

Branding the Street: Visual Politics in Zohran Mamdani's 2025 New York City Mayoral Campaign

Dr. Syeda Arooj Zehra Rizvi

aroorj.cad@pu.edu.pk

Lecturer, Department of Graphic Design, University College of Art and Design, University of the Punjab

Corresponding Author: * Dr. Syeda Arooj Zehra Rizvi aroorj.cad@pu.edu.pk

Received: 09-11-2025

Revised: 06-12-2025

Accepted: 16-12-2025

Published: 23-12-2025

ABSTRACT

Political branding in contemporary urban democracies increasingly depends on visual communication strategies that embed identity within community experience rather than relying on standardized campaign aesthetics. This qualitative study examines the 2025 mayoral campaign of Zohran Mamdani, whose visual branding system adopted an unconventional visual language grounded in the material and cultural aesthetics of New York City's working-class neighborhoods. On November 4, 2025, Mamdani won the mayoral election with 50.78% of the vote, achieving the highest voter turnout in over fifty years. By drawing from the city's visual environment, including subway signage, bodega storefronts, taxicab colors, and multilingual community markers, the campaign positioned itself as locally rooted and culturally resonant. Employing semiotic analysis and multimodal discourse analysis within an interpretive framework, the study analyzes how the campaign achieved differentiation through saturated color palettes, hand-rendered typography, community-referential illustrations, and inclusive multilingual messaging. The findings demonstrate that these design choices constructed a coherent identity system that functioned as persuasive political communication, shaping voter perception, signaling ideological alignment, and cultivating trust through aesthetic authenticity. The analysis reveals that community-centered design, when applied to political branding, operates as a strategic mechanism for building solidarity, strengthening political positioning, and challenging conventional norms of campaign communication. This study contributes to scholarship on visual communication and political marketing by illustrating how graphic design can reshape democratic engagement when it emerges from local culture and shared urban experience.

Keywords: political branding, visual communication, urban semiotics, campaign design, multimodal discourse, semiotic analysis

INTRODUCTION

On November 4, 2025, democratic socialist Zohran Mamdani won New York City's mayoral election with 50.78% of the vote, defeating independent Andrew Cuomo and Republican Curtis Sliwa (Pazmino, 2025; Stark-Miller, 2025). The election drew approximately 2,055,921 voters, representing the highest turnout in more than fifty years since 1969 and marking a watershed moment in American urban politics (Pretsky, 2025). Mamdani, a 34-year-old state legislator representing Astoria, Queens, campaigned on a progressive platform emphasizing universal childcare, free public transit, and rent control (Pazmino, 2025). Yet his victory extended beyond policy positions or grassroots organizing alone. Post-election analyses consistently highlighted an unexpected factor: the campaign's visual identity resonated profoundly with New York's diverse constituencies in ways that traditional political branding had failed to achieve (Zanger, 2025).

This study investigates how Mamdani's culturally rooted visual branding strategy functioned as strategic political infrastructure rather than mere aesthetic packaging. Unlike conventional campaigns that deploy

standardized national color schemes and corporate typography, Mamdani's design system drew its visual language directly from New York City's material culture. The campaign incorporated taxi yellow and subway blue, hand-painted bodega signage, Bollywood-inspired color saturation, sports team iconography, and multilingual street posters (Haile, 2025). These design choices represented strategic interventions that translated progressive policy commitments into culturally legible visual forms that diverse communities could recognize, trust, and claim as their own.

Political communication within contemporary urban democracies increasingly relies on visual strategies that move beyond conventional campaign aesthetics. In dense metropolitan environments marked by cultural plurality, spatial complexity, and visual saturation, voters encounter political information in a competitive field of commercial advertising, public signage, and community messaging. As a result, political branding must operate simultaneously as strategic communication, cultural expression, and visual identity. Mamdani's campaign offers a compelling case study of this shift, departing from the polished, corporate-style materials that have long dominated United States political communication and instead adopting a brand identity grounded in local aesthetic cues, community symbolism, and the vernacular visual language of New York City's working-class neighborhoods.

The significance of this electoral outcome extends beyond New York City politics. As American urban centers become increasingly diverse, political campaigns face the challenge of communicating effectively with heterogeneous constituencies who bring different cultural frameworks, linguistic backgrounds, and aesthetic literacies to their interpretation of political messages. Traditional political communication strategies, developed primarily for mass media appeal to relatively homogeneous national audiences, often fail to resonate in these multicultural urban contexts. Mamdani's campaign offers a model for how culturally intelligent visual design can bridge these communication gaps and mobilize diverse coalitions.

Research Gap and Contribution

Political communication scholarship has extensively documented the importance of branding in electoral campaigns (Scammell, 2015; Needham, 2015), emphasizing message consistency, candidate image management, and strategic positioning. However, existing research predominantly focuses on verbal messaging, media strategy, and digital outreach while treating visual design as a secondary concern, viewing it as aesthetic window dressing rather than substantive political communication. Even studies that examine emotional appeals through imagery in political advertising (Brader, 2006), or that offer general frameworks for analyzing visual grammar and semiotics applicable to political contexts (Leeuwen & Kress, 2020), rarely examine how culturally specific design elements function to construct political identity and mobilize particular demographic constituencies.

This gap proves especially problematic in increasingly diverse urban democracies where voters navigate multiple cultural identities and semiotic systems simultaneously. A Bengali immigrant in Jackson Heights encounters political messages alongside Bollywood film posters, halal butcher shop signs, and MTA subway maps, forming a visual ecosystem vastly different from the aesthetic environment of rural Pennsylvania or suburban Arizona. Yet most political campaigns deploy visual identities designed for national television broadcasts and generic suburban sensibilities, missing opportunities to engage urban voters through the cultural codes they actually inhabit.

Mamdani's campaign offers a corrective model. By grounding its visual system in New York's specific cultural and spatial landscape, the campaign achieved what political scientists studying candidate localness call place-based identification: the perception that a candidate understands, belongs to, and will represent the interests of the community (Schulte-Cloos, 2023). This study contributes to visual communication scholarship by demonstrating how such identification can be deliberately constructed

through strategic design choices and by providing a detailed semiotic analysis of how specific visual elements function within culturally diverse urban contexts.

Research Questions

This study addresses three research questions designed to analyze and evaluate the visual communication strategies employed in the Mamdani campaign:

1. How did the Mamdani campaign's visual branding strategy employ culturally situated design elements to construct political identity and communicate policy commitments to diverse urban constituencies?
2. In what ways did specific semiotic choices, including chromatic schemes, typographic treatments, iconographic motifs, and multilingual messaging, function as rhetorical devices to differentiate the campaign, engage communities, and signal ideological positioning?
3. What transferable design principles emerge from this case that can inform the development of culturally responsive visual campaign strategies in similarly diverse urban democratic contexts?

Research Objectives

To address the research questions, the study pursues four objectives.

1. To identify and systematically analyze how the Mamdani campaign's culturally situated visual branding elements constructed political identity and communicated policy commitments across diverse urban constituencies.
2. To categorize and interpret the campaign's key semiotic choices, including chromatic schemes, typographic treatments, iconographic motifs, and multilingual messaging, and to examine how these operated rhetorically to differentiate the campaign, engage communities, and signal ideological positioning.
3. To synthesize transferable design principles and a replicable analytical framework from the case study that can inform culturally responsive visual campaign strategies in similarly diverse urban democratic contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of political branding and visual communication has expanded significantly over the past two decades as scholars recognize that election campaigns function as complex branding systems shaped by cultural, spatial, and semiotic forces. This literature review integrates scholarship from political branding theory, visual communication research, urban semiotics, and multimodal discourse analysis to establish the theoretical foundation for analyzing the Mamdani campaign.

Political Branding as Strategic Infrastructure

Recent theoretical developments in political branding scholarship reconceptualize branding as strategic infrastructure rather than superficial packaging (Needham, 2015). This body of work challenges earlier transactional models of political marketing by demonstrating how coherent brand identities function as complex communication systems that must resonate culturally and emotionally with constituents to achieve electoral objectives. Scammell's (2015) foundational work on consumer democracy argues that contemporary political campaigns operate as branding systems where differentiation and authenticity determine competitive advantage in saturated media environments. Her framework emphasizes that effective political brands must stand out through cultural resonance rather than generic messaging.

Similarly, Needham and Smith (2015) demonstrate that political brands develop through shared ideologies, sustained engagement, and strategic visual communication across multiple touchpoints. Their research validates the approach of constructing brand identity from localized semiotics rather than national templates to signal proximity and build trust with specific constituencies. The centrality of differentiation in political branding emerges consistently across this literature. French and Smith (2011) argue that candidates who adopt unconventional communication strategies can disrupt voter expectations and create space for alternative narratives rooted in local identity.

Research on political brand personality establishes that visual and stylistic cues influence perceptions of candidate traits (Smith, 2011). Drawing on social cognition research demonstrating that warmth and competence constitute fundamental dimensions of social evaluation (Fiske, 2019), this work has shown these traits function as significant predictors of voting intentions. Wheeler (2017) emphasizes that consistent repetition of core visual motifs across media platforms strengthens brand coherence and trust, a principle clearly evident in campaigns that maintain uniform deployment of saturated color palettes, hand-rendered typography, and recognizable iconography across all materials.

Visual Communication and Electoral Persuasion

Visual communication scholarship provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how design choices function as rhetorical arguments rather than mere decoration. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) influential framework establishes that design elements constitute a visual grammar where color, typography, layout, and imagery combine to shape interpretation and social meaning. Their multimodal approach demonstrates that visual and textual modes operate synergistically to construct persuasive messages, suggesting that the integration of culturally specific imagery with multilingual text creates layered communication accessible across literacy and language boundaries.

Research on emotional cues in political advertising demonstrates that visual elements often exert stronger persuasive effects than verbal messaging alone, particularly when they evoke cultural familiarity or community values (Brader, 2006). Brader's experimental work reveals that simply changing music or imagery while retaining identical text provokes completely different voter responses, validating the strategic importance of deliberate visual choices. Saturated color palettes, bold hand-drawn typography, and neighborhood iconography can echo vernacular aesthetics of working-class communities, communicating sincerity and approachability while aligning campaigns with everyday urban life rather than distant political institutions.

Color psychology research establishes that palettes influence ideological framing and spatial belonging. While mainstream U.S. campaigns typically employ red, white, and blue to signal patriotism and institutional legitimacy, campaigns using nontraditional palettes often seek to position themselves as agents of change. Elliot and Maier (Elliot, 2014) demonstrate that colors have psychological impacts and culturally specific associations that influence audience responses. Research on place branding demonstrates that locally resonant color palettes can foster community identification and spatial belonging by evoking familiar urban environments (Lenclos & Lenclos, 2004).

Typography likewise carries semantic weight beyond mere legibility. Research on ideological perceptions of typography demonstrates that voters associate different typeface categories with distinct political orientations: serif fonts are perceived as more conservative and traditional, while sans-serif fonts are perceived as more liberal and progressive (Haenschen & Tamul, 2020). Hand-rendered and script lettering communicates informality, human presence, and relational proximity (Brumberger, 2003). Lupton (2010) notes that handcrafted lettering evokes authenticity and individuality, attributes that can distinguish grassroots campaigns from polished corporate political branding.

Urban Semiotics and Spatial Identity

Urban semiotics scholarship provides essential context for understanding how campaigns can leverage the semiotic infrastructure of cities to build political identity. Cities function as complex semiotic systems where familiar signs and objects shape collective identity and spatial belonging (Hutchison & Gottdiener, 2018). Research demonstrates that visual familiarity in urban landscapes carries trust and community identification (Zukin, 2012), suggesting that campaigns incorporating local motifs align themselves with residents' lived experience rather than abstract political rhetoric.

Lynch's (1960) foundational work on urban imageability argues that familiarity with environmental elements enhances cognitive mapping and spatial orientation. By appropriating urban symbols such as transit cards, bicycles, and building facades, political campaigns can embed themselves within voters' mental maps of the city, bringing candidates psychologically and spatially closer to constituents. This strategy proves particularly effective in immigrant-heavy neighborhoods where residents may have limited exposure to traditional American political aesthetics but extensive daily engagement with city infrastructure and community signage.

Zukin's (2010) analysis of authenticity in urban spaces emphasizes that residents value cultural expressions rooted in community history and everyday practices rather than imposed commercial or institutional aesthetics. Visual systems that draw directly from neighborhood vernacular, including bodega awnings, hand-painted storefront signs, and street vendor displays, create what might be termed authentic urban culture rather than gentrified or corporate visual language. This authenticity can contribute to strong performance among working-class voters across ethnic lines, as the visual system signals class solidarity and community belonging through design choices accessible to diverse cultural groups.

Multimodal Discourse and Inclusive Communication

Multimodal discourse analysis demonstrates how campaigns can broaden accessibility and reduce communication inequality by integrating multiple semiotic resources (Jewitt, 2014; Leeuwen & Kress, 2020). This framework explains the strategic effectiveness of multilingual materials that present parallel content across multiple languages. Rather than treating multilingualism as mere translation, effective campaigns construct culturally specific visual layouts and design elements appropriate to each linguistic community, demonstrating what O'Halloran (2008) terms systemic functional multimodal discourse, where visual and linguistic modes reinforce rather than simply duplicate meaning.

Research on multilingualism and political participation establishes that linguistic accessibility enhances democratic engagement among immigrant communities (Pavlenko, 2017). Citizens generally feel most comfortable engaging with political issues in their own language, suggesting that multilingual outreach removes barriers to participation while signaling respect for linguistically diverse populations. The consistent visual identity maintained across language versions, using the same color palette, similar typographic treatment, and parallel iconography, reinforces brand coherence while demonstrating cultural competence.

Community-Based Branding and Co-Ownership

Community-based branding theory explains how political campaigns can construct perceptions of co-ownership and mutual belonging with constituents (Holt, 2004). Brands gain cultural power when they resonate with lived values and shared narratives of specific communities rather than imposing external identities. In political contexts, emphasizing local identity and community symbols fosters what Lees-Marshment terms relational marketing, where constituents perceive the campaign as emerging from rather than targeting their community (2020).

Holt's (2004) framework on cultural branding demonstrates that iconic brands achieve resonance by addressing cultural contradictions and embodying collective aspirations through symbolic communication. A campaign can address the contradiction between a city's multicultural reality and the homogenizing aesthetics of conventional political campaigns by explicitly celebrating diversity through multilingual messaging, culturally specific design elements, and inclusive iconography. This symbolic resolution of cultural tension can help build broad coalitions across ethnic, generational, and class boundaries, as different constituencies recognize their own cultural references within the campaign's visual language.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study integrates four interrelated bodies of scholarship that collectively explain how political branding operates through visual communication: political branding theory, multimodal discourse analysis, urban semiotics, and design strategy within graphic communication. Together, these frameworks support a comprehensive understanding of how the Mamdani campaign constructed meaning through color, typography, iconography, layout, and cultural symbolism.

Political branding theory forms the foundation of this research, offering insights into how candidates establish relational meaning and differentiate themselves in competitive communication environments. Scholars describe political brands as multifaceted identity systems combining policy positions, emotional resonance, symbolic cues, and personal attributes (Scammell, 2015; Needham, 2015). Through this lens, branding serves as a strategy for constructing a coherent narrative about the candidate that can be communicated across multiple media platforms. Political branding theory identifies differentiation as central to political persuasion, particularly when campaigns must compete against highly standardized templates dominating national electoral communication (Smith, Measuring the changes to leader brand associations during the 2010 election campaign, 2011). The theory also emphasizes authenticity as a key determinant of voter trust. According to Banet-Weiser (2012), authenticity in branding emerges not from factual accuracy but from perceived sincerity and cultural coherence.

Multimodal discourse analysis provides the second pillar of the theoretical framework, offering a way to understand how campaigns communicate meaning through combinations of visual and textual elements. According to Kress (2014), multimodality refers to the use of multiple semiotic resources, including image, color, typography, gesture, and spatial organization, to create layered communicative effects. In political communication, multimodality allows campaigns to appeal to diverse audiences, particularly those with varied literacy levels or linguistic backgrounds. (Jewitt, 2014) explains that multimodal analysis is essential for understanding contemporary political communication because meaning is rarely conveyed through language alone; campaigns rely on the orchestration of visual forms that carry ideological content and emotional cues.

Urban semiotics provides the third theoretical lens by examining how cities operate as symbolic landscapes shaped by cultural, historical, and political forces. Gottdiener and Hutchison (2018) argue that urban environments function as signifying systems in which buildings, transportation infrastructure, signage, and street-level visual culture act as markers conveying identity and collective memory. Within this framework, political campaigns that reference local urban symbols participate in the production of urban meaning by invoking shared cultural knowledge. When a campaign adopts the aesthetic language of transit graphics, corner-store awnings, or improvised community posters, it aligns the political brand with the semiotic identity of the city itself.

Figure 1: Integrated Theoretical Framework for Political Branding and Visual Communication Analysis



Note. This figure illustrates the convergence of four theoretical pillars: political branding theory, multimodal discourse analysis, urban semiotics, and design strategy. These frameworks collectively inform the analytical approach used to examine how visual elements construct political meaning and community identification.

Design strategy and graphic communication constitute the fourth component of the framework. Design scholars view graphic elements not merely as aesthetic choices but as communicative tools that construct meaning, evoke emotion, and shape audience perception (Lupton, 2010). In political campaigns, design strategy encompasses decisions related to color, typography, illustration, composition, and narrative framing, all of which contribute to brand personality, message clarity, and affective tone. Elliot and Maier (2014) note that colors communicate both cultural associations and emotional cues, while Heyer and Brumberger (2019) demonstrate that typefaces influence perceptions of authenticity, approachability, and professionalism. These four theoretical lenses converge to form a comprehensive analytical model for understanding how culturally grounded visual branding systems operate as strategically effective political communication.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in interpretive inquiry to analyze the visual communication strategies and branding architecture of Zohran Mamdani's 2025 mayoral campaign. The methodological approach integrates semiotic analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, and visual rhetorical analysis within an interpretive paradigm. This combination of analytical methods facilitates a comprehensive examination of how the campaign constructs meaning through color, typography, illustration, spatial composition, and culturally situated symbolism.

Research Design

The study follows a qualitative, interpretive research design that prioritizes depth of analysis over quantitative measurement. Qualitative inquiry is well suited to examining political branding and visual communication because visual identity systems often operate through symbolic, emotional, and cultural cues that cannot be reduced to numerical variables (Levitt, 2018). The research design centers on understanding how the campaign communicates political meaning through its visual system and how this meaning is generated by interactions among graphic elements, cultural references, and urban symbols. The analysis seeks to identify the campaign's key visual choices, interpret their communicative effects, and situate them within broader theories of branding, communication, and urban culture.

Data Collection

Data collection involved gathering the campaign's visual materials across a range of formats to ensure comprehensive understanding of its visual identity system. The corpus includes printed posters, stickers, outdoor signage, digital graphics, social media posts, campaign merchandise, and multilingual outreach materials. These items were obtained from publicly available sources, including the campaign's official website, social media channels, and archived press coverage, as well as photographic documentation of printed materials displayed in public spaces.

Each item was catalogued noting its format, date of appearance, primary language, dominant color palette, typographic style, and key visual motifs. This cataloguing process allowed systematic comparison across media types and ensured consistency in the analytical approach. Only materials created during Mamdani's mayoral campaign period were included, with emphasis on visuals intended for public consumption and voter outreach. Materials were included if they met two key criteria: first, they were designed for voter engagement or public visibility; and second, they contained significant visual content relevant to the campaign's branding or communication strategy. Materials that were purely informational without distinct design features were excluded from analysis.

Analytical Procedures

The analysis followed a multi-stage procedure employing three complementary analytical approaches applied in an integrated fashion. Semiotic analysis formed the core of the methodological process. Following Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) principles of visual grammar, each campaign item was examined for its use of color, form, composition, spatial arrangement, and typographic style. This level of analysis sought to determine how specific visual choices contributed to meaning-making and political positioning. Three guiding questions shaped this stage: which visual strategies appeared consistently across the campaign materials; how those strategies communicated political identity and brand personality; and how color, typography, and illustration functioned as rhetorical devices.

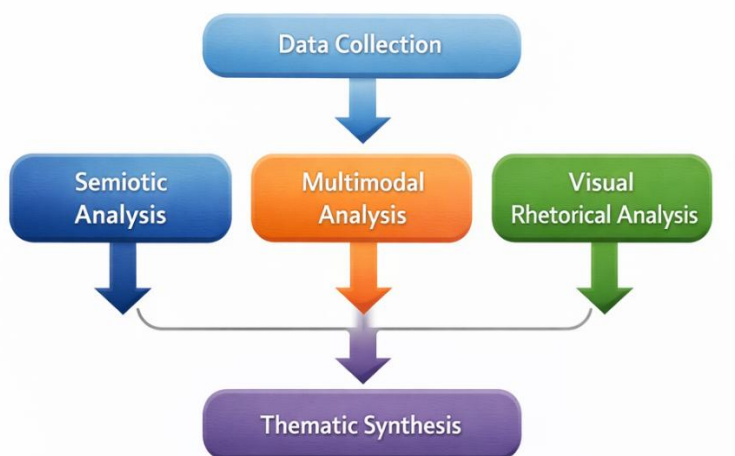
Multimodal discourse analysis provided insight into how various communicative modes worked together in the campaign materials. This analytical layer examined interactions between text and image, spatial structures and reading paths in layouts, hierarchies of visual emphasis, the relationship between multilingual content and accessibility, and the integration of community-based symbols with political messages. This approach provided insight into how the campaign visuals were constructed to be inclusive and accessible to diverse audiences, and how messaging, policy themes, and cultural references were fused into cohesive visual compositions.

Visual rhetorical analysis was used to interpret the persuasive and cultural significance of the campaign visuals. Drawing on urban semiotic perspectives from Gottdiener and Hutchison (2018) and Zukin (2010), this stage focused on how visual elements referenced the symbolic vocabulary of New York City and how these references shaped political meaning. The analysis explored the campaign's use of local colors associated with transit, street signage, and neighborhood commerce; the incorporation of everyday objects as cultural icons; visual references to neighborhood identities, architectural forms, and street culture; and the symbolic associations embedded in images of transportation, food, and public spaces.

Following these three parallel analyses, a thematic coding process was undertaken to synthesize the findings. Recurring themes and visual strategies were identified and coded into overarching categories such as color symbolism, typographic identity, community iconography, and layout structures. Sub-codes captured more nuanced elements including hand-drawn texture, multilingual integration, geometric framing devices, and urban life motifs. This coding allowed the researcher to detect patterns across different media formats, evaluate the consistency of branding strategies, and compare the symbolic

content of visuals. Analytic memos were written for each category, and these were later synthesized into the thematic findings.

Figure 2: Methodological Framework Integrating Semiotic, Multimodal, and Visual Rhetorical Analysis



Note. The figure depicts the three-stage analytical process moving from data collection through parallel analytical procedures to thematic synthesis, demonstrating the integrated qualitative approach employed in this study.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Throughout the analysis, ethical considerations were observed. All materials analyzed were publicly available campaign visuals intended for distribution to voters. No private or confidential data were used. The primary ethical concerns were to accurately represent the campaign materials, to interpret cultural symbolism respectfully, and to ensure fair use of images for scholarly critique. As with all qualitative research, the analysis is interpretive and therefore subject to the researcher's perspectives. Although this subjectivity was managed through systematic coding and triangulation of theoretical frameworks, different scholars might interpret certain visual symbols in distinct ways. Additionally, the dataset was limited to materials that were publicly accessible; it does not capture any internal design deliberations or unpublished variants of the campaign designs. The study also does not include direct audience reception data, meaning that impact is inferred based on design principles and theoretical frameworks rather than measured voter responses.

Findings and Analysis

The integrated analytical approach reveals how Mamdani's campaign constructed a visually driven political brand that was deeply embedded in the urban context of New York City. The findings are organized around the campaign's key design elements: chromatic identity, typographic architecture, illustration and iconography, multilingual communication, and compositional layout. For each element, the analysis identifies the design techniques employed, interprets their semiotic and rhetorical significance, and explains how they contributed to the campaign's overall branding objectives.

Chromatic Identity and Color Symbolism

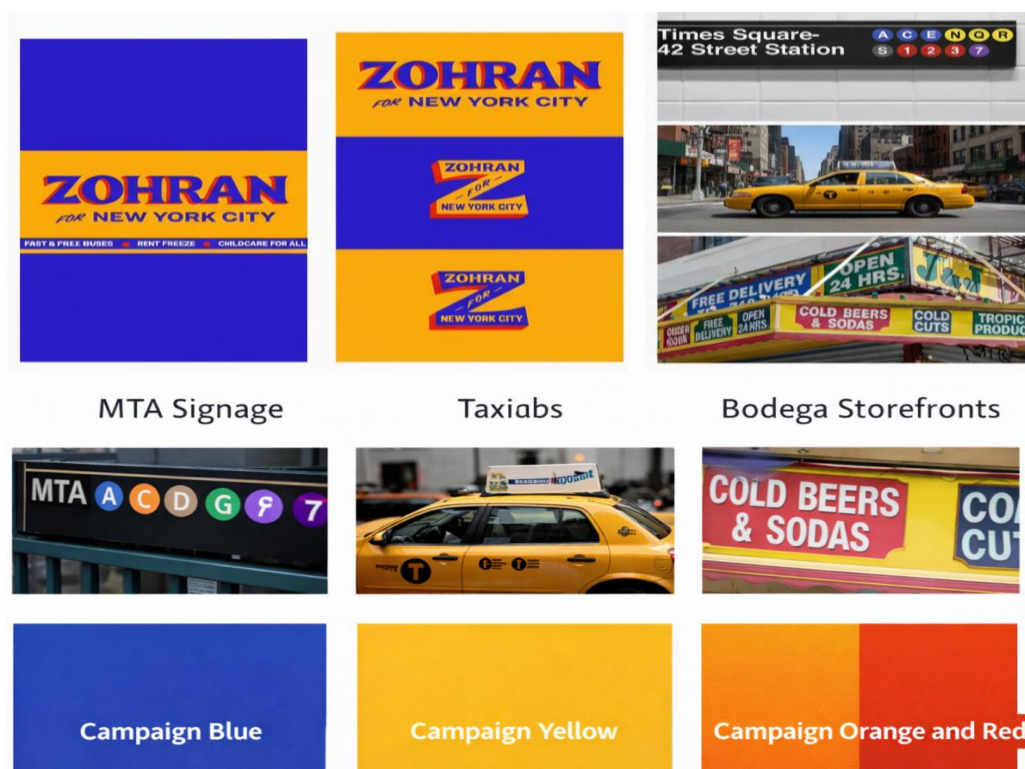
Color emerged as one of the campaign's most potent communicative elements. The visual identity was dominated by three vibrant tones: a deep blue, a bold yellow, and a rich red. Each of these colors was

deliberately drawn from familiar urban sources and carried specific connotations that reinforced the campaign's positioning as locally rooted and culturally authentic.

The blue mirrored the hue of New York City subway signage and street-name signs. This shade conveyed a functional, dependable, and civic tone, invoking the realm of public services and everyday municipal life. It contributed a sense of reliability and functionality to the campaign's visuals, connecting the candidate to the city's infrastructure that residents encounter daily. The yellow was inspired by the iconic New York taxicab color and the visual presence of street vendors' umbrellas and carts. This bright yellow suggested energy, urgency, and constant movement. It communicated vibrancy and evoked the dynamic pace of city life, helping the campaign materials command attention in crowded urban environments. The red resembled the hand-painted lettering on bodega awnings and the bold graphics of protest posters and labor union signs. This red signified urgency and grassroots activism, introducing a sense of boldness and seriousness while alluding to economic struggle and solidarity with working-class causes.

Collectively, these three colors formed a chromatic identity that was culturally anchored and visually assertive. By using hues rooted in New York's visual culture, the campaign established a palette that voters could subconsciously associate with the city itself. This use of local chromatic language helped establish authenticity and differentiation, aligning the campaign brand with the community's own visual vocabulary rather than with generic national political symbolism. As Haile (2025) reported, the campaign's deputy campaign manager explicitly described the logo's yellow hue as evoking the city's iconic taxi cabs, city street signs, and even old Bollywood movie posters in order to appear bright, colorful, and joyful. The deliberate rejection of traditional Democratic blue and Republican red differentiated the campaign from establishment political aesthetics.

Figure 3: Urban Sources of the Campaign's Color Palette: MTA Signage, Taxicabs, and Bodega Storefronts



Note. The figure presents visual comparisons between the campaign's primary colors and their urban referents, demonstrating how the chromatic scheme was derived from New York City's everyday visual environment rather than conventional political palettes.

Typographic Architecture

Typography in the Mamdani campaign functioned as a powerful semiotic device that conveyed tone, personality, and ideological positioning. Notably, the campaign departed from the polished, sans-serif, geometric fonts common in American political design. Instead, it adopted a hand-rendered, expressive typographic style for its headlines and key slogans. The primary campaign typeface appears to have been custom-drawn to mimic the look of hand-painted storefront and mural text common in New York neighborhoods.

Distinctive features of the campaign's typography included imperfect edges and textured strokes suggesting the use of a paintbrush or marker rather than a computer, varying letter widths and slight irregularities in letterforms, and bold, all-caps lettering set at dynamic angles. For example, the campaign name often appeared in bold uppercase with a subtle slant, with letters that were not perfectly aligned on a baseline, evoking the aesthetic of community art or signs in independent shops. These intentional imperfections gave the text a human, informal quality. The typography felt conversational rather than corporate, visually leveling the hierarchy between the politician and the residents by looking like something a community member might have painted.

According to design theorists, hand-rendered typography communicates humanity, approachability, and authenticity (Heyer & Brumberger, 2019). In political communication, such traits signal that a campaign is people-centered rather than institution-centered. The campaign's typographic choices conveyed a relatable, grassroots character. The bold uppercase forms projected confidence and assertiveness, reinforcing the activist tone of the campaign's messaging. At the same time, the irregular, textured style conveyed informality and creativity, representing everyday community voices and signaling non-elite identity. The strokes were thick and high-contrast, which also enhanced visibility for posters seen from a distance on city streets.

Figure 4: Campaign's Primary Hand-Rendered Typography



Note. This figure displays examples of the campaign's distinctive lettering style, highlighting the intentional imperfections, varied stroke weights, and informal character that distinguished the typography from conventional political design.

Illustration and Iconography

Illustrations and simple graphic icons played a crucial narrative role in the campaign's visual branding. Rather than using complex images or generic political symbols, the campaign opted for accessible, stylized illustrations that resembled elements of community murals or folk art. These illustrations were used both decoratively and symbolically across various materials, serving to connect political issues with everyday life in New York.

The campaign developed a set of recurring graphic symbols that were highly resonant with local culture. Among the frequently seen icons were a MetroCard (the iconic yellow transit fare card of NYC), bicycles, pigeons, stylized building facades evoking neighborhood storefronts or apartment buildings, grocery bags, baby bottles, and buses. Each of these illustrations was rendered in a simple, flat-color style, often in the campaign's core colors, making them immediately recognizable and friendly in appearance. These symbols functioned as visual shorthand for broader policy themes or community values. The bus icon corresponded to transit reform and mobility equity, connoting accessibility, speed, and dignity in public transportation. The baby bottle symbolized childcare support policies, invoking themes of care and family stability. The pigeon suggested urban community life, signifying relatability and the shared environment of the city's residents. The MetroCard stood for public infrastructure, carrying meanings of reliability and affordability.

Figure 5: Illustrative Icons Used in Campaign Materials: Stylized Bus, Pigeon, MetroCard, and Baby Bottle



Note. The figure shows the campaign's iconographic system (L), demonstrating how everyday urban objects were rendered in the campaign's visual style to communicate policy themes through culturally familiar imagery (printed on a bandana as a part of the campaign merchandise).

By using such everyday objects and creatures as symbols, the campaign linked abstract political proposals to tangible, familiar aspects of daily life. This made the messages more concrete and emotionally resonant for voters. A policy about free public transit became instantly relatable when depicted with a humble MetroCard or bus graphic; it was not merely an abstract promise but something visual and specific that people handle or see regularly. The illustrations operated as narrative anchors visually linking policy proposals to everyday experiences, cultural signifiers reflecting neighborhood identity and daily routines, and emotional catalysts that introduced friendliness and approachability to the campaign's appearance.

Multilingual Communication Strategy

Community-based branding was evident in the campaign's extensive multilingual messaging. Posters and stickers were produced in multiple languages including Urdu, Bengali, Arabic, Mandarin, and Spanish, reflecting the linguistic diversity of Queens and greater New York City. This commitment to multilingual communication signaled inclusivity and respect while also expanding political access for groups historically marginalized by monolingual campaign materials.

The campaign's multilingual approach extended beyond simple translation. Each language version maintained the same visual identity, using the consistent color palette, similar typographic treatments, and parallel iconography, while adapting layouts as needed for different scripts and reading directions. This strategy demonstrated what O'Halloran (2008) terms systemic functional multimodal discourse, where visual and linguistic modes reinforce rather than simply duplicate meaning. The visual acknowledgment of linguistic diversity communicated that the campaign belonged to these communities rather than merely courting them opportunistically.

Figure 6: Multilingual posters



Note. The figure shows the campaign's 2020 poster with Arabic, Hindi and Spanish language.

Research on multilingualism and political participation establishes that linguistic accessibility enhances democratic engagement among immigrant communities (Pavlenko, 2017). The campaign's materials allowed voters to see their own language, a core part of their identity, in the political arena. This visual recognition created a powerful connector and sign of respect. The consistent visual identity maintained across language versions reinforced brand coherence while demonstrating cultural competence, positioning the campaign as emerging from rather than targeting these communities.

Compositional Layout and Visual Hierarchy

The layout and composition of campaign materials were carefully designed to balance visual impact with functional clarity. Composition served as a strategic tool shaping how viewers took in information, what they noticed first, and how they navigated the content. Many of the campaign's posters and print materials adopted grid-based structures inspired by urban visual logic, subtly referencing the layouts of subway maps or city directories and further tying the campaign's aesthetic to the urban environment.

Figure 7: Campaign posters



Note. The figure shows the campaign's 2025 poster with dynamic layouts.

A common layout format in the campaign's posters was a two-tiered composition separating the main slogan from illustrative elements. Typically, the upper portion of a poster featured a bold headline or slogan in the distinctive typography, often encapsulated in a geometric shape or banner. The lower portion would include an illustration or a set of smaller text such as a sub-slogan or hashtags. This arrangement ensured the core message hit the viewer immediately while contextualizing it with visual and textual detail beneath. By structuring the content into clear regions, the design reinforced the primacy of the political message while still providing narrative or explanatory elements through imagery.

Across designs, the campaign prioritized readability and quick communication. Several tactics were employed to maintain clarity even amid visually intense design elements. High-contrast color blocking placed text in light-colored type on dark backgrounds or vice versa, maximizing legibility. Clear spatial separation between text and imagery prevented overlapping or cluttering. Generous margins and whitespace around text helped key slogans stand out. Simplified iconographic forms ensured illustrations complemented rather than competed with text. These design choices ensured that a poster could be read at a glance, whether someone was walking past it on the street or scrolling by it online. The efficiency of the layouts did not come at the expense of creativity; the posters remained visually striking while delivering information in a digestible way.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that Mamdani's mayoral campaign employed visual communication not merely as an aesthetic dimension of political advertising but as a deliberate cultural, social, and ideological strategy. This discussion interprets the findings within the broader frameworks of political branding theory, multimodal discourse analysis, urban semiotics, and design strategy, highlighting the campaign's implications for understanding how visual identity systems construct political meaning.

One central insight is the campaign's successful use of color, typography, and iconography to construct a political identity that is both culturally authentic and strategically differentiated. Unlike mainstream campaigns that rely on national color palettes and institutional typography, Mamdani's brand drew its visual language directly from the material culture of New York City. This strategy aligns with theories of authenticity in branding which emphasize cultural coherence and local resonance as key to building trust and relational proximity with voters (Banet-Weiser, 2012). The saturated blues, yellows, and reds extracted from the city's infrastructure reinforced the candidate's connection to the urban environment and signaled a commitment to representing the everyday experiences of working-class residents.

The typographic strategy reveals a nuanced approach to political communication. The use of hand-rendered type conveyed human presence, informality, and relationality, directly challenging the perception of political communication as distant, mass-produced, or bureaucratic. This resonates with research identifying typography as a potent semiotic resource capable of shaping perceptions of authority, warmth, and credibility (Haenschen, 2020). By disrupting the polished corporate style typical of modern political design and evoking instead the visual language of street posters and community flyers, the typography enhanced the campaign's approachability and situated it within the cultural fabric of local neighborhoods.

Illustrations and iconography contributed to the campaign's narrative by translating policy proposals into familiar urban experiences. The use of icons like buses, baby bottles, MetroCards, and pigeons provided immediate cultural recognition and linked abstract political objectives to concrete aspects of daily life. This practice aligns with graphic design scholarship on the narrative power of symbolic imagery and its ability to express ideological meaning through accessible, emotionally resonant forms (Heller, 2012). By humanizing policy issues, the campaign communicated complex ideas through visual shorthand that

transcended language barriers, tapping into collective memory and shared symbols to strengthen emotional bonds between viewer and message.

The campaign's commitment to multilingual messaging further emphasizes inclusivity and community orientation. By producing materials in languages including Urdu, Bengali, Mandarin, Arabic, and Spanish alongside English, the campaign acknowledged the linguistic diversity of its constituency and affirmed the political presence of immigrant communities. This approach reflects multimodal discourse theory, which advocates using multiple semiotic resources to broaden accessibility and reduce communication inequality (Jewitt, 2014). The visual recognition of seeing one's own language on a campaign poster represents a powerful connector and sign of respect, potentially strengthening community engagement and trust.

A theoretical contribution of this study lies in examining how design functions as political ideology. The campaign demonstrates that visual identity is not merely a stylistic complement to a political platform; it is one of the means through which political values are materially expressed. The alignment of design choices with progressive policy themes shows how branding can support ideological positioning through symbolism. The campaign's conscious rejection of national political design norms communicated a resistance to institutionalized power structures and a bottom-up model of political engagement. The brand itself became a site of ideological performance, with every poster visually embodying the campaign's message of community empowerment.

In comparison to other progressive campaigns, Mamdani's approach stands out for its hyper-local visual grounding. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's breakthrough 2018 congressional campaign also employed a bold, non-traditional aesthetic featuring a vibrant purple-and-yellow color scheme, angled text, and heroic imagery of the candidate as a signal of generational change (Budds, 2018). However, Ocasio-Cortez's branding centered on her personal narrative and a nationally resonant progressive message, effectively scaling a local race into a national movement symbol. Mamdani's campaign, by contrast, deliberately localized its scope, invoking Queens, bodegas, halal carts, and the everyday New Yorker. Where AOC's campaign used her image and story as a focal point projecting movement iconography, Mamdani's campaign notably avoided elevating the candidate's persona in visuals; instead, it projected the community as the hero through symbols and collective imagery. This comparison highlights the flexibility of progressive visual branding: it can either amplify a personal narrative to galvanize widespread support or subdue the personal in favor of communal symbols to cultivate grassroots solidarity.

Finally, the campaign's consistency across various media underscores the importance of a coherent identity system in political communication. Repetition of core colors, type styles, and icons across posters, social media, apparel, and other materials strengthened brand recognition and message recall. This aligns with branding theory that identifies consistency as essential for establishing a strong brand (Wheeler, 2017). The campaign exemplified how an identity system that is both culturally grounded and visually consistent can achieve symbolic power by resonating deeply with a community and strategic utility by ensuring every piece of communication reinforces the same narrative and values.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the visual communication strategies employed in Zohran Mamdani's 2025 New York mayoral campaign and demonstrated how the campaign constructed a culturally embedded, community-centered political brand. The findings reveal that the campaign's visual identity system drew deeply from the urban semiotic landscape of New York City and used design as a tool for political differentiation, cultural inclusion, and ideological communication. Through a distinctive combination of saturated urban colors, hand-rendered typography, narrative illustrations, multilingual messaging, and

structured layout patterns, the campaign articulated a brand personality rooted in authenticity, accessibility, and progressive values.

The conclusions highlight three central contributions of this study. First, political branding can move beyond standardized national templates and instead draw upon local cultural and visual vocabularies to build meaningful political identification. A campaign can successfully appear to belong to the community it represents, and in doing so, strengthen its rapport with voters. Second, this study illustrates the value of multimodal and semiotic approaches in understanding political communication. Traditional analyses of campaigns might focus on speeches or advertisements in isolation, but this research demonstrates how design choices carry ideological weight and persuasive power. An analytical framework incorporating visual semiotics and design principles proves essential for fully understanding modern campaigns. Third, community-oriented design strategies can enhance political engagement and foster a sense of belonging among diverse constituencies. When voters see their city, their language, and their culture reflected in campaign materials, they may be more likely to feel that the campaign is for them and be motivated to participate.

Based on these findings, several practical recommendations can be made for political communication practitioners, designers, and scholars. Future political campaigns should consider adopting community-based design strategies that reflect the cultural and spatial identities of their constituencies. Rather than defaulting to generic templates, campaigns might audit their local visual environment and integrate elements that will resonate locally, whether colors from city infrastructure, typography echoing local signage, or symbols of local pride. Political branding research should further investigate the influence of local aesthetics and vernacular cultural symbols on voter perception and political trust. Designers working in political contexts are encouraged to explore hand-rendered typography, localized color palettes, and culturally specific iconography as tools for enhancing authenticity in campaign communication. Campaigns in linguistically diverse districts should prioritize multilingual communication to ensure accessibility and inclusivity.

In conclusion, the Mamdani campaign demonstrates that visual communication is not a supplementary aspect of political branding but a central mechanism through which political identity, cultural meaning, and ideological values are articulated. By grounding its design in community culture, the campaign showed that graphic design can do more than make a candidate look modern or professional; it can actively shape the narrative of who the candidate is and what they stand for. This campaign offers a compelling model for how future political campaigns might align visual strategy with democratic engagement by designing for and with the community, making the campaign a reflection of the people's own world, and thereby inviting those people to see themselves as stakeholders in a shared political project.

REFERENCES

- Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic™: The politics of ambivalence in a brand culture*. In *Authentic™*. New York University Press.
- Brader, T. (2006). Campaigning for hearts and minds. In T. Brader, *Studies in Communication, Media, and Public Opinion* (p. 280). From <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/C/bo3640346.html>
- Brader, T. (2011). The political relevance of emotions: "Reassessing" revisited. *Political psychology*, 32(2). doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2010.00803.x>
- Brumberger, E. R. (2003). The rhetoric of typography: The awareness and impact of typeface appropriateness. *Technical Communication*, 50(18), 206-223.
- Budds, D. (2018, July 02). *How designeli Ocasio-Cortez's brand*. From Curbed: <https://www.curbed.com/2018/7/2/17526166/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-design-campaign-branding>

- Elliot, A. J. (2014). Color psychology: Effects of perceiving color on psychological functioning in humans. *Annual review of psychology*, 64(1), 95-120.
- Elliot, A. J. (2014). Color psychology: Effects of perceiving color on psychological functioning in humans. *Annual review of psychology*, 65(1), 95-120.
- Haenschen, K. &. (2020). What's in a font?: ideological perceptions of typography. *Communication Studies*, 71(2), 244-261.
- Haile, R. (2025, April 18). *How Zohran Mamdani's campaign became the look of progressive New York politics*. From GQ: <https://www.gq.com/story/zohran-mamdani-campaign-branding>
- Heller, S. &. (2012). *100 ideas that changed graphic design*. Laurence King Publishing.
- Holt, D. B. (2004). *How brands become icons: The principles of cultural branding*. harvard business press.
- Hutchison, R. M., & Gottdiener, M. (2018). *The new urban sociology*. Routledge.
- Jewitt, C. (2014). *The Routledge handbook of multimodal analysis*. Routledge .
- Kostelnick, C. (2019). *Humanizing visual design: The rhetoric of human forms in practical communication*. Routledge.
- Lees-Marshment, J. (2020). *Political management: The dance of government and politics*. Routledge.
- Lees-Marshment, J. (2020). *Political management: The dance of government and politics*. Routledge.
- Leeuwen, T. v., & Kress, G. (2020). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. Routledge. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003099857>
- Lenclos, J.-P., & Lenclos, D. (2004). *Colors of the world : A geography of color*. (G. Bruhn, Trans.) W.W. Norton & Co.
- Levitt, H. M.-O. (2018). Journal article reporting standards for qualitative primary, qualitative meta-analytic, and mixed methods research in psychology: The APA Publications and Communications Board task force report. *American Psychologist*, 73(1), 26.
- Lupton, E. (2010). *Thinking with type: a critical guide for designers, writers, editors, & students*. Princeton Architectural Press.
- Lynch, K. (1960). *The image of the city*. MIT Press.
- Needham, C. &. (2015). Introduction: Political branding. *Political Marketing*, 14((1-2)), 1-6. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2014.990828>
- O'Halloran, K. (2008). Systemic Functional-Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA): Constructing Ideational Meaning Using Language and Visual Imagery. *Visual Communication*, 7, 443-475. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357208096210>
- Pavlenko, A. J. (2017). Communicative relevance: Color references in bilingual and trilingual speakers. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 853-866.
- Pazmino, G. (2025, November 4). *Zohran Mamdani wins New York City mayoral election*. From CNN: <https://www.cnn.com/2025/11/04/politics/nyc-mayor-zohran-mamdani-wins>
- Pretsky, H. &. (2025, November 07). *5 takeaways from the 2025 NYC election turnout*. City & State New York. From City and Stateny: <https://www.cityandstateny.com/politics/2025/11/5-takeaways-2025-nyc-election-turnout/409413/>
- Ryan, M. H. (2018). *The new urban sociology*. Routledge.
- Scammell, M. (2015). Politics and image: The conceptual value of branding. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 14((1-2)), 7-18. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2014.990829>
- Schulte-Cloos, J. B. (2023). Local candidates, place-based identities, and electoral success. *Political Behaviour*, 679-698. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09712-y>
- Smith, G. &. (2011). Measuring the changes to leader brand associations during the 2010 election campaign. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 27(7-8), 718-735.
- Smith, G. &. (2011). Measuring the changes to leader brand associations during the 2010 election campaign. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 27(7-8), 718-735.

- Stark-Miller, E. (2025, November 05). *NYC Mayor's race: Historic turnout sees more than 2 million voters shatter years of apathy*. From amNewYork: <https://www.amny.com/politics/nyc-mayors-race-turnout-cuomo-mamdani-sliwa/>
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2014). Critical discourse analysis and multimodality. *Contemporary critical discourse studies*, 281-295.
- Wheeler, A. (2017). *Designing brand identity: an essential guide for the whole branding team*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Zanger, J. (2025, November 04). *Zohran Mamdani wins NYC mayoral election after energizing young voters with focus on affordability*. From CBS News: <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/mamdani-wins-nyc-mayoral-election-2025/>
- Zukin, S. (2010). *Naked city: The death and life of authentic urban places*. Oxford University Press.
- Zukin, S. (2012). The social production of urban cultural heritage: Identity and ecosystem on an Amsterdam shopping street. *City, Culture and Society*, 3(4), 281-291.