Stylistic analysis of election campaign visuals in the secure and intensely competitive constituencies of the 2021 Sarawak State Election

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ABSTRACT

This study analysed election campaign visuals in the secure and intensely competitive constituencies of Kuching and Kota Samarahan during the 2021 Sarawak State Election. Using Crystal and Davy's (1969) framework of stylistic analysis and Benoit's (2017) functional theory of political campaign communication, 20 posters and 12 banners were analysed to examine their graphetic, typographical and textual features. Findings show that graphically, the campaign visuals in secure constituencies often used images to acclaim past achievements while those in intensely competitive constituencies reflected the electorate's dissatisfaction to attack. Typographically, the campaign visuals in the secure constituencies only used capitalisation whereas those in intensely competitive constituencies used capital letters, questions marks, and exclamation marks. Analysis of textual choices reveals the presence of explicit messages in phrasal form in the election posters and banners in both the secure and intensely competitive constituencies. Semantically, the ambiguous messages in the intensely competitive constituencies were personal, emotive, subjective, and ambiguous but those in secure constituencies were largely literal and declarative to reflect the confidence level of the political parties in winning the election based on their track record. The findings indicate that the intensity of the electoral fight is reflected in the visual and textual images of campaign visuals.

Keywords: Stylistic analysis, election posters, election banners, Sarawak, Malaysia
INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, election posters are considered more reliable than social media campaigns. A study by Sualman et al. (2008) on 1,049 registered voters in the Permatang Pauh constituency found that election posters are perceived the third most reliable form of media during elections, after candidate photographs and television coverage. Furthermore, the study highlighted that posters are the second most influential media type in determining election outcomes, only surpassed by campaign speeches. This underscores why political parties in Malaysia continue to use election banners and posters extensively during campaign seasons. For opposition parties, these posters and banners are particularly important since mainstream newspapers often give priority to the incumbent party.

Previous studies have shown that the posters for major and minor parties differ significantly. In this paper, opposition parties are considered minor parties, while ruling parties are viewed as major parties. Dumitrescu (2012) found that major parties use poster designs and messages that attract the electorate and signify their authority to expand their voter base. In contrast, minor party posters focus on providing information about their party and ideology to increase their support. Pătruț and Monalache (2013) noted that during Romania’s 2012 legislative campaign, most major party posters included details such as the candidate’s ballot position and number, photo, party name, logo, and slogan, while avoiding direct criticism of opposition parties. Bremmer’s (2012) analysis of the impact of visuals in European campaign posters revealed that the candidate’s image and details of issues helped attract the electorate, foster a positive opinion, and enhance the recall of a poster.

Combining the insights of Dumitrescu (2012) as well as Pătruț and Monalache (2013), it seems that major party posters often feature the candidate’s image, while minor party posters focus on issues. The primary goal of major party election posters is to familiarise the electorate with the visual symbols associated with the party (Whalen, 2012). Analysing election banners and posters provides insights into how propaganda is used to influence public sentiment and how messages are crafted for specific target groups (Seidman, 2008).

In Malaysia’s Parliamentary democracy, candidates who emerge victorious in elections will serve as the representative of the electorate (Abdul Latif & Oh, 2020). During elections, some constituencies are considered intensely contested or competitive, while others are viewed as safe. In this respect, there is a lack of research on election advertising content that takes these constituency categories into account. Studying the strategies used by parties and candidates is crucial as it reveals how parties with safe seats allocate their campaign efforts and resources to win in competitive constituencies. Additionally, it is important to investigate the tactics employed by parties and candidates when trying to flip their opponent’s safe seats, particularly if these seats are perceived as vulnerable.

Stylistic analysis is commonly used to examine election posters and banners (Awang Daud et al. 2018; Ezebube et al. 2019; Sharndama & Mohammed, 2013). Consistent with the findings of Dumitrescu (2012) as well as Pătruț and Monalache (2013), such analyses have shown that ruling parties tend to highlight their leaders using a wider variety of colours, photographs, font styles, and sizes more than opposition parties. Aman (2014) also found that governing parties often use clauses in their manifestos, while opposition parties use phrases. Additionally, ruling parties employ more personal pronouns, such as exclusive-we, inclusive-we, and I, to manage social interactions with the public. According to the functional theory of political campaign communication (Benoit, 2017), political
candidates must set themselves apart from their opponents and establish preferability through acclaiming, attacking, and defending as the electorate learns about candidate distinctions through political messages.

To better understand the 2021 Sarawak State election (SSE21) in Kuching and Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, this study employed stylistic analysis to examine a selection of election posters and banners. The study has two main objectives: (1) to compare the visual elements of election posters and banners in secure and intensely competitive constituencies, focusing on their graphical and typographical features, and (2) to evaluate the literary aspects of the acclaiming, attacking, and defending messages in these posters and banners, including their syntactic and semantic properties.

In this paper, we show that by combining the stylistic analysis of election banners with the functional theory of political campaign communication, the confidence level of political parties in winning an election can be predicted, evident in the use of punctuation marks, emotive language, ambiguous messages, and images of candidates to convey trustworthiness, credibility, and leadership, as opposed to images and messages that are used to highlight weaknesses of the opponent in hotly contested areas through attacking and defence strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Election campaign visuals

Election posters have been long used for propaganda purposes and persuasion in election campaigns (Popova, 2012). Silion (2006) sums up the three functions of election posters, which are to: (a) ensure the broadcasting of ideas, (b) elevate the party's image, and (c) persuade electors. According to Ansary (2000, as cited in Silion, 2006), election posters play a significant role in disseminating information and persuading the electorate to support a specific party or candidate. Dumitrescu's (2012) survey revealed that in some countries, election posters play a more crucial role to show the campaign strength of a party. According to Sasmayunita and Assiddiq (2021), election banners have significant influence by shaping the public perception of candidates, boosting specific individuals, and potentially undermining opposing figures. Thus, election posters and banners serve to communicate the party's overall campaign messages directly to voters (Russmann, 2011).

The success of election campaign visuals depends on the laws of memory. Raşcanu (2003) explained that individuals tend to overlook election posters initially. Upon subsequent viewings, they gradually become more attentive, although they may not fully engage with the content until the third exposure. By the fourth encounter, discussions about the messages may arise. Subsequently, they begin to form opinions, either agreeing or disagreeing with the communicated content. Ultimately, by the seventh stage, they are likely to reach a decision and become ready to vote.

Several studies argue that traditional media continues to play a crucial role in shaping election outcomes, despite the emergence of digital media (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016). During the 2014 Indian election campaign, posters and billboards remained the most crucial form of political communication across the country (Willnat et al., 2017). In Indonesia, election posters remain a prominent medium during political campaigns due to the limited reach of print, radio, and social media, which are unable to effectively engage a wider audience. As this exposure influences voting decisions, election posters continue to be favoured by many Indonesian candidates. In rural areas, election posters and banners are considered the primary channels for reaching the electorate, especially when access to the media is limited (Norris, 2000, as cited in Dumitrescu, 2009).
In Malaysia, election posters are considered more reliable than social media campaigns. Sualman et al.’s (2008) study found that election posters were identified as the third most trusted medium during elections, and ranks second in influencing election outcomes. This explains the popularity of roadside election banners and posters throughout the campaign season. Furthermore, the rigid government control and ownership of traditional media were found to provide limited coverage for the opposition before the elections (Hassim et al., 2020).

**Stylistic analysis**
Stylistic analysis is frequently employed when evaluating election posters and banners, offering valuable insights into the visual and textual elements that enhance their effectiveness in conveying political messages. In studying political campaign posters in Ilocos Norte, Philippine, Cristobal (2022) revealed that political posters are essential tools for visual communication, employing various colours, images, and text to attract electorate. His study highlighted the use of simple syntax and emotive language to make the text appealing and clear.

As for the 2017 Anambra State gubernatorial election in Nigeria, Ezebube et al. (2019) observed that the campaign posters featured vibrant colours and artistic graphics. They identified various phrases and slogans designed to highlight and communicate the visions and missions of the candidates. The indigenous language, Igbo, was employed as a strategy to reach the grassroots communities. The study concluded that posters are essential tools for communication during elections.

In Malaysia, Awang Daud et al. (2018) analysed the graphetic (visual), typographical, and textual features of posters from the 12th Sarawak State Election. They found that the ruling party introduced a new colour scheme and logo to create a fresh identity, while opposition parties used a range of colours that sometimes led to voter confusion. Both parties displayed candidate photos and party logos but opposition posters tended to use more capital letters for emphasis. The ruling party’s syntactic style was noted for its clarity and factual nature to communicate messages effectively (Awang Daud et al., 2018).

**Functional theory of political campaign communication**
The functional theory of political campaign communication (Benoit, 2017) provides a framework for analysing how political communication strategies are designed to achieve electoral success. This theory posits that political campaigns employ communication to serve three primary functions, that is, acclaiming, attacking, and defending. According to Borah (2016), these strategies aim to persuade the electorate and secure victory in elections. Benoit (2017) explained that during elections, the functional theory is based on several assumptions. One key assumption is that there must be some distinctions between candidates to give the electorate a reason to choose one contender over another. Additionally, candidates must create the impression that they are not only different from their opponents but preferable. The following explanation of the functional theory of political campaign communication is based on Benoit (2017).

Three functions collaborate in election messaging to convey the perception of desirability including acclaim, which highlights a candidate’s strengths; attack, which pinpoints weaknesses in opponents; and defence, which rebuts attacks from opponents. These functions operate across two main themes, namely policy and character. Policy includes past achievements (record in office), future plans (specific policy proposals or methods to achieve goals), and general objectives (overall aims). Character includes
personal traits (individual qualities), leadership capability (competence in governance), and ideals (principles or values).

The functional theory of political campaign communication emphasises that effective political campaigns strategically balance these functions to persuade electorate, shape public opinion, and ultimately, secure electoral success. It provides a framework for analysing how different communication tactics are employed to achieve these specific goals during electoral campaigns. Using stylistic analysis, this paper shows how candidates and parties from secure constituencies use acclaims focusing on past achievement, good records and future plans as well as attacks and defences in intensely competitive constituencies.

METHODOLOGY

The study focused on two research sites, specifically, Kuching, with a population of 711,500, and Kota Samarahan with 102,700. Kuching is an intensely competitive constituency, predominantly comprising a Chinese-majority electorate. Candidates from both the ruling coalition and opposition parties in Kuching were predominantly Chinese, and key constituencies include Padungan, Batu Lintang, Pending, and Kota Sentosa. In contrast, Kota Samarahan is considered a secure seat for Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), the leading political party in Sarawak, with a population mainly consisting of Malay and Melanau voters. Constituencies in Kota Samarahan include Satok, Demak Laut, Asa Jaya, and Muara Tuang.

The political landscape in the Sarawak state elections involves GPS, the main ruling coalition consisting of Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS), Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP), and Sarawak United People’s Party (SUPP). Opposition parties include the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Bumi Kenyalang (PBK), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), and Parti Sarawak Bersatu (PSB).

In this study, 20 posters and 12 banners displayed during the Sarawak State Election 2021 in Kuching and Kota Samarahan were analysed. The posters represent seven political parties: 10 from GPS, 2 from DAP, 2 from ASPIRASI, 2 from PKR, 2 from PSB, 1 from PBK, and 1 from AMANAH. The banners analysed were from three political parties: 6 from GPS, 4 from DAP, and 2 from ASPIRASI. Campaign visuals were presented in English, Mandarin, Iban, and the local Malay Sarawak dialect.

The analytical framework used in the study is Crystal and Davy’s (1969) framework on English language stylistics. It has been applied to analyse linguistic characteristics of political advertisements in various settings, including Nigeria (Sharndama & Mohammed, 2013) and Malaysia (Awang Daud et al., 2018), revealing differences in messaging between ruling and opposition parties’ election banners.

Crystal and Davy’s framework analyses style at three levels, which are graphetic features (size, colour, artistic elements), typographical features (punctuation, capitalisation), and textual features (syntax, lexical items, semantics). The syntactic analysis in this study includes evaluating emotive versus factual, figurative versus literal, phrasal versus full sentence, and declarative versus interrogative messages. Semantic analysis focuses on distinguishing between clear and ambiguous messages.

FINDINGS

Graphetic features include the use of size, colour, and the artistic effects of photographs and logos in the election campaign visuals. The analysis indicates differences in the use
of colour, logos, and artistic effects in campaign visuals in both secure and intensely competitive constituencies.

For instance, in the secure constituencies, campaign visuals utilised photos of past events to showcase the development that has taken place (Figure 1). Displaying photos of development serves as a strategy to remind the electorate of the achievements of the party, the candidates and their commitment to fulfil campaign promises. Establishing past accomplishments is crucial for building the party’s reputation as a capable representative of the electorate.

Figure 2 illustrates an election poster featuring the candidate’s photographs. In secure constituencies, certain posters included the premier’s image alongside those of the candidates, suggesting that Sarawak’s prosperity is due to the leadership of the GPS government and the premier. This also underscores the concept of teamwork rather than individual leadership.

**Figure 1.** A GPS candidate showcasing infrastructure development in the safe seat of Demak Laut

**Figure 2.** A GPS candidate announcing that a new road will soon be built in the safe seat of Asajaya
Conversely, in intensely competitive constituencies, campaign visuals often used images to reflect the electorate’s dissatisfaction. For instance, Figure 3 shows a poster featuring a man weighed down by a large bottle of cooking oil, symbolising the public’s hardships under the current government. It is crucial for opposition parties and candidates to provoke resentment towards the ruling coalition to shift public opinion. Similarly, Figure 4 depicts a man burdened by a large vegetable, sending the message that the GPS government has failed to adequately support the people, leading to the burden of rising prices for daily necessities.

**Figure 3.** Photo of a man burdened by a big bottle of cooking oil headlined “GPS GOVERNMENT FAILS, PRICE INCREASES, PEOPLE SUFFER! Help…” in the DAP campaign poster in Kota Sentosa

**Figure 4**: Photo of a man burdened by a big vegetable headlined “GPS GOVERNMENT FAILS, PRICE INCREASES, PEOPLE SUFFER! Help…” in the DAP campaign poster in Padungan
Based on the graphetic features, it is evident that campaign visuals from secure constituencies predominantly use an acclaiming strategy, highlighting strong leadership records and future plans. In contrast, opponents in intensely competitive constituencies employ an attacking strategy to influence voter opinion.

The level 2 stylistic analysis involves examining the utilisation of typographical elements within texts, encompassing capitalisation and punctuation. This analysis excludes commas, which were frequently used to link sentences rather than conjunctions.

Election campaign visuals in both secure and intensely competitive constituencies used capitalisation extensively. Visually, capitalised words stand out on the election campaign visual, as shown in Excerpts 1–2.

1. “WE SEE THE FUTURE WE SHARE” — (PSB Mambong)
2. REJECT POLITICS OF LIES AND DECEIT. ONLY GPS CAN DELIVER — (GPS Kota Sentosa)

Next, Excerpts 3 and 4 reveal a notable usage of question marks aimed at provoking the electorate to consider several issues. Employing question marks can instil scepticism regarding the opposing candidate, potentially influencing the electorate to view them as doubtful and unworthy of support. Excerpt 3 illustrates how DAP condemned SUPP by questioning their integrity. Conversely, GPS criticised DAP’s Chong Chien Jen for the opposition’s unfulfilled election pledges. The questions featured on election campaign visuals served to undermine the rival candidates.

3. Can SUPP speak out for you? — (DAP Padungan)
4. CCJ, where’s the promised RM2000 for each Sarawakian every year? — (GPS Padungan)

The analysis revealed that exclamation marks were more frequently used in the election campaign visuals of intensely competitive constituencies compared to those in the secure constituencies (Excerpts 5–6).

5. It’s time to change!!! — (DAP Pending)
6. I am SIH HUA TONG. I am NOT a POLITICAL FROG! — (GPS Padungan)

The exclamation marks used in the DAP banner (Excerpt 5) emphasise the force to move the electorate to a vote for DAP to change the government. Conversely, the exclamation mark by the GPS candidate (Except 6) highlights his personal trait as an honest politician. In intensely competitive constituencies, the presence of exclamation marks in campaign visuals adds a personal touch to the message, reflecting the use of emotional appeal to sway voters towards specific parties and candidates.

It is interesting to note that the typographical elements show that candidates in both secure and intensely competitive constituencies use capitalised letters as a part of their acclaiming strategy. However, the use of question marks and exclamation marks indicates an attacking strategy, which is also employed as a defensive tactic by the candidates.

The results for Level 3 of the stylistic analysis in Crystal and Davy’s (1969) framework are presented for lexical choice (emotive versus factual language; figurative versus literal language) and syntax (phrases versus complete sentences; declarative versus questions). The textual choices in the election campaign visuals in the secure and intensely competitive constituencies are different. In the secure constituencies, the textual choices
reflect feelings of harmony, as shown in Excerpts 7–8. The PKR poster (Excerpt 7) urged parents to support PKR for the sake of securing a brighter future for their children, while the GPS poster (Excerpt 8) emphasised the sense of community and belonging among voters in the Stakan constituency.

7. KITA BINA MASA DEPAN ANAK BANGSA YANG LEBIH BAIK (We build a better future for the next generation) — (PKR Satok)
8. Kita semua Stakan (We are all Stakan) — (GPS Stakan)

In contrast, the election campaign visuals in the intensely competitive constituencies portrayed the feeling of unhappiness, or even anger, as shown in Excerpts 9–10. The DAP posters (Excerpts 9 and 10) reflect the party’s strategy to provoke frustration among the electorate by highlighting the hardships suffered due to rising prices of household stuffs under the ruling government. Their message conveyed the struggle of the people in coping with the high cost of living under the current government. Consequently, the use of emotive language aimed to echo with the electorate’s emotions. These DAP posters aimed to develop resentment towards the ruling coalition, with the intention of provoking electorate to realign their support towards the opposition.

9. GPS kerajaan gagal, harga barang naik, rakyat susah (GPS government fails. Price increases, people suffer! Help…) — (DAP Kota Sentosa)
10. GPS people suffer, suffer, suffer. Become government everything up, up, up. (literal translation from Mandarin) — (DAP Pending)

Candidates in the secure and intensely competitive constituencies differed in their use of emotive language. Those in secure constituencies utilised an acclaiming strategy, whereas candidates in intensely competitive constituencies adopted an attacking strategy.

Next, the analysis of how factual information were highlighted in the election campaign visuals shows variations in the intentions behind its usage. Political parties carefully select and structure their campaign messages so that the electorate can feel and understand their political agenda. Excerpts 11–12 illustrate factual information presented in election campaign visuals within the secure constituencies.

11. SARAWAK DIUTAMAKAN, SARAWAK FIRST. SATOK FOR ALL. ALL FOR SATOK— (GPS Satok)
12. Terus memberi khidmat terbaik kepada rakyat (Continue giving the best service to the people) — (GPS Muara Tuang)

The facts presented in the election campaign visuals in the secure constituencies did not seem to urge the electorate to take a drastic action. Instead, the facts simply conveyed messages about the future plans of the political party. On the other hand, the election campaign visuals in the intensely competitive constituencies made a strong appeal to the electorate to do something radical based on facts. The presentation of factual information in a logical and rational manner could lend some advantages to the opposition parties to sway the electorate’s opinion as can be seen in Excerpts 13 and 14.

13. BN ruled 58 years
   PH (DAP) ruled 22 months
   ENOUGH
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VOTE PSB FOR CHANGE
KOTA SENTOSA
OUR HOME OUR RESPONSIBILITY— (PSB Kota Sentosa)

14. CORRUPT POLITICIAN MUST GO. GIVE WAY TO NEW GENERATION OF CLEAN YBS — (PKR Batu Lintang)

The messages clearly indicate that people were tired of the current ruling coalition. Opposition parties urged the electorate to change for a new government. The words “enough”, “change” “give way” and “clean YBs” were purposely selected to move the electorate. They presented facts that suggest that the new government would be able to save them from the predicament of the current situation. Although candidates in the intensely competitive constituencies highlighted their rivals’ records in governing the state, their intention is to attack. In contrast, candidates in the secure constituencies used an acclaiming strategy to convey factual messages.

A careful choice of words in the election campaign visuals is very important to persuade the electorate. Literal language was used in almost all the election campaign visuals, regardless of whether the election campaign visuals were displayed in the secure or intensely competitive constituencies. Literal language is easy to understand, and political parties understand the advantage of using literal language to reach the masses.

However, there is a difference in the use of figurative language. The analysis of lexical choices showed that none of the election campaign visuals in the secure constituencies used figurative language. Instead, figurative language was widely used in the intensely competitive constituencies. Excerpts 15–16 illustrate the tactic of indirectly attacking political parties by referring to something without directly stating the purpose. The words imply value judgment or feelings which the candidates hoped would be considered positive by the electorate. In the GPS banner, the politician used the words “political frog” on the election campaign visuals to express sarcasm towards politicians who switched allegiance (Excerpt 15). The candidate wanted the electorate to know that he was not like the politicians who jumped from one party to another for personal gain. The same sarcastic tactic was also used in a DAP banner where the party accused the ruling coalition of spending the people’s money lavishly (Except 16). Candidates in both types of constituencies used a defensive strategy in their figurative messages. It appears that candidates in the secure constituencies employed this tactic for personal reasons, aiming to defend themselves. Meanwhile, their rivals in intensely competitive constituencies used defensive tactics to protect the state.

15. I am SIH HUA TONG. I am not a POLITICAL FROG! — (GPS Padungan)
16. Don’t give GPS a Blank Cheque to squander our Money — (DAP Batu Kitang)

Next, the analysis of the usage of phrases versus sentences revealed that there are no obvious differences between the election campaign visuals in the secure and intensely competitive constituencies. Phrases and complete sentences were used because they are short and easy to be read.

There were more election campaign visuals with declarative sentences than questions. Declarative sentences were mostly used to convey the pledges of political candidates and parties to the electorate. Excerpts 17–18 are from posters of the opposition parties in the secure constituencies. Declarative sentences were used straightforwardly to express the parties’ agenda. For the opposition parties, the election provided a chance for them to challenge the ruling coalition’s manifesto. Using complete, clear, and direct forms can trigger the electorate to realise that the opposition party is proposing something new if the electorate chooses to change the government. Declaring a referendum is significant
as it is one of the ways to make a change. Moreover, declaration of pledges by candidates can persuade the electorate to change their current representative to new ones for the betterment of their constituency.

17. Defend the rights of Sarawakians
   Towards Sarawak Independence Referendum Ordinance — (ASPIRASI Kota Sentosa)

18. UNDILAH SAYA. KEPADA PENDUDUK DAN PENGUNDI N05 DEMAK LAUT…MARILAH BERSAMA-SAMA UNTUK MEMBERI KEPERCAYAAAN KEPADA WAKIL RAKYAT YANG BARU KALI INI. BERSAMA KHAIRULAHMAD HEBATKAN DEMAK LAUT— (VOTE FOR ME. TO THE N05 DEMAK LAUT CITIZENS AND VOTERS… LET’S STAND TOGETHER TO GIVE YOUR TRUST TO A NEW REPRESENTATIVE THIS TIME. TOGETHER WITH KHAIRULAHMAD TO MAKE DEMAK LAUT GREAT)” — (Independent candidate, Demak Laut)

On the other hand, it appears that questions were widely used in the election banners in the intensely competitive constituencies. These questions were used by political parties or candidates to attack their counterparts. Excerpt 19 shows that the current ruling coalition used interrogative language to attack Chong Chieng Jien (CJJ) in order to tarnish his image and destroy his reputation. Furthermore, the attacking strategy extended beyond targeting individual candidates. Instead of questioning a specific election candidate, interrogative language was also used to criticise a political party. In Excerpt 20, SUPP’s credibility was called into question, generating negative publicity and fostering distrust in the party. It is evident that interrogative messages are intended to attack candidates or parties. Both ruling and opposition parties used this strategy to expose their rivals’ weaknesses. However, the use of acclaiming strategies in declarative sentences by the candidates in the secure constituencies indicates that they were highlighting their strengths.

19. CCJ, WHERE IS THE PROMISED RM2000 FOR EACH SARAWAKIAN EVERY YEAR? — (GPS Padungan)
20. IT’S OBVIOUS. SUPP IS SCARED TO SPEAK. CAN SUPP SPEAK FOR YOU? — (DAP Padungan)

The last aspect of the textual analysis is focused on semantic analysis — comparing clear versus ambiguous meanings conveyed in the message of the election campaign visuals across the secure and intensely competitive constituencies. The analysis revealed a dominance of explicit messages constructed to be catchy and memorable. Excerpt 21 shows a clear message used in the poster of GPS candidate in Tupong, a secure constituency, which is “UNDILAH SARAWAK. Utamakan Sarawak. Sarawak First”. Written as an imperative, the poster instructs the electorate to vote GPS. The political party is indicated by the photo of the candidate although it is not explicitly stated in words. Political parties and candidates in the secure and intensely competitive constituencies aimed for messages that were easy to read and attention-grabbing.

Ambiguous messages in the election campaign visuals were only seen in the intensely competitive constituencies. Examples of the ambiguous messages are shown in Excerpt 21 (translation for Figure 5) and Excerpt 22 (translation for Figure 6).

21. A man who is looked down by a thousand men, still works like a cow — (literal translation from Mandarin) (GPS Batu Lintang)
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Figure 5. Figurative language used in the election poster by a GPS candidate in Batu Lintang

22. Sarawak contributes 95% to West Malaysia! Those 82 candidates which support West Malaysia are the cause of the problem!” (literal translation from Mandarin) — (ASPIRASI Batu Lintang)

Figure 6. Ambiguous message used in the election banner by a candidate from ASPIRASI in Batu Lintang

The GPS poster (Excerpt 21) sent a message that might not be easily understood by the people outside of Batu Lintang constituency because they might not catch the implied meaning of the candidate. Moreover, the context of the message could only be understood by people who knew the candidate personally, who claimed to be a hardworking person but not appreciated. The image of a ploughing cow signifies someone who is working hard for the people. Therefore, the electorate should make a wise decision and vote for him as he could do more for them than other political candidates.

Similarly, the banner by ASPIRASI (Excerpt 22) might not be clear to those who do not understand the political situation in regard to Sarawak and the federal government. The statement “Sarawak contributes 95% to West Malaysia! Those 82 candidates which
support West Malaysia are the cause of the problem!” appears to be written for those who know the political context regarding the Sarawak-West Malaysia divide. Because background information is needed to understand ambiguous messages, there were fewer election campaign visuals written in ambiguous language compared to many more written in clear language.

Candidates in the secure constituencies seem to have used ambiguous messages as a defensive strategy, intending to protect themselves from opponents’ attacks. Conversely, opposition parties in the intensely competitive constituencies used ambiguous messages to attack their rivals. However, the ambiguity of these messages might have also limited the electorate’s full understanding.

DISCUSSION

This study provides empirical evidence of the stylistic variations in language use in the election campaign visuals of secure and intensely competitive constituencies during the Sarawak State Election 2021.

In secure constituencies, candidates and parties employed an acclaiming strategy to win votes. They showcased achievements and future plans through visually appealing campaign materials, using a combination of colours, photos, text, and artistic effects to capture the electorate’s attention. For ruling parties, images of candidates with the premier convey trustworthiness, credibility, and leadership. Ezebube et al. (2019) noted that candidates’ photos suggest their friendly nature and readiness to serve the public. Additionally, the typographical analysis reveals that capitalisation was used by both ruling and opposition parties to emphasise the seriousness of issues, enhancing the acclaiming strategy. As Cristobal (2022) pointed out, capitalisation helps to make names and messages memorable for voters. Furthermore, emotive messages in campaign visuals evoke positive feelings, fostering a sense of harmony among the electorate. Candidates presented positively, with a formal appearance, are more likely to persuade electorate, as they are perceived as trustworthy leaders (Lirola, 2016). This is further supported by the use of factual language and declarative sentences in the ruling party’s visuals. The only defensive strategy observed is in their figurative messages, confirming that candidates in secure constituencies rely on acclaiming strategies based on their strong records and future plans.

In intensely competitive constituencies, candidates and parties also skilfully used colours, photos, text, and artistic effects. Sharndama and Ibrahim Mohammed (2013) reported that colourful posters and banners motivate and familiarise the electorate with political candidates. Conversely, opponents used images intended to evoke negative feelings towards the ruling party, such as photos depicting hardship to highlight issues like high cost of living. These images aimed to provoke dissatisfaction among the electorate. Mattes (2008) claimed that negative campaigning not only highlights opponents’ weaknesses but also ensures that messages resonate with targeted voter groups. The attacking strategy is evident through the use of capital letters, question marks, and exclamation marks, designed to capture attention and convince the electorate of the opponents’ ideologies and campaign missions.

In another study on election posters in an earlier Sarawak state election, Awang Daud et al. (2018) noted that various punctuation marks make messages appear more orally spontaneous. For this study, lexical and syntactical analyses reveal the dominant use of attacking strategies in these constituencies, with emotive and factual languages designed to criticise opponents. At the semantic level, ambiguous messages used by candidates were personal and subjective, aiming to provoke deeper, implied meanings that the electorate
must interpret. However, ambiguous messages risk being lost on an electorate that is unfamiliar with certain issues (Awang Daud et al., 2018). Despite this risk, candidates may believe their supporters will interpret these messages positively. This tactic was noted among ruling party candidates in competitive constituencies who used ambiguity to defend themselves.

In conclusion, political parties and candidates employ various stylistic elements to secure voter support. This study highlights clear differences in campaign visuals between ruling and opposition parties in secure and intensely competitive constituencies. The careful construction of visual elements, typography, and overall design ensures effective communication with the electorate. Holtz-Bacha and Johansson (2017) noted that parties invest in high-impact posters, strategically placing them to generate free media coverage. Ultimately, compelling election campaign visuals help candidates win tight contests. Incumbents or candidates from secure constituencies frequently employ an acclaiming strategy, while many candidates from opposition parties in intensely competitive constituencies opt for an attacking strategy.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights the crucial role of election campaign visuals as powerful tools of visual and non-verbal communication employed by political parties and candidates during election periods. Graphically, election posters and banners in both secure and intensely competitive constituencies were designed to be eye-catching, featuring a mix of vibrant colours, images, and texts. The use of different languages in the texts underscores the strategy of appealing to the electorate by communicating in their shared languages. For instance, Malay was used for Malay voters and Mandarin for Chinese voters, demonstrating a cultural engagement by political parties and candidates.

At the lexical level, the messages in the campaign visuals of both the secure and intensely competitive constituencies are characterised by short, precise, and concise phrases. These clear and direct messages were crafted to be memorable and easily retained by the electorate. Semantically, political candidates in the intensely competitive constituencies often used ambiguous language in their election posters and banners. This ambiguity could lead to unclear interpretations, which might either benefit or disadvantage the candidates.

Overall, the study shows that the intensity of the electoral fight is reflected in the visual and textual images of campaign visuals. The parties aligned to the ruling parties and the opposition parties adopt varied strategies in their posters and banners to attract, persuade, and convince electorates. From the functional theory of political campaign communication perspective (Benoit & Henson, 2007; Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013), candidates in secure constituencies have a track record which enables them to use acclaims of past achievements to make promises of future plans but candidates in competitive constituencies have to be more aggressive and attack their opponents as well as defend themselves against the opponents’ attacks.

However, a limitation of the study is that the election campaign visuals were confined to one election at the state level, which has its own contextual implications. Future research could explore voter reactions to linguistic features used in posters and banners on voter behaviour to find out if they are alert to the connotative meanings conveyed. Researchers could also investigate whether the saturation level of banners and posters influences voter behaviour and the comprehension of campaign messages. Additionally, examining political content on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, X) using the functional theory of political campaign communication presents another promising area for future research.
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References


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