

THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION BETWEEN
GEORGE W. BUSH AND JOHN F. KERRY:
AN ANALYSIS OF VISUALLY COMPARATIVE TELEVISED ADVERTISEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study used impression management theory and framing to explore how George W. Bush and John F. Kerry used nonverbal behavior cues (body movement, eye gaze, facial expression, posture, gestures, and dress/clothing) and production techniques (camera angle, camera shot, light angle, color, motion, production style, setting (formality), setting (location), symbols, others in shot, and shot length) in their respective visually comparative televised advertisements in the general election in 2004. This study sought to determine the differences and similarities between the two candidates in how they portrayed themselves as candidate and how they portrayed each other as opponent.

Several differences were found and expected, since one of the goals of political advertising is to set the candidates apart from one another. However, there were also quite a few similarities in how Bush and Kerry used visual imagery in their respective ads. Both candidates appear to have used visual imagery to create impressions or frame themselves in a manner that emphasizes specific characteristics. It seems that both men wanted to appear serious about the campaign, issues, and being President; that both candidates wanted to appear in control of themselves and their surroundings; and that both men wanted to appear strong/powerful. Additionally, Kerry, it seems, also wanted to appear approachable and average, “of the people.”

Regarding how the candidates portrayed each other, it seems that Bush sent mixed visual messages (e.g., leader-like, but also laidback) about Kerry to the viewers of the ads, but that

Kerry was more uniform in how he presented Bush (e.g., inferior, deceitful, and threatening) to audiences. Neither candidate, however, used visual imagery in their shots to conclusively create specific impressions of their opponent.