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Hyperreality of School Graduation in Visual Culture: An Analysis of the Toga Video from SMK Citra Bangsa Mandiri on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the graduation process at SMK Citra Bangsa Mandiri Purwokerto is represented through video uploads on social media, and how such visualizations construct a new meaning of graduation. The main issue addressed is the shift in the meaning of graduation when academic symbols typically used at the university level are applied in the context of secondary schools. To address this issue, the study employs a qualitative visual analysis approach of the videos' aesthetic elements, such as composition, lighting, camera angles, and presentation structure, which are then combined with an interpretation of social meanings derived from public responses. The results show that the dominance of academic symbols, cinematic visual aesthetics, and structured event packaging create a graduation representation that resembles a university commencement, thereby generating a new reality accepted by the audience without questioning the vocational context of the school. These findings highlight the capability of social media to influence how educational institutions present themselves and how the public assigns meaning to educational symbols. The study concludes that in the digital era, graduation is no longer merely an academic ritual but has become a visual construction that follows the logic of attention and social media aesthetics.

Keywords: Graduation Representation; Visual Communication; Social Media Aesthetics; Vocational School; Digital Culture; Symbolic Performance

INTRODUCTION

Every civilization has its own distinct way of marking important moments, including in the realm of education. One symbol that has endured in the tradition of academic farewells is the ceremonial robe, or toga, which traces its roots back to Ancient Rome. The word 'toga' comes from

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the Latin tego, meaning 'covering'; it was originally worn as formal attire by Roman citizens, especially the nobility, to denote social status. Over time, this practice was adopted into the academic world of medieval Europe. Prestigious universities such as Oxford and Cambridge officially began using the toga as academic uniform around the 13th to 14th centuries, serving as a symbol of honor, scholarly discipline, and academic status (Pertiwi 2021).

At the end of the 19th century, the American Council on Education introduced the Intercollegiate Academic Costume Code, which standardized the style of academic robes in the United States for higher education, distinguishing designs based on degree levels such as bachelor's, master's, and doctorate (Sejarah Wisuda: Dari Abad ke-12 hingga Perkembangan Tradisinya Kini n.d.). This standardization later influenced many countries, including Indonesia, where the toga was initially used only for college graduation ceremonies. However, in recent years, its use has expanded to lower educational levels such as high school, even to junior high and elementary schools. This has sparked diverse opinions regarding the loss of the academic tradition's sacredness. For example, the meaning of the black color represents seriousness and the solemnity of knowledge, marking that a graduate has overcome intellectual challenges to reach the peak of achievement (Insights Into Graduation Gown Colours Meaning and Traditions n.d.).

The phenomenon of school graduation in Indonesia appears to have undergone a rather interesting transformation in recent years. Whereas in the past graduation events were synonymous with simplicity—distribution of diplomas, brief speeches, and modest photo sessions—today these ceremonies have turned into grand visual celebrations, meticulously orchestrated to appear magnificent (Toga; Antara Simbol Selebrasi dan Kematangan Akademik n.d.). Schools at the secondary level have begun employing academic symbols of universities: the toga complete with a stole, and the shifting of the tassel, and even stage formats that resemble senate sessions. This pattern indicates that symbols are no longer bound to their original context, as Baudrillard once argued that signs can become detached from their real-world referents when they are excessively reproduced (Baudrillard 2001).

The development of social media seems to be one of the driving factors behind this transformation. In an era where a single post can reach thousands of people within hours, schools

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are not only documenting graduation moments but also curating their public persona through carefully crafted visual narratives. Instagram, for instance, is known as a space where aesthetics and performativity are integral to visual communication.(Highfield and Leaver 2016) Many schools do not simply upload documentation but instead create “visual experiences” deliberately made to look neat, elegant, and fit for public consumption. In other words, graduation is no longer just an internal school event but has become a social occasion, publicly showcased and assessed by the wider community (Toga; Antara Simbol Selebrasi dan Kematangan Akademik n.d.).

Within this context, a simple yet important question arises: why are university symbols so readily adopted by secondary schools? There are many possible reasons. First, such symbols carry an aura of prestige—a certain image that schools wish to present to parents, prospective students, and the community. Second, digital society has specific aesthetic preferences shaped by the visual culture of social media. The toga, the stage, and the formal graduation format convey a sense of success that is “ready to be shared.” Third, visual representation is often stronger than verbal explanation; as Kress and van Leeuwen explain, images work as a system of meaning that can create their own effect of reality (Kress and van Leeuwen 2020). When a post looks grand, people tend to believe the visual message without questioning its academic context.

Looking more closely at this phenomenon, it becomes apparent that school graduation ceremonies can provide an entry point for understanding how society interprets education in the digital era. Educational reality is no longer determined solely by learning achievements or academic processes, but also by how education is visually presented and received. Public perception is shaped through representation, not direct experience. When a graduation video presents the impression of a “university commencement,” the public may easily believe it is one, even if that is not the case. This is what is called hyperreality—a condition where the image is more powerful than the reality it represents (Baudrillard 1995).

The viral graduation of SMK Citra Bangsa Mandiri Purwokerto on Instagram serves as a clear example illustrating these dynamics. An event that was, in fact, a secondary school graduation was presented in a highly structured, cinematic, and emotional visual format. The post not only attracted massive attention but also generated various responses showing how the public

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forms their interpretations through the images displayed on their screens. This case is fascinating to examine because it highlights how educational symbols operate within the digital space—a space that often positions the visual as a new form of truth (Manovich 2013).

Table 1 The Shift in the Meaning of the Toga Symbol

Original Meaning (Higher Education)	New Meaning (Digital School Culture)
Symbol of academic legitimacy	Symbol of visual aesthetics
Marker of scholarly achievement	Marker of digital status & virality
Formal academic ritual	Performative content for social media
Based on academic structure	Shaped by digital visual curation

Through this research, the author seeks to understand how academic symbols are reproduced and interpreted in the context of social media, as well as how circulating visual representations can shape new perceptions of graduation. The discussion is directed toward examining whether this phenomenon is merely an aesthetic trend or instead signifies a fundamental shift in the way society understands education and its symbols. This study therefore asks: how does the visualization of a vocational school graduation on Instagram construct new meanings using academic symbols, digital aesthetics, and institutional performance?

Theoretical Framework

The phenomenon of visually staged graduations on social media brings us to several key concepts in the study of representation, especially as educational symbols begin to operate outside their original contexts. To understand this tendency, several classical and contemporary theories can be used as analytical tools—not as a list of definitions, but to see how signs move, transform, and shape perceptions.

One thinker relevant to this context is Jean Baudrillard. He explains that in modern society, signs do not merely represent reality; they often create new realities. At a certain point, a sign can even detach itself from its original reference and stand as its own reality (Baudrillard 1995). When symbols—in this case, the toga and gown or the format of the procession—are reproduced outside their context, over time they cease to be pointers to the academic world and become autonomous

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images. Baudrillard's framework helps map how academic signs can appear so dominant even when their original meaning is absent.

Beyond simulation theory, the visual framework also enriches our understanding. Kress and van Leeuwen, who have written extensively on visual grammar, stress that images are never neutral; every composition, point of view, and color scheme carry specific social meanings (Kress and van Leeuwen 2020). An upward camera angle, dramatic lighting, or contrasting colors are not merely aesthetic choices—they are part of a representational strategy. In the context of vocational high school graduations, these visual choices build an impression of grandeur and authority, even when the procession itself does not take place within an academic structure equivalent to a university.

Another useful approach is the idea of social performativity as proposed by Erving Goffman. He describes social life as a series of "front stage" and "backstage" performances, where both individuals and institutions present themselves according to the audience's expectations (Goffman 1958). Neatly arranged graduation processions—with decorations, formal gestures, and academic symbols—can be read as attempts by institutions to frame their identities. Social media expands this stage: what is displayed is no longer just for the invited guests, but for a much broader public.

The role of digital technology in image production cannot be ignored either. Manovich discusses how editing software has made visual production an everyday activity, no longer something exclusive to the creative industries (Manovich 2013). Thanks to this capability, reality is not just recorded but reconstructed. A simple graduation can be transformed into a cinematic spectacle. The aesthetics born out of this software-driven manipulation blur the lines between documentation and performance.

Social media, especially Instagram, intensifies this trend. Highfield and Leaver find that Instagram creates a culture where visuals are not merely supports for communication, but become the center of interaction—a visual sociality that shapes the way people understand the world (Highfield and Leaver 2016). Graduation posts not only showcase an event, but create a version

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of reality that is received, liked, and shared by the public. In this way, visual representation becomes instrumental in assigning meaning.

Ultimately, these theoretical frameworks are not meant as a collection of standalone concepts. They serve as a map for understanding how academic symbols, digital aesthetics, social performativity, and media practices converge in a single graduation event. Through the interplay of simulated signs, visual strategies, staged actions, and the logic of digital platforms, we can grasp how the graduation procession is understood, both by participants and by the online public. At this point, graduation is no longer merely an educational ritual but becomes part of the dynamics of contemporary visual culture.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach because the phenomenon under investigation is more closely related to meaning, representation, and the way signs function in digital spaces (Murniarti 2025). This approach was chosen not merely for its flexibility, but because it allows researchers to read visual details that cannot be captured through numbers. The research model employed resembles a case study, although it does not fully follow the classical pattern. In this context, the case study is not understood as a rigid technical procedure, but to examine an event—in this case, the graduation procession of SMK Citra Bangsa Mandiri Purwokerto—more deeply. As suggested by Yin (Robert K. Yin 2014), a single case can serve as a rich source of understanding when the phenomenon is unique and contextually embedded (Hollweck 2015).

The research data was obtained from video and photo posts shared via Instagram accounts featuring the graduation procession. This source is considered relevant because visual representation is indeed the focus of the study. Secondary data, such as news articles, public comments, and other related information, is used to complement understanding of how the posts are received by the audience. This approach somewhat resembles light ethnographic work in digital spaces, especially as the researcher seeks to understand the context in which the videos appeared, patterns of netizen responses, and the way the videos circulate.

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The analysis was carried out through visual readings of the elements that appear in the videos. This reading does not use a single model, but combines two methods: first, visual reading using the basic principles of the grammar of images as explained by Kress and van Leeuwen—especially in relation to perspective, composition, color, and focus[2]; second, reading visuals as signs functioning in a system of simulation as offered by Baudrillard. Thus, the analysis does not stop at what is visible but moves towards how the visuals reproduce meaning and construct realities.

In addition, the researcher also notes public responses appearing in the comments section as part of reading social meaning. These responses are not analyzed statistically but are used to understand how the public participates in building interpretations of the displayed visuals. This method aligns with the view that meaning in social media is not formed only by content creators, but also by the audience who consumes and interprets it.

To maintain accuracy, the analysis process was carried out in stages. Each visual element was documented, compared, and re-read in the context of relevant theories. Not all details are used in the results, but the selection process is based on their relevance to the main research focus: how academic symbols are reproduced, how digital aesthetics shape the image, and how society interprets the procession through social media. This kind of approach gives the researcher space not only to explain phenomena, but also to interpret them reflectively.

To elaborate on the analytical procedures: the selection of video scenes for analysis was based on purposive criteria, prioritizing moments where academic symbols appeared most prominently — such as the processional walk, tassel-turning ritual, and stage ceremonies. Visual elements were identified and categorized according to the semiotic categories proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen, namely representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. Public comments were sampled by selecting the first 50 comments chronologically, supplemented by comments that were frequently liked or replied to, as these tend to reflect dominant public interpretations. Thematic patterns were identified through repeated reading of the comment corpus. As this study was conducted by a single researcher, interpretive rigor was maintained through a reflexivity practice — whereby the researcher regularly revisited and questioned their own

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interpretive assumptions throughout the analytical process — and through systematic cross-referencing between visual findings and theoretical frameworks at each analytical stage.

The analytical procedure can be summarized into two main analytical steps: (a) Visual Analysis. Using the principles of Kress and van Leeuwen: composition, perspective, color, focus, lighting arrangement, symbolic relationships between objects. (b) Media Simulation Analysis (Baudrillard). To read: stages of simulation, shifts in symbolic meaning, construction of hyperreality in the content.

While some quantitative indicators — such as the frequency of symbol appearances and levels of public engagement — were noted during the observation process, these figures are not treated as independent analytical variables. They serve solely as contextual evidence to support the qualitative interpretive analysis, helping to illustrate the intensity of visual elements and the scale of audience reception without reducing the findings to numerical measurement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The graduation ceremony held by SMK Citra Bangsa Mandiri Purwokerto on Thursday, May 8, 2025, and uploaded via the Instagram account @sadli_alpadlim, attracted public attention after the video documentation spread widely on social media.(Pakai Toga dan Atribut Lengkap, Wisuda Siswa SMK CBM Tuai Kontroversi n.d.) In the video, 326 twelfth-grade students are shown participating in a grandly packaged graduation ceremony resembling a university commencement. The event was held in the school's multipurpose hall. The students wore black gowns complete with tassels, with the stage adorned with a lavish backdrop and official decorations. The tassel-turning ceremony further enhanced the atmosphere, making it seem as if it were a college graduation.(Viral Wisuda SMK di Purwokerto Mirip Universitas, Ada Pemindahan Tali Toga n.d.)

Meanwhile, teachers and faculty staff wore full academic regalia — including gowns and mortarboard caps — of the type typically reserved for rectors or academic leaders during university commencement ceremonies.(Viral Wisuda Mewah SMK Citra Bangsa Mandiri Purwokerto,

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Kementerian Pendidikan: Jangan Berlebihan | tempo.co n.d.) The event also included the reading of an "open senate session."(Viral kelulusan SMK di Purwokerto digelar bak wisuda perguruan tinggi, begini tanggapan kepala sekolah n.d.) In an official statement delivered by the principal, Prisillia Mutiara Sari, it was stated that the use of academic regalia and an event format resembling a university commencement has been a school tradition since 2013,(RRI.co.id - Wisuda Ala Kampus di SMK Citra Bangsa Mandiri Purwokerto Viral, Ini Penjelasan Pihak Sekolah n.d.) and is part of the school's curriculum and cultural agenda aimed at fostering appreciation for students' academic achievements. The entire sequence has made the SMK Citra Bangsa Mandiri's graduation ceremony more than just a simple internal event. By utilizing formal symbols such as gowns, gordon necklaces, and university-like ceremony protocols, the event atmosphere was transformed into a symbolic experience, felt by students, parents, and social media viewers alike, as if witnessing a real university graduation.

A. Dominance of Academic Symbols in Visual Representation

One of the most striking findings is the intensity of the use of academic symbols typically associated with higher education. Gowns, gordons, a podium resembling a senate session, and the ritual of tassel-turning appear as main visual elements throughout the video. These symbols are not placed randomly; they are featured in carefully chosen moments—for example, when students walk up to the stage or when the principal makes a formal gesture.

Table 2 Frequency of Academic Symbols Appearing in the Video

No	Academic Symbol	Frequency of Appearance	Duration (seconds)	Interpretation
1	Student graduation gown	23 times	48 seconds	Dominant; constructs an image of "high academic achievement"
2	Teacher's stole (like a rector's stole)	7 times	15 seconds	Adopts the academic authority of a university
3	Tassel turning	5 times	12 seconds	Imitates the tassel-turning ceremony of higher education institutions

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4	Open senate session	3 times	8 seconds	Symbol of high-level academic formality
5	Formal "Graduation/Wisuda" backdrop	12 times	30 seconds	Reinforces an official and elite impression

A simple count shows the graduation gown as the most dominant visual object compared to other elements, appearing in nearly two-thirds of the total analyzed scenes. This dominance shows that the visual identity of the procession greatly relies on academic symbols, rather than on activities or the educational value of the vocational school itself.

B. Consistent and Deliberate Digital Aesthetic Patterns

The video displays a particular aesthetic pattern that does not seem coincidental. Many shots use low-angle perspectives, giving an impression of grandeur to the recorded subjects. Lighting is focused on the participants' faces, while the background is darkened, making the ceremonial moment appear even more dramatic.

Table 3 Visual Elements and Their Symbolic Functions

Visual Element	Findings	Aesthetic Effect	Simulation Implication
Camera angle	Dominantly low-angle	Creates a grand and superior impression	Positions students as "mini scholars"
Editing	Cinematic transitions	Adds a professional feel	Enhances the illusion of a real graduation
Color	Black–gold	Academic and prestigious colors	Mimics higher-education aesthetics
Music	Dramatic, inspirational	Produces emotional & serious atmosphere	Generates a hyperreal experience
Caption	Formal, official	Provides narrative authority	Reinforces the construction of "graduation"

Based on direct observation of the video, the background music features orchestral and uplifting tones typically associated with celebratory or ceremonial contexts, emphasizing the procession's atmosphere as a major celebration. The combination of music, lighting, and camera angles makes the graduation appear far more formal and majestic than its actual academic context.

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Additionally, the use of symmetrical compositions and dominant black-gold colors creates a powerful visual impression, as if the procession symbolizes authority or a high level of achievement.

C. Visualization Similar to University Graduation

Observations indicate that the overall graduation procession is arranged to resemble a university commencement. Some indicators include: (1) the use of microphones and formal podium; (2) rows of students in specific order as in a processional; (3) individual tassel turning; (4) congratulatory remarks in academic style; (5) spotlighting as students receive their symbolic degrees. No visuals are found that refer to distinctive vocational school characteristics, such as practical work products or skill portfolios. The removal of the vocational context transforms the representation of graduation into an academic event different from its reality.

D. High Intensity of Symbol Appearances in a Short Duration

Although the video is brief, nearly every second features academic symbols. The frequency matrix shows that:

Table 4 High ratio video highlights

Symbol	Frequency of Appearance	Ratio to Total Scenes
Graduation gown (toga)	Very frequent	± 65%
Academic stole (gordon)	Frequent	± 40%
Low angle shot	Frequent	± 35%
Dramatic lighting	Consistent	± 80%
Formal gestures (handshake, bowing)	Frequent	± 45%

This high ratio highlights that the video is tightly curated to build a particular image—not merely to document the event.

E. Broad and Mostly Positive Public Interaction

The post received an extremely high number of views (over 187,000) in its first week, with likes exceeding 12,000 and hundreds of comments. A thematic reading of the comment corpus reveals three dominant response patterns. The first and most prevalent pattern is celebratory admiration, exemplified by comments such as: User A wrote 'This is more impressive than my

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university graduation, congratulations!', and User B wrote 'SMK but the vibes are full university-level, so proud.' The second pattern involves symbolic identification, where viewers explicitly map the event onto university imagery, as seen in comments like User C's remark: 'Feels exactly like a real convocation, I almost forgot this was a high school.' The third pattern, which appeared in a small minority of comments, involves critical questioning of contextual appropriateness, with some users asking why vocational school graduations adopt university-level academic symbols. This distribution of responses — overwhelmingly positive, with only marginal critical voices — suggests that the constructed representation was largely received as legitimate and desirable by the audience.

There were a few comments questioning the relevance of university symbols in a vocational school context, but these were far fewer. In general, the public seemed to accept the representation projected by the video, without questioning the actual academic context.

F. Sharp Contrast between Reality and Representation

A closer look reveals a discrepancy between the reality of vocational education and the constructed visual representation. The reality of vocational schools should emphasize skills, practical work, or vocational competencies. However, none of these elements appear in the video.

This result shows that visual representation works more strongly than institutional reality. The video does not merely show a graduation event—it constructs a different version of reality, more closely aligned with university academic symbolism.

G. Signs of Simulation in Visual Representation

Compared to Baudrillard's stages of simulation, the findings reveal several characteristics of simulacra: (1) The sign masks reality – university symbols are used to redefine vocational school graduation; (2) The sign masks the absence of reality – the procession is considered a graduation, even though academically it is not; (3) The sign stands as reality – the public accepts the visuals as an authentic portrayal of graduation; (4) Thus, the visuals do not merely represent a procession; they create a new, standalone meaning.

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Discussion

The discussion in this study is aimed at understanding how the visuals of the graduation ceremony at SMK Citra Bangsa Mandiri Purwokerto function as a symbolic construction in the digital space. The research findings indicate that the representation presented in the video does not merely document the event but constructs a new version of reality. The following discussion elaborates on these dynamics through the lenses of simulation, visual representation, institutional performativity, and social media culture.

A. Academic Symbols and the Shift in Meaning

The research found that academic symbols such as toga and gowns, cords, formal podiums, and the turning of tassels appear dominantly. In the context of vocational high schools (SMK), these symbols are not structurally inherent, as SMK graduations do not exist within the same academic system as universities. However, in the video, these symbols become the very core of the visual narrative.

This phenomenon can be interpreted through Baudrillard's framework of simulation. When symbols are used outside their academic context, the sign no longer represents reality, but stands as reality itself (Sutriwana, Hidayat, and Suktomansyah 2024). In the video, “SMK graduation” becomes a reality that is interpreted through the lens of university graduation symbols. These symbols are not mere embellishments but serve to mask another reality: what is being represented is a secondary-level graduation, not an academic convocation.

The strength of this video lies in the symbols’ success in supplanting the reality they represent. The public readily accepts this representation as normal, even worthy of celebration, as reflected in the positive comments on the post. Mapping onto Baudrillard's Four Stages of the Image. To deepen the theoretical grounding of this analysis, it is useful to explicitly map the graduation video's representational logic onto Baudrillard's four stages of the image.

In the first stage, the sign reflects a basic reality. At the outset, academic symbols such as gowns and mortarboard caps genuinely reflected university commencement ceremonies — they were authentic markers of higher education achievement. In their original context, these signs maintained a transparent relationship with the reality they represented.

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In the second stage, the sign masks and perverts a basic reality. When SMK Citra Bangsa Mandiri adopted these same symbols, the signs began to distort reality rather than reflect it. The graduation procession is presented visually as equivalent to a university commencement, yet the underlying reality — a vocational secondary school graduation — is fundamentally different in academic standing and institutional context. The visual packaging does not merely represent the event; it actively obscures the distinction between secondary and higher education.

In the third stage, the sign masks the absence of a basic reality. This is perhaps the most critical stage evident in the video. The procession presents the appearance of academic achievement at university level, yet the academic reality that would justify such symbolism — a university degree, a convocation of scholars — is entirely absent. The toga, the tassel-turning, and the senate-session format create the impression of an academic milestone that does not structurally exist within the SMK system. The sign no longer points to a reality; it conceals the fact that no such reality exists.

In the fourth and final stage, the sign bears no relation to any reality whatsoever — it becomes pure simulacrum. The overwhelmingly positive public reception, in which viewers described the event as 'feeling exactly like a real convocation,' suggests that the graduation video has reached this stage. The representation no longer refers back to either university graduation or vocational school graduation; it has become its own self-referential image, circulating within social media as an autonomous visual reality. At this point, the question of whether the event 'really is' a university graduation becomes irrelevant — the simulation has supplanted the need for any original referent.

B. Digital Aesthetics as a Shaper of Reality

The findings show that all visual components—symmetrical composition, dramatic lighting, low camera angles, and emotional music—work to reinforce a sense of grandeur. Every visual element appears with purpose; all are directed to create a formal, elevated, and prestigious impression.

This aligns with Manovich’s idea that digital culture not only records reality but reorganizes it.(Manovich 2013; Media et al. 2024) Editing, lighting, and color selection become

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instruments for meaning making. What is in essence a simple graduation is packaged with aesthetics akin to a university convocation video, resulting in a reality that has been polished.

It is within this context that the boundary between documentation and performance becomes blurred. What is seen is no longer “how the graduation took place,” but “how graduation should look” based on digital aesthetic standards. Editing is not just about beautification; it shapes the structure of meaning. For example, polarized visuals between dark and light, often used in cinematography, give an impression of grandeur or authority. Such effects strengthen the perception that SMK graduation is on a par with university convocation. In visual culture, what is seen can be more powerful than what happens (Lister et al. 2008).

C. The Institution's Front Stage and School Identity Construction

The use of academic symbols is not just about aesthetics; it is an institutional strategy. By presenting a grand graduation procession, the school is constructing a certain image before the public. This corresponds with Goffman's concept of the front stage, where institutions present themselves in the best possible light, tidying up their image and controlling the impressions received by the audience. This graduation procession also functions as an institutional performance. Goffman explains that organizations and individuals always have a “front stage” where they manage impressions and build self-image (Goffman 1958). In the video, the school presents itself as a modern, professional institution with high visual standards.

This graduation video serves as an “institutional performance” targeted at parents, prospective students, and the wider community. With its neat and professional visual packaging, the school projects itself as a modern, prestigious, and progressive institution—a strategic effort that may not be explicit but becomes evident through choices in visual representation. The visual choices are not merely a matter of aesthetics, but strategic actions in building identity. Many educational institutions use social media to expand their institutional image, and the phenomenon observed in this video aligns with what Couldry describes as “media rituals”—practices that give a sacred or significant aura to an institution through media representation (Wilmore 2003).

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The success of this performance is visible in the largely positive public response, with many even identifying the procession as a university convocation. The public does not just see the visuals; they accept and reinforce the meanings constructed by the institution.

D. Visual Representation that Conceals Vocational Characteristics of SMK

In-depth analysis shows that there is not a single visual element referring to the vocational identity of SMK. There are no vocational practices, no competence portfolios, and no characteristic symbols of vocational education. All representation is designed to imitate the format of a university graduation. The absence of vocational elements in the video—such as practical activities, portfolios, or technical competencies—demonstrates how visual representation can selectively filter reality. Kress and van Leeuwen state that visuals always contain ideological choices, whether consciously or not (Kress and van Leeuwen 2020).

This absence is significant: it shows that higher education symbols are considered more effective for building institutional image and public attention than vocational ones. At this point, representation not only displays reality, but chooses which aspects of reality are given space. By choosing university academic symbols, the video indirectly positions the vocational identity of SMK as less visually appealing. This can also be read through(Debord and Nicholson-Smith 2023), which explains that contemporary society tends to be more interested in “spectacle” than substance.

The dominance of academic signs at this stage shows that prestigious symbols have stronger social appeal than vocational ones. This further reinforces a state of simulation, where vocational reality is hidden beneath glamorous academic representations.

E. The Public as Reinforcer of Simulation

The comment patterns further illuminate the public's role as active co-producers of meaning rather than passive consumers. The dominant celebratory responses indicate that viewers not only accepted the hyperreal representation but actively validated it through social engagement. Notably, comments expressing admiration tended to receive significantly more likes than those questioning the vocational context — a dynamic that reflects how social media algorithms and peer validation mechanisms reinforce dominant interpretive frames. The audience's tendency to map the SMK

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event directly onto university imagery ('feels like a real convocation') demonstrates that the simulation had successfully displaced the original referent: viewers were no longer evaluating a vocational school graduation on its own terms, but measuring it against the prestigious template of university commencement. This confirms Baudrillard's proposition that in the stage of simulacra, the copy no longer needs the original — the representation becomes the standard against which reality is judged (Highfield and Leaver 2016).

Thus, the public fortifies the simulation. They accept the sign as reality, even celebrating it. This shows that in the social media ecosystem, meaning is shaped not only by content creators but also by actively participating audiences.

The public are not merely spectators; they are co-producers of meaning who confirm that this representation has succeeded in creating a symbolic world even stronger than the actual academic reality.

F. The Hyperreality of Graduation in the Social Media Era

When academic symbols are used excessively, digital aesthetics polish every second of video, and the public provides social validation, the graduation process is no longer at the level of ordinary representation. It enters the realm of hyperreality, where the line between "vocational school graduation" and "university commencement" becomes blurred. As Baudrillard notes, hyperreality occurs when the representation becomes more real than reality itself (Baudrillard 2006).

At this point, graduation is no longer an academic event, but a visual commodity in the attention economy. Representation becomes more important than the educational process itself. The reality presented is not the reality of the institution, but the reality expected by the public. As Debord asserts, "what appears becomes the main thing," and society no longer distinguishes between spectacle and reality.

This phenomenon shows that education, in the social media era, is no longer outside visual culture. It has become part of a digital landscape that prioritizes image, performativity, and visual appeal.

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CONCLUSION

Graduation in the era of social media needs to be understood as a cultural practice that is no longer rooted solely in academic rituals, but rather as a visual construction that follows the logic of digital attention. This study demonstrates that claim concretely through the case of SMK Citra Bangsa Mandiri Purwokerto, whose graduation procession — as displayed on Instagram — is not merely a documentation of the event, but a visual representation that constructs new meaning about graduation using academic symbols, digital aesthetics, and institutional imaging strategies. The findings reveal that the dominance of toga and gowns, ceremonial sashes, cinematic compositions, dramatic camera angles, and emotional music not only beautify the presentation, but also shift the SMK graduation procession into a symbolic framework typically associated with university commencements. This representation then shapes public perception, with viewers accepting these visuals as the ideal form of graduation, while simultaneously obscuring the vocational identity that is the main characteristic of SMK.

Therefore, this study directly answers the research question by demonstrating that the visualization of graduation on social media can alter the meaning of graduation itself through processes of simulation and aesthetic curation. The key contribution of this research lies in its explanation of how secondary education institutions negotiate with the logic of social media and the demands of public visuality, turning academic rituals into digital performances that serve to build image and attract attention. The theoretical implication suggests that educational symbols can lose their original connections and acquire new meanings when produced and shared within the digital ecosystem. Meanwhile, the practical implication opens up space for schools to reflect on how they present themselves on social media and how such representations shape public perception. This research is still limited to a single case, so further studies could expand the analysis to various educational institutions or delve deeper into the dynamics of public reception towards graduation representations in the digital sphere. In this sense, graduation in the social media era should be reinterpreted not merely as an academic ritual, but as a dynamic visual practice shaped by digital culture and the logic of public attention.

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