

Political branding on X: sentiment dynamics in Indonesia's presidential discourse

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Abstract This study investigated the strategic construction of political personal branding on social media within Indonesia's dynamic political landscape, focusing on how it is manifested and contested through user-generated content about Prabowo Subianto on X (formerly Twitter). This study examined how visual symbols, hashtags, and popular culture references influence public opinion and reveal contrasting narratives that reflect the polarised nature of Indonesia's digital public sphere. Employing a mixed-methods approach, algorithmic sentiment analysis (Naive Bayes) is combined with qualitative visual-symbolic coding. Findings reveal a dominant negative sentiment coexisting with strong pro-candidate messaging enriched by humour and affectionate visuals. This duality suggests potential audience segmentation and deliberate efforts to humanise the candidate, creating digital echo chambers for loyal supporters despite widespread criticism. The results highlight the strategic use of humour and emotional appeal by campaign teams and supporters to reconstruct public image, drawing on principles of affective engagement and participatory branding. The study provides valuable insights into how political figures and their communication strategies navigate polarised environments, offering key lessons for digital political public relations in an era shaped by emotion, culture, and interaction.

Keywords: naive bayes; political personal branding; sentiment analysis; social media

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the proliferation of social media has fundamentally transformed political communication, particularly in Indonesia's evolving digital landscape. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) are no longer merely spaces for social interaction; they have become central arenas for ideological contestation, political advocacy, and strategic personal branding (D. Kreiss & Mcgregor, 2018). This shift marks the rise of a networked public sphere in which political messages circulate rapidly through multimodal formats, involving emotional appeals, symbolic references, and viral content (Van Eeden, 2020). Within this dynamic environment, politicians, digital influencers, and ordinary citizens co-produce narratives that blur the boundaries between information, affect, and entertainment (Abidin, 2021). Political branding, therefore, is not only about crafting a public image but about continuously negotiating political identity through algorithmic visibility and participatory culture especially during transitional moments such as post-election periods, where legitimacy must be consolidated and narratives strategically managed (Van Es et al., 2021).

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The transformation of political communication practices is closely intertwined with the rise of diverse social media platforms that have introduced novel modes of expression and interaction. Among these, platform X plays a pivotal role in amplifying the circulation of political discourse and fostering symbolic engagement between political elites and the public (Jungherr et al., 2019). Through its core features—brevity in messaging, viral hashtags, visual symbolism, and memetic culture the platform X facilitates the rapid dissemination and aesthetic framing of political content, making it a central arena for real-time political branding (Van Eeden, 2020). The affordances of the platform enable political figures to continuously curate their digital personas, engage directly with fragmented publics, and strategically manage visibility in an algorithmically mediated environment (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018)(Harju & Huhtamäki, 2021). As such, the platform not only supports communicative immediacy but also serves as a site of identity negotiation, where affect, symbolism, and data-driven communication converge.

The increasing reliance on social media by political actors signifies a broader transformation from conventional top-down political communication toward more dialogic, participatory, and networked models of engagement (Kalsnes, 2022) (Cristian Vaccari, 2021). In Indonesia, this shift is notably driven by millennials and gen z, who represent a dominant force in the digital sphere—not only as consumers but also as active producers and disseminators of political content (Lim, 2020) (Ramadhany Nugroho & Erna Setijaningrum, 2023). Their digital literacy and platform fluency have enabled the co-creation of political narratives, memes, and visual messages that reframe political discourse in real-time. As a result, the locus of meaning-making in political communication has expanded beyond mainstream media institutions, increasingly shaped by participatory culture, grassroots commentary, and algorithmic visibility (Tapsell, 2021). This evolution illustrates a reconfiguration of communicative power, where the boundaries between audiences and actors blur within hybrid digital environments.

Prabowo Subianto, as the elected President in the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election, exemplifies how social media, particularly X, is effectively utilised for political personal branding. Prabowo's posts not only convey formal political messages but also leverage visual elements, popular culture symbols, the use of emojis, and the creation of memes to strengthen emotional connections with the public. This approach indicates that contemporary political communication must simultaneously integrate rational and affective aspects to build stronger engagement with audiences.

Political personal branding requires consistent, authentic, and adaptive identity management that responds to the dynamics of digital audiences. Politicians must project a relatable, humanistic, yet authoritative public image. Platform X provides opportunities for politicians to manage public impressions through visual imaging, micro-narrative construction, and language styles suited to the characteristics of digital culture.

—This context applies the perspective of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy, political actors on the social media stage curate performances to form public impressions. This portrayal appeals to gen z and millennials while softening political polarisation through humour and emotional connection. Although these expressions appear organic, their repetition by accounts associated with the campaign suggests deliberate orchestration (Enli, 2024). It reveals a strategic tension between authenticity and performance, where affective cues are used to manage visibility and sentiment. Prabowo's branding exemplifies how politicians leverage the platform's ability to create a flexible and resonant identity that is carefully staged (Abidin, 2021).

Agenda Setting Theory, as proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), is essential for understanding how political actors on social media shape public opinion by highlighting certain issues above others. On Platform X, politicians achieve this by framing emotionally charged topics, selectively emphasising specific issues, and leveraging strategic hashtags or slogans (Mustapha & Mustapha, 2017; Daniel Kreiss et al., 2020). In posts promoting the narrative 'Prabowo Gemoy' prioritises favouritism, national pride, and symbolic warmth over policy discussions, distracting from criticism of the government or elitism. These posts often incorporate humour, emojis, and memes, which play a role in directing the discourse. As the content gains traction, the platform's algorithm strengthens its visibility, reinforcing its intended agenda. This shows that agenda-setting on social media is not a passive process; rather, it involves the construction of active meaning through symbolic and affective curation. As a result, this theory has proven to be instrumental in analysing how political figures use digital platforms to distract the public and influence emotional engagement.

Previous literature reviews indicate that earlier studies have predominantly focused on sentiment analysis in social media to measure public opinion during political campaigns (Haryanto et al., 2019). However, most of these studies concentrate solely on text analysis and have yet to integrate the role of visual elements, popular culture symbols, and political memes in shaping political perceptions. Research by Fitriani et al. (2021) emphasises the importance of considering the visual dimension in digital communication analysis, given that social media are saturated with rich symbolic imagery that possesses strong rhetorical power (Darlius & Aprilia, 2024).

The transformation of political images via social media involves more than the mere transmission of messages; it also encompasses the construction of complex and multidimensional political identities. Visualisations through images, the use of specific hashtags, emoji selections, and references to popular culture such as music, films, or memes form an integral part of contemporary political communication strategies. These elements create more emotional communicative experiences, deepen audience engagement, and construct political narratives that resonate more profoundly with the public.

Social media platforms facilitate the negotiation of meanings between politicians and the public. Audience participation through actions such as retweets, replies, likes, and meme remixes illustrates that political narratives are dynamic, continuously being negotiated and redefined. While the two-way symmetrical communication model proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984) originally emphasises mutual understanding, it is essential to acknowledge that in the context of political communication on social media, interactions often exhibit asymmetrical characteristics, with a primary focus on persuasion and strategic branding. Public dialogue and participation remain critical in shaping political images; however, these interactions are typically framed within broader strategic efforts aimed at influencing public perception and engagement (Girsang & Kartikawangi, 2021). This nuanced perspective underscores the complex relationship between interactivity, dialogue, and the strategic nature of political messaging in the digital age.

These conditions necessitate new approaches in political communication studies that do not solely rely on text analysis but also consider visual, emotional, and cultural dimensions in digital interactions. An interdisciplinary approach combining communication theory, semiotic analysis, and digital culture studies becomes increasingly crucial for understanding the complexity of political personal branding on social media.

Recent studies in digital political communication reveal that the optimisation of visual and symbolic elements significantly impacts the effectiveness of political messages (Rizkia & Euis Komalawati, 2024). These findings reinforce the importance of understanding social media not merely as a channel for communication but as a cultural environment where identity construction, public engagement, and symbolic negotiations play a central role.

Building upon the previously outlined background, this research seeks to critically examine how Prabowo Subianto constructs and strategically manages his political personal branding through the utilisation of platform X. Specifically, the study aims to identify and analyse the key elements of visual communication, the integration of popular culture, and the deployment of symbolic strategies that are employed to shape and influence public perceptions during the pivotal post-election political transition, spanning from March 2024 to February 2025. This period is of particular importance as it represents a crucial phase in Indonesia's democratic trajectory, during which the newly elected leadership embarks on consolidating political power, navigating the fluctuating sentiments of a polarised electorate, and crafting narratives centred on unity and legitimacy. The strategic use of the platform X during this transition offers a unique opportunity to explore the ways in which political branding is constructed within a rapidly evolving digital environment, especially considering the platform's profound influence in shaping public discourse surrounding key political events, such as the 2024 presidential election and the subsequent Constitutional Court (MK) ruling. Branding efforts during this transitional window are especially compelling, as political figures must deftly manage public expectations, respond to critiques, and recalibrate campaign imagery into a credible governing narrative. These dynamics highlight the critical role of digital political branding, which extends beyond mere image management to encompass a strategic negotiation of political identity within a contested and emotionally charged public sphere. This research addresses a notable gap in the existing literature on sentiment analysis and digital political communication, particularly by

focusing on the role of platform X in post-election branding, a dimension that remains underexplored in previous studies.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative sentiment analysis with qualitative approaches, specifically critical discourse analysis and digital semiotics to examine the dynamics of political personal branding as constructed and contested through social media, particularly on the platform X. The sentiment analysis provides a computational overview of public attitudes, which is then complemented by in-depth qualitative interpretation of visual symbols, hashtags, and popular culture references to uncover the ideological and affective dimensions of political communication. This integrative approach allows for both the detection of discursive patterns at scale and the contextual interpretation of symbolic meaning within Indonesia's evolving digital political landscape. The core objective is to explore how public sentiment, symbols, hashtags, and references to popular culture collectively contribute to the digital political image construction following the official announcement of presidential and vice-presidential candidates by the General Elections Commission (KPU).

The sentiment analysis component is integrated alongside qualitative coding techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the political discourse that developed around Prabowo Subianto during the post-election transition. The data set consisted of posts containing the keyword 'Prabowo Subianto', which was collected during March 2024 to February 2025. This extended timeframe was deliberately chosen to capture not only the immediate reaction following the official announcement of the election results by the KPU on March 20, 2024, but also the ongoing shifts in public sentiment, narrative construction, and symbolic branding throughout the broader post-election transition phase.

Data is collected using the Platform X API with custom search parameters that include high-traffic and politically prominent hashtags (e.g., #PrabowoGemoy, #PresidenGemoy, #KPUCurang, #MKAnak), as well as visual and affective markers such as emojis, memes, and embedded images. The inclusion of these multimodal elements reflects an interdisciplinary approach based on digital political communication and effective public discourse analysis. By observing patterns over a full year, the study seeks to go beyond episodic snapshots and instead map the temporal dynamics of identity construction, audience engagement, and symbolic negotiation in a polarised media environment.

Methodologically, this long-form dataset enhances the resilience of sentiment analysis by allowing for comparative readings across political moments (e.g., post-announcement reactions, Constitutional Court decision debates, initial governance narratives), while theoretically, it places the study in a broader discussion of algorithmic agenda-setting, mediated populism, and emotional resonance in digital political branding.

An automated data scraping protocol was employed to extract publicly available posts from Platform X. Specifically, Tweet Harvest, an open-source scraping utility, was implemented within a Google collab environment to enable efficient and scalable data acquisition. This Python-based infrastructure facilitated real-time retrieval of user-generated content based on predefined keyword and hashtag parameters, while adhering to the Platform X's data usage policies to ensure ethical compliance. The system enabled the systematic collection of large volumes of data, including associated metadata such as timestamps, engagement metrics (likes, reposts, replies), and embedded visual content.

Following data acquisition, a relevance-based filtering process was conducted to retain only posts that directly referenced political personal branding and included visual-symbolic elements—such as memes, emojis, and political slogans—for subsequent analysis. During the preprocessing phase, textual content was cleaned by removing extraneous elements such as hyperlinks, user mentions, and non-alphanumeric characters. The text was then normalised through processes such as lowercasing and stemming, to ensure consistency and reliability in both sentiment analysis and qualitative coding. This integrated computational-qualitative approach provided a rigorous methodological foundation for examining the affective, symbolic, and discursive dimensions of digital political communication throughout the studied transition period.

The sentiment analysis process begins with data collection through web scraping techniques, which involve automatically extracting textual data from social media platforms

using Python programming. The collected data typically consists of user-generated content such as posts, comments, or tweets related to a specific topic. Since this raw data often contains irrelevant elements like hashtags, URLs, special characters, and inconsistent formatting, it undergoes a series of preprocessing steps. These include punctuation removal, text normalisation, tokenisation, and stop word elimination, all of which are essential to ensure the data is clean and structured for computational analysis.

Once the data is pre-processed, the next step involves converting the textual information into a numerical format suitable for machine learning algorithms. In this study, feature extraction is carried out using methods such as Term Frequency (TF) or Term Frequency Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF). The transformed data is then analysed using the Naive Bayes classification algorithm, specifically the MultinomialNB model from the `sklearn.Naive_bayes` module. This model is particularly well-suited for handling text-based datasets where input features represent word frequency. The dataset is divided into a training set and a testing set to ensure the model is both trained effectively and validated for accuracy.

The final output of the classification model is a sentiment prediction categorised into three primary classes: positive, negative, and neutral. Each text sample is evaluated and assigned a sentiment label based on the highest predicted probability across the categories. This enables researchers to quantitatively assess public opinion on specific issues or topics. To validate the model's performance, evaluation metrics such as accuracy, precision, recall, and F1-score are employed. Thus, the entire pipeline from scraping and preprocessing to feature transformation and classification—provides a robust framework for conducting sentiment analysis using machine learning techniques.

For qualitative analysis, a coding framework was applied to identify recurring patterns in the use of visual symbols and hashtags. This included elements such as emojis (e.g., ❤️, 😡, 🇮🇩), prominent hashtags (#PrabowoGemoy, #KPUCurang, #MKAnak), and linguistic markers of high emotional intensity, such as the use of capital letters. The coded data was then organised into thematic categories, as shown in Table 2, which illustrates how symbols and hashtags contribute to the framing of political narratives. Categories included expressions of positive affect, protest sentiments, and nationalistic elements embedded in both supportive and critical discourse. For instance, heart and flag emojis were frequently associated with messages of support and patriotism, while angry emojis and critical hashtags were used to express dissatisfaction with the perceived democratic process.

The analytical integration involved correlating the quantitative sentiment classifications (pro, contra, neutral) with the dominant qualitative themes and symbolic patterns identified in user-generated content. Posts labelled as 'pro' sentiment were closely examined to identify recurring narrative frames—such as humour, affection, and admiration—and symbolic markers including emojis, memes, and hashtags like #PrabowoGemoy, which collectively contributed to a more humanised and approachable portrayal of the political figure. In contrast, posts classified as 'contra' sentiment were analysed for expressions of distrust and resistance, often articulated through satire, antagonistic hashtags such as #KPUCurang, and critiques emphasizing legality and legitimacy. This integrative approach enabled a multidimensional understanding of how digital political branding is co-constructed, showing how sentiment is not only conveyed through linguistic content but also reinforced and contested through visual, symbolic, and affective elements within platform-specific discourse.

To enhance the validity of the analysis, data triangulation was employed by integrating automated sentiment classification with qualitative interpretation of symbolic elements. While sentiment labels were generated entirely by the Naive Bayes algorithm, a purposive subset of posts was manually reviewed to interpret the contextual meanings conveyed through accompanying text, emojis, hashtags, and visual components. This qualitative inspection did not involve relabelling or manual annotation but served to cross-verify how sentiment was contextually constructed and communicated through discursive and symbolic strategies. The analytical integration of algorithmic classification and qualitative interpretation enabled a multidimensional understanding of sentiment expression within the broader framework of digital political discourse.

Ethical considerations were integral to the research process. As data was sourced from publicly accessible posts, user identities were anonymised. All posts were analysed in aggregate form, and personally identifiable information was excluded from publication. The study adhered

to digital research ethics guidelines, ensuring responsible and respectful handling of publicly shared content.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examines 344 tweets collected from the Twitter platform using the keyword 'Prabowo Subianto' during the period of March 2024 - February 2025. Employing a critical discourse analysis and media semiotics framework, the research identifies five primary areas of focus: the classification of narratives, the utilisation of symbols and hashtags, the interrelation with popular culture, the interpretation of political figures, and the integration of digital culture.

Classification of narratives: positive, negative, neutral

The analysis of 344 tweets concerning the 2024 Indonesian presidential election identified three dominant sentiment categories: positive, negative, and neutral. These classifications were derived using Python and the Naive Bayes algorithm, which enabled systematic sentiment analysis of user-generated content. The dataset focused specifically on tweets posted between March 2024 and February 2025 that referenced Prabowo Subianto, both as a political figure and as the elected president. This methodological approach allowed for the extraction of sentiment trends that reflect how digital media platforms, particularly X (formerly Twitter), are employed not only to express political opinions but also to construct affective and symbolic narratives surrounding national leaders (See Figure 1).

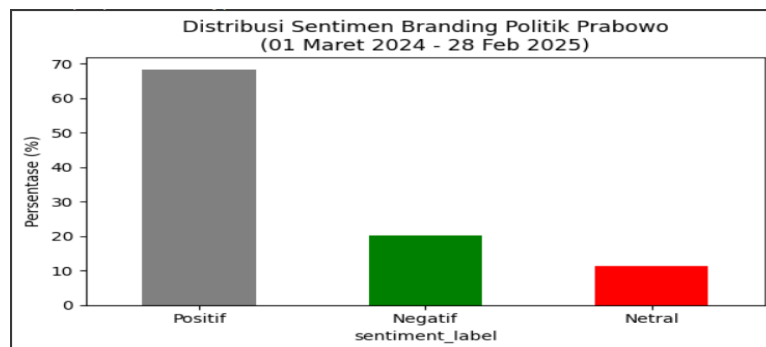


Figure 1. Political narratives on Prabowo Subianto on X media platform
Source: Data Processed by Author (2025)

The evaluation results of the sentiment classification model using the Naive Bayes algorithm indicate an accuracy rate of 0.67, meaning that 67% of the model's predictions matched the actual labels. The model's precision score of 0.83 suggests that 83% of all predicted labels (across positive, neutral, and negative categories) were correct. A recall score of 0.67 indicates that 67% of all actual labels were successfully identified by the model. Meanwhile, the F1-score of 0.67 represents a balanced measure between precision and recall, offering a general overview of the model's overall performance. The macro average values for precision, recall, and F1-score are 0.83, 0.67, and 0.67, respectively, reflecting the average performance across all classes without considering class imbalance. In contrast, the weighted average, which accounts for the number of instances in each class (support), also yielded a recall and F1-score of 0.67.

The pro-narratives primarily employed effective and personalised discourse. They reframed Prabowo Subianto, the presidential candidate, as a warm and humorous figure known as 'Pak Gemoy'. This reframing strategy significantly altered public perception, shifting Prabowo's image from a militaristic past to a more approachable and endearing persona. Several tweets illustrate this transformation:

"Pak Gemoy selalu tersenyum, bahkan di tengah debat panas. Karismanya bikin hati adem 🥰" (@ge2**, 25 Maret 2024) ("Pak Gemoy always smiles, even in the middle of a heated debate. His charisma makes the heart feel calm 🥰")

"So gemoy! Pak Prabowo kayak presiden anime 🥰🇮🇩" (@ot**la, 26 Maret 2024) ("So cute! Pak Prabowo is like an anime president 🥰🇮🇩")

"Dulu gue ragu, sekarang ngeliat dia ngopi sama warga biasa, wah salut banget sih." (@net**aik, 24 Maret 2024) ("I used to doubt, but now seeing him have coffee with ordinary people, wow, I really respect him.")

These expressions, often accompanied by emojis and hashtags like #GemoyForR11 or #PresidenGemoy, show that emotional appeal plays a central role in constructing digital political identities (Daulay & Aulia, 2024).

The contra-narratives targeted Gibran Rakabuming, Prabowo's vice-presidential running mate, focusing on concerns about political dynasties and procedural injustice. These tweets expressed discontent with the Constitutional Court (MK) ruling and portrayed Gibran as a product of nepotism:

"Selamat datang di era 'MK = Milik Keluarga'. Gibran bukan wakil rakyat, dia wakil dinasti!" (@rak**s, 26 Maret 2024) ("Welcome to the era of 'MK = Family's Property.' Gibran is not a people's representative; he is a representative of a dynasty!")

"Nepotisme dibungkus gemoy. Jangan tertipu senyuman." (@pol**s, 27 Maret 2024) ("Nepotism wrapped in cuteness. Don't be fooled by the smile.")

"MK BONEKA! Hukum tunduk pada kekuasaan. Ini bukan demokrasi!" (@law**na, 28 Maret 2024)

("MK IS A PUPPET! The law submits to power. This is not democracy!" (@law**na, 28 March 2024))

The use of capital letters (e.g., "MK BONEKA!"), angry face emojis 🤔, and sarcastic hashtags highlights the emotional intensity and collective sense of injustice expressed by the users. As Highfield and Leaver, explained, such symbolic acts on social media serve to encode political affect and dissent through culturally resonant language (Highfield & Leaver, 2016).

The neutral narratives, which mostly came from media outlets and citizen journalism accounts, presented factual updates without emotional bias. For instance:

"Perhitungan suara menunjukkan Prabowo-Gibran unggul di 18 provinsi. Data lengkap menyusul." (@det**k, 28 Maret 2024) ("The vote count shows that Prabowo-Gibran leads in 18 provinces. Full data to follow.")

"Gibran resmi ditetapkan sebagai cawapres usai putusan MK, kata KPU." (@jur**n, 23 Maret 2024) ("Gibran has been officially appointed as vice-presidential candidate following the MK ruling, said KPU.")

These posts show how institutional actors use X as a tool for information dissemination rather than ideological contestation.

This classification highlights the dynamic role of X in framing political imagery, amplifying collective emotion, and allowing the public to participate in meaning-making during critical political events. Through memes, emojis, and informal language, digital political engagement in contemporary Indonesia is constructed with a strong cultural logic.

Symbol and hashtag usage patterns

Social media serves as a platform for political communication, where visual and linguistic symbols are used not only for aesthetic purposes but also carry significant cultural and political meanings. Table 1 presents the dominant symbols and hashtags that play a role in shaping the discourse.

In the digital discourse surrounding the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election, symbols such as emojis, hashtags, and typographic choices help shape the tone, sentiment, and ideological framework of online discussions. Specifically, pro-Prabowo narratives use symbols like ❤️, 🍵, and 🐻 to construct an image of a warm, friendly, and emotional candidate. These emotional symbols, when paired with hashtags such as #PrabowoGemoy and #GemoyForPresident, contribute to reshaping Prabowo's public persona—from a strict, militaristic figure to one that is "cute and affectionate." This representation aligns with the concept of affective politics, where emotions play a central role in the construction of political subjectivity (Boler & Davis, 2020)

For example, X such as:

"Pak Gemoy is the cutest general we've ever had 🥰 #PrabowoGemoy" (@kratw**t, March 21, 2024) ("Pak Gemoy adalah jenderal paling imut yang pernah kita punya 🥰 #PrabowoGemoy")
 "His smile melts hearts ❤️❤️❤️ Even my mom changed her vote LOL" (@bd**a, March 24, 2024) ("Senyum beliau melelehkan hati ❤️❤️❤️ Bahkan ibu saya ganti pilihan LOL")
 "Debate siapa takut? Ada Pak Gemoy yang selalu chill 😎" (@isan**y, March 25, 2024) ("Who's afraid of the debate? There's Pak Gemoy who is always chill 😎")

Table 1. Most frequently used symbols and hashtags

Symbol / Hashtag	Pro-Narrative	Anti-Narrative	Symbolic Function
❤️ (red heart)	✓		Love, emotional support
😡 (angry face)		✓	Anger toward political elites
🇮🇩 (Indonesian flag)	✓	✓	Nationalism symbol
#PrabowoGemoy	✓		Positive and humorous branding
#GibranIllegal		✓	Protest against the legality of candidacy
#KPUCurang		✓	Allegations of fraud against the election commission
#PresidenGemoy	✓		Emotional narrative to build persona

Source: Data Processed by Author (2025)

These X demonstrate how emotional symbols and hashtags become part of the collective language of support, reflecting political preferences and emotional involvement. Highfield refers to this as 'emotional language' where aesthetic and affective aspects of digital communication reinforce group identities and political alignment (Boler & Davis, 2020). In contrast, anti-narratives employ a sharply different symbolic language, marked by emotions of anger, frustration, and distrust. Emojis such as 😡, 🚫, and 🤢 appear alongside expressions in capital letters like 'MK BONEKA!', 'NEPOTISME EVERYWHERE!', and 'INI BUKAN DEMOKRASI!'. These tools serve to express opposition, particularly toward Gibran Rakabuming's candidacy and the Constitutional Court's ruling on presidential and vice-presidential age requirements. Such expressions include:

- "MK BONEKA! Apa lagi yang bisa kita harapkan dari sistem yang sudah rusak 😡" (@pkritik, March 26, 2024) "Constitutional Court puppet! What else can we expect from a broken system 😡" (@pkritik, March 26, 2024)
- "Wakil rakyat? Lebih kayak wakil keluarga istana 🚫 #TolakDinasti" (@naktual, March 27, 2024) ("Wakil rakyat? Lebih kayak wakil keluarga istana 🚫 #TolakDinasti" (@naktual, 27 Maret 2024))
 "People's representatives? More like representatives of the royal family 🚫 #RejectDynasty" (@naktual, March 27, 2024)
- "Disgusting level of nepotism 🤢 Where's the outrage?" (@jpoli**k, March 25, 2024) ("Tingkat nepotisme yang menjijikkan 🤢 Di mana kemarahan itu?" (@jpoli**k, 25 Maret 2024))

These examples illustrate the concept of the 'affective public' where emotions form the basis of collective online engagement, challenging the legitimacy of established political structures (Boler & Davis, 2020).

While both pro and anti-narratives rely on emotional symbols, their emotional tones are starkly different. Pro-narratives focus on warmth, humour, and admiration, whereas anti-narratives channel anger, betrayal, and defiance. This divergence is what Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) calls 'emotional framing', where emotions are strategically used to shape perceptions of events and political figures (Choi et al., 2021).

Hashtags like #PrabowoGemoy and #TolakDinasti function as both organisational tools for digital activism and emotional signals that define ideological divides. These hashtags allow users to engage with political discourse through emotional entry points, often bypassing traditional political debates. In this context, digital symbols serve as more than just aesthetic elements; they

are essential tools in shaping political narratives, encoding ideological positions, and performing effective political work in the digital age.

The connection to popular culture

The 2024 Indonesian presidential election shows a significant convergence between political narratives and popular culture. Political actors strategically incorporate elements of fandom, meme culture, and anime references to build emotional resonance with voters, particularly among young people who dominate digital spaces. These cultural tools are used not simply for entertainment but to construct political identities that feel more relatable and emotionally engaging.

One vivid example appears in the portrayal of Prabowo Subianto as Levi Ackerman, a prominent character from the anime *Attack on Titan*. Levi is depicted as small in stature yet immensely powerful, a characterisation that many supporters find fitting when describing Prabowo's renewed public image. An X user wrote:

"Pak Gemoy itu kayak Levi, kecil tapi ngalahin Titan! 🤔"
("Pak Gemoy is like Levi, small but able to defeat Titans! 🤔") (@ot***putih, 26 March 2024).

This analogy highlights more than just humour. Drawing on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, this portrayal can be seen as part of an impression management process, where Prabowo's persona is reconstructed to meet the emotional expectations of his audience. The image of a heroic protector resonates with widespread cultural fantasies and reframes his political identity into a figure of affection and admiration (Solomon et al., 2013).

The nickname 'Pak Gemoy' itself reveals the deep influence of digital remix culture. Originally seen as a stern military figure, Prabowo's transformation into a 'cute dad' persona reflects what Jenkins, Ford, and Green describe as participatory culture. Supporters actively create and share memes, short videos, and fan edits across platforms such as X and TikTok. Through these digital acts, political communication becomes a two-way interaction, where voters not only consume images but also modify and redistribute them, building a collective emotional narrative around the candidate.

Milner and Phillips point out that memes function as vernacular creativity. In the political context, memes do not exist as neutral jokes but serve as ideologically charged texts that signal group belonging, critique, or endorsement. Referencing Levi Ackerman allows supporters to infuse political communication with emotional depth and cultural familiarity (Katz & Shifman, 2017). This helps frame Prabowo not through traditional speeches or manifestos but through symbols that audiences already trust and admire.

The continuous circulation of these narratives establishes an affective environment in which political impressions are formed and reinforced. Supporters upload images of Prabowo smiling, dancing, or behaving casually, embedding these representations in popular discourse. Over time, the accumulation of such imagery subtly shifts how voters perceive his leadership qualities.

Agenda-setting theory can further illuminate this process. Through constant exposure to memes, videos, and cultural references, audiences develop cognitive frameworks that prioritise certain attributes of political figures over others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Emotional narratives created through popular culture not only determine what political issues are salient but also shape how political actors are emotionally ranked and remembered.

Pop culture references also become tools for political critique. Opponents use similar strategies by linking Gibran Rakabuming Raka to 'Joffrey Baratheon', a despised character from *Game of Thrones*. The metaphor criticises perceived political dynasties and resonates with younger audiences familiar with the source material. These critical symbols are powerful because they condense complex political evaluations into easily recognisable cultural codes.

Highfield observes that the entanglement of popular culture and political communication transforms how political participation occurs (Bouko, 2023). Humour, emotional storytelling, and cultural references have become central modes through which citizens engage with politics online. Politics is no longer confined to formal discussions; it is woven into everyday digital practices and shaped by emotional investments.

From a dramaturgical perspective, political figures must now manage performances across multiple stages, adjusting their personas to fit the expectations of digitally literate

audiences. At the same time, agenda-setting dynamics ensure that emotional and symbolic framings crafted through popular culture have a strong influence over public perceptions of credibility, leadership, and relevance.

Meaning-making of political figures and digital culture

The transformation of political personas within digital platforms reveals a profound shift in how emotional resonance and participatory dynamics influence public discourse. Political identities, once constructed primarily through top-down processes, are now co-created through interactive, emotionally charged exchanges across social media. This evolution reflects the concept of digital affective culture, which emphasises emotional connectivity as a core element of political engagement in online spaces (Wiederhold, 2020).

Participants in digital culture no longer assume passive roles as spectators. Instead, they actively contribute to the creation, distribution, and reinterpretation of political narratives. Drawing upon Jenkins, Ito, and Boyd's (2015) framework of participatory culture, individuals operate simultaneously as users and producers, blending humour, memes, anime imagery, and informal language to depict political figures in ways that often diverge from formal portrayals. These reimagined representations introduce elements of playfulness, satire, and irony, significantly broadening the spectrum of political expression.

The emotional repackaging of political figures through digital media underscores a changing basis for public evaluation. Politicians are increasingly assessed not solely through ideological platforms or policy proposals but also through their emotional compatibility with online communities. Highfield (2016) observes that the 'meme-ification' of political figures fosters a vernacular mode of discourse, where popular culture becomes a primary vehicle for political storytelling. Through this lens, political narratives gain a heightened capacity for emotional resonance, particularly among younger audiences who navigate politics through a culturally familiar digital vernacular.

While digital platforms facilitate emotional bonding with political figures, they simultaneously provide avenues for critique and symbolic resistance. Within the networked public sphere (Kruse et al., 2018), social media users engage in continuous negotiations of power by deploying memes, hashtags, and parodic content. These practices often expose contradictions, challenge authoritative claims, or highlight grievances, thereby contesting dominant narratives propagated by traditional institutions. The decentralised nature of these critiques underscores the participatory ethos embedded in contemporary digital communication.

The impact of these developments extends beyond stylistic changes in political presentation. The growing emphasis on affect in political engagement necessitates a high degree of emotional literacy and digital awareness among political actors. Successful political branding now demands an ability to align with prevailing cultural trends, adapting personas to fit the aesthetics and rhythms of digital virality. Emotional resonance, rather than formal authority, becomes a critical currency in securing public attention and loyalty.

However, emotional engagement in digital politics carries inherent risks. Papacharissi highlights that affective publics, which coalesce around shared emotional experiences, often reinforce echo chambers that deepen polarisation (Aminudin & Luhur, 2025). In these spaces, emotional appeals may overshadow empirical reasoning, encouraging the circulation of distorted, oversimplified, or misleading political messages. Studies by Waisbord (2018) and Marwick and Lewis (2017) further warn that algorithmic amplification intensifies emotional narratives, making digital ecosystems particularly vulnerable to misinformation and symbolic manipulation (Lecheler & Egelhofer, 2022).

Recognising the centrality of affect and participation within digital political culture calls for interdisciplinary approaches. Researchers must integrate insights from communication studies, media theory, and political sociology to fully grasp the complexities at play. Additionally, educational efforts that promote critical digital literacy are crucial for empowering citizens to navigate emotionalised political environments, enabling them to critically evaluate the symbolic layers embedded in online political communication. Importantly, this study also offers key implications for political public relations practice in Indonesia. The findings underscore the strategic necessity for political PR practitioners to move beyond traditional top-down messaging. Instead, they must learn to navigate and meaningfully engage with co-created, affect-laden

narratives emerging from participatory digital culture. This includes understanding and leveraging emotionally resonant symbols, memes, and viral language (e.g., the 'Gemoy' phenomenon), which hold significant sway over public sentiment and political image formation in the digital age.

The intertwining of affective culture and participatory media has irrevocably altered the landscape of political engagement. Digital citizens, no longer confined to the role of passive recipients, emerge as cultural agents who shape political imaginaries through emotional expression and symbolic creativity. This development offers possibilities for more inclusive and diverse forms of political discourse but simultaneously challenges traditional models of rational deliberation and democratic participation. Ongoing research must continue to examine the intersections of emotional expression, symbolic communication, and participatory practices in redefining authority and legitimacy in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

This study illustrates how digital popular culture—through memes, emojis, anime references, and affective language—reshapes political narratives and personal branding in the context of Indonesia's 2024 presidential election. Findings reveal a clear polarization of opinions, with dominant negative sentiment critiquing Prabowo's nomination process and alleged manipulation, contrasted by pro-candidate narratives that highlight his 'adorable' and humanised persona through strategic rebranding. Applying Goffman's dramaturgical theory, the analysis shows how political figures perform curated digital personas, while Agenda Setting Theory helps explain how participatory digital publics influence which narratives become prominent.

Methodologically, the integration of algorithmic sentiment analysis and qualitative coding effectively captures the symbolic and emotional complexity of digital discourse, opening further opportunities to explore how visual and affective elements shape public opinion. For political communication practitioners, particularly in Indonesia's dynamic digital landscape, this study underscores the strategic importance of engaging with culturally resonant visual symbols and emotionally charged language to build relatable political personas. However, this must be calibrated carefully to maintain authenticity and avoid backlash in participatory spaces prone to irony, satire, and oppositional interpretations.

While the study focuses on Twitter and a specific political moment, which may limit broader generalisation, it provides a critical foundation for future research across platforms and political contexts. Ultimately, the findings expand the understanding of political personal branding in the digital age, highlighting the emotional and symbolic power of popular culture in contemporary political communication.

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