

***Political Meaning-Making In Indonesian Presidential Debates: A Systematic Review
Of Multimodal Discourse Analysis***

**Pembentukan Makna Politik Dalam Debat Presiden Di Indonesia: Tinjauan Sistematis
Analisis Wacana Multimodal**

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ABSTRACT

Political debates are critical sites of meaning-making in democratic elections, where candidates communicate policies, values, and leadership personas through multiple semiotic modes. This study systematically reviews research on multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) of Indonesian presidential debates published between 2020 and 2025, aiming to synthesize theoretical frameworks, analytical practices, and thematic patterns in political communication. Using a structured systematic literature review, peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters were collected from Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and DOAJ. Studies were screened based on their relevance to Indonesian presidential debates, use of multimodal frameworks, and empirical rigor. The review revealed that social semiotics is the predominant theoretical framework, with verbal language, gesture, and facial expressions being the most analyzed semiotic modes. Dominant themes of political meaning-making include leadership construction, national identity and populist appeals, and interactional power negotiation, often mediated by televised and digital platforms. While multimodality enhances understanding of how meaning is co-constructed, methodological inconsistencies—including small datasets and variable transcription practices—limit comparability across studies. This review highlights the growing importance of multimodal approaches for analyzing political debates in Indonesia and identifies gaps for future research. Specifically, more balanced attention to underexplored semiotic modes, standardized transcription methods, and theoretical integration are needed to advance the field. The study contributes to political discourse research by providing a comprehensive synthesis of recent multimodal analyses, offering insights into the complex ways in which Indonesian presidential candidates communicate meaning to diverse audiences.

Keywords: Indonesian Presidential Debates, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Political Meaning-Making, Social Semiotics, Systematic Literature Review

ABSTRAK

Debat politik merupakan arena penting pembentukan makna dalam pemilihan demokratis, di mana para kandidat mengkomunikasikan kebijakan, nilai-nilai, dan persona kepemimpinan melalui berbagai mode semiotik. Studi ini secara sistematis meninjau penelitian tentang analisis wacana multimodal (MDA) debat presiden Indonesia yang diterbitkan antara tahun 2020 dan 2025, dengan tujuan untuk mensintesis kerangka kerja teoretis, praktik analitis, dan pola tematik dalam komunikasi politik. Dengan menggunakan tinjauan pustaka sistematis yang terstruktur, artikel jurnal yang ditinjau sejawat, prosiding konferensi, dan bab buku dikumpulkan dari Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, dan DOAJ. Studi-studi tersebut disaring berdasarkan relevansinya dengan debat presiden Indonesia, penggunaan kerangka kerja multimodal, dan ketelitian empiris. Tinjauan tersebut mengungkapkan bahwa semiotika sosial merupakan kerangka kerja teoretis yang dominan, dengan bahasa verbal, gerak tubuh, dan ekspresi wajah sebagai mode semiotik yang paling banyak dianalisis. Tema-tema dominan pembentukan makna politik meliputi konstruksi kepemimpinan, identitas nasional dan daya tarik populis, serta negosiasi kekuatan interaksional, yang sering dimediasi oleh platform televisi dan digital. Sementara multimodalitas meningkatkan pemahaman tentang bagaimana makna dikonstruksi bersama Inkonsistensi metodologis—

termasuk kumpulan data yang kecil dan praktik transkripsi yang bervariasi—membatasi kemampuan perbandingan antar studi. Tinjauan ini menyoroti pentingnya pendekatan multimodal yang semakin berkembang untuk menganalisis debat politik di Indonesia dan mengidentifikasi kesenjangan untuk penelitian di masa mendatang. Secara khusus, perhatian yang lebih seimbang terhadap mode semiotik yang kurang dieksplorasi, metode transkripsi yang terstandarisasi, dan integrasi teoretis diperlukan untuk memajukan bidang ini. Studi ini berkontribusi pada penelitian wacana politik dengan memberikan sintesis komprehensif dari analisis multimodal terbaru, menawarkan wawasan tentang cara-cara kompleks di mana kandidat presiden Indonesia mengkomunikasikan makna kepada beragam audiens.

Kata Kunci: Debat Presiden Indonesia, Analisis Wacana Multimodal, Pembuatan Makna Politik, Semiotika Sosial, Tinjauan Literatur Sistematis

1. Introduction

Political debates play a central role in democratic elections, functioning as a key public arena where presidential candidates articulate ideologies, negotiate identities, and persuade voters. In Indonesia, presidential debates have become highly mediated political events that not only convey policy positions but also construct political meaning through language, gesture, visual symbolism, and media framing. As a multicultural and multilingual democracy, Indonesia presents a distinctive context in which political communication is shaped by sociocultural norms, power relations, and evolving media ecologies. Consequently, the study of Indonesian presidential debates has attracted growing scholarly attention, particularly in relation to how meaning is produced beyond spoken language alone.

Traditional analyses of political debates have largely focused on verbal discourse, such as argumentation, rhetoric, and critical discourse strategies (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008). While these approaches have provided valuable insights into ideological positioning and power relations, they often overlook non-verbal and visual elements that significantly contribute to political meaning-making. In contemporary televised and digitally circulated debates, candidates' gestures, facial expressions, posture, gaze, attire, and interaction with media technologies play a crucial role in shaping public perception. This limitation has prompted scholars to adopt multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) as a more comprehensive analytical framework.

Multimodal discourse analysis conceptualizes communication as the interaction of multiple semiotic modes, including language, image, sound, movement, and spatial design (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, 2006). From this perspective, political meaning emerges through the orchestration of these modes rather than through verbal language alone. In political debates, multimodality enables candidates to project authority, empathy, nationalism, or populism through coordinated semiotic choices. As such, MDA has proven particularly useful for examining how political actors strategically construct identities and influence audiences in highly mediated settings.

In the Indonesian context, multimodal studies of presidential debates have explored a range of issues, including leadership representation, populist rhetoric, power asymmetries, and cultural symbolism (Eriyanto, 2018; Wodak, 2015; Herman et al., 2023). These studies often draw on social semiotics and critical discourse traditions to uncover how candidates align themselves with dominant ideologies or challenge existing power structures. However, existing research remains fragmented, employing diverse theoretical frameworks, datasets, and analytical procedures. This diversity makes it difficult to identify overarching patterns or methodological trends in the study of Indonesian presidential debate discourse.

A systematic literature review offers a rigorous approach to synthesizing existing research and mapping the intellectual landscape of a field (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). By systematically identifying, evaluating, and analyzing relevant studies, such a review can highlight dominant themes, theoretical orientations, methodological strengths, and research gaps. Despite the increasing number of multimodal studies on political discourse in Indonesia, there

has been limited effort to synthesize this body of work in a systematic and comprehensive manner, particularly with a focus on presidential debates.

This study addresses that gap by conducting a systematic review of scholarly research on Indonesian presidential debates that employs multimodal discourse analysis. The review focuses on how political meaning is constructed through the interaction of verbal and non-verbal modes, and how scholars conceptualize and operationalize “meaning-making” within this context. By examining patterns across studies, this review seeks to clarify how multimodal resources are used by presidential candidates to project political identities, negotiate power, and engage voters.

Furthermore, this review contributes methodologically by evaluating the analytical frameworks and data sources used in existing studies. Issues such as corpus selection, transcription of multimodal data, and analytical rigor are critically examined. Understanding these methodological practices is essential for advancing future research and ensuring the reliability and comparability of multimodal political discourse studies. The review also considers how technological developments, such as social media dissemination and digital remixing of debate footage, have influenced analytical approaches.

In sum, this systematic review aims to advance the field of political discourse studies by providing a structured overview of multimodal research on Indonesian presidential debates. By synthesizing existing findings and identifying gaps in theory and methodology, the study offers directions for future research on political meaning-making in democratic contexts. Ultimately, this review underscores the importance of multimodality in understanding contemporary political communication and the complex semiotic processes through which political meaning is constructed and contested.

2. Literature Review

1. Political Debates as Sites of Meaning-Making

Political debates have long been recognized as crucial communicative events in electoral processes, serving as platforms where candidates publicly negotiate policies, ideologies, and leadership personas. Scholars argue that debates are not merely informational exchanges but performative acts in which candidates strategically construct meaning to appeal to voters (Chilton, 2004). Meaning-making in political debates involves framing issues, legitimizing authority, and positioning oneself in relation to opponents and the electorate. This process is shaped by institutional norms, media mediation, and audience expectations, making debates a rich site for discourse-oriented inquiry.

2. Discourse and Power in Political Communication

The relationship between discourse and power has been central to political discourse studies. Political actors use discourse to establish dominance, marginalize opponents, and naturalize particular worldviews (Bourdieu, 1991). In debates, power is exercised not only through policy arguments but also through interactional control, turn-taking, and evaluative language. Researchers have shown that linguistic choices such as modality, pronoun use, and evaluative lexis contribute to the construction of authority and credibility (Jaworski & Coupland, 2006). These studies emphasize that political meaning is ideologically loaded and socially situated.

3. Emergence of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

As political debates increasingly take place in televised and digital environments, scholars have turned to multimodal discourse analysis to capture the full complexity of political communication. Multimodal discourse analysis views meaning as the result of the interaction between multiple semiotic resources, including speech, gesture, gaze, posture, visuals, and

sound (Jewitt, 2009). This approach challenges language-centric models by highlighting how non-verbal modes can reinforce, contradict, or extend spoken discourse. In political debates, multimodality allows candidates to convey confidence, empathy, or assertiveness beyond verbal content alone.

4. Multimodality in Political and Media Discourse

Previous studies in political multimodality have examined how visual and embodied resources shape political interpretation. For instance, researchers have demonstrated that facial expressions, hand gestures, and body orientation significantly influence audience perceptions of trustworthiness and leadership (Müller, 2008). Visual framing by broadcast media, such as camera angles and split screens, also contributes to meaning-making by subtly privileging certain candidates or interpretations (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). These findings underscore that political meaning is co-produced by candidates and media institutions.

5. Multimodal Studies in Asian and Indonesian Contexts

In Asian political contexts, multimodal discourse studies have highlighted the importance of cultural norms in shaping political communication. High-context communication styles, respect for hierarchy, and symbolic gestures often play a significant role in political meaning-making (Hall, 1976). Indonesian political discourse, in particular, reflects local cultural values such as politeness, collectivism, and nationalism. Scholars analyzing Indonesian political texts and performances have noted the strategic use of cultural symbols, religious references, and national identity narratives to appeal to diverse voter groups (Heryanto, 2014). However, many of these studies focus on speeches or campaign materials rather than debates specifically.

6. Methodological Approaches to Multimodal Analysis

Methodologically, multimodal discourse studies employ a range of analytical tools, including social semiotics, interaction analysis, and conversation analysis. Researchers often rely on video data, multimodal transcription systems, and qualitative interpretation to examine how modes interact (Norris, 2011). Despite these advances, there is considerable variation in how multimodality is operationalized across studies. Differences in transcription detail, analytical focus, and theoretical grounding can limit comparability and replicability. This methodological diversity highlights the need for systematic evaluation of existing research practices.

3. Research Methods

1. Research Design

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) as its research design. A systematic review is a rigorous and transparent method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing research to answer specific research objectives (Snyder, 2019). Unlike narrative reviews, an SLR follows a structured protocol to minimize bias and enhance replicability. This design is particularly appropriate for examining multimodal discourse analysis studies, which often employ diverse theoretical frameworks and analytical techniques. The present review aims to synthesize scholarly findings on political meaning-making in Indonesian presidential debates and to identify dominant themes, methodological patterns, and research gaps.

2. Data Sources

The data sources for this systematic review consist of peer-reviewed scholarly publications published between 2020 and 2025. This time frame was selected to capture recent developments and contemporary analytical approaches in multimodal discourse analysis, particularly in response to advances in digital media and political communication. Academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Directory of Open Access

Journals (DOAJ) were systematically searched. Publications written in English and Indonesian were included to ensure both international and local scholarly representation.

3. Research Instrument

The primary research instrument for this study is a systematic review protocol and eligibility checklist. The checklist was designed to ensure consistency during the screening and evaluation process and included the following criteria: (1) the study focuses on Indonesian political discourse or presidential debates; (2) the study employs multimodal discourse analysis or explicitly analyzes multiple semiotic modes; (3) the study is empirical in nature; and (4) the study was published between 2020 and 2025. This instrument guided the inclusion and exclusion decisions throughout the review process (Okoli, 2015).

4. Data Collection Method

Data collection was conducted through a structured multi-stage procedure. First, keyword searches were performed using combinations of terms such as multimodal discourse analysis, political debate, presidential debate, Indonesia, and political communication. Second, duplicate records were removed, followed by title and abstract screening to assess relevance. Third, full-text screening was carried out to ensure that each study met the predefined inclusion criteria, particularly the publication year requirement (2020–2025). Studies that did not focus on debates, did not employ multimodal analysis, or fell outside the selected time frame were excluded from the final corpus.

5. Data Analysis Method

The selected studies were analyzed using qualitative thematic synthesis, which enables the identification of recurring themes and analytical patterns across qualitative research (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Each study was coded according to theoretical framework, semiotic modes analyzed, data type, analytical procedures, and key findings related to political meaning-making. Cross-study comparison was then conducted to identify similarities and differences in how multimodal resources were used and interpreted. Methodological aspects such as transcription practices and analytical transparency were also examined to evaluate the robustness of existing research.

4. Results

1. Research Focus and Debate Data

Most studies focused on national-level presidential debates, particularly those organized by the General Elections Commission (KPU). Some studies analyzed full debate sessions, while others focused on selected segments such as opening statements, rebuttals, or closing remarks. A smaller number of studies examined debate clips circulated on social media platforms, highlighting the role of digital remediation in political meaning-making.

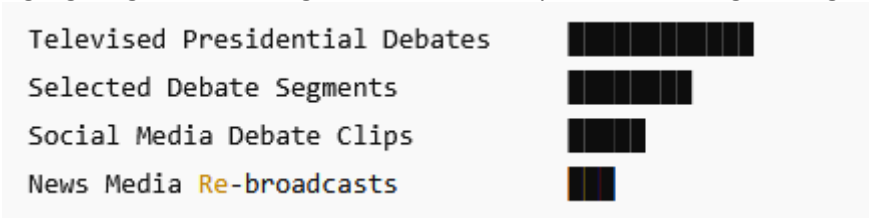


Figure 1. Primary Data Sources Used in Reviewed Studies

2. Theoretical Frameworks Employed

Analysis of the reviewed studies revealed that scholars adopted a range of theoretical frameworks to examine multimodal political meaning-making. Social semiotics was the most

frequently used framework, followed by multimodal critical discourse analysis and interactional multimodality.

Table 1. Theoretical Frameworks Used in Multimodal Studies

Framework	Frequency
Social Semiotics	High
Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis	Moderate
Multimodal Interaction Analysis	Moderate
Media Discourse Analysis	Low
Hybrid / Mixed Approaches	Low

3. Semiotic Modes Analyzed

All reviewed studies analyzed verbal language, but the depth of multimodal analysis varied considerably. Embodied modes such as gesture, facial expression, and gaze were commonly examined, while audio-prosodic and spatial modes were less frequently addressed.

Table 2. Semiotic Modes Examined Across Studies

Semiotic Mode	Level of Attention
Spoken Language	Very High
Gesture	High
Facial Expression	High
Gaze	Moderate
Posture & Body Movement	Moderate
Visual Framing (camera, layout)	Low–Moderate
Prosody (intonation, stress)	Low

4. Dominant Themes of Political Meaning-Making

Thematic synthesis revealed several recurring themes related to political meaning-making in Indonesian presidential debates. The most prominent theme was leadership construction, where candidates used coordinated verbal and non-verbal strategies to project competence, decisiveness, and moral authority. Another dominant theme involved national identity and populist appeals, often expressed through inclusive language, symbolic gestures, and references to unity and the people.

Additional themes included power negotiation, such as turn-taking, interruption, and gaze control, as well as media mediation, highlighting how camera angles and visual framing influenced audience interpretation.

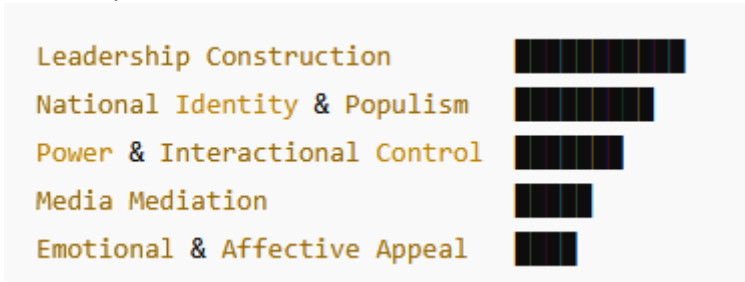


Figure 2. Major Themes Identified in the Reviewed Studies

Overall, the results indicate that research published between 2020 and 2025 increasingly recognizes the importance of multimodality in political meaning-making during Indonesian presidential debates. However, the field remains characterized by theoretical diversity and methodological inconsistency. These findings provide a strong empirical foundation for the subsequent discussion of theoretical implications and future research directions.

Discussion

This systematic literature review set out to examine how political meaning-making in Indonesian presidential debates has been analyzed through multimodal discourse analysis between 2020 and 2025. The results demonstrate a growing scholarly recognition that political meaning in debates is not constructed through verbal language alone, but through the dynamic interaction of linguistic, embodied, and visual semiotic resources. This section discusses the key findings in relation to existing theoretical perspectives and highlights their implications for political discourse research.

One notable finding is the increasing volume of multimodal studies published after 2020, suggesting heightened academic interest in debate discourse amid intensified media circulation and digital engagement. This trend reflects broader shifts in political communication, where televised debates and their subsequent dissemination through social media platforms have amplified the importance of visual and embodied performance. The growing focus on recent election cycles indicates that scholars are responding to changes in how political messages are produced, mediated, and consumed in contemporary Indonesian democracy.

The dominance of social semiotic frameworks in the reviewed studies underscores the centrality of meaning-making as a sociallyAnother key finding concerns the unequal analytical attention given to different semiotic modes. Although all studies acknowledged the importance of multimodality, verbal language remained the dominant focus, with non-verbal modes often treated as supportive rather than constitutive of meaning. Gestures, facial expressions, and gaze were frequently analyzed, yet prosody, spatial arrangement, and media-related visual framing received comparatively limited attention. This imbalance suggests that, despite methodological advancements, multimodal discourse analysis in this context has not fully realized its potential to treat all modes as equally significant in political meaning-making.

The thematic patterns identified across the reviewed studies further illuminate how meaning is constructed in Indonesian presidential debates. Leadership representation emerged as the most prominent theme, with candidates consistently using multimodal resources to project competence, authority, and moral integrity. This finding aligns with the personalized nature of contemporary electoral politics, where individual performance often outweighs policy detail. Similarly, the frequent emphasis on national identity and populist appeals reflects Indonesia's sociopolitical landscape, where unity, nationalism, and people-centered narratives play a crucial role in electoral persuasion.

Power negotiation and interactional control also featured prominently in the reviewed literature. Studies demonstrated that meaning-making in debates extends beyond content to include control over turn-taking, interruption, gaze direction, and bodily orientation. These interactional features shape audience perceptions of dominance, confidence, and legitimacy. Importantly, the review highlights that such power dynamics are not only enacted by candidates but are also influenced by debate formats and media mediation, reinforcing the co-constructed nature of political meaning.

The findings also expose methodological limitations that constrain the cumulative impact of existing research. Many studies relied on small, selectively sampled datasets and employed varied transcription practices without explicit justification or standardization. While qualitative depth is a strength of multimodal discourse analysis, the lack of methodological consistency reduces comparability across studies and limits the generalizability of findings. This suggests a need for clearer reporting standards, more transparent analytical procedures, and, where possible, the integration of larger or longitudinal datasets.

Overall, the discussion highlights that multimodal discourse analysis has made significant contributions to understanding political meaning-making in Indonesian presidential debates, particularly in revealing the role of embodied and visual communication. However, the field remains fragmented in terms of theoretical integration and methodological rigor. Addressing these challenges will be essential for advancing multimodal political discourse

research and for developing more comprehensive accounts of how meaning is produced, mediated, and interpreted in democratic debate settings. and culturally situated process. By conceptualizing semiotic modes as resources with specific affordances, social semiotics enables researchers to explain how candidates strategically coordinate speech, gesture, gaze, and visual appearance to construct leadership identities. However, while this theoretical orientation provides a robust foundation for analyzing multimodal meaning, the review also reveals limited theoretical diversification. Fewer studies engaged deeply with interactional or cognitive perspectives, suggesting opportunities for integrating complementary frameworks to enrich interpretations of political performance.

5. Conclusion

This systematic literature review examined how political meaning-making in Indonesian presidential debates has been analyzed through multimodal discourse analysis in studies published between 2020 and 2025. The review demonstrates that contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes political debates as multimodal events in which meaning emerges from the interaction of verbal, visual, and embodied semiotic resources. The findings highlight that leadership construction, national identity, and power negotiation are the dominant dimensions through which candidates strategically shape political meaning in highly mediated debate contexts.

Despite these advances, the review reveals several limitations in the existing literature. Verbal language continues to receive disproportionate analytical attention, while other semiotic modes such as prosody, spatial organization, and media framing remain underexplored. In addition, methodological inconsistencies—particularly in data selection and multimodal transcription practices—limit the comparability and cumulative impact of current research. These issues suggest that multimodal discourse analysis of political debates has yet to fully realize its analytical potential.

In conclusion, this study contributes to political discourse research by synthesizing recent multimodal studies and clarifying key trends, themes, and gaps in the field. Future research would benefit from greater theoretical integration, more balanced attention to semiotic modes, and more transparent and systematic analytical procedures. By addressing these challenges, scholars can develop richer and more comprehensive understandings of political meaning-making in Indonesian presidential debates and in democratic political communication more broadly

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