty-first century, it must overcome the Eurocentric heritage which has distorted its analyses and its capacity to deal with the problems of the contemporary world.” It is time to take this issue seriously. In stimulating a dialogue with equal partners, it is important to develop a tolerance of ambiguity and to initiate a discussion with an open outcome. Only then can it be ensured that we are sufficiently flexible to develop new and innovative approaches in our field.

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****Deqiang Ji****

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In the current global context BRICS countries are often framed as emerging economic powers, which are believed capable to challenge the dominant Western countries in the long run and therefore lead to a possible change of the global political and economic order. I think the major paradigmatic assumption is that the world order has been caught in a dominant power structure underpinned by a center-periphery relationship. However, the global development is dialectical and multi-linear. Emerging powers, BRICS for example, marked a historical return towards a more diverse and balanced political and economic order.

My research on BRICS media began in 2014, when I was invited to join a BRICS media research project and an international scholars' network led by Prof. Kaarle Nordenstreng. Though the project is mostly conducted on a national basis, we did attempt to do comparative studies among five countries. I argue that the biggest shift in our research is that we, or at least myself as a Chinese scholar, realized that comparison is a very important tool to help us understand the similarities and differences on the one hand, but on the other hand, it helps us admit a fact that there are a lot of differences which cannot be compared. In order to make sense of those differences, we have to contextualize them in concrete social and cultural settings and try to conceptualize and theorize them for our colleagues from other countries and cultures. In other

words, there is an emerging consensus that new theories should be developed even beyond those wide spreading and prevailing theories in international communication or media studies.

I think the nature of de-westernized research is not a geographical shift, nor a geopolitical critique, but lies in the diversity of different localities. Therefore, it is argued that the genuine contribution to media and communication theories in general should come from solid local-based researches, which are supposed to solve local problems, for example, media development in each BRICS country. As a Chinese scholar our major responsibility is to take advantage of the geographical and cultural relevance to our society and to map the dynamics of media development in China. However, it is worthy to mention that this is not going to be isolated in the international academia, but to build a solid research base for a much deeper and more efficient interaction with scholars from other countries.

As to BRICS studies in future, we have realized that the Chinese government is downplaying BRICS in comparison with The Belt and Road Initiative proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013 for a shift paradigm of international relations. The communicative potentials amongst the BRI countries, particularly with the support of traditional media organizations (e.g. The Belt and Road Media Alliance) and new media platforms (e.g. social media), are at the centre of scholarly attentions in China. Questions also remain in how to understand the relations between BRICS and BRI in future. Will it be a shift from BRICS to BRI or a parallel?

****Gianluigi Negro****

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I can't consider myself an expert on visual online communication. However, during the last years I have noted a growing interest in this specific research field. One of the most provocative research articles I read on this topic was provided by Yeo who lamented "a lack of appropriate models of research practice in visual communication design education, and also the need for early training in the research discipline for visual communication in undergraduate studies" (2014). Another more recent contribution was provided by Rigutto (2017), who confirmed that at the present stage social research methods focused on images are getting more and more solid "both in the qualitative and quantitative analysis of space and dynamics".

My personal impression is that visual online communication is getting strongly related to social network and mobile communication, which, at the present stage, are mainly analysed under a quantitative perspective, also because of the growing importance of

big data that, as Rigutto argues, represents a very important tool for qualitative research. One of the most interesting challenges for the discipline will be to identify a new method to interpret and understand how platforms work. A particular focus should be addressed to the role of algorithms, but also to the policies, that regulate controversial images, and, in more general terms, to the contribution provided by the platforms where the visual communication is co-created, shared, and interpreted. These questions need to be framed even before the analysis of a specific cultural and local particular case, BRICS included.

The edited book “Mapping BRICS Media” from Nordenstreng and Thussu in 2015 provides a very important contribution to the research field of communication sciences. However, my impression is that this specific research field is still far from being acknowledged systematically by the academia at a global level. For instance, ICA and ECREA have not dedicated thematic working groups yet. Moreover, in more general terms, some BRICS political and economic projects raised some concerns and questions on the effectiveness of BRICS in a more general term. Two useful examples in this direction might be represented by the overlapping activities on Internet governance like the failed experience of Net Mundial Initiative, which had the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee as one of the three organizing partners and the World Internet Conference organized by the Cyber Administration of China. Why did two BRICS countries organize two different platforms to share a different idea of Internet governance (Brazil, multi-stakeholder oriented and China, more inclined to support a multi-lateral model)?

A second example is represented by the “One Belt, One Road Initiative”. What is the role of such important country like India to this big project mainly supported by China? One last concern is related to the size of at least four of the BRICS members; namely China, Russia, India, and Brazil territories are very large and with a lot of internal differences. The Chinese example is very relevant to this issue. Indeed, mainland China has a very diversified social and economic situation between the western and eastern areas. It is important to highlight here that some Chinese scholars are still raising issues on countries like China (see Hurst and Sorace posts on the academic blog *Chinoiresie.info* “Treating What Ails the Study of Chinese Politics” <http://www.chinoiresie.info/treating-what-ails-the-study-of-chinese-politics/> and “Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom: A response to William Hurst on the Field of Chinese Politics” <http://www.chinoiresie.info/let-a-hundred-flowers-bloom-chinese-politics/>).

I would frame the question on a different perspective at least for the BRICS experience, especially in the field of communication. More than a shift, BRICS contributed to the re-emerge of some issues. Daya Thussu is not the

only one who with his *Digital BRICS: Building a NEWICO 2.0* (2015) lists a series of similarities with the past. Christian Fuchs noted how some issues discussed in the Macbride Report – published in 1980 and with the goal to establish a New World Information and Communication Order – are still relevant. More in detail, Fuchs questions whether “BRICS power can be a brick in the wall against global capitalism” (2015), supporting a form of continuity with the issues and expectations developed after the publication of the Macbride Report.

Coming to the contribution of visual communication, the success of social networks and mobile communication raised a series of methodological issues related to the online sphere. New challenges are posed both at the economic and social level. In the first case one interesting issue is provided by Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen, who in their investigation in *Online Video News: A cross national analysis in news organizations' enterprising approach to digital media* (2017) point out the importance of the video and the role of platforms related to the traditional press. Coming to the second, it is already clear that the public has taken an active role in the production of the visual culture. Adami and Jewitt remind that through copy and paste, visual artifacts are easily assembled and reused from one media to another. What is important to highlight here, is that such process will bring to different significates which cannot be isolated by the cultural, economic and social contexts. It is China again that brings two very interesting experiences with 恶搞 *e'gao* and 山寨 *shanzhai*. It would be interesting to identify and eventually explore forms of contamination in BRICS countries.

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A great many critical studies into the visual field have focused on the organization of gender and sexuality, looking at the ways in which gender and sexuality are represented and (re)produced in visual culture across diverse media, including painting, photography, film, television, and digital media. For LGBTQ communities, visual culture is used to designate a set of concerns 'around the ways in which politically motivated images are produced, circulated, and consumed to both construct and reinforce, and resist and overthrow articulations of sexual ontologies, identities, and subjectivities' (Smith, 2008, p. 4). Visual representations of gender and sexual minorities should be taken seriously because 'how social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in life... how we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation' (Dyer, 2002, p.1). For queers, especially those who live in places that lack queer communities and related support, visual representation is vitally important, as it impacts strongly on their identity of 'self'. Moreover, queer visual culture pays special attention to the discourses of 'visibility', which have been central to LGBTQ activists' rhetoric. For example, the China Rainbow Awards, established in China in 2011, aims to honour gay-friendly media and encourage more positive images of Chinese gay men and lesbians in the media. Similar awards can be found in other BRICS countries, such as the Pink Triangle Award in Brazil.

New communication media has made it easier for queers to find each other, which seems to raise hope for queers giving them greater visibility. Rodman (1997, p.19) proposes 'a partial list' of the constitutive features of cultural studies: 'its radical contextualism, its explicitly political nature, its commitment to theory, and its self-reflexivity', which is at stake in understanding the complex relationship between visual online communication and queer cultural practices. From a cultural studies perspective, the necessary action is to radically contextualize both the internet itself and the very concept of 'queer visibility'. We need to demythicize the notion of new media technologies being revolutionary for LGBTQ communities, and simultaneously reject the understanding of the internet as

an autonomous sphere of social action. Visual online communication is not isolated from other cultural phenomena, which should be placed in queer everyday life. Radical contextualization not only enables us to shed critical light on the facts on the ground that do not support technological empowerment and liberation, but also accounts for physical queer bodies who end up homeless, are attacked or oppressed, or face discrimination in the digital age.

Moreover, as Barnhurst (2007, p. 2) argued, queer visibility is 'a true contradiction' that 'begins from assertions accepted as true about a positive good – progress, financial means, acceptance, and digital prowess – but the value... turns out to be at least partly negative, contrary to expectation'. This paradox requires us to consider a radical contextual approach to global queer visual culture studies, which recognizes that queer cultural practice and its context are organically related – 'the former grows out of the latter, and in turn, transforms the latter into something different from what it had previously been' (Rodman, 1997, p.20). Meanwhile, it also reminds us to pay more attention to the pronounced heterogeneity in the queer experiences among BRICS societies, which I will elaborate on more in the following section. It is important to note that the goal of LGBTQ activism has never simply been visibility, but rather a certain kind of visibility. Allan (2007) interrogates the equation of visibility and progress, arguing that the benign images of gay men in market-driven media came at the price of locking gay people into a desexualised persona. The queer visibility enabled by digital technologies in BRICS countries might 'cultivate a narrow but widely accepted definition of gay identity as a marketing tool and help to integrate gay people as gay people into a new marketing niche' (Hennessy, 2000, p.137). Although the market is not necessarily the enemy of queers in non-Western political contexts, when queer visibility becomes a good business prospect in a digital age, the question we need to ask is 'for whom?' and 'who is profiting from these new markets?'

Without reflexivity, the analysis of the queer visual field may result in, what Jensen and Pauly (1997, p.167) called, a 'de-politicized intellectualism' and 'a postmodern sensibility' that 'encourages researchers to focus on the ironic, hip, urban, mobile, and young'. This reminds us of the questions of who 'we' are and who 'they' are when we are imagining global queer audiences. 'Word and image' is ultimately 'an ethical and political issue when we approach the boundaries of the unspeakable and the unimaginable' (Mitchell and Smith, 2008, p.42). To study the nexus of visual online communication and queer lived experiences, we must reflexively attend to not only 'those who can fully access the urban cosmopolitan ideal' but also 'those who are poor, rural, HIV positive, non-monogamous, selling sex' (Kong, 2016, p.505). This requires us to be critically

conscious through personal accounting of how our self-locations across class, gender, race, sexuality, age, ethnicity, and nationality influence our research and knowledge production, thereby moving towards self-reflexivity as ‘a continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness’ (Callaway, 1992, p.33).

The utility of the concept of ‘BRICS’ as academic inquiry has been widely examined in the literature. In the field of Media and Communication Studies, while some scholars take a more optimistic view of ‘BRICS’, highlighting its role as an emerging potential power bloc in reshaping global communication (e.g., Zhao, 2015), others question the coherency of the BRICS grouping, citing their differences in economic scale and rates of growth, media freedom, and internet usage (e.g., Sparks, 2014). Queer visual culture is not only integral to the social and political lives of BRICS societies, but is also so interwoven with gender and sexuality politics that it has become an unavoidable topic in global policy debates. Locating the assumptions of BRICS countries research mentioned above in the field of global gender and sexuality politics, it can be argued that heterogeneity is still more pronounced.

Brazilian feminist activist Sonia Corrêa (2015) points out that there was no consistent sign of ‘BRICS’ as a coherent body and political entity to address topics of gender and sexuality within various UN bodies, such as Human Rights Council, the Economic and Social Council, or at the General Assembly until mid-2013. The frequent use of the concept of ‘BRICS’ in relation to sexual rights contributes to ‘crystallising an image of homogeneity and cohesion among the five member countries, when in fact these formations are comprised by States whose interests do not fully coincide and which, not rarely, compete with each other in a variety of fronts’ (Corrêa, 2015, p.175). It is likely that the BRICS challenge to the hegemony of the Global North can subvert a normative gender and sexuality politics. However, it also has the capacity to implement ‘a neo-conservative approach that builds on anti-Western sentiments and various kinds of nationalism, along with religious conservatism’ (Centre for Emerging Worlds, 2016). It is in this context that visual online communication studies should therefore be careful not to overlook the differences in LGBTQ experiences in the five member countries, which might be diluted in the global construction, regulation, and imagination of gender and sexuality.

The analysis of the relationship between visual online communication and queer cultural practices in the BRICS countries has important implications for the de-Westernization of queer theory and LGBTQ activism in the transnational context. Taking China as an example, over the past decade, a major trend that has been observed within Chinese media, communication, and cultural studies is that a growing body of literature has critically

examined the politics of visual representation, looking at how images of Chinese queers flow from and through media and popular culture, and their relations to the formations of homosexual identities (e.g., Eng, 2010; Leung, 2012; Lim, 2006). With the reconfiguration of Chinese media, especially the digitization of the visible field, more recent attention has focused on the images of Chinese queers in the forms of digital video activism (e.g., Bao, 2015), webcast (e.g., Deklerck & Wei, 2015), gay web television (e.g., Wang, 2016), and gay and lesbian smartphone applications (e.g., Zhou, in press). This remarkable shift should be understood in the milieu of the second wave of studies of homosexuality in contemporary China. Since the 2000s, the field of homosexuality studies ‘has slowly departed from the bio-medical science’ and ‘offers a more complex and humanistic understanding of the kaleidoscopic lives of homosexuals’, which has shifted away from ‘the etiological question of what makes a person homosexual’ to ‘a constructionist question of examining what social-historical conditions give rise to the modern form of homosexual identity’, or ‘a queer theory question of challenging the operation of the hetero/homosexual binary for constructing the self’ (Kong, 2016, pp.503-505).

This shift led me to think about two interrelated issues: the limits of critical textual methods in the academic work on the queer visual representations, and the actual consumers of queer visual culture. Jensen and Pauly critically point out the limits of critical textual methods in audience research in cultural studies, arguing that ‘the rush to analyse media as texts typically neglects the social situation from which those texts emerge – the questions of production, distribution, and consumption that have interested social scientists and political economists; the assumptions about politics, ideology, and history that have defined British cultural studies; and the concerns with meaning, power, community, and democracy that characterized earlier versions of American cultural studies’ (1997, p.156). Along with the ongoing rise of Chinese queer studies in the context of De-Westernization and Decolonization, critical textual analysis of visual representations of non-normative sexualities in the media seems to offer politically progressive ways to construct arguments about queer lived experiences. However, reflecting on Jensen and Pauly’s argument, we need to be careful about de-linking these visual representations and practices with their socio-historical contexts. The interpretation of texts is a necessary element for cultural studies, but it is not the ultimate goal. Cultural studies aims to provide ‘a richer understanding of the political character of cultural and social life, and this means examining the relationships among people, places, practices, and things’ (Sterne, 1999, p. 262). A reflexive ethnographic approach is needed to study the complex relationship between visual

online communication and queer lived experiences in the BRICS countries, in order to unpack the incompatible expectations and outcomes in the increasing queer visibility brought by digital technologies. 'Audience' matters in visual (online) communication. As Winkler (2009, p. 17) argued, visual (online) communication studies should be 'equally concerned with the sociology and psychology that surround audiences and users, and their preference for and ability to see/read, interpret, comprehend and retain information', and more importantly, 'to understand how they respond to and use images and objects in their daily life experiences'. This reminds us of the problems of connecting with the queer communities about whom 'we' write, upon which the methodological concerns regarding 'reflexivity' mentioned above calls.

Queer studies and queer theory originated in, and remain dominated by Anglo-American academic circles. The growing body of research focusing on the visual representations and practices of non-normative sexualities in the BRICS countries in general and China in particular enables me to question the applicability of queer theory in non-Western societies, as problematized in the 'Queer Asia' project (e.g., Wilson, 2006; Lee, in press). The analysis of the organization of gender and sexuality taking place in cinematic, televisual, and digital media in the BRICS countries can benefit further from 'inter-BRICS referencing' studies. Drawing upon Kuan-Hsing Chen's theorization of 'Asia as method', the 'BRICS' concept could potentially be used as 'an imaginary anchoring point' and 'emotional signifier' to call for regional integration and solidarity in relation to the nexus of visual online communication and (non)normative gender/sexualities. Its task is to understand each of the BRICS countries but also to enable a renewed understanding of the (queer) self. Societies in 'BRICS' could then become 'each other's points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt' (Chen, 2010, pp.212-213).

Nevertheless, we also need to bear in mind that the concept of 'BRICS' should be seen as a theoretical problem for a reflexive interrogation rather than essentialized entities. Taking China as an example, Chow (1998, p.4) argues that 'the lingering, pervasive hegemony of Western culture' resulted in 'a collective habit of supplementing every major world trend with the notion of "Chinese"', namely, 'the ethic supplement'. The politics of 'Chineseness' (the ethic supplement) is built upon the tradition of anti-Western thoughts to counter hegemonic Western practices. This manifested in the form of 'logic of wound' among Chinese intellectuals, who have been previously placed at a reactive position due to Western hegemony, and thus doubted everything Western, and attempted to qualify it with word 'Chinese'. For Chinese scholars working with LGBTQ subjects and

visual communication in contemporary China, it is necessary to be cautious of 'the ethic supplement' and 'logic of wound' in our subjective experiences, which might contribute to an obsession with 'Chineseness' as cultural essentialism and sino-centrism in relation to the production of knowledge. The point here is not to deny that Chineseness exists, but to interrogate its cultural and political meaning in queer and visual communication scholarship and to continue to problematize the simplistic reading of China and Chinese-ness as 'empty' and/or 'arbitrary' with regard to the discussion around gender and sexualities.

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Speaking from the perspective of applied linguists born and raised in Brazil, when we think about the theories, methods, models and frameworks needed to study Visual Online Communication in the global academic research, we can only say that any attempt to address such topic can only be partial, considering the different contexts visual online communication can be studied from as well as the located diversity it is subject to. From the perspective of applied linguistics scholars whose job has always been connected to foreign language communication, considering visual online communication and how it has expanded ways of communicating in diverse languages differently, we are inclined to say that the first thing that is needed to study visual online communication in the global academic research is to consider local knowledge, especially when one thinks of how diverse the BRICS countries are, even though connected due to some similarities. In fact, considering the size of some of those countries, we would go even further and state that, within them, differences are one of their hallmarks, due to the different contexts that can be encountered. In terms of theories, especially considering the complexity involved in the differences that distance but also connect the BRICS countries, we believe that the new literacies theory can be an appropriate one to address visual online communication. We say that especially considering the paradigmatic shift brought to those studies when compared to the moment only literacy studies, as opposed to new literacies, was the focus. The change connects to evolving from a psycholinguistic approach to literacies to a sociocultural theoretical and research paradigm, according to which, the literacies we develop are part of our social practices (Lanshear & Knobel, 2011) instead of a brain-local knowledge each individual would develop. Therefore, the way we make use of the visual mode to communicate is pretty much determined by the digital practices we have access to, since we are talking about a practice approach. From this

point of view, our personal impression is that qualitative research models are still the ones which better respond to ways of understanding visual online communication practices, even though we understand that those practices are increasingly dictated by algorithms.

When we think about which remarkable shifts have occurred in the research field of Visual Communication and/or BRICS countries research as well as which global contribution this type of De-Westernized research can make, we do it considering our experience as Brazilian educators/applied linguists/researchers who deal with English language teaching under the perspectives of the new literacies theories. We begin by highlighting the remarkable shift that has occurred in the way people communicate, which is certainly linked to the fact that the importance we used to apply to writing, as the main mode of meaning making, has given room to multimodal productions, with the focus on the visual. This visual turn can be easily noticed in the uses people make of network technologies, where the convergence of different modes (visual, written, oral, spatial, gestural, etc) has changed the way we communicate. Websites, personal pages on Facebook, profiles on Instagram, infographics, e-zines, and other digital genres are multimodal. As Jewitt (2008) affirms, this visual turn comes as an answer to the fluidity and immediacy that marks the late/postmodern societies. New ways of learning are then required to deal with the various communication possibilities that arise, on a regular basis, from local and global networked digital communication (Sheridan & Rowsell, 2010). Despite the fact that the visual and other modes are gaining growing importance in the meaning making process, our researches in the context of English language teaching at public schools located in the northeast region of Brazil have revealed that it is common to find teaching practices that still understand the image as a complement to the messages conveyed in the written mode. So, when dealing with the teaching of English as a foreign language, we recognize the importance of practices that help expand people's ideas on the role of images in communication, with the understanding that they are texts that carry intentions, beliefs and cultural values. This work with the visual and other modes are based on the ideas of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), Lankshear and Knobel (2011), and Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran (2016) among other authors who emphasize the need for a critical approach to educational/literacies studies. Our research efforts, as well as of other researchers who also investigate the relationship between English language teaching, the multimodal nature of communication, and the development of critical citizenship in the context of Brazilian public schools, such as Monte Mór (2015) and Zacchi (2016) are part of a new literacies national project. Bringing examples of researches conducted in Brazil and other BRICS countries to the international

debate makes this study extremely relevant. It is so because it focuses on contexts other than the ones based on the perspectives from research conducted in North American and/or European countries only, which is crucial for the understanding of different local contexts, their needs, experiences, and perspectives. Therefore, contributing to de-westernizing knowledge production.

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(03/28/2018)