Examining the Role of Visuals in Influencing Participation in Social Movements: A Case Study of Malaysia

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Abstract

The use of visuals has become increasingly prevalent in a variety of domains, including design and social media. While it is known that visuals can be manipulated for sentiment persuasion in the context of social movements, there has been limited scientific investigation into the role of visuals within such movements. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the influence of visuals on sentiment within a social movement platform. Specifically, the research utilizes a qualitative analysis of select postings from the official Facebook page of the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH), one of the largest recorded social movement protests in Malaysia, as well as in-depth interviews with nine informants. The findings of this study revealed that anger is the most prominent theme present in the visuals, with additional emotions such as empathy and pride also present.

Keywords: Visual Communication, Visual Framing, Emotion, Social Media, Social Movement

1.0 Introduction

It has been reported that several recent elections in Malaysia have been highly contentious and divisive, with some even referring to the most recent one as the "mother of all elections." The 2013 13th General Election, in particular, has been referred to as the "social media election," as users and voters actively posted comments and voiced their opinions online, leading to a significant increase in political participation through social media[1] . This unprecedented level of online activity was a defining feature of the "social media election."

The proliferation of social media has had a significant impact on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in the realm of social movements. Traditional channels of information dissemination, such as print and broadcast media, have been supplemented by the use of official websites, blogs, and social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, for the dissemination of information. This shift has challenged the dominance of journalism as the gatekeeper of news, potentially due to the changing demographics of its audience [2].

The advent of online picture sharing has provided a new avenue for information sharing, particularly in comparison to text-based online media. The proliferation of digital cameras and the rapid expansion of the market for smartphones with advanced image-capturing capabilities have contributed to the increased sharing of images on social media. Within the context of social movements, images are often used as a means of conveying ideas, eliciting emotions, and garnering support [3].

According to [4], attractive and often shocking images on the field can easily become popular on social media sites and are able to incite the attention of global communities. Often, processes of social movements largely require visual interpretations of events to strengthen their objectives and aims. In today's modern world, we have witnessed a building up of attention towards this phenomenon.

A research by [5] found that the visual aspects of protests and social movements are discussed in many different disciplines. From media experts studying how activists of movements utilize media to how

protests are covered by both public and private news sources. Researchers have begun to examine the role of images in the construction of meaning within social movements on social media [6], [7]. Given the importance of the sharing of images and photographic content to the development of social movements, it is crucial to understand the motivations of media consumers to participate in this phenomenon and the role of visual images in disseminating ideas in these contexts. The widespread adoption of smartphones and the proliferation of social media have led to significant changes in the way that images contribute to the growth and composition of social movements.

2.0   Visual Media and Activism

Recent research on social movements have shown that social movement groups primarily employ social media platforms for the purpose of disseminating information, with little or no dependence on conventional media [8]–[11]. The increasing use of social media as a platform for disseminating ideology and information to a wide audience is a phenomenon that has attracted significant research attention, particularly due to the multimodal capabilities of these platforms. Scholars have examined the textual and visual framing of social media in order to understand the effectiveness of these platforms for information dissemination. Additionally, research has focused on identifying factors that influence the emotional response of individuals to specific media content [12]. News editors and advertisers have used a variety of media to evoke strong emotions in viewers and readers. Sound, visuals, videos, and written passages are now among the few available mediums for media creators to draw in audiences, arouse their emotions, and ultimately prompt behavior.

Several studies have investigated the relationship between visual stimuli and emotion. One such study [13] found that certain types of images, such as those evoking anger, distress, or disgust, can elicit specific negative emotions that activate motivational mechanisms. These mechanisms can in turn affect users' information processing and decision-making processes [14]. In addition to influencing attitudes and emotions, visual stimuli can also impact behavior, such as participation in activism. Proximity to influential individuals who are associated with causes can also generate emotional responses that may inspire others to support various social or political movements.

3.0   Visual Framing

In defining visual framing, many scholars have diverse interpretation of what it is. According to [15], [16] popular definition of framing can also be applied to visual. Visual framing then refers to the selection of perceived reality and their accentuation to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment evaluation by visual stimuli. Coleman added, visual framing is the process of selecting some aspects of a perceived reality, highlighting them above others by means of visual communication, and making them salient, meaningful, and memorable, so that certain attributions, interpretations, or evaluations of the issue or item described are visually promoted.

This notion is aligned with what [17] explained; that visual frames perform as highlighted pictorial configurations of reference that organize and render meaningfully selected aspects of an issue, visually suggesting its "central organizing idea". Subsequently, [18] argued that visual framing devices are the smallest salient, coherent, and meaningful visual units of a picture that contribute to the pictorial composition of the visual frame(s) and thus to the activation or (re)configuration of conceptual visual frames in the recipient's mind. Taken together in a meaningful way, visual framing devices construct the visual media frame that the picture offers and that visually proposes the "central organizing idea."

As revealed by [18], all visuals have two general commonalities despite their chameleonic form of appearance. First, they portray meaning in a visually compact and holistic form which normally follows logic of a representative and associative nature. Secondly, they interrelate with the social contexts. As framing theory has a long tradition of highlighting the interaction between media frames and the receiver's individual characteristics in the construction of meaning, the second commonality is of particular significance in framing research, that is : Visual frames operate through informational cues that individuals use in order to construct their subjective perception and interpretation of social reality [18].

This research takes into perspective [19] levels of visual framing. They suggested four levels of visual framing which are, first; visual as denotative, second; visual as semiotic stylistic, third; visual as connotative system and fourth; visual as ideological representation. This framework can be used to analyze any visual medium or perceptions of users towards the visual content. The first level refers to the concept of denotation that was introduced by [20], that explains the first level of meaning as literal or analogic. It refers to 'the natural element of a subject' by asking the question of 'who and what is portrayed in the visual'. This first level also refers to what [21] said as the analogical and indexical nature of an image. The other level discussed in this paper is the connotative level that refers to the implicit layer of an image. In this level, people and object do not just refer to certain individual, things or places, but more towards the idea or concept that lies within them. In this context, visuals were analyzed as signs and its relationship with other signs are observed.

4.0   Conceptual Framework

As described by Miles and Huberman (1992), a conceptual framework can be regards as a visual or written document, one that "explains, either graphically or narratively, the main items to be studied — the key causes, principles or variables — and the supposed relationships between them". The conceptual framework shown in Figure 2.4 explains the conceptual ideas of this research. It is intended that the visual framing from social movements organization towards political participation is understood based on this proposed framework. This proposed framework illustrates the innovatory exploration of visual framing on social media based on reviews of related theories and literatures. It begins with the central discussion on the utilization of visual by social movement's organization in the efforts of persuasion within stages of a social movement to understand the key concept of the study. In understanding efforts of visual framing within social movement's organization, the key concepts in levels visual framing by Rodriguez et al. (2011) that is adapted in this research which is shown on the outer layer of the diagram needs to be understood to explain the whole framework.

According to Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011), the four levels of visual framing consists of the denotative level which conceptualized 'Who or what is being depicted?', stylistic-semiotic level which is 'The stylistic conventions involved in representation', connotative level which translates inti the 'Ideas or concepts attached to the visuals' and the ideological level which "draws together of symbols and stylistic features of images into a coherent interpretation which provides the "why" behind the representations being analyzed'. In this conceptual framework, the term visual portrayal was chosen to present the manifest function of visuals while the term visual meaning was chosen to represent the latent function of a visuals which becomes the fundamental.

Concurrently, agenda setting on the intersections shown in the diagram was also involved in determining the role it played in inducing users' political participation through social media. Within visual framing, the acts towards agenda setting are theorized as ongoing elements. Other concepts like core framing task, tone of voice, dominating ideas and propaganda techniques were interpreted to understand the visual framing phenomenon. Thus, the action of visual framing toward political participation in the middle of the diagram itself is dominant for this framework in signifying the efforts of the social movement's organization. Adapting the previous works of literature and research framework on visual framing, this study seeks to understand this phenomenon in the local context.
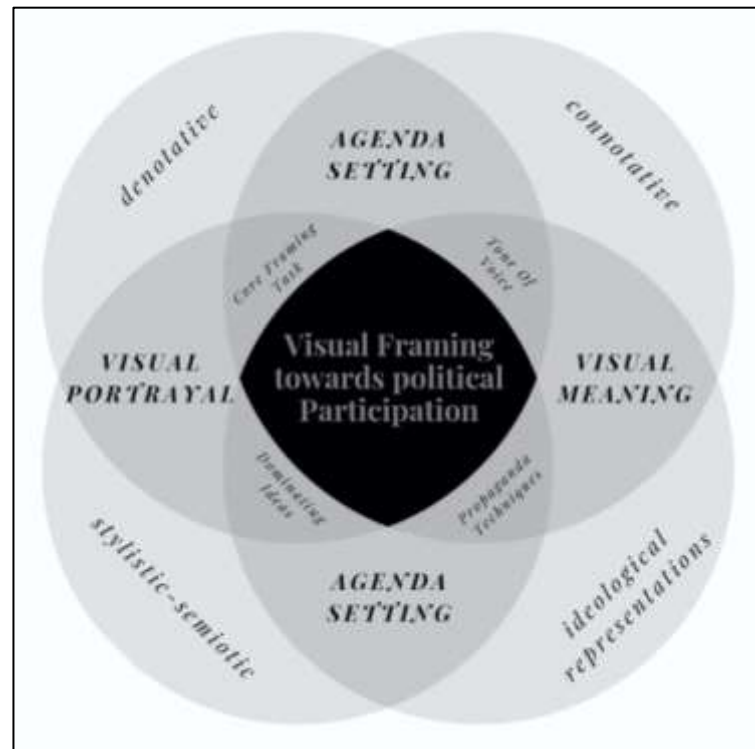
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework on Visual Framing Towards Political Participation

5.0 The BERSIH Movement

The BERSIH movement began as an apolitical group that expressed dissatisfaction with the government's election systems in Malaysia. This group was originally a coalition of 62 NGOs that called for the reform of the national electoral process on November 23, 2006. The BERSIH movement has eight main demands, including the cleaning of the electoral roll to eliminate irregularities, the reform of the postal ballot system to ensure all citizens have the opportunity to vote, the use of indelible ink, and the provision of free and fair access to the media. The movement also calls for the strengthening and reform of public institutions to act independently, enforce laws, and protect human rights. The first four demands were made in 2007, while the remaining four were presented in 2011 [24].

Prior to 2007, mass demonstrations such as BERSIH were relatively rare in Malaysia. The authorities effectively suppressed street activism, including the Reformasi campaign of 1998-1999, resulting in a period of apolitical calm from 2000 to 2006, with the exception of anti-Iraq demonstrations in 2003. However, the BERSIH demonstration in 2007 and subsequent street demonstrations, including the Hindraf marches, the Repeal the Internal Security Act march, and the Occupy Dataran movement, marked a significant shift in this trend [24] . The first public demonstration in November 2007 drew about 40,000 participants [25] . The second rally in July 2011 still drew about 50,000 protesters, despite being deemed illegal by the government who combated the protesters with the riot squad, tear gas, and street arrests. Marked by road blockages, riot police, tear gas, and water cannon, the 2012 BERSIH 3.0 rally drew around 150,000 to 200,000 protesters.

The movement turned out to be increasingly popular and became an influential social and political movement in Malaysia in the face of government crackdowns and criminalization [24]. Rather than just a democratic reform campaign, BERSIH has also led to rising rates of political engagement among young urban Malaysians, as expressed in the mobilization of voters at the 2013 General Election.

6.0 Method

In this study, a qualitative visual content analysis approach was utilized to examine online visual data on social media using social media analytic tools, such as *Popsters.* The collected metadata from Facebook was organized and analysed to meet the research objectives. To select relevant samples, a set of criteria was employed, including high engagement photos based on the number of likes and engagement rates (E.R) on the official Facebook account of Bersih, Official Bersih 2.0. It should be noted that likes on Facebook are often interpreted as indicating support or approval for the content. This research presents a new methodological technique for analysing visual data on social media, and the use of Popsters and other analytics programs allows for the efficient and effective organization and analysis of the data, including the E.R counts on each sample [26].

Using *Popsters,* all data was collected including videos, text, links and photos. Total units of data collected without applying the specific control condition is 4451 units. In order to get good sample data according to the aim of this research, proper cleaning and exclusion were done which leaves only posts in the form of photos (images) selected. The sample of data were then categorized and sorted according to the quantity of *'like'* it gets. As stated earlier, samples for analysis were chosen based on photos that received more than 0.5% engagement rate (E.R). Engagement rate is the number of comments, shares, clicks, likes expressed as a percentage of the total people a post reached. Engagement rate is counted using the formula of total engagement (like + comment + share) divided by total followers of that certain page, times 100. An engagement rate of above 1% is considered good, 0.5% to 0.99% is considered average, and anything below 0.5% needs improvement [27]. Upon filtration, 59 items were sampled as these were the images that sits on the top 100 highest *like* photos and rated more than 0.5% engagement rate.

Next, these photos were coded accordingly, adapting the level of visual framing. Coding was done based on two levels: denotative and connotative level. It was done following two stages: first stage was coding of the denotative level of image. This was done by describing the literal nature of the image, the denotative level. According to [28], denotation refers to "a natural condition of a certain subject' which raise a question of who and what was referred to in the visual. The second stage of coding was done by interpreting the underlying message of the images to identify the implicit meaning of images; the connotative level. The interpretation was done via in depth interview with nine informants who had experiences in Malaysian politics, visuals, and the movement itself.

7.0 Findings

The first level of analysis found that most of the sample selected is in the form of photos; 29 out of 59 or 49.15%, followed by visuals in the forms of posters; 23 out of 59 or 38.98%.

TABLE 1
Visual Forms

Visual Forms	Frequency	%
Photos	29	49.15
Posters	23	38.98
Link	3	05.08
Infographic	2	03.39
Screenshot	1	01.70
Video Screenshot	1	01.70
TOTAL	59	100

Perhaps because of their accessibility, pictures and posters predominated. While some of these images came from news websites and Facebook's public domain, others were taken by demonstrators and extensively shared on social media. Yellow-colored posters with photographs of protesters and

information were the most popular and often circulated posters. Some of these posters made fun of current government figures. It's interesting to see that demonstrators are portrayed positively in the images with high engagement rates and likes. Images of nonviolent demonstrators on the streets appeared in several photos that received a lot of likes.

For the analysis of visual frames, several 104 codes was developed from the sample which is clustered into three different groups namely *subjects* (denotative level), *forms*, and *depiction* (connotative level). Analysis on the denotative level of visual framing found 61 dominant subjects that were shown in these images. From a thematic analysis of these 61 subjects, the dominating frames were based on the theme *'participants of the social movement'*. Visuals of *Protestors, Crowd* and *Protest* seems to be the most frequent element with each appearing at least more than 20 times.

Figure 2. Sample visual that depicts '*Participants of The Social Movement'*

The second most dominant theme that was detected was *significant individuals* (related to the movement). Photos and depiction of *Politicians* and *Activist* appears at least more than five times. The one that appeared most was a negative portrayal of Najib Razak while individuals from the opposition like Tun Mahathir was positively portrayed. Popular activists like Maria Chin and Fahmi Reza were also positively portrayed in an almost 'heroic' fashion.

Figure 3. Sample visual that depicts 'Significant Individuals'

On the connotative level, the findings revealed that most of the images induced implicit messages such as *solidarity* and *call for action*. Analysis on the implicit nature of the images revealed that many of them depict crowds mostly trying to elicit the feeling of solidarity. Some of the posters were straightforward in sending messages to tempt the masses to join the protests whilst some of them tend to educate the masses while at the same time revealing the dysfunctional element in the electoral system.
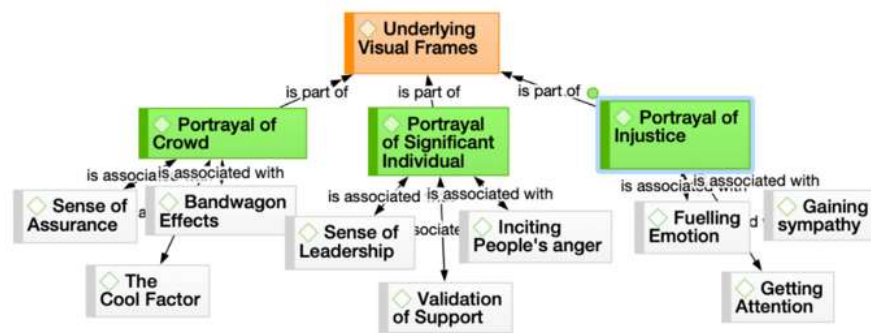
Figure 4. Network Graphics for Underlying Visual Frames

On the second stage of analysis, which is the in depth interview with nine informants, nine themes emerged that build three categories that explains the underlying visual frames. The images shown on the social media of a social movement's organization tend to show different meanings as it goes. Based on the theme collected in the visual analysis, the portrayal of the crowd seems to be the dominant content. According to the informants, these images are essential to provide several messages. The first is to provide a sense of assurance. Secondly, to impose a bandwagon effect. Thirdly, the portrayal of the crowd would portray a sense of cool factor.

Pictures of a crowd can give the effect of a trusted movement that is supported by the majority of the people. One of the informants reports that the portrayal of the crowd depicts the trust people can have by looking at the image. Another informant added that the portrayal of the crowd showed people's support in big numbers. As politicians, two informants elaborated why pictures of the crowd acted as a crowd puller by satisfying and giving some sort of guarantee to the people who saw the image.

In the context of a political social movement, propaganda mostly play a role in influencing and enticing people through media. According to some informants, propaganda is being used by social movements to attract people and trigger action from the mass. Bandwagon is one of the seven types of propaganda. One of the informants denotes that bandwagon is the affect you get when crowd pictures are portrayed.

Where visual framing is a concern, emotion was commonly an after-product of a frame. Sympathy is one of the emotions triggered when certain wrongdoing is being done towards a certain individual or organization. One informant elaborated that the portrayal of police injustice was meant to escalate the feeling of unfairness and gain sympathy. Anger is found to be one of the main emotion portrayed by the images. Images of the government individual, mainly the Prime Minister during that time, Datuk Seri Najib Razak was found to be one of the type of portrayal that induced anger.

Another informant elaborated that portrayal of oppression was meant to show injustice in the system and eventually gaining sympathy. The 'virality' of a certain related issue to the movement can be an advantage in the context of escalating popularity. According to the founder of BERSIH, YB Maria Chin, the images of police brutality had increased the popularity and the reputation of the movement as it gets attention of the international community.

The reputation gained by the social movement towards the international community has indeed gives more pressure to the government during that time. Referring to the stages of social movement, coalescence is the stage where a social movement broadly promotes their cause. In the age of social media and internet, virality is a concept that is used to escalate the popularity of a certain issue. In this case, the portrayal of injustice has managed to escalate the popularity and establish reputation of BERSIH in the eyes of the international community.

8.0   Conclusion

In conclusion, the study highlights the importance of effectively conveying emotions through visual media in social movements, particularly in the era of social media. Images have a powerful influence in framing due to their ability to elicit emotions with minimal cognitive effort. Visuals, often perceived as objective facts, can be a potent tool for persuasion. The study specifically identifies the portrayal of emotions through images of large groups of people rallying around a cause, as a common visual representation in political social movements. This finding is particularly relevant to movements like BERSIH, which heavily rely on emotional appeal to garner support. Thus, understanding the role of visual propaganda and its impact on emotions and perceptions is crucial in comprehending the significance of social movements, such as BERSIH, in shaping Malaysia's political and propaganda landscape in the past and present.

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