Depiction of Pandemic in Indonesia Local Election 2020 Political Advertising

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Abstract

In the last quartal of 2020, during Covid-19 pandemic, local elections were held in various cities and provinces in Indonesia. As a result of the public awareness of the pandemic situation and the urgent need for solutions to deal with its implications, Covid-19 pandemic became a suitable theme to be addressed on election campaign media. The aim of this paper is to discover various patterns on how Covid-19 pandemic imageries were utilized by candidates in their political advertising to establish their personal brand. Thematic analysis was employed to identify the various patterns on how Covid-19 pandemic imageries were utilized by candidates in their political advertising. 329 Covid-19 related political advertisements from various candidates were reviewed to explore the emerging patterns on candidates' personal brand establishment. The study found that promoting Covid-19 safety protocols, candidates' strategies, and appreciation toward frontline workers became three major themes within the depiction of the pandemic in Indonesia local elections 2020 political advertising. Covid-19 pandemic-related imageries are not only employed to perform their informative functions but also as a context in which political advertising is able to perform its persuasive function.

Keywords: *pandemic, politics, advertising, personal brand*

INTRODUCTION

On December 9th, 2020, in the midst of Covid-19 pandemic, local elections were held in various cities and provinces in Indonesia. As part of Indonesia's democratic system, elections provide the opportunity for the public to practice their political rights directly as well as determining the leader of their region for the next five years. As ruled in its election system, candidates had been given 71 days start from September 26th, 2020, to December 5th, 2020, to promote themselves and to

persuade the public to entrust their vote to a particular candidate through various means.

Continuous escalation of Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia had affected the course of the 2020 political campaign process which is distinct from any previous political campaign activities. Considering various implications produced by Covid-19 pandemic situation, various political campaign activities that gather a mass of people and involve direct communication between candidates and voters which used to be the norm of Indonesia's political campaign activities in pre-pandemic were strictly permitted in the 2020 political campaign. Furthermore, with the government's sanction on the limitation of public mobility during the pandemic where each citizen is advised to limit their outdoor activities, outdoor advertising seems to be less effective to employed during the pandemic than what it used to be. The devastating spread of the pandemic forced each candidate to formulate alternate political campaign approaches that differ from typical campaign activities which usually held in previous periods.

As a result of public mobility limitation and stay-at-home order during Covid-19 pandemic, numbers of candidates shift from conventional outdoor media to a more personalized media—communication media that enable the candidate to convey information and idea to the public through communication devices that are used and own by the public individually. Social media can establish communication between candidates and the public with little limitation in terms of time and space. Inevitably the usage of social media as a communication channel by the candidates had increased during the pandemic. Specifically, Instagram became one of social media platform that was frequently used by election candidates as a campaign media during the pandemic. The prominence of visual elements that inherent in Instagram as communication media had been utilized by candidates as a substitution for conventional outdoor media to establish communication to their potential voters whereas the limitation of time and space had become a major problem in conducting political campaigns during the pandemic.

Regarding its implication, Covid-19 pandemic not only affected the approach on how candidates conducting their political campaign but also the content of campaign media itself. As a result of public awareness towards Covid-19 pandemic situation that was formed by various information directly or indirectly retrieved by the public, Covid-19 pandemic discourse became a relevant topic to presented by candidates in their political campaign advertising. Furthermore, the importance and urgency of means and solutions on dealing with pandemic situations became an opportunity for the candidates to exhibit their point of view, plan of action, and

leadership quality to cope with the dire situation of Covid-19 pandemic to the public. Visual elements play major functions in advertising which they could alter the relationship between audiences and the candidates (Grabe and Bucy, 2011), impression formation and persuasion (Nagel, Maurer, and Reinemann, 2012), drawing and increasing audiences' attention (Fahmy, Bock, and Wanta, 2014). Throughout campaigning during the pandemic, candidates portrayed their point of view and reaction toward Covid-19 by utilizing visual signs within political campaign advertising posted on their Instagram account. Pandemic discourse that was visualized in political campaign advertising not only served as information that should be conveyed by candidates to the public but is also employed to influence how the public perceives and establishes candidates' personal brand. Therefore, the establishment of a candidate's personal brand during the campaign in the midst of pandemic not only could be achieved by representing general idea about him/herself (i.e., value, personality, expertise), but also can be established by specifically depicting candidate's point of view, ideas, and reactions toward the devastating Covid-19 pandemic in his/her political campaign media. This paper aims to discover various patterns on how Covid-19 pandemic imageries were utilized by candidates in their political advertising to establish their personal brand.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

329 political advertising posted by candidates to their Instagram account were reviewed in the search of emerging patterns on political advertising during the pandemic. Those 329 Covid-19 related political advertising were selected from thousands of political advertisings posted by candidates from various local elections. Each political advertising that was reviewed must include at least one Covid-19 related visual element, therefore political advertising that did not include any Covid 19 pandemic-related visual imageries excluded from the selection process. Political advertising that are being reviewed must be posted during the political campaign period started from September 26th, 2020, to December 8th, 2020. The researcher also put the intensity of Instagram usage as campaign media by each candidate as a consideration during the material selection process. Covid-19 pandemic-related visual elements consist of any visual element within the political advertising which conveyed any explicit or implicit message that can be related to Covid-19 pandemic discourse such as the depiction of a mask, pandemic protocol, or any activities that can be associated to the public health during the pandemic.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify various themes of Covid-19 related imageries from political advertising that used by candidates to build their personal brand in public eyes. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and

reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In relation to image and social media research, thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns of social media users on posting and liking image behaviour (Lowe-Calverley and Grieve, 2018), and was utilized to identify the themes and underlying meanings of #fitspiration posts in social media (Deighton-Smith and Bell, 2016). In this paper, thematic analysis was utilized primarily to assess visual elements in political advertising so that able to describe the emerging patterns on the depiction of Covid-19 pandemic imageries that was employed by candidates to establish their personal brand. Although the verbal aspect was not the primary focus in this paper, the verbal aspect in political advertising was utilized to provide a more fitting underlying meaning of visual elements that were being assessed.

The process of inquiry in this paper will follow the guide in conducting thematic analysis presented by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first phase involves the process where the researcher familiarizes himself with the data. Second phase, based on reading from the previous phase, researcher will generate initial codes upon Covid-19 related visual elements in political advertising that had been reviewed. Next, codes that had been produced were then grouped into several initial themes based on the correlation between codes. In the fourth phase, initial themes then undergo reviewing processes which conducted by reviewing codes in each initial theme to determine whether those codes established a coherent theme, and also reviewing the individual theme in relation to the entire data set. As mentioned by Braun and Clarke (2006), upon completing the fourth phase, researcher will obtain sufficient understanding to identify different themes, how each theme correlates to each other, and the overall narrative of the data. The fifth phase involves defining and naming each theme in which the researcher must identify the essence of each theme and also the story narrated by each theme.
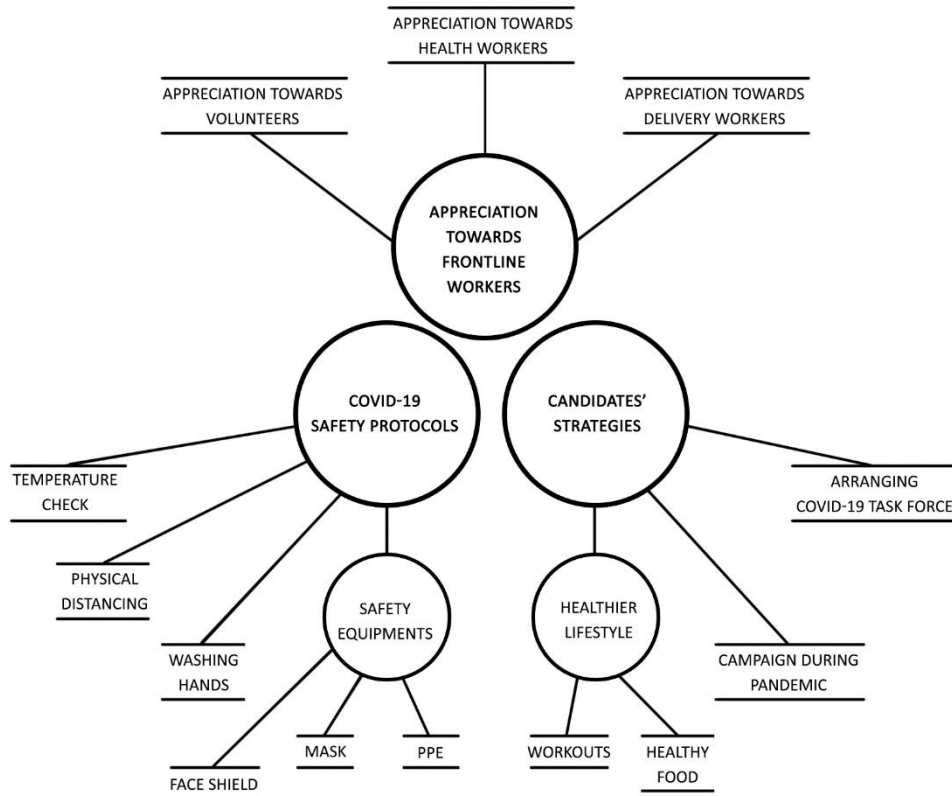
RESULTS

Figure 1. Themes, sub-themes, and codes of Covid-19 related imageries
in Indonesia local election 2020 political advertising.

Close reading on the material produced three themes on Covid-19 related imageries that were used by candidates in their political advertising to establish their personal brand through the political campaign media amid the pandemic.

1. Promoting Covid-19 Safety Protocols

Campaigning during Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the importance of inclusion of the event that was directly experienced by the public. Promoting Covid-19 safety protocols in candidate's election campaign media not only showing that the candidate supporting the preventive measures advised by the government on dealing with Covid-19 pandemic, but also exhibiting the point of view on the existence of Covid-19 pandemic where public and candidate should take part to protect him/herself and everyone around him.

1.1 Mask

One of the most frequent Covid-19 related visual elements used by candidates in their campaign media is the depiction of face masks. Face masks have become one of the items that highly correlate with Covid-19 pandemic. It is currently acknowledged that Covid-19 virus can spread directly from human to human through droplets from the nose and mouth, and also from indirect contact with a contaminated object and airborne contagion (Lotfi, Hamblin, and Rezaei, 2020; Shereen et al, 2020; WHO, 2020). The instruction to wear at least a mask while doing outdoor activity ruled by the government as a preventive measure to cope with the spread of Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the wearing of a mask as a new norm in daily life during the pandemic. Therefore, the depiction of mask within election campaign media became a relatively easier attempt to associate candidate to the Covid-19 pandemic and also the public. Some campaign media depicted the candidate or others wearing a mask, candidate helping others to wear a mask, candidate giving a mask to other people, or only with portraying a mask in election candidate's campaign media. It needs to be noted that, although face mask became one of the most visible Covid-19 related visual imageries in election campaign media, however, there are campaign media that depicting election candidates did not wear it properly. Some campaign media depicting candidates carrying the mask in their hand while doing campaign activity in the public and wearing a mask under their chin which does not cover their mouth and nose.

1.2 Face shield

Even though not as frequently depicted as masks in election campaign media, some candidate depicts himself or others wearing face shield along with face mask in their campaign media. Popular media, television especially, play a major role to establish the relation between face shield and Covid-19 in which the participants in various TV programs were shown to wear a face shield when broadcasting during the pandemic.

1.3 Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) along with face masks, before pandemics, was commonly associated with health workers and patients in the hospital. During the pandemic, PPE symbolized the need to protect oneself from the virus and how easy the virus infecting and spreading from one person to another. In comparison to other safety equipment, the depiction of PPE in election campaign media can create a more severe and dark note toward the pandemic. Depicting health workers or volunteers wearing PPE in election campaign media was able to exhibit candidate's point of view on the severe situation and devastating implication caused by Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 2. Depiction of Covid-19 safety equipment sub-themes: mask, face shield, and PPE
Source: www.instagram.com/official_udin_undun; www.instagram.com/appi_mika;
www.instagram.com/bajo.untuksolo

1.4 Physical distancing

Apart from safety equipment sub-theme as Covid-19 related visual code in election campaign media, the theme of promoting Covid-19 safety protocols also included advising physical distancing protocol. Physical distancing protocol in election campaign media was shown by advising people to stand apart from each other and also depicting campaign activity where the participants stand or sit apart from each other with measured distance. Along with wearing a mask, during the pandemic public is advised to distancing him/herself from other people when they are in the public space to minimalize the risk of Covid-19 virus transmission (Pratomo, 2020; Dewi and Probandari, 2021). Similar to the case of wearing a mask, reading on the material found that there are candidates that depicted themselves in their campaign media breaking physical distancing protocol especially when they are conducting their campaign activity in the public.

1.5 Washing hands

Although quite scarce in terms of exposure, some election campaign media employed imageries that suggest or reminding people to wash their hands as a preventive measure toward the spread of Covid-19 pandemic. These imageries convey through visual icons that portray the action of washing hands.

1.6 Temperature check

Similar to the depiction of washing hands, only a few election campaign media that portray the action of measuring a person body temperature when holding campaign activity as preventing measure. The association between measuring body temperature and Covid-19 pandemic could be established by the current regulation needed by someone to enter public buildings such as markets, restaurants, governmental buildings, hospitals, universities, etc.

Figure 3. Depiction of physical distancing, temperature check, and washing hands visual codes
Source: www.instagram.com/bajo.untuksolo; https://www.instagram.com/eva_dwiana;
www.instagram.com/official_udin_undun

2. Candidates' Strategies Toward Pandemic

Considering that the candidates have to exhibit their expertise to the public as an attempt to convince the public that they have the leadership and ability needed to run the government, campaign media become a channel that provides the opportunity for the candidate to exhibit the vision and plan of action to tackle various challenges and public concerns. Implications brought by Covid-19 pandemic upon society become one of many challenges that elected candidate has to dealt with. How candidates reacted to Covid-19 pandemic situation became a theme that emerges from election campaign media which exhibit their ability to deal with challenging situations.

2.1 Promoting workouts

Maintaining health and immunity, along with implementing Covid-19 safety protocols, has become one of the various ways to protect ourselves from Covid-19 virus. During the campaign period, some candidates exhibiting their vision on how to deal with pandemic situations by advising the public to do some workouts such as playing football, jogging, and cycling which are quite popular and accessible sports for the public. While football is one of the most popular sports in Indonesia even before the pandemic, cycling gains its popularity during the pandemic. Promoting exercising such as playing football, jogging, and cycling to the public showed how the candidate is able to provide another suggestion or plan to deal with Covid-19 situation apart from the existing regulation namely Covid-19 safety protocols.

2.2 Promoting healthy food

Within the sub-theme of promoting a healthier lifestyle, along with promoting workouts/exercise, some candidates also promote the consumption of healthier food to the public as a suggestion to maintain public health while dealing with Covid-19

situation. This visual code was depicted by including the sources of nutrients that are able to help the public to maintain their health.

2.3 Arranging Covid-19 taskforce

As an attempt to deal with the pandemic situation, some candidate organized their own volunteers or Covid-19 task force. Some campaign media depicted a group of volunteers assembled by a candidate to help the public dealing with pandemic situation. Some candidates also portrayed the task forces that they assembled spraying disinfectant on citizen houses. Similar to promoting a healthier lifestyle, arranging Covid-19 volunteer or task force exhibited the candidate's strategy on dealing with Covid-19 pandemic that hopefully will be able to enhance public perception toward the candidate in terms of how the candidate dealing with real-life challenges.

2.4 Campaigning during pandemic

Conducting a political campaign during the pandemic becomes a challenge. Some candidates utilize visual elements on their campaign to illustrate how they conducted their campaign activity in the midst of the pandemic to assure the public that they conducted their campaign activities in appropriate ways considering situations caused by Covid-19 pandemic. This explanation becomes important to answer the questions regarding the safety of campaign activity held by the candidate for the public and whether candidates implementing many things that they suggested to the public. This explanation can be conveyed by depicting the candidate implementing Covid-19 safety protocols and the candidate also conducting his campaign activity with a virtual meeting.

Figure 4. Depiction of promoting workouts, healthier food,
and arranging Covid-19 taskforce visual codes
Sources: www.instagram.com/sugiantoedyofficial;
www.instagram.com/mahyeldiaudy.id; www.instagram.com/ladubcenter)

3. Appreciation Toward Frontline Workers

Another theme that emerges from Covid-19 relater imageries in election campaign media is appreciation towards essential workers who play a significant role to help the public dealing with Covid-19 situation.

3.1 Appreciation toward health workers

During the pandemic, health workers become the first group in the line to deal with Covid-19 pandemic. The appreciation toward health workers exhibits candidates' support toward health workers (doctor and nurse) and their significant roles in helping the public to cope with the pandemic. Most of the campaign media that show candidate's appreciation toward health workers published around the National Health Day and National Doctor Day that happened within Indonesia local election campaign time period.

3.2 Appreciation toward volunteers

Similar to appreciation toward health workers, appreciation toward the Covid-19 volunteer was also able to establish an association between candidates and volunteers' positive attributes such as empathy and willingness to help other people.

3.3 Appreciation toward delivery service workers

During the pandemic, with the government suggest that the public have to limit their outdoor activity and mobility, delivery service workers play a major role to help the public fulfilling their daily necessities. Unlike health workers especially doctors that can be categorized within the upper-class group in society in terms of their income, delivery service workers primarily consisted of the lower-class workers. Showing appreciation toward delivery service worker is able to convey the idea of candidate's inclusiveness toward the lower-class group of society which is a big part of the society.
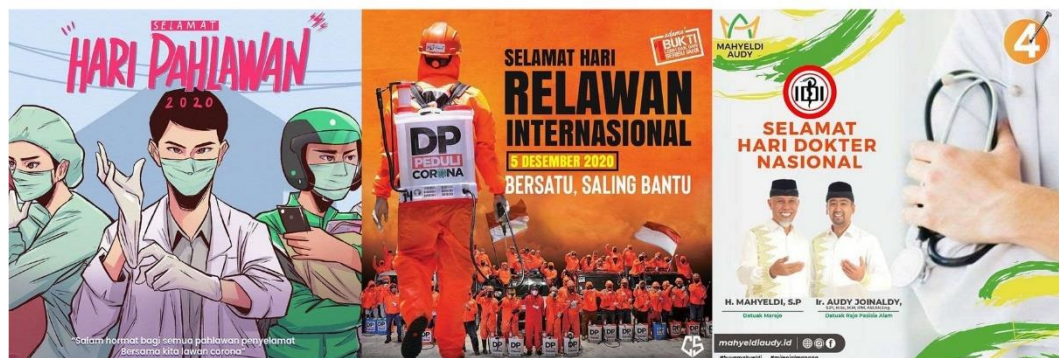

Figure 5. Depiction of appreciation towards frontline worker's theme
Source: www.instagram.com/gibran_rakabuming; www.instagram.com/dpramdhanpomanto; www.instagram.com/mahyeldiaudy.id

DISCUSSION

The Covid-19 pandemic-related imageries presented in Indonesia local election 2020 campaign media are able to be categorized into three themes: promoting Covid-19 safety protocols, candidate's strategies, and appreciation toward frontline workers. Looking into each theme closely, we will be able to see the function of each theme to enhance the candidate's personal brand and the overall narrative formed by the correlation between each theme as a unit.

Promoting Covid-19 safety protocols through visual elements in election campaign media can be seen as an attempt from the candidate to convey their point of view toward Covid-19 pandemic situation and also to support Covid-19 pandemic regulations ruled by the Indonesian government. Russmann, Svensson, and Larson (2019) characterized this type of message content as broadcasting—Instagram postings that convey stances, performances, opinions, and ideas to the followers. Advising other people to implement Covid-19 safety protocol by utilizing visual elements in campaign media will be able to form an association between candidate and the construct of universalism value—understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people, and the personality trait of friendliness—concern and sensitive towards others and their needs (Caprara et al, 2006). It could be concluded that utilizing Covid-19 related visual elements to promote Covid-19 safety protocol not only served to inform and to remind the public to implement safety protocols but also could enhance the candidate's personal brand.

Regarding the candidate's strategy's theme, along with enhancing his universalism and friendliness in terms of personal value and personality trait respectively, showing his/her reaction apart from promoting Covid-19 safety protocols will be able to exhibit candidate's competency to deal with challenging situations. Expertise (Montoya and Vandehey, 2009) or competency (Rampersad, 2008) is one of the aspects of personal brand establishment. Exhibiting the candidate's plan of action and reaction toward pandemic situations through campaign media is able to illustrate how the candidate deals with challenging situations. A glimpse of candidate's capability to deal with a challenging situation will be able to establish public's expectations toward the candidate. Furthermore, if the plan of action provided by the candidate is perceived to be beneficial for the general public or segmentation of it, then the candidate's personal brand will likely be perceived more positively by that segmentation of the public.

The theme of appreciation toward frontline workers can be seen as an attempt to exhibit inclusiveness. Inclusiveness in a sense that every part of the public plays a role to deal with the pandemic situation, and also the candidate as a part of those who took an action on dealing with pandemic situation for the better of the whole society. By reaching out to health workers, volunteers, and delivery service workers, hopefully, will be able to create a symbolic relation between candidates and those who play a pivotal role within public life during the pandemic. Reaching out to other parts of society, especially delivery service workers, will be able to portray a populist narrative—the candidate as one with the people (Grabe and Bucy, 2011). By conveying appreciation toward frontline workers, the candidate will be able to depict him/herself as part of the mass public and also attempting to create a positive relationship with the public.

As a whole, the depiction Covid-19 related imageries in election campaign media were able to convey the narrative in which portrayed the candidate's belief of the existence of Covid-19 pandemic and its various threats and implications, and also portraying candidate's empathy toward public health and safety which become of the biggest concern during the pandemic. Candidate's belief or value—what is considered as important and serve as guiding principle of life, and personality traits—the tendency of patterns of thought, feeling, and action to describe what people are like (Caprara and Vecchione, 2017), become two important aspects on establishing his/her personal brand (Montoya and Vandehey, 2009). Considering the similarity-attraction paradigm and also voting as an expressive role for the voter, candidate personality (trait and personal value) is able to draw voters that similar personality to the candidates (Caprara et al, 2006). Regarding candidate's empathic feeling toward public health, goodwill—to be recognized in a positive way—become one criterion on the personal brand establishment (Rampersad, 2008). Exhibiting the gesture of caring and willingness to help will be able to help the candidate to establish a positive public image.

Santilli (1983) suggested that advertising performs two functions which are the informative and the persuasive function, although Emamalizadeh (1985), commenting on Santilli's work, argued that advertising performs only one function which is to persuade. Persuasion is a successful intentional effort at influencing another's mental state through communication in a circumstance (O'keefe, 2016); or as a symbolic process by utilizing a form of language in which communicators try to convince other people to change their own attitudes or behaviours (Perloff, 2017). It is important to note that Covid-19 related imageries within election campaign media are not only utilized by the candidate to inform the public on how the public should react and how the candidate reacts to Covid-19 pandemic

situation, but also serve as persuasive tools for the candidate as an attempt to draw voters' support to increase candidate's electability. Utilizing Covid-19 discourse, along with many other discourses, as a context to exhibit candidate's value, goodwill, and inclusiveness through visual elements in election campaign media can also be seen as an attempt from the candidate to enhance their personal brand and to influence voter's decision-making process so that the voters' willing to give their vote on one particular candidate.

The study found that there are some contradictions within the campaign media that on one hand the candidate advising to implement Covid-19 safety protocol, on the other hand, their campaign media depicting themselves did not implement their own advice or at least not doing it properly, especially on wearing a mask and social distancing protocols. The contradiction that depicted by candidates' campaign media could be caused by the friction between purposes of their campaign media, on one hand, candidates want to depict themselves support the Covid-19 safety protocols, but on the other hand campaign media also have to play their role to established public awareness toward the candidate so that they could be easily identified by the public. Hence, sometimes they depicted themselves wearing a mask improperly so that the audience could recognize their face. Similarly, in the case of breaking social distancing protocols, it could be caused by the friction between candidates that wanted to depict themselves as a supporter of social distancing protocols and the need to depict themselves as an open and friendly person which could enhance their perceived public image. Lastly, the study also found that the depiction of Covid-19 related imageries in Indonesia local election 2020 was portrayed in a more positive approach in comparison to other media outlets such as news coverage. Upon reading on the material, the study did not find any Covid-19 related imageries that depicting the grim and devastating implication of pandemic situation in election campaign media, unlike the imageries that can be frequently seen in news coverages. Considering that how something is communicated could affect the audience's perception of the communicator, depicting Covid-19 pandemic more positively and encouragingly will be able to establish a more positive public image compared to depicting Covid-19 pandemic as a hopeless and grim situation.

CONCLUSION

On the surface, we could see Covid-19 related imageries in Indonesia local election 2020 campaign media utilized to perform advertising informative function that inform the public on many aspects of Covid-19 pandemic situation. Advising the public to implement Covid-19 safety protocols, promoting a healthier lifestyle,

caring, and supporting each other, and especially those who play a pivotal role during the pandemic becomes a piece of encouraging information and reminders for the public on how to deal with the pandemic situation. Along with it, considering the persuasive function of political advertising, Covid-19 pandemic is utilized by candidates through their election campaign media as a context where each candidate exhibits their value, personality, and capability to enhance his/her personal brand as an attempt to influence voters' decision making. Covid-19 pandemic became one of many contexts in election campaign media utilized by candidates to persuade the voter to lend his/her vote to him/her.

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