

Digital rhetoric in Indonesian political campaigns: a multimodal discourse analysis of social media narratives

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Feb 15, 2026

Revised Mar 10, 2026

Accepted Mar 20, 2026

Keywords:

affective publics;
discourse analysis;
ideological framing;
multimodal rhetoric;
social media politics.

ABSTRACT

Background: Today's political campaigns increasingly rely on multimodal rhetoric to shape public perception and voter behavior through social media platforms. **Objective:** This study aims to analyze the digital rhetoric strategies of Indonesian presidential candidates Ganjar Pranowo and Anies Baswedan during the 2024 election campaign on Instagram and Twitter. **Method:** Using a qualitative approach with Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis (CMDA), the research examined 30–50 official posts per candidate, focusing on visual, textual, and symbolic elements. **Results:** The results show that Ganjar constructs a populist-technocratic identity through inclusive imagery and civic-nationalist framing, while Anies uses religious and moral narratives to mobilize faith-based voters. Ganjar's participatory content appeals to affective publics via humor and nostalgia, whereas Anies elicits higher engagement through sermon-like storytelling and visionary rhetoric. These narrative patterns reflect distinct ideological alignments and are shaped by the structural foundations of each candidate's political-religious coalition. **Implication:** The findings suggest that digital rhetoric functions not only to inform but also to emotionally mobilize and ideologically position voters within polarized digital communities. **Novelty:** The novelty of this study is the exploration for ethical and strategic awareness in designing political messages in digitally networked democracies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the age of digital politics, social media platforms have become critical arenas for electoral contestation, where political actors craft and disseminate persuasive narratives to mobilize support and shape public opinion. In Indonesia's 2024 presidential election, platforms like Instagram and Twitter played a central role in political campaigning, with candidates Ganjar Pranowo and Anies Baswedan leveraging these tools to construct multimodal appeals that combine text, image, and symbolic cues [1], [2]. Analyzing these campaigns is crucial for understanding how digital rhetoric operates as a form of power and persuasion in contemporary Indonesian democracy [3], [4]. This study addresses the urgent need to decode how meaning is constructed and ideology is reproduced through digital content. Given the increasing entanglement of politics with algorithmic platforms, unpacking these narratives offers insight into not just electoral communication, but broader sociopolitical dynamics influenced by media convergence and audience participation in hybrid public spheres.

Previous research on political communication in Indonesia has mostly focused on traditional media, elite interviews, or quantitative content analysis [5], [6], [7], [8], leaving a gap in understanding the nuanced interplay of multimodal semiotics in digital campaign discourse. Scholars have explored the role of digital media in shaping political activism and populism in Indonesia [9], [10], [11], [12], yet they tend to prioritize macro-structural analysis over micro-level rhetorical strategies. While multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) has gained traction globally, it is rarely applied within Indonesian political contexts, particularly in relation to Instagram and Twitter campaigns. Furthermore, studies that integrate Norman Fairclough's critical discourse approach—especially his focus on ideology and power—with multimodal analysis remain limited. This study fills that gap by offering a systematic and interpretive framework for analyzing how verbal and visual elements jointly encode political values and aspirations in the digital arena.

This research seeks to examine how digital rhetoric is constructed in the 2024 presidential campaigns of Ganjar Pranowo and Anies Baswedan on Instagram and Twitter through multimodal discourse analysis. Specifically, it investigates the ways textual captions, visual imagery, hashtags, and prominent user comments are orchestrated to advance political identity, evoke emotional engagement, and project ideological stances. The core research question driving this study is: *How do Indonesian presidential candidates utilize multimodal resources to construct persuasive and ideologically loaded narratives on social media?* By selecting 30–50 posts from each candidate's official social media accounts during the formal campaign period (January–February 2024), the study provides a focused and comparative analysis of digital campaign strategies. The research contributes to a more granular understanding of how multimodal texts function rhetorically and ideologically in electoral contexts, particularly within emerging digital democracies like Indonesia.

Preliminary analysis suggests that both candidates strategically employ a blend of visual symbolism and emotionally resonant language to reinforce particular political identities—Ganjar emphasizing grassroots nationalism and inclusivity, while Anies foregrounds intellectual authority and moral leadership. Visual elements such as color, gesture, and camera angle are not merely aesthetic, but carry ideological weight, often tied to broader political myths and voter expectations. By applying Fairclough's notion of discourse as a form of social practice, this research hypothesizes that digital rhetoric on social media reproduces not only campaign messages but also structures of authority, affiliation, and resistance. The implications are far-reaching: political actors are no longer just message senders, but multimodal designers navigating algorithmic publics. Understanding this shift is critical for evaluating the quality of democratic discourse, the ethics of persuasion, and the role of visual culture in shaping political legitimacy in Indonesia's post-reformasi era.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Digital Rhetoric

Digital rhetoric is broadly defined as the practice of persuasion through digital media, combining traditional rhetorical strategies with the affordances of digital platforms. Sulianta (2024) views digital rhetoric as the study of rhetorical practices in digital environments, emphasizing interactivity, multimodality, and user-generated content [13]. Meanwhile, Cowan (2021) defines digital rhetoric more narrowly as a continuation of classical rhetoric, adapted to online discourse communities [14]. The divergence in definitions arises from whether scholars prioritize the technological medium or the communicative practice. Some frame it within a techno-centric view, highlighting platform-specific features [15], [16], while others stress the role of rhetoric in constructing identity and meaning in digital spaces [17], [18]. In political contexts, digital rhetoric is not only about message dissemination but also involves dialogic engagement and symbolic power. Thus, the conceptual debate reveals the need to ground digital rhetoric within the socio-political dynamics of digital communication.

The components of digital rhetoric can be broken down into several key indicators: multimodality, interactivity, audience positioning, and platform-specific aesthetics. Multimodality refers to the use of multiple semiotic systems—text, image, audio, video—to construct persuasive meaning [19]. Interactivity denotes the two-way communicative potential of digital media, enabling users to comment, share, or remix political messages [20], [21]. Audience positioning involves how a post addresses its viewers and invites certain responses or identifications [22], [23]. Platform-specific aesthetics refer to design constraints and conventions on platforms like Instagram (visual storytelling) and Twitter (concise textual framing with hashtags). These dimensions are critical in shaping how political campaigns use digital media not only to broadcast messages but also to engineer affective responses and social engagement. Understanding these indicators enables a more nuanced reading of how digital rhetoric operates within electoral narratives.

2.2. Multimodal Discourse

Multimodal discourse refers to the integration of different modes—linguistic, visual, spatial, aural, and gestural—into a unified communicative act. According to Fatih Bilici (2025), meaning in modern communication is no longer exclusively constructed through language but through the orchestration of multiple semiotic resources [24]. Tetiana Krysanova (2022) distinguishes between multimodal documents and multimodal discourse by emphasizing the socio-contextual dimension of meaning-making [25]. Other scholars, like Benedictis (2023), Dondero (2024), Zhigang Yu (2024), focus on visual semiotics as a specific subset of multimodality, particularly in analyzing how images convey ideology [26], [27], [28]. Differences in understanding multimodal discourse arise from the analytical focus: whether the object of study is a static artifact (e.g., poster), a dynamic interaction (e.g., social media comment thread), or a cultural practice (e.g., online campaigning). For political campaigns, multimodal discourse enables layered messaging, where visual signs amplify or contradict textual claims, often revealing underlying ideological formations.

Multimodal discourse is analyzed through dimensions such as representation, interaction, and composition, as introduced by Cope (2025 and Kong (2022) in their visual grammar framework [29], [30]. Representation pertains to the people, objects, and actions depicted, shaping the denotative and connotative meaning of a message. Interaction focuses on how viewers are positioned through gaze, distance, and angle—indicators of power and alignment. Composition concerns the layout, framing, and salience of visual elements, influencing how attention is directed. In the context of digital campaigns, additional elements such as hashtags, emojis, and typography contribute to the multimodal ensemble [31], [32]. These components collectively function to position the audience ideologically, either reinforcing nationalistic appeals, religious sentiments, or populist claims. Through multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), researchers can unpack the ideological investments encoded in images and text, revealing how political meaning is co-constructed by both senders and receivers in digital environments.

2.3. Political Discourse and Ideology

Political discourse refers to the use of language and symbols to negotiate power, influence beliefs, and shape public consciousness. Fairclough (1995) defines it as discourse that is explicitly concerned with the exercise of power and the reproduction of social dominance [33]. Van Dijk (2006) emphasizes the ideological function of political discourse, where language becomes a tool for legitimizing actions and delegitimizing opposition [34]. Within digital contexts, political discourse merges with media discourse, creating hybrid forms of influence. Some scholars interpret political discourse as performative, highlighting its ritualistic and theatrical dimensions [35], [36], [37], while others focus on its structural effects—how it shapes institutions and policy framing [38], [39], [40]. The variation lies in whether the analysis targets micro-level language use (e.g., metaphor, pronoun choice) or macro-level discursive strategies (e.g., framing populist narratives). For this study, political discourse is understood as the interplay of language, image, and ideology used to shape voter perception during campaign communication.

Key indicators of political discourse include lexical choices, discursive strategies, narrative structures, and ideological positioning. Lexical choices involve the selection of emotionally charged words, slogans, and identity markers (e.g., “wong cilik”, “perubahan”) that encode political values. Discursive strategies include nomination (labeling actors), predication (assigning attributes), and argumentation (using topoi or warrants to justify claims) [41], [42]. Narrative structures refer to how politicians construct cause-effect relationships and moral hierarchies (e.g., “us vs. them” framing) [43]. Ideological positioning is evident in the alignment of posts with broader values such as nationalism, religious morality, or democratic reform. In digital contexts, these elements are often embedded in multimodal formats—e.g., a powerful image of a candidate praying, accompanied by a caption invoking justice or hope. These indicators help researchers trace how political narratives operate discursively and symbolically to construct ideological hegemony.

3. METHOD

The unit of analysis in this study consists of 30–50 official social media posts from the verified Instagram and Twitter accounts of Ganjar Pranowo (@ganjar_pranowo) and Anies Baswedan (@aniesbaswedan) during the formal campaign period of the 2024 Indonesian presidential election (January–February 2024). These posts include a combination of text-based captions, visual imagery (photos, graphics), embedded hashtags, emojis, and selected highlighted user comments. The selection is motivated by the centrality of these platforms in shaping public discourse and political persona through multimodal narratives. According to Harmer and Southern (2025), Instagram and Twitter are not only channels of political expression but also spaces of curated identity performance, making them ideal for exploring digital rhetoric [44]. This unit of analysis allows for comparative examination of how each candidate strategically crafts political messages using semiotic resources to persuade and position themselves ideologically in the digital public sphere.

Table 1. Modal elements in selected social media posts

Candidate	Mode Used	Visual Features	Textual Features	Ideological Symbolism
Ganjar Pranowo	Image + Text	Smiling with farmers, red-dominant colors	Inclusive words: <i>rakyat</i> , <i>gotong royong</i>	Populism, grassroots connection
Anies Baswedan	Image + Text	Speaking at mosque, green-dominant tones	Moral keywords: <i>adil</i> , <i>berkahi</i> , <i>amanah</i>	Religious morality, Islamic intellectualism
Ganjar Pranowo	Video + Caption	Montage of infrastructure projects	Economic terms: <i>pembangunan</i> , <i>mandiri</i>	Technocratic efficiency
Anies Baswedan	Image + Hashtag	Raising hands with ustadz figures	Hashtags: #Perubahan, #IndonesiaAdil	Reformist narrative, religious endorsement

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically using a critical multimodal discourse analysis (CMDA) framework to interpret digital political texts. CMDA, as outlined by Simon Statham (2022), blends multimodal analysis with critical discourse traditions to explore the power relations and ideological dimensions embedded in visual and linguistic elements [45]. The rationale for choosing this design lies in its ability to uncover not only what is communicated but *how* meaning is structured across different semiotic modes. Unlike quantitative content analysis, this approach does not rely on frequency but on interpretive depth and contextual relevance. Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse theory enriches the analysis by linking discourse to social practices, enabling a deeper understanding of how digital campaigns reproduce power and identity [33]. Through CMDA, this study interrogates the ideological implications of campaign narratives and uncovers how multimodal texts contribute to shaping collective political imagination.

The primary data for this research comes directly from the verified social media timelines of the two candidates. These publicly available posts were archived manually and cross-verified with media reports and campaign schedules to ensure authenticity and relevance. Additional sources include metadata (e.g., posting time, engagement metrics), prominent user comments (top replies), and campaign-affiliated hashtags frequently used in the posts. To contextualize the findings, secondary data such as electoral regulations from the KPU (General Elections Commission), political communication studies, and social media policy documents are also considered. These sources offer crucial background on the media environment and institutional frameworks that shape digital campaigning. As suggested by Fanny Lopez (2025), understanding digital self-presentation requires not only analyzing content but also recognizing the surrounding discursive and technological infrastructures [46]. Thus, triangulating various information sources strengthens the reliability and depth of the discourse analysis.

The data collection process was conducted through purposive sampling of posts uploaded during the formal campaign window defined by the KPU, specifically January 1 to February 10, 2024. Researchers captured screenshots and metadata of all relevant posts and organized them into a database categorized by platform, candidate, content type, and engagement. Posts were selected based on predefined criteria: (1) containing both visual and textual components; (2) reflecting campaign-related messaging such as slogans, policy themes, or symbolic performances; and (3) having high user engagement (likes, retweets, comments). To ensure representativeness and depth, each platform was sampled proportionally. For reliability, two coders independently collected and labeled the data, and discrepancies were resolved through consensus. The use of purposive sampling in multimodal research is well-established (Maiss Ahmad, 2025) as it enables a focused analysis of complex semiotic structures [47]. This method ensured that only posts relevant to the rhetorical and ideological dimensions of the campaign were included.

The data analysis followed a structured process involving three stages: (1) description, (2) interpretation, and (3) explanation. In the first stage, visual and textual features of each post were identified and coded using Gunther Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) visual grammar categories—such as gaze, modality, salience, and composition [48]. Captions were analyzed for rhetorical devices, keyword selection, and ideologically loaded terms using Fairclough's (1995) textual analysis framework [33]. In the second stage, interpretive strategies were applied to examine how meaning is made through the interaction of modes, including the role of hashtags, symbols, and user comments. Finally, the explanation stage used Fairclough's model of discourse as a dialectical relation between text and social context to uncover power relations, identity constructions, and ideological stances. Through this method, the study systematically maps how multimodal rhetoric operates as a vehicle for political persuasion and how it reflects deeper socio-political tensions within Indonesia's digital democracy.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Semiotic analysis: modal and social issues

The posts of both candidates reflect systematic patterns in the use of semiotic resources. Ganjar’s posts prominently feature red color palettes, working-class subjects, and infrastructural achievements, all suggesting alignment with nationalist-populist values. The recurring imagery of unity, agriculture, and informal interaction with the public visually encodes closeness and populism. Meanwhile, Anies’ semiotic construction revolves around religious institutions, green and white color schemes, and textual references to moral authority. Many of his posts occur within Islamic settings, such as mosques or Islamic boarding schools, reinforcing his identity as a Muslim intellectual.

Table 1 captures the multimodal structure of selected campaign posts by both candidates. Each post was analyzed for its use of images, text, and symbolism. Ganjar’s posts emphasize collective national identity through agriculture, infrastructure, and working-class imagery. Meanwhile, Anies combines religious imagery and rhetorical appeals to morality and justice. The combination of semiotic resources (mode, text, symbol) enables each candidate to reinforce ideological frames while targeting specific constituencies.

The multimodal composition (image + text + symbol) serves distinct ideological functions. As Barthes (1977) argues, images are not neutral but carry connotations that interact with text (Eva-Tabea Meineke, 2025). In this sense, the visual grammar in each candidate’s content not only communicates policy or slogans but constructs a worldview—Ganjar’s modern, state-centered unity versus Anies’ moral renewal. These symbolic choices also act as affective cues that prompt identification and emotional resonance among followers.

These semiotic patterns reflect broader sociopolitical positioning. Ganjar Pranowo constructs himself as a technocratic yet populist leader—someone deeply rooted in the people’s everyday struggles yet capable of overseeing macroeconomic growth. This reflects a “hybrid populism,” as discussed by Feeza Vasudeva (2025), where emotional appeals blend with state-led narratives [49]. His use of visual proximity (e.g., walking in rice fields) and linguistic inclusivity (*kita, bersama, mandiri*) encodes solidarity with the masses and presents his campaign as an extension of national will.

On the other hand, Anies Baswedan’s visual rhetoric builds upon the legacy of Islamic cosmopolitanism, portraying him as a morally grounded reformist. The frequent use of religious backdrops and moral-ethical keywords positions him within the tradition of political Islam, albeit with modern articulation. This aligns with the findings of Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi (2022) on religious-symbolic politics in post-reformasi Indonesia [50]. His rhetoric attracts conservative Muslim voters by embedding Islamic values within calls for political change.

In conclusion, both candidates construct political identities through strategic multimodal choices. Their visuals and texts are not merely expressive but performative—they do political work by projecting values, affiliations, and ideologies that resonate with their intended audiences. This semiotic encoding is central to building persuasive campaign narratives in the digital era.

4.2. Political campaigns: social media framing and religious politicization

There are key patterns of political framing and religious symbolism in each candidate’s digital campaign. Ganjar’s posts frame the election as a matter of continuity, development, and unity, using a secular and inclusive tone. In contrast, Anies deploys a frame of moral transformation, featuring Islamic rhetoric and figures to build a reformist image. Religious references are more central in Anies’ campaign, especially in his captions and hashtags that invoke ethical values and divine justice.

Table 2. Social media framing and religious symbolism

Candidate	Framing Strategy	Religious Elements	Message Framing Style	Hashtag/Narrative Use
Ganjar Pranowo	Economic-nationalist	Minimal, secular mosques	Institutional achievements	#GotongRoyong, #IndonesiaBangkit
Anies Baswedan	Moral-religious reformist	Intense, Quranic citations	Ethical responsibility	#Perubahan, #AdilUntukSemua
Ganjar Pranowo	Participatory government	Syncretic: all-faith meetings	Citizen voice inclusion	#GanjarMenjawab, #SuaraRakyat
Anies Baswedan	Anti-establishment	Religious public figures	Critique of status quo	#IndonesiaAdilMakmur, #Hijrah2024

An observable trend from the data is that Ganjar Pranowo consistently uses developmental and participatory frames, with visuals of him engaging diverse religious communities in balanced, secular contexts. His campaign avoids overt religious labeling and instead emphasizes civic nationalism and

inclusive governance. Hashtags like *#GotongRoyong* are secular cultural terms rooted in Indonesian traditions, helping him appeal across religious lines.

Anies Baswedan, however, uses moral-religious framing consistently, highlighting symbolic acts like visiting pesantrens, quoting verses from the Qur'an, and using religious leaders to endorse his campaign. His visual narrative relies heavily on Islamic symbolism and messaging styles that evoke moral duty and reform. The repetition of the word "*adil*" (just) is dominant, suggesting a critique of the existing administration and an alternative vision based on divine and ethical responsibility.

This pattern suggests contrasting narrative strategies: Ganjar focuses on pragmatic unity, while Anies emphasizes ethical change. Each candidate thus curates their digital discourse to mirror their political bases. The divergence in political framing reflects ideological and sociological cleavages within the Indonesian electorate. Ganjar's secular-nationalist rhetoric aligns with PDI-P's ideology and seeks to maintain pluralist, cross-class appeal. His campaign mirrors what Peter C. Mentzel (2020) describes as "performative nationalism," projecting visual stability and civic togetherness without invoking religious exclusivism [51]. His avoidance of deep religious cues may also be a strategy to avoid polarization.

Anies' campaign, in contrast, deliberately employs what Marcus Mietzner (2018) term "moral populism"—a narrative that frames political failure as a result of moral decay and positions Islamic values as solutions [52]. His use of Islamic imagery and actors allows him to tap into the conservative Muslim electorate, particularly in urban Java and digital Islamic spheres. Hashtags like *#Hijrah2024* are spiritually charged, invoking religious transformation alongside political reform.

In summary, the social media campaigns of both candidates are framed not only to inform but to *mobilize* distinct voter identities. Religious politicization, especially in Anies' case, operates as a legitimizing force that blends theology with electoral strategy, while Ganjar relies on institutional continuity and cross-religious civility to gain trust.

4.3. Social media narratives: digital media and voter engagement

The comparative analysis of selected social media posts shows the narrative strategy and engagement metrics of Ganjar Pranowo and Anies Baswedan. Ganjar's narratives often take the form of personal storytelling, community-centered visuals, and humorous or nostalgic tones. In contrast, Anies emphasizes religious reflections and visionary change through structured messages resembling sermons or ethical monologues. Engagement rates show that Anies tends to attract higher interaction per post, particularly on emotionally charged or reform-oriented content.

Table 3. Narrative strategies and voter engagement metrics

Candidate	Narrative Type	Engagement Tactics	Avg. Likes/Comments per Post	Dominant Emotional Tone
Ganjar Pranowo	Inspirational storytelling	Humor, nostalgia, citizen stories	35,000 / 2,300	Hopeful, grounded
Anies Baswedan	Moral-religious narrative	Religious calls to action	48,000 / 3,000	Reflective, resolute
Ganjar Pranowo	Participatory narrative	Interactive Q&A, challenge videos	32,000 / 2,800	Relatable, energetic
Anies Baswedan	Visionary transformation	Sermon-style clips, reform themes	50,000 / 3,500	Urgent, transformative

From the data, a clear distinction emerges in how candidates structure their social media narratives. Ganjar's content often tells grounded stories from rural and suburban Indonesia, highlighting relatable issues such as farming, education, and family economics. These are wrapped in culturally familiar formats—memes, throwback photos, or citizen testimonials—that generate empathy and familiarity. His frequent use of interactive content such as Q&A sessions and digital challenges reflects a youth-oriented strategy to humanize his image.

Anies Baswedan's narrative relies on visionary storytelling rooted in religious and intellectual authority. Posts often begin with a problem (social injustice, corruption) and end with a call to *hijrah* (transformation), invoking collective moral urgency. Visuals of him giving speeches or engaging with Islamic scholars reinforce a tone of principled leadership. These narratives elicit emotional responses in the form of affirming comments and quote-sharing, especially from religious digital communities. This contrast shows how digital narratives are tailored to mobilize distinct emotional and ideological communities [31], [53].

The contrasting storytelling techniques are not merely stylistic—they reflect fundamentally different political engagement strategies. Ganjar's use of participatory and nostalgic narratives illustrates what

Papacharissi (2014) describes as *affective publics*—groups bound not by ideology but by shared emotional resonance and digital intimacy [54]. His content fosters a sense of co-presence, making voters feel heard and represented through informal, sometimes humorous, portrayals.

Anies' more formal, theological narrative style reflects *networked moral publics*, where digital space becomes an arena of religious activism and moral judgment [54]. His posts function as micro-sermons that politicize virtue, justice, and transformation—key emotional triggers in Indonesia's religious middle class. The stronger engagement metrics may indicate not just support, but digital ritualization, where liking, commenting, and sharing become acts of political piety.

In conclusion, both candidates exploit digital media's narrative potential to engineer emotional proximity with voters. However, their narrative worlds differ: Ganjar builds emotional familiarity through inclusivity and humor, while Anies builds moral authority through ideology and identity. These digital stories are central to constructing political legitimacy in an age where social media is both stage and battleground.

5. DISCUSSION

The semiotic choices of both candidates function as strategic tools to shape digital political identity, but they also reveal functional and dysfunctional outcomes in audience targeting. Ganjar's imagery and textual patterns foster unity and pragmatic nationalism, which can engage moderate and secular voters effectively. However, this approach may underperform among religiously motivated audiences who seek explicit moral or faith-based signals. In contrast, Anies' semiotic strategy functions strongly within religious digital spheres by leveraging Islamic symbology, thus enhancing emotional and ideological engagement among pious voters. The dysfunction here is the risk of alienating pluralist or non-Muslim constituencies. According to Sewlall (2010), modality in visual communication shapes credibility and alignment; in this case, candidates' semiotic constructions determine how believable and relatable they appear to segmented audiences [19]. The implication is that multimodal rhetoric in digital platforms is not neutral—it functions as a filtering mechanism that either amplifies or limits political resonance based on symbolic alignment.

The underlying structure shaping these semiotic strategies is rooted in Indonesia's post-reformasi socio-political divide between pluralist nationalism and moral-religious identity politics. Ganjar's visual choices resonate with the *Pancasila*-based narrative of unity in diversity, reflecting the structural ideology of his party (PDI-P) and its alignment with institutional stability. This framework prioritizes inclusive visual codes that transcend ethno-religious boundaries [26], [27], [28]. Anies' reliance on Islamic symbolism reflects a counter-structure—one that mobilizes religious capital as a form of legitimacy, especially post-2012 movement, where religious sentiment became a political force. The cause-effect linkage here shows that candidates adapt their visual-rhetorical modes in response to the ideological expectations of their support bases [32], [55]. Thus, multimodal campaign strategies are not merely creative decisions but are structurally embedded in broader ideological and sociocultural cleavages. These structures define what "counts" as persuasive and what must be avoided to maintain narrative coherence and avoid backlash.

The framing strategies used by Ganjar and Anies demonstrate distinct functions and dysfunctions in shaping voter perception. Ganjar's civic-nationalist frame encourages cross-faith dialogue and democratic pluralism, aligning well with Indonesia's multi-religious electorate. This fosters institutional legitimacy and perceived competence but may fail to trigger emotional mobilization among ideological groups. Conversely, Anies' moral-religious framing powerfully activates emotional engagement through shared Islamic values but risks reinforcing political polarization and exclusivism. According to Wodak (2009), discursive framing determines who is included in or excluded from the imagined political community [35]. In this context, Anies' narrative builds strong loyalty within Muslim conservative circles but may marginalize minority groups. The implication is that social media framing acts as both a unifier and divider, depending on its alignment with Indonesia's socio-religious fabric. The dual-edged nature of religious politicization highlights the need for ethical boundaries in digital campaigns, especially in fragile democracies prone to sectarian tension.

The divergence in political framing is deeply rooted in the structural alignment of the candidates with their respective political-religious coalitions. Ganjar operates within a secular-nationalist infrastructure where political legitimacy is derived from state performance, economic development, and civic inclusivity. His avoidance of overt religious rhetoric stems from a structural reliance on pluralist institutions and a broader national identity narrative. In contrast, Anies derives much of his support from networks of Islamic preachers, *pesantren* communities, and conservative influencers. This structure incentivizes the deployment of religious symbolism as a legitimating discourse, especially in digital arenas where religious affect thrives [54], [56], [57]. Zizi Papacharissi (2014), refers to this phenomenon as "*networked moral publics*", where digital religious actors shape political discourse through moral framing. Thus, the underlying structure dictates not just rhetorical tone but also content, form, and audience. The structural cause-effect pattern underscores the entanglement between political strategy and religious ecosystem in shaping online electoral rhetoric.

The contrasting narrative styles and engagement tactics of Ganjar and Anies reveal how digital storytelling functions as both a campaign tool and a political performance. Ganjar's participatory, humorous, and nostalgic narratives humanize his image and create a perception of openness and accessibility. This fosters emotional engagement, especially among younger and rural voters. However, the informal tone may dilute perceived gravitas or ideological clarity. Anies' sermon-like posts and visionary calls for transformation, in contrast, function to establish authority and consistency, particularly among faith-driven communities. While this reinforces credibility, it may reduce relatability among secular or undecided voters. According to Zizi Papacharissi (2014), digital narratives generate *affective publics*—groups mobilized by emotional connections rather than shared ideology [54]. Therefore, the function of narrative is not just to inform but to emotionally anchor support. The implication is that the success or failure of digital campaigns hinges on their ability to construct compelling emotional worlds that resonate across segments.

The variation in digital engagement styles stems from the candidates' differing institutional affiliations and strategic audience targets. Ganjar's engagement is structured around participatory governance ideals promoted by his party, which encourages grassroots mobilization and media interactivity. His digital team utilizes humor, nostalgia, and public response mechanisms to mirror values of democratic accessibility. Anies' digital approach is rooted in intellectual-religious tradition, where communication mimics the structure of religious pedagogy—sermons, parables, and moral instruction. This reflects the *symbolic authority structure* of Islamic leadership, where credibility is built through consistent moral framing. According to Kelly (2023), narrative structures in digital campaigns reflect deeper cultural expectations and communicative hierarchies [43]. Thus, Anies' strategy reproduces a structured sense of moral clarity and future-oriented vision, while Ganjar's produces affective intimacy and participatory belonging. These structures inform not just *what* is said but *how* it is said and *why* it resonates differently among Indonesia's complex electorate.

6. CONCLUSION

One of the most significant insights from this research is the realization that digital rhetoric in political campaigns functions as both a symbolic tool and a sociotechnical performance, enabling candidates to construct ideologically loaded narratives tailored to their constituencies. The study highlights how multimodal discourse—through images, texts, hashtags, and comment engagement—acts as a mechanism of identity-making and political alignment, particularly in a digitally mediated democracy like Indonesia. This research contributes theoretically by bridging Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis (CMDA) with religious and affective framing in political communication, offering a novel methodological framework that integrates semiotic theory with voter engagement analytics. It also extends scholarly conversations on digital populism and Islamic political symbolism in Southeast Asian contexts. The study renews perspectives on campaign rhetoric by showing how narrative form, visual modality, and ideological content coalesce to shape the affective public sphere, moving beyond simplistic content analysis toward a deeper interpretive multimodal method.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that suggest opportunities for future research. The data is limited to the formal campaign period and focuses solely on Instagram and Twitter, potentially overlooking key rhetorical patterns on platforms like TikTok or YouTube where younger demographics are more active. Additionally, while the study emphasizes ideological and narrative construction, it does not account for algorithmic visibility, bot amplification, or platform moderation, which can significantly affect digital reach and resonance. Therefore, future research should incorporate computational analysis, real-time sentiment tracking, or network analysis to examine not only what messages are posted, but how they circulate and influence within digital ecosystems. Expanding the corpus across electoral cycles and comparative regions would also enhance understanding of evolving political discourse patterns in digital democracy, offering more robust insight into both voter psychology and rhetorical power.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author gratefully acknowledges colleagues and academic peers who provided valuable feedback and support during the preparation of this study.

FUNDING INFORMATION

Authors state no funding involved.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Eka Fitri Hastuti: conceptualization (lead), methodology (lead), formal analysis (lead), writing – original draft (lead), writing – review and editing (lead).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration and has been approved by the authors' institutional review board or equivalent committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Data availability is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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