

FACE MASKS, BETWEEN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL MESSAGES IN COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT. In the COVID-19 pandemic, people should wear face masks as medical equipment to stop the spread of the coronavirus. Some people donate and distribute face masks to many other people in social charity events. Unfortunately, these kinds of events are used by some people to do political campaigns while distributing donations. This study conducted a Semiotic analysis to describe and analyze signifiers brought by face masks distributed in a social charity event by a Klaten's regent that symbolizes social and political messages. Using the concept of 'rhetoric of the image' by Barthes (1977), which was dragged into a critical semiotics study, which analyzed the image, colors, and written language on the object observed in a video taken from television news. Political messages are often disguised in social events and publications to gain more supporters for bigger chances to win the election.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; face masks; political campaign; semiotics; social donation

ABSTRAK. Di masa pandemic COVID-19 masyarakat diharuskan memakai masker sebagai alat kesehatan untuk menghentikan penyebaran virus korona. Beberapa orang menyumbangkan dan membagikan masker dalam kegiatan sosial. Sayangnya, kegiatan-kegiatan semacam ini digunakan oleh pihak-pihak tertentu untuk melakukan kampanye politik saat membagikan sumbangan. Penelitian ini menggunakan analisis Semiotika untuk mendeskripsikan dan menganalisis penanda dari masker yang dibagikan dalam kegiatan sosial oleh Bupati Klaten yang menyimbolkan pesan sosial dan politik. Menggunakan konsep 'retorika gambar' Barthes (1977) yang ditarik ke arah penelitian semiotika kritis, penelitian ini menganalisa gambar, warna, dan tulisan pada objek yang diamati melalui video rekaman berita televisi. Pesan politik kerap kali disamarkan dalam kegiatan sosial dan acara publikasi untuk menggalang lebih banyak pendukung yang bertujuan untuk meraih kesempatan yang lebih besar dalam kemenangan pemilu.

Kata kunci: pandemi COVID-19; masker; kampanye politik; semiotika; sumbangan sosial

INTRODUCTION

The presence of things or goods in social activities sometimes cannot be distinguished from using properties in political campaigns. Many people carry out political campaigns disguised as charity events involving the public and publications. They mix-and-match the political purposes with social activities to save time and energy in gaining sympathies. This strategy provides many advantages: more flexible and shorter working time, less energy usage, bigger chances of political victory, free publications, and a lower budget. When these kinds of activities (social and political) are combined, the genuine purposes of each of these activities become blurred, so the public does not realize the true intentions of the actors. They cannot differ whether the actors of these activities sincerely help them by doing social services and charity, or they merely do political campaigns disguised as social activities. Since these people need help in their difficult times, they do whatever the election candidates want as long as they get the donations.

At the beginning of 2020, the world started its struggle to fight against the pandemic of COVID-19. Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID -19) is a medical name for an infectious disease spread at the end of 2019 as a pandemic caused by a newly discovered

virus called SARS-COV2, which is included in the coronavirus family. This virus attacks the human respiratory by droplets transmission through coughs, sneezes, or exhales from an infected person to the healthy one. When healthy people get too close to people with coronavirus or touch a contaminated surface, they might get infected through their own eyes, nose, or mouth—the WHO instructed people in all countries to keep themselves clean to stop the spread of the coronavirus. The strategies include washing hands with soaps as many times as possible, using hand sanitizers, and wearing face masks. Following the instruction from WHO and the government, many Indonesians distributed face masks to other people in social campaigns. Many social movements were carried out by those concerned about the struggle and welfare improvement due to the pandemic. However, those involved in the political campaigns also participated. At the pandemic's beginning, people involved in both campaigns went to the streets and remote areas to reach and donate equipment to as many people as possible to prevent the spread of the virus.

One of those who distributed face masks to the public is the regent of Klaten, Sri Mulyani. She held a donation event to distribute face masks as medical equipment to the people of Klaten regency in April 2020. This activity became a material on television

news, including on *CNN Indonesia* published by TransTv channel, which was aired on April 28, 2020. In the statement, Sri Mulyani, the Regent of Klaten Regency, was reported to have distributed some things (including face masks) to Klaten's residents in a social activity to help them face the spread of the coronavirus. The main reason why this occasion was first brought to national television news was the fact that her identity marked all the things that she gave to the residents: the bottles of hand sanitizers affixed with stickers of her picture in the regent's official attire were the subsidies from the Social Ministry (proven by the actual stickers behind them that said "#KEMENSOS" ("*#Social Ministry*")); the same pictures of this regent in her official attire printed on packages of essential foods distributed to the residents; and last but not least, the face masks (Figure 1) with the name of the regent written on them.



Figure 1. The face masks with the name of the regent written on them

The residents reacted to donations marked with the regent's picture and name. Some believed that this social activity to distribute the contributions to residents were included in the actions to get a head start before the actual local election on September 23, 2020 (Figure 2).



Figure 2. A banner of a political campaign to support Sri Mulyani in the election for the next period

However, since these residents affected by the pandemic needed the donations, they (including those who disagreed with the regent's action in marking the contributions with her identity) still used and wore the items (Figure 3).



Figure 3. A resident expressed his disagreement with the regent's action, while wearing the mask from the regent in an interview

On the streets, the regent's assistants from the regency office and the party she represents also distributed the face masks with the regent's name to the residents who passed by (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Residents were asked to wear the face masks with the regent's name written on them

Although this case began with the controversy of hand-sanitizer bottles and other things affixed with the regent's stickers, the present study discusses the signifiers, mainly shown by the face masks marked with the regent's identity distributed along with other donations. This study has no intention to corner the regent of Klaten, the regency of Klaten she leads, or the party she represents. This study was conducted solely for research purposes and as a concern for all of us in organizing donation activities in the social or political sphere. Relying on the semiological system proposed by Barthes (1972:113), there are tri-dimensional patterns: *signifier*, *signified*, and the *sign*. These patterns formed a system (Figure 5).

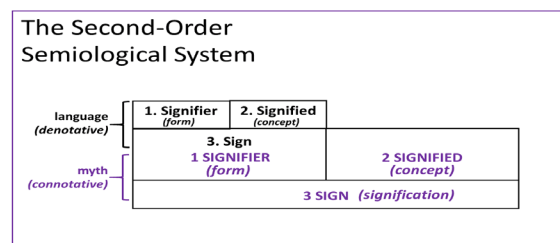


Figure 5. The semiological system of Barthes

In the first order of signification, the signifier and the signified represent the denotation meaning (the image and concept). The signifier and the signified in the first order of signification create the next signifier in the second-order signification, representing anything related to what comes to mind about the image and concept in the first order. The signified in the second-order signification conveys the connotation meaning, called myth. Myth creates content related to the historical background or the situational background. It expands the scope that can be used as criticism in society—the myth in the second-order signification results in an ideology that emerged from the situational ground. Barthes (1968:47), in his work *The Elements of Semiology*, argued that the substance of a signifier is always material, such as sounds, objects, or images. He stated that different kinds of matter are sometimes involved as mixed systems (e.g., sound and image, object and writing, etc.). Therefore, in analyzing semiotics study, it is appropriate to collect all the signs based on the concept of typical signs, such as the verbal, the graphic, the iconic, or the gestural signs. The existence of signifiers might support revealing the messages and information in them (Raihan, Wardiani, & Saleha, 2020). Barthes (1977:32) also proposed a sign system concept used primarily in advertising and campaign, mainly through advertisement elements. This concept is called ‘rhetoric of the image,’ which involves the four signs in the idea of advertisement: *image* (photographs or pictures), *written language*, *spoken language*, and *motion pictures* (moving images). *Written Language* or textual signs might also relate one sign to another (Rajagukguk, Gunardi, & Adipurwawidjana, 2021). Based on the concept by Barthes, this study describes the signifiers shown by the face mask marked with the regent’s identity. The interpretation of the face mask with the regent’s identity as the object of the discussion is described in the findings and discussion section below.

In line with this study in Semiotics, studies were conducted in a similar field before. These previous studies prove that the Semiotics study is compelling to work by analyzing different issues. There are semiotics studies on political campaigns and semiotics studies upon masks. The semiotics studies on political campaigns were conducted on various topics. McIlwain (2007) worked research in a Semiotics study on a political movement through televised political advertisement produced by David Perryman, a white Congressman candidate, against J.C. Watts, a former black Congressman. Relying on Barthes’ concept, this study was conducted to give semiotic understanding. It was indicated that the primary material in the advertisement took racial issues by using the fact that Watts is a black man.

Similar to the present study, McIlwain proposed to conduct a critical semiotics study to represent ideological and cultural criticism. The topic of the investigation was inequality and political issues between a white candidate and a black candidate for a congress seat, which were usually discussed in the critical discourse analysis studies. His research shows that the racial issue implicitly used in political advertisements negatively affected the public. However, despite struggles for racial equality, the voters’ number for black candidates could decrease in the election because of ads like this. Consequently, fewer black candidates would be representatives for congress seats, especially in the Southern United States, where racial issues still become the leading social problem.

Similarly, the study by McIlwain also shows an action as an effort to gain more voters in the election. A semiotics study on political campaigns was also conducted by Murtiningsih (2017), who took the object for her analysis from the comic media about the general election campaign in 2004. The source for her research was *Kompas* Newspaper which published a comic strip named *Ketopraktoon*. *Ketopraktoon* is a comic strip that presents socio-political issues in the form of social critics to the public. The figure’s characters and stories in the comic were created based on the actual and factual conditions related to the general election during the Reform Era. Her study on comics described specific values through the symbols represented by characters, dialogs in speech balloons, and settings. She combined these elements to determine how the comic’s frames would retell the story. Similar to the present study, Murtiningsih incorporated the concept of Barthes’ semiological system to find the signs found in the comic through its connotation and myths. She discovered that the slogans in general election campaigns are full of rhetoric used to gain popularity and power.

Another study that relied on Barthes’ semiological concept on political issues was the study by El-Nawawy and Elmasry (2016). This study was conducted in two fields of linguistics studies: analyzing the sign system on two posters of Abdelfattah Al-Sisi in the 2014 Egyptian presidential campaign for semiotics study and analyzing the dominant discourses in Al-Sisi’s most prominent campaign video for discourse analysis study. The semiotics study found that the posters presented Al-Sisi as a familiar figure through Barthes’ concept. The discourse analysis study found that the video presented him as an ultimate patriot and a strongman with immense leadership abilities. The combined result of these two studies showed the purpose of the political campaign by Al-Sisi was to create the profile of the man to be presented to the public as

a transformation military man into a cult-like leader. The construction of this image was to gain more voters, similar to this study.

Man-Ki (2015) studied the semiological system upon the image of posters used by Park Geun-Hye and Moon Jae-In during the 18th Presidential Election in 2012. Both candidates used image advertisements rather than problem ads in a positive rather than negative way of the campaign. Emoticons, caricatures, and marks were also used in the advertisements. Geun-Hye focused on logical appeal, while Jae-In focused on emotional appeal to influence the public and gain more voters. Meanwhile, the semiotics study upon masks was conducted on various topics rather than different 'forms' of masks. Pollock (1995) conducted a mixed anthro-semiotics survey on the symbolism of mask and masking and the social functions of masking rituals as icons and indexes of identity. The framework in this study created a broader category on the concept of 'masks' by taking the ethnographic examples from the *Kwakiutl* Indians of the northwest coast of North America and the *Kulina* Indians of western Brazil. Pollock relied on his study of Pernet's (1992) concept for the anthropological perspective related to the symbolism of the mask and its social function and Peirce's (1931) for the semiotics perspective related to icons and indexes. This study focused on discussing the mask's role rather than the means or the image of the mask itself. The study concluded that masks could transform the identity and are more than representational media. The symbolism and the social function of masks in Pollock's analysis are similar to the social role of masks in this study. However, the social part of masks in this study was dragged to fulfill the political process.

Another study on masks was conducted by Ogilvie (2005) as the material for her thesis. However, 'masks' in her research are in the form of 'women's makeup.' A semiotics perspective of Pierce's triadic system (especially of the icon, index, and symbol) that started from the semiological system by Barthes (the myth concept) was used to analyze the 'masks' in the form of 'women's makeup' in this study. Barthes concept was used to identify the source of the analysis taken from print media over the ten-year period (1990-2000) that represent people with various types of make-up in pictorial form. The object in the pictures was taken from models and ordinary people. Supports for the analysis were taken from film, television, and music video clips to identify patterns of face makeup. Peirce's concept was used to analyze pictures chosen by the participants to classify their feelings, tastes, and opinions on the various designs of face make-up used by women in their 30s. The Peircean framework of icon, index, and symbol

(Danesi, 2004), which emphasizes the index and the experiential dimensions of a sign, created new characters and impacted the motion of make-up. The result of this study was to indicate the various reasons for the way women wear make-up. Some reasons are influenced by the environment in that women desire to conform to a societal appearance code. By fitting into the code, women may increase their chance of acceptance and success in their community. The finding also aimed to support the marketing division's assessments over their consumers on the use of face makeup.

As the pandemic of COVID-19 spread worldwide, many studies were also conducted in different fields related to the virus spread. Face masks have become everyday objects in this pandemic of COVID -19 due to the efforts to prevent the spread of the virus. This study was conducted to describe and analyze the signifiers in semiotics through the image, colors, and written language, shown on the face masks distributed in a social charity event by Klaten's regent Sri Mulyani which symbolizes social-political messages. Face masks are medical equipment. Moreover, the existence and the use of face masks in this pandemic of COVID-19 are essential. However, in this case, face masks exist (and are hoped) to be worn with double messages: social message and political message. It is hoped that by this study, this paper may give a broader perspective on semiotics, or to be more precise, the critical semiotics, as one linguistic study which can be applied in more aspects beyond linguistics. This study aims to contribute to the linguistics field and benefit anyone concerned about continuing the investigation in critical semiotics and those interested in conducting similar research on related topics.

METHOD

This study proposed to conduct a semiotics study, more precisely, a critical semiotics study to represent ideology in the political and social criticism, since the topic of the study was about political campaigns covered by social activity. A semiotics concept of the sign by Roland Barthes ('rhetoric of the image') was taken as the base for analyzing the sign shown by the analysis object. The object of this study was the face masks distributed by Sri Mulyani, the Regent of Klaten regency, to her citizens, along with other donations following the government's instruction in handling the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary data source was taken from a news material broadcasted in the *CNN Indonesia* program, which was aired on the TransTv channel on April 28, 2020. The show came by the title of "*Waspada Virus Corona: Kontroversi*

Bantuan Sosial Bupati Klaten” ~ (Coronavirus Alert: The Controversy of Social Donation from Klaten’s Regent). For analysis, this study obtained the video from the YouTube channel on May 7, 2020, titled “*Bantuan Sosial Ditempel Sticker Dirinya, Ini Kata Bupati Klaten” ~ (Social Donations Were Affixed with Her Stickers, This Is What the Klaten’s Regent Said).*

The use of signifiers in this study was taken from the characteristic of colors and images (in written language) on the object, supported by various secondary data that relate to the thing, which may lead to a particular assumption by the public. The data for the analysis were collected through purposive sampling. This sampling technique was used to obtain the closest data to the topic and the field of this study. These collected data (the primary and the secondary data) were observed, separated, classified, and analyzed through a descriptive qualitative approach proposed by Creswell (2014) to describe the signifiers shown by the object of the analysis and the supporting data and to achieve a thorough analysis and reach the best results. The methods for research analysis proposed by Creswell include the following: (1) *emerging methods*, (2) *open-ended questions*, (3) *interview data*, *observation data*, *document data*, and *audiovisual data*, (4) *text and image analysis*, and (5) *themes and patterns interpretation* (Creswell, 2014:45). Related to this study, the approach by Creswell suggested that the researcher of this study observe behaviors by establishing the meaning of a phenomenon from the views of participants involved and identifying a culture-sharing group during their engagement in the activities (Creswell 2014:48).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The obligation of using some medical devices and equipment, such as face masks, provided several ideas and opportunities for some people to take advantage of their interests. The simple function of face masks as medical equipment was used beyond its original purpose. Semiotic perspective is used to reveal the meaning and purpose of things for what they represent.

1. Semiological Concept on Face Masks

Barthes’ concept of the semiological system can be broken down on face masks (Figure 6). The *signifier* and *signified* formed the *sign* through the process of *signification*. The denotation meaning in the first order of signification and connotation meaning in the second-order create the myth, which later shows the object’s ideology (Barthes, 1972:113).

In the semiological system by Barthes, the signifier, signified, and signification is placed in syntagmatic relation. Signification is the relation

between the signifier and the signified. In the object of a face mask, the signifier is the sign’s physical form (face mask). It could be the composition of the face mask’s form, shape, size, and color. The signified is the idea presented by the concept which emerges in our minds about face masks. The signifier creates this denotation meaning, and the signified in the first-order signification. The relation between the signifier and the signified in this first-order makes the sign in the second-order signification. This sign is also the next signifier in this second-order, representing anything related to the form of a face mask. The signified in this second-order signification is the concept known as ‘face cover.’

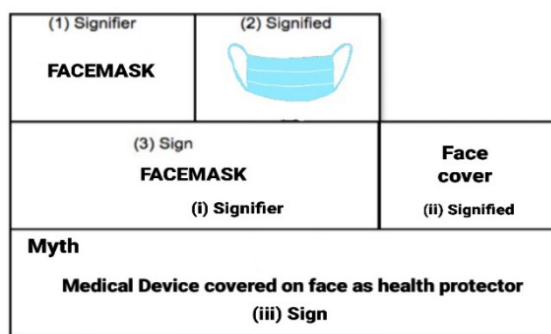


Figure 6. The signification of face masks

The concept is created because, when there is an obligation to use face masks, people who do not bring face masks try to use anything to cover their face. On the street, people use a jacket, shirt, veil, handkerchief, or any cloth which can be used as a ‘facemask’ to avoid inspection by the police. The signifier and the signified in this second-order signification create the connotation meaning. This connotation meaning, also known as myth, is the meaning in the form of a message. The use of this message is sometimes influenced by history or situation and shared among the society member. It is also an expansion of content that can be used as criticism in the community.

In this study, the situation that influenced the myth shown by the face mask is the obligation to wear face masks in the pandemic of COVID-19. In this critical situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, face masks are not just any cloth covering the face without any health purpose. In this pandemic of COVID-19, face masks are the ‘medical device covered on the face as health protector.’ Although it is known as a ‘medical device,’ which the medical facemasks have become rare, the face masks made of any fabric are also used as medical masks. The situation created emergency usage of the fabric masks.

2. Social Message of Face Masks Donation

The obligation to use face masks in the pandemic of COVID-19 is one of the efforts to stop

the spread of the virus. However, many people have not equipped themselves with face masks (neither with the original medical face masks nor the common fabric ones). Therefore, there are many efforts to distribute and donate as many face masks as possible to more people.

As a social message, this distribution and donation do not contain a hidden purpose except to give more knowledge and awareness to the public about keeping selves and the environment clean so that we can end the spread of the virus together. The social message is also described by the image of the face mask itself, in the semiological system by Barthes in the signification of face masks (Figure 6).

3. Political Message of Face Masks Donation

The ‘rhetoric of the image’ by Barthes (1977:32) is primarily used in advertising and campaign. It is how the image ‘says’ something. It is mainly used through the elements of advertisement in the advertising business. This concept proposed four signs commonly used in the ad: *image* (photographs or pictures), *written language*, *spoken language*, and *motion pictures* (moving images). In this discussion, the ‘rhetoric of the image’ is supported by the semiological system to describe the political message brought by the face masks donation. The effort of personal branding done by the regent was also included in the hidden campaign. The explanation of the face mask distributed by the regent, taken as the object of the discussion, is broken down into several sections and described as follows.

a. Names as the Branding of Personal Image

Brand or *branding* is giving meaning to a product to sell. These terms are commonly used in the marketing field. However, the discussion of brand and branding is also essential in semiotics study (Manning, 2010). In semiotics study, it can be seen what ideology can be constructed through branding.

The terms *brand* and *branding* are related to the term *product*. According to Kotler and Keller, a product is any item launched to fulfill needs and demands, such as goods, properties, information, ideas, events, places, services, experiences, organizations, or even people (Kotler & Keller, 2015). Therefore, everything has a brand. A brand is any label that carries a meaning and association (Kotler, 2003:8). A brand is a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies the distinction between one good or service to another.

Meanwhile, branding gives a brand power to products and services (Kotler & Keller, 2015). Therefore, a product is something to offer to the public. A brand is the perceived image of the product, while branding is the strategy to create that image in public. (Kotler & Keller, 2015).

The regent’s name that was marked on the face masks was the sign of the personal branding of the regent. With her name written on the face masks, she wanted to say something to the public through it. The ‘rhetoric of the image’ meant: the written language of the name ‘tells’ the public that the donation was from the regent. Why should the regent write her name on each of the face masks? The reason is related to the situation, which finally creates the myth and ideology in public. The concept of the semiological system is described as follows:

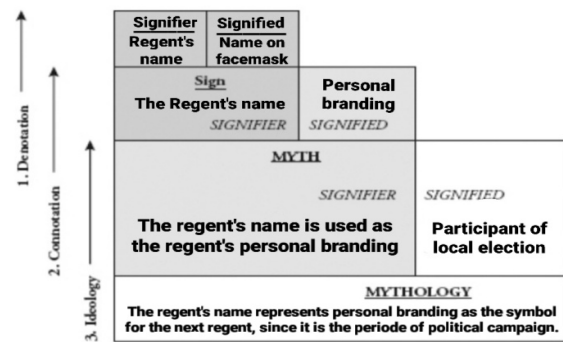


Figure 7. The myth and ideology shown through a written name

The signifier is the name of the Regent, Sri Mulyani. The signified is shown by the name written on the face masks. This relation between the signifier and the signified of the regent’s name in the first order of the signification creates the denotation meaning of the regent’s name, as the sign says ‘Sri Mulyani.’ This sign is also the next signifier in the second-order signification related to anything to do with the name. The signified in this second-order signification is the concept of the ‘personal branding’ of the regent. The signification of the name and the personal branding of the regent creates the connotation meaning, also known as the myth, a perceived image by the public that the regent’s name on the face masks is used as the regent’s branding. Putting names on objects required to be used during the COVID-19 pandemic will make that name and the person it represents stick in people’s minds. The signified is that the name is one of the participants in the upcoming local election. The myth created by the signification in the second order produces the ideology influenced by the situation at that time. The doctrine conveys that the regent was doing a strategy of personal branding as the symbol of a participant in the upcoming local election to be a regent for the next period. Therefore, it is hoped that everyone who received the donation and noticed the deed will vote for the incumbent regent.

b. Colors as the Identity of Ideology

Sometimes an object hides the message in its colors. The colors are symbols that represent the ideology constructed behind the things. The face

masks colors distributed to the public by the regent also contain a message about the outlook of the party it represents. The face masks represent two colors: red and black. However, since the color 'red' dominates the overall face mask, it is used as the sample to describe the ideology resulting from the signification in the semiological system (Figure 8).

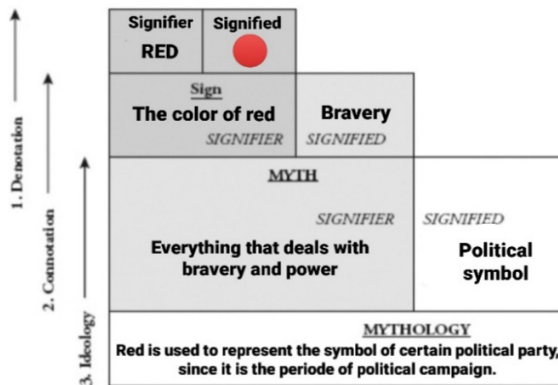


Figure 8. The myth and ideology shown through the color of the facemask

In this discussion, the signifier is the word 'red.' The signified of the word is the concept of the color, which is the perceived image of the color 'red.' The form signification and the idea in the first order create the denotation meaning of the color of 'red.' It is also the signifier in the second-order signification. The signified in this layer is the concept of the color, which represents 'bravery.' The relation between the signifier and the signified in this second-order signification creates the connotation meaning known as myth. Influenced by the situation at that time, the myth relates to everything that deals with bravery and power. The actual two colors contained in the face masks represent different concepts. Red represents 'bravery,' while 'black' represents 'hard work.' These colors' representations signify the identity of a particular political party's symbol. Therefore, relying on the situation at that time, the myth results in the ideology that gives a message. This message is related to the colors used by the regent for the face masks distributed. The colors conveyed that the regent represents the party with the same colors in its symbol to join the upcoming local election. The colors of the face masks explained the intention of the regent to rejoin the forthcoming election to represent a particular political party by 'telling' hidden messages to the public.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic of COVID-19 gives misery to people worldwide and allows some people to take advantage of the situation in the name of humanity for their gains. Social messages and political

messages are sometimes mixed in charity events. A political campaign is often disguised in social events involving many people and publications. Therefore, it is easier for them to gain more supporters to get a bigger chance to win the election.

This paper may give a broader perspective on semiotics study upon signifiers through images by relying on Barthes' concepts. Furthermore, this study proposed additional information for critical semiotics studies, that is, semiotics study that specifically takes the object analysis from ideology, social, and political issues. These issues are usually discussed in Critical Discourse Analysis studies; however, this study took only discourses for the analysis materials beyond the elements of images.

The result of this study may be applied as general consideration to broaden their perspective about social and political intentions in an event. In this pandemic of COVID-19, mixing these two fields in one donation event for a particular purpose might save time and energy. However, it might obscure the true meaning of procuring the donation event. This action would harm the sense of humanity, people would question the sincerity of the donation, and the actors will not be trusted anymore.

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