

Visual Discourse Analysis of Zohran Mamdani's Campaign in New York: Urban Aesthetics and Shifts in Political Representation

Afusa Nidya Kinasih¹, Achmad Nur Kholis^{2*}

^{1,2}Department of Visual Communication Design, Universitas Pembangunan Jaya,
Jalan Cendrawasih Raya Blok B7/P, Sawah Baru, Kecamatan Ciputat, Kota Tangerang Selatan, Banten, Indonesia,
15413

*E-mail: afusa.nidya@upj.ac.id, achmadnurkholis836@gmail.com**

Abstract

Contemporary political communication shows a significant shift towards the dominance of visual culture, especially in the context of political campaigns in metropolitan areas. Visuals no longer function as supporting elements, but as the main medium in shaping images, social relations, and political discourse. This study aims to analyze the visual strategies of Zohran Mamdani's campaign in the 2025 New York City mayoral election using the Grammar of Visual Design framework. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with visual analysis methods on campaign materials in the form of posters, digital content, and graphic designs published through the campaign's official online media. The results show that Mamdani's campaign shifts the center of political meaning from the dominance of the candidate's figure to a collective representation based on the city's identity and urban experience. Representational analysis shows that the city is positioned as the main political subject, while the candidate's figure is subordinated in a broader visual system. In the interactive and compositional dimensions, an egalitarian relationship between candidates and voters is built through non-authoritative gaze, equal social distance, and the dominance of design structures such as color, typography, and layout. These findings show that visual design operates as an active political actor in shaping urban political discourse. This research contributes to the study of Visual Communication Design by positioning political campaign design as a cultural practice that produces meaning, social relations, and political ideology.

Keywords: *visual political communication, campaign design, Grammar of Visual Design, urban identity, Zohran Mamdani*

Corresponding author Received: December 22 ; Accepted December 23; Published December 2025
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INTRODUCTION

The development of political communication in the last decade has shown a significant shift towards the dominance of visual culture, especially in the context of political campaigns in metropolitan areas. Visuals no longer function as supporting elements but have become the main medium in shaping the image, narrative, and relationship between candidates and the public (McNair, 2017). In this context, visuals work as a system of signs that not only convey political messages but also shape social and ideological relations between political actors and audiences. New York City, as one of the centers of global political and cultural, is a fertile ground for experiments in visual political communication that reflect its demographic complexity and social dynamics. The city's multicultural, dense, and socially layered character makes campaign visuals a complex field of political identity negotiation. In this context, the 2025 New York City mayoral election becomes an important arena for observing how visual aesthetics influence contemporary political practices.

Globally, the transformation of political branding strategies has been influenced by the increasing use of digital platforms, social media aesthetics, and the blurring of boundaries between popular culture and political representation. Political candidates now seek to convey their messages not only through rhetoric, but also through visual styles that resonate with specific audiences, particularly young voters and multicultural communities (Castells, 2011). Campaign visuals serve as an affective medium that builds emotional closeness and social identification. In many cases, more progressive visual approaches emerge from candidates who represent urban movements and grassroots communities, who utilize a design language that is close to the daily lives of their constituents. This reflects a more participatory and contextual approach to politics (Jansen, 2017).

Zohran Mamdani's campaign for the 2025 New York City mayoral election is a prominent example of this shift. Mamdani's campaign uses visual strategies that are very different from mainstream American political aesthetics, which are synonymous with red, white, and blue colors, formal candidate poses, and icons of nationalism. Instead, Mamdani's campaign design adopts urban visuals such as neon colors, retro typography reminiscent of city signage, and modular compositions inspired by elements of public space such as bodegas, taxis, and New York's transportation system (Grapheine, 2023). This aesthetic choice signifies a shift from national symbolism to urban experience-based political representation. This approach emphasizes a political identity rooted in urban life and diversity, rather than a homogeneous national identity.



Figure 1. Visual of Zohran Mamdani's Campaign

(Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/society/zohran-mamdani-new-york-mayor-campaign-handdrawn-visual-design-naba-yasir/article70269754.ece>)

Although several studies have highlighted the importance of visual communication in political campaigns (Veneti et al., 2019; Block, 2020), studies that specifically discuss the aesthetics of progressive urban campaigns such as Zohran Mamdani's campaign are still limited. Furthermore, few studies have used the *Grammar of Visual Design* framework (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) to analyze contemporary political campaigns, especially those related to the construction of urban identity. This framework is relevant because it allows visual readings as social meaning systems that construct relationships, hierarchies, and ideologies through visual structures. In fact, this framework offers powerful analytical tools for unpacking how visual elements work representational, interactively, and compositionally in shaping political meaning.

This research gap highlights the academic urgency of understanding how Mamdani's visual strategies not only reflect a particular political identity but also shape new political discourse in urban spaces. This research is important in the context of visual communication design, as it broadens our understanding of how visuals can construct candidate-voter relationships through contextual design language. In addition, this research has practical significance for the Indonesian context, where political campaign strategies are still dominated by national symbols and conventional aesthetics. Thus, this research contributes to the Visual Communication Design discourse by positioning design as an active actor in the production of political meaning. Therefore, this study aims to analyze Zohran Mamdani's visual campaign strategy using the *Grammar of Visual Design* framework to reveal how political meaning is produced through unique and contextual visual representations.

METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with visual analysis methods to understand the visual discourse strategies in Zohran Mamdani's political campaign. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study focuses on interpreting meanings, relationships, and ideologies constructed through visual elements, rather than on statistical measurements or quantitative analysis of voter behavior. Thus, this study treats visuals as cultural texts that can be read and analyzed critically. The analysis was conducted by examining the signs, symbols, and visual structures in the campaign materials, then relating them to the political and cultural context of urban New York.

The data used in this study consists of primary and secondary data. Primary data is in the form of visual material from Zohran Mamdani's campaign, which includes posters, billboards, digital content, and other graphic designs uploaded via Zohran Mamdani's official Instagram account and website during the campaign period. Visual material was selected based on its level of public visibility, consistency in the use of design elements, and representation of the main visual strategies repeated throughout the campaign. The selection of this data aims to ensure that the visuals analyzed represent the overall visual identity of the campaign, rather than incidental examples.

Secondary data was obtained from news articles, design reviews, and visual analyses on websites such as *Grapheine*, as well as academic literature discussing visual political communication, urban identity, and visual design theory. Secondary data served as interpretive context that helped to read campaign visuals not only as design artifacts, but also as products of specific social, political, and cultural dynamics. Data collection was conducted through visual documentation and literature review techniques. Data analysis was conducted using the *Grammar of Visual Design* framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), which views visuals as a social semiotic system. This framework divides visual meaning into three main dimensions, namely *representational meaning*, *interactive meaning*, and *compositional meaning*. In the first stage, representational analysis was used to identify how actors, objects, and actions were represented in the campaign materials. This stage focused on the form of the candidate's presence, visual symbols, and the spatial context presented in the design.

The second stage is *interactive meaning* analysis, which aims to examine how the relationship between visuals and the audience is constructed. This analysis covers aspects of *gaze*, social distance, perspective, and the level of visual *modality* used. Through this analysis, the study examines how campaign design shapes the relationship between candidates and voters, whether it is hierarchical, egalitarian, or participatory. The third stage is *compositional meaning* analysis, which focuses on how visual elements are arranged to form the overall meaning structure. This analysis covers aspects of *information value*, *salience*, and *framing*, which determine which elements are prioritized and how the audience's attention is directed. At this stage, the study examines the role of color, typography, and layout in shifting the center of meaning from the candidate's figure to the design structure.

To maintain sharpness and consistency of interpretation, the analysis was conducted repeatedly by comparing visual materials and linking them to the context of campaign production and supporting literature. This approach allows for a visual reading that is inseparable from the social and ideological conditions that underlie the emergence of campaign designs. The results of the analysis were then interpreted to see how these visual strategies contributed to the construction of urban political identity and distinguished Zohran Mamdani's campaign from conventional political aesthetics.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of a visual analysis of Zohran Mamdani's campaign based on the *Grammar of Visual Design* framework (Kress C van Leeuwen, 2006) and discusses the implications of the meanings produced. The analysis focuses on how visual elements not only represent candidates but also shape social relations and urban political discourse through design. By viewing visuals as a social semiotic system, this section shows how political meaning is produced through structures of representation, interaction, and visual composition. The findings are divided into several subsections to show the interrelationship between the representational, interactive, and compositional dimensions in constructing political meaning.

1. Representational Meaning: The city as a Political Subject

The analysis shows that Zohran Mamdani's campaign constructed a political identity that was very different from the conventional political aesthetics of the United States. Instead of presenting the candidate as a central figure with formal poses and national symbolism, the visual representation of Mamdani's campaign focused on the aesthetics of urban space and the urban experiences of New York residents. Elements such as neon colors, modular patterns resembling *bodega* signage, the visual texture of public spaces, and *condensed* typography reminiscent of small shop signs are key components in constructing the representational meaning of the campaign (Grapheine, 2023). This approach positions the city not merely as a visual backdrop, but as an active political subject that produces meaning.



Figure 2. Design and typography of Zohran Mamdani's campaign

(Source: https://www.linkedin.com/posts/leilaspenn_can-we-roll-it-back-to-last-week-we-haven-activity-7394399043407417344-SJOa)

Zohran Mamdani's photo does appear in some campaign materials, but his presence is not positioned as the center of visual representation. On posters featuring the candidate, the photo is placed in a small to medium size, with a casual pose and a relatively neutral visual background. This visual choice of results in a low level of *modality*, where there are no authoritative gestures, dominant angles, or dramatic lighting commonly used to assert the candidate's power in mainstream political campaigns. These elements indicate that Mamdani's campaign emphasizes the representation of the candidate as part of the urban community, rather than as a figure above the citizens.

The placement of visual characters of the city as the main carriers of meaning shows a shift from political personalism to space- and community-based political representation (Iveson, 2013). Within the framework of representational meaning, this strategy shifts the focus of meaning from individuals to the social networks and urban spaces that shape the collective lives of citizens. The representational meaning produced through this visual strategy shows how Mamdani's campaign articulates progressive political discourse. Candidates are not positioned as heroic figures standing apart from citizens, but as political actors working within complex urban social networks. This approach reflects grassroots politics that emphasize community and everyday experiences, rather than relying on personal charisma as a source

of political legitimacy.

2. Egalitarian Visual Strategy in Zohran Mamdani's Campaign

An analysis of Zohran Mamdani's campaign materials shows that the egalitarian relationship between the candidate and voters is not built through a single visual element, but rather through the integrated orchestration of interactive dimensions and compositional design structures. This campaign's visual strategy consistently avoids the dominance of the candidate's figure and instead prioritizes the urban visual experience as the primary carrier of political meaning. Thus, relational equality is not only present at the level of figure representation but is systematically produced through design as a system of visual meaning.

In the interactive dimension, the relationship between the candidate and the audience is built using non-authoritative *gaze*, relatively close social distance, and naturalistic visual *modality*. In the material featuring photos of the candidate, Zohran Mamdani is not shown in a formal pose or with an expression that affirms the hierarchy of power. His gaze is social and friendly, creating a horizontal relationship between the candidate and the voters. The choice of *medium shots* and *medium close-ups* reinforces this sense of closeness, positioning the candidate as part of the daily lives of city residents, rather than as a figure standing above or watching over the audience. This representation is in line with a community-based political approach that seeks to build trust through closeness, rather than through symbols of authority.

This interactive relationship is further strengthened by the visual context accompanying the candidate's image. In several digital materials and video *canvassing* uploaded via the Instagram account @zohrankmamdani, Mamdani is shown alongside residents and in public spaces such as small shops, neighborhood streets, and transportation areas. The urban space in the campaign visuals does not function as a neutral backdrop, but rather as an active element that emphasizes the candidate's connection to New York's urban ecosystem. Even in materials that do not feature photos of the candidate, the interactive relationship is still established through visual experiences that are familiar to city residents. The use of bright colors, rhythmic compositions, and bold typography reminiscent of urban *signage* creates a familiar visual sensation, especially for young voters and the urban working class who interact with the city's visuals on a daily basis.



Figure 3. Visuals from Zohran Mamdani's video and social media campaign

(Source: <https://www.creativebloq.com/design/graphic-design/new-york-mayor-zohran-mamdani-branding-is-a-graphic-design-masterclass>)

At the same time, the compositional structure of the campaign consistently subordinates the candidate's figure and shifts the center of *saliency* to design elements. Analysis shows that color, typography, and layout play a major role in directing the audience's attention. The candidate's name often appears in large font and is placed in a strategic position, while the candidate's photo tends to be placed in a smaller scale and does not dominate the visual space. Contrasting color blocks, especially neon palettes, become the main markers that dominate the visual field and form a dynamic compositional rhythm. Thus, the design structure not only supports the political message, but also functions as the main device in the production of visual meaning.

The arrangement of *information value* and *framing* also reinforces this strategy. Design elements that represent urban identity are placed in areas of high informational value, while the candidates' figures are placed in more peripheral positions. The modular structure, composed of simple geometric shapes, creates an organized yet flexible visual impression, reflecting the character of a dense, diverse, and fast-moving city. This compositional approach shifts the focus of meaning from the individual to the visual system that represents the community and urban space as a shared political identity.

This synthesis between interactive and compositional dimensions shows that Mamdani's campaign builds egalitarian relations not through the elimination of the candidate's figure, but through controlling his role in a broader and more collective visual system. The candidate's figure remains present as a marker of identity but does not become the ideological center of the campaign. Instead, the design functions as a political language that mediates the relationship between the candidate and the voters, while framing politics as part of everyday urban experience. This strategy marks a shift from political personalism towards a more collective, contextual, and relevant visual approach to the dynamics of metropolitan societies such as New York.

3. The Implications of Visual Design on Urban Political Discourse

The findings of this study indicate that visual design in Zohran Mamdani's campaign did not merely function as a means of political communication, but played an active role in shaping, negotiating, and shifting urban political discourse. By prioritizing the identity of the city and the everyday visual experiences of New Yorkers, this campaign shifted the political focus from the personalism of the candidate to a collective representation based on space and community. In this context, design works as an ideological medium that re-mediate the relationship between politics, citizens, and urban space, rather than merely serving as a tool for conveying messages.

The main implication of this finding is the emergence of design as a relatively autonomous political actor, rather than merely a device to support the candidate's verbal message. Through a visual strategy that places design elements as the main carriers of meaning, Mamdani's campaign shows that the legitimacy of political can be built without dependence on the dominant figure of the candidate. This approach challenges the conventional political campaign model that relies on personal image and national symbols as sources of visual authority, while opening space for more inclusive and contextual political practices, especially in heterogeneous metropolitan areas (Block, 2020).

In addition, the emphasis on urban aesthetics affirms the city as a political subject, not merely a geographical backdrop. Visual elements inspired by urban *signage*, the visual rhythm of the streets, and the materiality of public spaces present the city as a shared experience that unites diverse social identities. Within this framework, the city is positioned as a field of political meaning production, where citizens are not merely an audience, but part of the visual narrative itself. Design, thus, functions as a political language that bridges differences in ethnic, class, and cultural backgrounds, and facilitates political participation based on shared experiences rather than symbolic uniformity (Castells, 2011).

For the discipline of Visual Communication Design, these findings expand our understanding of the role of design in contemporary political campaign practices. Design can no longer be understood solely as an aesthetic tool or *branding* strategy, but rather as a cultural practice that actively produces discourse, social relations, and political ideology. These implications are relevant not only in the context of the United States, but also for political campaign practices in other countries, including Indonesia, where visual approaches are still dominated by national symbols and heroic candidate figures. This study shows that alternative visual approaches rooted in urban contexts and citizen experiences have the potential to create more equitable, participatory, and meaningful political relations.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Zohran Mamdani's visual campaign strategy for the 2025 New York City mayoral election represents a significant shift in contemporary political communication practices, particularly in the context of metropolitan urban areas. Through analysis using the *Grammar of Visual Design* framework, this study reveals that political meaning is not primarily constructed through the dominance of candidate figures, but rather through the orchestration of visual elements rooted in the city's identity and the daily experiences of urban residents. These findings confirm the role of visual design as a key mechanism in the production of political meaning. The results of the analysis show that the egalitarian relationship between candidates and voters is produced simultaneously through interactive and compositional dimensions. At the interactive level, the use of non-authoritative *gaze*, equal social distance, and naturalistic visual *modality* builds a horizontal relationship between candidates and audiences. Meanwhile, at the compositional level, the dominance of color, typography, and design structure systematically shifts the center of *of salience* from the candidate's figure to the design elements, so that the design functions as the primary carrier of political meaning. These findings confirm that the candidate's photo is not eliminated but is consciously subordinated within a broader and more collective visual system.

This study shows that visual design operates as an active political actor in shaping urban political discourse. By placing the city as the main visual identity, Mamdani's campaign frames politics as part of the experience of space and community, rather than merely as a representation of individuals or national symbols. This approach challenges the aesthetics of conventional political campaigns, which tend to be personalistic, and opens the possibility of political communication practices that are more contextual, inclusive, and relevant to diverse urban communities. This study contributes to the understanding that political campaign design cannot be viewed solely as an aesthetic or *branding* strategy, but rather as a cultural practice that produces meaning, social relations, and political ideology. Practically speaking, these findings are also relevant to the Indonesian context, where political campaigns are still dominated by national symbols and heroic candidate figures. This study shows that a visual approach based on urban identity and citizen experience has the potential to build more equitable and meaningful political relations. Further research could expand this study by comparing similar campaigns in other cities or combining visual analysis with audience reception studies to understand the visual impact of campaigns more comprehensively.

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