

Caricatures of Jokowi in Tempo Magazine Covers: A Semiotic Approach

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: October 27, 2025

Revision: April 10, 2026

Accepted: April 13, 2026

Keywords:

Caricature

Jokowi

Semiotic

Triadic Model

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how Tempo portrayed Jokowi, using a semiotic lens of Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model to decode the deeper political meanings embedded in its cover caricatures. Using a qualitative content analysis research design, the research examined how each cover functioned as a sign consisting of representamen (icons, indexes, and symbols), object, and interpretant. Icons appeared in the form of Jokowi's exaggerated caricatures, which made him instantly recognizable. Indexes were shown through visual objects such as mirrors, balloons, or puppet strings, pointing to Jokowi's active role in political actions. Symbols, like the phrases *cawe-cawe* and *dinasti tiada henti*, added cultural and political meanings that reflected concerns about interference and dynastic politics. By connecting these signs with their objects and interpretants, the study found that Tempo did not present Jokowi as a neutral or retiring leader. Instead, he was shown as someone still deeply involved in shaping politics, controlling images of himself, and ensuring power continued through his son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka. The interpretations encouraged readers to see Jokowi as a leader who extended his influence beyond his formal term. These findings demonstrate how visual semiotics functioned as a critical tool for the media to comment on Jokowi's political image.

INTRODUCTION

Semiotics is the study of how signs function in communication, allowing meaning to be conveyed through language, images, and symbols. Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) introduced the concept of the signifier (the form of a sign) and the signified (the concept it represents), emphasizing that meaning arises from differences between signs rather than inherent properties. Expanding on this, Roland Barthes (1972) explored how signs carry denotative (literal) and connotative (cultural/ideological) meanings, influencing how media constructs narratives and reinforces myths.

While Saussure and Barthes laid the foundation for semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce (1998) developed a more dynamic approach through his triadic model, which classifies signs into three categories:

1. **Representamen** – The form of the sign.
2. **Object** – The concept or entity the sign refers to.
3. **Interpretant** – The meaning derived from the sign based on interpretation.

Semiotic analysis is widely used in media studies, helping scholars interpret the messages contained in advertisements, films, and political images. Semiotics aims to establish the "grammar" of a particular sign system and effectively describe the specific communication phenomena governed by that sign system (Eco, 2018).

Magazines use semiotics a lot to convey their meaning through their covers, which are the first thing readers see. Covers are carefully created with images, fonts, and color schemes to change the way people see things and attract their attention (Wijaya, Ramli, & Sumartono, 2022).

In Indonesia, Tempo magazine is known for its controversial covers and in-depth coverage. Tempo often depicts politicians and government policies with satire and graphic symbolism. Unlike mainstream media, Tempo's editorials often challenge dominant political narratives (Sevtiany, Kurnia, & Gani, 2023). This is different from mainstream media.

The politician Joko Widodo (Jokowi) appeared on 20 out of 43 Tempo magazine covers during 2024. The public criticized Jokowi because of his oligarchic rule and his practice of nepotism. The 2024 presidential election intensified public fascination with his political authority since his son Gibran Rakabuming Raka entered the race (Reuters, 2024). Public comprehension of events develops through visual content in media because Tempo magazine displays influential symbolic images of political leaders throughout its publications. Magazine covers are descriptive and communicative because they are visual texts. Images convey a multitude of meanings that reflect and shape political discourse. The media uses photographs extensively yet researchers have not studied how these images affect public perception of leaders. There are still limited researchs on the influence of this visual on public perception. The research examines Jokowi's 2024 Tempo magazine cover appearance through semiotic analysis to address this research gap.

This study used Peirce's triadic semiotic model to analyze the cover of Tempo 2024 featuring Jokowi, highlighting the importance of visual representation in shaping political discourse. This study attempts to decipher the latent signals within the cover by classifying signs into iconography, gesture, and symbol, and examines how Tempo influences Jokowi's political image.

The cover published on February 26, 2024 serves as an initial case study.

Figure 1. 1 Preliminary Data



Representamen/Sign Elements

- a. **Icon** → The caricature visually resembled Jokowi.
- b. **Index** → The "control room" setting suggests he was actively managing political outcomes.
- c. **Symbol** → The term "*Cawe-cawe*" carried Indonesian political context that meant suggests undue influence or meddling. The gray tones suggest secrecy and cold calculation.

1. The Connection Between Representamen/Sign, Object and Interpretant

The icon in the representamen/sign is the caricature of Jokowi, which visually represented and signified his identity, the object it referred to was Jokowi himself. The arrangement of the control room in the representation/sign indicates an index, meaning that Jokowi's activities in managing or influencing political events are directly related to that index. In this case, his actions are the object. The term "*cawe-cawe*" is used in Indonesian political discourse to mean "interference". The object here is to understand the broader meaning of political interference.

When these pieces are put together, the conclusion is that Jokowi is not retreating from politics, but is instead actively involved in or influencing politics, even when people think he

should stop doing so. The public will understand this image as Tempo's political criticism of Jokowi because his presidential term approaches its conclusion.

The study examines how visual media platforms create political narratives that affect social understanding of political events. The research examines political leader visual representation on Tempo magazine covers to understand their media portrayal. Through semiotic analysis researchers gain better understanding of how media organizations interact with political institutions and form public opinions. The field of political media semiotics receives limited research attention because there are few studies that use semiotic methods to analyze Indonesian magazine cover images of political figures across multiple time periods. This study aims to address this gap by offering a systematic examination of modern media representations, thereby enriching the discourse on media, politics, and public perception in Indonesia. It aims to highlight its implications for understanding media discourse in Indonesia.

Several researches had investigated semiotic theory applications in media studies through examinations of visual communication and political representation in magazine publications. The research builds on existing studies through its analysis of Peirce's triadic semiotic model and its application to Jokowi's Tempo Magazine cover from 2024.

Annisa et al. (2019) studied how Joko Widodo's public image evolved through strategic social media indicators. This research highlighted the significance of semiotics in political imagery by shaping public perception through the graphics. Its strength lies in its ability to monitor social media interactions in real-time, demonstrating the rapid and straightforward use of semiotic techniques in a digital context. Its focus on a specific platform, namely the internet, and its exclusion of conventional print media, is a limitation. This research did not select a specific semiotic framework, compared to this study that utilized Peirce's triadic model. This research offers a more comprehensive, theory based, and contemporary analysis of the cover of Tempo magazine's 2024 edition, emphasizing image construction relevant to modern political representation.

Sevtiany et al. (2023) analyzed two Tempo covers portraying Jokowi as Pinocchio. The research showed how media content with repeated symbolic elements creates powerful evidence to support political fraud accusations. This research demonstrated Peirce's storytelling approach. The research had a restriction because it studied only two magazine covers which resulted in a restricted number of available data points. While, this study examines the more diverse covers, thus enhancing the relevance and utility of Peirce's techniques in a modern setting. Both studies use the same approach to examining Tempo's visual techniques; however, this study is more comprehensive and works within a more modern political context, particularly with the use of caricatures in the lead up.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative content analysis research design to examine the caricatures of Jokowi in the covers of Tempo Magazine. Qualitative content analysis offered a more systematic and theory informed method of interpreting visual data (McKinley & Rose, 2019). This shift enabled a deeper exploration of how *Tempo* constructs political meaning through its use of caricature and visual symbolism. The analysis was grounded in Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of semiotics, which conceptualized signs through three interrelated components such as representamen (visual elements as icons, indexes, or symbols), object, and interpretant. Qualitative content analysis allowed for a nuanced interpretation of the layered meanings on object and interpretant embedded in each magazine cover. This approach enhanced the analytical depth and aligns with the study's objective of uncovering how semiotic strategies shape public perception and political discourse.

The primary data for this study were the magazine covers published by the Tempo Magazine Official account in the form of images. A total of 30 selected covers were analyzed, all of which feature caricatures of Jokowi and directly mention his name. These covers were released between February 2023 and July 2025, encompassing a wide range of political and social contexts during his leadership. The selected covers were obtained through the Shopee online platform, specifically from the official Tempo Magazine account, to ensure the authenticity and credibility of the data source. The use of the official account as the primary reference was essential to

maintain data reliability, as it guarantees that the materials were officially produced and distributed by Tempo itself, thus minimizing the risk of using unofficial or altered versions of the covers. By focusing on verified sources, this study ensured that each analyzed cover accurately represents the magazine's original editorial stance and visual portrayal of Jokowi during the designated period.

FINDINGS

The semiotic analysis of 30 *Tempo* magazine covers reveals two dominant thematic constructions of Joko Widodo's (Jokowi's) political identity and influence. These themes are central to how the magazine visually narrates Jokowi's evolving role in Indonesian politics during the latter years of his presidency and beyond. The first theme is focused on the consolidation of Jokowi's political dynasty and long-term legacy, while the second explores his behind-the-scenes influence and continued control over national political affairs, particularly concerning the leadership of Prabowo Subianto. Across both categories, the magazine utilizes caricature, metaphor, color symbolism, and textual signifiers to construct a complex and often critical portrait of Jokowi. The findings show how *Tempo* positions Jokowi not simply as a president nearing the end of his tenure but as a persistent and strategic political force whose influence permeates Indonesia's shifting democratic landscape.

The first category, which includes 18 of the analyzed covers, centers on the construction of Jokowi's political dynasty and legacy. These covers often depict Jokowi as a figure who has moved beyond his original reformist image and is now engaged in the calculated preservation of personal and familial political power. In these portrayals, Jokowi is no longer the outsider or grassroots leader of his earlier political brand. Instead, he is shown as a political actor deeply entrenched in systems of power, using his position to shape not only the present but also the future of Indonesian politics through dynastic succession. One cover, for instance, shows Jokowi painting over the words "Reformasi Dikorupsi" with the logo of the Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI), implying a symbolic act of rewriting or erasing the spirit of the reform era. This act suggests a transition from defending reformist ideals to redefining or even corrupting them in favor of personal political alliances. The visual metaphor here is powerful, as it critiques how reformist rhetoric can be manipulated to serve emerging political interests rather than genuine democratic change. These visuals reinforce the idea that Jokowi continues to shape political outcomes even in arenas where he holds no formal authority, making him appear as a kingmaker or puppeteer operating behind the scenes.

The second category, which appears in 12 of the magazine covers, focuses on Jokowi's extended influence beyond his presidential term, particularly over Prabowo Subianto's administration. These images construct Jokowi not as a retired statesman but as an enduring power broker who uses informal tools to guide national policy and political direction. In one striking example, Jokowi is shown carrying heavy sacks labeled "bansos" or social aid, while a larger figure resembling Prabowo sits atop the load. This visual implies that Jokowi continues to bear the burden of public expectations and political maneuvering while others reap the benefits. The use of red tones in this image suggests tension and manipulation, indicating that aid programs may serve more as instruments of political strategy than genuine welfare efforts. Another cover shows Jokowi inflating a balloon-like candidate figure within a ballot box, accompanied by the phrase "Satu Putaran" or "One Round," hinting at attempts to engineer a swift electoral victory. These representations present Jokowi as a political engineer whose behind-the-scenes efforts are designed to simplify, influence, or even bypass democratic processes for strategic outcomes. These visual elements contribute to an interpretant where Jokowi is the architect of a long term political order shaped by strategic appointments, narrative control, and manipulation of democratic institutions.

Across both categories, *Tempo* constructs a multifaceted yet critical portrait of Jokowi's political identity. Far from being a passive leader nearing the end of his term, Jokowi is portrayed as a strategic, future-oriented political actor who reconfigures institutions, alliances, and even national narratives to maintain influence. Whether through the projection of dynastic power, the

orchestration of elections, or the silent manipulation of policy and public perception, Jokowi is depicted as someone who has transitioned from reformer to operator. These visual narratives collectively signal a shift in how political power is understood in Indonesia. They suggest that power is no longer confined to official positions but is sustained through networks, images, legacies, and informal influence. The findings ultimately highlight a central tension in contemporary Indonesian democracy: the conflict between the ideals of reform and the realities of power consolidation in the hands of a few.

Compared to Annisa et al. (2019), this study differs in terms of media format and theoretical depth. Annisa's study is limited to digital content and does not explicitly apply a semiotic theory, whereas this study is grounded in Peirce's semiotics and focuses on traditional print media. This distinction allows for a richer and more focused analysis of editorial intent and visual narrative strategies, particularly in the context of *Tempo*'s journalistic history. Additionally, while Ayub et al. (2022) conducted a multimodal analysis, they did not concentrate on political content or electoral caricature. In contrast, this study is directly situated in the political moment of the 2024 election and narrows its focus to the portrayal of a specific political figure Jokowi through the lens of caricature and symbolism. Durrani (2021), while exploring visual literacy and semiotic interpretation, takes a more generalist and educational approach. This study, by contrast, provides a regionally grounded and politically urgent analysis tied to current national events.

Forceville et al. (2019) explored visual metaphor in Western political cartoons, and while their methodology overlaps in using exaggeration and symbolism, their cultural context differs significantly. This study addresses Southeast Asian political aesthetics and cultural references, such as the use of the term "cawe-cawe" or depictions of political dynasties, which may not be intelligible or relevant in Western media. Likewise, while Modu et al. (2023) provides valuable insights into the ideological framing of political figures through magazine design in Nigeria, their findings are culturally and politically distinct. This study contributes a localized analysis, offering insights into how Indonesian media uses caricature and semiotic layering to critique leaders without overt textual criticism. Finally, unlike Hasanah et al. (2020), who analyzed cartoons, this study focuses on *Tempo*'s magazine covers, which are editorially curated and circulate within a more formal media discourse, thereby reaching a broader and more politically engaged audience.

This study builds on a growing body of semiotic scholarship that explores the political function of visual media. It shares core methodological and theoretical similarities with prior works, particularly in its use of Peirce's model and its interest in visual political communication. However, it distinguishes itself through its broader and more recent dataset, its specific focus on editorial caricature during a critical election year, and its grounding in Indonesian sociopolitical realities. By situating its analysis within the context of *Tempo* Magazine covers, this study not only offers a more timely and locally grounded exploration of political identity construction but also contributes to ongoing discussions about how semiotic strategies are used to sustain power, critique governance, and shape public perception in transitional democracies.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study analyzed 30 *Tempo* Magazine covers published on the official account that featured caricatures of Jokowi, using Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of semiotics. The analysis focused on understanding representamen (icons, indexes, and symbols), connecting them to objects, and interpreting the resulting meanings. The results showed that *Tempo* consistently views Jokowi as an important political figure, even as his term nears its end. The news covers show Jokowi maintaining his position of authority instead of showing him stepping away from politics.

The study reveals that Jokowi continues his dynastic political rise through his son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka's political advancement. The symbolic images in *Tempo* create concerns about family power concentration because they use mirror and family reflection motifs. The presentation of this situation threatens democratic values because it shows a transition from reformist objectives to the enhancement of personal authority and political heritage.

The study also identified frequent critiques of institutional manipulation, especially involving the judiciary and election processes. The visual elements of a chessboard and a resigned judge and a broken courthouse in the images show the deterioration of democratic institutions. These semiotic signals reflected Tempo's editorial position and illustrate how political symbolism, satire, and caricature are used to challenge authority, critique policies, and provoke critical reflection on the state of Indonesian democracy.

Future researchers could expand this study by examining the semiotic depictions of more political actors across various media platforms or cultural settings. The same Peirce's paradigm when applied to comparative analysis would reveal how visual media constructs political stories across different global contexts. A complete understanding of media trends and political representation biases in editorial content requires studying more years of publications.

This study also highlighted the importance of fostering critical media literacy among readers. Studying how signals work, particularly in political cartoons, can help people think more critically about visual media and avoid superficial interpretations. Readers of news and other media need to be aware that images and videos have multiple meanings influenced by ideology, context, and the editor's intent.

This study could be a useful resource for teachers and students in media studies, linguistics, and cultural studies. The regional and contemporary characteristics of the data make it a relevant illustration for the application of Peirce's semiotic theory.

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