

A social semiotic analysis of women's political self-branding on Instagram in the Indonesian parliament elections

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Abstract

This study analyzes the construction of political images of women legislative candidates on Instagram in the context of persistently low women's representation in the Indonesian House of Representatives (20.52% in 2019) despite the implementation of a 30% gender quota. The research explores the visual representation strategies employed by women politicians to enhance visibility and electability within a male-dominated political landscape. Employing qualitative methods and a social semiotic approach, this study examines eight Instagram posts from eight women candidates representing eight different political parties who were successfully elected in the 2024 General Election. The analytical framework integrates Kress and van Leeuwen's theory of visual grammar with Barthes' concepts of connotation and cultural myth. The findings reveal that candidates construct self-representations emphasizing closeness to constituents, religious and cultural values, femininity, professionalism, and integrity. The negotiation of visual meaning occurs through hybrid strategies that combine traditional gender roles (motherhood and domesticity) with attributes of modern political leadership, reflecting efforts to meet societal gender expectations while establishing political credibility. Local political dynamics, including the multiparty system and male dominance, shape adaptive and contextual representation strategies in the digital space. This study demonstrates that Instagram functions as a multimodal arena for political communication rich in social, spiritual, ideological, and cultural meanings. The findings contribute theoretical implications for advancing social semiotics and digital political communication studies by emphasizing the contextual and ideological nature of visual meaning. Practical implications include promoting gender-sensitive political communication strategies and strengthening more substantive women's political representation in the digital sphere.

Keywords

gender and politics, Instagram, social semiotics, visual grammar

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Introduction

In recent decades, the issue of women's political participation in government branches such as the executive, legislative, and judicial has become a major focus in many countries worldwide, including Indonesia. Growing awareness of the importance of women's representation in these sectors has driven the implementation of affirmative action policies. One measure to support this policy is the implementation of a 30% gender quota for women candidates in legislative elections. This policy aims to increase women's participation in legislative institutions, particularly in the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR).

While this regulation has shown significant progress, its implementation has not fully met expectations. According to data from the General Elections Commission (KPU), women's representation in the DPR reached only 17.32% in the 2014 election and increased slightly to 20.52% in 2019 (Aspinall et al., 2021; Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019; Prihatini & Halimatusa'diyah, 2024). This data shows an encouraging upward trend, but it remains well short of the established 30% quota target. Men still dominate political representation, both in terms of numbers and influence in the legislative sphere. This situation demonstrates that affirmative action policies alone cannot guarantee substantive representation for women. Therefore, women politicians need to develop effective political communication strategies to increase their visibility, competitiveness, and electability in an increasingly competitive and male-dominated political landscape.

Responding to these challenges, social media has emerged as a strategic tool that allows women politicians to build their political image and reach voters more directly. Among various digital platforms, Instagram has become a highly relevant tool in contemporary Indonesian political communication. This visual-interactive platform offers a space to build, disseminate, and represent political identities in a personal and authentic way. Instagram is no longer limited to everyday social use but has evolved into one of the leading platforms for political campaigns in the digital space (Indrawan et al., 2023; Royani & Rusdiana, 2023). This is in line with Instagram's large user base in Indonesia, particularly among millennials and Gen Z, who constitute strategic voter segments. Previous research has shown that these two demographic groups constitute a significant portion of active voters, and Instagram has proven to be a highly effective political communication channel for reaching them (Rizaty, 2025).

As a visual-based social media platform, Instagram offers a variety of features such as photo and video uploads, stories, and live broadcasts, enabling women legislative candidates to authentically and directly introduce themselves to voters. Through these features, they can construct and project a multidimensional identity encompassing humanitarian, religious, cultural, professional, and social engagement aspects. This visual representation strategy allows women candidates to create personal narratives that emphasize humanitarian values and empathy (Arnandy et al., 2024). In the context of the 2024 general election in Indonesia, candidate posts depicting public activities such as direct interactions with the public and simple daily routines have become an integral part of visual communication strategies to build public trust and maintain emotional connections with voters (Farkas Xénia & Bene, 2020; S. Geise et al., 2024). Globally, social media platforms like Instagram have become a major focus of feminist scholarship and contemporary media studies. Various studies have shown that women politicians often face a dilemma in building their personal branding and gaining political legitimacy in the digital space, where they are expected to appear visually appealing while maintaining a professional image (Caldeira et al., 2020). The use of personal imagery and strategic visual design on Instagram has been shown to significantly increase public engagement, particularly in polarized political contexts (de-Lima-Santos et al., 2024). These findings emphasize that visual representation on social media is not simply a matter of aesthetics but an

integral component of political communication strategies closely linked to contemporary social, cultural, religious, and ideological dynamics.

Furthermore, Instagram serves not only as a means of self-promotion but also as an alternative space for women candidates to overcome structural and cultural barriers that persist in the traditional political arena. This platform provides opportunities for women candidates to convey their political views directly to the public, bypassing the gatekeeping of traditional institutions such as political parties and the media, which are often male-dominated. Research shows that women politicians use digital media to promote themselves and their public work in thereby circumventing conventional media controls, increasing their visibility, influencing public perception, and consolidating their political positions (Matsilele & Nkoala, 2023). Further comparative studies reveal that while digital technology optimism claims that the internet and social media will revolutionize politics and empower marginalized groups, the reality is that platforms like Instagram do not completely eliminate structural barriers. Nevertheless, these platforms provide opportunities for women to transcend the gatekeeping of mainstream media in defining political discourse (Cardo Valentina, 2020). Thus, Instagram plays a vital role in empowering women candidates to expand a more inclusive democratic space in the contemporary political landscape, while still operating within the framework of existing social and gender norms.

Despite numerous studies on the use of social media in political campaigns, a significant research gap persists, particularly in sociological-semiotic analyses of women's political representation in the digital space. Most previous research has focused on analyzing political messages or digital activism, without delving into the symbolic and ideological meanings contained in candidates' visual self-presentations (Farkas Xénia & Bene, 2020; Ridhah et al., 2023). Therefore, to fill this research gap, this study uses the social semiotics framework developed by Roland Barthes (1977) and further expanded by Günther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2020) to analyze images and visual elements published on the Instagram accounts of women legislative candidates. The social semiotic approach seeks to understand how visual signs generate meaning in specific social and cultural contexts, and how images convey messages at both the denotative (literal) and connotative (deeper cultural meaning) levels (Barthes & Stephen, 1977; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). Within this framework, photos and videos uploaded to Instagram are viewed as visual signs imbued with ideological and cultural meaning. Elements such as captions, image composition, color usage, facial expressions, and visual styles displayed by the candidates will be analyzed to uncover the layered meanings contained within these visual constructions.

Understanding the layered meanings within these visual constructions is crucial given the fundamental principle of social semiotics, which emphasizes that visual meaning cannot be separated from the social and cultural contexts in which it is produced and negotiated (Cardo Valentina, 2020; Matsilele & Nkoala, 2023). In other words, the visual representation of women political candidates on Instagram reflects not only individual aesthetic choices but also the product of complex negotiations between the candidate's personal agency and the surrounding socio-cultural structures. Based on these principles, this study poses the following questions: how do visual and multimodal elements construct the representation of women political candidates on social media? How are these visual meanings negotiated in relation to cultural values, public perceptions, collective emotions, and gender expectations? And how do local Indonesian political and cultural dynamics shape the self-representation strategies of women political candidates in the digital space? Building on these questions, this study aims to critically explore the representation of women political candidates on social media by considering the relationship between visual representation practices and the broader socio-cultural context. The findings of this study are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of social semiotics and digital political communication studies by emphasizing the contextual and ideological nature of visual meaning. Furthermore, this study is expected to have practical and

social implications in encouraging more gender-sensitive political communication strategies and contributing to the strengthening of substantive and inclusive women's political representation in Indonesia's digital space.

Method

This study uses a descriptive, qualitative method with a social semiotic analysis to examine how women political candidates represent themselves in the Indonesian legislative elections. This approach was chosen because it is well-suited to exploring the meanings of visual and textual representations on social media platforms such as Instagram. Qualitative research involves the collection and analysis of non-numerical data such as words, images, and documents to deeply understand social phenomena in their natural context (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This method allows researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of phenomena through various data sources such as interviews, field notes, photographs, videos, memos, and other relevant documentation.

The primary data source in this study is Instagram content, including images, videos, captions, hashtags, and comments. All data was collected from the eight official accounts of women candidates running for the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR) in the 2024 general election. The following table shows the research data sources:

Table 1. List of Names of Women Politicians Elected from Eight Political Parties

No.	Name	Political Party
1	Nurul Arifin	Functional Groups Party (<i>Partai Golongan Karya-Golkar</i>)
2	Desy Ratnasari	National Mandate Party (<i>Partai Amanat Nasional - PAN</i>)
3	Nihayatul Wafiroh	National Awakening Party (<i>Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa - PKB</i>)
4	Ida Nurlaela Wiradinata	Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (<i>Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan - PDIP</i>)
5	Nevi Zuairina	Prosperous Justice Party (<i>Partai Keadilan Sejahtera - PKS</i>)
6	Cellica Nurrachadiana	Democratic Party (<i>Partai Demokrat</i>)
7	Lisda Hendrajoni	National Democratic Party (<i>Partai NasDem</i>)
8	Mulan Jameela	Great Indonesia Movement Party (<i>Partai Gerindra</i>)

Source: Processed researcher data (2025)

This study employed observation and note-taking techniques as the primary data collection procedures. The observation method is a research method that involves systematic, in-depth observation of the use of language, images, and symbols in specific social contexts (Sudaryanto, 2015). Within a social semiotic framework, this method is relevant for critically examining the representation of women political candidates on social media, considering the relationship between visual representation practices and the broader socio-cultural context (Machin, 2013).

The data for this study were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) women who actively campaign on Instagram, have public figures, and have a high number of followers; (2) representation from various political parties to ensure diverse ideological

affiliations; and (3) geographic diversity, including candidates from both Java and outside Java. The purposive sampling technique was chosen because it allows researchers to strategically select cases that are rich in information and relevant to the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data were collected through digital documentation by downloading and archiving 8 Instagram photo posts from each candidate, resulting in a total of 8 posts for analysis. The photos were collected between November 28, 2023, and February 10, 2024. This period represents the official 75-day campaign period set by the General Elections Commission (KPU). Data collection during the official campaign period is crucial for capturing planned and intensive political communication strategies. Furthermore, note-taking techniques were used to document in detail visual and linguistic elements relevant to the research objectives, including image composition, color usage, captions, comments, and other semiotic elements.

The data analysis methods and techniques are based on two main theoretical frameworks. First, semiotic theory Barthes and Stephen (1977) interprets the denotative (literal) and connotative (cultural/associative) meanings of visual signs to uncover the ideology embedded in their representations. Second, the theory of visual grammar developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) analyzes the structure and meaning communicated through visual elements such as composition, perspective, and modality. This framework allows for a systematic analysis of three metafunctions of meaning: representational (what is depicted), interactional (the relationship between the image producer and the viewer), and compositional (how visual elements are arranged to create coherence) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020).

The combination of these two theoretical approaches enables a more comprehensive analysis of how women candidates strategically use visual symbols to construct and communicate their political personas to the public on Instagram. The analysis process involved coding the data, identifying emerging patterns and themes, and interpreting meaning within the broader Indonesian socio-political context.

Results

This section presents findings from a social semiotic analysis of eight Instagram posts from eight women legislative candidates during the 2024 general election campaign period. The analysis was conducted by integrating Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to identify denotative and connotative meanings, and Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar theory to analyze the composition, representation, and interactional strategies in each post. The findings indicate that women political candidates use a variety of visual representation strategies to construct their political personas, which can be categorized into several dominant themes: representation of domestic and maternal roles, representation of professionalism and political competence, representation of religiosity and moral values, and representation of closeness to constituents through *blusukan* (public outreach) activities and social activities. Each of these representation strategies reflects a complex negotiation between traditional gender expectations and demands for political credibility in the public sphere. The following is a detailed analysis of each Instagram post that represents these representational patterns.

Figure 1 depicts Nurul Arifin as a digital cartoon wearing a yellow t-shirt with the number "1" printed on it. Her smile and a purple finger raised, pointing directly at the viewer. In the background, a group of young men in yellow, associated with the Golkar Party, is depicted. The faces of Prabowo and Gibran, the President and Vice President-elect for the 2024–2029 term, are also depicted. Accompanying visual text such as "Hari Kasih Suara/Vote Day," "Hadir untuk suara rakyat!/" Here for the people's voice!" and other political information, including the

candidate's name, party affiliation, and electoral district, all form a clear and targeted visual message. From a connotative and mythological perspective, yellow is the Golkar party's official color, symbolizing enthusiasm, optimism, and ideological continuity (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). The cartoon depiction of Nurul Arifin with her iconic ink-stained finger conveys a cheerful, friendly, and energetic figure engaged in electoral participation. Her ink-stained finger serves as a powerful symbol of democracy in Indonesia and represents the legitimate act of voting. Her smile reinforces this impression, conveying warmth and optimism to voters.



Figure 1. Nurul Arifin (Golkar Party)

The inclusion of youth in this figure suggests the campaign is targeting a younger demographic and invokes connotations of inclusivity, modernity, and collective enthusiasm. Their gestures, pointing forward or forming symbolic hand signs, visually reinforce the call for active political participation. The animated style of the illustration creates a “contemporary” aesthetic aimed at a young, digitally connected audience and positions the candidate as a “friendly” millennial politician (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020; Lilleker et al., 2019). Furthermore, the pointing gesture creates a “demand image,” inviting the audience to interact directly. Within Barthes’s connotative framework, the use of cartoon visuals in this image constructs an image of a socially acceptable woman politician in a patriarchal culture that often discourages open expressions of women’s power (Barthes & Stephen, 1977). The phrase “Hari Kasih Suara/Vote Day,” a play on “Valentine’s Day,” reframes voting as an act of civic love and care, lending a humanistic and emotional appeal to the political image. In visual theory, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020), this image employs a prominent narrative structure called the “action process,” in which Nurul Arifin points toward the viewer with an inked finger, a symbolic gesture of active voting. In addition to visual grammar, the action process refers to participants engaging in visible, recognizable actions, such as pointing, walking, or holding an object (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). These actions serve as a direct invitation to the public to participate in the election. The background figures reinforce the collective message of youth engagement in the democratic process.

Interpersonally, Nurul Arifin’s direct gaze and warm smile create a challenging image and invite visual interaction with the audience (Thomas & Thomson, 2025). This direct eye contact strengthens the interpersonal connection with potential voters, while her smile reinforces the affective strategy, making the political impression more personal and relevant. This mode and level of realism are deliberately reduced through the cartoonish style. As explained by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020), this visual strategy aims to convey a light, friendly, and approachable tone. This differs significantly from the formal realistic style common in traditional political communication and serves as a form of political rebranding. Compositionally, Nurul Arifin is

placed in the bottom right corner of the image, with her finger pointing out of the frame towards the viewer. This placement aligns with the “ideal-real” spatial zone, where the right side often symbolizes “new information” or future-oriented propositions. Young figures are placed on the left, representing the “given” zone, symbolizing the candidate's inherent values, such as youth, energy, and modernity. The bright yellow background creates a high contrast with the text and other visual elements, drawing attention and establishing a distinctive visual identity consistent with the Golkar Party. This composition not only strengthens the candidate's bond with the party but also builds a strong personal brand through a unique visual style.

Therefore, this post exemplifies the practice of visual centrism in digital political communication, in which visual imagery serves as a core medium for constructing political identity strategies. The visual strategies employed reflect a conscious effort to resonate with millennial and Gen Z audiences through popular aesthetics, bright colors, and participatory symbolism, such as inked fingers and inclusive gestures. These findings align with recent research, which highlights that women political candidates on social media often employ visual techniques that align gender representation with strength, wisdom, and emotional resonance, while strengthening democratic participation through compelling personal images (Gakahu, 2024).



Figure 2. Desy Ratnasari (PAN Party)

Figure 2 depicts Desy Ratnasari, a legislative candidate from the National Mandate Party (PAN), wearing a blue uniform, a white hijab, and a warm smile. In the upper left corner, a simulated ballot paper shows the party name, the number 12, and the first registered candidate, "Desy Ratnasari." In the lower right corner, the electoral district information is clearly stated: "Candidate for the Indonesian House of Representatives, Electoral District IV of West Java – Sukabumi City and Regency/DPR RI Candidate for West Java Electoral District 4, Sukabumi City and Regency."

Connotatively, the blue and white colour scheme conveys a sense of cleanliness, serenity, and trustworthiness, closely associated with PAN and its values of religiosity and moral integrity. Her modest appearance, emphasised by her hijab and formal attire, reinforces an identity as an educated, polite, and trustworthy Muslim woman, suitable for public representation. Blue symbolises stability and credibility, while white denotes purity and religious morality (Barthes & Stephen, 1977). Together, these elements create the visual ethos of a modern yet religiously grounded leader. In the image, this smile symbolises warmth and openness and projects a friendly personal image. Furthermore, the flower brooch on her hijab adds a feminine touch, softening the portrait's formal tone. Furthermore, the ballot paper is also visually incorporated into the image, serving as an anchor text that guides the interpretation of the spectacle and

reinforces the primary visual signifier. This strategy supports the depiction of Desy Ratnasari as a legitimate political figure, rather than a mere celebrity, underscoring her formal political candidacy. A connotative reading of this photograph reveals how visual elements help construct the myth that women can lead in politics without sacrificing traditional or religious values. This myth serves to bridge conservative political identities with modern women's roles in the public sphere. Recent research also suggests that powerful visual representations can empower women in politics, creating space for participation without sacrificing cultural or religious identities (Gakahu, 2024).

Based on the visual grammar framework of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020), this image also reflects a narrative format known as the "action process," in which Desy Ratnasari's subject is presented as an active agent, smiling and looking directly into the camera. This direct gaze creates an image of demand, inviting viewer engagement and encouraging voter participation (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). The photo is taken from an eye-level perspective, which establishes a sense of equality and connection between the candidate and the audience, underscoring a populist, inclusive approach. Furthermore, the use of a strong blue color with high contrast enhances the image's modality, or perceived realism, lending credibility and authenticity to the visual message.

In terms of compositional significance, Desy Ratnasari's image is positioned on the right side of the poster, a spatial zone typically associated with new or future-oriented information. Meanwhile, the ballot paper on the left conveys details "already known" to the audience, such as the party, number, and candidate name. The prominence of her name and image, particularly the bold typography "DESY RATNASARI," underscores her central role in the visual narrative. The image elements are tightly arranged and integrated, reinforcing a cohesive identity that aligns her personal image with PAN's political image. This post illustrates a gender-based political self-branding strategy that aligns with social and religious norms in Indonesia. The woman is portrayed not through masculine strength but through a model of "soft leadership," which aligns with widely accepted domestic and spiritual values in society. This aligns with Desy Ratnasari's approach in this visual post, as recent research has shown that women candidates in patriarchal societies often adopt hybrid political identities, combining traditional and modern elements in their public representation (Banerjee Rituparna & Mitra, 2024).



Figure 3. Nihayatul Wafiroh (PKB Party)

Figure 3 presents a simulation of a legislative election ballot for the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI) in the electoral district of East Java III, which includes Banyuwangi,

Situbondo, and Bondowoso. The name of Dr. Hj. Nihayatul Wafiroh, MA., is prominently placed at the top of the list, emphasized by a bright yellow background, while the names of other candidates are displayed as placeholders. The bottom-right corner displays the logo of the National Awakening Party (PKB), with the number 1. Below the simulated ballot, a woman wearing a dark green hijab smiles broadly and gestures to the right. This gesture aligns with the regional language slogan, "Partaine nomor siji, nomor rute siji/ The number one party, and number one", creating a cohesive visual-verbal composition.

Connotatively, this image is loaded with symbolic elements that reinforce the campaign narrative. The repeated emphasis on the number "1" through textual cues and gestures builds associations with superiority, leadership, and confidence. These directional cues serve as vectors within the visual narrative structure, directing the viewer's attention to the core message: the candidate as the optimal choice. The use of East Javanese dialect reinforces cultural proximity and affective resonance with local constituents, reflecting authenticity and grassroots affiliation. As previously mentioned, local languages in political communication enhance group identity and encourage social inclusion (Cardo Valentina, 2020). Furthermore, the use of green in the candidate's attire serves as the party's visual identity and evokes PKB's ideological roots in traditional Islam and the Nahdlatul Ulama community. This aligns with research on Indonesian political semiotics, which shows that green is often associated with piety, growth, and social justice (Robinson, 2017). The candidate's warm expressions and friendly demeanor foster a populist self-image that stands in stark contrast to that of elite political figures. Furthermore, Barthes's theory of myth states that these representations are not ideologically neutral but operate as naturalized symbols to convey hidden values and political meanings through familiar visual forms (Barthes & Stephen, 1977).

The visual grammar of Figure 3 falls into the category of narrative representation, specifically reactive processes, in which the candidate is depicted as an active participant directing the viewer's attention through a pointing gesture. In this context, the candidate is not merely a visual object but a subject shaping the narrative. His gaze is not directed toward the viewer but rather to the side, while simultaneously pointing, a gesture referred to as an offering image (Gupta et al., 2022). This compositional choice subtly invites the viewer to attend to the referents of his gesture, his name, and the ballot number as a form of persuasive, yet indirect, visual communication. The use of bold colors such as green for the National Awakening Party (PKB), bright yellow for the candidate's name, and red for the number one enhances the modality of the image, reinforcing the perception of the message as powerful, clear, and authoritative. The upward-pointing gesture symbolically evokes higher ideals, moral authority, and aspiration. From a compositional perspective, the candidate's placement in the bottom right quadrant of the poster aligns with the "new" information zone in the visual structure, suggesting novelty or importance (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). Meanwhile, the party logo and the bold positioning of the number one fill the visual, standing out as key communicative elements. The bright yellow text, large red number, and candidate's face collectively form the image's primary focal point, reinforcing a clear visual hierarchy.

Although individual visual elements are separated by contrasting lines and colors, they are integrated through directional gestures and harmonious color schemes, creating visual coherence and compositional unity. This study provides an example of a political identity strategy grounded in religion and local culture, portraying the candidate as a devout and approachable woman with a grassroots background. This visual image draws on traditional Islamic values (Nahdlatul Ulama) and local ethnolinguistic identity (East Java), reinforcing cultural authenticity. This aligns with findings highlighting how women candidates on social media use culturally and religiously grounded self-branding strategies to navigate and challenge structural gender barriers in politics (Gakahu, 2024).



Figure 4. Ida Nurlaela Wiradinata (PDI-P Party)

Figure 4 visually shows Hj. Ida Nurlaela Wiradinata, a candidate for the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI) from Electoral District X of West Java, is wearing a red blazer and a red hijab, the colors of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P). Ida Nurlaela is placed in the bottom center of the image against a striking background. At the top, the party's main figures are shown: Megawati Soekarnoputri, the party chair, and Ganjar Pranowo and Mahfud MD, the presidential and vice-presidential candidates for the 2024–2029 period. Other visual elements include the PDI-P logo (a black bull's head in a red circle), the party's serial number (3), and the campaign slogan "SOLID BERGAK UNTUK INDONESIA RAYA / United in Action for a Great Indonesia". In the upper right corner, an image of Indonesia's Founding Father, Sukarno, in military uniform. This adds historical depth and symbolism.

Connotatively, the dominant red color in the image implies struggle, courage, nationalism, and also demonstrates a militant quality consistent with the historical identity of the PDI-P as a nationalist-populist party embedded in Sukarno's ideological legacy. In semiotic terms, red signifies the people's revolutionary spirit and loyalty to nationalist ideals (Barthes & Stephen, 1977). The inclusion of Sukarno in a military uniform enhances the aura of historical authority, establishing a genealogical link between the nation's founding leader and the PDI-P as his ideological successor. The placement of Megawati in the top center reinforces her symbolic status as the inheritor of political power and charismatic authority. The presence of Ganjar Pranowo and Mahfud, accompanied by the tagline "Ganjar-Mahfud," supports the continuity of the ideological narrative and the regeneration of leadership.

Ida Nurlaela herself is depicted standing upright with a friendly expression, framed by a modern graphic background. This projects the image of a strong, yet approachable, women politician who connects emotionally with the public. This visual symbol not only conveys information but also constructs a political myth and collective narrative that frames electoral participation as a form of national struggle (Barthes, 1985). Within this framework, supporting the PDI-P candidate is positioned as a continuation of Sukarno's nationalism. From a visual grammar perspective, the figure represents a complex narrative involving multiple participants arranged in a hierarchical

structure. Megawati, Ganjar, and Mahfud occupy the ideological and national levels, while Ida represents the party's local embodiment. This spatial arrangement creates relational meaning, positioning Ida within the PDI-P's broader national vision. Interpersonally, she gazes directly at the viewer with a gentle smile, creating an image that Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) describe as demanding, seeking emotional engagement and trust. Her red formal attire, paired with a batik-patterned hijab, signifies her dual identity as a nationalist and religious woman while simultaneously representing Indonesian womanhood. The neon-style slogan in capital letters reinforces the sense of urgency and collective action.

Compositionally, the figure is divided into two main zones: the upper portion conveying ideological and national leadership, and the lower portion showcasing the local candidate as a vehicle for that ideological fervor. The predominance of red, strategic lighting of the face, enlarged typography for the candidate's name and slogan, and cohesive background texture all contribute to a unified narrative. This aligns with the concept of ideological integration, as described by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020), in which individual identity aligns with institutional messaging. Ultimately, the post constructs a digital political identity for a women candidate that transcends gender representation, placing her within a larger ideological and cultural framework. Ida is portrayed as a local agent of the national movement, combining ideological representation (Sukarnoism), national leadership (Ganjar-Mahfud), and the role of local women (Ida Nurlaela). Digital campaigns by women candidates often strategically blend national political narratives with personal and cultural elements to foster emotional and political resonance with voters (Gakahu, 2024).



Figure 5. Nevi Zuairina (PKS Party)

Figure 5 shows a visual simulation of the legislative ballot for the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI) in Electoral District II of West Sumatra, which includes Padang Pariaman, Agam, Bukittinggi, Lima Puluh Kota, Payakumbuh, Pasaman, and West Pasaman. Hj. Nevi Zuairina appears in the first position, framed by a bright yellow background, while the names of other candidates appear as substitutes. She represents the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), whose party number (8) and logo are prominently displayed in the upper right corner. At

the bottom, Nevi Zuairina wears a white blazer and a white hijab with an orange motif, integrating the PKS's visual identity. Her smiling expression, combined with the ballot image, the Minangkabau-language slogan "Mari Gadang Basamo/Let's Achieve Glory Together," and the national tagline "PKS Menang Rakyat Senang/ PKS Wins, People Happy," creates a persuasive visual narrative. Her name and electoral position are presented in large, bright letters to maximize the candidate's visual impact.

Connotatively, the colors orange and white have symbolic meaning. Orange represents energy, warmth, openness, and optimism, while white represents purity, sincerity, and piety. Together, these reinforce the PKS's image as a modern, clean, and inclusive Islamic party. Nevi Zuairina's formal attire and headscarf emphasize religious morality, aligning her with the values of the predominantly Muslim electorate in West Sumatra. Local slogans serve as cultural markers that emotionally bind candidates to Minangkabau identity, generating what has been defined as a myth: a constructed narrative that naturalizes ideological meaning (Barthes, 1985). In this context, the myth positions a religious, locally based, and active women candidate as the ideal representative of the constituents. This narrative also resonates with the concept of "maternal politics," in which women political figures are constructed as simultaneously nurturing and authoritative, representing moral leadership in public life (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016).

This political framework of motherhood emphasizes how traditional gender expectations about motherhood and caregiving are incorporated into the legitimacy of women's political leadership, creating a space for participation that is both empowering and limiting (Rietig & Perkins, 2018). Through visual grammar, the candidate is depicted as the central actor, pointing to her name, smiling confidently, and engaging the viewer through direct eye contact (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). This demanding imagery establishes a symbolic interaction, and the eye-level camera angle suggests a relational equality between candidate and voter, reinforcing her role as a reliable public servant. Compositionally, the image divides meaning into two zones: the top left displays the ballot, while the bottom right presents Nevi Zuairina as the preferred future choice. Her name and party are prominently displayed, and the repetition of the PKS logo reinforces the visual affiliation. The color scheme, dominated by orange and white, ties all elements together in a cohesive, party-centric framework.

Furthermore, this post constructs a digital political identity centered on religiosity, local culture, and gender. Nevi is portrayed not only as a Muslim woman but also as an agent of Minangkabau culture and a moral representative of the PKS. This strategy aligns with the pattern of women candidates combining religious, family, and cultural symbolism to foster public trust and emotional engagement (Cardo Valentina, 2020; Gakahu, 2024). Therefore, this analysis suggests that this representational strategy is highly effective in shaping traditional cultural values and religious affiliation.

Figure 6 shows Cellica Nurrachadiana, a legislative candidate from the Democratic Party from Electoral District VII of West Java. She is wearing an elegant blue dress complete with a floral brooch and a dark blue hijab. The background displays a dark blue gradation with a light blue combination, then there are two important figures of the Democratic Party, namely Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono (AHY) and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY). The party logo is a red-white-blue triangle. On the ballot paper, there is a serial number (2) with the words "DEMOCRAT S14P!", and the direction "VOTE NO.2 DPR RI PARTAI DEMOCRAT" is also clearly displayed.

Connotatively, the dominant use of blue symbolizes stability, professionalism, and institutional authority. As a color often associated with state and corporate institutions, blue reinforces the Democratic Party's image as a centrist, rational, and established political force. Research shows that color in political communication functions as a predictor of ideology and has a significant

psychological impact on public perception, with blue consistently associated with trust, reliability, and institutional strength (Losada & Sánchez, 2022). Other studies reveal that politicians strategically adopt certain colors as part of chromatic isomorphism to build collective identity and institutional legitimacy, with blue in particular being used to communicate stability and a tradition-oriented approach (Casiraghi Matteo et al., 2022). The choice of color in political branding is thus a strategic decision that integrates color psychology with visual communication goals to influence voter perceptions. The presence of AHY and SBY is behind building a narrative of leadership legitimacy and generational continuity within the party. Cellica Nurrachadiana's simple and modern appearance, characterized by a hijab and formal attire, communicates religious values, modern femininity, and nationalist sentiment. This combined image articulates a political identity that harmonizes religiosity and nationalism in a women leader.



Figure 6. Cellica Nurrachadiana (Democratic Party)

The slogan "S14P" carries multiple meanings. Phonetically, it echoes the Indonesian word "siap," while symbolically indicating generational continuity (i.e., the party's 14th generation) and institutional readiness for electoral competition. The posts collectively construct a myth, portraying Cellica Nurrachadiana as a modern, poised, competent women leader supported by established political institutions. Her choice of clothing, including a formal sash, also signals social status and class distinction, in line with the argument that fashion in political imagery can be read as a visual code of power and legitimacy (Behnke, 2016). In Barthes's terms, this combination of visual elements exemplifies the mythologization of power, a strategy that instills political authority through a calm and elegant aesthetic (Barthes, 1977).

From a visual grammar perspective, the post operates as a visual narrative with strong representational significance (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). Cellica Nurrachadiana occupies the central visual space as the main actor, while AHY and SBY, positioned above in the background, serve as symbolic supporters who provide elite legitimacy. This spatial configuration reinforces the hierarchical structure, positioning Cellica Nurrachadiana as the leading candidate supported

by the party leadership. Interpersonally, her direct gaze at the viewer creates a demanding image, establishing a symbolic and emotional connection with voters. Her warm smile, upright posture, and eye-level perspective convey friendliness and authority, reinforcing her image as a confident and authoritative leader. The red capital letters in "VOTE NO. 2" serve as a strong visual call to action. Compositionally, the vertical layout separates the party elite at the top from the new candidates below, visually suggesting that Cellica Nurrachadiana represents the party's next step forward. The dominance of bold blue letters for the candidate's name and the strategic use of geometric elements, triangles, arrows, and lines frame the image in a unified political and aesthetic structure.

This post describes a digital campaign strategy in which women's political identities are constructed through a combination of structural representation (party support), religious and professional signifiers (hijab and formal attire), and emerging leadership narratives (colors, slogans, and designs). This reflects findings that women candidates in the digital space often combine religious imagery and professional credentials to gain legitimacy in the male-dominated political arena (Banerjee Rituparna & Mitra, 2024). Similarly, it has been argued that personalized visual campaigns, particularly on platforms like Instagram, drive higher levels of voter engagement and emotional connection (Nurnisya & Kasmani, 2025). These insights confirm that such visual strategies are not merely aesthetic but also effective in increasing political visibility and resonance in the social media era.



Figure 7. Lisda Hendrajoni (Nasdem Party)

Figure 7 depicts Lisda Hendrajoni, a legislative candidate from the National Democratic Party (NasDem), wearing a black outfit paired with a soft pink hijab. The image also includes the NasDem party logo and the number "50" to refer to the party's anniversary. The visual text lists various forms of social assistance and achievements attributed to the candidate, including scholarships, ambulances, affordable housing, wheelchairs, prosthetic limbs, and livestock. Furthermore, the image displays a ballot marked with the ballot number 1, accompanied by a clear call to action: "VOTE NO. 1."

Connotatively, the soft pink hijab evokes associations with empathy, compassion, and caring, traditionally associated with femininity and social nurturing. In contrast, the black garment conveys professionalism, authority, and assertiveness. This combination of colors projects a balanced image of an empathetic and authoritative women leader. As noted by Casiraghi Matteo et al. (2022), pink is often associated with feminine softness, while black signifies formality and

structural strength. The use of bold, large-scale numerical data in the visual reinforces Lisda's image as a results-oriented politician, someone who prioritizes measurable achievements over empty promises. The depiction of marked ballots emphasizes the performative aspect of voter participation, underscoring the importance of democratic action through voting. From Barthes's semiotic perspective, this visual constructs the myth of the people's mother, a women politician who is not only a legislative representative but also a grassroots servant deeply connected to the social needs of her community. This myth positions women leadership as capable of harmonizing representative and empathetic roles in a political space still dominated by masculine norms (Barthes, 1985).

In a visual grammar analysis, the image serves as a primarily conceptual representation rather than a narrative representation (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). No implied actions or events occur; instead, the image offers an informative depiction that emphasizes data and facts. The image depicts Lisda Hendrajoni standing upright in the center, surrounded by infographic elements and indicators of her social contribution. This format communicates a political identity based not on abstract rhetoric, but rather on concrete, verifiable performance. Interpersonally, her slightly averted gaze avoids direct eye contact with the viewer, creating what Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) describe as an image that offers contemplation. This visual choice places the viewer in a reflective space, allowing them to assess the candidate's credibility based on performance metrics. Her calm posture, with her hands folded neatly in front of her, reinforces an image of discipline, professionalism, and emotional control. Bold fonts are used for statistics to enhance the visual impact and underscore the narrative of tangible success.

Compositionally, the candidate is placed in the center of an area considered the "ideal" zone in visual grammar theory, while the surrounding data and party symbols occupy the "real" zone of the image. This layout visually communicates that Lisda is the driving force behind the achievements presented. Visual prominence is enhanced by the dominance of soft pink, the striking party logo, and large number markers, which generate emotional and affective appeal. The structured visual layout, framed with balance and precision, reflects a systematic, organized, and trustworthy personality. This visual strategy builds Lisda Hendrajoni's digital political identity as a woman candidate who embodies three interrelated personas: a maternal social figure (symbolized through a gentle tone and caring image), a results-oriented public servant (through performance-based infographics), and a professional leader affiliated with a modern national party (NasDem). This aligns with observations that women candidates in digital campaigns often combine feminine values, performance legitimacy, and social participation to enhance political credibility (Gakahu, 2024). This is also in line with findings that women candidates in contexts such as Kenya, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia use social media to simultaneously communicate messages of citizenship, concern, and credibility, particularly in patriarchal political landscapes (Banerjee Rituparna & Mitra, 2024; Cardo Valentina, 2020).

Figure 8 shows Mulan Jameela, a legislative candidate from the Great Indonesia Movement Party-Gerindra, wearing a white suit and matching white hijab, posing with a namaste hand gesture. The Gerindra party logo appears in the upper right corner, while large text in the center reads "AYO!! SUKSESKAN PEMILU 2024/Mari Jadikan Pemilu 2024 Sukses/ LET'S GO!! MAKE THE 2024 ELECTION A SUCCESS/Let's Make the 2024 Election a Success", along with slogans such as "Menjadi wakil rakyat yang terus berjuang dan bermanfaat bagi rakyat / Becoming a people's representative who continues to fight and be useful to the people" and "Mohon doa dan dukungannya/ Please pray and support ". The party's serial number "2" is prominently displayed in red and yellow. At the bottom, her full name and academic title, "Mulan Jameela, S.S.," are accompanied by her candidacy for the House of Representatives (DPR RI).

Connotatively, white clothing symbolizes purity, honesty, and sincerity, values often associated with moral integrity and spiritual legitimacy. The namaste gesture symbolizes humility and

modesty, conveying a cross-cultural and interfaith message of respect. With both hands placed on the chest, this gesture serves as a powerful "image of humility," reflecting respect and emotional alignment with voters as a source of democratic legitimacy. Such a posture demonstrates how women politicians often present themselves in digital campaigns not as power seekers, but as individuals humbly seeking political legitimacy (Osei-Appiah et al., 2023). Furthermore, the striking red and yellow colors used for ballot numbers and slogans convey the qualities of passion, strength, and courage that are central to Gerindra's populist-nationalist identity. The pleas for prayer and support introduce a spiritual-emotional tone, emphasizing moral connection over political aggression, and positioning the candidate as a relatable figure grounded in shared values.



Figure 8. Mulan Jameela (Gerindra Party)

From the perspective of visual grammar by Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006), the image is a conceptual representation rather than a narrative one. There is no visible action or interaction, but rather the candidate's static, frontal pose accompanied by declarative textual content. The visual elements, the party logo, number, and slogan, are arranged to emphasize political affiliation and candidacy without relying on narrative dynamics. Interpersonally, the candidate's direct gaze into the camera creates a demanding image, establishing symbolic engagement with the viewer and conveying commitment and sincerity. The namaste gesture serves as a non-dominant greeting, reinforcing his humility and respect for the public. From a modality perspective, the use of bright lighting, high-resolution imagery, and warm facial expressions creates a sense of authenticity, trustworthiness, and emotional accessibility.

Compositionally, the image is meticulously composed. The top "ideal" zone in the visual grammar displays the call to action "AYO!! SUKSESKAN PEMILU 2024/ LET'S GO!! MAKE THE 2024 ELECTION A SUCCESS", signaling moral intent and patriotic fervor. The middle zone, referred to as "actual," includes the candidate's face, ballot number, and full name, emphasizing the message's electoral focus. Prominence is achieved through the dominant use of red and yellow, making the ballot number and slogan more visually prominent than the candidate himself, suggesting a priority of party identification over individual personality. Although the visual

elements are clearly segmented, the design maintains cohesion through color harmony and diagonal framing, which introduces visual dynamism and demonstrates strategic confidence.

In terms of building a women political identity, Mulan Jameela's campaign visuals combine three key elements of visual political branding. First, she projects a respectable femininity through a simple, elegant, and clean appearance. Second, her religiosity and humility are conveyed through the namaste gesture and spiritual appeal, which evoke emotional resonance. Third, the minimalist nationalist design using symbolic colors such as white, red, and yellow communicates strength and clarity without excessive ornamentation. This visual strategy aligns with findings that women politicians in Muslim-majority contexts often present themselves through religious and symbolic representations to gain socio-political credibility (Banerjee, Rituparna & Mitra, 2024). Furthermore, personalized, emotionally resonant, and symbolically rich visuals are highly effective in bridging the psychological gap between candidates and constituents and fostering emotional bonds in the digital campaign space (Gakahu, 2024). Thus, the use of visual strategies that combine religious, personal, and emotional elements demonstrates a strategic approach to building political legitimacy and connecting with voters in the digital age.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that women legislative candidates in Indonesia actively utilize Instagram as a primary platform to build a strong, personal, and image-centric political identity. Rather than relying solely on textual communication, these candidates strategically employ visual language as the primary means of conveying political messages. This aligns with the concept of image-centrism proposed by Gakahu (2024), who states that contemporary women politicians increasingly rely on visual representation as a strategy to build credibility, visibility, and emotional connection with voters in the digital political landscape. Consistent representational patterns emerge in the use of party colors, body gestures, direct gaze, and smiling expressions, all of which contribute to the interactional dimension of visual grammar (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020)

Direct gaze into the camera—referred to in visual grammar terminology as a demand image—and frequent displays of smiles serve to build affective connections and psychological closeness with viewers. These visual strategies create the illusion of direct interaction between candidates and voters, a trend also identified in a study of women candidates in Kenya (Gakahu, 2024). Furthermore, the visualization of social welfare programs (e.g., in Lisda and Nevi's posts), appearances in national dress or traditional cultural motifs (e.g., Nihayatul), and the use of religious symbols and feminine attributes (e.g., Mulan, Desy, and Nevi) illustrate representational strategies that combine performative and symbolic elements. These visual elements are not merely decorative, but rather serve as complex identity markers that communicate cultural values, religiosity and a commitment to community well-being.

In terms of feminine politics and cultural mythology, this study also found that motherhood remains a dominant symbolic trope in women's political communication. Candidates like Nevi Zuairina and Lisda Hendrajoni employ maternal symbolism both linguistically (e.g., slogans about "prosperous citizens" and "nurture") and visually (e.g., gentle gestures, feminine clothing, pastel colors), creating narratives of emotional closeness, service, and compassion. As Barthes argued, these connotative meanings function as cultural myths constructed by society to frame particular social representations (Barthes & Stephen, 1977). Furthermore, many candidates negotiate a balance between modernity and piety, often expressed through diverse fashion choices (e.g., Western-style professional attire paired with a hijab) or visual layouts that juxtapose party symbols with personal images. This aligns with findings suggesting that women's visual political identities in similar contexts are formed through a complex interplay between

progressive ideals and traditional norms. Research shows that women politicians visually construct their non-verbal political performance through various cues, such as fashion choices (traditional or Western attire), the use of culturally specific religious symbols, and gendered political actions, all of which remain linked to social expectations and historical narratives (Banerjee Rituparna & Mitra, 2024). Women's political negotiations regarding these aspects underscore the reproduction of colonial legacies and the production of contemporary social differences. Furthermore, contemporary studies by Cardo Valentina (2020) show that while social media offers a platform for individual expression, it still operates within the constraints of social norms and expectations, where women's self-presentation does not always challenge these norms but rather reinforces them.

In terms of self-branding and differentiation strategies, Indonesian women candidates demonstrate a strong tendency toward political personalization, emphasizing narratives of moral transformation and positioning themselves as autonomous political figures. In this context, Instagram serves as a curated platform where candidates project idealized versions of themselves tailored to voters' expectations in the digital space. Visual elements such as sashes, hand gestures, and symbolic backdrops featuring national figures served as tools of differentiation in a crowded electoral landscape.

However, the findings also indicate that despite the use of visuals as a primary image-building strategy, not all candidates successfully optimized the compositional elements of visual grammar. Some images, such as those analyzed in the case of Lisda, appeared overly dense with information and lacked a clear visual narrative structure, diminishing the clarity of communication and the overall impact of the message. The lack of a clear focal point or structured layout ultimately diminished the effectiveness of visual political communication and could obscure the intended message.

Conclusion

Based on the results of eight women political candidates, it was revealed that women politicians in Indonesia strategically utilize Instagram as a visual platform to construct their political identities. Their political self-images are built on symbolic constructs that combine personal traits, cultural identities, religious values, and party affiliations. The visual communication strategies employed by these women candidates reflect multiple dimensions. Interpersonally, they use eye contact, smiling expressions, and gestures to build affective connections with their audiences. Representatively, they portray themselves as maternal figures, moral authorities, or professional leaders. Compositionally, they also rely on color schemes, typography, and the spatial arrangement of visual elements to reinforce their campaign messages.

This study concludes that the visual representations of women candidates in the Indonesian political arena serve not only as campaign tools but also as cultural sites for the production of political identities. Despite the progressive image they seek to convey, these visual practices often reproduce traditional values, including myths about motherhood, normative femininity, and religious values that shape public perceptions of women leadership. This duality reflects the complex negotiation between innovation and tradition that characterizes women's politics in Indonesia.

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