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THE VISUAL LITERACY
OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS:
THE OPERATIONALIZED MEDIA COMPETENCIES
TO COMMUNICATE BETWEEN MODERN ORGANIZATIONS
AND PUBLICS

Abstract. The aim of this article is to analyze visual literacy in evaluating and measuring PR competencies. It contributes to communication competence research, focusing on skills of PR professionals working with media and highlighting the visual dimension essential for organizational–audience dialogue. This conceptual article is based on a review of media and PR literature, identifying where visuality appears in contemporary studies on PR skills and competencies. The focus is on visual skills rather than communication goals. Findings explore the value of visual competencies and situate them within broader organizational communication debates. The article’s significance lies in its pioneering integration of visual skills into the assessment of PR practitioners’ competencies in media relations, moving beyond language-focused frameworks by incorporating the often-overlooked visual dimension.

Keywords: media competence; visual public relations; visual literacy; communication skills

INTRODUCTION

Creating effective and innovative messages for strategically important audiences is a core PR function. Contemporary media and organizations are saturated with images (Aiello and Parry, 2020; Kohrs, 2018; Meyer et al., 2013). Today’s communication is highly visual: filtered photos, memes, infographics, videos, webinars, 360° reports, VR/AR. “Public relations and strategic communication have always used visualization (...) to create meaning that supports agents’

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goals” (Wiesenberg and Verčič, 2021, p. 230). Thus, compelling PR narratives must be reinforced with engaging images. “The power of a visual image is an eye-grabbing hook (...) connecting audiences through human interest and episodic frames” (Dhanesh and Rahman, 2021, p. 9). Visual content is increasingly central in institutional communication (Collister and Roberts-Bowman, 2018), requiring PR professionals to combine technical and creative skills. Yet translating visual experience into verbal forms is difficult (Clarke, 2007). “Communicator skill (...) varies based on the technician vs manager role” (Knight and Sweetser, 2021, p. 3). Effective campaigns rely on creative, multisensory media relations. PR can be framed as visual storytelling strategic, lasting, and dependent on creativity and imagination (Hilgers-Yilmaz et al., 2018). “Language, verbal and visual, is at the forefront of the public sphere (...) a powerful tool to influence or persuade” (Kohrs, 2018, p. 14). Within the socio-cultural paradigm (Edwards and Hodges, 2011; Ihlen and Fredriksson, 2018), PR creates discourses (Ravazzani and Maier, 2017; Edwards, 2018). Given the shift toward multimodal, image-centric communication (Stöckl et al., 2021), this must be recognized by practitioners. The persuasive power of visuals is well documented: picture superiority effect (Paivio, 1991) and visual persuasion (Messaris, 1997). Organizational studies highlight visuals’ role in constructing and transforming meaning, stressing the “novel quality” of “visual language” (Meyer et al., 2013). However, research on visual communication in PR remains limited (Dhanesh and Rahman, 2021; Quintana and Xifra, 2016; Pressgrove et al., 2018; Wiesenberg and Verčič, 2021).

Contemporary PR requires visual competencies. The challenge is to “think visually” (Galsworth, 2017; Górska, 2019), i.e. perceive context and design innovative visual strategies advancing PR. Such competencies can be developed, but first must be examined and evaluated. Visual production competence at the individual level is largely neglected (Wiesenberg & Verčič, 2021, p. 235). Strategic visual choices shape the audience’s experience of organizational performance (Creed et al., 2020). This article is based on a systematic review of literature, a conceptual analysis of existing definitions and theoretical frameworks on media and PR competencies related to visual skills, and a synthesis to develop an original concept for assessing visual competencies in PR. Following Göransson and Fagerholm (2018), Collister and Roberts-Bowman (2018), and Wiesenberg and Verčič (2021), the paper examines PR and strategic organizational communication through visual activities. After reviewing the literature to locate visuality in PR competencies research, an operational approach is proposed. The paper explores the under-discussed intersection of visual literacy and PR practice, defining key concepts and practical implementation areas.

1. VISUAL COMPETENCIES, CAPABILITIES AND SKILLS IN PR

The well-established Theory of Public Relations Competence (Hazleton, 2006) addresses not only the roles public relations practitioners enact, but also adds two key elements that are absent in other public relations theories: publics as active participants in the determining competence and recognizing context as a central feature in public relations (Knight and Sweetser, 2021, p. 1). The quoted authors provided an empirical test of the Theory of Public Relations Competence. “Competence is then a mix of communicator skill, communicator knowledge, communicator motivation, outcomes, and context” (Knight and Sweetser, 2021, p. 2). In a visually saturated culture (Mirzoeff, 2016) and visually orientated organizational environment (Bell et al., 2014), it is worth developing arguments for more in-depth and visually-orientated competencies framework. Among others, Hodges (2006) advanced the cultural approach to public relations research and practice through linking societal culture and occupational culture of public relations to the communication practices of practitioners. This paper intends to explore the potential and place of the visuals in the PR competencies debate. “For practice, there is a framework and emerging creative space within which strategies can be planned and implemented that embrace visual (...). This offers a landscape rich with opportunities for highly original and immersive experience that will improve the efficacy of communications. However, making full use of such a domain extending beyond text will require a better understanding what this means for professional practice in terms of skills and behaviors necessary for this twenty-first-century discipline” (Robert-Bowman and Collister, 2018, p. 196).

The study by Tench and Moreno presents the results of the European Communication Professional Skills and Innovation’s (ECOPSI) research, which defines the skills, attributes, competencies and knowledge of mainly senior practitioners. “Skills are the things practitioners are able to do to perform their job/role effectively” and “knowledge is defined as what practitioners are required to know in order to do their job/role effectively” (Tench and Moreno, 2015, p. 42). They conclude: “What is clear from the studies of skills, knowledge and personal attributes is that they overlap in terminology and that there is a pattern forming about how skills, knowledge and personal attributes lead to broader competencies” (Tench and Moreno, 2015, p. 43). The term “public relations competence” used in their study is defined by Ann Gregory as “behavioral sets or sets of behaviors that support the attainment of organizational objectives. How knowledge and skills are used in performance” (Gregory, 2008, p. 216).

In 2019 the quoted author, along with Johanna Fawkes, reviewed the main theories from management, professionalism and PR studies regarding the concepts of competencies, competency and capability (Gregory and Fawkes, 2019). Competencies are traditionally used to describe professional expertise and body of knowledge. When individuals master these, they can be regarded as competent to perform their role (Gregory and Fawkes, 2019, p. 2). Capabilities, however, is a more “open model” that recognizes the dynamic process of skills acquiring and the continuous development of the organizational environment where individuals perform (Gregory and Fawkes, 2019, p. 3). Capability “embraces the possibility of professionals being equipped to deal with a very different future in which roles will be subject to “disruptive change” (Gregory and Fawkes, 2019, p. 3). The quoted scholars also make the distinction between individual and organizational framework for understanding and setting standards for professional PR development. The description of competency, ability to perform tasks and roles, is assessed in relation to expected situational standards. Those are defined by the institutional context, which may vary.

While these and other studies have explored the definitions of competencies, capabilities and skills in general, this paper focuses on the visual dimension of the discussed phenomena. Rather than engage in definitional debates, it points to the existence and importance of image-centered communication practice, namely indicating where the visual dimension appears in the research on PR competencies, capabilities and skills. Given space restraints, this literature review is not exhaustive, but sets the backcloth for the proposal of incorporating visual literacy into the public relations discussion on professional competencies.

1.1 THE VISUAL COMPONENT IN PR SKILLS AND COMPETENCES RESEARCH

The World Public Relations Forum in 2016, Commission on Public Relations Education Report in 2018, Global Alliance Capability Framework (2019) and research on Certification in Education for Public Relations (2020) all mention the visual dimension of PR competencies. The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communications Management developed a foundational list of knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviors (KSABs) (Manley and Valin, 2017, p. 59). The majority of international documents examined for Global Alliance study were used to create a comprehensive list for 2 stages of professional PR development. An entry-level professional should have foundation skills, abilities and personal attributes (called FSA6) that include visual communication abilities, especially digital and visual literacy, including the ability to develop and manage content for multiple platforms. The authors indicate a fundamental skill (FSA12),

that is technological and visual literacy (Manley and Valin, 2017, pp. 62-63). These skills and abilities are core and universal, not only in early careers but also in more senior roles (SFSA1, SFSA12). The researchers list the developed ability to create content for diverse applications and platforms using visual communication skill, along with writing ability at an advanced and specialised level (both informative and persuasive). Continuous study of the global capability framework also directly indicates visual skills as part of the sub-capabilities (Gregory and Fawkes, 2019, p. 9). The updated Global Capability Framework presents 11 statements from practitioners, academics and employers, stressing the need to synthesize complex ideas into clear content across paid, earned, shared and owned (PESO) channels each saturated with visuals: e.g., paid videos with brand ambassadors, earned influencer events, shared live-streams with infographics, or owned e-books. A PR practitioner needs strong written and visual storytelling skills to engage publics (Gregory and Fawkes, 2019, p. 9).

What is more, Wiesenberg and Verčič's (2021) study, conducted as part of the 2017 European Communication Monitor, showed the rising importance of visuals: 94.4% of over 3,000 respondents acknowledged their role, and almost 70% reported higher stakeholder demand. Yet, half of professionals lack basic competencies (Wiesenberg & Verčič, 2021, p. 238). Another study linking education and career requirements showed demand for graphic design and visual concept-making (Meganck et al., 2020). Analysis of 1,000 U.S. PR job posts through the LinkedIn platform confirmed enduring importance of writing, but also increasing emphasis on digital, social and visual skills (Leaver et al., 2019; Brantner and Stehle, 2021). In the human resources posts for communication related positions, 78.2% of the total sample mentioned communication skills, with the majority of those (88.9%) specifying written communication skills. The analyzed positions indicated in the posts were: PR Coordinator, PR Account Coordinator, PR Specialist, PR Account Executive, PR Associate, Communication Specialist, PR Assistant, Communication Coordinator, PR Acct. Executive. What is interesting is that the graphic design and visual concept-making was mentioned in 24.5% of job posts ranging from PR assistant to executive. But within the senior positions for PR specialist, 50% of jobs required visual conceiving and 33% for PR Associate (Meganck et al., 2020, p. 4). The results suggest visual imagery as integral for senior PR roles, requiring not only practical skills, but also advanced competencies in creativity, concept development and motivation. Not only the large US market, but also regional research in Poland (EU), confirms this trend. A Polish study during the 2019 PR Congress showed rapidly growing visual tool usage (Waszkiewicz-Raviv, 2021).

Among 200 practitioners, over 80% reported strong visual trends, with more than 40% in senior positions. Over 50% used photos and infographics in nearly all campaigns, while over 30% used corporate videos and posters. Visual content creation emerges as a vital element of PR work at all career stages, widely perceived as effective. As Kohrs (2018, p. 14) puts it: "Understanding how visual language works in an age of all-pervasive image-making enables public relations to effectively manage perceptions and strategic relationships between organizations and stakeholders".

2. PUBLIC RELATIONS COMPETENCIES AND VISUAL LITERACY

The review of PR competencies and related concepts, including the visual dimension, confirms that visuals are part of professional debate and research. Yet terminology varies, with no clear distinction between visual language comprehension and image-centered communication. This complicates practical application and performance evaluation. To address this, the paper proposes an operational term for assessing and describing PR practice within visual communication.

Useful words to encapsulate the visually skillful PR professional might be: visually literate. "Ability", "skill", "behavior", "competence", "capability" and even "concepting" in term of the visual communication field might be accompanied by the term "visual literacy" (VL). This exact term has already appeared in PR competence research (Manley and Valin, 2017, pp. 62-63). This paper, however, offers a detailed examination of the VL concept in the chosen PR competence framework. "Competence, competency or competencies in VL enable individuals to efficiently communicate visually. Thus, individuals have knowledge and skills for interpreting and understanding visual messages as well as using or creating them for communication purposes. (...) Visual literacy is considered a group of skills that have practical application in various contexts, from daily social interactions to professional communication at work" (Kedra, 2018, p. 72). To be precise, this paper applies three proposed categories of VL by Kedra (2018) into individual PR competencies using the framework proposed by Knight and Sweetser (2021), which is based on Hazleton's Theory of Public Relations Competence (2006). Lacking its own coherent theoretical framework, public relations might look outside the field for a cogent model to underpin the discussed competence in detail. "Visual literacy involves the ability to understand, produce, and use culturally significant images, objects,

and visible actions” (Felten, 2008, p. 60). Seppänen (2006) understands visual literacy as the critical understanding of the meanings of visual orders. Proficiency in visual literacy is crucial for effective visual communication practice, and thus for living and working in a visually saturated environment composed of its social, organizational and individual levels. The individual competencies of PR professionals interrelate with PR performance for and within an institution. It also resonates with the socio-cultural dimension, namely visual media culture.

2.1 HAZLETON’S THEORY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS COMPETENCE AND VISUAL LITERACY COMPONENTS

Joanna Kedra (2018) in the “Journal of Visual Literacy” explains what it means to be visually knowledgeable. The author emphasizes the VL multidimensional aspect but, what is important in the PR competencies context, she goes beyond the statement about the lack of coherence in the field. Her contribution answers the call for more operational attempts sufficient to measure the group of vision-related competencies. Based on the literature study, Kedra’s overview of 11 VL definitions (from 1968 till 2013) offers three lists of VL areas with thematic categories with the intention to assess and evaluate the VL. This study connects the Kedra outline (2018) offering thematic VL categories with lists of competencies necessary in PR practice that were recently empirically tested by Knight and Sweetser (2021). The following study also provides some further suggestions regarding PR activities for which various visual skills are required.

Hazleton (2006) reasoned that, in public relations competence, a practitioner is attempting to reach two main goals: instrumental and relational. This requires skills in two main areas and differentiates a technician from a manager. Technical skills are more semantic and graphic and for senior positions and for leaders organizational and managerial skills are critical (Travis and Jordan, 2021). In that case, a technician would obtain more reading and writing visual literacy skills and a manager more applied image use through visual thinking and education. Knight and Sweetser (2021) recently described Hazleton’s PR competencies and verified them empirically. Communicator skills, communicator knowledge and communicator motivation create the mixed construct for individual PR competence. *Communicator skill* is based on the ability to write, design and direct PR content, enabling assessment of the practitioner’s potential to do the job. Technicians are the ones creating the content and managers are the top-level strategists directing the work (Knight and Sweetser, 2021, p. 2). However simplistic,

this conceptualization has generally been held over time, according to the quoted authors. Visual skills in reading, writing and visual thinking would apply to Hazleton's communicator skill construct.

The second competence is *communicators knowledge* being "at the core of public relations excellence" (Knight and Sweetser, 2021, p. 2). It includes role-specific information that enables the practitioner to perform technical and managerial tasks and enact the technician or manager role as required. It is knowledge not only about tools and techniques but also paradigms in which PR operates (Travis and Jordan, 2021), e.g. relational orientated actions and dialogic expertise. In addition, Pieczka (2011) proved an intellectual link between public relations and dialogue theory. In that case, using visuals that connect or are co-created within the dialogic process might be applicable. In the case of communicator knowledge, especially the comprehension of different visual forms, their grammar and syntax matters. Also, knowledge of the visuals useful and proper for PR activities, the culturally significant images, objects and actions that help PR technicians realize their goals or managerial PR relationship-oriented strategies. For that reason, visual culture knowledge seems crucial. In the case of short-term tasks, the aim is to choose the right design infographics for the client (Amit-Danhi and Shifman, 2018) or Instagram aesthetics (Cassinger and Thelander, 2020). On the managerial level, it is to choose aesthetics that might create common ground between publics and the client.

The third competence, *communicator motivation*, is the driving force behind a public relations practitioner, stimulating the practitioner to apply knowledge and skills efficiently. In this way, as Knight and Sweetser, (2021) argue, showing initiative and maintaining a good attitude results in preferable outcomes. The motivation component is built upon successfully used knowledge together with operationalized goals and applied skills. As a result, it culminates in achievements. What is essential is that outcomes are evaluated in terms of the norms and expectations others have about the competencies of the practitioner. In the case of visual communication, it means how motivated PR professionals are to work with visuals. Felten (2008, p. 60) indicates visuals as: images, objects, and visible actions. "The component of *context* continues to add in subjectivity in assessing achievements, and adds the necessary granularity to understand why a public relations practitioner may be considered competent in one situation but not in another" (Knight and Sweetser, 2021, p. 2). Referring to visual culture context (Mirzoeff, 2016), especially in organizations driven by aesthetic values (Chytry, 2008) or operating with their own visual language, communicator motivation seems crucial. Lovegrove (2018) study proved the usability of visuals

in terms of crisis management, and ultimately the author indicates unique organizational visual language as a powerful tool and precious resource guiding and motivating employees of various positions. The author mentions the rich visual history of British Airways, IKEA, Microsoft and British Petroleum (Lovegrove, 2018, pp. 151-157). For those companies, competent visual communication and literate visual management proved to be fruitful.

2.2 THREE VISUAL LITERACY CATEGORIES APPLIED IN THREE PR COMPETENCIES FRAMEWORK

Traditionally, literacy in general has referred to a set of cognitive skills that individuals acquire to function in society, primarily the ability to read and write to a specified degree of proficiency (Serafini, 2014, p. 19). The contemporary approach sees it more as a social practice using individual cognitive skill (Seppänen, 2006; Serafini, 2014). Recent research trends have developed multi-literacies (Brumberger, 2019), where the visual one seems to have developed rapidly in the digital information age. Brumberger (2019, p. 175), mapping the concept, emphasizes the practice of VL and its social impact. Therefore, how can we approach visual communication for multiple contexts so that it is effective and ethical? In this sense, it is particularly important to see a professional public relations practitioner as visually competent in creating informative, persuasive and ethical communication. Visual literacy also has a social impact. For Brumberger (2019, p. 175), it means: How does visual literacy function in decision-making, public action and civic discourse? For the PR area, it relates with PR-operated visuals alongside their outcomes, like influence on media discourse and in conjunction with institutional interest. Aiello and Parry (2020, pp. 110-113) proved how important this might be concerning images of politicians in the public sphere.

In this sense, rather than simply something that individuals have or acquire, visual literacy in PR practice is something individuals *do* with images (media messages, visible objects, visible actions) in particular social contexts, which means “doing PR” and managing visual communication.

To be more specific, this paper followed Hazleton (2006), Knight and Sweetser (2021) when identifying public relations competencies as *communicator skill*, *communicator knowledge* and *communicator motivation*, embracing the following elements constituting visual literacy (Kedra 2018): (1) *visual reading* (2) *visual writing* (3) *other visual skills*. The results of the juxtaposition are described in detail in Table 1.

Table 1 Visual literacy skills (Kedra, 2018) present in PR competencies framework (Knight and Sweetser, 2021).

	VISUAL LITERACY SKILLS (Kedra, 2018)	PUBLIC RELATIONS COMPETENCIES Knight and Sweetser (2021) based on Hazleton's Theory of Public Relations Competence		
		communicator skill: writing/ designing/ directing PR content	communicator knowledge: specific information that enables the practitioner to perform technical and managerial tasks	communicator motivation: initiative and maintaining a good attitude; driving force behind PR practitioner, fueling the practitioner to apply knowledge and skills effectively
(1) Visual reading	Visual perception (distinguish and comprehend visible actions, objects, symbols; comprehension and enjoyment of VC masterworks)		1	1
	Interpretation, analysis and understanding of the visuals (culturally significant images, objects and actions) made for intentional communication	1	1	
	Knowledge of grammar and syntax of different visual forms	1	1	
	Translation (visual-verbal-visual) that goes beyond a simple description of what is in the picture	1	1	
	Evaluates information in visual media and makes decision based on that	1	1	

(2) Visual writing	Creative and effective visual communication (e.g. visual framing and coherent composition)	1	1	
	Proper and intentional use of visual communication elements (visual media production)	1	1	
	Express oneself in terms of images			1
(3) Other visual literacy skills	Visual thinking as a result of visual education (interaction with images in a systematic way)	1	1	
	Applied image use (visual searching, planning, citing)	1	1	
	Visual learning (systematic and comprehensive visual education)			1

Visual reading (1) relates with visual perception, that is knowledge on how to discriminate and comprehend visible actions, objects, symbols, as well as motivation to enjoy and share the VC masterworks. The rest of the visual literacy elements correspond with communicator skills and knowledge of the PR practitioner. Visual reading also concerns interpretation, analysis and understanding of the visuals (culturally significant images, objects and actions) made for intentional communication. Additionally, knowledge of grammar and syntax of different visual forms is part of communicator skills and knowledge. The second category of VL is *visual writing* (2). In the case of communicator skills and knowledge, it means that the PR practitioner provides creative and effective visual communication (e.g. knows rules of visual framing and coherent composition). Competent professionals properly and intentionally use visual communication elements and design, as well as manage visual media production. The last area of the visual writing (2) is initiative to express oneself in terms of images, e.g. an effective and knowledgeable attitude toward one's own visual representations. That falls into the discussed field of Hazleton's communicator motivation. The third category listed by Kedra (2018) is called: *other visual literacy skills* (3). This involves visual thinking as a result of visual education (interaction with images in a systematic way) as well as applied image use

(visual searching, planning, citing). It corresponds with PR communicator skills and knowledge. This list closes the visual literacy component present in the third category (3), that is the visual learning. Overall, systematic and comprehensive visual education fits into PR communicator motivation. Appendix 1 presents practical tool associating two discussed frameworks. The Table 1 with a detailed description might be a useful tool for in-depth evaluation of the visual literacy level among PR practitioners. It requires empirical verification, for example, using Likert's scale for each competence of the PR technician and manager. Also preliminary in-depth interviews with PR professionals are needed to adapt existing tools to measure visual literacy like Visual Literacy Index (Avgerinou, 2007; Arslan and Nalinci, 2018).

CONCLUSIONS

As Collister and Roberts-Bowman (2018, p. 4) assert, "the powerful effects of visual communication, taken together with the growth and adoption of visual culture as a distinct field of study has allowed scholars from different disciplines to engage theoretically and analytically with images as vehicles for communication and meaning-making." A visual approach to PR generates insight into how professionals negotiate complex relationships within shifting organizational, socio-political and visual cultures in a globalized context. Communication specialists need to observe organizational and media landscapes. Visual literacy may equalize the status and importance of visual communication in PR practice. This paper has attempted to answer the question of what it means to be visually literate in terms of PR skills, knowledge and motivation. With images dominating media and shaping visually acculturated publics, the study proposes visual literacy as a concept uniting PR competencies and capabilities.

A limitation is the focus on the visual modality. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021, p. 35) note: "the place, use, function and valuation of speech and writing in public communication is changing. It is moving from its former, unchallenged role (...) to a role as one mode among others, a component of multimodal forms of communication." Visual competencies among communicators, PR professionals and researchers are thus crucial, especially in online contexts where non-verbal interaction is confined to screen-based representations. This paper views PR and media communication from a specific angle, seeking to anticipate and expand knowledge on image-related competencies and visual skills to foster innovation.

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ALFABETYZM WIZUALNY PRAKTYKÓW PUBLIC RELATIONS –
OPERACJONALIZACJA KOMPETENCJI MEDIALNYCH DO KOMUNIKACJI
MIĘDZY NOWOCZESNYMI ORGANIZACJAMI A PUBLICZNOŚCIAMI

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza kompetencji wizualnej w kontekście oceny i pomiaru kompetencji PR. Artykuł wnosi wkład w badania nad kompetencjami komunikacyjnymi, koncentrując się na umiejętnościach specjalistów PR pracujących z mediami oraz podkreślając wymiar wizualny

niezbędny do dialogu organizacja–odbiorcy. Artykuł koncepcyjny opiera się na przeglądzie literatury medialnej i PR, identyfikując miejsca, w których wymiar wizualny pojawia się we współczesnych badaniach nad kompetencjami i umiejętnościami PR. Uwaga skupiona jest na kompetencjach wizualnych, a nie na celach komunikacyjnych. Wyniki badań ukazują wartość kompetencji wizualnych i osadzają je w szerszej debacie dotyczącej komunikacji w organizacjach. Znaczenie artykułu polega na pionierskiej integracji umiejętności wizualnych w proces oceny kompetencji praktyków PR w relacjach medialnych, wykraczając poza ramy ewaluacji skupionych na języku i włączając często pomijany wymiar wizualny.

Słowa kluczowe: kompetencje medialne; wizualne public relations; alfabetyzm wizualny; umiejętność komunikacji