

## Social Media Visual Framing towards Political Participation: An Analysis on BERSIH 2.0

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### ABSTRACT

The political atmosphere in Malaysia had witnessed a growing trend of social movement organisations and protests. The recent attention is on the phenomenal record usage of social media platforms as tools to spread political ideology. The multimodal nature of social media has made it an efficient tool where users can post textual information as well as visual materials to reach out to its audience. This article sets out to examine the visual strategy of one of the largest political social movements in Malaysia, the BERSIH movement, within a social media setting. Building on the existing work on visual framing, it asks: How were issues visually portrayed on the BERSIH social media account during the peak of the movement in Malaysia? In this context, Facebook was chosen as the social media platform analysed as it is the main social media used by the movement. Adapting on the level of visual framing, a content analysis was done to a sample of 59 (N=59) top liked photos posted on the Bersih 2.0 Official Facebook account which received more than 0.5% engagement rate (ER= >0.5%). The findings showed that at the denotative level, the main forms of visuals used were photos of protesters, followed by posters and photos of important individuals. The findings also showed that at the connotative level, the main frame highlighted was 'solidarity' followed by 'call for action' in the form of direct and symbolic visuals.

**Keywords:** *Visual framing, framing, social movement, political communication, social media.*

### INTRODUCTION

A few recent general elections in Malaysia have been considered as some of the most competitive and divisive elections ever recorded in the history of the general elections in Malaysia. Some even coined the most recent one as the 'mother of all elections', while Dato Seri Najib Razak, the previous Prime Minister, called the 13th General Election in 2013 as the 'social media election' (Salleh et al., 2014). The so called 'social media election' was coloured by participatory democracy activities like the country has never seen before, with the online and offline political atmosphere filled with users and voters alike posting comments and voicing out their opinions thus creating a plethora of online debates that contribute to the political participation of the masses. What was also observed in these elections' atmosphere was the emergence of a new breed of 'journalists' that mainly consisted of common people with internet devices producing user generated content, the so called 'citizen journalists' (Balaraman et al., 2015). Non-governmental organisations (NGO) were also included in this phenomenon where the transfer of information does not only depend on traditional media,

but official platforms of these organisations like websites, blogs, Facebook accounts, Twitter handles, and Instagram accounts were set-up to ease the transfer of ideas and information to the masses. The impact of these phenomena has made the respectable profession of journalism find itself at a moment in history where, for the first time, its dominion as the gatekeeper of the news was compromised; not just by the new technology and competitors, but possibly by the audience that it served (Ritonga & Syahputra, 2019).

Meanwhile, online image sharing too has brought about a new perspective of information sharing. The sharing of images in social media has increased with the advancement of digital cameras and has developed further when the industry of smartphones with high quality image capturing abilities grew rapidly (Li & Xie, 2020). In the context of social movements, images are often used as part of the means in disseminating a notion, inciting emotion and to gain support (Rovisco & Veneti, 2017). According to Rovisco (2017), 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. More often than not, processes of social movements largely require visual interpretations of events in order 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 Kilgo & Mourão (2021) found that the visual aspects of protests and social movements are discussed in many different disciplines. From scholars of media observing the way media are being used by activists of movements to demonstrations being framed in both public and commercial news outlets. In this age of smartphones, coupled with social media, researchers are challenged with significant changes in the way photos add to social movements' development and elements. Some researcher also reflect the construction of meaning through images on social media like Twitter in the collectivities of social movements (Esfandiari, Fridrich & Yao, 2021). As sharing of images and photographic content contributions are deemed important to the development of social movements, it is crucial to understand what motivates media consumers to partake in this phenomenon as well as the role of visual images in disseminating ideas in such settings. Building on the existing work on visual framing, this paper asks: How were issues visually portrayed on the BERSIH social media account during the peak of the movement in Malaysia?

#### THE BERSIH MOVEMENT

The BERSIH movement emerged as an apolitical movement that voices out dissatisfaction with the election systems. It was originally a coalition of 62 non-government organisations (NGOs) demanding an overhaul of the officially formed national electoral process on 23 November 2006. The movement's appeal includes:

1. The electoral roll is to be free of irregularities
2. The reformation of the postal ballot system to ensure that all citizens can exercise their right to vote
3. The use of indelible ink during the voting process
4. Free and fair media access
5. Strengthen and reform public institutions to act as separate institutions
6. Law enforcement and human rights preservation
7. Stop corruption
8. Stop dirty politics

The first four items were put forth in 2007 while the remaining were presented in 2011. Several scholars including Chong (2018) assert that BERSIH was Malaysia's biggest people's movement and is well recognised for having orchestrated five big rallies over the past decade to seek democratic reform and greater independence for Malaysia. The protests sparked numerous "acts of citizenship" and citizen participation in political affairs past the voting act once in five years. BERSIH's roots and growth are often linked to the general population's disappointment with the National Front (*Barisan Nasional* – BN) Government that is headed by the United Malaysian National Organization (UMNO). Khoo (2021) corroborated this view, that BERSIH's insistence on democratic reform is rooted in BN's hegemony for the last forty years. Despite the economic growth and the increase of the middle-class population under the BN Government, claims are made stating that the improvement failed to include democratic transformation.

In Malaysia, mass demonstrations such as BERSIH are rare. There have been a few street activisms since the advent of the *Reformasi* campaign in 1998-1999, but the authorities shut them down. The streets of Malaysia have been quiet and apolitical between 2000 and 2006 except for the 2013 anti-Iraq demonstration. BERSIH's 2007 demonstration broke the still atmosphere and other street demonstrations such as Hindraf marches, 'Repeal the Internal Security Act march', and the Occupy Dataran march (Lim, 2016). About 40,000 individuals participated in the first public demonstration in November 2007 (Malaysia Kini, 2007). Meanwhile, despite being illegal in the eyes of the law, the second rally in July 2011 drew about 50,000 protesters, who were dealt with by the law enforcement with riot squad, tear gas, and street arrests. Such treatment was echoed in the 2012 BERSIH 3.0 rally – the 150,000 to 200,000 protesters were mired with roadblocks, riot police, tear gas, and water cannons.

The movement became an influential social and political movement in Malaysia in the face of government crackdowns and criminalisation (Lim, 2016). BERSIH took the lead in organising a democratic reform campaign and increasing the urban youth's political engagements, which is reflected in the 2013 General Election voter's mobilisation. At the time, BN gained 60 per cent of the seats, but only gained 47.4 per cent of popular votes compared to 50.9 per cent for People's Alliance (*Pakatan Rakyat* – PR), making it BN's worst election since 1969.

The government's surveillance of public affairs in physical spaces should be considered when considering the use of social media in BERSIH political movements. The Malaysian constitution allows freedom of speech and association, but the 1967 Police Act controls such freedom by policing the appropriateness in the interests of protection, good order, and morality. The Act defines a public gathering as an assembly of five or more citizens, and such gathering must be authorised with a police permit (Police Act 1967, n.d).

Only 4 months after BERSIH 2.0, the government approved the 2012 Peaceful Assembly Act (PAA) which amended Section 27 of the Police Act which scrap the need for permits for mass assemblies. Nonetheless, organisers must notify the police 10 days before the date of the event (Peaceful Assembly Act 2012, n.d). The police will then respond to the notification subject to restrictions and regulations. The PAA forbids public protests and assemblies within 50 metres of 'restricted sites' such as airports, petrol stations, hospitals, train stations, worship sites, and schools. The PAA is criticised as 'undemocratic', more stringent, and discourages public protests. The strict regulations on using public space turned BERSIH activists to the digital space to organise, coordinate, extend, and maintain

demonstrations and campaigns. Nevertheless, BERSIH protests are still being held on the streets.

#### SEMIOTIC AND PHOTO PERSUASIVENESS

In discussing the aspect of visual images in social movement settings, there is a need to look at the foundation of the theory of visuals, which is Semiotics. Harrison (2003) contends that semiotics is in general describing the “study of signs” and for a sign to be present, there must be meanings or contents being manifested through forms of expression or representation. These representations could appear in the form of images, design graphics, and photographs. Images have powerful impacts on viewers’ attitude, and the impacts are impossible to materialise through texts alone. In the news context, the presence of a photograph would significantly alter consumers’ attitude towards the framed issue.

Furthermore, McIntyre et al., (2018) contends that images in news articles have been shown to have some dominant impacts on readers due to their visual character, but they can also just contribute to the gestalt meaning of all of the components. In many cases, photographs influenced print media due to their impact on a person's degree of interest, emotion, and attitude. Some contend that the impact of certain graphics depicting action, conflict, or even a neutral posture has influenced readers' general perspectives, and that this impact could not have been achieved just through words .

#### VISUAL FRAMING

Scholars have diverse interpretations of what can be constituted as visual framing. According to Coleman (2009), Entman’s (1993) popular definition of framing can also be applied to visuals. 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 Gamson and Modigliani (1989) explained; that visual frames perform as highlighted pictorial configurations of reference that organise and render meaningfully selected aspects of an issue, visually suggesting its central organising idea. Subsequently, Geise (2017) 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 and thus to the activation or 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 organising idea.”

As revealed by Geise (2017), 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 (Geise, 2017).

Most of the literature in this field claims that social sciences ignore visual aspects in media and framing. Bock (2020) takes the lead in her recent research and attempts to theorise visual framing through the analysis and review of 165 articles on the concept of visual framing. Her paper observes the uniqueness of the structure of an image in the context of framing that complicates the discussion and research on the topic. Bock's study discovers that attempts to measure abstract objects frequently neglect the unique feature of picture properties such as rhetorically derived definitions, contingency, and materiality. She evaluates the operational activities of the word "visual framing" and detects that media researchers prioritise literal images over visual concepts or developments, simultaneously disregarding the critical capacity of visual communication. Some glaring patterns emerge from Bock's research. One of the patterns is the appearance of a 'standard' framework in media research that focuses on inductive analysis.

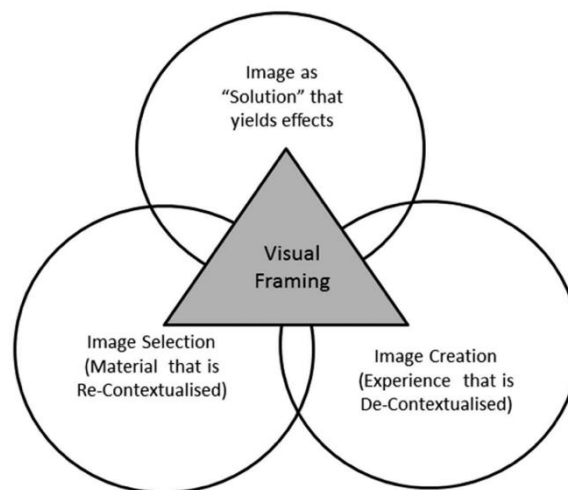


Figure 1: A model for visual framing (Bock, 2020)

Bock's study also observed that media studies tend to highlight literal representations rather than visual structures or development. Those studies also disregard the interrogative and critical capacities of visual communication. Underlying messages are pertinent in understanding the persuasive potential of visuals in influencing or manipulating human emotions. A more recent study by Dhanes, Duthler & Li (2022) found that narrativity of images can enhance engagement on Facebook and Instagram. Furthermore, interactive features of distance, point of view as well as compositional feature of framing increased engagement on social media.

Building on this framework, this study attempts to identify the connotative and ideological level in visual framing regarding the underlying messages in the visuals of a social movement, with a particular focus on BERSIH. It takes into perspective Rodriguez et al., (2011) levels of visual framing. It suggests 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 (Mustaffa & Ibrahim, 2018). This framework can be used to analyse any visual medium or perceptions of users towards the visual content. The first

level refers to the concept of denotation that was introduced by Barthes (1964), that explains the first level of meaning as literal or analogic. According to Panofsky (1955), 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 Messaris (1997) 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 objects do not just refer to certain individuals, things or places, but more towards the idea or concept that lies within them. In this context, visuals were analysed as signs and its relationship with other signs are observed.

#### LEVELS OF VISUAL FRAMING

Considering that framing research seems to explore mainly media texts, Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) proposed a model for analysing visual frames. This research adapts Rodriguez and Dimitrova's model in understanding the nature of images shared on social media in framing the issues in hand. As mentioned before, the four-tiered levels of visual framing analysis are:

- 1) Visuals as denotative systems
- 2) Visuals as stylistic-semiotic systems
- 3) Visuals as connotative systems
- 4) Visuals as an ideological representation

*The first level* – visual as a denotative system – considers visual as a spark that activates the optic nerves to send information to the brain (Lester, 2006). In this context, the frame is the 'measure' of objects and the different elements ingrained in the visual. Frames are then constructed with meanings of identified elements, the composition, and the structure of the visual's sensation to a certain theme. As stated by Barthes's (1964) '*Rhetoric of the Image*', the conceptualisation of the denotative concept is the first level of meaning in the analysis of visual messages. Earlier scholar Panofsky (1955) referred to denotative as "the original nature of a subject" by asking "who and what is portrayed in that visual", which is later echoed by Messaris and Abraham (2001) when they note that the first level of visual analysis is the images' analogical and indexical nature. In short, images are deemed as a reality that is captured by a tool, for example, a camera. Framing in general focuses on the underlying message, but viewers can only identify the visual input based on their knowledge and experience.

*The second level* – visuals as stylistic-semiotic systems – refers to the role of techniques in visual portrayal such as 'close-up' shots that showed intimacy, 'medium shot' that portrays personal relationship, 'full shot' that portrays social relationship, and 'long shot' that portrays context, scope and social distance (Berger, 1991). According to a recent research by Doerr (2021), professional graphic designers in Germany help far-right populist movement parties by commercialising extremist ideology by providing ambiguous pictures and text messages. The findings show that the Alternative for Germany's (AfD) visual campaign documents the instrumentalization and appropriation of feminist and LGBT rights rhetoric, assisting the AfD in rebranding itself as a liberal democratic opposition party. Professionally created election posters used visual representations of gender and sexuality to mock and shame Muslim minorities and denounce their "Otherness," while also promoting the party's heroic self-image as a saviour of white women and Western civilization from the threat of male Muslim migrants.

Apart from that, social distance, visual modality, and subjects' behaviour are frequently used as framing instruments. The concepts of proxemics that is introduced by Hall (1969) is closely linked to social distance. It acts as the 'invisible barriers' among people that tend to cause a variety of fields of vision. For example, we can see faces or heads from intimate ranges. We carry in both the head and the hands at near personal ranges. We see the other human from the knees up at distant personal ranges. We see the entire figure at a near social distance. We see the whole figure at a long social distance with void around it. From this, six values can be assigned to social distance based on how the bodies of human subjects are presented in frames – intimate, close personal, far personal, close social, far social, and public (Mustaffa & Ibrahim 2018). This second level of visual framing aids the assessment of the photos' composition and graphic design style that has gained popularity.

*The third level* - visuals as a connotative system – claims that subjects and objects refer to individuals or tangible things, and the idea and concepts that are associated with them. Visual news is analysed as signs and its associations with other signs within its perspective. Visuals used in the press are also capable of creating strong emotions to readers and they can imagine what is reported in the text of the news in question (Mustaffa & Ibrahim, 2018). According to Culloty et. al., (2019), connotation is the meaning that individuals attach to visual objects in terms of their ideas, feelings, or critical values. Despite the fact that connotation is dependent on the existence of denotation, it is at the level of connotation that observers, including academics, introduce their own interpretations of meaning. For example, climate-change communication experts may interpret a photo of floods as a "climate-change effect", however there are a variety of interpretive frames that may be used depending on the context of the viewer. A flood picture might be interpreted negatively in terms of loss and devastation, neutrally in terms of normal weather patterns, or even positively in terms of better fishing opportunities. A visual metaphor is frequently characterised by a concrete image that represents an abstract concept, for example, country flags are used to symbolise patriotism, military strength, or an increasing sense of place in the news.

*The fourth level* - visuals as ideological representation analyses visuals while referring to basic principles to unearth the attitude of certain groups, races, time, philosophy, or religious stand. It combines both symbols and stylistic features of a certain image to make a statement about the image's interpretation and presentation (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). Ideological questions arise about the interests, the voice, and the ideas that are presented and dominated by the image. The questions are also on the correlation of a subtler nature in the cultural, emotional, psychological spheres, as well as the different ways in which these links figure into the phenomenon of subordination and are not limited to only economic or political interests (Amores et al., 2019).

#### VISUAL MEDIA AND ACTIVISM

Recent studies in social movement have identified the use of social media platforms by social movement organisations (Basu & De, 2016; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Gerodimos, 2004) with little reliance on mainstream media as its platform of information dissemination. The multimodal nature of social media has made it the platform of choice to disseminate ideologies and information to the mass audience. Some study of usage in social media investigates textual and visual framing of social media to understand the effectiveness of social media in disseminating information (Khazraee & Novak, 2018). Scholars have also studied factors that made humans induce certain emotions when met with certain media

(Picard & Klein, 2002). The use of many types of mediums to induce emotional impact towards media users have been utilised by advertisers and news editors. Mediums like sound, images, films and written passage have become among the few choices for media users to attract audience's attention, evoke emotions from them and eventually trigger actions.

At the same time, several recent studies have also explored how images impact emotions. A recent research by Klein & Amis, (2021) explored how photos that trigger anger, distress and disgust, generate specific negative emotions linked to the activation of motivational mechanisms. Activation of the motivational systems driving this mechanism affects how users retrieve information. As a result, image-induced emotions can shape how messages are determined. Not only images can persuade emotions, they can also influence later conduct, such as activism. Due to their emotional impact, exposure in close contact to important people connected with certain issues may encourage people to take part in various causes including political social movements (Uluçay & Melek, 2021).

#### METHODOLOGY

Adopting a qualitative visual content analysis approach, this paper presented a relatively new methodological technique in analysing online visual data on social media. It integrates social media analytic tools, *popsters* in order to collect the metadata from Facebook and organise it accordingly to assist the analysis. Social media analytics programs such as *popsters* have enabled the data to be arranged accordingly based on the aim of the research. For the purpose of this research, a list of criteria is employed in order to narrow down the relevant samples. In this case, high engagement photos were chosen based on the quantity of 'like' it gets on Facebook as well as the Engagement Rate (E.R) counts on each sample. The 'like' on Facebook generally means that people acknowledged and enjoyed the photo (Facebook, n.d.). In this case, 'like' on the official Facebook account of Bersih, *Official Bersih 2.0*, can be translated into support, backing or encouragement.

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 a 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 was then categorised 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 (Gyant, 2018). Upon filtration, 59 items were sampled as these were the images that sit 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 by (Rodriguez et al., 2011). 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 Panofsky (1955), denotation refers to a natural condition of a certain subject which raises 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 by coding the images based on



the Kansei affinity cluster for social movements in Malaysia developed to identify emotional elements in social movements.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the graph in Figure 2, it is evident that the *like* peaked especially near the protest date. For example, the highest liked photos that recorded 8281 *likes* occurred on the 29 August 2015, the night of the BERSIH 4 event.

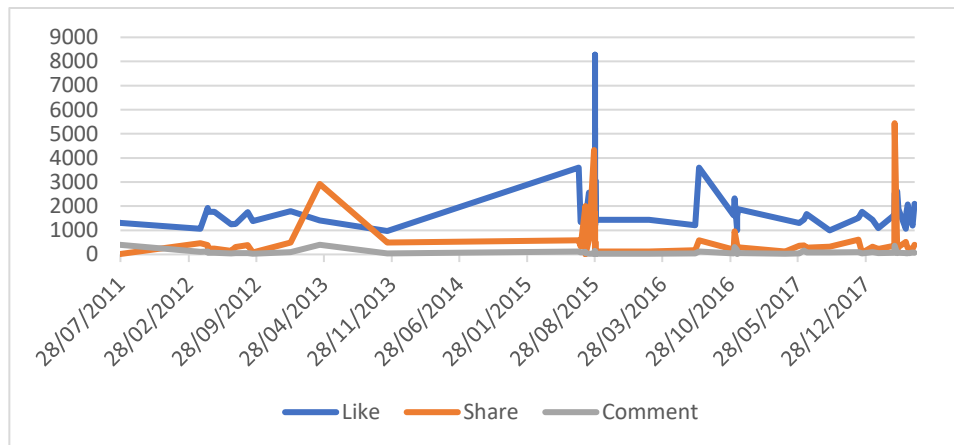


Figure 2: Trend of likes, shares and comments on photos in the Facebook of BERSIH 2.0

The first level of analysis found that the majority 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 of image data

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

Photos and posters were dominant possibly because they are easily available. Some of these photos were captured by protesters and shared widely on social media platforms while some of them were photos from news portals and public domains on Facebook itself. Posters that were shared and received high user engagement (Figure 3) were mainly yellow in colour (Sample 1 & 2). Interestingly, images that received high engagement rate and likes consist of portrayal of protesters in a positive sentiment. Photos that received a high number of likes showed images of protestors on the streets in a calm and peaceful manner (Sample 3 & 4).



Figure 3: Example of photos that received high engagement

#### ANALYSIS OF VISUAL FRAMES

A number of 104 codes were 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, 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 4: Example of photos that showed the theme 'participants of the social movement'

The second most dominant theme that was detected was '*important individuals*' (related to the movement). Photos and depictions of Politicians and Activists appears at least more than 5 times. The one that appeared most was a negative portrayal of Najib Razak (Sample 7) while individuals from the opposition like Tun Mahathir (Sample 9) was positively portrayed. Popular activists like Fahmi Reza (Sample 8) were also positively portrayed in an almost heroic fashion.



Figure 5: Example of photos that showed the theme 'important individuals'

The analysis of the styles and visual techniques resulted in a fairly straightforward finding. The first type of visual technique being coded to the samples is the camera shot. Based on the coding, four types of camera shots were found to be the most used type of shots. The first is wide shots, followed by medium shots, medium close up shots and close up shots. Wide shot photos mainly consist of people in a crowd during street protests and gatherings. Generally, in a social movement, wide camera shots or sometimes called long shots, are used to portray a large space containing subjects and objects that relates to the social movement. A wide shot can also provide background to add context to the object in the image. An example of a wide shot is the topmost liked image from the BERSIH Facebook Page, which showed a bird's eye view of the crowd near Dataran Merdeka.



Figure 6: Topmost liked photo depicting a wide shot

For example, this wide shot on the image in Figure 6 provides context to the subject where at first glance, the image clearly shows the location of the protest, which is in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, near Dataran Merdeka. A glimpse of the Malaysian flag draping down from two buildings in the photo strengthens the fact that this is happening in Malaysia. Another context that was provided from the wide shot is the timing of the photo, which is at night. Also, the crowd that flooded the street from many angles had provided a sense of 'hecticness' that would reflect the support towards the organisation at that time.

The second type of camera shot is the medium shot. Medium shots in the context of this research were normally used to portray subjects in a small group. Generally, these images showed clear and identifiable individuals affiliated with the organisation. Most of the images that used medium camera shots were images of people from the organisation itself, usually in a posed or candid photo that depicts support for the movement. Some examples were photos during street protests, small protests in front of the court and press conferences in the vicinity of an office. Medium camera shots in this sense provided clear proof of who were involved in the movement as the size of faces of the subject in the image would make the faces identifiable.



Figure 7: Photos that depict medium close up shot

The third type of camera shot is the close-up shot. Close up shot images typically consist of subjects or elements that show the faces of significant individuals and symbols that relate to the movement. Generally, these types of shots were able to show clearly the expression of the individuals and a clear message from text or symbols in the image. Most of the images from the samples that use close up shots were images of political leaders from the government, like the then Prime Minister Dato Seri Najib Razak, as well as other politicians like Tun Mahathir and activists from the movement itself like YB Maria Chin and Ambiga Srinivasan. Other subjects that were shown using close up shots were text messages from the organisation that reflects elements of persuasion in terms of subtle emotion and direct call for action.

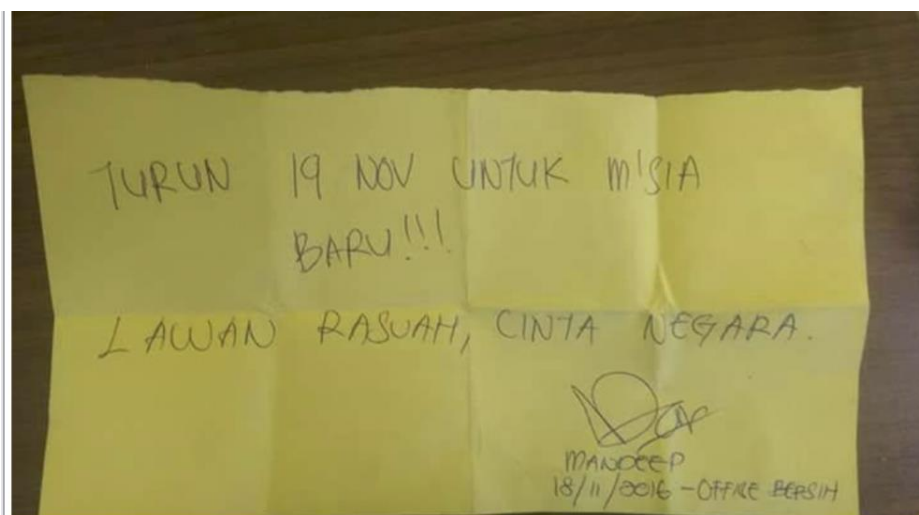


Figure 8: Photo of message in a closeup shot

The above close up photo (Figure 8) showed an example of a note by Mr Mandeep Singh, the secretariat member of BERSIH. This message was posted on the BERSIH Facebook page on the day the police raided the BERSIH office, which was a day before BERSIH 5. This image received 0.716% ER, 1593 likes and 332 shares. In this context, the timing of the posting was clearly important. The simple message was actually riding on people's accumulated anger and spirit to join the BERSIH 5. It can also be seen clearly that simplicity plays a part to get the

message across faster. Close-up shots in this context played an important role as the simple and short message needs to be seen in clarity and brevity.

Apart from that, the findings revealed that most of the images induced implicit messages such as solidarity and call for action on a connotative level. 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. However, despite some elements of mockery and cynicism in the images, most of the images were interpreted as having positive connotations; peace, unity, solidarity, motivation, respect, fairness. Some showed neutrality; remembrance, discussion, invitation, whilst very few showed negativity; violence, crime, unfairness, injustice (Figure 6). A possible explanation for this could be because the movement wants to portray ‘feel-good’ emotions while implying the feelings of solidarity and unity. Negative portrayal or portrayal of hatred would hinder people to join the cause, more so because protest movements such as this are something out of the norm to the citizens of Malaysia.

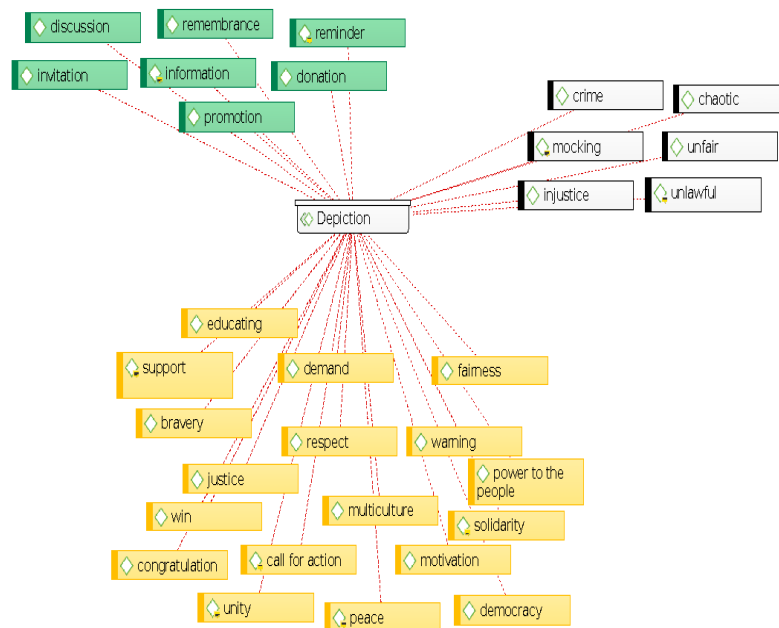


Figure 9: Connotative level in photos of BERSIH

The difference between this study and past studies is this study discusses the elements of visual techniques that were utilised on social media and how they were used to affect visual framing in a social movement. This was not discussed in past studies, which mainly focused on visuals in traditional media (Bock, 2020; Boomgaarden et al., 2016). Social media provides a unique platform for visuals that is different from traditional media in a few ways, which eventually forces the visual strategy to be different. For example, functions like *share*, *comments* and *like* on social media can alter the effectiveness of a certain visual even if the visual itself does not meet the perceived visual aesthetic that previously contributed to the effectiveness of the visual.

## CONCLUSION

The result has enabled the research to conclude that at the denotative level, the main forms of visuals used were photos of protesters, followed by posters and photos of important individuals (politicians and activists). Most of the photos showed activities of the protestors followed by a depiction of politicians involved from both sides of the political divide. The findings also showed that at the connotative level, the main frame highlighted was 'solidarity' followed by 'call for action' in the form of direct and symbolic visuals. In conclusion, an effective visual portrayal of issues is important in this day and age of social media especially if a certain social movement organisation or individual intends to invite or persuade the audience towards their cause or ideology. Image has a stronger impact on framing relative to textual because they are less invasive, and they need less cognitive load or learned skills. Visuals are seen as a powerful tool of conviction, because they are often received as objective truths, while only selective constructions of reality are simultaneous. (Jungblut & Zakareviciute, 2017). Based on the findings in this study, one of the most dominant visual portrayals is images of people in a large group supporting the cause. For example, images of protestors and important figures who support the movements. These kinds of images can be considered important as political social movements such as BERSIH largely require persuasive strategy in order to invite more people to join their cause. These findings provide sound insights on visual framing and how it influenced society, thus providing a basis for stakeholders who wish to address their viewers effectively through visuals.

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