

Creative Intelligence in Political Visuals: A Semiotic Study of Facebook Content in Sri Lanka's Aragalaya

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Abstract – Social media visuals increasingly structure political communication in Sri Lanka, especially during and after the 2022 people's protest movement (Aragalaya) which used visual and digital media to express dissent and solidarity. Despite their reach, there is still limited understanding of how creative intelligence operates within political visuals to steer interpretation and action. Using a semiotic approach grounded in Saussure's dyadic model, Peirce's triadic model, and Barthes's denotation/connotation and myth framework, this study analyzes highly engaged Facebook posters, memes, and photographs from the protest period. The findings include that the visuals function as creative-intelligence devices: they simplify complexity through color, scale, montage, and typography and mobilize and coordinate publics, stage resistance to power and shape collective identities by binding personal pain to shared symbols. By revealing how design choices encode ideology and guide decoding across audiences, the study clarifies the ethical and political stakes of visual communication in Sri Lanka's digital sphere, advancing accounts of democratic participation, political agency, and meaning making through design, memory, and imagination.

Keywords: Creative Intelligence; Visual Semiotics; Political Communication; Social Media

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.2025.5>

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I. Introduction

Social media has become the primary arena of political communication in Sri Lanka, where posters, memes, and videos circulate rapidly and shape public meaning in the digital public sphere. This is representative of a wider trend in political communication around the world, in which online platforms have altered the manner where political actors, activists, and citizens communicate and produce meaning as well as mobilize action (Castells, 2012).

The 2022 people's protest movement in Sri Lanka, which was named as 'Aragalaya' crystallized this shift. Facebook functioned as a public square, archive, and amplifier of visual persuasion. The context of Sri Lanka is especially interesting to discuss in terms of the political visuals since the postcolonial media environment, the rapid development of the digital audience, and the strong traditions of the symbolic design intersect there in a unique manner. Yet most studies describe content trends or misinformation, while overlooking how design choices, cultural codes, and strategic intent combine inside political visuals to guide interpretation and action.

This research investigates how Facebook visuals from the Aragalaya constructed meaning and mobilized audiences through resources such as color, scale, symbolism, montage, and typography, and how viewers decoded them using the classic semiotic frameworks of Saussure, Peirce, and Barthes. It aims to analyze how creative intelligence operates through design elements in Facebook visuals of the 2022 Aragalaya.

Although political visuals on social media are widely used, their role as a form of creative intelligence blending design, culture, and strategy remains underexplored in Sri Lanka. This paper addresses this gap. By addressing this question, the research clarifies mechanisms of influence that operate beyond text and offers guidance for more ethical visual practices by parties and activists.

II. Literature Review

Visuals strongly shape how people think, perceive, and make decisions. Among the five senses, vision is the main way we gather information about our surroundings (Sensory Organs, n.d.). Over time, different thinkers studied how humans understand images and signs, which later developed into semiotics which is the study of signs, symbols, and meaning in communication (Semiotics, Britannica, 2024). From this came visual semiotics, which focuses more directly on how images communicate messages in different fields.

In today's world, social media makes this topic even more important. The constant stream of images, memes, and videos influences how people see society and also affects their decisions in everyday life. In politics especially, visuals on social media can quickly shape opinions and even change the way users think about issues.

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This part of the research looks at visual semiology and how creative political content interacts with the way people use and respond to social media today.

A. *Semiology and focus on Visual Semiotics*

1. *Visual Semiotics*

Semiology looks beyond what we see on the surface of a visual. It is not just about describing content or doing a basic analysis, but about digging into the cultural and social layers that shape meaning (Rose, 2001). Thinkers such as Saussure, Barthes, Althusser, Freud, and Marx all contributed ideas about ideology, society, and psychology that built the foundation for semiology. Their work showed that meaning is not naturally given it is created, shared, and interpreted within society.

Visual semiotics emerged as a key branch of Semiology. It studies how visuals communicate meaning through signs and symbols (Mengoni, 2021). Visual semiotics is a tool for uncovering how visuals act as communicative signs. Scholars like Barthes and Rose emphasize that visuals are not straightforward. They are constructed in ways that communicate meaning, often reflecting wider cultural or political contexts (Rose, 2001a). Eco (1979) pointed out that anything can be a sign if it represents something beyond itself. But meaning is not universal, it depends on culture and context. For example, the same symbol can mean different things in different societies. This is why analyzing visuals requires background knowledge of culture and politics.

Semiotics provides structured tools for analyzing visuals. Unlike content analysis, which often relies on counting elements, semiotics explores meaning. Chandler (2007) argued that images are not reflections of reality but constructed representations. Williamson (1978) showed how advertising images attach cultural values to products. Kress and van Leeuwen studied how design features like framing, color, and space affect meaning. However, the meaning is not fixed.

Different audiences interpret visuals in different ways depending on context. On social media, meaning is even more fluid, shaped by comments, sharing, and algorithms (Rose, 2001a).

2. *Integrating multiple Semiotic models to a Theoretical Framework*

Visual semiotics builds on semiotic theory but focuses specifically on visuals. It argues that visuals are not neutral but constructed with codes shared cultural meanings that viewers must decode (Chandler, 2007). Thinkers like Saussure, Peirce, and Barthes each offered different models of the sign that together provide a framework for analyzing visual communication.

Saussure's dyadic model defined a sign as the connection between signifier and signified (Saussure, 1916). In visuals, the signifier may be an image, while the signified is the idea it conveys. For example, a campaign photo of a leader (signifier) may signify authority or unity.

Peirce expanded the idea of the sign into three parts as representamen (the form), object (what it refers to), and interpretant (the meaning interpreted). This model highlights how meaning depends on interpretation (Peirce, 1991). Peirce also classified signs as icons (resembling their objects),

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indexes (linked by cause or connection), and symbols (arbitrary but culturally agreed upon). For example, a portrait is iconic, smoke is an index of fire, and a national flag is symbolic. In political imagery, these categories explain how visuals trigger responses across audiences. Barthes introduced the ideas of denotation (literal meaning), connotation (cultural meaning), and myth (deep ideological meaning). Myths make certain ideas seem natural and unquestionable (Barthes, 1957). These three models has been used as layers of analysis of a single analytic framework for social media visuals. Saussure (form concept) provides the basic coding of visuals into signifiers/signifieds. Peirce introduces variability on viewer side and circulation dynamics such as comments while Barthes denotation/connotation and myth describes the process through which repeated codings turn into ideology (myth) on platforms. On Facebook protest images, Saussure defines what can be meant, Peirce defines how meaning flows and transmutes, and Barthes defines how repeated readings become hardened to become what Barthes calls ideology.

B. Creative Intelligence and Visual Semiotics

Creative intelligence is basically the ability to think in new and original ways and use that thinking to solve problems or express ideas (Sternberg, 2006). Visual semiotics is about how signs and images carry meaning, both simple meanings and deeper cultural ones (Chandler, 2007). When we bring these two together, we can see how creativity shapes visuals and how people then interpret them in different contexts.

1. Creative Intelligence in Communication

Creative intelligence is not only about coming up with something new, but also about making it fit to a situation. Sternberg explains it as a balance of creative, practical and analytical thinking (Sternberg, 2006). In communication, especially visual communication, creativity is needed to grab attention and also deliver meaning. For example, in advertising or even political posters, creativity is used to select the right visuals, colors or symbols that connect with people emotionally and culturally.

2. Where Creativity Meets Semiotics

The connection between creative intelligence and semiotics is in the way visuals are made and then understood. A creative person making a visual has to think carefully about which signs to use and how to use them. Williamson (1978) showed how advertisements join products with cultural values. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) explained how things like color, framing and layout give shape to meaning. All this needs creativity, because it is not just about placing a picture but designing it so that people can read more into it.

We can see this link very clearly in today's media, especially online. Memes, political posters, and infographics all rely on creativity mixed with semiotic codes. A meme is creative because it plays with cultural knowledge, but it is also semiotic because it uses signs that people decode. In politics, visuals like national symbols or staged leader photos carry both denotative and connotative meaning. Barthes' idea of myth also comes in here, because political visuals often

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make ideologies feel natural. Creative intelligence helps to design such content, while visual semiotics helps to explain how audiences take it in.

3. Creative Intelligence and Design Cognition

To avoid merely describing “viral posters,” creative practice is framed as design cognition. According to Nigel Cross (2006) designerly ways of knowing are abductive and solution oriented. Designers reduce complex situations to visually representable forms, which can be understood fast, judged and repeated. This compression and clarity demand is enhanced in the light of protest communication where time pressure, moral urgency and heterogeneous publics compound this need.

C. Political Transformation in recent Sri Lankan history

1. Evolution of Sri Lanka's Recent Politics

In Sri Lanka politics, the last decade changed a lot. During the war years (1983–2009) people didn't really use social media much. Even after the war ended, Mahinda Rajapaksha and his government stayed in power for about ten years straight. (Joseph, 2018). Around 2010–2015 Facebook and other platforms started to grow fast in the country. People began to share their political views online more, and this slowly shaped the way society looked at politics.

From 2015 to now, politics in Sri Lanka can be divided roughly into four parts. In 2015 Maithripala Sirisena won as the common opposition candidate. That ended Mahinda Rajapaksha's decade of rule. This government promised less corruption and more fairness. The 19th amendment and the Easter Sunday attacks were two key things in this period. Also, social media grew very strong in those years. After the Easter attack the government even blocked social media for a while, which showed how powerful it had become in shaping public opinion.

Then in 2019 Gotabaya Rajapaksha came into power. Many people, scared after the attacks, voted for him with a huge majority. At first he pushed new policies, but soon COVID-19 arrived. The economy started to fall badly because of tax cuts, policy changes and the pandemic (George et al., 2022). Sri Lankans suffered shortages of fuel, food and medicine. Long power cuts also made life worse.

By 2022 people had lost hope. The Aragalaya protests began, and thousands of people, especially youth, joined. It was mostly peaceful and brought together people from different religions and ethnic groups (A Brief Analysis of Aragalaya, 2023). Social media was key here, protesters used Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to organize and spread updates quickly. At the end Gotabaya Rajapaksha had to resign, the first Sri Lankan president to do so before his term finished.

Afterwards Ranil Wickremesinghe became president. His period, from 2022 to 2024 has been about recovery and debt restructuring. Still, people are very critical and online discussions show a big hunger for system change and corruption-free politics.

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2. Social Media and Political Discourse

Over these years, social media became the main stage for political talk. It helped people share ideas and fight for rights, but it also spread fake news and hate. Visuals like posters, memes, and protest videos had a big impact. Visual semiotics, even if not deeply researched in Sri Lanka, is important here because meaning was made and spread through these visuals.

In short, social media totally reshaped Sri Lankan politics in the last decade. It gave ordinary citizens more power to talk and act, but also created problems like misinformation. Visual content became central in how politics was discussed, showing clearly how strong the mix of media and politics is today.

III. Methodology

For this study, the focus is narrowed to visuals shared on Facebook during the peak months of the Aragalaya movement in 2022. Facebook was selected for two main reasons. First, it is the most widely used platform in Sri Lanka, with over 80% share among social media users (OOSGA, 2023). Second, Facebook during the protests acted as both a public square and a documentation archive. Protesters, activists, and everyday users uploaded photos, posters, digital artwork, and memes that quickly gained reach.

To make the analysis manageable, a sample of 50 key visuals was selected. These included protest photographs, graphic posters, and memes that received high engagement which is measured through reactions, comments, and shares.

The selection criteria emphasized:

1. Relevance to Aragalaya – visuals directly related to the protest movement.
2. Engagement level – content with significant reach, showing that it shaped or reflected public opinion.
3. Symbolic richness – visuals with strong symbolic or cultural elements

This approach ensures that the study focuses on representative and influential visuals, rather than treating all protest posts equally.

The analysis of visuals uses three classic semiotic models that together provide a layered framework for interpreting meaning. By combining these three models, the analysis covers the structural, interpretive, and ideological dimensions of protest visuals. What is frequently lacking in the previous work is a means of following a single post by the entire pipeline. The combined model connects specific visual choices like color, type, scale, montage, choice of icon, etc. to audience responses, demonstrates how engagement responses mediate those responses, and follows how recurrence over time fixes shared accounts of responsibility, urgency, and action.

A total of 50 visuals were collected through screenshots of public Facebook posts made during the peak protest months in 2022. Only public posts were considered to maintain ethical standards and avoid private content. From the broader sample, 4 visuals from the Aragalaya time period were

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chosen for detailed semiotic analysis. These were selected based on diversity of meaning, symbolic richness, and engagement.

These collected sample of images were studied according to the models of visual semiotics mentioned above in the literature review. The thematic analysis and visual discourse analysis were used for the analysis of visual content. According to this theoretical framework for visual semiotic analysis, each post was analyzed separately according to the Dyadic model of sign by Swiss Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, Triadic model of sign by Charles Sanders Peirce and Multi Layered View on Visual Semiotics by Roland Barthes.

The visuals analyzed in this study were taken from public Facebook pages and groups. No private or personally sensitive data was accessed. Care was taken to anonymize individual identities where visible. Since the protest context is politically sensitive, the analysis avoids attaching political bias or interpreting content in a way that could harm individuals or groups. The focus is strictly on the semiotic structures and symbolic strategies of the visuals.

IV. Analysis

This chapter presents the analysis of selected Facebook visuals from the Aragalaya 2022 protest, using the three key semiotic models discussed in the literature review: Saussure's Dyadic Model, Peirce's Triadic Model, and Barthes' Multi-layered View. The role of creative intelligence is explored alongside visual semiotics, to understand how citizens expressed their creativity through visuals and how these images carried meanings far beyond their literal content. The combination of creative intelligence and semiotic analysis provides a deeper picture of how symbolic communication evolved with the political changes in Sri Lanka.

A. Social media post 1

This post was uploaded on 19 April 2022 by Thimira Viraj. By the end of 2024, it had reached about 89 reactions, 58 shares, and 8 comments.

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Figure 1

Facebook post selection 1



Note. This post was uploaded on 19 April 2022 by Thimira Viraj.

1. Dyadic Model of sign

Each element points to a clear idea. The man lying on the floor suggests death or defeat, while the man now standing with a board signals rising up and taking action. The crows imply scavenging or attack; the dogs suggest barking and aggression. The bold typography “GOHOMEGOTA” represents public protest and a united call for change. The red background conveys danger and terror, and the overall color choice underlines conflict.

2. Triadic Model of sign

As a form, the picture is intentionally sparse: a few silhouettes arranged to tell a story. The immediate objects we notice are the fallen man, the rising protester, and the approaching animals. The deeper concept is an individual standing up against political oppression and violence. The interpretant, the meaning we take away is that despite loss and fear, people rise to resist; even one person can face a threatening crowd.

3. Barthes Multi layered view

Denotatively, it is a simple silhouette scene with minimal components and a red ground. Connotatively, it becomes a statement about Sri Lankans rising against the government and those who serve it; the animals symbolize the “political slaves” coming at the lone protester, while red dramatizes conflict and urgency. Overall, the stripped-down style makes the message direct and memorable, showing how color and symbol can speak loudly with very few details.

Here, purposeful choices (silhouettes, bold text, red) guide how we read the protest. This is creative intelligence at work: using simple signs to turn complex politics into clear meaning and, potentially, action.

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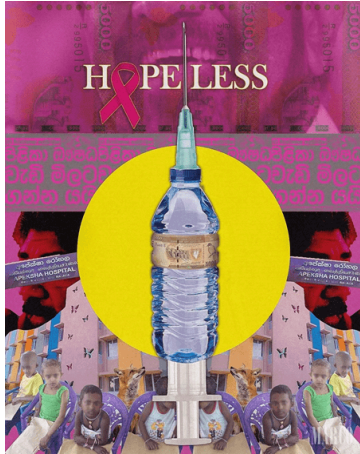
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B. Social media post 2

This post was uploaded on 16 October 2022 by the Facebook page “project de Marco.” It received about 140 reactions, 102 shares, and 8 comments.

Figure 2

Facebook post selection 2



Note. This post was uploaded on 16 October 2022 by the Facebook page “project de Marco.”

1. Dyadic Model of sign

The syringe stands for medical treatment; the bottle hints at basic needs like water; the 5000-rupee note signals cost and money. Children represent innocence and the most vulnerable. The political figure signals government involvement, while the hospital building and ribbon point to cancer care. Words like “Hopeless,” the hospital name, and “පිලිකා ඖෂධ වැඩි මිලට ගන්න යයි” (“cancer drugs will be bought at higher prices”) stress loss, difficulty, and rising costs. Using real images grounds the criticism in lived reality.

2. Triadic Model of sign

As a form, it is a collage of real elements merged into one image. Immediately we see health-related objects mixed with money and everyday needs. The deeper concept is the alleged malfunction and corruption in the health system and how cost and politics can overwhelm patient care. The interpretant is clear: hope is draining away for patients, who become victims of decisions beyond their control.

3. Barthes Multi layered view

Denotatively, it’s an edited photo combining a bottle, a money note, a syringe form, hospital scenes, children, the health minister, a ribbon, and text. Connotatively, it criticizes rising medical costs and corruption, highlighting how patients especially children bear the consequences. The choice to use real footage makes the critique feel immediate and concrete, and audience engagement suggests people respond to this newer visual style.

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The college arranges familiar signs (money, medicine, children...etc.) to steer empathy and anger toward policy. That design choice, how elements are picked and placed shows creative intelligence turning everyday symbols into a clear political claim.

C. Social media post 3

This post was uploaded on 14 May 2023 by Gihan De Chikera. It received roughly 84 reactions and 38 shares.

Figure 3

Facebook post selection 3



Note. This post was uploaded on 14 May 2022 by Gihan De Chikera

1. Dyadic Model of sign

The high-rise buildings and the Lotus Tower signal visible “development.” The gas, fuel, and milk powder stand for day today needs. The big figure in white is a political leader; the small figure is the common citizen. The text and framing emphasize the steep rise in prices.

2. Triadic Model of sign

As a form, the picture sets up a side-by-side contradiction. The immediate objects are development landmarks versus basic goods shown as huge. The deeper concept is “expectation vs. reality”: what politicians showcase as progress versus what people actually feel in their wallets. The interpretant is that real life has become smaller for ordinary people; even as buildings grow, citizens seem dwarfed by the cost of essentials. The use of exaggerated sizes is the key technique that carries this meaning.

3. Barthes Multi layered view

Denotatively, it’s a scene where development stands opposite everyday goods drawn oversized, with a large politician and a small citizen walking by. Connotatively, the sizes do the talking: development is big and impressive, but the burden of living costs looms even larger over the public. The blend of cartoonish exaggeration with realistic references makes the point easy to grasp.

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By making essential needs huge, the design reframes the debate not “Are we developing?” but “Can we live?” kind of question. That reframing is creative intelligence using scale to shift public understanding.

D. Social media post 4

This post was uploaded on 28 July 2022 by designer Aakash D Alexander. It drew about 251 reactions, 201 shares, and 3 comments.

Figure 4

Facebook post selection 4



Note. This post was uploaded on 28 July 2022 by Aakash D Alexander

1. Dyadic Model of sign

Each part points to an idea of politicians and regime power, parliament, the nation, government and wealth, the military and law, war and violence, the 88/89 uprising, the civil-war era, development symbols, an explicit naming of “Ranil Wickramasinghe” and threads that hint at puppetry and hidden control. The overall tone is realistic and intricate.

2. Triadic Model of sign

As a form, the face is built from many small, real pieces. The immediate objects we spot are specific buildings, uniforms, weapons, dates, and labels. The deeper concept is that many institutions military, finance, law, history interlock behind a single political figure. The interpretant is that the “big picture” resembles a monster created out of these parts, implying control, entanglement, and a system that pulls strings from within.

3. Barthes Multi layered view

Denotatively, it’s a collage portrait made from photographs of places, people, and symbols. Connotatively, it presents a leader as the sum of institutions and conflicts, with threads suggesting

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puppets and control. The unusual style stands out in Sri Lankan political art and invites debate by packing history and power into one face.

Turning institutions into facial features makes an abstract system feel personal and immediate. This is creative intelligence: blending many signs into one image so viewers “see” how power connects.

E. Summary

Creative intelligence treats design as purposeful and wide ranging inquiry. In these posts, choices of color, scale, collage, and labeling act as signs that shape public meaning. By selecting, arranging, and simplifying symbols, designers generate insight, connect ideas across disciplines, and push audiences toward clearer understanding and toward change.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that political images on Facebook in Sri Lanka 2022 Aragalaya contributed to the formation of meaning and mobilization by an interdependent process of design, interpretation and repetition. The clear messages were coded in specific design decisions like color, typography, composition and well known icons. Then there was different interpretation and dissemination of these images among audiences as icon, index, or symbols and this circulation reinforced specific readings. Extended repetitions of correlations between form and message conditioned over time into common place stories about crisis, responsibility and collective action. The primary donation is a convenient design model, where Design Moves → Semiotic Effects → Platform Feedback → Myth, that connects innovative design to visible mobilization results. Although as limited as the participants to Facebook content shared publicly but during the peak of the protest and leaves out audience experiments, the conclusions explain how functionality of plain well-crafted images can reduce complexity, lead the interpretation, and enforce responsible collective action in the digital public in Sri Lanka. When creative intelligence meets careful visuals, people can reimagine power responsibly for understanding, memory, and for change.

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