

Exploring Counter-Imaging in Online Political Advertisements During Elections Campaigns: A Case of South African Main Opposition Parties

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Abstract

This article contends that visual depictions within online political advertisements during South Africa's 2021 and 2024 local and national government elections employed counter-imaging as a visual rhetorical strategy. These visual rhetorical manoeuvres, being ideological and inherently subjective, are intricately crafted to either legitimise or undermine political issues and actors subtly. The study employed a research methodology grounded in visual discourse analysis to scrutinise the underlying visual rhetoric embedded within chosen visual representations from the online political advertisements of South Africa's main opposition parties: the ActionSA, Democratic Alliance (DA) and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). The findings of this research divulge that the selected visual representations strategically undermine the legitimacy of the ruling African National Congress (ANC)-led government.

Keywords: counter-imaging, online political advertisements, South African political parties, visual rhetoric

1. Introduction

Political advertising, as defined by McNair (1999), involves the strategic purchase of advertising space to convey political messages aimed at a targeted audience. This advertising often prioritises emotional appeal over substantive political discourse, potentially undermining rational decision-making processes. As a result, voters may be swayed more by emotional rather than logical choices, raising concerns about the alignment of online political advertising with the democratic ideal of informed, issue-based decision-making.

Political advertisements have evolved from traditional media such as newspapers, radio and television to digital media. The social media platform YouTube was used for the first time in 2008 during the US presidential election campaign of Barack Obama (Dommett, 2019; Barnard & Kreiss, 2013) for political advertisements. In South Africa, online political advertisements became available on YouTube for the first time during the 2009 national and provincial election campaigns (Thatelo, 2017). Online political advertisements are sometimes called digital political advertisements because they are available on digital media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X and YouTube (Fowler, Franz, & Ridout, 2021). The idea behind YouTube "... is that anybody, anywhere in the world, can upload video content about almost anything they like." (Salmond, 2011). YouTube is by far the most-used video-sharing website. There is a lack of a comprehensive definition of the concept of online political advertising. This paper defines online political advertising as a strategic communication effort produced by political actors on digital media platforms essentially to target, appeal to and persuade the electorates with political messages.

Chen and Wang (2022), Fowler, Franz, Martin, Peskowitz and Ridout (2021), Kreiss and Barrett (2020) and Dommett (2019) highlighted some of the benefits and challenges of online political advertisements during election campaigns. One of the benefits is that online political advertisements are underpinned by new data sources that allow advertisers to identify and target audiences with more precision. Advertising space is cheap compared to television advertisements. They can be helpful to the underdog candidates who are not well-funded and can set and shape news media agendas. However, Chen and Wang (2022) and Fowler et al. (2021) point out that their main shortcoming is their ability to manipulate voters with misinformation. Sometimes advertisements are rejected by computer algorithms for "nonsensical reasons" (Fowler et al., 2021, p.73).

Extending this discourse, Yanich (2020), Vafeiadis, Li, and Shen (2018) and Tak, Kaid, and Lee (1997) emphasise that political advertisements are deliberate and persuasive yet potentially manipulative. The messages not only construct narratives around political issues and actors but are also ideological, subliminal, and subjective. They can legitimise or delegitimise political opponents, creating counter-narratives that set political agendas and shape public opinion.

The key aspect of this paper is that online political advertisements use visual imagery (Schill, 2012). While research has focused on visual images in traditional media formats like newspapers, posters and television (Thatelo, 2017; Fourie, 2017; Fourie, 2008; Teer-Tomaselli, 2006 & 2005), there remains a notable dearth of literature explicitly addressing the visual rhetorical strategies of online political advertisements in South Africa. This paper aims to bridge that research gap by focusing specifically on counter-imaging rhetorical strategies.

By investigating the strategic use of visual elements such as colours, symbols, objects, and people, this paper seeks to decode the mechanisms of counter-imaging, a critical yet underexplored component of online political advertising. These visual cues shape the perceived ethos of political actors but also serve as heuristic devices that guide viewers' understanding and elaboration of political messages (Veneti, Jackson, & Lilleker, 2019).

This paper deploys a visual discourse analysis framework, aiming to closely examine the visual rhetorical strategies embedded in selected visual depictions from the online political advertisements of the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) posted on YouTube. Through this approach, the study will explore the intricate layers of visual rhetoric used in these advertisements, identifying the nuanced messages and persuasive techniques that shape political narratives and influence viewer perceptions. The objective is to uncover the rhetorical devices and symbolic representations within the visuals, offering insight into how they impact political discourse and public opinion during electoral campaigns.

By focusing on counter-imaging, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how visual rhetorical strategies are employed in the South African political context, particularly within the relatively new landscape of televised political advertising. This study is crucial for comprehending how these visuals influence voter attitudes and behaviours, ultimately shaping the political discourse in democratic processes.

1.1 Contextual Background

South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994 marked a pivotal moment in the nation's history, with Nelson Mandela elected as the first president in a fully democratic system. Over the years, South Africa's political landscape has evolved significantly, with various parties gaining representation in both the National Assembly and provincial assemblies. The African National Congress (ANC) dominated as the ruling party since 1994 but experienced a significant shift in the 2024 national elections, losing its majority. The DA, which had established itself as the primary opposition party in 2004, continued to offer an alternative to the ANC's policies.

A significant development in the 2024 elections was the rise of the uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MKP), led by former president Jacob Zuma. The MKP not only eroded the ANC's long-standing dominance but also impacted the support base of the EFF. Founded in 2014, the EFF had previously carved out a prominent space in opposition politics, particularly advocating for socioeconomic transformation and equality. The emergence of the MKP shifted the balance of power further, contributing to a new era in South African politics.

The lead-up to the local government elections on 1 November 2021, South Africa's sixth local election since democracy, saw both the DA and EFF launch online political advertisements, symbolising the growing importance of media in political campaigns. These elections cover 257 municipalities across the country and are critical in shaping service delivery at the local level, although issues of corruption and skills shortages have hindered local governments from effectively fulfilling their mandates (Masiya, Davids, & Mangai, 2021; Omarjee, 2021).

In previous local elections, the ANC's dominance had been waning. For instance, in 2011, it secured 61.95% of the vote, but by 2016, this had dropped to 53.91%, with further declines to 47.90% in the 2021 elections. The DA also saw its share decrease slightly in 2021, while the EFF gained traction, securing 10.42% of the vote. The ANC's loss of control in key metropolitan councils underscored the shifting dynamics in South African politics (Masuabi & Tabane, 2021).

Both the DA and the EFF leveraged political advertising to sway voters during the 2021 and 2024 elections by deploying counter-imaging strategies, reflecting broader themes in political advertising in South Africa, where parties aim to build identities, set agendas, and position their political image.

The following are the main research questions explored in this study:

RQ: What are the counter-imaging rhetorical strategies deployed in the DA and EFF online political advertisements to construct counterarguments during South Africa's 2021 and 2024 local, provincial and national government elections?

RQ: What ideological foundations and subjective elements shaped the visual rhetorical strategies in these online political advertisements, particularly in their efforts to either legitimise or challenge political issues and figures?

RQ: How did the selected visual elements in the DA and EFF's online political advertisements contribute to the construction of political imagery, setting of agendas, facilitation of discourse, and formation of identities and representations within their counter-imaging visual rhetoric?

2. Literature Review

Since the introduction of political advertisements on television in South Africa during the 2009 national and provincial elections, it has become increasingly evident that visual imagery plays a vital role in shaping public opinion, establishing political agendas, and influencing public discourse. Early research by Adams and Schreibman (1978), Culbert (1984), and Graber (1996), among others, highlighted the importance of visual images in politics, arguing that they are essential tools in shaping public perception, guiding political narratives and persuading voters. Visuals in politics deploy various elements such as abstractions (ideas, thoughts, notions), actions and symbols in the form of visual metaphors and modifiers (tools that change the appearance of visual elements such as objects, light, and colour, among other, to make them more specific) essentially to frame political arguments (Parmelee, 2002; Scott, 1994). These visual elements are often implicit and deliberately selected to frame political arguments, thus subjective (Messaris, 1997). For example, James and Sule (2023) demonstrated how visual elements are deployed to frame counter-imaging to delegitimise political figures by highlighting their failure to create favourable economic and social conditions for youth in Nigeria. Similarly, Perlmutter and Golan (2005) observed that counter-imaging in political television advertisements serves to frame various narratives, such as the “us” versus “them” and the “master” narratives in election campaigns, to either legitimise or delegitimise political actors, events and issues. While James and Sule (2023), explored counter-imaging in political visual texts, their study did not address whether counter-imaging is a fundamental aspect of visual rhetoric that frames political discourse in online political advertisements, a key medium of political communication during election campaigns. There remains a gap in research regarding whether counter-imaging is a visual rhetorical strategy that can be effectively used in online political ads.

This paper seeks to fill this gap by examining online political advertisements as a contemporary medium of political communication during election campaigns. Several studies, including those by Farrand (2024), Dommett, Mensah, Zhu, and Stafford (2024), Fowler, Franz, and Ridout (2021), Kirk and Teeling (2022), and Dommett (2019), have established that online political advertising is a crucial tool for political communication in elections. Moreover, van der Groot, Kruikemeier, de Ridder and Vliegenthart (2024) found that online political advertisements significantly influence voter decision-making. A qualitative study by Dommett, Mensah, Zhu, and Stafford (2024) identified six key counter-imaging communicative strategies – “evidence,” “reputation,” “community,” “targeting,” “outcome,” and “othering” – that are commonly used in online political ads to frame political messages. However, these studies focus on framing positive and negative political messages rather than counter-imaging as a visual rhetorical strategy.

Just like in television and print media, visual images in online political ads represent concrete information that influences social, political, and cultural spheres. Nonetheless, Dommett et al. (2024) caution that visual images in online political ads can be misleading and may lack credibility. This paper, therefore, concentrates on counter-imaging as a visual rhetorical strategy used by the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in their 2021 and 2024 online political advertising campaigns.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative visual discourse analysis to investigate counter-images in the political advertisements of the DA and the EFF during South Africa's 2021 and 2024 local and national government elections. Through purposive sampling, this paper sampled a total of five DA and EFF online political advertisements, namely: “Choose a secure future with dignity – Choose a party that gets things done” [DA TV advert 2021]; “This election is about survival! Unite to rescue SA” [DA TV advert 2024]; “The contrast between DA-run municipalities and ANC municipalities is so unmistakable” [DA TV advert]; “Vuka Vela Vota” [EFF Advert/2024 Elections]; and “EEF-Land and Jobs Manje!” Data was collected in early 2024, when the DA's online political advertisement, “This election is about survival! Unite to rescue SA” [DA TV Advert 2024], which featured the burning of the national flag, caused a national stir in the public sphere as political actors campaigned for national and provincial elections. Key analysis areas of counter-imaging as a visual rhetorical strategy in the selected online political advertisements are “abstractions”, “associations”, “counter-imaging”, “ideological meanings”, “juxtaposition”, “metaphors”, and “symbolism” (James & Sule, 2023; Perlmutter & Golan, 2005; Parmelee, 2002; Scott, 1994).

This paper is grounded in counter-narrative theory, which serves as both a theoretical and an analysis framework. The counter-narrative theory examines the conflict between dominant master narratives and alternative stories that challenge prevailing power structures (Hyvärinen, Hatavara & Rautajoki, 2021; Fiske, 1994; Delgado, 1989). The concept of

counter-narratives has been integral to narrative inquiry since the mid-20th century, originating from marginalised groups that resist hegemonic narratives in which the minority is rendered voiceless and portrayed as oppressed. These counter-narratives offer alternative and competing discourses that challenge the dominant narratives propagated through media and other public platforms (Maxwell & Sonn, 2021; Miller, Liu & Ball, 2020; Lechuga-Peña & Lechuga, 2018). Bamberg and Andrews (2004:1) simply describe counter-narratives as “narratives that resist another narrative”.

Delgado (1989) contends that counter-narratives are not merely oppositional but are creative and innovative forces that drive social change, foster progress, and highlight critical ethical issues such as justice and access to resources. These counter-stories function as tools for empowerment, offering new perspectives and alternatives to the status quo. However, Lueg, Bager, and Lundholt (2020) caution that counter-narratives cannot be simplistically defined as solely emancipatory or liberating stories; instead, they can be hostile, serving to destabilise established political systems and ideologies.

Although this paper focuses primarily on counter-imaging rather than counter-verbal narrative, Schill (2012) and Scott (1994) argue that the significance of counter-visuals in advertisements frames narratives through ironies, artistic styles of omission and negation of the established dominant imagery. For this reason, this paper deployed counter-narrative theory as the main theoretical framework to locate and interrogate visual rhetorical strategies on counter-imaging in the selected online political advertisements.

As an analysis method, counter-narratives critique and deconstruct the dominant discourses embedded within the master narratives, challenging the accepted norms and structures that reinforce power imbalances (Stanley, 2007). This dual capacity of constructive and critical counter-narratives makes them essential in understanding the dynamics of power and resistance in political and social contexts.

4. Qualitative Data Presentation and Interpretation

The data provided in this section goes into the visual representation of counter-imaging as a strategic political tool employed by the DA and the EFF. This examination is grounded in the theoretical framework that underpins counter-imaging. By scrutinising the visual narratives utilised by these parties, the study unpacks the various layers of meaning embedded within their imagery and understands how they strategically construct and disseminate counter-narratives to influence public perception. The data underscores thematic analysis, identifying themes: a visual representation of service delivery issues, political agenda-setting, economic struggles and unemployment, racial representation and stereotyping, and critique of opposition parties' strategies.

4.1 Research Question 1: Counter-Imaging Strategies in Visual Rhetoric

Employment of counter-imaging strategies

The DA and EFF's online political advertisements during the 2021 and 2024 elections employed counter-imaging strategies to craft and communicate visual rhetoric aimed at influencing public perception.

- **Service delivery issues**

Figure 1 provides examples of how these parties use visuals to highlight service delivery problems. Pictures showing piles of rubbish, informal settlements, and infrastructure challenges are used to criticise the ANC's performance. The DA strategically employs depictions of waste management issues, housing inequality, and infrastructure problems to set a negative agenda against the ANC, suggesting their failure to address these critical areas.

Beyond their rhetorical functions, these visuals evoke emotional responses such as frustration and dissatisfaction among voters. Such imagery could also influence voter behaviour by reinforcing perceptions of the ANC's governance as ineffective and prompting a desire for change, thereby motivating support for the DA. For instance, visuals depicting clean streets in DA-run municipalities juxtaposed against poorly maintained ANC-led areas create a compelling argument for voters to consider alternative governance models. This direct contrast likely appeals to voters' sense of practicality and desire for improved service delivery in their own communities.

- **Positive imagery of governance**

Figure 2 illustrates the DA's use of visual imagery to promote a positive image of their governance. Pictures of clean streets, well-maintained roads, and uninterrupted electricity are intended to portray the DA as effective in managing services. These visuals contrast sharply with the perceived failures of the ANC, aiming to position the DA as a more competent alternative.

While these images aim to set a political agenda, their impact on voter behaviour is tied to their ability to inspire hope and trust. By showcasing tangible examples of efficient service delivery, the DA reinforces its credibility and appeals to voters seeking pragmatic and results-oriented leadership. These visuals not only communicate a narrative of competence but also provide voters with concrete reasons to believe in the DA's capacity to address their everyday challenges.

- **Economic struggles and unemployment**

Figure 3 highlights the EFF's focus on economic issues, particularly youth unemployment and landlessness, which forces South Africans to live in informal dwellings. Visuals of frustrated young graduates and newspaper headlines about unemployment emphasise the ANC's failures in addressing economic challenges and creating job opportunities.

These counter-imaging strategies are employed to shape the visual rhetoric of both parties, using imagery to criticise opponents and promote their agendas.

The visuals are more than ideological tools; they are designed to resonate with specific voter groups, particularly the youth and economically marginalised populations. For example, images of unemployed graduates holding signs could trigger feelings of solidarity and shared struggle among young voters, potentially galvanising their support for the EFF. Additionally, the depiction of burning informal settlements taps into broader anxieties about economic inequality, encouraging voters to align with the EFF's proposed radical solutions. Such emotionally charged visuals are instrumental in shaping voter decision-making by linking personal experiences with the party's political messaging.



Figure 1. Screenshots of service delivery issues

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-w0FqAuNOPY>

The political agenda of the lack of services in the public sphere has been carried out by media, civic organisations, and opposition parties that are critical of the ANC government. Among the criticisms are the deteriorated waste management infrastructure, lack of proper implementation of integrated waste management plans and budget allocation, and lack of human and technical skills and finances that could improve waste management services (Mazele & Amoah, 2022; Polasi, Matinise, & Oelefse, 2020). More concerning is the limited understanding by municipalities to realise that waste is an economic resource that has the potential to contribute to the economic growth of South Africa (Parker, 2021).

The DA uses the second image as a visual image to set a political discourse on housing as a social crisis faced by many poor South Africans. The Population Census of 2022 reported more than 17 million (about 88.5%) South African households live in formal housing. However, 12.3% of South Africans live in informal dwellings, and 5.3% in traditional rural or village dwellings (Statistics South Africa, 2024).

The lack of or poor services in many parts of South Africa has resulted in sometimes violent service delivery protests in vulnerable communities, primarily the ANC constituencies. The fifth picture depicts service delivery protests in black communities. On the other hand, service delivery protests suggest that local government officials lack administrative and technical capacity (Morudu, 2019). Moreover, the above visual image is rhetorical and constructs imperial Eurocentric stereotypes that a “black man” is a problem, an anarchist, is backward, primitive, inferior, and devoid of relevance, substance, and values in modern civilisation (Amin, 1988).

4.2 Research Question 2: Ideological Foundations and Subjective Elements

Ideological underpinnings of visual rhetoric

The visual rhetoric employed by the DA and EFF is deeply rooted in ideological foundations that seek to legitimise their positions and challenge their opponents.

- **Service delivery and racial representation**

The DA’s portrayal of clean streets and efficient waste management (Figure 2, Pictures 7 and 9) ideologically contrasts their success with the ANC’s failures. This positive imagery not only aims to legitimise the DA’s governance but also constructs a narrative of racial superiority by using a white man as a symbol of effective service delivery (Picture 8). This racial representation reinforces stereotypes of white competence versus black inefficiency.

- **Economic struggles**

The EFF’s visual focus on economic struggles (Figure 3) is ideologically designed to critique the ANC’s failure to address unemployment. The images of unemployed youth and job-seeking graduates frame the economic challenges as a direct result of ANC policies, seeking to position the EFF as a party advocating for necessary economic reforms.

These ideological foundations are reflected in how the parties use visuals to both legitimise their actions and challenge the credibility of their opponents.

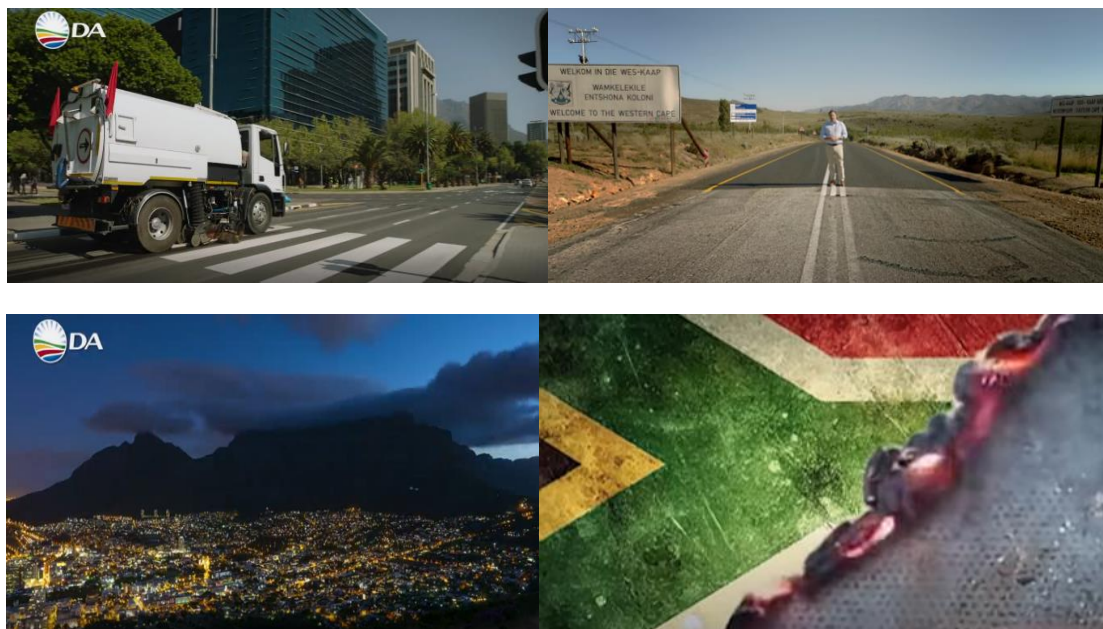


Figure 2. The positive image of the DA’s service delivery

Sources: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-w0FqAuNOPY>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcdZRAP3cn0>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXuZGfCAcPk>

In Figure 2, the screenshots depict scenes showcasing what appears to be efficient service delivery by the DA. Picture 7 features a clean street with a road sweeper truck, implying proactive infrastructure maintenance and effective waste management. Picture 8 displays a white man standing on a road; one part of the road appears new, and the other seems old. Picture 9 shows an uninterrupted electricity supply, contrasting with widespread load shedding in South Africa. The DA strategically employs these images to convey a positive political image, contrasting their purported successes with the perceived shortcomings of the ANC government. The visuals challenge the legitimacy of ANC governance, particularly in service delivery, racial representation, and electricity provision. Through these depictions, the DA seeks to influence public perception and shape discourse surrounding governance issues, positioning themselves as a credible alternative to the ruling party.

The DA strategically employed the visual depiction (picture 7) of a road sweeper truck operating within Cape Town's urban centre to ideologically craft a favourable political narrative (Lee & Moon, 2017). This portrayal aimed to shape a positive image and representation of the party's governance efforts (Briandana, 2019). Concurrently, the image undermined the credibility of an advertising campaign by the ANC local government, which promoted the master narrative of "building better communities together." Through this juxtaposition, the DA sought to challenge the legitimacy of the ANC's governance narrative and position itself as a more effective and responsive alternative. By leveraging such visual imagery, the DA aimed to influence public perceptions and reinforce its political messaging regarding service delivery and urban management.

Picture 8 subliminally creates a rhetorical argument (Dahl, 2015), racial identity (Reid, 2012), and representation (Briandana, 2019). The problem with the above visual image is that it constructs stereotypes that a white man, the DA leader, is capable of rendering superior and reliable services to South Africa despite the lack of services in predominantly black and coloured communities in the Western Cape Province and Gauteng metropolitan cities. The use of a white man constructs a representation of a saviour narrative. Moreover, it constructs racial binaries that the ANC-led governments, which are significantly black, are inferior; thus, one should expect inferior or lack of services.

Picture 9 evokes critical discussion about the state of energy supply in South Africa. Since 2007, South Africa has been plagued with continuous electricity supply shortages called load-shedding (essentially electricity blackouts) due to, among others, corruption, mismanagement, and lack of maintenance of generating stations (Yelland, 2014). In 2021 alone, the country reached a new record of 1 136 hours of load-shedding compared to 121 hours in 2014 (Steyn, 2021). To put this into perspective, South Africa had 47 days and 8 hours without electricity. It is worth noting that this poor electricity supply has a direct bearing on the lower economic growth of South Africa and contributes to unacceptably high unemployment levels (Mofokeng, 2021). Thus, the problem with picture 9 is that the DA is misrepresenting the electricity issue to suggest that the Western Cape is free from electricity blackouts. Moreover, the visual image presents a master narrative of a capable political party that could distribute electricity free from blackouts, essentially a rhetorical representation of white excellence. It is worth noting that at the time of writing this paper, in September of 2024, South Africa had 155 days of consistent electricity supply without interruption.

Picture 10 portrays the burning of the South African national flag, a symbol loaded with historical and ideological significance. From the liberalist DA perspective, the national flag embodies the nation's transition from apartheid to democracy, marked on 27 April 1994, Freedom Day. It represents the ideals of racial unity, freedom, and democracy – a collective national identity forged through the dismantling of apartheid and colonial oppression.

The DA employs this imagery to convey a visual metaphor for what they argue is a dire future should the ANC form coalitions with far-right political parties such as the EFF and the recently established *uMkhonto weSizwe* Party (MKP), led by former president Jacob Zuma. The burning flag serves as a rhetorical device, invoking a "fear appeal" strategy reminiscent of the apartheid-era doctrine of *swart gevaar* (Afrikaans for "black fear" or "black danger"). As Govan Mbeki (1991) observed, the *swart gevaar* ideology effectively united English- and Afrikaans-speaking whites through a shared fear and hostility towards the African majority, portraying them as a threat to white civilisation.

In this advertisement, the flames and smoke rising from the burning flag are ideologically charged. They suggest that the vision of Nelson Mandela and the democratic ideals he symbolised have been eroded by three decades of ANC governance. The imagery implies that the continuation of the ANC's rule, mainly through partnerships with parties like the EFF and MKP, could lead to South Africa's collapse. However, the ad concludes with the flag being restored—a metaphor for the DA's proposed salvation of the nation, contingent upon voters uniting behind their vision and rejecting the ANC.

Criticism of the advertisement has been swift and scathing. Bojang (2024) describes it as "insensitive," "unpatriotic," "provocative," and "inciteful," arguing that it desecrates the hard-won freedoms of South Africans who fought against apartheid and colonial oppression. According to Bojang, the advertisement undermines the principles of democracy, unity, tolerance, and peace that are essential to South Africa's cohesion. Additionally, Ramose (2018) interprets the burning flag as a declaration of war against black South Africans, reinforcing their marginalisation and systemic oppression under a settler-colonial-apartheid-liberalist framework.

This framework, as articulated by Hartman (1997), legally entrenches the binary of "whiteness as exclusivity" and "blackness as degradation." Sithole (2024) extends this critique, arguing that black South Africans are systematically "othered," dehumanised, and stripped of personhood, reduced to "nothingness" within the socio-political order. The burning flag, therefore, symbolises not only a rejection of the ANC but also a perpetuation of the historical narrative that associates blackness with criminality and inferiority.

The DA's use of this advertisement underscores its reliance on fear-based rhetoric to mobilise voters, drawing parallels with divisive and racially charged tactics of the past. While ostensibly optimistic, the visual restoration of the flag raises questions about the ethical implications of leveraging such powerful symbols in political advertising. The advertisement

exemplifies how visual rhetoric can simultaneously inspire hope and provoke deep societal tensions, reflecting the complex interplay of symbolism, ideology, and strategy in South African electoral politics.

4.3 Research Question 3: Contribution to Political Imagery, Agenda Setting and Identity Formation Construction of Political Imagery and Discourse

The selected visual elements in the DA and EFF's advertisements contribute significantly to political imagery, agenda setting and identity formation.

- **Construction of political imagery**

The DA's visuals (Figure 2) create a narrative of effective governance and contrast this with the ANC's perceived incompetence. The imagery of clean streets and functioning infrastructure builds a political image of the DA as a superior alternative. In contrast, the EFF's visuals (Figure 3) focus on economic hardships, constructing a narrative that the ANC has failed to address critical issues affecting black South Africans.

- **Setting of agendas and facilitating discourse**

Both parties use their visuals to set political agendas. The DA's positive imagery and the EFF's focus on economic struggles set the discourse around the effectiveness of governance and economic policy. This strategic use of visuals facilitates a broader discussion about the state of South African politics and the parties' respective roles in addressing national issues.

- **Formation of identities and representations**

The DA's use of racial imagery (Picture 8) and the EFF's focus on unemployment contribute to the formation of political identities and representations. The DA's imagery constructs a representation of white competence versus black inadequacy, while the EFF's visuals emphasize the economic struggles of black South Africans, thereby shaping public perception of both the ANC and themselves.



Figure 3. EFF messages about the economic struggles and unemployment

Sources: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YH8oHgh8y8>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrV7m0chd4I&t=22s>

Figure 3 presents a denotative analysis of economic challenges and unemployment in South Africa, particularly among the black population. Picture 11 depicts a newspaper poster highlighting South Africa's youth unemployment issue, emphasising the urgency of addressing this socioeconomic problem. Meanwhile, picture 12 features a group of young black graduates holding posters advocating for job opportunities, showcasing their frustration and demand for immediate solutions to the unemployment crisis. Picture 13 depicts the burning of informal settlements made out of shacks, a common feature during the winter months. These images signify the prevalent economic struggles faced by black South Africans, attributing responsibility to the ANC for failing to tackle these issues adequately. The visual elements underscore the seriousness of youth unemployment and lack of adequate land for housing and convey a sense of urgency for effective interventions to address the economic hardships experienced by the youth population.

Like the DA, the EFF used counter-imaging in the 2021 and 2024 elections. The EFF 2021 and 2024 elections manifesto

focused on the political issues of electricity, land, job opportunities and higher education funding for the poor. Pictures 11 and 12 use visual images to set a legitimate political agenda about the plight of unemployment among young people in South Africa. During the 2024 elections, unemployment in South Africa was 32.9%, meaning 16.2 million South Africans were economically inactive (Statistics South Africa, 2024). These alarming unemployment figures are caused, among others, by the structural legacy of colonial Apartheid, the low investor confidence, poor quality of education and training, mismatch in the demand and supply of labour skills, and the ANC's inability to govern South Africa (Lebakeng & Matebese-Notshulwana, 2024).

Thus, the above visual images are ideological; they represent and construct a narrative argument about the economic struggles of black people in post-1994 South Africa. They rhetorically argue that the ANC-led government fails to create economic opportunities for its citizens. Although the EFF raises a legitimate issue of jobless South Africans, the party has been criticised, among others, for calling for open borders (Launspach, 2021) and encouraging economic migrants to find "creative ways" to enter South Africa (Feketha, 2021). The influx of undocumented international migrants into South African shores, particularly in vulnerable township and village communities, has created all sorts of socioeconomic problems, such as crime, drug abuse, destruction of strategic infrastructure, human trafficking, and urban decay (Hlatwayo, 2023). It is worth noting that undocumented international immigrants have taken over 90% of small and medium enterprises in townships and villages and the informal economy, namely "spaza shops" (over 100 000 small informal retailers across the nation), illegal mining, construction services, local transport, beauty salons and household maintenance services, among others, of the hands of vulnerable South Africans (Hogg, 2021; du Toit, 2020). In other words, the township and village economies have been captured by undocumented international migrants.

5. Conclusion

This study has highlighted the significant role of visual imagery in political advertisements as a powerful mechanism for crafting counter-images. Through the strategic use of visual rhetoric, both the DA and the EFF have adeptly challenged the legitimacy of their political adversaries while advancing their ideological positions. The DA leveraged visual representations of service delivery and infrastructure issues to project itself as a more effective alternative to the ANC. Conversely, the EFF employed visuals to spotlight socio-economic failures and injustices attributed to ANC governance, aiming to erode the ruling party's credibility and resonate with the electorate's sense of economic marginalisation.

To strengthen the strategic use of visual rhetoric, political parties could consider the following recommendations:

1. **Tailoring visual strategies to audience demographics:** Political parties should use data-driven approaches to understand their target audiences and tailor their visual messages to resonate with specific voter groups. For instance, focusing on issues like youth unemployment or housing inequality can appeal to economically marginalised populations.
2. **Balancing ideological messaging with practical solutions:** While ideological narratives are powerful, incorporating visuals that suggest tangible solutions or actionable plans could enhance credibility and voter trust.
3. **Engaging in ethical advertising practices:** Political parties must ensure their visual rhetoric does not perpetuate harmful stereotypes or misinformation. Ethical advertising practices foster trust and align with democratic values.

Additionally, policymakers should consider the following for regulating political advertising:

1. **Establishing ethical standards for visual rhetoric:** Regulators should implement guidelines to prevent the dissemination of misleading or harmful visuals in political advertisements. These standards could include transparency about the origins and intent of visual content.
2. **Promoting media literacy among voters:** Policymakers should advocate for media literacy programs to help voters critically analyse and interpret visual political messages, reducing susceptibility to manipulation.

Future research could build on this study by exploring empirical data on voter responses to visual political advertisements. Such research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness and ethical implications of visual rhetoric in shaping voter behaviour and public discourse.

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Authors contributions

Dr Mopailo Thomas Thatelo and Dr Kealeboga Aiseng conceived the research idea, designed the study methodology, collected and analysed the data, interpreted the results, and drafted the manuscript.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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Appendix

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-w0FqAuNOPY>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YH8oHgh8y8>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrV7m0chd4I&t=22s>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcdZRAP3cn0>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXuZGfCAcPk>