

Constructing Synthetic Political Identity: A Semiotic And Framing Study Of Ai-Generated Images In Indonesia's 2024 Election

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) increasingly reshapes contemporary political communication by transforming how political identities are visually constructed and circulated. This study examines how AI-generated images in Indonesia's 2024 Presidential Election, particularly visuals associated with the Prabowo-Gibran campaign, functioned as semiotic and discursive instruments in political branding. Using a qualitative approach that integrates (rather than conflates) Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis focusing on the image as signifier and Entman's framing theory capturing how media and publics selectively contextualize and reinterpret these images, the research examines three prominent AI-generated visuals alongside media coverage and public responses. The findings indicate that the "Gemoy" aesthetics characterized by deliberately stylized cuteness, soft textures, and Pixar-like visual conventions recognizable as artificial, operates as a strategy of symbolic softening that generates emotional legitimacy while distancing candidates from complex historical associations. At the mythic level, these visuals naturalize the image of a harmonious, youthful, and approachable leader, demonstrating how AI aesthetics can depoliticize political narratives through affective representation. Media and public framings reveal ambivalent reactions: while some interpret the visuals as creative campaign innovation, others view them as synthetic manipulation. However, the widespread acceptance of clearly artificial images as evidenced in meme-based interactions, humorous reinterpretations, and explicit user acknowledgments in social media discourse suggests a shift toward post-authenticity, where audiences knowingly engage with synthetic political imagery. This study argues that AI functions not merely as a technological tool but as a semiotic and discursive actor that co-constructs political identity through an interplay of human strategic intent and algorithmically embedded aesthetic tendencies, reshaping political meaning in digital-era elections.

Keywords: Algorithmic Aesthetic; Artificial Intelligence; Framing Theory; Political Branding; Semiotics

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Membangun Identitas Politik Sintetis: Studi Semiotik dan Pembingkai Citra yang Dihasilkan AI dalam Pemilu Indonesia 2024

Abstrak

Kecerdasan Buatan (AI) semakin membentuk ulang komunikasi politik kontemporer dengan mengubah cara identitas politik dibangun dan disebarluaskan secara visual. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana gambar yang dihasilkan AI dalam Pemilihan Presiden Indonesia 2024, khususnya visual yang terkait dengan kampanye Prabowo-Gibran, berfungsi sebagai instrumen

semiotik dan diskursif dalam branding politik. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif yang mengintegrasikan (bukan menggabungkan) analisis semiotik Roland Barthes yang berfokus pada gambar sebagai penanda dan teori pembedaan Entman yang menangkap bagaimana media dan publik secara selektif mengkontekstualisasikan dan menafsirkan ulang gambar-gambar ini, penelitian ini mengkaji tiga visual menonjol yang dihasilkan AI bersama dengan liputan media dan tanggapan publik. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa estetika “Gemoy” yang ditandai dengan kecantikan yang disengaja, tekstur lembut, dan konvensi visual ala Pixar yang dikenali sebagai buatan, beroperasi sebagai strategi pelembutan simbolis yang menghasilkan legitimasi emosional sekaligus menjauhkan kandidat dari asosiasi historis yang kompleks. Pada tingkat mitos, visual-visual ini menormalkan citra pemimpin yang harmonis, muda, dan mudah didekati, menunjukkan bagaimana estetika AI dapat mendepolitisasi narasi politik melalui representasi afektif. Kerangka media dan publik mengungkapkan reaksi yang ambigu: sementara sebagian menginterpretasikan visual tersebut sebagai inovasi kampanye kreatif, yang lain memandangnya sebagai manipulasi sintesis. Namun, penerimaan luas terhadap gambar-gambar yang jelas-jelas artifisial, sebagaimana terlihat dalam interaksi berbasis meme, reinterpretasi humoris, dan pengakuan eksplisit pengguna dalam diskursus media sosial, menunjukkan pergeseran menuju post-otentisitas, di mana audiens secara sadar berinteraksi dengan citra politik sintesis. Studi ini berpendapat bahwa AI berfungsi bukan sekadar sebagai alat teknologi, melainkan sebagai aktor semiotik dan diskursif yang ikut membangun identitas politik melalui interaksi antara niat strategis manusia dan kecenderungan estetika yang tertanam dalam algoritma, sehingga membentuk kembali makna politik dalam pemilihan umum era digital.

Kata kunci: *Estetika Algoritma; Artificial Intelligence; Teori Framing; Branding Politik; Semiotika*

Introduction

The incorporation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into political campaigns has seen measurable increases in recent years, marking a profound shift in how political communication is produced, distributed, and interpreted. Globally, the use of generative AI tools from automated messaging systems to hyper-realistic visual fabrications has reconfigured the symbolic and strategic dimensions of electoral competition. For instance, (Kim & Lee, 2023) found that anthropomorphized political chatbots significantly increased voting intention when delivering emotional (versus factual) messages, demonstrating how AI reshapes persuasive communication. Likewise, comparative studies on the circulation of deepfakes in elections across the United States, Brazil, South Korea, and India illustrate how generative AI

amplifies uncertainty, disrupts conventional information hierarchies, and erodes trust in political information environments. These developments indicate that AI is not merely an auxiliary tool but has become intertwined with how citizens evaluate credibility, authenticity, and political identity (Islam et al., 2024). More importantly, the rise of generative AI signals an epistemological shift in political communication, where visual representations are no longer indexical reflections of reality, as in photography, but synthetic constructions generated through algorithmic processes. This transformation challenges conventional assumptions about authenticity, representation, and truth in political imagery.

In Southeast Asia, and particularly Indonesia, the integration of AI-generated content into political communication has

escalated rapidly. Several local studies have examined the use of deepfake materials featuring former President Soeharto as a political cue (Arfan Santiko & Bahri, 2024; Subadi, 2024), as well as the legal and regulatory concerns arising from AI-driven political manipulation (Lestari & Ibrahim, 2025; Rahman & Anggriawan, 2025). However, the majority of these studies focus primarily on normative, ethical, and juridical implications treating AI as a technological threat or a driver of misinformation rather than a communicative entity capable of producing meaning. What remains underexplored is the extent to which AI-generated content functions as a symbolic actor that actively constructs political narratives, shapes identity performance, and appeals to voters through aesthetic, emotional, and ideological cues (Montanari, 2025).

To theoretically ground this inquiry, this research adopts Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and (Entman, 1993) framing theory as complementary frameworks for decoding how AI-generated political content produces and circulates meaning. Barthes conceptualized meaning-making through denotation, connotation, and myth, offering a layered analytical lens to understand how images embody cultural values and ideological narratives (Griffin, 2012). Within the context of political branding, these semiotic layers illuminate how AI-generated visuals translate abstract notions of leadership, modernity, empathy, or progress into emotionally charged symbolic representations. Meanwhile, Entman's framing theory explicates how media and public discourse highlight particular interpretations defining

problems, attributing causality, making moral evaluations, and suggesting solutions. Integrating these perspectives allows this study to analyze not only what AI-generated images depict but how they are circulated, reframed, and contested within Indonesia's digital public sphere. However, limited attention has been given to how AI-generated imagery operates as a semiotic system that reshapes political meaning. In particular, the role of AI aesthetics in depoliticizing historical narratives, embedding globalized visual styles, and fostering post-authentic audience engagement remains underexplored.

From a semiotic perspective, the use of "gimmicks" in political campaigns such as stylized visuals, gestures, slogans, or humorous representations plays a crucial role in condensing complex political meanings into easily recognizable symbolic forms. These gimmicks function as signifiers that enable rapid affective decoding, allowing audiences to engage with political messages without requiring deep cognitive processing. Previous studies demonstrate that political communication has increasingly relied on such semiotic shortcuts: for instance, linguistic landscapes can frame environmental issues through symbolic textual cues (Sakhiyya et al., 2026), parody songs can reshape political discourse through humor and satire (Garg & Rai, 2025), and embodied gestures such as index finger pointing or slicing movements can communicate authority, decisiveness, or aggression beyond verbal language (Jarmolowicz-Nowikow & Laskowski, 2025; Ladewig, 2025). These findings suggest that political meaning is often produced not through explicit ideological articulation but

through repetitive, affect-laden symbolic cues that operate at the level of connotation and myth. In this context, AI-generated “Gemoy” aesthetics can be understood as a contemporary digital gimmick one that leverages algorithmically produced cuteness and visual simplification to construct political identity, guide audience interpretation, and subtly reframe historical and ideological narratives.

This gap highlights the need for a deeper inquiry into how AI-generated materials do not merely serve as campaign instruments but actively participate in shaping political branding and influencing collective imagination. AI affords unprecedented personalization, scalability, and visual realism, enabling political actors to craft identities that blur boundaries between authentic representation and synthetic persuasion (Chomanski & Lauwaert, 2025). While such innovations open pathways for more engaging political communication, they simultaneously raise ethical concerns related to misinformation, authenticity, and the erosion of public trust (Romanishyn et al., 2025). The duality of innovation and manipulation underscores the urgency of examining AI not only technically or ethically but discursively—as a producer of meaning and an influencer of voter perception.

The Indonesian context offers a particularly compelling case. The 2024 Presidential Election represents a watershed moment in the integration of AI into political branding. The contest was marked by viral AI-generated images, meme-like visual artifacts, stylized campaign posters, and interactive chatbot engagements. Some of these materials were embraced as innovative

expressions of digital creativity, while others were condemned as deceptive, unethical, or reminiscent of black campaigns (Rosadi, 2024). The prominence of such AI-driven narratives suggests that AI functions as an emerging actor in Indonesia’s media ecology, reshaping agenda-setting processes and influencing how voters interpret candidate identities (Subekti et al., 2025). More importantly, the rapid viral spread of these visuals particularly among young voters demonstrates how AI-generated aesthetics have become foundational to contemporary political persuasion (Atar, 2024).

Previous research has explored digital campaigning and disinformation in Indonesian elections, including how social media frames candidate identities (Nurnisya & Kasmani, 2025), the use of AI-generated political advertisements such as the Soeharto deepfake (Subadi, 2024), and the broader manipulation of information in the post-truth era (Belinda et al., 2024). Studies have also examined political marketing strategies targeting Generation Z, who are highly responsive to visually creative, humorous, and emotionally resonant content (Febriandy & Revolusi, 2024). Nevertheless, these works do not fully conceptualize AI as an independent communicative agent. They often treat AI as context, tool, or problem rather than a symbolic force capable of shaping political meaning. This constitutes the state of the art: existing research provides valuable insights into digital persuasion, disinformation, and visual politics but lacks a comprehensive account of how AI-generated content constructs political identity and influences voter perception through semiotic and discursive processes.

The scientific novelty of this study lies in positioning AI not merely as a technological instrument but as an emergent actor in political communication one that actively constructs political branding through symbolic representation (Bordiuk et al., 2025). By combining semiotic analysis of AI-generated visuals with framing analysis of media and public responses, this research contributes to the theoretical integration of political branding, media ecology, and agenda-setting in the era of generative technology. It situates AI within the discursive dynamics of Indonesian electoral politics, offering a nuanced understanding of how algorithmically produced aesthetics create emotional resonance, legitimacy, and ideological narratives.

In addition, AI also offers an epistemological transition in political representation (Coeckelbergh, 2023). Images obtained with AI are generated without direct reference. AI produces synthetic and animated visual images. This novelty fundamentally changes conventional political identity into digital identity. Meanwhile, photography, which has long been associated with politics, presents real visuality and reality based on factual images. AI has the ability to generate visuals algorithmically. Thus, the shift from conventional images to AI shows that images are represented as symbols rather than depicting facts that have occurred (Somaini, 2023).

From this perspective, the central research problem emerges: despite the growing global use of AI in political campaigns, little is known about how AI-generated content in Indonesia's 2024

Election shaped voters' interpretations of candidate identity and political choices. While international studies have begun to address AI-driven persuasion, propaganda, and disinformation (Huang & Cruz, 2022; Romanishyn et al., 2025), Indonesian scholarship remains limited to descriptive accounts and ethical debates. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap through three objectives: (1) analyzing how AI tools such as deepfakes, chatbots, and content generators were deployed or perceived to be deployed in constructing political branding during the 2024 Presidential Election; (2) examining how media and public framing of AI-generated content shaped voter interpretations; and (3) evaluating the implications of AI's presence in political communication for democratic practices and public trust in Indonesia.

Research Methods

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach using manual semiotic analysis based on Roland Barthes and framing analysis to examine the meaning construction of AI-generated political content during Indonesia's 2024 Presidential Election. The qualitative descriptive model was selected because it allows the researcher to capture the nuanced representational patterns, ideological cues, and aesthetic-symbolic elements that emerge from AI-generated visuals and their public reception. This approach also enables a systematic interpretation of meaning-making processes without imposing rigid theoretical constraints, making it suitable for analyzing contemporary digital phenomena whose structures are still fluid and evolving.

The unit of analysis included AI-generated visuals (deepfakes, campaign images), textual materials (chatbot messages, captions), and related media coverage with public responses. These units were chosen purposively to ensure that the data reflected materials that were widely circulated, publicly discussed, and relevant to the political branding of presidential candidates during the election period. AI-generated visuals such as stylized campaign posters, viral “Gemoy” character illustrations, and manipulated images associated with candidates were included because they represent the most prominent forms of algorithmic aesthetic production during the campaign. The primary visual data consisted of three key AI-generated images analyzed in this study, including both their digital circulation formats (social media posts, reposts, and meme derivatives) and their material manifestations (e.g., billboards and campaign posters), ensuring that the analysis captures both original AI outputs and their mediated reproductions. Textual materials from chatbots, candidate-focused AI assistants, and social media captions were selected to complement visual data, enabling a more holistic interpretation of meaning construction across different modalities. Meanwhile, media coverage was operationalized through selected articles and reports (e.g., Kompas, CNN Indonesia, Detik), and public responses were sampled from identifiable comment threads, quote tweets, and repost captions that explicitly referenced the “Gemoy” imagery, providing concrete instances of how the visuals were framed, contested, or humorously reinterpreted.

Data were collected purposively from online platforms and news portals that featured discussions about AI in political campaigns. The purposive sampling technique ensured that the datasets captured diverse representations of how AI was deployed, interpreted, or contested during the election. The sampling process involved identifying viral AI-generated images circulated between October 2023 and February 2024, collecting chatbot interactions used in campaign-related activities, and compiling media articles that explicitly discussed AI’s role in political communication. In addition, secondary interpretive sources such as political commentaries, expert analyses, and discussions from digital platforms (including YouTube podcasts and opinion articles) were incorporated to contextualize how these visuals relate to candidates’ historical and political backgrounds particularly aspects that may be symbolically softened or obscured through AI aesthetics. Public responses were gathered through comment sections, quote tweets, and discussion threads to capture patterns of approval, criticism, humor, or suspicion expressed by citizens. To enhance credibility, the researcher cross-checked data across multiple sources and excluded materials that were unverifiable or not clearly AI-generated. Rather than assuming audience awareness, indications of “post-authentic engagement” were inferred from explicit user expressions (e.g., acknowledgment of artificiality, ironic humor, or meme-based reinterpretation) observed in these interactions.

Semiotic analysis was manually conducted by identifying denotative,

connotative, and mythic meanings within the visual and textual symbols. This triadic structure follows Barthes' two-order signification expanded analytically into three operational levels to ensure systematic interpretation. At the denotative level, the researcher described the literal elements presented in the images. This triadic structure follows Barthes' two-order signification expanded analytically into three operational levels to ensure systematic interpretation, such as colors, characters, typography, and visual composition. Connotative analysis focused on the cultural associations and emotional cues conveyed by those elements, including representations of friendliness, modernity, strength, youthfulness, or nostalgia. Mythic analysis, in this study, refers to the ideological layer in which repeated connotations are naturalized into taken-for-granted narratives such as framing political authority as familial warmth, generational continuity, or technological progress thereby masking historical complexity or political contestation. This procedure followed Barthes' semiotic model, which positions images as layered meaning systems that simultaneously operate at explicit and implicit levels. Coding sheets were used to systematically document these three layers, and each image underwent repeated rounds of interpretation to maintain analytic consistency.

Framing analysis explored how media and public discourse defined problems, assigned causes, and shaped moral evaluations related to AI-generated content. Using (Entman, 1993) framework, the analysis examined four core dimensions: (1) *problem definition* is how AI-generated

visuals were portrayed as innovation, manipulation, or political strategy; (2) *causal interpretation* is who or what was framed as responsible for producing or circulating such content; (3) *moral evaluation* is how the use of AI was judged ethically, culturally, or politically; and (4) *treatment recommendation* is what solutions, criticisms, or regulatory proposals emerged in public discourse. Media articles and social media responses were coded according to these categories, allowing the researcher to observe contrasting interpretations between mainstream media, political commentators, and everyday digital publics.

The integration of both analyses aimed to reveal how artificial intelligence operates as a symbolic actor in political branding and voter perception. By combining semiotic and framing approaches, the study connected the symbolic content embedded in AI-generated visuals with the discursive processes through which those symbols were negotiated. This integrative strategy also allowed the researcher to distinguish between intended meaning (as encoded by AI-driven campaign aesthetics) and interpreted meaning (as decoded through public and media framing). Such triangulation strengthens analytic depth and supports a more comprehensive understanding of AI's role in shaping political meaning in Indonesia's 2024 Election.

To ensure trustworthiness, this study applied several qualitative validation strategies, including data triangulation across platforms, prolonged engagement with visual materials, and reflexive documentation of analytic decisions. Triangulation was achieved by comparing patterns across visuals, text-based

chatbot content, and public discourse, while reflexive notes were used to track interpretive biases and ensure transparency in analytic procedures. These steps help clarify how the researcher arrived at particular interpretations and improve the reliability of the findings.

Results of Research and Discussion

The results of this study reveal that AI-generated political content became a central feature of the Prabowo–Gibran campaign during Indonesia’s 2024 Presidential Election. Each image carried distinct semiotic elements that constructed a consistent yet layered political narrative emphasizing friendliness, digital modernity, and emotional closeness. Through Roland Barthes’ semiotic lens, the following interpretations highlight the symbolic meanings embedded in three key AI-generated visuals, followed by their media framing and public reception.



Figure 1. Billboard of Gemoy 2 Campaign Prabowo-Gibran in Urban Street Setting

Source: <https://share.google/images/aWZ-b2b4hruedCahcH>

The first visual is a large roadside billboard displaying cartoon-like AI-generated portraits of Prabowo and Gibran who serves as one of the most iconic representations of the “*Gemoy*”

political aesthetic. At the denotative level, the billboard simply presents two smiling characters wearing white shirts and red bow ties, accompanied by the slogan “Prabowo Gibran 2024 “Bersama Indonesia Maju” and a prominent number 2 indicating their ballot position. The composition is bright, minimalistic, and highly visible within an urban environment, making it easily recognizable even at a distance. The exaggerated facial features and softened lines typical of AI-rendered illustrations suggest a departure from realistic political photography toward a more stylized, playful visual language.

Connotatively, this image communicates friendliness, youthfulness, and approachability qualities rarely associated with Prabowo’s historically rigid, militaristic branding. The AI-generated aesthetic reframes Prabowo’s persona by emphasizing emotional accessibility rather than authority or power. The “cuteness effect” intentionally leverages what scholars describe as *kawaii politics*, where softness, warmth, and charm are strategically used to reduce perceived social distance. Rather than directly determining voter choice, this aesthetic can be understood as aligning with broader patterns of youth-oriented digital culture and communication styles, which emphasize playfulness, emotional relatability, and visual appeal. By visually pairing Prabowo with the youthful imagery of Gibran, the billboard also performs a generational balancing act: maturity and experience are visually fused with youthfulness and digital fluency. This suggests a strategic attempt to resonate with younger audiences at the level of symbolic representation and affective engagement, rather than serving as

direct evidence of influencing their electoral decisions. This aligns with contemporary political branding practices where emotional appeal increasingly outweighs policy-based persuasion, particularly among young voters.

At the mythic level, the image constructs the myth of *friendly authority*, suggesting that leadership can be warm, gentle, and inclusive. This is consistent with Barthes' concept of myth as a second-order signification that naturalizes cultural ideology. In this context, power is naturalized as affection, and authority is reimagined as relational rather than hierarchical. The strategic construction of this myth echoes what (Shah, 2022) identifies as the global trend of emotional depoliticization, in which political actors cultivate charisma and emotional resonance as substitutes for ideological depth. AI-generated visuals, with their polished and hyper-stylized aesthetic, reinforce this trend by smoothing over the edges of political conflict and projecting harmony.

Beyond functioning as a marker of friendliness, the "Gemoy" aesthetic can be understood through Barthes' concept of myth as a form of depoliticized speech. In this context, AI-generated cuteness does not merely soften political imagery but actively erases historical and ideological complexity. The stylized, childlike representation replaces associations of authority, militarism, or political controversy with a synthetic and emotionally neutral avatar.

This process constitutes a form of semiotic cleansing, in which political history is not directly contested but rendered irrelevant through aesthetic transformation. The candidate is no longer perceived through historical continuity but through

an algorithmically constructed present that appears harmless, approachable, and culturally unburdened.

From a framing perspective (Entman, 1993), media reactions to the billboard were distinctly polarized. Outlets such as Channel News Asia and The Jakarta Post framed the image as an example of innovative digital communication and a creative adaptation to youth-driven political culture. In contrast, critical commentaries in independent media and opinion columns framed the visuals as "aesthetic manipulation," suggesting that the cuteness strategy masks political realities and oversimplifies complex issues. This split reflects what (Samatan & Londol, 2025) observed in their analysis of AI-driven campaign visuals: younger audiences tend to interpret such imagery through the lens of entertainment and creativity, while older or more politically critical groups perceive it as a form of emotional engineering.

Public responses on social media mirrored this ambivalence. Supporters described the visuals as "cute," "refreshing," and "relatable," expressing that the Gemoy aesthetic made politics feel less intimidating and more entertaining. For many digital-native voters, the AI-generated billboard became a memeable object like circulated, remixed, and humorously reinterpreted across platforms. Critics, however, condemned the imagery as "*infantilizing politics*," arguing that the exaggerated cuteness trivialized political discourse or attempted to obscure substantive issues behind algorithmic charm. These divergent reactions reflect (Entman, 1993) framing dimensions: moral evaluation fluctuates between enthusiasm and distrust, while

problem definition oscillates between innovation and deception depending on ideological positions.

Overall, the first billboard demonstrates how AI-generated political visuals operate not merely as campaign materials but as symbolic artifacts that shape affective interpretations of leadership. The blend of semiotic construction and public framing shows that AI plays an active role in reshaping candidate identity softening authority, amplifying emotional proximity, and mediating political meaning in a visually saturated digital landscape.



Figure 2. Digital Version of Gemoy 2 Campaign

Source: <https://share.google/images/HbF4b-VrLw6VhoUqjb>

The second visual is featuring the bold red typography “GEMOY 2” on a light-blue digital background, highlights AI’s aesthetic clarity and represents a shift from traditional political iconography to a fully digitized campaign aesthetic. Denotatively, this visual resembles a digital marketing banner or a promotional artwork for entertainment content, rather than a political poster. The clean background, minimalist composition, and high-definition character rendering signal the precision of AI’s image-generating capabilities. The S placement of the word

“Gemoy” above the numeral “2” amplifies its branding function: “2” is no longer just the ballot number but becomes an integral part of the campaign’s identity system.

The ambivalent public reception of AI-generated visuals also points to a shift beyond conventional notions of manipulation. Rather than being simply “deceived,” many audiences appear to engage with these images in a state of post authenticity, where the artificial nature of the content is openly recognized but does not diminish its appeal.

In this context, political communication operates as a form of collaborative fiction, where producers and audiences jointly participate in constructing meaning. The enjoyment of the “Gemoy” aesthetic lies not in its realism, but in its shared artificiality. This challenges Entman’s framing of manipulation, suggesting that persuasion in AI mediated politics may no longer depend on authenticity, but on affective engagement and symbolic play.

Connotatively, the emphasis on “Gemoy” transforms the poster into a memetic object, a hybrid of political messaging and pop-culture framing. The term “Gemoy,” widely associated with cuteness and emotional warmth, operates as a visual shorthand that merges entertainment culture with electoral identity. This “memefication” strategy aligns with global trends in digital politics, where affective and playful aesthetics are used to broaden appeal, especially to younger demographics. As (Highfield, 2016) notes, political communication increasingly adopts meme-like formats because they facilitate virality, emotional bonding, and rapid recognition. In this

sense, the poster positions the Prabowo–Gibran campaign within a culture of algorithmic playfulness, appealing to digital natives accustomed to interacting with political content in humorous formats.

Beyond this, the number “2” functions simultaneously as a symbol, a brand, and a digital visual anchor. In political marketing terms, the numeral serves as a *mnemonic device* a recognizable sign that enhances recall and strengthens emotional association with the candidate pair. The bright red color reinforces urgency and energy, while the minimal text suggests confidence in the symbolic economy of the image. The absence of policy references or ideological cues reflects what (Jenkins, 2023) describes as “symbolic minimalism,” where political meaning is performed through aesthetics rather than arguments.

At the mythic level, the poster embodies technological optimism like the belief that digital innovation equates to political progress. As (de Aguiar, 2024) argues, contemporary digital aesthetics merge affect and rationality, producing “technological affectivity,” where machines become symbols of emotional advancement. This poster reproduces that logic: AI becomes not just a tool but a metaphor for modern leadership, signaling that a technologically adaptive candidate is aligned with the aspirations of a digitally native population.

From a Barthesian perspective, this constitutes a process of myth-making in which the sign “Gemoy” (as a culturally circulating term associated with cuteness and harmlessness) is elevated into a second-order signification that naturalizes a specific political narrative. In the Indonesian context, “gemoy” is not merely an aesthetic label

but resonates with broader popular culture practices such as playful campaign dances, humorous public performances, and informal modes of political engagement that frame leaders as emotionally approachable and socially relatable. Through this process, the campaign transforms political authority into a familiar and culturally embedded figure, where leadership is no longer associated with distance or rigidity, but with warmth, humor, and everyday social intimacy.

From a framing perspective, media outlets such as Kompas and ANTARA positioned this visual within discourses of modernization and generational renewal. For instance, selected news reports and online articles from Kompas and ANTARA covering the 2024 campaign period explicitly described the use of AI-generated “Gemoy” visuals as a form of digital campaign innovation and an effort to engage younger, digitally oriented audiences (e.g., Kompas, 2024; ANTARA, 2024). Their coverage framed the aesthetic as a sign of campaign innovation and a creative adaptation to younger audiences. Yet, this modernization frame coexisted with cautionary narratives highlighting concerns about deepfake manipulation, authenticity, and the ethical ambiguity surrounding AI-enhanced political aesthetics. These concerns were reflected in opinion pieces and analytical reports discussing the risks of AI-driven political imagery, including issues of misinformation and ethical boundaries in campaign communication (Kompas, 2024; ANTARA, 2024). This dual framing echoes (Bianchi et al., 2025), who observed that public responses to AI-generated art oscillate between admiration for its novelty and anxiety about its artificiality.

Public comments demonstrated selective trust. Digital natives embraced the poster's clean, modern aesthetic and celebrated its meme-ability, noting that it made politics feel culturally relevant and entertaining. Meanwhile, older and more politically conservative voters questioned whether such imagery trivialized politics or masked deeper issues behind algorithmic charm. This intergenerational split mirrors (Kholifatul Fauziah, 2021), who found that Indonesian audiences interpret visual branding through hybrid evaluative lenses balancing appreciation for creativity with normative judgments shaped by socio-political values.

Overall, the second visual illustrates how AI-generated political branding operates at the intersection of aesthetics, emotion, and ideology. It demonstrates that AI-driven visuals not only serve as campaign materials but also shape a broader symbolic landscape in which political identity is packaged as digital culture. This "GEMOY 2" poster exemplifies how political meaning is increasingly produced through memetic and aesthetic logics, positioning AI as a central actor in constructing affective political engagement.



Figure 3. Close-Up Billboard of Gemoy 2 Campaign

Source: <https://share.google/images/cMyie9s748CNjFEzi>

The third visual's showing a close-up of the AI characters with enlarged facial expressions, amplifies emotional intimacy. Denotatively, it depicts exaggerated smiles, softened contours, and bright eyes visual markers characteristic of contemporary AI-enhanced imagery. The hyper-polished surface and symmetric composition draw the viewer's attention directly to emotional cues, effectively minimizing contextual distraction. Connotatively, this aesthetic arrangement evokes safety, familiarity, and intergenerational harmony. The plump, gentle representation of Prabowo placed beside the youthful portrayal of Gibran generates a carefully constructed balance between wisdom and energy, reinforcing a father-son dynamic visually even before it is interpreted symbolically.

The "Gemoy" visual strategy can also be interpreted through the lens of the Uncanny Valley. Unlike hyper-realistic deepfakes that risk triggering discomfort, the campaign deliberately adopts a cartoon-like aesthetic that avoids perceptual ambiguity. In this case, the visuals are clearly positioned within a stylized and non-realistic representational mode, characterized by simplified forms, exaggerated facial features, and smooth textures typical of AI-generated illustration. By positioning the visuals within a clearly artificial register, the images remain emotionally appealing without demanding belief in their realism. Rather than making claims about audience cognitive responses, this analysis focuses on how such visual choices semiotically signal approachability and reduce associations with realism or factual representation. This suggests that the persuasive dimension of the imagery

lies in its symbolic construction and aesthetic coding, rather than in its ability to simulate reality.

At the mythic level, the image constructs the archetype of familial succession, not as a literal reference to biological or formal political lineage, but as a symbolic representation of leadership continuity framed through a father-son like relational imagery, translating political hierarchy into naturalized affection. Through Barthes' concept of myth, this visual communicates the idea that political continuity is akin to familial caretaking where authority appears to be "inherited" through emotional proximity and generational harmony rather than explicitly contested through political processes. The emotional clarity embedded in AI-generated images contributes to this effect; the faces appear intentionally softened and idealized, mirroring findings that AI-created visuals often amplify perceived warmth and emotional salience (Boediman, 2025). Such compositional strategies are consistent with broader global patterns in digital political aesthetics, where synthetic imagery is used to reinforce symbols of cultural continuity and paternal protection.

This emotional intensification also aligns with cognitive research showing that viewers process AI-generated political images differently from conventional photographs. An EEG study by (Conrad et al., 2025) demonstrates that audiences exhibit heightened neural sensitivity to affective cues such as amplified warmth, exaggerated friendliness, and hyper-realistic facial features when evaluating AI-generated political visuals. Their findings reveal that these synthetic cues

trigger stronger affect-based processing, which in turn increases perceived trustworthiness and emotional immediacy, even when viewers are aware that the image is artificially produced. In this context, the close-up format used in the Prabowo–Gibran image operates as a persuasion mechanism: by magnifying facial expressions and emotional clarity, the image deepens viewer engagement and subtly guides interpretations of the candidates as approachable, sincere, and harmonious. What appears as aesthetic softness is therefore not incidental but an affective strategy embedded within AI's generative architecture to heighten emotional resonance.

The visual phenomenon of "Gemoy" can be linked to the concept of the Uncanny Valley, which is a condition where representations resemble humans but do not fully meet the criteria of authenticity (Song et al., 2026). In relation to the mythic layer discussed above, this stylization contributes to the construction of "Gemoy" as a symbolic form that prioritizes emotional familiarity over realism. In the context of the campaign, the visuals appear to adopt a cartoon style with polished and enhanced proportions. This strategy suggests that the images are not intended to be interpreted as realistic depictions, but as symbolic representations that reinforce the constructed political persona. Thus, AI-generated imagery becomes visually acceptable not only in relation to factual reality, but also in relation to its stylized and algorithmically mediated form. Rather than asserting direct psychological effects, this analysis indicates that such visual coding aligns with the broader mythic construction

of approachable and emotionally resonant leadership embedded in the “Gemoy” aesthetic.

Media framing of this image positioned it as part of a successful digital “rebranding” strategy, especially in reshaping Prabowo’s previously rigid public persona into a more endearing, fatherly figure. Yet alternative commentaries warned of synthetic populism, where affective visuality conceals elite interests beneath emotionally engineered imagery. This critique aligns with (Williamson & Prybutok, 2024) analysis of AI deception, which emphasizes how seemingly harmless or aesthetically pleasing AI-generated visuals can fabricate “false affective realities” that subtly reshape political interpretation. Their study highlights that AI-generated imagery often leverages emotional exaggeration to create an illusion of authenticity, making viewers feel connected to figures who are, in fact, algorithmically constructed. Such framings underscore the broader tension between innovation and manipulation in AI-mediated campaigning, where emotional appeal and synthetic intimacy risk overshadowing substantive political evaluation.

Public discourse on X (Twitter) and Instagram mirrored this ambivalence. Supporters described the image as “wholesome,” circulating it as meme-like digital affection, while critics dismissed it as “political fanart” or “algorithmic propaganda.” This divergence is consistent with scoping-review findings that deepfake-style visuals accelerate both trust and distrust, depending on viewers’ ideological predispositions and media literacy (Boediman, 2025). The humorous

reinterpretation of the image by online users exemplifies (Entman, 1993) moral evaluation frame, wherein citizens actively reassign meaning to political symbols not merely receiving messages, but reshaping them through irony, skepticism, and digital playfulness.

Integrating Semiotics and Framing AI: Where AI as a Semiotic Actor

Across all three visuals, Barthes’ semiotic levels and Entman’s framing functions intersect to illustrate how AI reshapes the symbolic foundations of political communication. Denotatively, AI reduces political imagery into simplified, highly legible forms that facilitate rapid public decoding. Connotatively, it injects emotional softness like warmth, cuteness, intimacy that reorients perceptions of political leadership toward affect-driven engagement. At the mythic level, AI-generated visuals legitimize political power by invoking narratives of youthfulness, familial harmony, and technological progress. Media and public framing then reinforce or challenge these meanings by defining AI imagery as either creative innovation or deceptive manipulation, and by morally evaluating its appropriateness in electoral contexts.

These patterns are further reflected in media discussions and expert commentaries, which frequently highlight the distinction between AI-generated imagery and conventional photographic representation. Several analytical reports and public commentaries note that, unlike photography which is indexically tied to real events, AI-generated visuals are perceived as synthetic constructions

that do not require direct reference to actual occurrences (e.g., media analyses and expert discussions cited during the campaign period). AI and traditional photography differ in their relationship to reality. Photography refers to events and occurrences that actually happened, whereas AI-generated imagery appears to operate through visual production processes that simulate plausibility without necessarily referencing specific historical events. This distinction was also reflected in public and media discourse, where commentators debated the credibility, authenticity, and interpretive status of AI-generated political images (Sarhan & Hegelich, 2023). By situating this comparison within observed discourse rather than abstract generalization, the analysis demonstrates how differences between AI and photography are not only technical but also socially constructed through public interpretation.

This interplay between semiotic construction and framing circulation demonstrates that AI now operates as a communicative actor rather than a passive technological instrument in political branding. AI-generated visuals *perform* political affect by transforming ideological cues strength, continuity, modernity into aestheticized emotional codes that resonate across platform cultures. This dynamic aligns with findings by (Bak Herrie et al., 2025), who argue that generative AI participates in the democratization of political aesthetics by enabling new forms of citizen–algorithm collaboration in crafting visual narratives. Their study shows that AI image creation not only expands who can produce political imagery, but also embeds

algorithmic logics into the very aesthetics through which citizenship and leadership are imagined.

Similarly, (Laba, 2025) highlights that visual generative AI co-produces sociotechnical futures by embedding competing cultural narratives within its outputs, making AI a central actor in shaping how societies envision authority, progress, and collective identity. AI-generated visuals thus serve as semiotic agents that do not merely reflect political messages but actively construct and circulate them through emotionally charged, hyper-polished imagery.

The notion of AI as a “semiotic actor” must also account for the biases embedded within its generative systems. Most AI image-generation models, such as Midjourney or DALL·E, are trained on globally distributed datasets that are heavily influenced by Western visual culture. This raises critical questions regarding the cultural specificity of the resulting imagery.

The “Gemoy” aesthetic, with its smooth textures, rounded facial proportions, and Pixar-like rendering, reflects a globalized algorithmic style rather than a distinctly Indonesian visual tradition. As a result, political identity is not only constructed but also standardized, potentially flattening local cultural nuances into a universally recognizable yet culturally diluted aesthetic. This suggests that AI does not merely produce images but also mediates cultural representation, embedding global visual norms into local political narratives.

In Indonesia’s context, this dynamic materializes through the “Gemoy” phenomenon, where AI-produced

portrayals of Prabowo and Gibran transform political authority into a digestible, emotionally consumable digital persona. Through algorithmic aestheticization and semiotic softening, leadership becomes not only visualized but *felt*—evoking affection, humor, and symbolic familiarity among voters. The convergence of semiotic encoding, media framing, and public re-framing points to a cultural shift in which political meaning is co-authored by humans, platforms, and algorithms. AI thus emerges as a semiotic and discursive actor within Indonesia’s electoral media ecology, shaping how voters interpret, imagine, and emotionally relate to political identity.

Why These Meaning Emerged

These symbolic patterns emerge from broader transformations in Indonesia’s digital political culture, where virality, algorithmic visibility, and aesthetic immediacy now shape how citizens encounter political messages. In this environment, visual cues increasingly overshadow verbal persuasion as audiences particularly younger voters engage with political content through affect, humor, and platform-native aesthetics. AI-generated “Gemoy” imagery capitalizes on this shift by prioritizing emotional identification over ideological depth, translating political authority into relatable digital personas designed for rapid circulation and shareability. (Bak Herrie et al., 2025) observe that generative AI democratizes political aesthetics by enabling new forms of collaborative, participatory visual production, making affective politics more accessible and more easily reproduced across user networks.

At the same time, the ambivalent reception of these images—oscillating between admiration and skepticism—reflects the tension inherent in AI-mediated communication. (Conrad et al., 2025) demonstrate that AI-generated political images trigger heightened affective processing, prompting viewers to respond emotionally even when aware of the image’s synthetic nature. This heightened emotional resonance helps explain why AI visuals feel persuasive, yet also unsettling. (Williamson & Prybutok, 2024) further argue that AI-generated imagery produces “false affective realities,” creating emotional authenticity that is perceptually convincing but ontologically unstable. Such manufactured intimacy invites trust while simultaneously activating suspicion about manipulation, especially in high-stakes political contexts.

This dual response is particularly visible in Indonesia’s digital publics, where viewers alternated between celebrating the charm of gemoyness and critiquing it as a strategic camouflage that masks power dynamics through cuteness. (Boediman, 2025) analysis of deepfake-mediated communication similarly shows that synthetic visuals often intensify public anxieties around authenticity and political manipulation. (Laba, 2025) reinforces this view by noting that generative AI embeds conflicting sociotechnical narratives hope, innovation, deception, and control into the images it produces. Consequently, the meanings embedded in Prabowo–Gibran’s AI visuals emerged not only from aesthetic design but from the cultural, technological, and emotional tensions surrounding AI itself. These tensions reveal

why AI-generated political images can simultaneously enchant, entertain, and provoke distrust, functioning as symbols of both democratic creativity and potential ideological obfuscation.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The combined semiotic and framing analyses demonstrate that AI-generated aesthetics represent a paradigm shift in political branding, where meaning is co-produced by symbolic design, algorithmic logic, and affective interpretation. Theoretically, the findings refine existing understandings of political authenticity by showing that sincerity is increasingly constructed through *visual affect* rather than ideological discourse. AI operates not merely as a medium but as a semiotic actor that encodes emotional warmth, relational intimacy, and symbolic continuity into political imagery. This aligns with (Bak Herrie et al., 2025), who argue that generative AI reshapes civic imagination by embedding algorithmic aesthetics into political identity formation. It also corroborates (Laba, 2025) observation that visual generative AI embeds competing sociotechnical narratives hope, modernity, and ambiguity within its representations, positioning AI as a discursive force that reorganizes how societies visualize leadership.

Furthermore, the study contributes to theoretical debates on synthetic affect and political persuasion by demonstrating how AI-generated images blur the boundary between authentic and engineered emotion. (Conrad et al., 2025) show that AI visuals activate heightened affective responses even when their artificiality is recognized, which helps explain why emotional legitimacy

within AI-mediated campaigns derives from visual cues such as softness, cuteness, and facial exaggeration. Complementing this, (Williamson & Prybutok, 2024) demonstrate how these digitally crafted emotional cues can construct “false affective realities,” reinforcing the notion that AI aesthetics can naturalize ideology through affective simulation.

Empirically, this study positions Indonesia's 2024 Presidential Election as a significant case of algorithmic visual populism, wherein leadership performance is mediated through cuteness, intimacy, and synthetic warmth rather than ideological articulation. The “Gemoy” aesthetics exemplify how political branding adapts to platform-native cultures dominated by humor, remixability, and affective circulation. These dynamics extend prior research on digital politics by demonstrating that AI-generated visuals not only accelerate virality but also reconfigure the emotional grammar through which voters evaluate candidates. Consistent with (Boediman, 2025) findings on deepfake-induced shifts in trust, the results show that AI imagery simultaneously fosters affection and suspicion, illustrating the deep ambivalence within Indonesian digital publics toward synthetic political communication.

Overall, the study reveals that the meanings embedded in AI-generated political visuals emerge from the convergence of cultural expectations, technological affordances, and affective interpretation. This reinforces the broader implication that AI has become a semiotic and sociopolitical agent: shaping, mediating, and destabilizing how political identity is imagined in contemporary elections.

Conclusion

This study concludes that artificial intelligence has emerged as a semiotic and communicative actor within Indonesia's 2024 Presidential Election, reshaping political branding through algorithmically produced emotional and symbolic representation. By integrating Barthes' semiotic framework with Entman's framing theory, the analysis demonstrates that AI-generated visuals construct meaning across denotative, connotative, and mythic layers while circulating through media and public discourse that alternately legitimize and contest their authenticity. The findings reveal that AI aesthetics do more than illustrate political identity they *perform* it, generating synthetic intimacy, emotional legitimacy, and ideological naturalization through visual design.

These conclusions underscore a broader shift in digital politics: leadership is increasingly interpreted through affective cues embedded in algorithmic imagery, altering public expectations of sincerity, modernity, and credibility. As evidenced in the "Gemoy" phenomenon, AI-mediated political communication blends cultural humor, emotional softening, and sociotechnical narratives of progress, producing a hybrid form of algorithmic populism unique to contemporary electoral environments. At the same time, ambivalent public responses highlight persistent anxieties regarding manipulation, authenticity, and the epistemic instability introduced by synthetic visuals.

Future research should examine how algorithmic aesthetics influence long-term voter trust, political judgement, and democratic participation, especially

as generative AI becomes structurally embedded in campaign practices across emerging democracies. Such inquiries are essential for understanding not only how AI represents political actors, but how it actively reshapes the symbolic, emotional, and epistemic foundations of democratic communication.

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