Power of Visuals in Political Branding: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of visualatory campaigns

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Abstract

Political branding is a media strategy employed by political leaders, influencing public opinion through visual discourse strategies. In the modern era of visual discourse studies, visual representation has shifted the trends towards nonverbal communication, which significantly plays a pivotal role in constructing the political narrative for the public. This study, however, investigates the power of visual branding of political representations employing multimodal visual discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). For this, the study ratifies a qualitative research method and gathers data from media representations in the political campaigns of Pakistan's major political party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). The study examines the PTI campaign's rhetoric and the content of party postings on social media to understand the political narrative. The results of the study show that each representation of PTI employs distinct colors, unique symbols, and attractive images of leaders. The media regulation strategies not only build up the political narrative of the political party but also represent political personalities that persuade the voters. This study tacitly implies that PTI's visuals are modern, target the young generation, and appeal to change, utilizing visualatory campaigns. Consequently, the analysis supports the importance of visual representations and media regulation strategies, actively engaging voters in their political desiderata.

Keywords: political branding, visual discourse, political campaigns, PTI, media strategies

Introduction

Political branding (Needham & Smith, 2015; Ali et al., 2023) has now become an essential aspect of the contemporary struggle for political power, particularly

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during election times, since visuals are an essential aspect of political personalities and parties. Pictures, icons, and formats are classes of visualization as they help in the constructing 'truths and transmission of 'truths' that are political ideologies as Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) opined. While visual content implies the possibility of instant recognition and connects with emotionality, these are important features in the context of fast-moving elections. In Pakistan, all political parties including PTI and PMN-N use videostories (Zunino & Testa, 2018) as their primary mode of conveying their different messaging of change and status quo (Žižek, 2009; Zhao & Zappavigna, 2020; Zottis, 2020). The strategies of visuals seek to target various voter groups, thus placing visual branding as an important research topic in political communication (Berger, 1972; Barthes, 1977; Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Rose, 2016).

The role of graphics (Halliday, 1978; Fairclough, 1995; Jewitt, 2009) in political campaigns is, infact, connected with the fact that the picture can deliver a message at once and completely. According to Barthes (1977), visuals convey both denotative and connotative meanings, which are useful in the process of incorporating ideology into political campaigning images. For instance, PTI employs prominent colors, coverage of large and young groups, and images to support a narrative on change and reformation (Zhao & Zappavigna, 2020). These visual strategies are not coincidences, but they are rooted in the socio-political setting of Pakistan, where visuals represent authority, truth, and relationship with the populace (Machin and Mayr, 2012) however this study aims to scrutinize the usage of visuals in the election campaigns, with particular attention to connections of pictures, words, and cultural discourses.

The socio-political environment of Pakistan is peculiar and is conducive to studying the use of visuals in political marketing. Demographically, Pakistani society is highly heterogeneous, which, along with a multicultural background and a somewhat turbulent political experience, creates various opportunities and problems for political discourse (Ali et al., 2021b). Branding, in this context, therefore, has to accommodate for differing regional, linguistic, and cultural contexts while coherently telling a national story (Van Dijk 2008). Another site that on the surface seems to mitigate power imbalances—the official sites of the dominant parties, such as PTI and PML-N, as they are revealing of the ways that different parties use visual branding to appeal to different constituencies. This can be explained by the followership of the dynamic image by PTI for its youthful and reformist character. It is also important to investigate how the culture of creating political visuals has

evolved not only from a cultural perspective but also in the current digital product. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are now core cardinal platforms in election campaigns, giving political parties a cheap means of reaching the electorate without intermediaries and feedback in near real-time (Zhao & Zappavigna, 2020). PTI is sometimes credited for being the leading party in using social media in political communication in Pakistan and does well amongst the youth. Using memes, infographics, and interactive content, the party proved that the researchers consider the potential of the digital plane as a tool for the repeal of its message on the need for change and the receipt of control (Rose, 2016). It might be freely using the new media technology, especially through social media. Another element of visual political branding is leadership representation (Tucker, 1977; Zylinska, 2017). In Pakistan, since the political parties are normally formed around key personalities, the concept of leadership is given a prominent place in the campaign pictures (Mehmood et al., 2025; Ashraf et al., 2021; 2025). The images in PTI are usually accompanied by Imran Khan in active and typical scenarios to show his charm and popularity among the young people. Concerning traditional costume, he wears shalwar kameez, which indicates that he is a supporter of what is culturally acceptable in Pakistan and, by so doing, is an appealing figure to a variety of voters (Van Leeuwen, 2005). The leadership images are not only allegorical but also weapons that maintain and hold productive each party's larger storyline (Barthes, 1977). In that respect, usability also lies in the ability of political visuals to entertain a target audience and incite certain feelings, emotions, and thought processes. For instance, nerdy hope appeals from voters and engage them in social media platforms. Furthermore, research analysis reveals that the leadership imagery should be emotional with action calls to order, congestion pictures, solving a problem image, or other such images that will elicit an emotional appeal instead of rationality (Zottis, 2020). Young and dynamic PTI, for instance, is better placed in terms of visually enshrouding hope and enthusiasm as it triggers a high level of social media engagement. Photographs are used in this work, and an examination of audience reactions in the form of likes, shares, and comments is measured as the influence of visuals on the public and voter turnout as recommended (Zhao & Zappavigna, 2020).

Political branding is influential in building visuals; they are defamatory when overemphasized which impacts the voters' alienation or criticism. For instance, the use of visuals that show incremental improvements in areas that would not normally be associated with development distorts credibility and erodes the party's credibility

(Van Dijk, 2008). On the same principle, the inundation of political visuals on the social media platform equally raises questions on how visibility and uniqueness are achieved. This research, however, aims to account for the misconceptions in the existing literature to investigate challenges that may be associated with visual political branding.

Review of the Literature

Chandler (1995) ascertained that people are meaning-making machines and are called "Homo signings or Homo significans". The genetic make of species has morphologized meaning by inventing then reading signs. Therefore, any mode of signifying practice—the spoken language, music, and photograph are semiotic systems that signify meaning (Hall 1997). It is these signifying systems that make it possible to affirm or negate, as individuals within collective groups, meanings that do not speak to us. These signifying processes are identification, which are affected by the process of "becoming" an identity/culture is enabled (Hall, 1997), enabled by the discursive extra-linguistic elements of society, ideology, and culture (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 258).

Discourse, according to Fairclough et al. 1995, is "socially constructed knowledges of (some aspect of) reality." With respect to the notion of discourse, there are two presuppositions: (i) discourse is connected to or 'exists' in language, and (ii) discourses simply 'exist' irrespective of material instantiations of discourse. Wodak (2009) states that "discourse means anything from a historical monument, a lieu de memoire, a policy, a political strategy, narratives in a restricted or broad sense of the term, text, talk, a speech, topic-related conversations to language per se" (p. 3). On the principles of Fariclough et al. (1995) and Wodak (2009), discourse is socially accomplished and a proper place where ideology is done thus both power and social relations are mediated through discourse. In this sense, it is assumed that domination is discursive, meaning thereby that discourse is domination (Dar et al., 2024; Alnuzaili, et al., 2024). van Dijk (1993) gives discourse to the foreground role within the discursive construction of power relations. Thus, discourse exists in the social field and helps maintain dominance and is the emotional life, the conscious and unconscious, of the individuals who are governed (Saram et al., 2023).

In discourse, advertising is an essential form of persuasiveness to show power in modern political communication as it is designed to change perception or behavior

with regards to a product, service and idea using technological communicative strategies. The political party, candidate and winning ideology is sold through advertising that is well planned. For this reason, political communication covering the construction, encoding, and transmission of messages that seek to change the voters' attitudes and behavior to the advantage of the candidate or political party entails advertising, especially during election periods (Tan, 2002; Uztuğ, 1999). Political advertisements or political commercials, which are usually aired during election seasons, help political parties or individual candidates reach out to the voters and pass their message effectively. As the culturally politicized equivalent of commercial advertising, through words, stories, and pictures, political advertisements guarantee the political players to empower.

Political visuals depict a function of power display and parties use visualatory media to either threaten opponents or demonstrate strength against them. According to Fairclough (1995), visuals are intertwined with discourse, meaning that imagery is imbued with ideologies, which refer to relations of power in the larger socio-political context. Political campaigns mean campaigns full of symbols in the context of Pakistan, and the visuals understood, therefore, mark one of the major signifying strategies for building a specific party identity and for marking differences vis-à-vis competing parties (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Multiple voices and written words in the construction of political narratives are best analyzed through the framework of multimodal discourse analysis (MDA). According to Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006), integration of different semiotic modes, including image, print media, text, and layout, increases the prosthetically powerful shape of political communication. In election campaigns, MDA will allow researchers to disassemble the message and parts of slogans, images, and verbal messages and facilitate understanding of how political positions are encoded and conveyed (Jewitt, 2009, p. 195). Scollon and Scollon claim that this analysis can also be generalized to spatial and material features of campaign visuals, meaning the organization of the images or the use of space in the ads. Their work affirms that cultural and regional factors usually play a crucial role in the reception of political visuals (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Iconographic analysis brings attention to the coded nature of various visuals: pay significant attention to how signs generate meaning. Van Leeuwen (2005) expands on the idea of what he terms visual grammar—the way color, for instance, composition, or framing adds to the campaign's story or argument (Rose, 2016). Symbolism also applies to leadership depiction because most

visuals tend to depict certain aspects of leaders, such as charisma, authority, or resemblance (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Owing to the hegemony of information technology, the use of visuals has been made more accessible and effective in the political communication sphere. In the campaign, political parties use Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to publish visuals at the shortest time possible, and the parties can directly communicate with the voters (Stocchetti & Kukkonen, 2011).

Building on the ideas of Van Leeuwen (2005), the present study considers the fact that culture is reflected in symbols that are an integral part of visual communication and have an impact on how an audience perceives politicians. In that way, the parties enhance their appeal and develop better political brands adapted to concrete cultural settings (Fairclough, 1995). However, the prospects are obvious, though political visuals have certain difficulties in keeping the results stable and genuine. Also, it intensifies the availability of volume, and the visibility of the flowing images makes it hard for the parties to be conspicuous and stand out or distinguish their stories (Machin and Mayr, 2012).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research method. Specifically, this study utilizes multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) to analyze political visuals (Ali et al., 2021a Malik, 2017; Alnuzaili et al., 2024). Posters, advertisements, and visuals for social media platforms, as well as TV commercials, that will be created during the campaign will be the main source of data collection (Dar et al., 2025). To do this, the analysis will center on elements of repetition, pattern, process, and symbol that are central to the formation of political brands. Data will be interpreted concerning the socio-political context of Pakistan, especially the cultural and regional factors that can affect the visualization and perception of images (Ali et al., 2021b). Altogether, the use of multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) and content analysis will allow for a more fine-grained examination of what visuals do in relation to political beliefs and vote choices. This methodological framework has been employed in the analysis of political communication to examine the interrelation of visuals and narratives in the strategic plans of the campaigns (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

❖ **Multimodal Discourse Analysis**

Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) articulated a new dimension to provide a unified analysis of visual communication under the social semiotic framework of Halliday.

According to Kress & van Leeuwen (2006), the multimodal framework provides a descriptive mechanism of multimodality. It states three layers of visual, such as representational, interpersonal and compositional meaning of the visual images. The term multimodality refers to a combination of the modes of representation, with a special focus on the images and the written and spoken words. The interconnection of the various modes within the sociocultural communication process is defined by what Kress and Van Leeuwen referred to as multimodal representation (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 220). Kress and van Leeuwen's MDA method grounded on Halliday's systemic functional linguistic frameworks, it is possible to describe how many semiotic modes, including images, diagrams, photographs, and graphics, are integrated and working together to communicate the text. In addition, van Leeuwen (2021, p. 21) argues "[...], social semiotic interpretation must proceed from three kinds of knowledge: a knowledge of language and other semiotic resources, a knowledge of culture, and a knowledge of sociology and philosophy, which is useful in understanding the place of semiosis in social practice." However, information visuals have emerged as a central pillar in the field of branding politics, especially in capturing the voters. Media visuals in designs and symbolism are an effective way through which political entities engage in the construction of meaningful and enduring stories. Brand images are effective in political branding as visuals are an effective means of passing on information and stirring up the appropriate feelings. In cutting-edge research, it has been argued that one has to pay attention to visual symbolism to understand how political images are constructed and read. For example, Schill (2012) often notes that symbolism has a trait of political communication, and it can deliver arguments and agendas and establish candidate images.

❖ **Data Analysis**

During the PTI campaign, green and white are euphemistically used as the two main colors of the campaign, which reflect the cultural and national pride of Pakistanis. Imran Khan is presented in traditional dress many times, which focuses on portraying him as a down-to-earth leader. Often, visuals are based on young people and the urban environment, which will appeal to the young audience.

Figure 1

In Figure 1, the representational meaning of a political figure is shown not only by solely as a political leader but also leading figure that shows the interpersonal meaning. The hand gestures, also indicate this phenomenon. Compositional meanings are expressed through the color that attracts the voters, such as green, white, and red. Independent of the symbolism, PTI uses dynamic imagery in combination with elementary, powerful mottos such as Tabdeeli Aa Gayi Hai (essentially meaning change has come) to establish the discourse of change with a message of hope. One of the components of such appeals is often shots of the crowd during the rallies, stylized to prove massive support. Imran Khan (PTI) appears consistently in the middle of images, insisting on charisma and personal heroism. The way he directly looks into the camera and brings the audience into his charisma. There are images of him in informal locations, such as cricket fields, in order to associate him with his political success.

Figure 2

In Figure 2, the representational meaning of a political figure is demonstrated with vision and the leader is portrayed with a slogan. The raising hand gestures also indicate confidence and assurance to the voters. Compositional meanings are expressed through the color that attracts the voters, such as green, white, black and red. Independent of the symbolism, PTI uses dynamic imagery in combination with elementary, powerful mottos such as zulam ka badal vot se (redemption of brutality with vote) to establish the discourse of stand with righteousness and justice with a message of hope. One of the components of such appeals is often shots of the crowd during the rallies, stylized to prove massive support. Imran Khan (PTI) appears consistently in the middle of images, insisting on charisma and personal heroism. The way he directly looks into the camera and brings the audience into his charisma. There are images of him in informal locations, such as cricket fields, to associate him with his political success. The PTI's visuals elicit more engagement from youth, especially on Instagram and Twitter since the party uses memes and modern design.

Figure 3

In Figure 3, the PTI shows different strategies for election campaigns, capturing the intention of farmers using different visual colors that are mostly suitable and the farming culture of Pakistan. In this way, the regional adaptations of the PTI are strong enough to capture and attract uneducated voters also. PTI: The campaigns in rural areas use pictures of agriculture and farming and people in their local dress, while those in the urban areas use things like modernity today. PTI having energetic and young-looking symbols in fact produces a more favorable image in the minds of the people, which helps them to present them as a party of change. Each color scheme used in visual branding corresponds to the PTI narratives of change against the status quo. PTI uses youthful and active images, hence mobilizing the youthful vote, hence catering to the general and older voters. This analysis shows how visuals have played an important role in the construction and manipulation of political personalities and voters in Pakistan.

Discussion

In this study, we analyze political branding through visual advertising. The outcomes of the study show that the PTI adopts the strategies of political branding as we introduced in this study according to the framework of multimodal discourse analysis in figure-4.

Figure 4 Conceptual model for political branding
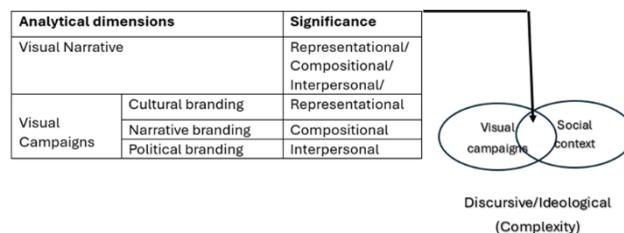
This study is based on the findings that visual campaigns employ a visual narrative of a political party, which has the vision of cutting edge into cultural branding, narrative branding, and political branding. These three are significantly associated with the theory of multimodal discourse and its three core dimensions--- Representational, compositional, and interpersonal. The PTI used three solid strategies: representation of colors, figures, culture, graphics, and images. On the other hand, compositional includes slogans and political narrative as it is observed in the figure-2 and 3. "Zulam ka badla vote se". Interpersonally shows the figure of leaders and their interaction with voters directly (Ilyas et al., 2023; Jabbar et al., 2021; Naz et al., 2023). This shows how much impact there is on the logo in political branding within the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf election promotions. The PTI sought to incorporate visuals into telling stories that would be irresistible to the electorate of each party desired (Alnuzaili et al., 2024). This is why, in the case of PTI visuals that were most essential for the campaigns, and as a result, they encapsulate its political messages in a short yet strong manner. There are beautiful, striking images commonly adopted in PTI campaigns, including Tabdeeli Aa Gayi Hai flex slogans, youthful morphology set to shape change and modernity through appealing imagery associating Imran Khan with the image of change (Fairclough, 1995). What is more, these aesthetic signs are not just a layer of ornamentation; they are actual semiotic signs that mediate specific forms of politics. The association of green with the PTIs' campaigns makes them symbolically linked to Pakistan, a country that the younger generation of PTI also highlights through the color white (Van Leeuwen, 2006).

Closely related to the success of the campaigns are, however, cultural and regional adaptations of the visuals. PTI has rightly applied agri-images in the rural areas while depicting modernity in urban areas of metropolitan districts (Ali et al., 2020). Similarly, it has attributed the infrastructure projects of Punjab and the concrete cultural themes of Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to depict its control over the socio-economic differentiation of regional diversity. All these adaptations not only extend the coverage of their messages but also render them more significant and more appealing to other voters in Pakistan (Mehmood et al., 2024). An analysis thus makes it quite clear that the high change orientation of the part is in congruence with positioning PTI as the change agents in the political theater of Pakistan. Their visuals suit the purpose of mobilizing the young and activating the reformist sentiment superbly but using charisma as a major tool turns its back on the old voters, who value organizational acumen more than a leader.

Conclusion

In sum, the study finds that the adoption of multimodal strategies about political branding not only attracts voters but also makes a political leader a brand of politics. Since visual media is in control of political discourses, the parties must shift strategies to remain in control. In the case of PTI, it's crucial to keep that youthful vote base but expand it to include more people from other age brackets. Therefore, it might help them create some modern visuals and incorporate some digital strategies because, with this, they get the youth, but they also do not lose their core older voters. It also suggests a research program for exploring the long run, where visual political branding might also affect the voters and their political beliefs. The political setup in Pakistan will have to change, as will the tactics of the nation's political players.

Implications of the study

This study implicates a conceptual framework for analyzing political branding, which will be adopted by future researchers for their frameworks. It may be tested with other brands of businesses as well. This model will help the voters recognize the leader of political parties and they can use consistent colors and logos and trust. It also implies graphic designers use different colors and tags and passionate symbols of pride and influence. The model also provides typography and layout of modern trends in the political campaigns.

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