

DIGITAL POPULISM AND AFFECTIVE POLITICS: THE CASE OF PRABOWO SUBIANTO'S '*GEMOY*' PERSONA AND ITS RESONANCE WITH MILLENNIAL AND GEN-Z VOTERS IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

This study analyzes Prabowo Subianto's strategic rebranding from an authoritarian military figure to a '*Gemoy*' (charmingly humorous) persona during Indonesia's 2024 presidential election, which targeted the youth vote comprising over 56% of the electorate. Employing a qualitative approach, including interviews with campaign insiders and digital analytics framed by Norton's communication style theory, the research identifies animated, expressive, and relaxed-impression-leaving styles as central to this transformation. Findings reveal that this digitally-driven affective strategy, particularly through viral TikTok content, successfully reshaped his public image and resonated strongly with millennial and Gen-Z voters, directly contributing to his electoral victory. The study concludes that emotional relatability and digital populism are now decisive factors in modern political branding.

Keywords: Affective Politics, Digital Populism, Political Branding, Youth Electorate, Indonesia, Prabowo Subianto.

INTRODUCTION

Political communication has undergone a fundamental transformation in the digital age, evolving from a primarily policy-oriented discourse to a highly personalized, image-driven, and emotionally resonant form of public engagement. This shift is marked by an increasing reliance on emotional resonance in political messaging, a strategy that significantly influences public perceptions and engagement, especially in the context of electoral politics (Gabriel, Maier, Masch, & Renner, 2023). Substantial research indicates that emotions play a critical role in political communication, enhancing engagement and altering public perception. Strategically deployed emotional appeals function as powerful instruments for influencing voter behavior and individual judgments about political figures and policies (Gabriel et al., 2023). Consequently, political leaders increasingly leverage emotional displays not only to garner immediate responses but also to create lasting impressions on their constituents (Wang, Lu, Zhou, & Zhu, 2022). Therefore, the effective use of emotions in political messaging transcends mere rhetoric and constitutes a fundamental element of political strategy in digital communication (Caiani & Cocco, 2023).

Furthermore, social media platforms amplify these emotional appeals, enabling more immediate and interactive engagement with the electorate. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok provide arenas where political actors engage directly with citizens, often bypassing traditional media filters. These social environments foster a dynamic where emotional responses are directly measurable through likes, shares, and comments, thereby providing immediate feedback on the effectiveness of communication strategies. Empirical evidence confirms that messages invoking hope generate significant interaction, further underscoring the role of emotion in engagement on digital platforms (Tarullo, 2020). The personalization of political communication is further intensified by the mediatization of politics, which refers to the processes through which media influence political behavior and public discourse. This phenomenon suggests that contemporary political communication is often less concerned with policy content and more

focused on crafting a public persona that resonates with the emotional states of the audience (Белугина & Рязанова, 2020). Accordingly, the distinction between information and branding becomes blurred, generating a new discourse where leaders are branded akin to consumer products—a shift that critiques the commodification of political communication in contemporary settings (Hofmann, 2023).

Moreover, the adaptation of political discourse to accommodate online engagement nuances signifies a major shift in the construction and understanding of political identities. Digital platforms have become instrumental not only for disseminating information but also for creating and shaping political identity (Fridlund, 2020). This transition facilitates a less formal dialogue that is more reflective of personal narratives and emotional undercurrents, potentially leading to a more engaged electorate capable of meaningful participation in political processes (Nugumanova & Zhunussova, 2023). Within populist contexts, the emotional dimension becomes particularly pronounced. Investigations into the relationship between populist movements and emotional appeal reveal that populist communication heavily relies on invoking strong emotional responses such as anger, pride, or fear. These emotions are central to mobilizing supporters and constructing collective identities (Widmann, 2020). Hence, comprehending this emotional framework is essential for fully grasping the mechanisms of contemporary political engagement.

As political actors navigate this complex landscape, it becomes evident that successful communication in the digital age necessitates more than policy expertise; it demands acute sensitivity to the emotional fabric of public sentiment. Political discourse thus embodies the convergence of emotional intelligence and strategic communication, fundamentally reshaping public engagement (Pimenta & Silva, 2024). Concurrently, new forms of political engagement and identity construction are emerging, driven by digital connectivity and social media interaction. This development signifies a paradigm shift in the political landscape, wherein personalization and emotional appeal have transitioned from fringe tactics to central components of political strategy (Flax & Zullo, 2022). The intersection of emotions and identity in political discourse yields multifaceted implications for the future of political engagement, wherein language and narrative play pivotal roles in shaping public opinion and delineating relationships between citizens and their leaders.

This ongoing transformation underscores the imperative for political actors to adapt their strategies to resonate emotionally with their audiences. This evolution highlights the centrality of emotional engagement in driving public participation and shaping political discourse. Consequently, contemporary political communication must navigate this complex terrain, fostering meaningful connections with constituents while addressing the diverse emotional landscapes that define public sentiment in a rapidly changing political environment. This shift is particularly evident in emerging democracies like Indonesia, where rapid technological adoption and a large youth population have created new dynamics of political representation and voter mobilization. The 2024 Indonesian presidential election exemplified this transformation, serving as a critical case study in how digital platforms and affective strategies are reshaping electoral politics. According to Yandra et al. (2023), the integration of advanced technology in election administration has facilitated cleaner and more credible electoral processes, while also enhancing the accuracy of voter data and youth engagement. With millennials and Generation Z comprising 56.45% of the electorate, amounting to over 113 million voters (Katadata, 2023), candidates faced unprecedented pressure to develop communication strategies resonant with this digitally native demographic. This digital inclusion not only enhances government engagement but also fosters a

more informed electorate, representing a key theme in the changing landscape of political communication in Indonesia (Sayogo, Yuli, & Wiyono, 2021).

It was within this context that Prabowo Subianto, a former military commander historically associated with authoritarian imagery (Riswandi, 2017), executed one of the most remarkable political rebranding campaigns in Indonesia's democratic history through his adoption of a '*Gemoy*' (charmingly humorous) persona. This transformation reflects the necessity for candidates to craft relatable personas as voter demographics increasingly align with younger audiences (Saud, Ida, Abbas, Ashfaq, & Ahmad, 2020). The political socialization of Indonesian youth, amplified through social media, allows for greater agency in political discourse and engagement, making digital communication strategies crucial for boosting youth voter turnout and engagement. Existing literature on political communication has established the importance of image crafting and voter perception in electoral competitions (Azhar, 2017; Nimmo, 2008). Previous studies on Indonesian elections have examined Prabowo's communication style, noting his dramatic and populist approach in 2014 (Riswandi, 2017) and his anti-elitist discourse in 2019 (Ritonga & Adela, 2020). Research on local Indonesian leaders has also applied Norton's communication theory to analyze stylistic variations in political messaging (Nurjana, 2023). However, several critical gaps remain unaddressed. While populist communication has been studied extensively, its intersection with digital affect and emotional branding remains underexplored, particularly in non-Western contexts (Olsson, 2014). Existing works have predominantly focused on verbal rhetoric and ideological positioning, paying insufficient attention to non-verbal communication and visually driven political performance (Cohen-Almagor, 2017; Sardoč & Wodak, 2023). Furthermore, few studies have integrated campaign strategy, digital analytics, and voter response to provide a holistic understanding of how political rebranding operates in practice (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Koc-Michalska, Klinger, Bennett, & Römmele, 2023).

Social media has emerged as a critical arena for political engagement, serving as a platform where candidates can demonstrate emotional resonance and connect with audiences (Zhang & Tang, 2024). This aligns with observations that emotional appeal in content can shape public perception and political support (Gallagher, Fracchiolla, & Fairfield, 2024). The analysis by Pezzullo et al. (2025) highlights the need for political entities to develop a coherent and relatable public persona to foster trust and loyalty among constituents (Pezzullo & Cox, 2025), a particularly pressing issue in emergent democracies like Indonesia, where historical political contexts necessitate innovative approaches to brand communication.

This study seeks to address these gaps by examining Prabowo Subianto's strategic shift from an authoritarian military image to a '*Gemoy*' persona during the 2024 presidential campaign. The research introduces three key theoretical novelties: first, it extends Norton's communication style theory (1978) beyond its traditional applications in interpersonal communication to analyze large-scale political rebranding at the presidential level; second, it develops the concept of 'digital affective strategy' as a distinct form of political communication that merges emotional appeal with platform-specific engagement; and third, it contributes to the emerging literature on political image transformation in post-authoritarian democracies (Norton & Pettegrew, 1979; Sanders, 1985). Methodologically, the study innovates by triangulating data from campaign insiders, digital analytics, and voter surveys to provide a comprehensive understanding of rebranding effectiveness.

To systematically investigate this phenomenon, this study is guided by several research questions that explore both the theoretical and practical dimensions of political rebranding. The

research examines how Prabowo Subianto's communication style evolved from the 2014 and 2019 elections to the 2024 campaign, and what factors drove this transformation. It further investigates the strategic role digital platforms and affective communication played in constructing and amplifying his '*Gemoy*' persona, particularly in terms of content virality and emotional resonance. Finally, the study analyzes the extent to which this rebranding influenced youth voter perception and electoral outcomes, and what this reveals about the changing nature of political persuasion in digital democracies.

The impact of Prabowo's rebranding strategy on youth voter perception invites scrutiny, especially regarding frameworks that discuss the efficacy of social media marketing in engaging target demographics (Gautama, 2020). This implies that campaign strategies prioritizing emotional appeals and personal narratives are likely to yield positive engagement outcomes. Furthermore, governmental reforms aimed at improving transparency and public engagement in Indonesia have created an environment where personalized political communication can thrive (Asteriniah & Hestiriniah, 2023), while the complex nature of political influence often intertwines monetary motivations with genuine voter engagement during electoral processes (Hidayaturrahman et al., 2022).

Through addressing these questions, this research contributes to broader scholarly discussions on digital campaigning, political branding, and the growing importance of affective politics in contemporary democracies (Chadwick, Vaccari, & Hall, 2024; Herrera, 2020; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). The findings offer valuable insights into how historical political identities can be transformed through strategic communication and what this means for the future of electoral competition in digitally mediated environments, with implications for both democratic theory and political practice in the Global South.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach to comprehensively examine Prabowo Subianto's political communication strategy during the 2024 presidential election. The research design followed the principles of qualitative inquiry as outlined by Creswell (2014), focusing on exploring complex phenomena within their natural settings through the collection of rich, detailed data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach was particularly appropriate for understanding the nuanced transformation of political image and communication strategies, as it allowed for in-depth examination of how and why these changes occurred, capturing the subjective experiences and strategic considerations of key campaign actors.

Research Participants and Sampling

The research participants were carefully selected through purposive sampling techniques to ensure the inclusion of information-rich cases relevant to the study's objectives. Patton (2015) emphasizes that purposeful sampling allows researchers to select cases that are particularly informative about the phenomenon of interest (Patton, Sawicki, & Clark, 2015). The final sample consisted of seven key informants with direct involvement or expertise in the 2024 presidential campaign, including three senior members of the Prabowo-Gibran National Campaign Team involved in communication strategy development, two political analysts specializing in Indonesian politics and digital communication, and two senior journalists from major national media outlets who extensively covered the election campaign. All participants possessed substantial professional experience in their respective fields, ranging from 10 to 25 years, and were based in Jakarta where the core campaign activities were coordinated. While this Jakarta-centric sample provided valuable insights from campaign strategists and political elites, it necessarily limits understanding of how

the communication strategy resonated across Indonesia's diverse geographical and socio-cultural landscape, representing a limitation that future research should address through broader regional sampling.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection employed multiple methods to ensure comprehensive understanding and methodological triangulation. Primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted using a detailed interview protocol that covered aspects of communication strategy development, implementation challenges, platform-specific approaches, and perceived effectiveness. These interviews, typically lasting 60-90 minutes, were conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Supplementary observational data were collected through systematic documentation of campaign events, public appearances, and social media activities, focusing particularly on non-verbal communication elements and audience interactions.

Secondary data sources included comprehensive analysis of campaign materials, speech transcripts, and extensive social media metrics from platforms including TikTok and Instagram, which were crucial for understanding the digital affective strategy. Existing survey data from reputable polling organizations such as Indonesia Political Opinion and Poltracking Indonesia provided additional context on voter perceptions and preferences. The multi-method approach enabled cross-verification of findings and provided both depth and breadth in understanding the communication phenomena under investigation.

Data Analysis Process

The data analysis process followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), involving three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The analysis specifically applied Norton's (1978) communication style theory as an analytical framework to identify and categorize dominant communication styles employed in the campaign. Interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis using NVivo software to identify patterns and themes related to communication strategy and image transformation.

Digital communication data was analyzed through quantitative content analysis techniques to identify patterns of engagement, virality, and audience response. Social media metrics including views, likes, shares, comments, and impression data were systematically tracked and analyzed to measure the reach and impact of the "*Gemoy*" campaign narrative. Survey data from polling organizations was analyzed to correlate communication strategies with voter perception changes across different demographic groups.

Throughout the analysis process, triangulation across different data sources and methods was employed to enhance the validity and reliability of findings. Member checking with selected participants ensured the accuracy of interpretations, while thick descriptive accounts were developed to provide a context-rich understanding of the communication phenomena under investigation. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and protecting participant identities in accordance with standard research ethics protocols.

Analytical Framework

The study employed Norton's communication style theory as its primary analytical framework, focusing specifically on the animated, expressive, relaxed, and impression-leaving styles that characterized Prabowo's transformed communication approach. This theoretical lens

enabled systematic analysis of how specific communication behaviors contributed to the overall rebranding strategy and how these styles were adapted for digital platform engagement. The framework provided a structured approach to examining the intersection between traditional communication theory and contemporary digital political communication, addressing the research questions regarding communication evolution, digital platform strategy, and voter perception impact.

RESULT

Voter Demographic Profile

The 2024 presidential election featured a significant youth demographic presence that fundamentally shaped campaign strategies. As shown in Table 1, millennials and Generation Z collectively comprised 56.45% of total voters, creating an unprecedented opportunity for candidates who could effectively engage these digital-native demographics. This demographic reality provided the strategic imperative for Prabowo Subianto's communication transformation and represented the primary target audience for the "Gemoy" persona strategy.

Table 1: Voter Demographics by Generation in the 2024 Presidential Election

Generation	Number of Voters	Percentage
Millennials	66,822,389	33.60%
Generation Z	46,800,161	22.85%
Other Generations	91,184,672	43.55%
Total	204,807,222	100%

Source: General Elections Commission (KPU), 2024

Digital Engagement Metrics and Virality Patterns

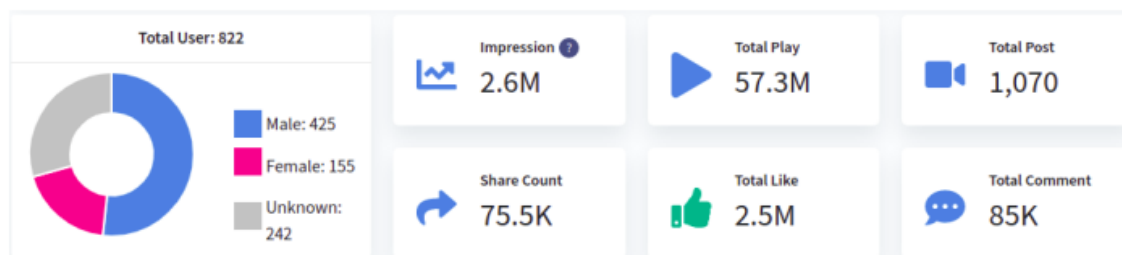
Analysis of social media performance revealed extraordinary engagement metrics for Prabowo's "Gemoy" content. The search intensity for the term "Gemoy" showed remarkable growth throughout the campaign period, as illustrated in Figure 1. The data demonstrates how the campaign successfully injected the "Gemoy" branding into public discourse, with digital traction being amplified by official campaign activities and organic user participation.

#fyp	316
#gemoy	264
#prabowo	224
#	178
#fypシ	153
#prabowosubianto	138
#prabowogemoy	133
#gibran	122

Figure 1: Search Intensity for the Term "Gemoy"

Source: [Netray.id](https://netray.id)

The TikTok platform emerged as the primary battleground for youth engagement, with monitoring data from November 24 to December 4, 2023, revealing substantial viral reach. As shown in Figure 2, the campaign generated 1,070 distinct content pieces that collectively achieved 57.3 million total plays and 2.6 million impressions. The content spurred remarkable audience participation, evidenced by 2.5 million likes, 75,500 shares, and 85,000 comments, indicating not just passive viewership but active engagement and content dissemination.



Gambar 4. Statistik unggahan konten di Kanal Tiktok

Figure 2: TikTok Keyword Search for "Gemoy" (Nov 24-Dec 4, 2023)*

Source: netray.id

Communication Style Transformation: From Military Figure to 'Gemoy' Persona

The visual documentation of Prabowo's campaign activities revealed a dramatic transformation in communication style. Figure 3 captures Prabowo's "'Gemoy'" dance that became a viral phenomenon, representing a strategic departure from his established public persona as a stern military figure. This deliberate use of non-verbal communication, characterized by simple, jovial movements, served as a strategic tool to cultivate a more relatable and approachable image specifically designed for younger demographics.



Figure 3: Prabowo's "Gemoy" Dance During Campaign Events
Source: [Tempo.co](https://www.tempo.co)

Public Interest and Search Trend Analysis

Google Trends data demonstrated escalating public interest in the "Gemoy" phenomenon throughout the campaign period. As illustrated in Figure 4, search interest for "Gemoy" showed a dramatic increase beginning in mid-November, rising steeply to its peak value of 100 during the official campaign period in late November/early December. This pattern strongly correlates with key phases of the political timeline and indicates successful brand penetration into public consciousness.

Tren Pencarian Kata Kunci "Gemoy" di Situs Pencarian Google

Periode 6 Agustus 2023 - 24 Desember 2023

Topik yang dikaitkan dengan tren pencarian "Gemoy" termasuk nama Prabowo dan Gibran.

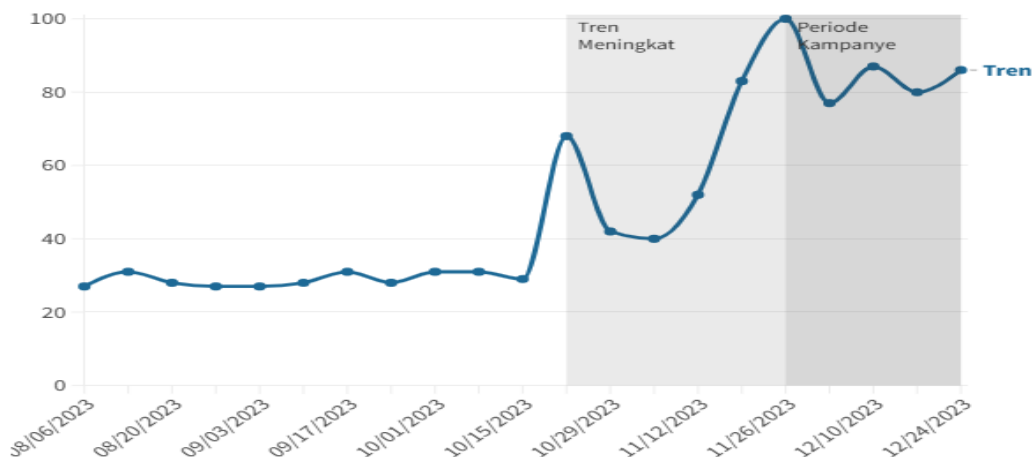


Figure 4: Google Search Trend for the Keyword "Gemoy"

Source: [Katadata.co.id](https://katadata.co.id)

Youth Voter Perception and Preference Shifts

Pre-election survey data from Indonesia Political Opinion revealed significant candidate preferences among youth voters. As shown in Figure 5, Prabowo Subianto garnered the highest preference among surveyed youth, securing 31.4% support compared to Ganjar Pranowo's 29.7% and Anies Baswedan's 21.7%. This data suggests the campaign messaging and "Gemoy" branding effectively positioned Prabowo as a leading choice for young voters during the critical campaign period.

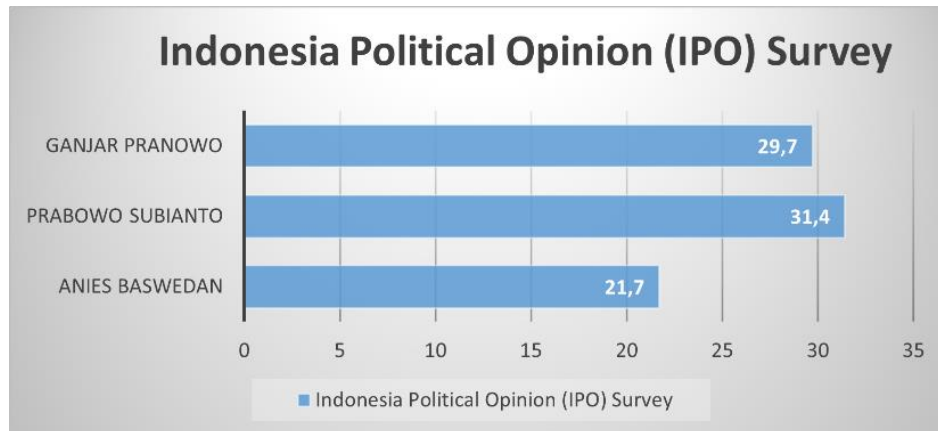
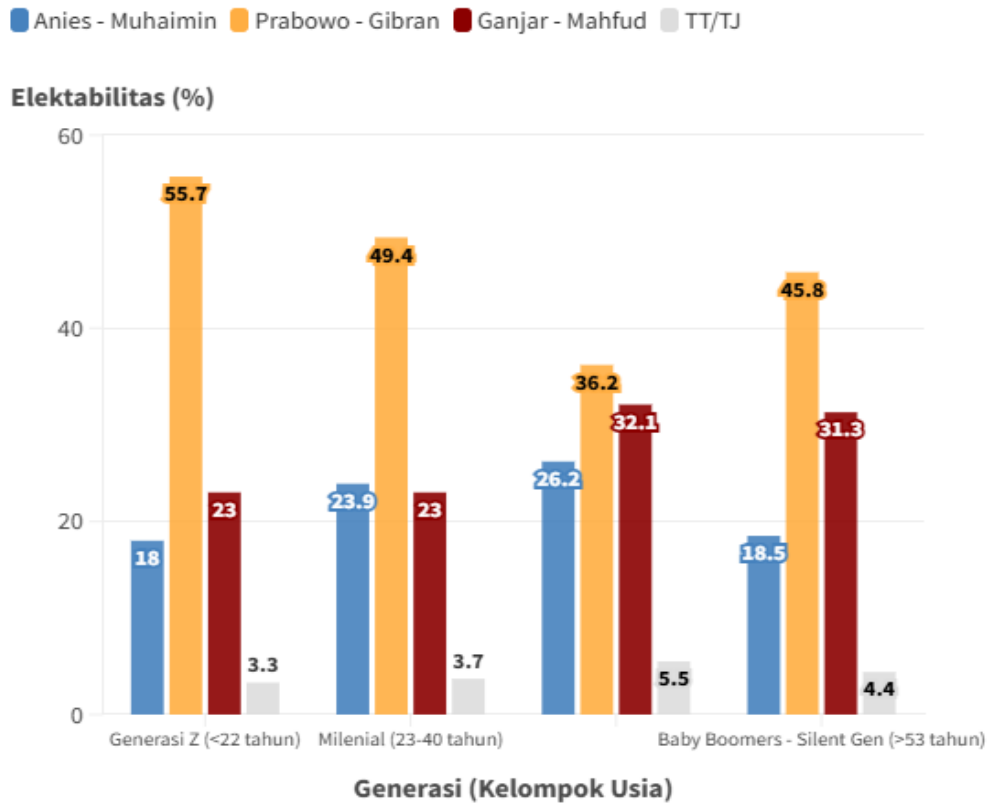


Figure 5: Prabowo Subianto Leads Among Young Voters in IPO Survey

Source: CNN Indonesia

Generational Voting Patterns

Poltracking Indonesia's survey data revealed distinct generational voting patterns that highlighted the success of Prabowo's youth-oriented strategy. As illustrated in Figure 6, the Prabowo-Gibran ticket demonstrated remarkable strength among younger demographics, securing 55.7% support from Generation Z (<22 years) and 49.4% from Millennials (23-40 years). In contrast, the Ganjar-Mahfud ticket showed a positive correlation with age, while the Anies-Muhaimin pair garnered consistent support across generations.



Sumber: Poltracking Indonesia • Periode Survey 29 November - 5 Desember 2023

Dkatadata.co.id

Figure 6: Electability of Presidential Candidates by Age Category
 Source: [Katadata.co.id](https://katadata.co.id)

Research Informant Profiles

Data collection involved seven key informants selected through purposive sampling. Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of research participants, showing a balanced representation of campaign insiders, political analysts, and journalists, all possessing substantial expertise in their respective fields.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Research Informants

Category	Number	Position/Role	Experience
Campaign Team	3	National Campaign Team Members	15-25 years
Political Analysts	2	Election Specialists	10-20 years
Journalists	2	National Media Representatives	12-18 years

Integrated TikTok Performance Metrics

Detailed analysis of TikTok platform performance revealed comprehensive engagement with the "Gemoy" narrative. During the intensive observation period, the 1,070 content pieces achieved remarkable metrics: 57.3 million views, 2.6 million impressions, and 2.66 million direct engagements comprising 2.5 million likes, 85,000 comments, and 75,500 shares. The high share-to-like ratio (approximately 3%) indicates content was not only positively received but actively disseminated, contributing significantly to organic proliferation.

Final Electoral Outcome

The 2024 presidential election concluded with decisive results, as shown in Table 3. The Prabowo-Gibran ticket secured an absolute majority of 96,214,691 votes (58.00%), representing a substantial margin of victory over competitors and confirming the successful translation of campaign strategy into electoral success.

Table 3: Official Results of 2024 Presidential Election

Candidate Pair	Total Votes	Percentage
Prabowo-Gibran	96,214,691	58.00%
Anies-Muhaimin	40,971,906	24.95%
Ganjar-Mahfud	27,040,878	16.45%

Source: General Elections Commission (KPU), 2024

The results comprehensively demonstrate the effectiveness of Prabowo's communication transformation, showing strong correlation between the "*Gemoy*" strategy, youth engagement metrics, and ultimate electoral victory. The data reveals how strategic rebranding, when executed through appropriate digital channels and communication styles, can successfully reshape public perception and influence voting behavior, particularly among crucial youth demographics.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a profound transformation in Prabowo Subianto's political communication strategy during Indonesia's 2024 presidential election, building upon yet significantly diverging from his previous campaign approaches documented in earlier literature. While Riswandi (2017) had characterized Prabowo's 2014 communication style as dramatic and emotionally charged, employing fiery rhetoric to invoke nationalist sentiments, and Ritonga and Adela (2020) identified his 2019 approach as predominantly populist and anti-elitist with emphasis on people's sovereignty, the 2024 campaign demonstrated a remarkable evolution toward what Norton (1978) would classify as animated, expressive, relaxed, and impression-leaving styles. This transformation represents not merely a tactical adjustment but a fundamental reorientation of political communication strategy in response to Indonesia's changing electoral landscape, particularly the demographic dominance of digital-native voters. The shift from what Nimmo (2008) would characterize as predominantly verbal rhetoric to a more performative, visually driven communication approach reflects a strategic adaptation to what Gerbaudo (2018) identifies as the "platformization" of political communication, where social media algorithms and affordances fundamentally reshape how political messages are crafted and disseminated.

The exceptional effectiveness of these communication styles in engaging youth voters, as evidenced by the 57.3 million TikTok views and 2.66 million engagements, aligns with and significantly expands upon Saud et al.'s (2020) findings on the political socialization of Indonesian youth through social media. Where previous research identified social media as creating new opportunities for political engagement, this study demonstrates how specific communication styles—particularly Norton's (1978) animated, expressive, and impression-leaving styles—can leverage these platforms to create deep emotional connectivity and political identification. The viral spread of "*Gemoy*" content exemplifies what Zhang and Tang (2024) identify as the power of social media in shaping political sentiment, but also reveals how cultural vernacular and local linguistic innovations can become powerful tools for political branding. This digital strategy successfully mediated the relationship between candidate and voters in ways that traditional

campaign methods could not achieve, particularly among the 56.45% of voters comprising millennials and Generation Z (KPU, 2024), creating what Bennett and Pfetsch (2018) might describe as a "hybrid media system" where organic social media trends and structured campaign messaging become increasingly intertwined.

These empirical findings make significant contributions to addressing the theoretical and methodological gaps identified in existing literature. First, they provide a substantive response to Moffitt's (2016) call for greater attention to the intersection of populist communication and digital affect in non-Western contexts by demonstrating how Prabowo's campaign merged emotional appeal with platform-specific engagement strategies, creating what might be termed "algorithmic populism"—a form of political communication optimized for social media virality that deserves further scholarly investigation. Second, the study addresses Wodak's (2017) concern about the neglect of non-verbal communication in political analysis by documenting how dancing, facial expressions, and informal interactions became powerful tools for image transformation, challenging the traditional Western-centric focus on verbal rhetoric and debate performance in political communication scholarship. Third, it answers Bennett and Pfetsch's (2018) call for more integrated approaches to studying political communication by developing a methodological framework that triangulates data from campaign insiders, digital analytics, and voter surveys, thereby providing a more holistic understanding of what Cangara (2023) identifies as the "complex ecosystem" of contemporary political communication where message production, dissemination, and reception occur through interconnected but distinct pathways.

The application of Norton's theory to presidential-level political rebranding represents a significant advancement beyond previous applications in Indonesian contexts, such as Nurjana's (2023) study of local leaders' communication styles. This extension demonstrates the scalability and adaptability of communication style theory from local to national political arenas, revealing how performative political communication operates across different levels of governance. The findings provide crucial insights into what Sihabudin et al. (2023) identify as the complex process of political image transformation in post-authoritarian democracies, where historical political identities rooted in authoritarian regimes must be reconciled with contemporary democratic demands for transparency and accountability. The research demonstrates how emotional resonance, which Banerjee (2024) argues often outweighs rational programmatic assessments in voter decision-making, can be strategically deployed through digital platforms to reshape voter perceptions, particularly among younger demographics who are more susceptible to visual and emotional appeals. This phenomenon represents what might be termed "digital emotional governance," where affective responses are systematically cultivated through algorithmic amplification and platform-specific engagement strategies.

Within this transformed media ecology, the media's role in amplifying this transformation offers a compelling case study that both supports and complicates Nimmo's (2008) theory of mediated political communication. While traditional media maintained nominal journalistic neutrality, their coverage patterns, particularly the emphasis on viral moments and emotional content, effectively amplified Prabowo's rebranding in ways that reflect what Gbadamosi (2024) identifies as the necessity for political entities to craft coherent and relatable public personas. The generally neutral to positive framing of Prabowo's new communication style, despite his controversial past, illustrates how media outlets navigate competing pressures: maintaining professional objectivity while responding to audience preferences for engaging content. This dynamic, which Gallagher et al. (2024) argue is increasingly shaped by emotional appeal in digital

content, reveals how traditional media institutions are adapting to what Gerbaudo calls the "platformization" of the public sphere, where social media metrics and viral potential increasingly influence editorial decisions and framing strategies across all media platforms.

However, these strategic successes raise profound questions about the sustainability and ethical implications of persona-based political campaigns in democratic systems. As Hutapea (2020) warns, while image politics can be electorally practical, democratic governance ultimately requires substantive leadership and policy implementation capacity that may be disconnected from campaign personas. The demonstrated effectiveness of emotional appeals documented in this study, particularly through what Gautama (2020) identifies as social media marketing strategies derived from commercial advertising, highlights fundamental tensions between political persuasion and substantive democratic discourse. This study contributes to understanding how technological changes in election administration, noted by Yandra et al. (2023), interact with political communication strategies in complex ways. The digital ecosystem described by Sayogo et al. (2021) not only enables more efficient electoral processes but also creates new opportunities for affective political engagement that transcend traditional campaign methods, potentially altering the very nature of voter-politician relationships in democratic systems. These developments suggest an urgent need for regulatory frameworks that address what might be called the "emotional governance gap"—the disconnect between electoral success achieved through emotional appeals and governance capabilities required for effective leadership.

Notwithstanding these contributions, the limitations of this study reveal several critical avenues for future scholarly inquiry. The Jakarta-centric nature of the sample, though providing valuable depth through access to key campaign strategists and political elites, necessarily limits our understanding of how Prabowo's communication strategy resonated across Indonesia's diverse geographical and socio-cultural landscape. As Hidayaturrahman et al. (2022) aptly demonstrate, regional political dynamics often involve complex interplays between monetary politics, local patronage networks, and genuine political engagement that may significantly moderate the effectiveness of digital communication strategies. Future research should employ stratified sampling across multiple regions, particularly Eastern Indonesia and areas with distinct political cultures, to examine how region-specific factors mediate the reception and effectiveness of emotionalized political communication. Such research could employ what Creswell (2014) describes as sequential mixed methods, combining quantitative surveys across diverse regions with qualitative focus groups to capture the nuanced ways local political contexts shape responses to national campaigning strategies.

Furthermore, while this study offers rich insights into a single candidate's strategic transformation, it highlights the need for comparative analysis that examines multiple candidates within the same electoral context. Building on Riswandi's (2017) comparative methodology, future research could employ what Yin (2018) terms a "multiple case study design" to analyze how different candidates employed distinct communication styles and digital strategies, and with what effects. Such comparative work could significantly advance our understanding of how communication style interacts with other factors, such as political ideology, previous public image, and party machinery, in determining electoral success. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of political communication strategies across electoral cycles would help determine whether the trends identified here represent temporary tactical adjustments or more permanent transformations in Indonesian political communication.

This research ultimately suggests that while digital platforms and emotional appeals can indeed transform electoral outcomes, their long-term impact on Indonesian democracy will depend on how these tools are integrated with, rather than substituted for, substantive political deliberation and policy implementation. The challenge for both scholars and practitioners lies in developing frameworks that harness the engagement potential of digital affective politics while safeguarding the substantive foundations of democratic governance.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Prabowo Subianto's strategic rebranding from an authoritarian military figure to a '*Gemoy*' persona during Indonesia's 2024 presidential election constituted a sophisticated form of digital populism and affective political communication. The research identified three dominant communication styles from Norton's framework—animated, expressive, relaxed, and impression-leaving—that systematically facilitated this transformation. The campaign's digital strategy, particularly through viral TikTok content, generated exceptional engagement with over 57 million views and 2.6 million reactions, significantly reshaping voter perception among the youth demographic that comprised 56.45% of the electorate. Pre-election surveys and final voting results confirmed the effectiveness of this approach, with Prabowo leading among young voters and ultimately winning the election with 58% of the vote, demonstrating the tangible impact of strategic communication rebranding on electoral outcomes.

Theoretically, this study makes several significant contributions to political communication literature. First, it successfully extends Norton's communication style theory beyond its traditional interpersonal contexts to analyze large-scale political rebranding at the presidential level, demonstrating its scalability and relevance in digital-era politics. Second, it develops the concept of 'digital affective strategy' as a distinct form of political communication that merges emotional appeal with platform-specific engagement tactics. Third, it provides empirical evidence from a non-Western context that addresses critical gaps in understanding the intersection between populist communication, digital affect, and emotional branding in contemporary democracies.

From a practical perspective, the findings offer valuable insights for various stakeholders in the political communication ecosystem. For political actors, the study demonstrates the necessity of developing integrated communication strategies that combine substantive policy messaging with culturally relevant affective appeals, while maintaining ethical standards and authenticity. Educational institutions should incorporate digital literacy and ethical considerations of emerging campaign technologies into political communication curricula to prepare future practitioners for the evolving landscape of digital politics. Regulatory bodies face the urgent task of developing guidelines for digital campaigning that ensure transparency and accountability while

preserving innovation in political communication. Media organizations, meanwhile, require enhanced journalistic training that includes coverage of affective political strategies to maintain balanced reporting while helping audiences critically evaluate emotional appeals in political messaging.

Several promising avenues for future research emerge from this study. Longitudinal research should examine whether such rebranded political personas can be sustained in governance contexts and how they evolve post-election, particularly investigating the potential 'emotional governance gap' between campaign personas and governing capabilities. Comparative studies analyzing similar phenomena in other Southeast Asian democracies could identify regional patterns of digital populism and affective politics. Further investigation into the ethical implications of emotion-driven political campaigning is crucial for understanding its long-term impact on democratic deliberation and political accountability. Additionally, more quantitative studies using experimental designs are needed to measure the causal relationships between specific communication tactics and voter behavior, particularly across different demographic and regional contexts.

These research directions and practical recommendations aim to foster a political communication environment that leverages digital innovation while maintaining substantive democratic discourse and ethical standards. As Indonesia continues its democratic evolution, the challenge for both scholars and practitioners lies in developing frameworks that harness the engagement potential of digital affective politics while safeguarding the substantive foundations of democratic governance. The case of Prabowo Subianto's transformation ultimately illustrates both the transformative power of strategic political communication in the digital age and the enduring questions it raises about the relationship between emotional resonance, political representation, and democratic quality in increasingly mediated political environments.

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