



The Contradiction of Meaning in Building Sympathy for Puan Maharani (A Semiotics Analysis of Puan Maharani's Clothing Giveaway Video in Bekasi)

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DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.47134/interaction.v2i2.4860>

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Received: 02-07-2025

Accepted: 26-08-2025

Published: 28-08-2025



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Abstract: This research examines the public figure Puan Maharani in the context of her efforts to cultivate public sympathy. The study focuses on a video in which Puan Maharani is seen distributing clothing to residents in Bekasi, revealing a significant contradiction between her symbolic actions and the nonverbal expressions she displays. To analyze this phenomenon, the study employs Relational Dialectics Theory as proposed by Leslie Baxter, alongside a semiotic approach developed by Roland Barthes, which explores three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. The findings suggest that actions intended to generate public sympathy instead provoked sarcastic reactions and public criticism. This indicates that in the realm of communication, it is not only the content of the message that holds significance, but also the manner of its delivery and the accompanying symbolic gestures.

Keywords: Semiotics, Relational Dialectics, Communication, Public Figure

Introduction

In contemporary politics, image has become one of the most strategic components in shaping public perceptions of political figures. Political image is not solely constructed through rhetoric and policy programs but is also strongly influenced by visual symbols disseminated through the media. Through various forms of political visual communication, politicians seek to convey messages of empathy, closeness to the people, and social concern. One of the most common practices of visual communication in Indonesia involves symbolic activities such as the distribution of basic necessities, direct cash assistance, or goods, which are frequently packaged as a means of engaging with society. This phenomenon becomes increasingly prominent during political years, particularly in the lead-up to the 2024 General Election.

According to Kompas Research and Development (Litbang Kompas) in June 2024, 21.7 percent of respondents stated that the high frequency of receiving social assistance provided a sense of satisfaction and directly contributed to a positive image of prospective leaders.

This finding indicates that visual acts depicting a political figure as caring and close to the people remain a crucial commodity in cultivating public sympathy.

Puan Maharani, as a prominent figure in Indonesian politics, possesses the capacity to influence public opinion through the messages conveyed in the media. One of her efforts to deliver such messages was through the distribution of T-shirts in Bekasi (Liputan6.com, 2022). However, it is important to recognize that the meaning of political messages does not always align with their outward appearance. Political communication has become an integral part of politicians' strategies to establish connections with their constituents (Cangara, 2016). One common approach involves the use of social media and video content, which can be accessed quickly and easily by potential voters. Puan Maharani, as a political figure, has adopted this strategy to foster public sympathy and garner support in advancing her political career.

The political image of a candidate is one of the key elements in generating sympathy and attracting voters. This image encompasses the attributes, values, and messages a candidate seeks to convey to society. In the context of this study, Puan Maharani's activity of distributing T-shirts in Bekasi can be regarded as part of her effort to construct a positive image and win voter sympathy. Nevertheless, political image is not always homogeneous. The significance of this research lies in the need for a deeper understanding of how political image is constructed in the context of electoral campaigns, and how contradictions in meaning can shape public perceptions of a political candidate.

Therefore, this study examines the video "Puan Maharani Distributing T-shirts in Bekasi" on September 28, 2022, by employing Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to identify and interpret the meanings embedded within the video. To further analyze the contradictions of meaning contained in the video, the researcher applies Relational Dialectics Theory as proposed by Leslie Baxter. Accordingly, this research seeks to address key questions concerning the textual meanings presented, the existence of contradictory meanings, and the relevance of relational dialectics in the context of the video of Puan Maharani distributing T-shirts in Bekasi. The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights for political practitioners, researchers, and the general public in understanding the dynamics of political communication in the modern era.

The purpose of this study is to examine the contradictory meanings, relational dialectics, and textual meanings present in the video "Puan Maharani Distributing T-shirts in Bekasi."

Theoretical Framework

This study employs the Relational Dialectics Theory proposed by Leslie Baxter and Montgomery. According to Baxter and Montgomery (Kim and Yun, 2007), Relational Dialectics Theory suggests that individuals involved in relationships constantly experience tensions arising from opposing desires. Essentially, people strive for positive outcomes or changes to achieve benefits; however, these efforts inherently involve contradictions. Contradictions are not limited to discussing two opposing goals but are always present in the pursuit of any objective. A similar dynamic can be observed in the relationship between Puan Maharani, as the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the community in Bekasi, wherein opposing desires exist. For instance, when Puan Maharani distributes T-shirts to the people of Bekasi, her action is intended to garner public sympathy, illustrating the interplay of conflicting intentions in political communication.

However, this expectation did not align with reality. The public tended to focus on Puan Maharani's less friendly expressions while distributing T-shirts, creating a contradiction between intention and perception. Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery (1996) argue that interpersonal relationships inherently involve tensions that can influence the course of the relationship itself, a phenomenon referred to as relational dialectics, in which such dynamics represent ongoing tensions.

Roland Barthes is recognized as a thinker who applied a linguistic model to cultural analysis. Barthes posits that language functions as a system of signs reflecting the assumptions of a particular society at a specific time (Sobur, 2013:63). His semiotic theory emphasizes three core analytical pillars: denotative meaning, connotative meaning, and myth.

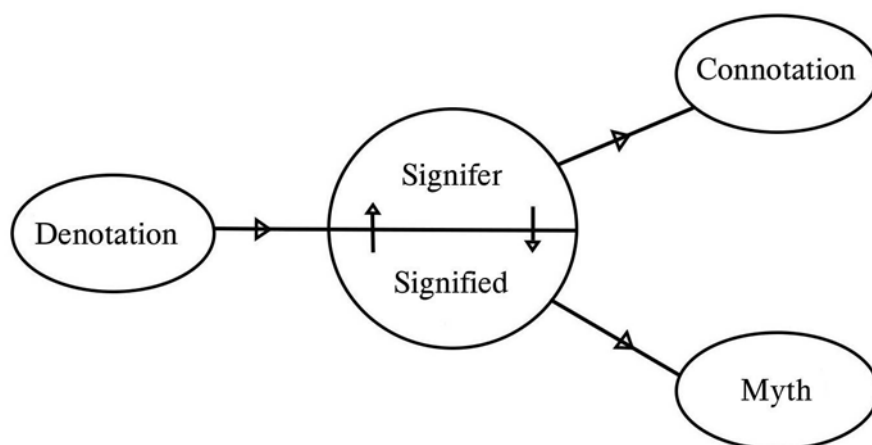


Figure 1. Analytical Framework of Roland Barthes' Semiotics

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach, using Leslie Baxter's Relational Dialectics Theory as the primary framework to explore the contradictory meanings that emerge in the video of Puan Maharani. This theory was chosen to analyze the tensions between symbolic expressions and nonverbal expressions in political communication within the video. Through relational dialectics, the researcher can understand how tensions and contradictions between two opposing needs continuously unfold in the relationship between a political figure and the public.

Furthermore, to examine the textual meanings in the video, the researcher applies semiotic analysis based on Roland Barthes' theory. This method allows for an in-depth interpretation of signs, symbols, gestures, and visual messages in the video, encompassing not only denotative (literal) meanings but also connotative meanings and myths. The semiotic approach is highly effective for exploring complex layers of meaning as well as contradictions present in political visual communication.

Results and Discussion

The following section presents the results and discussion of the study entitled "Contradictory Meanings in Enhancing Public Sympathy for Puan Maharani (A Semiotic Analysis of the Video 'Puan Maharani Distributing T-shirts in Bekasi)

Profile of Puan Maharani

Puan Maharani Nakshatra Kusyala Devi was born in 1973 in Surakarta (Solo), Central Java. She is an Indonesian female political figure who comes from a prominent political family with a strong political legacy. Her mother, Megawati Soekarnoputri, served as the 5th President of the Republic of Indonesia and is also the Chairperson of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P). Her father, Taufiq Kiemas, was a former Speaker of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR RI) and a well-known nationalistic figure. Furthermore, her grandfather, Ir. Soekarno, was the first President of Indonesia, a proclaimer of independence, and a central figure in the nation's struggle for independence.

Her formal political career began when Puan ran for a seat in the People's Representative Council of the Republic of Indonesia (DPR RI) during the 2009 legislative election. She contested from Central Java's Electoral District V, which covers Solo, Klaten, Sukoharjo, and Boyolali. In that election, she secured 242,504 votes, making her one of the female legislative candidates with the highest number of votes nationally (Kompas, 2019). Her election to the DPR not only reflected her personal and symbolic popularity as a member of the Soekarno family but also indicated a high level of political acceptance and legitimacy from the public.

During her tenure, Puan was actively involved in Commission VI of the DPR, which oversees trade, industry, cooperatives, and state-owned enterprises, and she was appointed Chairperson of the PDI-P Faction in 2012, replacing Tjahjo Kumolo. This position made her one of the most prominent young women in the national legislative arena. She is known for actively advocating strategic issues related to the economy, social equality, and public services. Puan also participated in discussions on major policy matters, including oversight of energy policy and macroeconomic issues, demonstrating her capacity to engage with national matters beyond her political family identity.

After successfully serving as a DPR member for the 2009–2014 period and as Chairperson of the PDI-P Faction, Puan Maharani's political career continued to advance. In the 2014 legislative election, she ran again and received significant support. However, she did not continue her legislative duties as she was appointed by President Joko Widodo to a strategic cabinet position. On October 27, 2014, Puan Maharani was inaugurated as Coordinating Minister for Human Development and Cultural Affairs (Menko PMK), becoming the first woman in Indonesian history to hold this position. During her tenure in the Working Cabinet (2014–2019), she was responsible for coordinating across ministries in the fields of social affairs, education, health, culture, and community empowerment (Tempo, 2019).

As Menko PMK, she was involved in strengthening several national priority programs, including the Smart Indonesia Program (Program Indonesia Pintar/PIP), Family Hope Program (Program Keluarga Harapan/PKH), as well as national nutrition programs and stunting prevention initiatives. Under her coordination, the government improved inter-agency synergy in poverty alleviation programs and in increasing the Human Development Index (HDI) across various regions (Kompas, 2019).

The Society of Bekasi

Demographically, the community of Bekasi is heterogeneous and multiethnic. The city is home to various ethnic groups, including Betawi, Sundanese, Javanese, as well as migrants from different regions of Indonesia, which contribute to the city's diverse social composition (Sulaiman & Hidayat, 2020). The Betawi culture, indigenous to this region, remains strongly preserved and is visible in various traditional practices, such as lenong performances, giant puppet ondel-ondel, and local culinary specialties like kerak telur and Betawi pickles (asinan) (Rachman, 2019). In addition, the Bekasi City Government regularly organizes cultural and arts festivals as a means of preserving and promoting cultural diversity, particularly among the younger generation (Bekasi City Culture Office, 2021).

Economically, Bekasi has developed into a significant industrial and commercial center in Indonesia. Major industrial zones, such as Jababeka Industrial Estate, MM2100

Industrial Town, and East Jakarta Industrial Park, serve as bases for hundreds of local and multinational manufacturing companies (Wibowo, 2020). The industrial sector functions as the city's main economic driver and provides employment for millions of residents (BPS Kota Bekasi, 2023). Additionally, the service, trade, and property sectors have shown rapid growth in response to increasing urban demands (Prasetyo & Putri, 2021).

Politically, Bekasi is part of West Java Province, with city governance led by a mayor supported by regional administrative apparatus. Local politics in Bekasi reflect national political patterns, with active participation from various political parties in regional elections and increasing civic engagement (Arifin, 2021). The city government focuses on infrastructure development, improvement of public service quality, and sustainable urban planning. Citizens are increasingly involved in planning and monitoring development projects through public consultation forums and other participatory mechanisms, strengthening local democracy (Siregar & Hadi, 2020).

With its diverse socio-cultural characteristics, dynamic economy, and increasingly participatory governance, Bekasi exemplifies a rapidly developing metropolitan city that faces both significant challenges and opportunities in adapting to modern urban transformation.

Research Findings

Puan Maharani is recognized as a figure with a calm personality and strong dedication to her responsibilities. She has successfully established a reputation as a competent leader, capable of effectively fulfilling her duties in various political positions she has held. Her career trajectory and contributions as an Indonesian political figure, combined with her background and experience, position Puan Maharani as a central figure in Indonesian politics, with a well-established personal brand.

On September 27, 2022, Puan Maharani, serving as the Speaker of the House of Representatives (DPR-RI), organized a T-shirt distribution event in Bekasi. The purpose of this activity can be interpreted from several perspectives, one of which is as a strategy to increase her popularity and strengthen support among the public, particularly the residents of Bekasi. As a politician, Puan Maharani used this opportunity to interact directly with the community, listen to their aspirations, and demonstrate a tangible commitment to addressing the issues faced by the public. This effort is intended to foster closer relationships between Puan Maharani and her constituents and to enhance her positive public image.



Figure 2. Sample video of DPR-RI Speaker Puan Maharani distributing T-shirts in Bekasi
Source: YouTube Metro TV, September 27, 2022

However, the video of Puan Maharani distributing T-shirts in Bekasi, which circulated widely, generated public opinions that did not align with its intended purpose. The activity, aimed at increasing public sympathy, unexpectedly produced reactions contrary to the objective.



Figure 3. Sample video of Puan Maharani distributing T-shirts in Bekasi with a neutral expression

Source: YouTube Buletin iNews, September 28, 2022

The video received considerable attention and negative comments from some members of the public. One example is a post on the YouTube channel Buletin iNews on September 28, 2022, which uploaded a video of Puan Maharani distributing T-shirts, titled “Puan Maharani’s Smile-less Expression Becomes a Topic of Discussion.”

Contradictory Meanings

Based on an in-depth analysis of the video showing Puan Maharani distributing T-shirts to the residents of Bekasi, several significant findings were identified in response to the research questions. One of the main findings is the emergence of a notable contradiction in meaning within this visual communication. Explicitly, the act of distributing T-shirts serves as a political symbol with populist elements. This action is intended to demonstrate tangible social concern while simultaneously building and strengthening public sympathy toward the politician.

From the perspective of political communication and semiotic theory, such actions are commonly interpreted as representing a leadership figure who is close to the people, sensitive to societal needs, and committed to providing direct assistance without bureaucratic intermediaries. Normatively, actions like these typically generate a positive image that benefits the politician, as the public tends to respond favorably to activities demonstrating emotional closeness and social care.

However, the critical findings of this study reveal a discrepancy or dissonance between the symbolic action and the nonverbal expressions displayed by Puan Maharani. This corresponds with **Roland Barthes' semiotic theory**, which asserts that **"a system of signs reflects the assumptions of a particular society at a given time."** In the context of the analyzed video, the researcher identified that Puan's stern or displeased facial expression generated assumptions of unfriendliness, even suggesting dissatisfaction or compulsion. The incongruity between the positively connoted act and the negative emotional display produces a complex contradiction of meaning. Within semiotic studies, this phenomenon is recognized as symbolic dissonance, where two simultaneous signs or symbols convey opposing interpretations. The symbol of "direct aid" inherently carries meanings of benevolence, empathy, and genuine intention to assist the community in need, yet the nonverbal expression displayed opens space for alternative interpretations that may undermine the intended positive connotation.

Socially and culturally, this symbol is associated with morally and socially virtuous actions. Conversely, a sour facial expression conveys the opposite meanings: displeasure, compulsion, and even apathy. This contradiction visually creates a duality of meaning that confuses audiences and opens space for varied interpretations among the public.

These findings emphasize the importance of alignment between verbal, symbolic, and nonverbal communication in political communication strategies. Effective political communication relies not only on symbolic acts or verbal messages but must also be supported by consistent nonverbal expressions that reinforce the intended message. Disharmony among these communication elements can result in confusion, ambiguity, and doubt among the public, ultimately weakening persuasive power and political legitimacy.

Overall, this study confirms that constructing a positive public perception requires a holistic understanding of political communication, encompassing both verbal and nonverbal aspects. In the context of increasingly dominant digital media and visual communication, politicians and public communicators must exercise great care in managing expressions, gestures, and visual symbols to ensure that political messages are received comprehensively and effectively. Awareness of contradictory meanings and efforts to address them are key to optimizing political communication strategies that build strong emotional connections with the public.

Relational Dialectics

This study also employs the concept of relational dialectics, developed by Baxter and Montgomery (1996), as a theoretical framework to understand the tension of meanings emerging in the video of Puan Maharani distributing T-shirts to the public. Relational dialectics in interpersonal communication essentially describes two needs that appear to be contradictory but are actually complementary, forming a complex relational dynamic. A classic example of this dialectic is the tension between the need for openness and the need for separation or distance within a relationship.

In the context of the video under study, Puan Maharani's act of distributing T-shirts can be seen as a manifestation of political openness. This openness represents the politician's effort to build close interpersonal relationships with the public as constituents, displaying empathy and symbolic closeness. The action is not only social but also carries strategic political dimensions, especially in the run-up to electoral moments, where politicians seek to increase sympathy, support, and electability. In political communication, such forms of openness are often considered crucial for reinforcing the legitimacy and popularity of political figures in the eyes of the public.

However, in contrast, Puan Maharani's facial expression in the video signals emotional separation. Her sour and rigid face, without a smile, open gestures, or enthusiastic expressions, gives the impression that the act was merely formal. The absence of genuine emotional warmth functions as a marker of alienation or symbolic distance between the leader and the citizens receiving aid. Within the relational dialectics framework, this signal of separation represents a different need, namely to maintain distance, preserve personal space, or even reluctance to engage in authentic emotional interaction. The tension arising between the intention to connect through openness and the expression indicating distance creates a complex visual political communication dialectic.

This situation demonstrates how two opposing needs coexist simultaneously, generating a meaning conflict that is difficult to resolve within the same time and space. In

this context, political communication is not solely about verbal messages or symbolic actions but is also strongly influenced by accompanying nonverbal cues.

The impact of this dialectical tension is the failure of the political message to achieve its intended effect, namely fostering emotional closeness and public sympathy. Conversely, the disharmony between action and expression can create doubt and cynicism among the public. Citizens may interpret the act as a “political spectacle” lacking authenticity, raising questions about the motives behind the action. This doubt can also trigger broader negative perceptions regarding the honesty, integrity, and commitment of the political figure in carrying out her role. Furthermore, this phenomenon illustrates that in modern political communication, particularly that which relies on visual media, emotional and symbolic aspects play a central role in shaping public perception. The mismatch between the symbol of openness and the signal of separation shows how misaligned political communication can reduce message effectiveness and even harm the constructed political image.

This study also underscores the importance of integrated communication management, where politicians and communication teams must balance the effort to demonstrate openness with the necessary maintenance of distance, so as not to generate contradictions that disrupt public perception. Understanding relational dialectics provides valuable insights for political communication strategies, especially in the context of visual interactions and increasingly dominant social media. Therefore, the findings of this study not only reveal the tension of meanings in the video but also illustrate how relational dialectics serves as an effective analytical framework for examining the dynamics of political communication full of contradictions and ambiguities.

Textual Meaning

The video capturing the moment Puan Maharani distributed T-shirts to the residents of Bekasi contains highly complex symbolic meanings when examined through Roland Barthes’ semiotic approach. One of the main focal points is Puan Maharani’s facial expression, which tends to appear sour or frowning, despite her engaging in a socially positive political activity. From Barthes’ perspective, the first meaning perceived in a visual sign is referred to as denotation.

Denotation serves as the foundational level before a sign develops into deeper connotative or mythological meanings. In a visual context, denotation operates through direct observation of form, color, movement, and physical expressions. This implies that denotative meaning refers not to what is interpreted, but to what is seen. It represents the “as-is” meaning of the sign, prior to being influenced by viewers’ subjective perceptions or values. In the case of Puan Maharani’s video distributing T-shirts to the residents of Bekasi, the denotation of her facial expression can be described as a literal display of a serious,

neutral, or sour expression. She does not smile, her lip movements are minimal, and there is little warm visual contact with the surrounding residents. This description provides an objective depiction of the visual signs present in the video. At this level, one only reads “what is seen” without immediately linking it to social meaning, intentions, or specific backgrounds.

However, in Barthes’ theory, signs do not stop at the denotative level. Signs always open space for connotative meanings, the secondary meanings shaped by cultural values, ideology, and social interpretation. Connotation renders a sign political, emotional, and ideological. Within Indonesian cultural constructions, including the Bekasi community, a smile carries strong social significance as a symbol of sincerity, friendliness, and good intentions in social interactions.

Smiling is not merely a habit but a form of nonverbal communication embedded within collective value systems. In this context, a smile is often interpreted as a marker of warmth, openness, and empathy, particularly in interactions between leaders and the public. Conversely, a sour or smile-less facial expression is frequently interpreted as insincerity, disinterest, or even coldness and arrogance. In a society that values politeness and social harmony, a closed or neutral expression in a public setting is considered a deviation from expressive norms that should convey closeness and goodwill.

In the context of Puan Maharani’s video, the connotation of her sour facial expression suggests that the political figure appears unfriendly, insincere, or even disengaged from social interaction. Especially when such expressions are displayed in situations symbolically intended to demonstrate empathy, benevolence, and social engagement—such as distributing T-shirts, culturally perceived as direct care for the public—the presence of a sour expression creates a tension of meaning. On one hand, the act of “giving” carries positive connotations: generosity, empathy, and connection between the elite and grassroots.

On the other hand, Puan Maharani’s facial expression conveys nonverbal signals that are contrasting: no smile, no gestures of enthusiasm, and even a sense of reluctance or discomfort. This misalignment between expression and social context becomes the space in which myth develops, in the Barthesian sense.

According to Barthes, myth represents the third level of meaning: an ideological construction that transforms a sign into a broader social narrative. Myth does not arise from the sign itself but from how society collectively interprets it repeatedly. In this case, Puan Maharani’s facial expression does not only denote “not smiling” (denotation) or “unfriendly” (connotation), but also begins to construct a myth of a politician who is insincere, distant from the public, and performing populist actions merely as formality. This myth grows as the sign (the sour expression) is repeatedly associated with contexts of

power, image-making, and electability, especially during election periods. Netizens' responses are generally sarcastic, with some comments suggesting that Puan was "forced to smile" or "not sincere in giving out T-shirts." This phenomenon illustrates that even a simple visual sign, such as a facial expression, can have significant political impact, as the public interprets it within the context of pre-existing values, images, and narratives associated with the figure.

Within Barthes' semiotic framework, this demonstrates that the visual communication of political figures cannot be considered neutral. Every gesture, expression, and action can be read across three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. These three levels are interconnected and shape public interpretation, which does not always align with the sender's intended message (in this case, Puan Maharani or her communication team). The lack of alignment between the symbolic message (the act of giving) and the nonverbal message (facial expression) creates a space for critique and even political irony.

Thus, the findings reinforce that in the visually driven digital era, nonverbal communication of public figures becomes a sensitive field of interpretation, where small inconsistencies can generate significant reactions. Examining the denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings of Puan Maharani's expression in the video demonstrates that visual symbols are never neutral; they always exist within a complex and dynamic orbit of cultural and political interpretation.

Conclusion

The researcher concludes that there exists a Meaning Contradiction in the video of Puan Maharani distributing T-shirts in Bekasi. Symbolically, the act of distributing T-shirts represents a form of social concern and a populist political strategy aimed at generating public sympathy. However, Puan Maharani's sour facial expression creates a mismatch between the symbolic intent and nonverbal expression. This contradiction produces a symbolic dissonance, where the visual sign conveys dual meanings of goodwill and insincerity, thereby opening space for diverse, and even negative, public interpretations.

Through the lens of Relational Dialectics, a tension was observed between the attempt at openness (manifested through direct social actions toward the public) and separation (reflected in facial expressions signaling emotional distance). This tension is part of the relational dynamics in communication, where two conflicting needs—being close and maintaining distance—occur simultaneously. The imbalance in message delivery results in a failure to establish authentic symbolic closeness between the leader and the public.

Regarding the Textual Meaning in the video, visual signs such as facial expressions, gestures, and contextual actions are constructed through a system of signs that carry layered meanings. Denotatively, the video merely shows someone distributing T-shirts; however,

connotatively and mythologically, the public interprets insincerity, political image-making, and even coercion. This demonstrates that meaning is not only embedded in what is visibly presented but is also influenced by culture, social perception, and the narratives constructed around it.

Overall, this study emphasizes that alignment between symbolic actions and nonverbal communication is crucial in shaping positive political perception. Discrepancies between the two can generate meaning contradictions, weaken political messaging, and open space for public critique. In the context of visual political communication, meaning is shaped not only by what is conveyed but also by how expressions are presented and socially and culturally received by the audience.

Suggestions

Political figures, particularly those who are building or maintaining a public image, need to recognize that nonverbal communication—such as facial expressions, body gestures, and demeanor when interacting with the public—has a significant impact on public perception. Moreover, political figures should develop gestures that are consistent with the moral or political messages they wish to convey, especially in the digital era, where short videos can spread widely and quickly shape public opinion.

Political communicators and political parties are advised to integrate semiotic analysis into their communication strategies to gain deeper insights into how messages are received and interpreted by diverse segments of society. In the era of social media, it is crucial to understand that the public does not merely passively receive political messages but actively interprets and reproduces meaning. Therefore, sensitivity to symbolic issues and visual culture must be strengthened.

For academics, this study remains exploratory and is limited to a single video case. Future researchers are encouraged to conduct comparative analyses of multiple political figures using the same approach to identify general patterns in the contradictions of visual political communication. Subsequent studies may also incorporate interviews with the public or focus group discussions (FGDs) to gain a deeper understanding of how different community groups interpret symbols in political communication.

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