

The Fashion Semiotics of 2024 Indonesian President and Vice President Candidates in Mass Media

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Abstract

Fashion can function as a political communication tool by shaping public perceptions of political figures through mass media. This study systematically investigates the fashion semiotics of all presidential and vice-presidential candidates featured in Indonesian mass media during the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election campaign. It aims to examine how clothing choices communicate implicit meanings and function as visual strategies for constructing political identities, populist images, and connections with voters. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study explores the diversity of fashion representations and interprets their meanings through descriptive analysis. Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and a visual culture framework are applied to analyze the denotative, connotative, and ideological meanings embedded in candidates' clothing, including styles, colors, and visual appearances. The study focuses comparatively on all three presidential and vice presidential candidate pairs to identify similarities and differences in their use of fashion as political communication. Its novelty lies in moving beyond previous candidate-specific studies by providing a comparative semiotic analysis of fashion across all competing candidate pairs in the 2024 election. The study contributes to study on fashion, semiotics, visual culture, and political communication by demonstrating how clothing operates as a strategic visual resource in contemporary populist electoral discourse.

Keywords: fashion semiotics; Indonesian presidential election; political communication; political populism; visual culture.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Politicians often employ fashion to construct an empathetic public persona by aligning their appearance with the values and aspirations of their target audiences to gain political support. As a form of visual expression situated within art and design, fashion can function as a medium for communicating ideas, emotions, identities, and social positions. In political contexts, clothing therefore extends beyond its aesthetic and functional purposes and can become a visual strategy for constructing how political figures are perceived by the public. In Indonesia, this phenomenon can be observed in Joko Widodo's use of checkered shirts during his campaign for the Jakarta gubernatorial election, which contributed to his representation as a leader willing to engage directly with ordinary citizens. In the international context, Justin Trudeau, the former Prime Minister of Canada, has frequently worn socks featuring distinctive colors and patterns at formal events and political forums, demonstrating how elements of personal appearance can communicate an image in which professionalism does not necessarily imply visual monotony.

Within the realm of politics, fashion can consequently function as a political strategy by shaping public perceptions of political figures at a personal and affective level. The cultivation of personal connections between political leaders and ordinary citizens can be understood in relation to populism. Conceptually, populism prioritizes the interests of common people over those of established elites and is characterized by distrust of elites and the preference for greater power in the hands of the public, often through direct democratic mechanisms or charismatic leadership (O'Neil et al., 2013). Budiman (2021) further describes populism as a fleeting yet significant protest signal that democracy cannot afford to ignore. Although populism is commonly discussed in relation to political ideology and institutional arrangements, it can also operate through visual and communicative strategies that allow political figures to appear accessible, familiar, and connected to ordinary citizens. Populism has consequently been conceptualized in various ways, including as an ideology, a set of

ideas, discourse, political style, communication style, and political strategy (Blassnig, 2021). Clothing is particularly relevant to political communication because it can communicate social status, authority, identity, and power. As Coghlan and Hackett (2023) argue, clothing is closely associated with power, particularly in the case of uniforms. The uniforms of judges and police officers, for example, are readily recognized as symbols of institutional authority. Although political campaign clothing does not necessarily constitute an institutional uniform, repeated and consistent use of particular garments, colors, and styles can similarly produce recognizable visual associations. Fashion can therefore operate as a form of social code through which individuals communicate social signals and through which audiences interpret identities and positions.



Figure 1. General elections commission released 2024 Indonesian presidential election ballot design
Source: CNN Indonesia, 2023



Figure 2. Mr. Ganjar Pranowo, Mr. Prabowo Subianto and Mr. Anies Baswedan in the first round of presidential debate
Source: Kompas, 2023

The 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election provides a significant context in which to examine the relationship between fashion, political communication, and populist representation. During the presidential and vice-presidential campaign, all three candidate pairs adopted distinctive clothing selections and fashion styles that were repeatedly featured across mass media platforms, including television news, online articles, YouTube Live, and Instagram. Candidate pair No. 1, Anies Baswedan and Muhaimin Iskandar, for instance, appeared in official campaign photographs wearing formal black suits, white shirts, and black *peci*, a cap commonly worn by Muslim men in Indonesia. Candidate pair No. 2, Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming, were prominently associated with semi-formal light blue shirts in official campaign photographs and various campaign activities. Meanwhile, candidate pair No. 3, Ganjar Pranowo and Mahfud M.D., frequently appeared in black-and-white semi-formal shirts. The recurring presentation of these visual elements suggests that the candidates' clothing cannot be regarded merely as arbitrary or meaningless outfits. Rather, their fashion choices potentially communicate implicit social, cultural, and political meanings. From their repeated appearances across mass media, it can be inferred that each candidate pair strategically constructed a recognizable visual

identity during the presidential campaign. The tacit meanings embedded in their clothing selections can therefore be examined through a semiotic approach. Semiotics, as the study of signs and signification, provides an important framework for understanding how art, design, and fashion communicate meaning and influence public perception. Fashion and clothing constitute non-verbal signs whose meanings may vary according to particular social, cultural, and political contexts. Consequently, visual representations of fashion circulated through mass media can be systematically interpreted by examining the relationships between their visible characteristics and the meanings assigned to them. Such a semiotic approach also considers the social effects produced through processes of meaning-making.

In this research, Roland Barthes' semiotic theory is employed to analyze the fashion styles and clothing of all presidential and vice-presidential candidates. Barthes' framework enables the analysis of the relationships between signifier and signified, as well as the denotative and connotative meanings embedded in clothing and appearance. At the denotative level, the analysis identifies the visible elements of candidates' fashion, such as garments, colors, accessories, and styles. At the connotative level, these elements are interpreted in relation to the cultural and political meanings they may communicate. The specific use of clothing and appearance in mass media is thus treated as a form of political communication through which Barthesian semiotics can disclose symbolic meanings associated with candidates' fashion choices.

Mass media is particularly important in this process because it facilitates the dissemination and repetition of candidates' visual representations and consequently contributes to the formation of public perceptions. Political identities can be constructed and reinforced through visual representations appearing in campaign advertisements, news coverage, and social media. The present research therefore incorporates a visual culture framework alongside Barthesian semiotics. Visual culture examines the production, circulation, and consumption of visual images within cultural contexts and considers their role in shaping meaning, identity, and social relations (Dikovitskaya, 2017). This perspective is relevant because the meaning of political fashion is not produced solely by clothing itself, but also through its circulation within media environments and its interpretation within particular social and cultural contexts. Accordingly, this research focuses on systematically investigating the fashion semiotics of all Indonesian presidential and vice-presidential candidates as featured in mass media during the 2024 campaign period. A qualitative methodological approach is employed because the study seeks to explore the diversity of fashion representations and communicate interpretations and findings descriptively. The analysis focuses on how clothing functions as a form of political communication and how its visual characteristics generate denotative, connotative, and broader ideological meanings within the context of electoral politics.

Although previous studies have examined fashion as political communication and the visual branding of individual political figures, the comparative examination of fashion across all three presidential–vice-presidential candidate pairs in the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election remains limited, particularly from a semiotic perspective. The novelty of this research therefore lies in its comparative semiotic analysis of the fashion choices and visual representations of all three candidate pairs, moving beyond candidate-specific analyses. Rather than treating fashion merely as an element of political branding, this study examines clothing as a visual and symbolic resource through which political identities, values, and relationships with voters can be constructed and communicated. By comparatively identifying the meanings, symbols, and ideological messages embedded in the candidates' clothing, the study addresses the intersection of fashion, semiotics, visual culture, political communication, and populism. It is important to note that this research is conducted from an objective, academic, and analytical perspective, and does not seek to promote one candidate pair over another or advocate for any political view or party. Instead, it seeks to understand how fashion operates as a visual language within contemporary Indonesian electoral discourse and how clothing choices can function as a strategic element in the construction and communication of political identities.

This study is limited to fashion and clothing that candidates consistently selected for their public appearances and media representations, rather than clothing received as gifts from external parties or institutions. This distinction is necessary because candidates may receive unsolicited clothing items, such as the *tenun ikat* scarves from East Sumba presented to all three candidate pairs by the Election Commission (*Komisi Pemilihan Umum*). Such items do not necessarily reflect the candidates' own visual or political choices and are therefore excluded from the analysis.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have established a relationship between fashion, political communication, and political branding in Indonesia, although comparative research examining fashion across competing presidential

candidates remains relatively limited. Terang, Erawan, and Jayant (2023), in “Politics Through Fashion: Jokowi, Semiotics, and the Age of Social Media,” examine how Joko Widodo’s political power was communicated through fashion across five significant moments, ranging from the 2019 political campaign to his subsequent period of leadership. Their study demonstrates that clothing operates beyond its aesthetic function and can serve as a symbolic resource through which political identity, authority, and public image are constructed. Research on political branding during the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election similarly demonstrates the strategic use of visual symbols in constructing political identities. In “*Political Branding Prabowo–Gibran dalam Pemilu Presiden 2024: Analisa Interaksionisme Simbolik di Media Sosial Instagram dan Twitter*,” Susetyawidianta and Geraldly (2024) examine the construction of Prabowo–Gibran’s political image through a symbolic interactionism approach to Instagram and Twitter. Their analysis identifies several symbolic strategies, including the use of light blue as a dominant costume color, the popularization of the term “*gemoy*” (cute) and the incorporation of artificial intelligence technology into campaign imagery. These findings demonstrate how visual and cultural symbols can be strategically mobilized to construct political identities and establish affective connections with voter segments. Similarly, Atala and Muhammad Prakoso Aji (2024), in “Political Analysis of Prabowo Subianto's Branding Through Instagram Social Media @Prabowo: Case Study of the 2024 Election Campaign,” analyze Prabowo’s political branding strategy through Instagram during the 2024 presidential election campaign. Their study examines how visual communication was employed to construct a positive political image of Prabowo, particularly among Generation Z. While this research provides important insights into the relationship between social media, visual representation, and political branding, its focus remains on Prabowo’s individual political image rather than comparatively examining the visual strategies of competing presidential candidates. The relationship between fashion and political communication has also been examined from a semiotic perspective. In “*Fashion Sebagai Komunikasi: Analisa Semiotika Roland Barthes pada Fashion Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono (AHY) dalam Pemilihan Gubernur Jakarta*,” Rahmawati (2020) analyzes Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono’s clothing choices during the 2016 Jakarta gubernatorial election. Using Roland Barthes’ semiotic framework, the study positions fashion as a medium of political communication through which candidates symbolically interact with the public during electoral campaigns. This research demonstrates the relevance of semiotics for interpreting clothing as a system of signs capable of communicating political meanings beyond immediate visual or functional characteristics.

Taken together, these studies indicate that fashion, clothing, visual symbols, and media imagery contribute to the construction and communication of political identity. However, existing research predominantly examines individual political figures, particularly Joko Widodo, Prabowo Subianto, or Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono and analyzes their visual strategies independently. Although previous research has examined the clothing choices and visual branding of Prabowo–Gibran during the 2024 election, a comparative semiotic analysis encompassing all three presidential–vice-presidential candidate pairs remains underexplored. This gap is particularly relevant because comparative analysis can reveal not only how individual candidates construct political identities, but also how different political actors employ fashion differently within the same electoral and media environment. Accordingly, this study comparatively examines the clothing choices and visual representations of the three presidential and vice-presidential candidate pairs competing in the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election. Rather than treating fashion merely as an element of political branding, the study applies a semiotic perspective to identify and compare the meanings, symbols, and ideological messages embedded in candidates’ clothing choices. This comparative approach enables the research to move beyond candidate-specific analyses and examine fashion as a visual language through which political identities, values, and relationships with voters are constructed.

2.1. Visual Culture and Mass Media

The exploration of meaning in visual materials is central to the study of visual culture (Rose, 2016). Visual culture is a multidisciplinary field concerned with visual images as central to processes of meaning-making within particular cultural contexts (Dikovitskaya, 2017). A visual culture perspective is particularly relevant to political fashion because it reconnects visual phenomena with everyday social life and lived realities (Tedjoworo, 2026). Moreover, the study of visual culture cannot be separated from questions of values and politics, as visual representations participate in broader cultural and ideological processes (Heywood, 2017). Visual culture or visual studies regards the visual image as a focal point in the processes through which meaning is produced within cultural contexts. It is inherently interdisciplinary, emerging through encounters among fields such as art history, anthropology, film studies, linguistics, comparative literature, cultural studies,

and poststructuralist theory (Heywood, 2017). This interdisciplinary character makes visual culture particularly appropriate for examining political fashion, which simultaneously involves visual representation, cultural identity, communication, media circulation, and political meaning.

Sturken and Cartwright (2001) emphasize that visual culture is inherently multifaceted and difficult to define because the meaning of visual objects is not intrinsic to the objects themselves. Rather, meaning is constructed through social practices and interactions. Meaning consequently emerges through the interaction between viewers' interpretations, the visual characteristics of images, and the contexts in which those images are produced and consumed. The methodological implications of this perspective include attention to meaning production, the often absent or hypothetical nature of audiences, the role of the critic or researcher as an interpreter, and the critical examination of the relationships and articulations through which visual culture operates (Bal, 2003). This perspective underscores the importance of examining the broader social relationships and cultural contexts through which visual materials acquire significance. Such considerations are particularly important when fashion is mediated through mass media. Political figures are not encountered by voters exclusively through direct interaction; their appearances are repeatedly mediated through campaign advertisements, television news, online news coverage, live broadcasts, and social media. Mass media therefore plays a critical role in disseminating visual representations and shaping public perceptions. Through visual framing, selection, repetition, and circulation, media representations can construct and reinforce political identities. The visual presentation of political figures during campaigns can influence how their identities and ideologies are perceived by the electorate (Shome, 2023). The broader role of mass media in shaping political culture is similarly significant. Media functions as an important agent of public opinion and political socialization and contributes to the construction of political identities through narratives concerning historical events and cultural identities (Sheikh, 2023). Beyond reflecting existing societal perspectives, media can also influence the socio-economic and political dimensions of a country (Ponomarenko et al., 2017). This relationship between media and politics is further reflected in the concept of mediatization, whereby political institutions, actors, and practices increasingly adapt to the operational logics of mass media. Within this environment, visual representations do not simply reflect political identities but actively participate in their construction by framing ideologies, shaping perceptions, and influencing public opinion.

Visual semiotic analysis provides a means of decoding these meanings. Such analysis can identify how visual images communicate messages and interact with audiences, as demonstrated in studies of fashion advertising. This analytical perspective can also be extended to political contexts, where mass media scrutinizes presidential candidates through representations of their policies, personal lives, personalities, and public characters (Pratiwi, 2023). Fashion is particularly relevant because it functions as a visual and semiotic signifier through which identity and societal values can be communicated (Hasyim & Arafah, 2023; Yang, 2023). Its visual dimension therefore extends beyond clothing as a material object and constitutes a complex system of symbols and meanings. Fashion can consequently be understood within visual culture as a system of visual codes through which cultural values become visible. When these codes are repeatedly circulated through mass media, they become part of the visual representation of political figures. Thus, mass media coverage of presidential candidates can shape public perceptions not only through explicit political statements but also through visual elements such as clothing, appearance, color, and styling (Pratiwi, 2023). This relationship provides an important theoretical foundation for examining presidential and vice-presidential fashion as a component of contemporary political communication.

2.2. Populism and Political Communication

Populism is a complex and contested political phenomenon. According to O'Neil et al. (2013), populism prioritizes the interests of common people over those of established elites, frequently challenging the legitimacy of expert opinion. It is characterized by distrust of elites and a preference for greater political power in the hands of the public, often through direct democratic mechanisms or charismatic leadership. Mai (2024), citing Daniel F. Pilario, observes that populist governments may achieve rapid popularity through compelling rhetoric alongside physical coercion. Such approaches can rely on a Manichaean worldview that divides political reality into opposing forces of good and evil, positioning "the people" against an allegedly corrupt elite (Pilario & Franklin, 2022). Budiman (2021), meanwhile, characterizes populism as a fleeting yet significant protest signal that democracy cannot afford to ignore. Beyond its ideological dimension, populism is closely associated with communication strategies through which political actors construct relationships with the public. Ernst et al. (2019) emphasize that analyzing populist communication is important for understanding the emergence and development of populist politics. Populist communication incorporates distinctive

messages and stylistic elements that shape how political actors engage with audiences (Blassnig, 2021). It encompasses both communicative content and style rather than focusing exclusively on the political actors producing the messages (Klinger & Koc-Michalska, 2022). Importantly, this communication is no longer confined to traditional mass media. Social networking sites have become significant environments in which stylistic and contextual factors contribute to the resonance of populist messages (Schmuck & Hameleers, 2019).

The expansion of online media has consequently facilitated changes in the ways populist actors legitimize themselves and represent political relationships with the public (Groshek & Engelbert, 2012). Populist communication involves not only explicit political messages but also affective communication and the strategic articulation of grievances through media practices (KhosraviNik, 2018). Populist actors may employ narratives, symbols, and myths to generate emotional connections with voters and construct a sense of belonging (Lacatus, 2023). This performative dimension is important for understanding how populist communication enters mainstream political discourse and how it shapes democratic politics (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013). These characteristics suggest that populist communication should not be examined exclusively through verbal rhetoric or political programs. The construction of proximity between political leaders and “the people” can also be communicated through visual and performative practices. Political appearance, including clothing and fashion, can therefore contribute to the affective and symbolic dimensions of political communication. In this context, fashion provides an additional visual channel through which political actors can communicate accessibility, familiarity, social affiliation, authority, or distinction.

2.3. Fashion as Political and Populist Communication

The relationship between populism and fashion can be understood through fashion’s dual function as both a cultural and communicative phenomenon. Through clothing, individuals communicate their identities as social and cultural beings while simultaneously interpreting messages originating from their social environments. Fashion therefore does not merely express individual preferences; it participates in the formation and maintenance of social relationships. Barnard (1996) argues that fashion enables individuals to communicate ideas, shared group values, taste, and mood, while functioning as a form of communication continuously produced and reproduced within society. Fashion also performs the dual social functions of socialization and differentiation (Budianto et al., 2024). These characteristics make fashion particularly relevant to political communication. Clothing can visually position a political figure in relation to particular social groups, cultural values, or notions of everyday life. By adopting recognizable garments, colors, styles, or levels of formality, political actors may construct visual proximity with particular audiences while simultaneously differentiating themselves from political competitors. In this sense, fashion can contribute to the construction of political identity at an affective and symbolic level. The connection between fashion and populism is particularly significant because populist politics frequently seeks to establish an apparent proximity between political leaders and ordinary citizens. Fashion can participate in this process by making political figures visually familiar, approachable, culturally recognizable, or representative of particular social groups. The strategic use of clothing may therefore function as a form of political communication through which abstract political identities are translated into visible and emotionally accessible representations.

However, the meaning of political fashion cannot be assumed solely by the clothing themselves. Clothing acquires meaning through its cultural context, its association with particular social groups, its repeated use, and its circulation through media. A particular color, garment, or style may therefore communicate different meanings depending on the political context in which it appears. Semiotic analysis is consequently necessary to examine how these visual signs produce denotative, connotative, and ideological meanings. Within the context of the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election, the distinctive fashion styles adopted by the three presidential–vice-presidential candidate pairs provide an opportunity to examine how political identities are visually constructed within the same electoral environment. A comparative semiotic analysis can reveal how different candidates employ fashion to communicate different forms of identity, social proximity, cultural affiliation, and political values. It also enables the analysis to move beyond the assumption that fashion is merely an accessory to political branding and instead consider clothing as an active component of political discourse.

Accordingly, this study positions fashion at the intersection of semiotics, visual culture, mass media, political communication, and populism. By comparatively examining the fashion representations of all three presidential and vice presidential candidate pairs, the study seeks to identify how clothing operates as a visual language and how its meanings are constructed through media circulation. This approach addresses a gap in

existing research, which has predominantly examined individual political figures or candidate-specific branding strategies, by investigating the fashion semiotics of all competing candidate pairs within a single national electoral context.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to systematically examine the fashion semiotics of Indonesian presidential and vice-presidential candidates as represented in mass media during the 2024 Presidential Election campaign. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative methodology seeks to discover and describe narratively what particular people do in their everyday lives and what their actions mean to them. It prioritizes the description and narration of perceptions, experiences, and meanings rather than their measurement and communicates findings primarily through descriptive accounts (Kumar, 2019). Qualitative research emphasizes contextual understanding and interpretive accounts of phenomena. This orientation is appropriate for the present study because fashion operates as a visual and cultural system whose meanings are dependent upon social, political, and cultural contexts. The study therefore does not seek to quantify the frequency or popularity of clothing styles, but to interpret the meanings communicated through candidates' fashion choices and their representations in mass media.

To enhance the validity and credibility of interpretation, this study also employs triangulation. Triangulation involves the use of multiple methods, theoretical perspectives, and/or data sources to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon and to validate interpretations through the convergence of evidence from different sources (Denzin, 2017). In qualitative research, triangulation can strengthen the credibility of findings by allowing a phenomenon to be examined from complementary analytical perspectives rather than relying on a single interpretive framework. This research specifically employs theory triangulation, incorporating three complementary theoretical perspectives: Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, populism theory, and visual culture theory. Barthes' semiotic theory provides the principal framework for identifying and interpreting the denotative, connotative, and ideological meanings embedded in clothing. Populism theory provides a political framework for interpreting how fashion may contribute to the construction of proximity, accessibility, and symbolic relationships between political figures and ordinary citizens. Visual culture theory situates these signs within the broader processes of image production, circulation, and interpretation in mass media. The combination of these perspectives enables the study to examine fashion simultaneously as a system of signs, a political communication strategy, and a visual-cultural practice.

3.1. Barthesian Semiotic Framework

This research utilizes the semiotic framework developed by Roland Barthes. Semiotics, or semiology, concerns the interpretation of signs, sign systems, and their meanings. More broadly, semiotics examines signs embedded in human, natural, and machine-based communication and consider not only the signs themselves but also their functions and effects. The term derives from the Greek '*semeion*', referring to a sign, and is concerned with how signs acquire significance within social contexts. Barthes developed and extended Saussure's structuralist conception of the sign into a two-tiered system of meaning. The first level, denotation, refers to the literal or explicit meaning of a sign, whereas the second level, connotation, concerns the implicit, associative, and culturally informed meanings attached to that sign (Ong, 2020). These levels are interconnected because connotative meaning builds upon denotative meaning; however, the secondary level can exert a dominant influence over the interpretation of the primary signification (Monticelli, 2016). Barthesian semiotics has consequently been applied to distinguish between denotative meaning, connotative or cultural meaning, and myth, understood as a system through which ideological meanings become naturalized through signs (Halim et al., 2024). According to Barthes (1991), ordinary cultural artifacts and objects can function as myths by producing and naturalizing dominant ideas concerning concepts such as power and culture.

The Barthesian framework is particularly relevant to fashion because fashion constitutes a semiotic phenomenon through which dynamic social structures become visible (Datillo, 2023). The meanings communicated by clothing are not determined exclusively by its technological or material construction but are also shaped by its visual appearance and the ideas associated with it. Although clothing is an integral part of everyday life, its communicative potential has historically received less attention than its aesthetic and functional dimensions. Kaiser (1998) emphasizes that clothing semiotics should be recognized as a valuable resource for understanding communication. Similarly, understanding Barthes' contribution to fashion requires

consideration of his broader semiotic framework and its relationship to fashion as a language (Honeycutt, 2021). Drawing upon Saussure's concept of the sign, consisting of the signifier and signified, Barthes developed a framework for understanding fashion as a system of communication (Saussure, 1959; Barthes, 1983). His approach, often described in relation to the "poetics of clothing," conceptualizes fashion through the relationship between the garment as signifier, its culturally situated meaning as signified, and the sign produced through their articulation. Dressing consequently functions as a form of communication that can address questions of identity and circumstance, including who is wearing a garment and the social, temporal, and spatial circumstances in which it is worn. Through its rhetoric, fashion communicates relationships between garments and their surrounding cultural contexts, thereby revealing underlying meanings and social functions (Honeycutt, 2021).

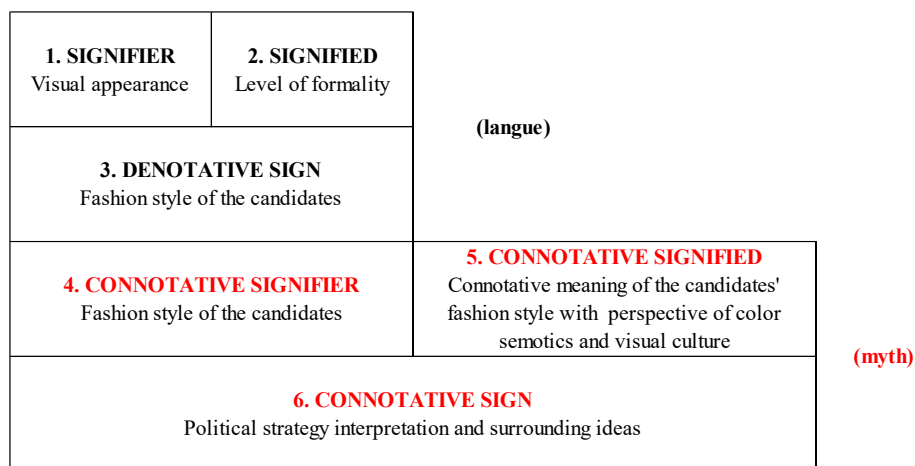


Figure 3. Barthesian Semiotic Framework

The relationship between clothing and power further reinforces the relevance of this framework to political fashion. Historically, clothing has been used to distinguish between the powerful and the less powerful (Owyong, 2009). Barthes (1983) argues that the semiotic significance of clothing is not determined solely by its material composition but is also shaped by its visual and linguistic dimensions. He further identifies three structures through which clothing can be analyzed in relation to language: the technological structure, referring to the actual garment and its material form; the iconic structure, referring to the visual depiction of clothing; and the verbal structure, referring to descriptions of clothing through language or words (Owyong, 2009). Accordingly, the meaning of clothing derives not only from its physical characteristics but also from the symbolic and verbal associations through which it is represented and perceived. This distinction is particularly important for the present research because the object of analysis is not only the physical clothing worn by political candidates but also its representation in mass media. Clothes may acquire additional meanings when it is photographed, broadcast, captioned, described, repeatedly circulated, or positioned within a particular political context. The analysis therefore considers both the visible characteristics of candidates' clothing and the broader symbolic meanings generated through their media representation. Barthesian semiotics is consequently used to disclose how fashion choices operate as signs within political communication.

Based on the Barthesian framework, the analysis considers the relationship between visible clothing elements and the meanings constructed around them. At the denotative level, the analysis identifies observable characteristics such as garments, colors, accessories, patterns, and levels of formality. At the connotative level, these elements are interpreted in relation to cultural, social, and political associations. At the level of myth or ideology, the analysis considers how repeated associations may naturalize broader political meanings, such as accessibility, authority, nationalism, religious identity, modernity, or proximity to ordinary citizens. Color is given particular attention because color preference can influence decision-making across various contexts, including product selection, clothing choices, and fashion trends (Passarelli-de-Lima et al., 2025). Color preference may emerge through biological-evolutionary, emotional, ecological, and affective processes. Passarelli-de-Lima et al. (2025), in a study involving electronic sales websites in Japan, Germany, and Canada, found that blue tended to be highly appreciated across the three cultural contexts. They suggest that blue can generate positive associations with harmony, suitability, and visual appeal, potentially increasing users' satisfaction and trust in website content. Such findings indicate that color can carry associative meanings that are relevant to the interpretation of political clothing. Color is also recognized as an important instrument in

marketing because it can influence perceptions of brand personality and likability (Kanuri et al., 2024; Labrecque, 2020). Although the present study does not examine commercial branding, the principle is relevant to political branding because political candidates similarly employ recurring visual elements to establish recognizable identities. Consequently, color is analyzed in this study as one of the visual components through which political candidates may construct symbolic associations and communicate particular identities to audiences.

3.2. Document Analysis

Document analysis is employed as the principal data collection and analytical strategy for examining the visual representations of candidates in mass media. Document analysis is a qualitative research method involving the systematic examination and interpretation of documents to obtain insights relevant to specific research questions (Linton et al., 2019). Fischer (2006) defines document analysis as a systematic process for examining and evaluating both printed and electronic materials. Similar to other qualitative methods, it requires rigorous examination and interpretation to derive meaningful insights, develop understanding, and generate empirical knowledge (Armstrong, 2022). Document analysis can also be combined with other qualitative approaches as a triangulation strategy. In this regard, Denzin (2017) conceptualizes triangulation as the combination of multiple methodologies for investigating the same phenomenon.

In this study, the term document provides visual and electronic media materials that represent the presidential and vice-presidential candidates during the 2024 campaign period. These include campaign photographs, television news representations, online news articles containing candidate imagery, YouTube Live or broadcast materials, and publicly accessible Instagram content. These materials are treated as visual documents because they contain representations of candidates' clothing and appearance that can be systematically examined through semiotic analysis. Document analysis provides an appropriate method for this research because the study focuses on fashion as represented and circulated through mass media rather than on candidates' private intentions or audiences' individual responses. The method allows the researcher to examine recurring visual representations across different media sources and identify patterns in clothing, color, styling, and appearance. Furthermore, document analysis can provide meaning and interpretive voice to the materials under investigation (Fitria, 2023). Its applicability across diverse research contexts further demonstrates its methodological flexibility, including the analysis of policy documents and other forms of documentary evidence (Cardno, 2019).

Moreover, document analysis is conducted systematically by identifying relevant media representations, documenting the candidates' visible fashion characteristics, organizing the visual data according to candidate pair and media source, and interpreting the identified signs using Barthesian semiotics. The analysis subsequently considers the cultural and political meanings of these signs through the visual culture and populism frameworks. This procedure enables the study to move from the observable characteristics of clothing toward their connotative and ideological meanings within the broader context of the 2024 electoral campaign. The use of multiple media sources also supports the triangulation of evidence. Rather than relying on a single photograph or media platform, representations from different forms of mass media are compared to identify recurring fashion elements and meanings. Convergence across different sources can strengthen the credibility of the interpretation, while differences between representations can reveal how the meaning of political fashion may vary according to media context. Thus, document analysis and theory triangulation work together to provide a more comprehensive interpretation of fashion as a form of political communication.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research applies Roland Barthes' semiological framework to examine the fashion representations of the Indonesian presidential and vice-presidential candidates in mass media during the 2024 election campaign. In the first level of signification, the candidates' fashion functions as a denotative sign. The signifier refers to the observable visual characteristics of clothing, including garments, colors, accessories, and headwear, while the signified refers to the degree of formality represented by the appearance, ranging from casual and semi formal to formal attire. Following Barthes' framework, the resulting denotative sign subsequently functions as the signifier at the second level of signification. At this level, the visual characteristics of fashion acquire connotative meanings through cultural associations, color symbolism, and visual conventions. These connotations then contribute to the construction of broader political meanings and ideological associations. This analytical process is consistent with Barthes' distinction between denotation, connotation, and myth, in

which ordinary cultural objects can acquire broader ideological meanings through processes of signification (Barthes, 1991; Ong, 2020; Monticelli, 2016; Halim et al., 2024). Fashion is particularly appropriate for this form of analysis because clothing operates as a semiotic phenomenon through which social structures, identities, and cultural values become visible (Datillo, 2023). As Honeycutt (2021) explains, Barthes conceptualizes clothing as a system of communication in which garments acquire meaning through their relationship with cultural contexts. Therefore, the analysis in this research does not regard clothing as merely a material object, but as a visual sign whose meaning is produced through appearance, cultural associations, and media representation.

The findings indicate that all three candidate pairs employed recognizable and relatively consistent fashion styles throughout the campaign period. Candidate pair number 1, Anies Baswedan and Muhaimin Iskandar, predominantly appeared in formal black suits, white shirts, and black *peci*. Candidate pair number 2, Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming, were strongly associated with semi formal light blue shirts. Candidate pair number 3, Ganjar Pranowo and Mahfud M.D., predominantly appeared in black and white semi formal clothing, with Mahfud M.D. also wearing a black *peci* in several representations. These recurring visual patterns suggest that the candidates' clothing was not an incidental aspect of campaign appearance. Rather, the consistency of their visual presentation indicates the construction of recognizable political identities through fashion.

The findings are particularly significant when considered within visual culture theory. Visual images do not possess meaning independently of the social and cultural contexts in which they are produced, circulated, and consumed (Dikovitskaya, 2017; Rose, 2016). The repeated circulation of candidates' appearances through television, online news, Instagram, and other mass media platforms consequently transformed individual clothing choices into publicly recognizable visual codes. Political identity is therefore constructed not only through verbal statements and political programs, but also through repeated visual representations (Shome, 2023). The following analysis examines how these visual codes operated differently across the three candidate pairs.

4.1. Candidate Pair Number 1: Formality, Authority, and Traditional Values

Candidate pair number 1, Anies Baswedan and Muhaimin Iskandar, predominantly appeared in formal black suits, white shirts, and black *peci*. At the denotative level, the signifiers consist of the black suit, white shirt, and black *peci*, while the signified is formal attire. The combination produces a denotative sign characterized by a formal and classical visual appearance. The consistent use of the black *peci* adds a culturally recognizable Indonesian element to an otherwise conventional formal political suit. At the connotative level, the formal black suit may communicate authority, seriousness, professionalism, and institutional legitimacy. Black has long been associated with elegance and authority, while white may communicate simplicity, purity, and a sense of renewal. These interpretations should not be understood as universal meanings of color, since color symbolism is culturally and contextually dependent. Nevertheless, color can influence perception and preference through affective and associative processes (Passarelli de Lima et al., 2025). The combination of black and white therefore creates a visually restrained appearance in which authority and seriousness are balanced with associations of simplicity and renewal. The black *peci* produces an additional layer of cultural signification. Unlike the suit, which is strongly associated with modern formal political institutions, the *peci* functions as a culturally recognizable Indonesian form of headwear and carries associations with Indonesian social and religious traditions. Its inclusion therefore creates an intersection between formal political authority and cultural familiarity. In Barthesian terms, the *peci* does not merely signify an item of clothing. Its repeated appearance within the political image contributes to a broader cultural sign in which political leadership is associated with conservative Indonesian identity and religious tradition.

The resulting connotative meaning of candidate pair number 1 can therefore be interpreted as an image of educated and established Indonesian leadership characterized by formality, authority, and relatively conservative cultural positioning. Their clothing creates visual distance from casual everyday appearance while simultaneously establishing cultural familiarity through the *peci*. The overall visual strategy consequently communicates a form of leadership that emphasizes institutional seriousness, education, traditional values, and religious cultural identity. This interpretation is also consistent with Owyong's (2009) observation that clothing has historically participated in distinctions between powerful and less powerful social positions. The formal suit can function as a visual marker of authority, while the *peci* modifies that authority by grounding it within a recognizable Indonesian cultural context. Thus, the political meaning of clothing does

not emerge from any individual garment alone, but from the combination of formal structure, color, cultural symbolism, and repeated media representation.

1 	1. SIGNIFIER black suit white shirt black <i>peci</i>	2. SIGNIFIED formal attire	(langue)	
	3. DENOTATIVE SIGN Formal and classic fashion style in neutral color, with traditional Indonesian <i>black peci</i>			
	4. CONNOTATIVE SIGNIFIER Formal and classic fashion style in neutral color, with both of them wear traditional Indonesian <i>black peci</i>	5. CONNOTATIVE SIGNIFIED Formal and classic fashion style: Indonesian elites, educated people, conservative Black: elegance, authority White: simplicity, purity, new beginning Black <i>peci</i> : Indonesian traditional and religious values		(myth)
	6. CONNOTATIVE SIGN Representing educated Indonesian elites that will lead in very conservative approach, education-oriented and also highly considering Indonesian traditional and religious values			

Figure 4. The Semiotic Analysis of Candidate Pair Number 1

4.2. Candidate Pair Number 2: Visual Distinction, Youthfulness, and Accessibility

Candidate number 2, Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming, demonstrated the most distinctive visual strategy among the three candidate pairs through their consistent use of light blue shirts in semi formal settings. At the denotative level, the principal signifier is the light blue shirt, while the signified is semi formal attire. The resulting denotative sign subsequently functions as the connotative signifier at the second level of Barthesian signification. The most significant characteristic of this visual strategy is the prominence of light blue. While candidate pairs number 1 and number 3 predominantly employed neutral combinations of black and white, candidate pair number 2 adopted a brighter and more immediately recognizable color. This distinction enhanced their visual differentiation within the competitive campaign environment. The color therefore functioned not merely as an aesthetic preference, but also as a visual identity marker. At the connotative level, light blue can be associated with calmness, peacefulness, reliability, and openness. Research on color preference has demonstrated that blue can generate positive associations across different cultural contexts, including perceptions of harmony, suitability, and visual appeal (Passarelli de Lima et al., 2025). Color is also an important component of strategic identity construction because it can influence perceptions of personality and likability (Kanuri et al., 2024; Labrecque, 2020). Within the context of political fashion, these associations provide a basis for interpreting light blue as a sign that contributes to an image of calmness, accessibility, and trustworthiness.

The semi formal character of clothing further reinforces these associations. Compared with the highly formal appearance of candidate pair number 1, the clothing of candidate pair number 2 reduced the visual distance between the candidates and the everyday appearance of ordinary citizens. The combination of semi formal clothing and light blue consequently produced a visual identity that can be interpreted as more relaxed, approachable, youthful, and contemporary. From a visual culture perspective, the significance of light blue also emerges through its contrast with the visual environment of the campaign. A color becomes more visually prominent when it differs from the dominant visual codes surrounding it. In this case, the relatively restrained black and white palettes of the other candidate pairs made the light blue appearance of candidate number 2 more immediately recognizable, while simultaneously contributing to a fresher and more youthful visual impression.

This strategy is particularly relevant in relation to younger voters. Susetyawidianta and Gerald (2024) and Atala and Aji (2024) identify the importance of visual and symbolic strategies in constructing Prabowo and Gibran's youthful political branding, particularly in relation to Generation Z. The presence of Gibran Rakabuming as the youngest candidate among the presidential and vice presidential candidates also reduced the generational distance between the candidate pair and younger voters. In this context, the combination of a youthful candidate, semi formal clothing, and a distinctive light blue visual identity can be interpreted as contributing to a political image that appears more contemporary and accessible to younger audiences. From the perspective of political communication, this visual distinction can therefore be interpreted as a strategic attempt to construct familiarity and accessibility. Populist communication does not rely exclusively on explicit

political rhetoric but also employs stylistic and affective elements to establish relationships between political figures and their audiences (Blassnig, 2021; Klinger & Koc-Michalska, 2022). Populist communication may operate through symbols and narratives that generate emotional connections and strengthen a sense of identification with voters (KhosraviNik, 2018; Lacatus, 2023). The light blue shirt can consequently be interpreted as part of a broader visual strategy that communicates political accessibility, social proximity, and contemporary identity.

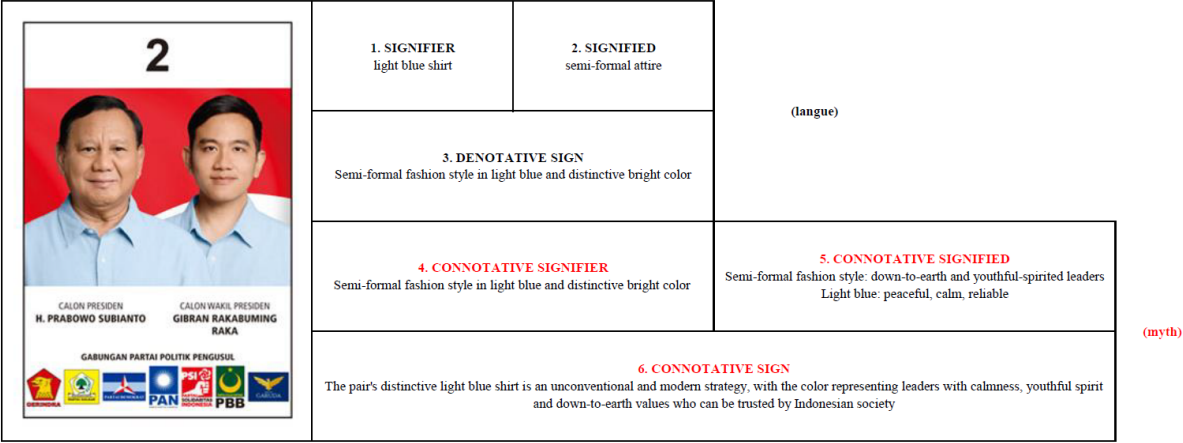


Figure 5. The Semiotic Analysis of Candidate Pair Number 2

It is important, however, to distinguish between the semiotic interpretation of a campaign strategy and its actual political effectiveness. Prabowo and Gibran subsequently won the 2024 election, but the findings of this study do not establish that their use of light blue clothing caused or directly contributed to their electoral victory. Election outcomes are influenced by numerous political, social, economic, organizational, and contextual factors. The significance of the light blue clothing within this research therefore lies in its function as a distinctive visual communication strategy. Its consistent appearance across mass media demonstrates how fashion can attract visual attention, strengthen political differentiation, and contribute to the construction of a recognizable political identity within a mediated campaign environment.

4.3. Candidate Pair Number 3: Moderation, Familiarity, and Simplicity

Candidate pair number 3, Ganjar Pranowo and Mahfud M.D., predominantly appeared in black and white semi formal clothing. At the denotative level, the principal signifiers are the black and white shirts, while the signified is semi formal attire. In several representations, Mahfud M.D. also wore a black *peci*, introducing an additional cultural and religious signifier. The black and white combination creates a visually neutral appearance while retaining the symbolic associations of both colors. Black may signify authority, seriousness, and elegance, while white may signify simplicity, purity, and renewal. The combination therefore produces a visual balance between authority, simplicity and accessibility. Unlike candidate pair number 1, whose highly formal clothing emphasizes institutional authority, candidate pair number 3 used semi formal attire that reduced the degree of visual formality. At the same time, the use of black and white retained relatively conventional visual identity.

The presence of the *peci* adds another layer of cultural meaning. Similar to candidate pair number 1, the *peci* associates political appearance with Indonesian cultural and religious values. However, because the overall clothing style is less formal, the cultural symbolism is combined with a more approachable visual presentation. The resulting connotation can therefore be interpreted as a form of leadership that maintains traditional cultural references while presenting itself as relatively accessible and people-oriented. Candidate pair number 3 consequently occupies an intermediate visual position between candidate pair number 1 and candidate pair number 2. Their appearance is less formal and rigid than the formal black suit and *peci* combination of candidate pair number 1, yet less visually distinctive and contemporary than the light blue semi formal style of candidate pair number 2. This middle position produces a visual identity characterized by moderation, familiarity, cultural continuity, and relative accessibility. The distinction between the three candidate pairs demonstrates that political fashion does not communicate through isolated clothing items alone. Meaning emerges through combinations of color, formality, cultural symbols, repetition, and comparison with

competing visual identities. This finding supports the visual culture perspective that meaning is produced through relationships among images, viewers, cultural contexts, and processes of circulation rather than being inherently contained within the visual object itself (Dikovitskaya, 2017; Rose, 2016).

3  CALON PRESIDEN H. GANJAR PRANOWO, S.H., M.L.P. CALON WAKIL PRESIDEN Prof. Dr. H. M. MAHFUD MD S.H., M.L.P. GABUNGAN PARTAI POLITIK PENGUSUL 	1. SIGNIFIER black and white shirt	2. SIGNIFIED semi-formal attire	(langue)	
	3. DENOTATIVE SIGN Semi-formal fashion style in neutral color, with one of them wearing black peci			
	4. CONNOTATIVE SIGNIFIER Semi-formal fashion style in neutral color, with one of them wearing black peci	5. CONNOTATIVE SIGNIFIED Semi-formal fashion style: down-to-earth and youthful-spirited leaders with conservative values Black: elegance, authority, neutral White: simplicity, purity, new beginning Black peci: Indonesian traditional and religious values		(myth)
	6. CONNOTATIVE SIGN Their fashion style represents Indonesian leaders with down-to-earth and youthful character with moderate conservative values, people-oriented and fairly considering Indonesian traditional and religious values			

Figure 6. The Semiotic Analysis of Candidate Pair Number 3

4.4. Comparative Semiotic Interpretation

The comparative findings demonstrate three distinct visual strategies. Candidate pair number 1 constructed the most formal and culturally traditional appearance through black suits, white shirts, and black *peci*. Candidate pair number 2 adopted the most visually distinctive appearance through light blue semi formal shirts. Candidate pair number 3 occupied a middle position through black and white semi formal clothing combined, in some representations, with the black *peci*. The distinction can be summarized through three dominant visual orientations. Candidate pair number 1 emphasized formality and traditional authority. Candidate pair number 2 emphasized visual distinction, accessibility, and youthful identity. Candidate pair number 3 emphasize moderation, familiarity, and simplicity. These orientations do not indicate the actual personality, competence, or leadership capacity of the candidates. Rather, they represent the meanings that can be constructed through their visual appearances.

The comparison also demonstrates the importance of visual distinction in political communication. When competing candidates operate within the same media environment, visual identity becomes a means of differentiation. Candidate pair number 1 relied primarily on formal structure and culturally recognizable symbols. Candidate pair number 3 used a similar black and white visual vocabulary but moderated it through semi formal clothing. Candidate pair number 2, by contrast, employed light blue as a distinctive visual marker that separated their appearance from the more neutral palettes of the other candidates. This distinction is important because political branding is not constructed only through verbal slogans or policy statements. Political communication also involves style, affect, symbols, and visual repetition (Ernst et al., 2019; Blassnig, 2021). Mass media amplifies these visual elements by repeatedly presenting political figures through selected images and representations. Consequently, clothing can become part of the broader visual identity through which political candidates are recognized and interpreted by audiences. The findings further demonstrate that fashion can operate as a form of political communication without requiring explicit political messages. The clothing itself does not verbally state that a candidate is conservative, modern, accessible, authoritative, or people oriented. These meanings emerge through cultural associations and processes of interpretation. This is precisely the analytical value of Barthesian semiotics. The denotative appearance of clothing provides the first level of meaning, while connotation and myth reveal the cultural and ideological associations that become attached to that appearance (Barthes, 1983; Barthes, 1991; Ong, 2020).

From the perspective of populist communication, the findings suggest that fashion can contribute to the construction of symbolic proximity between political candidates and the public. Clothing can make political figures appear more formal and authoritative, or alternatively more familiar, relaxed, and accessible. This supports the broader understanding of populist communication as involving not only political content but also communicative style and affective strategies (Klinger & Koc-Michalska, 2022; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2019). Fashion consequently constitutes one component of the wider performative dimension of political communication described by Moffitt and Tormey (2013). The findings should nevertheless be interpreted as

an analysis of political representation rather than political reality. The study does not claim that the candidates actually possessed the personal qualities suggested by their clothing. For example, the interpretation of light blue as communicating calmness or reliability concerns the cultural meaning potentially generated by the visual sign, rather than an empirical assessment of Prabowo and Gibran's actual trustworthiness. Similarly, interpreting formal clothing as signifying authority does not establish that the candidate possesses greater political authority. The distinction between represented meaning and actual political characteristics is essential to maintaining the analytical boundaries of semiotic research.

4.5. Fashion as a Strategic Political Resource

Overall, the findings indicate that fashion functioned as a strategic visual resource during the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election campaign. All three candidate pairs developed recognizable visual appearances, but they did so through different combinations of formality, color, and cultural symbolism. Candidate pair number 1 constructed an image emphasizing formal authority and traditional Indonesian and religious values. Candidate pair number 2 developed the most visually distinctive and contemporary identity through light blue semi formal clothing. Candidate pair number 3 constructed a moderate visual identity combining semi formal accessibility with black and white symbolism and elements of Indonesian cultural and religious identity. The case of candidate pair number 2 is particularly notable because their distinctive use of light blue created stronger visual differentiation within the campaign environment. Their subsequent electoral victory makes the relationship between fashion and political communication especially interesting. However, the study does not interpret the electoral outcome as evidence that fashion determined electoral success. Rather, the result demonstrates that fashion can form part of a broader political communication strategy through which candidates establish recognizable visual identities and compete for public attention. This interpretation is consistent with the understanding of fashion as a form of communication and social relation. Fashion enables individuals to communicate identity, group affiliation, values, taste, and mood while simultaneously participating in socialization and differentiation (Barnard, 1996; Budianto et al., 2024). In the political context, these functions become strategically relevant because candidates must simultaneously differentiate themselves from competitors and establish symbolic connections with voters.

Therefore, the findings suggest that political fashion should not be treated as a superficial or purely aesthetic component of electoral campaigns. Clothing operates as a visual language through which political identities are constructed, differentiated, and circulated. Its meaning emerges through the interaction of garment, color, cultural symbolism, media representation, and political context. The 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election demonstrates that these elements can be strategically organized to produce distinctive political images. Finally, this study does not seek to promote or legitimize any candidate, political party, policy, or leadership style. The analysis does not assess which candidate possessed the most effective policies, the highest leadership capacity, or the greatest degree of actual trustworthiness. Its purpose is limited to examining how the three candidate pairs constructed their mediated political appearances through fashion and how these appearances can be interpreted through Barthesian semiotics, visual culture, and populist communication. In this sense, the contribution of the study lies not in determining which fashion strategy was objectively superior, but in demonstrating how clothing functions as a significant semiotic resource within contemporary Indonesian political discourse.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that fashion functioned as a significant visual and semiotic resource in the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election campaign, through which all three presidential and vice presidential candidate pairs constructed distinctive political identities and communicated culturally embedded meanings through mass media. The comparative analysis using Roland Barthes' semiotics demonstrates that candidate pair number 1, Anies Baswedan and Muhaimin Iskandar, emphasized formal authority, education, and Indonesian religious and traditional values through black suits, white shirts, and black peci; candidate pair number 2, Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming, constructed a more distinctive, contemporary, accessible, and youthful image through consistent light blue semi formal clothing; while candidate pair number 3, Ganjar Pranowo and Mahfud M.D., occupied an moderate visual position by combining semi formal black and white clothing with elements of Indonesian cultural and religious identity. These findings demonstrate that clothing operates beyond aesthetic function as a form of political communication in which color, formality, cultural symbols, and repeated media representation contribute to the construction of political meaning and public

representation. The study further demonstrates the value of a comparative semiotic approach because examining all three candidate pairs simultaneously reveals differences in how fashion was strategically employed to establish political distinction, cultural familiarity, and symbolic proximity to voters. However, the findings do not establish that fashion directly determined electoral outcomes but rather indicate that fashion constituted one component of broader political communication and visual culture during the campaign. By positioning fashion as a semiotic and political resource, this study contributes to the intersection of fashion studies, visual culture, semiotics, and contemporary political communication in Indonesia.

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