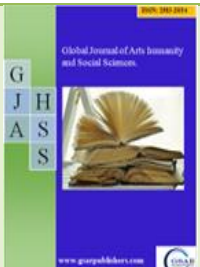
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Photography as a Medium in Political Communication for Building a Positive Image

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Abstract

Photography plays a strategic role in political communication as a visual medium capable of conveying political messages in an immediate, affective, and persuasive manner. Within contemporary societies that are increasingly oriented toward visual media, photography extends beyond its documentary function of recording political events. It operates as a powerful mechanism for shaping public opinion, reinforcing political legitimacy, and constructing the public image of political actors and institutions. This article aims to examine photography as a medium in political communication by analyzing its functions, visual characteristics, and its influence on public perception. The study employs a literature review method using a descriptive-analytical approach to key texts in the fields of communication, media studies, and political science. The findings indicate that photography possesses substantial symbolic and rhetorical power in the production of political meaning. This influence is primarily articulated through visual framing, contextual presentation, and media circulation, all of which contribute significantly to how political messages are interpreted and internalized by the public.

Keywords: Political Communication, New Media, Visual Photography, and Positive Image

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of new media has transformed the landscape of political communication, shifting it from conventional text-based modes of political socialization toward the paradigm of the visual turn. This shift corresponds with (Luna, 2024) argument that the issue of imagery is not merely an aesthetic phenomenon but represents an epistemological transformation that reconfigures traditional philosophical foundations. From this perspective, the visual turn signifies a fundamental change in the ways knowledge is produced, as nonverbal representations are no longer regarded as subordinate to language or text but are recognized as autonomous entities with independent cognitive capacity. As a consequence, contemporary political communication no longer relies solely on verbal rhetoric. Instead, it increasingly depends on the perceived authenticity and depth of meaning generated through digital visual imagery. Communication practices that were once conventional such as the placement of printed political leaflets on public transportation have undergone a process of digitalization, being rearticulated through photographic media that offer greater persuasive potential in the contemporary visual environment. The accessibility of digital technology has further accelerated this

transition, as digital channels such as official websites and institutional social media platforms have become primary conduits for mediating political messages (Bahroni, 2024). The strategic use of visual aesthetics reflects political actors' adaptation to contemporary patterns of information consumption, in which audiences demonstrate greater responsiveness to digitally mediated, image-based content. In this context, photographic visuals function as a central means for constructing political images, reinforcing symbolic meaning, and enhancing the persuasive capacity of political communication.

In the contemporary context, visual photography no longer functions solely as a medium of documentation but has evolved into a representational device that plays a strategic role in political communication practices. Within this domain, photography operates as a symbolic instrument deliberately constructed to produce political images and reinforce the legitimacy of power. (Wardana, 2017) argues that political images do not emerge naturally; rather, they are formed through carefully designed visual constructions that are communicated to the public through photographic media. These images function as a system of nonverbal communication, conveying ideological messages to



audiences through a visual language that appears objective. However, this perceived neutrality often masks underlying political interests embedded within the photographic representation.

The interpretation of photographic images can be examined through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework (Balqis, 2025), which conceptualizes photography as a sign system composed of layered levels of meaning. At the denotative level, photography represents reality as it appears to the naked eye and is therefore often perceived as an objective reflection of events or subjects being photographed. However, at the connotative level, photographic images carry symbolic meanings shaped by visual choices such as framing, camera angle, lighting, pose, and facial expression. These visual elements play a crucial role in constructing particular impressions that guide audience interpretations of the represented reality. Barthes explains that the accumulation of connotative meanings in photography may evolve into myth an ideological process of signification that naturalizes specific interests, rendering them seemingly neutral and unproblematic. Within the context of political communication photography, particularly images disseminated through official government channels, such myths function to construct positive representations of political actors or institutions. These include portrayals of leadership as humane, authoritative, or closely aligned with the public, which are subsequently received as visual truths by audiences. Accordingly, photography does not merely represent reality; it actively participates in shaping social reality and political perception through controlled visual constructions that operate within broader ideological frameworks.

MATERIAL AND METHODE

This study is both relevant and significant for in-depth examination, as the researcher identified a range of empirical findings through direct observation of phenomena occurring in the field. These observational experiences not only reveal how visual photographic practices operate within the context under investigation but also open space for critical analysis of meaning construction, representational strategies, and the aesthetic as well as ideological implications embedded within these practices.

This study identifies a set of articulations of fundamental problematics that serve as the basis for a critical analysis of photographic practices in the public sphere. The visual turn paradigm in contemporary political communication has generated a profound epistemological transformation, in which visual imagery is no longer positioned merely as a supplementary aesthetic element but operates as an instrument for reconstructing the philosophical foundations through which political knowledge is produced. The existence of nonverbal representation is now recognized as possessing autonomous cognitive capacity, capable of surpassing the limitations of traditional verbal rhetoric in mediating ideological messages. Within the new media landscape, the urgency of this research is further reinforced by a growing shift in public perception that increasingly relies on digitally constructed visual imagery. In line with the study conducted by (Susilawaty et al., 2024), contemporary media functions as a highly decisive

variable in shaping public perception. This dynamic is empirically reflected in the phenomenon of the "panggung gemoy," which demonstrates how visualized personification can dominate political narratives and exert a massive influence on public opinion. The findings further reveal that political images do not emerge organically but are the result of controlled meaning construction through strategically designed visual processes aimed at establishing and maintaining political legitimacy. As articulated by (Hamad, 2004), the media does not merely serve as a neutral channel for reporting events; rather, it actively participates in dismantling and reassembling reality through mechanisms of discursive deconstruction. Consequently, the reality received by the public is a symbolically engineered reality shaped through editorial decisions and political communication strategies orchestrated by actors with vested interests, including campaign teams and media institutions.

In addition, the study identifies the significant symbolic and rhetorical power of photography, particularly through the use of framing, camera angle, and lighting to generate specific impressions that guide audience perception (Alim & Sulaiman, 2021) conceptually argue that photography operates as visual rhetoric, as images do not merely represent reality but function as symbolic acts that direct how audiences read and interpret messages. Through selective framing and perspective, photographers or visual designers can emphasize power relations, emotional intensity, threat, or empathy, while lighting and compositional choices further enhance the persuasive and affective impact of the image. Visual meaning, therefore, is produced through the relationship between signifier and signified within a semiotic framework. In this regard, the rhetorical strength of photography lies in its ability to condense complex messages into immediate, emotionally resonant, and memorable visual symbols particularly within the context of public communication and social or political campaigns. Furthermore, the practice of photography within official government communication channels frequently generates what Barthes describes as "myth," namely ideological signification processes that naturalize political interests and present them as seemingly self-evident visual truths. This study finds that such naturalization practices exhibit patterns similar to image construction strategies in advertising, as discussed by (Dipoetra & Kurniadi, 2024). Just as television advertising manipulates the model's body to produce commercial myths, governmental communication employs photography to normalize ideological interests into political myths that are perceived by the public as objective reality. Through the repetitive accumulation of connotative meanings, these constructed representations of leadership are ultimately internalized as socially accepted and unquestioned realities.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Although photography is theoretically understood as a reflection of objective events at the denotative level, observations within contemporary political communication reveal a dominant use of photography as a symbolic instrument embedded with vested interests. This tension between visual truthfulness and image

construction constitutes the central urgency of the present study. Accordingly, through a descriptive-analytical approach to literature in the fields of communication, media, and political studies, this research seeks to examine how photography operates as a political medium capable of constructing positive images through mechanisms of visual framing, contextual presentation, and media distribution strategies. Although photography is theoretically positioned as an objective reflection of reality at the denotative level, the findings of this study indicate that, within contemporary political communication practices, photography is predominantly employed as a symbolic instrument embedded with strategic interests. Empirical observations reveal a consistent tendency to prioritize image construction over visual transparency, particularly in the production and circulation of political photographs. This condition exposes a critical tension between visual honesty and image engineering. Rather than functioning as neutral documentation, political photographs operate as controlled visual constructs designed to generate favorable impressions and reinforce positive political imagery. Visual framing, selective contexts of presentation, and strategic distribution across digital platforms play a decisive role in directing audience interpretation and shaping public perception. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that the effectiveness of photographic imagery in political communication is not solely derived from its visual content, but from the broader media ecology in which it circulates. The repetition of curated images across official channels and social media platforms contributes to the normalization of constructed representations, allowing these images to be received as credible and authoritative visual narratives. Consequently, photography functions not only as a representational medium but as an active agent in the production of political meaning and legitimacy within the public sphere.

1. Political Communication



Figure 1. The Construction of Political Reality through Visual Manipulation

(Source: Vidhy Felizzano Spinoza October 24, 2022)

The analysis of Figure 1 demonstrates that within the new media ecosystem, photography no longer functions merely as a passive witness to political events; instead, it has become a primary instrument for the construction of reality. Aligning with (Hamad, 2004) argument, political messages conveyed through both print and digital media are the result of deliberate deconstruction aimed

at creating a "pseudo-reality." It is observed that the application of technical elements, such as tight framing and specific camera angles in this image, serves to restrict audience perception. By highlighting only the controlled, positive aspects of the political actor, this confirms that public opinion does not emerge naturally but is the outcome of systematic impression management through visual filters.

2. New Media



Figure 2. The Visual Turn Paradigm and Actor Personification

(Source: Vidhy Felizzano Spinoza November 5, 2022)

Figure 2 illustrates a concrete manifestation of the "visual turn" paradigm as articulated by (Alim & Sulaiman, 2021), where visual imagery possesses a stronger cognitive capacity than verbal text in communicating political messages via new media. The strategy employed here is the utilization of visual personification to establish an affective emotional connection with the constituency. This phenomenon is highly relevant to the study by (Susilawaty et al., 2024) regarding the "Gemoy Stage" strategy, where relatable and popular visual characters are used as a distraction from complex political issues. This image proves that political actors utilize new media as a "channel of discourse" to instantaneously embed specific identities into the public's subconscious to restrict audience perception. By highlighting only the controlled, positive aspects of the political actor, this confirms that public opinion does not emerge naturally but is the outcome of systematic impression management through visual filters.

3. Visual Photography



Figure 3. Barthesian Semiotics and the Naturalization of

Interests

(Source: Vidhy Felizzano Spinoza November 17, 2022)

A semiotic analysis of Figure 3 reveals the mechanics of political "myths" formed through layers of denotative and connotative meanings. Drawing on (Dipoetra & Kurniadi, 2024) insights regarding the exploitation of signs in advertising, political photography here performs a similar practice by naturalizing ideological interests to appear inherently common. At the denotative level, the photograph depicts the physical activity of a political figure; however, at the connotative level, the use of lighting and composition injects messages of authority and legitimacy. This process culminates in the formation of a myth, where an artificial image construction is accepted by the public as an authentic and absolute visual truth.

4. Positive Image



Figure 4. Distribution Strategies and Institutional Image Legitimacy

(Source: Vidhy Felizzano Spinoza December 11, 2022)

Figure 4 emphasizes the critical importance of presentation context and distribution strategies in building a positive institutional image. The research finds that visual consistency across new media platforms serves to maintain the stability of power legitimacy. Much like the television advertisements analyzed by Kurniadi, every visual detail in Figure 4 is designed to create an "enchanted" appeal, transforming rigid political communication into an aesthetically pleasing and easily consumable visual narrative. The synergy between the rhetorical power of photography and the rapid distribution of new media ensures that the institution's positive image is permanently anchored as a credible representation of political identity in the eyes of the public.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the transformation of political communication in the new media era has positioned visual photography not merely as a documentation tool, but as a determinant strategic instrument in constructing a positive image. Through the *visual turn* paradigm, the power of imagery has proven capable of surpassing the effectiveness of conventional textual narratives in capturing public attention while simultaneously shaping mass opinion in an instantaneous and persuasive manner. The utilization of photography by political actors and institutions currently represents a highly calculated form

of impression management, where every visual element is curated to produce power legitimacy amidst a society increasingly dependent on digital visual stimulation. The results of the study, analyzed through Roland Barthes' (Daib & Setyawan, 2025) semiotic lens, indicate a systematic mechanism of "naturalizing interests." Political messages, initially artificial in nature, are deconstructed through framing techniques, camera angles, and presentation contexts, eventually transforming into "myths". These political myths function to disguise ideological agendas as visual truths that appear natural, authentic, and unproblematic to the public. Consequently, the synchronization between photographic aesthetics and new media distribution strategies creates a highly effective "channel of discourse" for managing audience perception and maintaining the long-term stability of a political actor's positive image.

As an implication of this study, it is recommended that political communication practitioners develop a deeper understanding of the ethics of visual representation to avoid excessive manipulation of reality. On the other hand, the public, as consumers of information, requires strengthened critical visual literacy to distinguish between objective reality and the mass-produced image constructions disseminated through new media channels.

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