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## **POLITICAL POSTERS, MEMES, AND MOVEMENTS: GRAPHIC DESIGN IN THE ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

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### **Abstract**

In the era of digital communication, graphic design has emerged as a vital tool for influencing political narratives, mobilising communities, and constructing collective identities. This study aims to examine the role of political posters, memes, and infographics as persuasive instruments within social media ecosystems. The objectives are (i) to analyse the influence of visual design on political mobilisation, (ii) to investigate how memes and digital graphics shape political identity, and (iii) to evaluate the ethical concerns related to visual propaganda. A qualitative content analysis was employed, drawing on secondary data from case studies of Malaysian political campaigns such as #Undi18, #Lawan, and #BenderaPutih. Data sources included published articles, social media archives, and government reports, which were thematically coded using media semiotics and visual culture frameworks. Findings reveal that visual communication significantly enhances political branding and mobilisation, but also poses risks of oversimplification and misinformation. The study underscores the necessity of visual literacy and ethical accountability in political design.

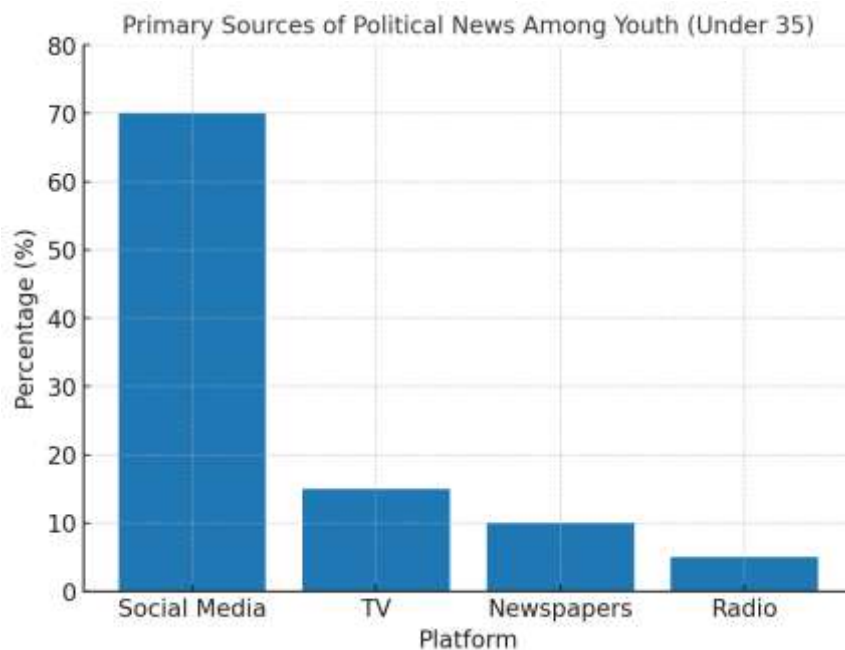
### **Keywords:**

Activism, Branding, Communication, Design, Ethics

## Introduction and Problem Statement

The domain of political communication has experienced a significant metamorphosis in the digital age. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (now X) have transformed the creation, distribution, and consumption of political messages, transitioning from text-centric communication to predominantly visual, image-based formats (Lim, 2023; Qazi & Rashid, 2024). This transformation signifies a wider societal shift towards visuality, wherein graphic design serves not just as an aesthetic instrument but also as a strategic medium for persuasion, mobilisation, and identity construction (Barnard, 2013; Aiello, 2020).

Statistics substantiate this transition: more than 70% of persons under 35 indicate that they primarily obtain political news from social media, with Instagram and TikTok proving especially impactful among younger voters (Reuters Institute, 2022).



**Figure 1: Primary Sources of Political News Among Youth (Under 35)**

The phenomenon in Malaysia is apparent in political events like the 15th General Election (GE15), where political parties and civil society organisations widely utilised infographics, memes, and Instagram carousels to shape voter perceptions and engagement (Lim, 2023).

Political figures, activists, and citizens increasingly utilise visual design elements (color palettes, typography, cultural symbols, and visual metaphor) to construct narratives, express resistance, and foster solidarity (Putera Faidz & Mohamad Puad, 2021). Global movements like Black Lives Matter and Fridays for Future illustrate how iconic imagery and viral visuals may surpass geographical limitations to foster international unity (Halversen & Weeks, 2023). In Malaysia, graphic design has been pivotal in civic initiatives including #Undi18, which advocates for reducing the voting age, and #Lawan, a youth-led protest against governmental mismanagement during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mustaffa, Hamzah, & Rahman, 2022). The #BenderaPutih

(White Flag) campaign emerged as a potent emblem of communal assistance, employing a straightforward yet significant visual signal to galvanise distressed communities (Ong, 2021). Concurrently, digital political graphics pose considerable threats. Although design can enhance the visibility of marginalised perspectives, it can also simplify intricate topics into oversimplified representations, so fostering disinformation and division (Brennen, Simon, Howard, & Nielsen, 2020; Chen & Liu, 2023). Algorithmic amplification on platforms like TikTok and Facebook prioritises virality over accuracy, favouring emotionally charged visuals that attract attention but frequently lack depth (Miltner, 2018). This atmosphere cultivates a digital spectacle (Debord, 1967), wherein aesthetics eclipse meaningful policy discourse, perpetuating echo chambers and exacerbating party divisions.

These difficulties prompt essential enquiries regarding the function of graphic design as a communicative strategy and an ideological tool in modern politics. Can design-oriented communication improve democratic engagement and visual literacy, or does it pose a risk of serving as an instrument for manipulation and propaganda? Resolving this issue is essential, especially in cultures such as Malaysia where internet activism is swiftly emerging as the predominant mode of political expression (Lim, 2023).

This article aims to analyse the role of political posters, memes, and social media campaigns in influencing public opinion, forming political identities, and facilitating collective action. This study, informed by the theoretical frameworks of visual culture theory (Mirzoeff, 2011), media semiotics (Barthes, 1977; Aiello, 2020), and the aestheticization of politics (Debord, 1967), examines the functioning of political design at the convergence of empowerment, mobilisation, and ideological manipulation in an age characterised by immediacy, virality, and visibility.



**Figure 2: The #BenderaPutih (White Flag) campaign graphic as used in Malaysian civic activism. Reprinted from “M’sians Spread ‘Bendera Putih’ Campaign Online To Reach Those In” by TheSmartLocal, 2021, TheSmartLocal (<https://www.thesmartlocal.my/bendera-putih-campaign/>)**

## Literature Review

### *Aesthetic Design in Political Communication*

Graphic design has always been fundamental to political communication, encompassing wartime propaganda posters, revolutionary iconography, and contemporary electoral materials. Barnard (2013) contends that graphic design operates as both an aesthetic medium and a visual rhetoric system, capable of conveying ideological implications beyond textual content. In political situations, visual elements such as typeface, colour schemes, and national emblems are deliberately selected to project authority, cultivate trust, or express disagreement. Faizd Hassanali and Mohamad Puad (2021) further underscore that semiotic choices, such as bold typography or nationalist imagery, can quietly affect understanding without overt textual coercion.

In modern democracies, graphic design has become crucial to political branding. Campaigns are progressively customised to evoke emotional connections, loyalty, and congruence with political identity (Qazi & Rashid, 2024). In Malaysia, political coalitions like Pakatan Harapan and Perikatan Nasional have employed uniform colour-coded logos, refined campaign graphics, and infographics intended for digital dissemination (Lim, 2023). This underscores the increasing significance of political design in influencing engagement among younger, digitally proficient demographics.

### *Memes, Virality, and Social Media Activism*

Memes embody a contemporary manner of visual political dialogue, amalgamating humour, irony, and critique into disseminable pictures that proliferate swiftly across digital platforms (Shifman, 2014). Initially regarded as digital folklore, memes are increasingly acknowledged as tools that influence political engagement and protest cultures (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). They distil intricate political ideas into visually captivating styles, frequently including satire and parody.

Recent research indicate that memes serve as both entertainment and vehicles for emotional and political expression. Halversen and Weeks (2023) discovered that the dissemination of political memes conveys emotional positions, augmenting conventional action. During GE14 and GE15 in Malaysia, memes were extensively utilised to attack politicians and stimulate youth voter participation (Mustaffa, Hamzah, & Rahman, 2022). Hashtag movements like #Lawan and #KerajaanGagal have achieved prominence through meme-based activism, combining aesthetic simplicity with incisive political critique.

FORMAT	PLATFORM	STYLE FEATURES	FUNCTION	EXAMPLE
Meme	Twitter, WhatsApp	Humour, satire, parody	Ideological critique	#KerajaanGagal
Digital Poster	Instagram	Bold text, call-to-action	Mobilisation	#Lawan
Infographic	Facebook, IG	Icons, stats, minimalist	Public education	#BenderaPutih

**Table 1: Comparative Features and Functions of Meme-Based And Poster-Based Political Visuals in Malaysia**



### ***Digital Posters, Infographics, and the Aestheticization of Movements***

In addition to memes, infographics and posters have emerged as vital instruments in internet campaigning. These styles improve accessibility by distilling intricate concerns into comprehensible pictures that evoke emotional responses. Treré and Mattoni (2016) contend that design aesthetics in activism fulfil both informative and emotional roles, enhancing group affiliation. Nonetheless, oversimplification continues to pose a concern. Miltner (2018) warns that design strategies intended for virality may reinforce preconceptions or propagate falsehoods.

The #BenderaPutih campaign in Malaysia illustrates how minimalist design, a simple white flag, can signify urgent socioeconomic suffering without language, depending solely on cultural and emotional identification (Ong, 2021). The #Undi18 movement illustrates how stylised, youth-centric infographics can express generational political identity (Lim, 2023). Chen and Liu (2023) observe that this adoption of minimalism corresponds with overarching communication trends emphasising that “less is more,” influenced by the socio-economic and cognitive requirements of digital audiences.

### ***Theoretical Frameworks in Political Imagery***

Multiple theoretical frameworks underpin the examination of political graphic design:

- **Visual Culture Theory** perceives visuals as socially formed and contested, emphasising their influence in forming collective meaning and emotion (Mirzoeff, 2011).
- **Media Semiotics** (Barthes, 1977; Aiello, 2020) examines the communicative functions of images via denotation and connotation, providing methodologies for interpreting satire and symbolism in political design.
- **Aestheticization and Spectacle** (Debord, 1967) elucidates how politics is experienced through stylised visuals, wherein aesthetics frequently eclipse substantive debate.
- **Political Branding Theory** underscores the deliberate application of design to foster voter loyalty and identify affiliation (Qazi & Rashid, 2024).

Author(s)	Focus Area	Theory/Framework	Key Findings
Barnard (2013)	Graphic design as communication	Visual rhetoric	Design conveys ideological messages via typography, colour, and symbolism.
Putera Faidz & Puad (2021)	Semiotic analysis in design	Semiotics	Symbolic design choices subtly shape perception and interpretation.
Qazi & Rashid (2024)	Political engagement & branding	Political branding theory	Visual design fosters emotional attachment and voter loyalty.
Lim (2023)	TikTok politics in Malaysia (GE15)	Branding in digital politics	Infographics and memes influence youth political

			identity and participation.
Shifman (2014)	Memes in digital culture	Media semiotics	Memes function as political commentary through humour, satire, and irony.
Halversen & Weeks (2023)	Political memes & affect	Visual communication	Meme sharing expresses emotion alongside activism.
Mustaffa et al. (2022)	#Lawan youth protest in Malaysia	Digital activism	Memes mobilise civic participation in protests.
Ong (2021)	#BenderaPutih campaign	Visual symbolism	Minimalist design embodies solidarity and socioeconomic demands.
Chen & Liu (2023)	Minimalism in communication	Aesthetic communication	Simplicity enhances virality but risks oversimplification.
Aiello (2020)	Visual semiotics developments	Semiotics	Modern semiotics extends meaning-making beyond traditional signs and symbols.

**Table 2: Summary of Literature and Theoretical Frameworks**



**Figure 3: Theoretical perspectives on political visuals, adapted from Barnard (2013), Barthes (1977), Debord (1967), Qazi & Rashid (2024), and others**

### Methodology

This study employs a conceptual qualitative methodology, emphasising secondary sources instead of primary data acquisition. The objective is to integrate current ideas and case studies to enhance comprehension of the function of graphic design in digital political communication.

- **Rationale for Approach:** A conceptual approach is suitable as the objective is to critically assess existing frameworks (visual culture theory, media semiotics, and the aestheticization of politics) and their relevance to political communication.
- **The study utilises data from** peer-reviewed journal papers, books, reports, and online resources released between 2020 and 2024, with selected seminal works for theoretical foundation (e.g., Barthes, 1977; Debord, 1967). Case studies of Malaysian activism (#Undi18, #Lawan, #BenderaPutih) were included to contextualise worldwide theories.
- **Data Management:** The literature was thematically categorised into the domains of mobilisation, identity construction, and ethical risks.
- **The study employs a theory-driven thematic analysis,** utilising visual culture theory for meaning-making, semiotics for decoding design features, and aestheticisation theory for assessing the spectacle of political graphics.

- **Process Flow:**
  1. Identification of pertinent theories and frameworks.
  2. Compilation of secondary data (scholarly articles, reports, campaign imagery).
  3. Thematic classification into mobilisation, identity, and ethics.
  4. Integration of insights into conceptual discoveries.



**Figure 4: Methodological Flow For The Conceptual Analysis Of Political Graphic Design**

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

This study employs three principal theoretical frameworks: visual culture theory, media semiotics, and the aestheticization of politics. Collectively, these viewpoints establish a basis for comprehending how political imagery communicates ideology, shapes identity, and galvanises audiences within algorithmically regulated digital environments.

#### ***Theory of Visual Culture***

Visual culture theory analyses how societies create, challenge, and disseminate meaning through visual representation. In political contexts, visuals function as performative tools, provoking emotions and encouraging engagement (Mirzoeff, 2011). This theory emphasises that images not only mirror political reality but also actively construct them by fostering communal imagination and togetherness. In Malaysia, initiatives like #Undi18 and #BenderaPutih illustrate this dynamic. Both campaigns utilised culturally significant symbols, youthful design elements and a plain white flag, that served as common visual codes, facilitating widespread identification and recruitment.

#### ***Media Semiotics***

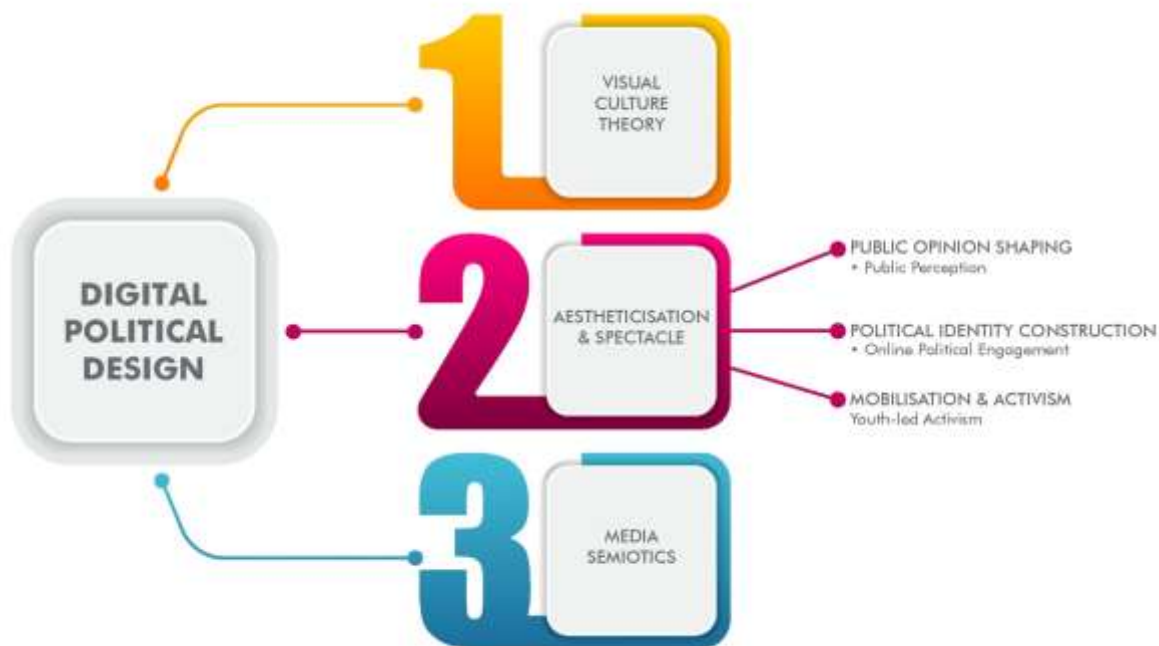
Media semiotics offers analytical instruments for interpreting the symbolic aspects of political imagery. Barthes' (1977) concepts of denotation and connotation are essential for analysing how colours, typography, and symbols convey complex meanings. Memes disseminated during election campaigns frequently amalgamate visual irony with textual indicators, producing criticism that transcends overt slogans. Furthermore, modern study expands semiotics into



interdisciplinary fields, demonstrating the evolution of visual semiotics to highlight multimodality in the arts, media, and communication (Aiello, 2020). This viewpoint is essential for interpreting the satirical and critical roles of Malaysian political memes, which often amalgamate humour and symbolism to confront authority.

### ***Aestheticization and the Digital Spectacle***

Debord's (1967) spectacle theory emphasises that contemporary politics is mediated by stylised visuals, converting political activity into consumable pictures. The aestheticization of politics indicates that aesthetics, rather than substantive policy, frequently influences exposure and virality. On platforms like Instagram and TikTok, political figures and protest organisations meticulously craft content, emphasising visuals over discourse. This is seen in Malaysia's digital activism, where visual coherence and aesthetic attractiveness frequently influence the dissemination and impact of political campaigns. The approach elucidates how the spectacle of design can concurrently engage audiences while potentially trivialising intricate topics.



**Figure 5: Conceptual Framework For Analysing Political Design In Social Media Activism**

### **Findings**

This conceptual paper synthesises the studied literature and case studies, revealing numerous crucial insights about the function of graphic design in digital political communication. These conclusions are based on theoretical frameworks, secondary data, and exemplifications of political engagement in Malaysia and elsewhere.

### ***Mobilisation The Influence of Political Imagery***

Graphic design, specifically memes, infographics, and digital posters, has demonstrated efficacy as a potent instrument for galvanising collective action. Movements like #Lawan and

Black Lives Matter illustrate how visually compelling information may enhance political demands and stimulate grassroots engagement (Mustaffa, Hamzah, & Rahman, 2022; Halversen & Weeks, 2023). The immediacy of digital platforms expedites the dissemination of these imagery, facilitating swift propagation across social networks.

### ***Identity Development and Collective Cohesion***

Visuals serve as symbolic indicators of identity. Initiatives like #BenderaPutih, utilising a plain white flag, demonstrate how uncomplicated design decisions may profoundly connect with cultural and emotional significances, fostering collective identities within communities in distress (Ong, 2021). The #Undi18 movement adeptly employed contemporary design elements to represent its advocacy for generational political empowerment.

### ***Ethical Risks and Disinformation***

Although political pictures enhance activism, they also pose ethical risks. The quest for virality can lead to the oversimplification of intricate matters, the perpetuation of stereotypes, or the intentional dissemination of falsehoods (Brennen, Simon, Howard, & Nielsen, 2020; Chen & Liu, 2023). Algorithmic amplification on sites like TikTok and Facebook favours emotionally charged content, potentially intensifying polarisation and undermining logical discourse (Miltner, 2018).

Theme	Case/Example	Key Insight	Implication
Mobilisation Power	#Lawan, Black Lives Matter	Visuals amplify demands and mobilise action	Graphics enhance civic participation
Identity Formation	#BenderaPutih, #Undi18	Simple visuals foster solidarity and identity	Visual design strengthens collective voice
Ethical Risks	Viral memes, misinformation cases	Virality may distort or polarise discourse	Need for visual literacy and ethics

**Table 3: Conceptual Findings on Political Visuals**

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed to achieve three objectives: (i) to analyse the impact of visual design on political mobilisation, (ii) to investigate how memes and digital graphics influence political identity, and (iii) to assess the ethical implications of visual propaganda. The synthesis of ideas and case examples facilitated the attainment of these aims. The findings indicate that graphic design serves as a communicative tool that enhances activism, fortifies political identity, and concurrently poses ethical challenges in the digital realm.

### **Constraints**

The study, being a conceptual work, relied solely on secondary sources, such as peer-reviewed literature and case studies. No primary data, such as interviews, surveys, or experimental tests, were gathered. This constrains the capacity to generalise the findings across varied contexts or to assess the true influence of design aspects on voter behaviour. Moreover, although instances were predominantly sourced from Malaysia, worldwide movements like Black Lives Matter

and Fridays for Future were referenced judiciously, allowing for a more extensive comparative comparison.

### Consequences

The research underscores the increasing significance of visual literacy for people, educators, and politicians. Political design, encompassing memes, infographics, and digital posters, has transitioned from mere ornamentation to a pivotal role in persuasion and mobilisation. Ethical considerations are paramount: in the absence of regulation and ethical practices, visual aesthetics may be exploited for misinformation, polarisation, and oversimplification. Designers and communicators must consequently reconcile creativity with accountability.

### Prospective Research Avenues

Subsequent research should build upon these conceptual insights by employing empirical methodologies. Surveys, interviews, and audience-reception studies may evaluate how various populations interpret and react to political imagery. Comparative analyses among nations would enhance comprehension of how cultural circumstances influence the reception of memes and posters. Furthermore, experimental designs could examine the degree to which particular design elements (e.g., colour, font, symbols) affect perception and engagement. Interdisciplinary research integrating communication, psychology, and political science could enhance understanding of the cognitive and emotional effects of political imagery in a digitally dominated world.

In conclusion, modern politics are conveyed not simply through words or texts but are increasingly constructed visually. Comprehending this transition is essential for manoeuvring through the convergence of design, media, and democracy in the digital era.

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