

RANO KARNO'S LEADERSHIP SEMIOTICS: THE USE OF BETAWI-CENTRIC SIGNS IN THE CAMPAIGN FOR THE ELECTION OF REGIONAL HEADS

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ABSTRACT

Article history

Received : December 2, 2025

Revised : March 23, 2026

Accepted : March 25, 2026

Keywords

Semiotics of Leadership

Political Campaigning

Ethnic Centric

This study examines the semiotic construction of political leadership identity in the context of Rano Karno's candidacy for deputy governor of Jakarta in the 2024 Regional Head Election. Specifically, it investigates three questions: (1) what verbal and non-verbal signs Rano Karno deployed to construct a Betawi-centric leadership identity; (2) how these signs were deliberately fabricated and amplified through multi-channel communication strategies; and (3) how the process of sign amplification produced an active echo chamber that reinforced his political identity among target voters. Drawing on Wempi and Chrisdina's (2023) Leadership Semiology framework and Barthes's theory of secondary signification, the study adopts an interpretive qualitative research design with data collected through semi-structured interviews with four purposively selected informants (a media professional, a campaign strategist, and two voters), direct observation of campaign events, and analysis of campaign materials. The findings reveal that Rano Karno, as the creator of signs, constructed the overarching narrative of "Rano Karno Anak Betawi" through a coordinated system of verbal signs and non-verbal signs. These signs were systematically amplified by the campaign's success team and digital media communicators across conventional, interpersonal, and digital channels, creating a self-reinforcing semiotic cycle that functioned as an active echo chamber. However, the study also found that the effectiveness of these signs was audience-dependent; non-Betawi voters and skeptical audiences produced oppositional readings that challenged the authenticity of the constructed identity. This study contributes to the field of leadership semiotics by demonstrating how the Leadership Semiology framework can be applied to ethnic identity-based political campaigns in pluralistic electoral contexts, extending its applicability beyond Western settings to the Indonesian political landscape.

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1. Introduction

The 2024 Jakarta Regional Head Election (Pilkada) represents a significant political event given Jakarta's role as the national capital and its function as a barometer for Indonesia's broader political dynamics. Among the competing candidates, Rano Karno who's a veteran actor and politician widely recognized through the television series "Si Doel Anak Sekolahan" (first aired in 1994) adopted a distinctive Betawi-centric campaign strategy. While the Betawi are historically recognized as the indigenous ethnic group of Jakarta, the city is highly heterogeneous; census data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS, 2022) indicates that although the Betawi constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in the capital, Jakarta's population is characterized by considerable ethnic diversity, with significant Javanese, Sundanese, Chinese, and other communities. Rano Karno's strategic emphasis on Betawi cultural identity must therefore be understood within this pluralistic demographic context rather than as an appeal to a demographically dominant group.

This study examines how Betawi-centric elements in Rano Karno's political campaign function as semiotic signs within the framework of leadership semiotics. Three key analytical concepts guide this investigation. First, "fabrication" refers to the deliberate construction and packaging of cultural symbols both verbal and non-verbal into political signs designed to project a particular leadership identity. Second, "amplification" denotes the process by which these fabricated signs are multiplied and distributed across communication channels, both digital and conventional, by campaign teams and supporters. Third, "active echo space" (or active echo chamber) describes the communicative environment in which amplified signs are repeatedly circulated, reinforced, and validated within community networks, producing a self-sustaining cycle of meaning that strengthens a candidate's political identity among target audiences.

Building on these concepts, this study addresses three research questions: first, what verbal and non-verbal signs does Rano Karno use in his campaign to construct a Betawi-centric leadership identity; second, how are these signs fabricated and amplified through communication channels by the campaign team and supporters; and third, how does the process of sign amplification create an active echo space that reinforces Rano Karno's political identity and electability.

This research is situated within the growing field of leadership semiotics, which examines how leaders construct reality and legitimacy through symbolic communication. Fairhurst and Cooren (2018) conceptualize leadership as a fundamentally symbolic communication process where leaders construct reality through language, narrative, and visual symbols. Koivunen and Wennes (2021) emphasize that the use of strategic symbols strengthens leader-constituent identification, while Zhang and Surma (2020) demonstrate a correlation between leaders' capacity to create and manipulate cultural symbols and followers' perceptions of leadership effectiveness. In the Indonesian context, Sulistiyono and Priyatmoko (2019) show that politicians' references to local cultural symbols increase perceptions of authenticity and closeness to voters, and Abidin (2020) highlights the significance of cultural identity politics in the contemporary Indonesian political arena. Recent semiotic analyses of Indonesian elections have examined political gimmicks on social media (Aminulloh et al., 2024), visual communication in legislative campaign billboards (Syahrani et al., 2024), and figurative language in presidential election discourse (Syamsuddin S Munfarida, 2024), yet none have specifically addressed the systematic use of ethnic-cultural signs in regional head campaigns.

Building on these foundations, this study employs Wempi's Leadership Semiology framework (Wempi S Chrisdina, 2023, 2024), which focuses on how leaders as creators of signs form myths by shaping the impressions society captures (Wempi S Chrisdina, 2024, p. 78). As stated by Wempi and Chrisdina (2023, pp. 14–15), analyzing a leader's semiotic quality requires examining the meaning formed, the signs attached by the leader, the style of sign presentation, the media used, audience characteristics, the signs exchanged socially and digitally, and the meaning captured by stakeholders as sign readers. This is also consistent with Fajri and Liwoso (2024), who demonstrate how signs and meanings are formed through social dynamics within discourse (p. 192). Studies in the broader leadership semiotics field further show that visual signs, including colors, slogans, poster layouts, and cultural icons, are strategically constructed to convey emotional and ideological messages in campaign settings (Aprianto, Anggreni, S Virga, 2025), and that leaders can leverage popular cultural symbols to build inclusive political identities, as demonstrated in Christianauli and Wempi's (2024) semiotic analysis of Ganjar Pranowo's use of traditional Indonesian cuisine as symbolic means to strengthen a national image.

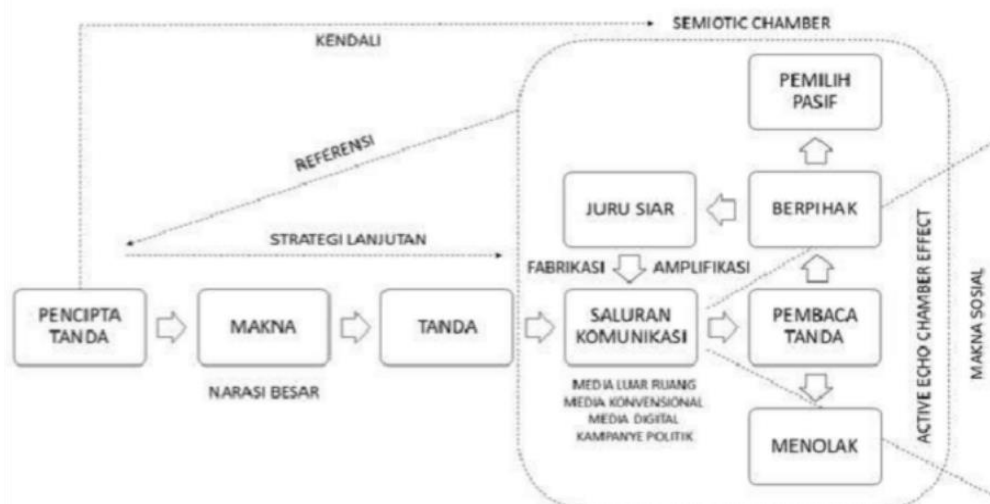


Figure 1 : Conceptual framework based on Jefri Audi Wempi's Leadership Semiology
 Source: Researcher's preparation based on the understanding of the article *The Battle of the Signs of Leaders Ahead of the 2024 General Election in Indonesia in the book Bunga Rampai Studi Current Leadership Practices (2024), 2025*

The conceptual framework adopted in this study is grounded in “leadership semiology” a term that warrants clarification, particularly for readers more familiar with Anglo-European semiotic traditions. While classical semiotics, as developed by Saussure and Peirce, examines how signs produce meaning within general communication systems, leadership semiology narrows this lens to the specific domain of political and organizational leadership. It investigates how leaders, as intentional creators of signs, strategically construct, deploy, and manage symbolic resources verbal, visual, performative to build legitimacy, shape public perception, and negotiate collective meaning with their audiences (Wempi S Chrisdina, 2023, p. 8). The distinction is consequential: whereas general semiotics treats signs as elements within a broader system of cultural meaning, leadership semiology foregrounds the agency of the leader as a sign-maker who deliberately fabricates myths in Barthes's sense of secondary signification by calibrating symbolic output to the impressions a target audience is predisposed to receive

(Wempi S Chrisdina, 2024, p. 78). This framework thus extends Fairhurst and Cooren's (2018) conceptualization of leadership as a "hybrid production of presence" by specifying the semiotic mechanisms through which such presence is operationalized in campaign settings.

Analytically, leadership semiology requires a multi-layered examination that goes beyond cataloguing signs. As Wempi and Chrisdina (2023, pp. 14–15) outline, a comprehensive analysis must account for the meaning formed, the signs attached to or by a leader and the organizational arena in which they operate, the style of sign presentation, the media channels employed, the characteristics of the audience as sign readers, the signs exchanged socially and digitally, and the meaning ultimately captured by stakeholders. This staged analytical procedure distinguishes leadership semiology from more static semiotic inventories by insisting on the dynamic, relational, and context-dependent nature of political sign-making. The framework is also consistent with Fajri and Liwoso's (2024) demonstration that signs and meanings are not pre-given but are actively formed through the social dynamics embedded in discourse (p. 192). Critically, this relational orientation addresses a limitation in earlier semiotic studies of Indonesian politics such as those analyzing political posters (Qolam, 2025; Panggabean et al., 2025) or figurative language in presidential debates (Syamsuddin S Munfarida, 2024; Rafi'i et al., 2025) which have tended to treat signs as fixed textual objects rather than as products of ongoing negotiation between leaders, media, and publics.

Existing research on leadership semiotics confirms that leaders construct political identity through the coordinated use of verbal and non-verbal signs. A bibliometric study by Aprianto, Anggreni, and Virga (2025) finds that social media has become the primary arena for producing leadership discourse through symbols, language, and performativity, reinforcing the view that digital platforms do not merely transmit pre-formed messages but actively shape the semiotic environment in which leadership meanings are constructed. Analyses of Indonesian political debates further reveal that a candidate's gestures, facial expressions, intonation, and communication style significantly influence voter perception, confirming that non-verbal aspects constitute an integral dimension of political meaning-production (Sutrisno et al., 2024). Beyond individual performativity, leaders can also mobilize popular cultural symbols to build inclusive political identities. Christianauli and Wempi (2024) demonstrate this through a semiotic analysis of Ganjar Pranowo's leadership, where traditional Indonesian cuisine functions as a symbolic means to project an "Indonesia-centric" image and appeal to a wide audience. This finding extends the semiotic understanding of leadership by showing that non-verbal signs and cultural symbols can transcend local legitimacy to embrace pluralistic national identities. However, these studies share a common limitation: they primarily analyze sign production that leaders create and display without systematically tracing how those signs are received, redistributed, and amplified by audiences and intermediaries across communication networks.

It is precisely this gap that motivates the present study's theoretical contribution: linking the semiotic production of leadership signs to the formation of what we term an "active echo space." In communication studies, the echo chamber concept has been extensively theorized as a phenomenon in which individuals are predominantly exposed to belief-consistent content, creating insular information environments that reinforce pre-existing attitudes (Cinelli et al., 2021). Törnberg (2022) further demonstrates that homogeneous networks amplify particular narratives through repeated exposure and social validation, producing cascading

effects of information diffusion. Yet existing echo chamber research has developed largely within media studies and political psychology, with limited engagement with semiotic theory. This study proposes that the echo chamber is not merely a structural property of media networks but also a semiotic phenomenon: the signs fabricated by a leader undergo amplification as campaign teams and supporters refabricate, redistribute, and recontextualize them across digital and interpersonal channels, generating an “active echo space” in which the original sign’s meaning is iteratively reinforced, validated, and naturalized. By integrating Barthes’s concept of myth where historically contingent meanings become “taken-for-granted” with the echo chamber’s mechanism of repetitive reinforcement, this study offers a theoretical bridge between semiotic analysis and contemporary media ecology, providing an analytical vocabulary for understanding how cultural signs are not only produced by leaders but actively sustained and amplified by community networks in the context of electoral campaigns.

2. Method

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative research design, which seeks to understand and explain social phenomena through the meanings that participants ascribe to them (Denzin S Lincoln, 2018). Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to this study’s objectives because it allows researchers to explore processes and meanings from the perspective of the research subjects through inductive, descriptive analysis (Fadli, 2021; Suwendra, 2018). The specific focus is on the verbal and non-verbal semiotic signs deployed by Rano Karno in his campaign for the 2024 Jakarta Regional Head Election, and the processes through which these signs are fabricated, amplified, and received within the electoral context.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques. The primary method was semi-structured interviews, which allowed the researchers to pursue emerging themes while maintaining focus on the study’s analytical categories. This approach is consistent with Maxwell’s (2020) view that less structured interview formats enable researchers to gain richer and more complex insights into participants’ experiences and perspectives. Interviews were supplemented by direct observations of campaign events, public appearances, and digital media content, as well as a literature study of media coverage and campaign materials related to Rano Karno’s candidacy.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select informants who could provide distinct perspectives on the semiotic construction of Rano Karno’s Betawi-centric campaign. Three categories of informants were identified: (1) a media professional with direct experience covering Jakarta’s political landscape specifically, Ismail Marjuki, Editor-in-Chief of Jawa Post News, who provided insight into how media framed Rano Karno’s campaign signs (interviewed October 16, 2025); (2) a campaign insider, referred to by the pseudonym REP, who served as Senior Strategy Social Media on the Pramono–Rano success team and offered an insider perspective on the deliberate fabrication and amplification of Betawi cultural symbols (interviewed October 17, 2025); and (3) an ordinary citizen and voter, Diva A., who represented the sign-reader perspective how members of the public interpreted and responded to Rano Karno’s cultural signs (interviewed October 1, 2025). A fourth informant, Firgiawan Y., was also interviewed as a voter (October 7, 2025) to provide an additional public perspective and to enable cross-validation of sign-reader interpretations. The selection of informants across these three categories media, campaign team, and public was designed to capture the full semiotic

circuit from sign production through mediation to reception, consistent with the multi-layered analytical requirements of the leadership semiology framework (Wempi S Chrisdina, 2023).

Data analysis followed a systematic three-stage procedure grounded in Wempi's Leadership Semiology framework. In the first stage, open coding, interview transcripts and observational notes were read iteratively and segmented into meaning units. Each unit was assigned a descriptive code corresponding to a semiotic element. For example, an informant's statement that "he often wears sadaria clothes, continues to be Betawi or Betawi style peci" was coded as "non-verbal sign: traditional Betawi attire," while an observation that Rano Karno consistently used the Betawi dialect and typical greetings in public appearances was coded as "verbal sign: Betawi linguistic markers." In the second stage, axial coding, the descriptive codes were organized into higher-order analytical categories aligned with the leadership semiology framework: (a) sign creation the leader's deliberate construction of verbal and non-verbal signs; (b) meaning formation the denotative and connotative meanings produced by these signs; (c) communication channels the media and platforms through which signs were disseminated; (d) sign readers—how audiences interpreted and responded to the signs;

(e) favors the associative effects and perceptual outcomes; (f) communicators the role of intermediaries in redistributing signs; and (g) active echo space the cumulative amplification environment. In the third stage, interpretive synthesis, the categorized data were analyzed through the lens of Barthes's secondary signification to identify how first-order denotative signs (e.g., Betawi clothing as traditional dress) were transformed into second-order connotative myths (e.g., Rano Karno as an "authentic Betawi leader"), and how these myths were sustained through the echo space mechanism.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several verification strategies were employed. Data triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing information across the three informant categories (media, campaign team, and public) and across data collection methods (interviews, observations, and document analysis). When informants from different categories independently identified the same semiotic elements for instance, all three groups identified Betawi attire, Betawi dialect, and the Si Doel persona as core signs the convergence strengthened the validity of the interpretation. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with informants to verify accuracy. The researchers also maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018), to document analytical decisions, emerging interpretations, and potential researcher biases. In terms of reflexive positioning, the researchers acknowledge that as communication scholars based in Jakarta, they possess familiarity with Betawi cultural symbols and Indonesian political dynamics that facilitated nuanced interpretation, while also recognizing that this proximity required conscious efforts to maintain analytical distance and avoid taking culturally embedded meanings for granted.

This study adhered to established ethical standards for qualitative research. Prior to each interview, informants were provided with a verbal explanation of the study's purpose, scope, and intended use of the data, and verbal informed consent was obtained before recording commenced. Informants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. To protect participant confidentiality, one informant from the campaign team was assigned a pseudonym (REP), while the other informants consented to be identified

by name in the published findings. All interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely and accessed only by the research team.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings and analysis organized into three thematic clusters. The first cluster, “Semiotic Construction of Leadership Identity,” examines how Rano Karno functions as a creator of signs, the meanings these signs carry, and the specific verbal and non-verbal sign systems deployed in the campaign (covered under the subsections “Rano Karno as the Creator of the Signs,” “Meaning,” and “Sign”). The second cluster, “Channels of Dissemination and Reception,” analyzes the communication channels through which these signs are distributed and the interpretive practices of voters as sign readers (covered under “Communication Channels” and “Sign Reader”). The third cluster, “Amplification and Echo Effects,” explores how favorable perceptions are communicated and amplified into an active echo chamber that reinforces Rano Karno’s Betawi-centric political identity (covered under “Favors,” “Communicator,” and “Active Echo Chamber”). Within each subsection, the results from interview data and observational findings are presented first, followed by an analytical discussion that situates these findings within the relevant theoretical frameworks. This organizational approach is adopted to enhance readability and to ensure that descriptive findings are clearly distinguished from interpretive analysis.

Rano Karno as the Creator of the Signs

In the study of leadership semiotics, leaders are not only positioned as symbols, but also as sign-makers who consciously choose, use, and disseminate symbols, both verbal and non-verbal, to build image, legitimacy, and closeness to the public. As stated by Kriyantono (2017), in political communication, symbols and representations play a crucial role in the construction of the leader's image.

As an actor known through the series *Si Doel Anak Sekolahan*, then as the Governor of Banten, and a candidate for Deputy Governor of DKI Jakarta 2024, Rano Karno has consistently used Betawi identity as a strategic element. According to Ismail Marjuki, Editor-in-Chief of *Jawa Post News*, “[...] public figures who are firmly rooted in Betawi culture ... a mature politician, with bureaucratic experience...” (Marjuki, I., Personal Communication, October 16, 2025). This statement underlines that Rano is not only framed as a symbol, but as an actor who consciously shapes a cultural symbol.

A resource person who is a member of the success team, stated that the campaign was structured with elements of Betawi culture as the “main axis”:

“We are deliberately playing in the cultural narrative, because Mr. Rano is already very attached to the Betawi identity...” (REP, Personal Interview, October 17, 2025). This statement confirms that the campaign does not only use symbols passively, but treats cultural symbols as Strategic Arsenal.”

Through the process of creating the sign, Rano Karno transformed Betawi identity into symbolic capital that strengthened the legitimacy of his leadership. As noted in the study “Politics through Fashion” (2023), the attributes of a leader’s clothing and style can serve as instruments

of political communication. Rano Karno consciously constructed a symbolic framework verbal and non-verbal that combines Betawi culture with the image of modern leadership, positioning himself as a “rooted but progressive” leader for Jakarta.

However, this sign-creation process warrants critical scrutiny. First, the characterization of Rano Karno as an “authentic Betawi figure” is itself a constructed narrative that glosses over his Javanese ethnic background, a point that opponents and skeptical observers have raised to question the genuineness of his cultural positioning. The deliberate nature of the campaign’s cultural strategy acknowledged openly by the campaign insider (REP) suggests that these signs are products of calculated political branding rather than organic cultural expression. Second, the data presented in this subsection are drawn predominantly from sources sympathetic to the campaign (the success team member and a supportive media figure), which risks producing a one-sided account of sign creation. Rival candidates’ supporters may interpret the same signs not as authentic cultural representation but as strategic appropriation of Betawi identity for electoral gain. Future analyses would benefit from incorporating perspectives of political opponents, independent cultural commentators, and voters who viewed this strategy with skepticism, in order to present a more balanced assessment of the sign-creation process.

Meaning

In the 2024 Jakarta Regional Elections, Rano Karno used Betawi identity as an integral part of his political communication strategy. Verbally, he consistently uses the local dialect and dialect, namely Betawi, such as on various campaign occasions, greeting supporters, and using typical Betawi phrases that are familiar to the ears of the people of Jakarta so as to create the meaning of “original Betawi people”. This strategy of using ethnic identity in political communication is in line with the findings of Priyono (2018) who stated that “local identity becomes an effective symbolic capital in local political contestation, especially when candidates are able to articulate that identity as an authentic representation of the voting community” (p. 45). His nickname, “Si Doel”, has become a strong political asset because it associates him directly with figures who represent the Betawi community on television screens for decades. The use of this language is not just a style of speech, but a political statement that he is part of the Betawi community who feel that his identity is increasingly marginalized in the capital.

Non-verbally, Rano Karno displays the image of Betawi through a choice of fashion and visual symbols. According to Hamid (2019), “non-verbal communication in political campaigns, including the choice of costumes and cultural symbols, serves as an image-forming mechanism that can create psychological closeness to voters who have similar cultural backgrounds” (p. 112). His gestures and body language also reflect the simplicity and familiarity that are characteristic of Betawi culture. The selection of campaign locations in Betawi villages, traditional markets, and areas that have historically been pockets of the Betawi community also reinforced the narrative that he is an authentic representation of Jakarta who understands the city’s cultural roots.

This strategy of emphasizing Betawi identity has a strategic political dimension. Rano Karno seems to want to take advantage of the sentiment of the Betawi people who feel increasingly displaced from their own hometown due to massive modernization and urbanization. Savirani and Aspinall (2017) explain that “identity politics in Indonesia’s local

context often emerge in response to the marginalization of certain ethnic groups, where candidates take advantage of primordial solidarity to mobilize political support" (p. 78). By positioning himself as a "native son of Jakarta", he tries to build an emotional connection with voters who yearn for a more inclusive Jakarta to the local culture. The political message is that Jakarta needs leaders who not only understand the physical needs of the city, but also value and preserve the cultural identity that is the soul of the capital. This is also a differentiator from other contestants who may not have as strong Betawi cultural roots as he does.

However, this identity strategy also faces challenges in the context of Jakarta, which is very heterogeneous and cosmopolitan. Rano Karno must balance between strengthening the support base of the Betawi community while maintaining appeal for voters from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In this context, Muhtadi (2020) reminds that the use of identity politics in heterogeneous urban societies carries the risk of polarization, requiring candidates to frame identity narratives within inclusivity and common interests (p. 156). Critically, the meaning construction analyzed above tends to privilege a sympathetic reading of Betawi signs. Yet signs are inherently polysemic; they generate multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings depending on the interpreter's cultural position. For non-Betawi voters, the same verbal and non-verbal signs that connote authenticity and cultural rootedness for Betawi audiences may instead connote ethnic exclusivism or calculated nostalgia. Firgiawan's own observation that "many people seem to disagree with him because Rano Karno himself 'said' not a native Betawi" (Firgiawan, Y., Personal Communication, October 7, 2025) reveals an oppositional reading already circulating among the electorate one in which the connotative layer of "authentic Betawi leader" collapses under scrutiny of Rano Karno's actual ethnic lineage. This counter-reading suggests that for skeptical audiences, the Barthesian myth does not naturalize successfully; rather, it is perceived as an ideological construction, exposing the gap between the candidate's performed identity and his biographical background. The present analysis, constrained by its reliance on a limited number of informants, cannot fully map the range of oppositional or negotiated readings that Rano Karno's signs may produce across Jakarta's diverse electorate. Nonetheless, the existence of such counter-interpretations underscores that cultural identity, while a significant political resource, is also a contested terrain whose semiotic effectiveness is audience-dependent rather than universal.

Sign

In semiotic theory, signs consist of signifiers (physical forms) and signified (mental concepts), and they operate as representational systems that communicate ideology, identity, and values to audiences (Peirce, in Chandler, 2017, p. 29; Sobur, 2016, p. 87). Within leadership semiology, these signs serve a dual function: they communicate personal identity while constructing the desired image of leadership, building legitimacy through complex processes of signification (Gaffney, 2016, p. 12). In Rano Karno's 2024 Jakarta campaign, verbal and non-verbal signs were strategically deployed to construct specific meanings in the minds of voters. Interview data reinforce this analytical framing. Ismail Marjuki, Editor-in-Chief of Jawa Post News, noted that the media consistently framed Rano Karno as a figure with a "dual character" on the one hand a public figure deeply rooted in Betawi culture through his role as Si Doel, and on the other an experienced politician with a mature bureaucratic track record (Marjuki, I., Personal Communication, October 16, 2025). This media framing indicates that signs of Betawi identity functioned not merely as visual ornaments but as instruments of political legitimacy.

Rano Karno's verbal cues in the campaign include the use of Betawi dialect, typical greetings such as "Encim" and "Encang," and references to the character "Si Doel." Following Barthes' semiotic framework (Chandler, 2017), these signs operate on two levels: at the denotative level, the Betawi language functions as the local dialect of Jakarta, while at the connotative level, it carries deeper meanings of authenticity, cultural rootedness, and solidarity with the marginalized Betawi community. The use of regional language in political campaigns is widely recognized as a semiotic strategy to activate collective memory and primordial solidarity among voters (Piliang, 2018, p. 134; Ladkin, 2020, p. 89). Ismail noted that the media's frequent use of the greeting "Bang Doel" in news headlines functioned as a narrative of closeness, indicating that the Si Doel persona had become a connotative sign for Betawi authenticity (Marjuki, I., Personal Communication, October 16, 2025). The name "Si Doel" thus serves as an icon connecting Rano Karno to the popular narrative of Betawi life, positioning him as a leader who is accessible and relatable.

Rano Karno's non-verbal signs include traditional Betawi clothing, cocoa clothes, black peci, and sadariah as well as body gestures reflecting simplicity and familiarity. Ismail highlighted that these visual elements became the most prominent symbols in media coverage, depicting "simplicity and closeness to small communities" (Marjuki, I., Personal Communication, October 16, 2025). In semiotic terms, clothing in political communication functions as an iconic sign that visually communicates cultural affiliation and ideological positioning (Fiske, 2016, p. 201). These non-verbal signs were also reinforced through cultural activities and events involving local communities. "We educate the young people of Karang Taruna to become event organizers, and they continue to help in PRJ, even though there are professional vendors. That's a strategy to lift the culture and economy of Jakarta's young people" (REP, Personal Interview, October 17, 2025). These findings are in line with Fiske's (2016) assertion that "clothing in political communication serves as an iconic sign that visually communicates a candidate's cultural affiliation, social status, and ideological positioning" (p. 201). Furthermore, the results of an interview with REP (Pseudonym), a Senior Strategy Social Media of Pramono-Rano's team, confirmed this strategy. REP stated that cultural symbols were integral to the campaign: "There are tanjidor, kroncong, and we use the Betawi shawl (Cukin) every campaign, very identical to Betawi" (REP, Personal Interview, October 17, 2025). This consistent deployment of cultural attributes by the entire team illustrates how non-verbal signs were systematically managed rather than incidentally displayed.

The choice of campaign locations in Betawi villages and traditional markets also functions as a spatial sign, creating legitimacy through geographical and cultural proximity to a particular social base (Wibowo, 2017, p. 156). These non-verbal signs collectively construct what Collinson and Grint (2019) term "embodied leadership" That is, leadership manifested through body, appearance, and performativity, where every element from clothing to gestures communicates the leader's values and relationship with followers (p. 234). Ismail framed this symbolic strategy as "cultural politics," framing Rano Karno as an authentic cultural leader rather than an elitist politician (Marjuki, I., Personal Communication, October 16, 2025) a characterization consistent with Gaffney's (2016) theory of legitimacy built through signs of morality and authenticity.

Overall, the sign system deployed by Rano Karno forms a myth in Barthes' sense a secondary communication system that transforms historically contingent meanings into

seemingly natural, Taken-for-granted. Ismail noted that the media views Rano Karno as a “successful Betawi child without forgetting his origins,” suggesting that his Betawi image functions as emotional branding in the eyes of the public (Marjuki, I., Personal Communication, October 16, 2025). The verbal and non-verbal signs used simultaneously create the narrative that Rano Karno is “naturally” the right leader for Jakarta. Yet as Eco (2019) reminds, each sign is polysemic and its effectiveness depends on Shared Cultural Codes between the sender and the receiver of the message” (p. 78). In heterogeneous Jakarta, the Betawi identity system must be negotiated with diverse voting communities. This reflects what Fairhurst and Connaughton (2020) term “Leadership as co-construction” the view that leadership meaning arises from the dynamic interaction between signs produced by a leader and the interpretations given by followers within specific socio-cultural contexts (p. 167).

Communication Channels

In semiotic terms, communication channels function as the material infrastructure through which signs are circulated from their producers to their interpreters (Fiske, 2016). The effectiveness of a semiotic strategy depends not only on the signs themselves but on the channels that carry them, since each medium imposes its own codes and constraints on signification. In the 2024 Jakarta Regional Election campaign, the Pramono–Rano pair deployed a multi-channel strategy that integrated conventional, interpersonal, and digital platforms, each serving a distinct semiotic function in the dissemination of Betawi-centric signs. Billboards installed across Jakarta’s major thoroughfares, bearing the slogan “Jakarta Menyala” and the colloquial tagline “Kagak Ribet, Dah!”, constituted the most visible channel. These billboards depicted Pramono in traditional Betawi attire with open arms and Rano Karno in a white cocoa shirt and black peci visual signs whose spatial placement in public areas transformed urban infrastructure into a semiotic field for identity projection.



Figure 2. Pramono Anung and Rano Karno’s campaign billboard

Semiotically, the billboard operates as what Kaid and Holtz-Bacha (2021) describe as a high-visibility channel that fixes signs in public space, ensuring repeated exposure and enabling the naturalization of connotative meanings through spatial ubiquity. In this case, the juxtaposition of Betawi dress codes with a populist Betawi dialect slogan created a denotative–connotative layering within a single visual frame. This semiotic anchoring through outdoor media complements Thorson and Wells’s (2016) argument that visual channels increase political awareness and reinforce candidate identity through repeated visual encounters in public spaces.

Whereas billboards fix signs in static visual form, interpersonal channels allow signs to be performed in real time, enabling what Collinson and Grint (2019) call “embodied leadership” through face-to-face interaction. The Pramono–Rano campaign conducted

32 face-to-face campaigns, 3 limited meetings, and 41 other activities between September 25 and October 9, 2024, distributed across all five Jakarta municipalities. From a semiotic perspective, the sheer frequency and geographical spread of these encounters function as signs of accessibility and grassroots commitment signifiers whose cumulative effect aims to naturalize the connotation that the candidates are “of the people.” McNair (2017) observes that multi-channel political campaigns achieve effectiveness precisely through this complementarity, where different channels reinforce different dimensions of the same signified meaning. A member of the Success Team confirmed the interpretive dimension of this strategy:

"The attraction feels inclusive because from each campaign there are also many who present a direct dialogue with residents, it may be one of their attractions to have a direct dialogue, so we also feel that we can convey our aspirations and complaints to the prospective leaders, maybe yes" (Diva, A., Personal Communication, October 1, 2025).

The digital channel introduced a third semiotic register: one governed by the participatory codes of social media platforms. Through TikTok, Instagram, and X, the campaign's Betawi-centric signs entered what Thorson and Wells (2016) term “curated flows,” where users recontextualize and redistribute political signs according to platform-specific norms of brevity, shareability, and affective engagement. The campaign team, through the Instagram account @revisijakarta, facilitated this process by translating traditional cultural signs into digital content formats accessible to Generation Z and millennial voters. This multi-platform approach is significant semiotically because each platform imposes distinct codes: TikTok's algorithmic amplification of short-form video, Instagram's visual aesthetics, X's discursive format that reshape the connotative register of the same Betawi signs for different interpretive communities. A member of the campaign team involved in the digital effort confirmed this:

"Times, it's just that I'm not from the party. Try to check @revisijakarta. Cave is part of it."

(Diva, A., Personal Communication, October 1, 2025).

In an interview with REP, it was explained how the team successfully adjusted the selection of social media to the target audience:

"Oh we are on all social media, I mean it's on TikTok, it's on X, it's on Facebook... I'm more of a strategy to go to big social media, TikTok, Instagram... Because of my skill there, that's just me." (REP, Personal Interview, October 17, 2025)

Beyond digital platforms, a fourth channel operated through local community networks such as Karang Taruna, which served as grassroots disseminators of campaign signs. These informal networks function as what could be termed interpersonal semiotic relays, where campaign signs are reinterpreted and endorsed through face-to-face trust relationships rather than algorithmic distribution:

"One of the strategies is that we gather young people in Karang Taruna in every Jakarta, we will give training to create an event organizer." (REP, Personal Interview, October 17, 2025)

Taken together, the multi-channel strategy functions semiotically as a system of complementary sign environments. Billboards anchor Betawi signs in public visual space; face-to-face encounters perform them through embodied interaction; digital platforms circulate them through participatory codes; and community networks validate them through interpersonal trust. This layered dissemination exemplifies what Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016) call “multi channel engagement,” but viewed through a semiotic lens, it reveals how the same set of cultural signifiers acquires different connotative inflections depending on the channel through which it is mediated. The semiotic effectiveness of this strategy lies not in any single channel but in the redundancy and mutual reinforcement across channels, which increases the probability that Betawi-centric signs are naturalized across diverse interpretive communities.

However, this multi-channel analysis carries methodological limitations. Specific engagement metrics such as follower counts, view rates, share statistics, or virality indicators for the @revisijakarta Instagram account or the campaign’s TikTok content were not systematically collected as part of this study. Future research should integrate digital analytics data (e.g., impressions, reach, engagement rates, and audience demographics from platform insights) to complement the qualitative findings and provide a more robust assessment of the actual semiotic impact of these digital strategies. Additionally, the differential impact of these communication channels across demographic groups remains underexplored. TikTok and Instagram were primarily aimed at younger voters (Generation Z and millennials), while billboards and face-to-face meetings targeted broader and older demographics. A more fine-grained audience segmentation analysis examining how voters of different age groups, socioeconomic classes, and ethnic backgrounds differentially engaged with these channels would strengthen future research on the semiotic effectiveness of multi-channel political campaign strategies in diverse urban environments such as Jakarta.

Sign Reader

In the perspective of semiotics, the sign reader or interpreter has a central role in the process of signification and the construction of meaning. Peirce (Chandler, 2017) asserts that signs only become meaningful through the interpreter, the mental process activated when a reader encounters a sign. In the context of Rano Karno’s campaign in the 2024 Jakarta Regional Elections, voters as sign readers do not passively receive messages but actively interpret verbal and non-verbal signs through culturally situated reading practices. This process of interpretation is shaped by the interaction between voters’ cultural knowledge, the socio-political context of Jakarta, and their personal experiences with Betawi representation in popular media. Analytically, the key question is not merely what signs voters identify, but how different social positions produce divergent interpretive outcomes from the same semiotic material.

Interview data reveal that different social positions produce distinct reading strategies. A campaign insider (Diva), operating within the organizational framework of the Success Team, read Rano Karno’s non-verbal signs through a strategic-instrumental lens, cataloguing specific semiotic elements Sadaria shirts, Betawi peci, cocoa shirts, Betawi shawls, and ondel-ondel ornaments at campaign sites as deliberate identity markers:

"Usually, for example, when he goes to the campaign, he often wears sadaria clothes, continues to be Betawi or Betawi style peci or uses such a Betawi batik shawl and actually at every campaign event there are many Betawi ornaments such as ondel-ondel tajinur so it's not just from the clothes." (Diva, A., Personal Communications, October 1, 2025).

The same informant also identified verbal signs Betawi dialect and pantun (rhymes) as semiotic differentiators that distinguished Rano Karno from competitors such as Ridwan Kamil and Dharma Pongrekun:

"Betawi often uses the Betawi dialect, yes, mostly he uses the Betawi dialect and there are rhymes as well, sometimes at the end of the end, like that, okay, it means this Betawi strategy that makes him different from other candidates, namely there are other candidates such as rano karno, eh sorry Ridwan Kamil and Dharma pongrekun." (Diva, A., Personal Communication, October 1, 2025).

A contrasting reading practice emerged from Firgiawan, an ordinary voter outside the campaign apparatus. His interpretation extended the non-verbal sign inventory beyond official campaign elements to include broader cultural associations the sarong worn as a neck sash, peci, and even the oplet vehicle historically associated with Betawi transport. This divergence is analytically significant: whereas the insider read signs as managed campaign assets, the outsider read them as indexical traces of a broader cultural identity:

"If we see Mr. Rano Karno, actually, at a glance, from the way he dresses, yes, he uses some kind of Betawi suits, yes, he continues to be covered with a sarong, yes, he is scarded, that's the term, it shows one of the identities of his Betawi, he continues to see how he also communicates, yes, then we see in his historical traces, he also often plays films that do smell of Betawi, yes and also like Actually, it's non-verbal, I don't observe too much, but if you look at the way you dress, yes, you have to wear a shawl with a sarong, yes, it's put on the right and left sides, eh, he's like symbolizing Betawi." (Firgiawan, Y., Personal Communication, October 7, 2025).

Firgiawan's reading further extended to the verbal domain, where the "Si Doel" persona functioned as a master signifier that collapsed the distinction between the fictional television character and the political candidate. This semiotic conflation is analytically noteworthy: it suggests that for some sign readers, the Si Doel character operates as an iconic sign (in Peirce's terms) that indexes popularity, simplicity, and Betawi belonging simultaneously:

"If you look at the campaign that is circulating, Rano Karno's verbal communication that is prominent in Betawian is quite thick. The most obvious and highlight, yes, the branding of "Si Doel" itself. Verbally, he not only looks like Si Doel, but he shows off that persona. The character of Si Doel has become a symbol of the 'Betawi people' who are popular, simple, and educated. In addition, he also often uses greetings, and Betawi accents in various videos or when meeting residents. Actually, this is a classic strategy to build emotional closeness, as if he is one frequency and part of the people of Jakarta." (Firgiawan, Y., Personal Communication, October 7, 2025).

Synthesizing the divergent readings documented above, a clear pattern of interpretive variation emerges that can be theorized through Fish's (1980, in Schnurr, 2019) concept of "interpretive communities." Fish argues that meaning is not inherent in signs but is produced by communities sharing reading strategies and interpretive assumptions (p. 15). The interview data, though limited in sample size, suggest the operation of at least four such communities within Jakarta's electorate: (1) the Betawi community, for whom Rano Karno's signs confirm authentic cultural representation; (2) the urban middle class, who may apply a skeptical reading that decodes identity politics as strategic calculation; (3) younger voters oriented toward substantive policy evaluation rather than cultural symbolism; and (4) non-Betawi migrant communities with limited attachment to the Betawi narrative. These communities do not merely differ in their evaluations of the candidate; they differ in the interpretive codes they apply to the same signifiers, producing fundamentally distinct semiotic objects from identical material.

However, this typology remains analytically suggestive rather than empirically definitive, given the limited number of informants. The interview data cannot fully map how each interpretive community actually processes Rano Karno's semiotic strategy. For instance, older Betawi voters may read signs through nostalgia for Si Doel Anak Sekolahan, while non-Betawi migrant communities Javanese, Sundanese, Minangkabau, and Chinese-Indonesian residents constituting a significant portion of Jakarta's population may respond to the same signifiers with indifference or alienation. Future studies should employ structured interview protocols or survey instruments with representative sampling across these communities, moving beyond identifying interpretive variation toward explaining the specific mechanisms through which different social positions shape the reception of political semiotic strategies.

Favors

With various signs attached to Rano Karno, it causes a perception effect where people associate themselves with Betawi culture. This is supported by the statement of the resource person who is an ordinary citizen:

"Specifically, I actually see him (Rano Karno) as representing Betawi, yes, from the way he moves, yes, how he seems to be like this, yes, he likes like silat like that, yes, that's what I've seen before, it's also one of the forms of what is his name to Betawian, and if it's actually non-verbal, I don't observe too much, yes, but if you look at the way he dresses, yes, there's a wear. Peci wears a sarong, yes, it is placed on the right and left sides, eh he is like symbolizing Betawi" (Firgiawan, Y., Personal Communication, October 7, 2025).

The association of Betawi in Rano Karno, can be seen visually through the clothes he wore during the campaign:

"It is very representative because from every campaign from the clothes also often wear Betawi traditional clothes like that." (Diva, A., Personal Communication, October 1, 2025).

In addition to the community, resource persons from the media also emphasized that Betawi symbols on Rano Karno are consistently observed. According to Bang Ismail, editor-in-chief of Jawa Post News: "If I look at it, it's already comprehensive, but from the media, it still has

to be balanced, right. When we report it ourselves or make mistakes, yes, we have to be fair to say that it is wrong. But if, for example, he is right, we must be taken care of and we are justified. Because there are indeed many such incidents in terms of law or others." (Marjuki, I., Personal Communication, October 16, 2025).

Mr. Ismail also emphasized that Rano Karno's Betawi narrative is not just a political image, but a vivid and emotional cultural representation: "The use of cultural symbols is an attraction of news. That's right, because indeed the symbol of Betawi culture is a magnet. Magnets in the news... from the media itself really presents a sense of belonging for its readers, the term is easy to read, pleasant to hear, and the average reader is indeed a Jakarta citizen who longs for the face of a city that is very humane, and does not lose its cultural roots, that Betawi still exists" (Marjuki, I., Personal Communication, October 16, 2025). This is in accordance with the findings of Garcia (2018), that "Symbolism ... plays a crucial role in forming collective identity and fostering community development." As the visual and symbolic representation of culture in the media plays a role in "affirming the collective identity and creating a sense of belonging for the community (in this case the Betawi tribe) represented".

Mr. Ismail also emphasized the role of cultural identity in building public perception: "I can admit, it's true that a Rano Karno is a Betawi figure. But in a case like this, we also recognize that we must be fair as well. Where was he born? Where did it come from? Like that. But indeed, if he has entered the territory to bring the Betawi, we admit that Rano Karno really guarded and brought his Betawi. It's not where he was born, where he came from." (Marjuki, I., Personal Communication, October 16, 2025).

From these various perspectives, it can be concluded that the Betawi identity inherent in Rano Karno is not only recognized by the general public but also strengthened by the media. The strategy of using these cultural symbols strengthens Rano Karno's position as a figure who is on the side of preserving local culture and building an authentic image in the eyes of the public.

Communicator

In spreading opinions, social media is a mainstream channel to execute this. Not only opinions, an individual's agreement with other individuals or partiality also occurs on social media. This is in line with Hermida's (2014) research which states that social media allows users to share news and information, as well as display their attitude towards an issue publicly through affirmative actions such as giving 'likes', sharing content, or commenting (p. 663-679). By sharing what an individual agrees with, there is persuasive communication because of the emotional attachment that is built:

"At some point, we will definitely help to voice the vision, mission, and uniqueness of the Rano Karno and Pram candidates." (Diva, A., Personal Communication, October 1, 2025).



Figure 3. Personal documentation from one of the sources on a personal Instagram account

Other speakers also added "Well, first of all, I was introduced to it before we were the first child of this couple. Pramona's son, his son Om Rano, Mas Raka's son. Because it's true, our hearts are so important because of friendship, it's important to have friendships. It's impossible to go the other way around. Now because my team and I also previously handled the vice presidential candidate, I previously handled Prof. Mahfud, I all held his social media, including digital strategies that will be issued on social media, all of which I handled. Well, coincidentally, because of that there are also friends, they are friends too, let's help too, let's work together, let's help to win the Pramono-Rano team." (REP, Personal Communication, October 17, 2025).



Figure 4. Activity documentation from one of the sources on a campaign team Instagram account

As part of a successful team, sharing posts about Rano Karno's campaign team activities is an obligation. These obligations are not only fulfilling the transactional aspect of carrying out tasks, but there is also an emotional side or attachment before the individual agrees to join it. Political activism and participation in campaign teams are often based on affective commitment and emotional attachment that precedes the decision to join (Theocharis S Lowe, 2016).

Partiality by expressing one's approval of an individual, whether from appearance, ideas and others, sometimes does not only occur in the body of the success team or the campaign team. A person who is "too confident" to the point of even idolizing, can also share ideas or figures that are idolized consciously through direct or indirect communication. These communications were disseminated through his personal social media accounts, although he knew there would be many opinions of other individuals who believed the individual was affiliated with the person he believed was affiliated with, even though in reality there was no underlying transactional or organizational involvement. Social media allows individuals to publicly express their political preferences and become independent political communicators who spread messages without direction or compensation from official campaigns (Freelon et al., 2020). These emotions were felt by the resource person who is an ordinary citizen as well as a voter in the 2024 Jakarta Regional Election:

"On several occasions, I have actually published tweets or comments on Instagram that were made or displayed with Rano Karno. The uniqueness of him is that although on several occasions many people seem to disagree with him because Rano Karno himself "said" not a native Betawi, but yes, as a candidate for governor of Jakarta at that time, I think Rano Karno should behave and behave like a Betawi person" (Firgiawan, Y., Personal Communication, October 7, 2025)."



Figure 5. Favors documentation from one of the sources on a X's personal account

Active Echo Chamber

Active echo chamber is a concept from political communication studies describing environments in which individuals or groups are predominantly exposed to information that reinforces their existing beliefs (Cinelli et al., 2021, p. 3). In the context of this study, the concept is employed not as a causal explanation for Rano Karno's electoral performance but as an interpretive framework for understanding the patterns through which Betawi-centric signs were circulated and reinforced within community communication networks. The qualitative data suggest that the Pramono-Rano campaign's semiotic strategy exhibited structural features consistent with echo chamber dynamics namely, selective exposure, in-group reinforcement,

and the progressive narrowing of the interpretive frame though the absence of quantitative engagement metrics means that the scale and causal impact of these dynamics cannot be empirically measured in this study.

The social significance of the active echo chamber in Rano Karno's Betawi-centric strategy can be understood through the lens of collective identity construction. Brubaker (2020) observes that "identity

Politics involves claims made in the name of identity groups, claims for recognition, for equality, for resources, or for political voice" and that in the local context, ethnic identity becomes the basis for strong political mobilization (p. 3). The active echo chamber appears to create a communicative space where Betawi symbols language, traditions, and communal values are repeatedly reproduced and validated, forming what resembles a collective interpretive framework that supports the reading of Rano Karno's leadership as authentic Betawi representation. Importantly, this interpretive pattern should be understood as a tendency observable in the qualitative data rather than a demonstrated causal mechanism. In this reading, the active echo chamber serves as a reflexive mechanism through which the Betawi community actively asserts their identity while projecting Rano Karno as a symbol of leadership that represents their communal aspirations and values.

The interview data also suggest a pattern consistent with what Törnberg (2022) describes as a cascade effect within echo chambers. Törnberg argues that homogeneous networks amplify particular narratives through repeated exposure and social validation (p. 1939). In the Pramono–Rano campaign, this pattern manifested as a snowball dynamic: each iteration of the Betawi-centric message not only amplified the original content but also accumulated layers of interpretation and validation from different community members. REP observed this dynamic directly: *"It's just going to be a snowball, right, later the young people who move below to voice support for Rano Karno"* (REP, Personal Interview, October 17, 2025). Barberá et al. (2019) similarly find that selective exposure mechanisms lead individuals to preferentially engage with like-minded content and sources (p. 7). Applied to this case, the Betawi-centric strategy appears to have gained momentum through sharing and endorsement within community networks. Within this interpretive framework, this pattern may contribute to the perception that support for Rano Karno constitutes a social norm within the Betawi community, which could in turn encourage additional individuals to align with the prevailing sentiment. However, it is important to note that the relationship between echo chamber dynamics and actual electability gains remains an interpretive inference rather than an empirically demonstrated causal link in this study. Without quantitative data on message reach, engagement rates, or voter attitude shifts, the snowball metaphor should be understood as describing an observed interpretive pattern the progressive consolidation and reinforcement of Betawi-centric readings within sympathetic networks rather than as measurable proof of electoral impact.

Before proceeding to the conclusion, several interpretive limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the analysis has predominantly examined sign reception from the perspective of audiences who share Betawi cultural codes. Jakarta's significant Javanese, Sundanese, Minangkabau, and Chinese-Indonesian communities may read the same Betawi-centric symbols not as markers of authentic leadership but as signals of ethnic exclusivity, evoking feelings of non-belonging in a city that is inherently pluralistic. Second, the echo

chamber analysis emphasizes the amplification of favorable interpretations without fully accounting for resistant or oppositional readings circulating in parallel digital spaces. Critical media literacy among urban, educated voters may generate counter-narratives that frame Rano Karno's semiotic strategy as performative appropriation given his Javanese ethnic background. Third, the reliance on informants from within or sympathetic to the campaign may introduce confirmatory bias; a more balanced approach would include voters from non-Betawi backgrounds, undecided voters, and supporters of rival candidates. These limitations do not invalidate the findings but indicate that the semiotic effectiveness of the campaign's echo chamber dynamics is likely more contested and audience-dependent than the present data can fully demonstrate.

4. Conclusion

Rano Karno as the creator of the sign formed the meaning of "Rano Karno Anak Betawi" as a large narrative structured through the use of verbal and non-verbal signs in the content of political communication. At the verbal level, the use of Betawi language, diction choices, and regional stylistics are identity markers that strengthen cultural associations. Meanwhile, at the non-verbal level, visual attributes such as how to dress, selection of iconic Jakarta locations, communication gestures, and Betawi cultural symbols appear as Serve which binds the audience to his representation as an authentic Betawi figure.

This narrative does not run alone. The signs created and represented by Rano Karno were then disseminated through various communication channels, both digital and conventional. The successful team plays an active role as Refabrikator meaning, they repackage, affirm, and distribute the Betawi sign through campaign content, social media, visual publications, and field activities. On the other hand, sign readers (the public and netizens) also act as Broadcasters that expand the echo of messages through digital interaction and public conversation.

This layered process creates what can be termed as Active Echo Chamber Effect, which is a condition when the meaning of "Rano Karno Anak Betawi" continues to be repeated, exchanged, and strengthened in the digital and social space to form a collective meaning. Thus, the use of the attributes of Betawian is not only a symbolic strategy, but also an effective semiotic mechanism in shaping public opinion and constructing Rano Karno's political identity during the gubernatorial election.

This study offers three principal theoretical contributions. First, it advances the field of leadership semiotics by demonstrating that political leaders do not merely deploy pre-existing cultural symbols but actively fabricate, calibrate, and manage semiotic systems that operate simultaneously across verbal and non-verbal registers. By applying Wempi's Leadership Semiology framework to an empirical case, this study extends the largely conceptual literature on leadership as symbolic communication (Fairhurst S Cooren, 2018) by specifying the concrete mechanisms fabrication, amplification, and echo space formation through which semiotic leadership operates in electoral settings. This tripartite model of sign production, redistribution, and collective reinforcement provides an analytical vocabulary that can be applied to leadership semiotic research beyond the Indonesian context.

Second, this study contributes to identity politics scholarship by illustrating how ethnic-cultural identity functions not as a static primordial resource but as a dynamically constructed semiotic product in contemporary electoral competition. The findings reveal that Betawi identity, as mobilized by Rano Karno's campaign, was neither a natural emanation of the candidate's biography nor a simple appeal to communal sentiment; rather, it was a carefully orchestrated system of signs whose effectiveness depended on multi-layered processes of fabrication and audience reception. This insight enriches theoretical understandings of identity politics in plural societies by showing that the semiotic dimension how identity signs are made, circulated, and interpreted is as consequential as the sociological dimension of group membership and mobilization.

Third, this study carries implications for the growing literature on digital campaign studies. The finding that cultural signs undergo transformation as they move across platforms from billboards to TikTok, from face-to-face encounters to Instagram demonstrates that digital media do not merely amplify pre-formed political messages but actively reshape the connotative registers of cultural signs for distinct interpretive communities. The concept of the "active echo space," as developed in this study, provides a semiotic reframing of the echo chamber phenomenon that bridges media ecology and sign theory, offering researchers a more nuanced analytical tool for understanding how political identities are sustained and reinforced in hybrid media environments.

Beyond the Jakarta case, these findings carry broader implications for political communication research and practice. The fabrication amplification-echo space model is not confined to Betawi identity politics; it offers a transferable framework for analyzing how any culturally rooted leadership narrative is constructed and sustained in ethnically diverse electoral contexts worldwide. Political practitioners and campaign strategists may draw from this study the insight that semiotic coherence across channels rather than mere message repetition is the key mechanism through which cultural identity is naturalized as political legitimacy. For scholars of political communication, this study underscores the value of integrating semiotic theory with media ecology and audience reception analysis to achieve a more holistic understanding of how political meaning is produced, contested, and stabilized in contemporary democracies.

Nevertheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, this study relied on a small purposive sample of four informants drawn predominantly from positions sympathetic to the Pramono-Rano campaign, which constrains the generalizability of the findings and may introduce confirmatory bias in the interpretation of sign reception. The absence of informants from non-Betawi communities, supporters of rival candidates, and undecided voters means that oppositional and negotiated readings of the Betawi-centric semiotic strategy remain underrepresented. Second, the study did not collect quantitative digital engagement data (such as follower counts, view rates, share statistics, or audience demographics from platform analytics), which limits the ability to assess the actual scale and impact of the echo space dynamics identified through qualitative analysis. Third, the single-case research design, focused exclusively on the 2024 Jakarta Regional Election, restricts the extent to which the fabrication-amplification-echo space model can be generalized to other electoral contexts and cultural settings.

Comparative studies examining the semiotic strategies of competing candidates within the same election for instance, contrasting Rano Karno's Betawi-centric approach with Ridwan Kamil's and Dharma Pongrekun's campaign semiotics would illuminate how different candidates negotiate cultural identity in a shared electoral space and how voters decode competing sign systems. Cross-regional comparisons with other Indonesian local elections where ethnic identity figures prominently (such as in Yogyakarta, Papua, or North Sulawesi) would test the transferability of the fabrication–amplification–echo space model across diverse cultural and demographic configurations. Mixed-methods designs integrating qualitative semiotic analysis with quantitative digital analytics (platform engagement metrics, audience sentiment analysis, and representative survey data) would enable a more robust assessment of the causal relationships between semiotic strategies and electoral outcomes. Finally, longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of leadership signs across multiple election cycles would provide insight into how semiotic capital is accumulated, contested, and transformed over time, contributing to a more dynamic understanding of leadership semiotics in democratic practice.

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