Identity Politics and Digital Branding of Political Figures on Social Media: a Case Study of President Prabowo Subianto on Tiktok in the 2024 Presidential Election

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Article Info	Abstract
	The 2024 Indonesian presidential election marked a significant shift in digital political communication strategies, with TikTok emerging as a central platform for shaping political identity. This study analyzes the political rebranding of Prabowo Subianto through digital public participation on TikTok constructed beyond the control of official accounts or institutional campaign narratives. Employing a descriptive-qualitative approach and constructivist paradigm, this research examines more than 150 TikTok videos uploaded between October 2023 and February 2024. Findings reveal that Prabowo's political identity was constructed collectively through visual symbols, emotional narratives, and popular cultural expressions. Three dominant dimensions emerged: nationalism, religiosity, and emotional populism represented through viral "Prabowo Gemoy" content. TikTok operates not merely as a communication channel, but as a participatory and affective space for political meaning-making. This study asserts that effective political communication in the digital era relies not on formal narratives, but on emotional resonance and the ability to engage within a collaborative, visually driven culture.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The 2024 Indonesian presidential election marks a significant transformation in national political communication practices, particularly through the use of social media as a primary platform for shaping political imagery and perceptions. Over the past two decades, developments in digital technology have transformed the way people access, produce, and distribute political information. Social media no longer functions as a complementary campaign tool but has become a strategic arena influencing public perception, shaping political affection, and reconstructing symbolic realities regarding political figures and issues. Among various digital platforms, TikTok has emerged as a powerful medium in constructing visual-based political imagery and emotional resonance, particularly among young voters.

As an audio-visual algorithm-based platform, TikTok no longer operates as a one-way communication channel but has evolved into a participatory space for the production and reproduction of political narratives. This platform's characteristics allow users to remix, duplicate, and reinterpret content through memes, video clips, popular music, and stitching practices. In this context, political communication no longer exists solely in the form of formal messages but is integrated with creative, spontaneous, and virally driven popular cultural expressions.

This phenomenon becomes relevant when linked to the representation of Prabowo Subianto as a presidential candidate who gained massive exposure on TikTok despite not having an official account on the platform. The high production of content featuring Prabowo not only demonstrates the intensity of digital conversations but also demonstrates a transformation in the representation of political identity. A figure previously associated with a militaristic and formal image has undergone a symbolic reconstruction into a more humorous, empathetic, and public-facing figure through the popular narrative "Prabowo Gemoy." This representation developed organically through the creative participation of digital users, rather than through formal, institutionally controlled communication strategies.

This situation indicates a shift in political rebranding practices, from an elitist and centralized model to a collaborative and participatory image-building process. In this dynamic, the public no longer plays the role of a passive audience but rather as actors contributing to the production of political meaning through visual symbols, emotional expressions, and digital cultural practices. Political identities are thus formed through the interaction between users, visual content, and the algorithmic mechanisms of social media platforms.

Most research on digital political communication still focuses on branding strategies controlled by official candidate accounts or campaign institutions. Studies on the formation of political identities that emerge collectively through digital public participation without the direct control of political actors are still relatively limited. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by examining how political rebranding can be formed in a decentralized manner through affective participation practices on the TikTok platform.

This research employs a constructivist paradigm, which views political reality as a social construction formed through symbolic interactions and collective interpretations. From this perspective, TikTok is understood not simply as a communication medium but as a symbolic space that enables the formation of political identities visually, emotionally, and performatively through digital public participation practices.

Theoretically, this research rests on four main frameworks. First, the theory of identity politics (Fukuyama, 2018), which explains the formation of political affiliation through symbolic narratives and social recognition. Second, the concept of digital political branding (Gainous & Wagner, 2014), which emphasizes a shift in political image strategies toward horizontal interactions based on digital media. Third, the concept of emotional branding (Ahmed & Matthes, 2021), which positions emotions as a crucial element in building psychological closeness between political figures and the public. Fourth, the concept of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), which views the digital public as active actors in shaping political opinion through emotional expression and popular cultural practices.

Based on this background, the research problem formulation is how the process of political rebranding of Prabowo Subianto was formed collectively on TikTok during the 2024 Presidential Election campaign, and how political identity was constructed through visual symbols, affection, and digital public participation. This study aims to analyze the formation of political identity through digital branding practices that develop outside the candidate's official account and explain how symbols of nationalism, religiosity, and emotional populism are mediated through the affective expressions of social media users.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of digital political communication studies by demonstrating that political identity construction on algorithm-based platforms can occur in a decentralized manner through digital public participation. Practically, this research has implications for the development of digital political

communication strategies that position the public as a participatory actor in the process of constructing political meaning on social media.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of political communication in the digital era has experienced significant developments along with the transformation of social media into a primary arena for the formation of political imagery and representation. In the context of the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election, TikTok has emerged as a new political communication space, functioning not only as a channel for information distribution but also as a medium for the symbolic and affective construction of political figures. This development demands a theoretical approach that is no longer limited to conventional political communication but also able to explain the visual, emotional, and participatory dynamics that characterize contemporary social media.

Gainous and Wagner (2014) explain that *digital political branding* works differently from traditional, centralized political branding practices. In the social media ecosystem, political imagery is not entirely produced by campaign institutions, but rather is formed through horizontal interactions between users, visual symbols, and the algorithmic mechanisms of digital platforms. In the context of TikTok, the visual and trend-driven nature of the platform makes aesthetics and affective resonance crucial for the formation of an effective political image.

This perspective aligns with Fukuyama's (2018) theory of identity politics, which views political identity as a social construction based on symbolic recognition and affiliation. Political identity is no longer understood solely as a formal ideological position, but as a representation that is continually negotiated through symbols of nationality, religiosity, and social background that are reinterpreted by the digital public.

Next, the concept of emotional branding. The approach developed by Ahmed and Matthes (2021) emphasizes the role of emotion as a central factor in modern political communication. Emotional expressions such as humor, nostalgia, empathy, and personal closeness have been shown to build stronger psychological bonds than rational persuasion approaches. In a social media environment dominated by ephemeral visual content, the emotional dimension becomes a key mechanism for strengthening the relationship between political figures and digital audiences.

The framework is extended through the concept of *affective audiences* introduced by Papacharissi (2015), who explains that digital audiences play an active role in shaping political opinion through affective expression and popular cultural practices. On platforms like TikTok, users not only consume political messages but also participate in producing, modifying, and disseminating political meaning through creative practices such as remixes, commentaries, memes, and content collaborations. This condition indicates a shift from representational politics to performative politics mediated by visual aesthetics and collective emotional experiences.

Several previous studies have highlighted the use of TikTok in digital political communication. Prabu (2024) demonstrated that user-generated content on TikTok serves as a political communication strategy based on virality and emotional collaboration between users. Febriandy and Revolusi's (2024) research on Gibran Rakabuming's personal branding also emphasized that visual affection is a crucial factor in building a leadership image that resonates with young audiences. However, most of these studies still focus on

official candidate accounts or communication strategies under the direct control of political actors.

Unlike previous research, this study examines how political representation can be formed without direct candidate intervention through digital public participation. The case of Prabowo Subianto, who lacks a personal TikTok account but gained widespread exposure through public content production, demonstrates the collective, symbolic, and affective mechanisms of political identity construction.

Thus, this research's theoretical framework is used to explain the shift in political rebranding practices from a centralized communication model to a decentralized and participatory identity construction process in contemporary social media culture. The integration of theories of identity politics, digital political branding, emotional branding, and affective publics allows for a more comprehensive analysis of how political identities are formed through the interaction between digital publics, visual symbols, and the algorithmic logic of the TikTok platform.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a constructivist paradigm, which views social reality as the result of the construction of meaning through social interaction and symbolic representation practices. In the context of digital political communication, this paradigm is used to understand that political identities are not entirely formed top-down by political institutions or actors, but rather are constructed participatory ally through user interactions in digital public spaces.

In this research, TikTok is positioned as a digital social space that allows users to produce, reproduce, and represent images of political figures through creative practices based on visuals and affect. This platform functions not only as a medium for distributing political information but also as an arena for symbolic interaction where political identities are negotiated and reinterpreted by digital audiences.

The research approach used was qualitative with a descriptive design using a single case study method. This method was chosen to allow for an in-depth analysis of a specific phenomenon: Prabowo Subianto's political rebranding process, which was formed through TikTok content production during the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election campaign. The research's temporal focus covers the period from October 2023 to February 2024, representing the intensive campaign phase through to the post-election period.

The research object is TikTok video content featuring explicit and implicit representations of Prabowo Subianto, including excerpts from public speeches, documentation of social interactions, remixes, parodies, political memes, and posts based on symbolic support. Given the absence of an official Prabowo Subianto account on the TikTok platform, all content is analyzed as digital visual cultural products produced by users, such as volunteers, sympathizers, fanbase accounts, entertainment content creators, and alternative media.

Data collection was conducted through digital observation by searching content using relevant keywords and hashtags, including "Prabowo," "Pilpres 2024," "Capres," #PrabowoGemoy, #PrabowoMenang, and #PrabowoGibran. Each piece of content that met the research criteria was documented based on upload metadata, including publication date, uploader account, number of views, likes, comments, and user interaction. Visual aspects such as the use of music, body gestures, visual symbols, and caption narratives were also recorded as units of analysis.

Data selection was conducted using purposive sampling techniques with the following criteria: (1) featuring Prabowo Subianto as the main subject, (2) containing

symbols of nationalism, religiosity, or populism, and (3) showing affective expressions such as humor, emotional closeness, or social interaction with the community. More than 150 pieces of content were selected because they showed recurring patterns of representation and reached data saturation in the qualitative analysis.

Data analysis was conducted interpretively by combining narrative-visual and semiotic approaches. Narrative analysis was used to identify the construction of political messages in captions, dialogue, and speech excerpts, while semiotic analysis was used to interpret visual symbols such as clothing attributes, dominant colors, body gestures, and cultural elements that represent certain political identities. The affective dimension was analyzed through public responses in the form of comments, remixes, duets, and content distribution patterns that indicate users' emotional engagement with the political figures represented.

Through this approach, this research methodology not only examines political representation at the content level but also traces the sociocultural processes that shape public perception and collective political rebranding practices in the algorithm-based social media ecosystem.

The validity of the interpretation was maintained through repeated reading of the data and a thematic categorization process to ensure the consistency of the representation patterns found in the analysis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of an analysis of TikTok content representing Prabowo Subianto during the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election campaign period (October 2023–February 2024). More than 150 videos were identified and analyzed using a narrative-visual reading to map patterns of political identity representation, affect-based digital branding strategies, and forms of digital public participation in the production of political meaning. The analysis focuses on three main aspects: (1) the construction of political identity through visual symbols, (2) the reproduction of affect as a mechanism for image strengthening, and (3) user participatory practices that shape the dynamics of affective publics.

The analysis is based on a constructivist paradigm that views political identity as a social construction formed through representation, symbolic interaction, and digital cultural practices. The theoretical frameworks used include identity politics (Fukuyama, 2018), digital political branding (Gainous & Wagner, 2014), emotional branding (Ahmed & Matthes, 2021), and affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015). These four frameworks are used in a complementary manner to explain how TikTok not only facilitates the dissemination of political messages but also becomes a space for the production of meaning influenced by visual aesthetics, emotional resonance, and the logic of user participation.

The Construction of Visual Political Identity

Research findings indicate that Prabowo Subianto's political identity on TikTok is constructed through repeated and relatively consistent visual representations. These representational patterns converge on three main dimensions: nationalism, religiosity, and emotional populism. These three dimensions emerge not primarily through the delivery of programs or policy narratives but rather through visual symbols, gestures, music selection, and affective captions that rapidly shape public perception in TikTok's distinctive format.

(1) Nationalism as a symbol of firmness and leadership. The representation of nationalism is seen through the use of state elements such as the Red and White flag, patriotic songs, and scenes of Prabowo in formal contexts associated with the state. The visualization of Prabowo using attributes with military connotations, such as uniforms or

inspection scenes, functions as an identity marker that links the candidate figure with firmness, protection, and the image of leadership. The strengthening of the meaning of nationalism also occurs through captions that emphasize love for the homeland and firm leadership, thus building a symbolic association of Prabowo as a figure protecting the nation in a popular visual package.

(2) Religiosity as emotional affiliation and moral legitimacy. The dimension of religiosity is represented through visuals of black peci (caps), moments of prayer, and interactions with Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) or religious figures. On TikTok, religiosity functions not only as a personal spiritual expression but also as a mechanism for affiliation with Muslim audiences through concise and easily understood moral narratives. Captions such as "God willing, trustworthy" or "devout leader" serve as markers of moral legitimacy while also building an inclusive emotional closeness. This pattern suggests that religious identity is constructed through a combination of visual symbols, calming atmospheres, and simple emotional language.

(3) Emotional populism through the "Prabowo Gemoy" narrative. The most prominent dimension in the TikTok ecosystem is emotional populism articulated through the "Prabowo Gemoy" narrative. At this point, the rebranding is seen as a shift in representation from a rigid, militaristic figure to one who appears humorous, warm, and approachable. Content featuring Prabowo dancing, laughing, or greeting children is produced and disseminated widely, often through remixes, parodies, and adaptations to popular audio trends. It is important to note that this narrative does not rely on the candidate's formal statements, but rather grows from the creativity of the digital public in reproducing symbols and packaging them into entertainment formats. Thus, political identity is formed through collective and affective mechanisms of representation.

The pattern of public engagement with the visual representation can be observed through the engagement data in Table 1 below.
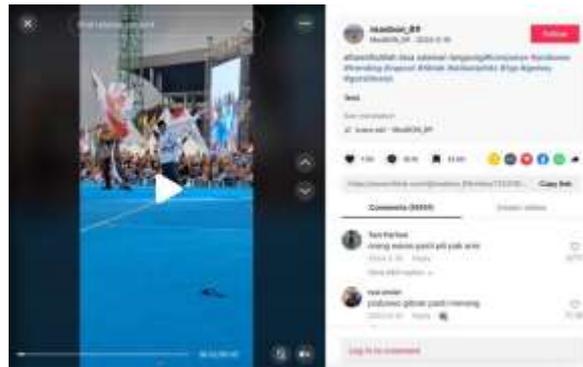

Figure 1. Representation of the "Prabowo Gemoy" Narrative on TikTok
Source: TikTok Documentation, 2024.

This finding aligns with Fukuyama's (2018) argument that contemporary political identities are shaped through the need for recognition, affiliation, and socially acceptable symbols. In the context of TikTok, symbols and affection serve as key tools that accelerate the formation of public perceptions, while also opening up space for the reinterpretation of political identities through participatory popular cultural practices.

Digital Branding Strategy and Affection Reproduction

Research findings indicate that digital political branding practices on TikTok do not occur through conventional campaign communication patterns that emphasize the delivery of formal political programs or messages. Instead, political image formation occurs through the reproduction of affect spread through memes, content remixes, stitching practices, and

spontaneous interactions between users. In this context, the center of political meaning production no longer resides with official candidate accounts or campaign structures, but shifts toward digital public participation as the primary actor in the representation process.

One dominant form of representation is seen in the content themed "Gemoy Ketemu Gemoy," which features Prabowo Subianto's interactions with children. While the content doesn't convey an explicit political message, it achieves high engagement because it emphasizes emotional expressions such as warmth, closeness, and empathy. The use of light music, relaxed body gestures, and visual narratives depicting interpersonal relationships are key elements that enhance the content's appeal. In this context, political resonance is built not through rational argumentation, but rather through emotional experiences easily identified by digital audiences.

These findings demonstrate that affect serves as a key mechanism in the digital political branding process. As Ahmed and Matthes (2021) argue, emotional branding works when a political figure is not only cognitively understood but also emotionally felt by the public. Prabowo's representation on TikTok demonstrates a transformation from an authoritative figure to a more relatable and humanistic one, enabling the formation of symbolic closeness between the political figure and the platform's users.

The representation of this emotional closeness can be observed visually in Figure 2, which shows Prabowo Subianto's interaction with the public in the narrative "Gemoy Meets Gemoy".

Source: TikTok Documentation, 2024.

This situation aligns with Gainous and Wagner's (2014) argument, which asserts that the power of political communication on social media no longer depends on institutional control of messages, but on the ability of political representation to build emotional resonance within digital communities. Thus, political branding on TikTok is collaborative, with the public acting as agents of the ongoing reproduction of political images.

Affective Public Participation and the Production of Political Meaning

TikTok's primary characteristic as an algorithm-based platform enables public engagement through symbolic participation practices that are emotional and creative. This participation is not realized through formal political discourse, but rather through visual expression, humor, and popular cultural practices that strengthen emotional connections between users. This phenomenon reflects the concept of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), namely digital communities that shape political opinions through collective affective expression.

Narratives like "Gemoy tapi Tegas" (Gemoy but Firm) demonstrate how political identities can be formed through public improvisation without formal communication planning. Hashtags and content formats develop organically through user interactions, then undergo repeated reproduction, reinforcing specific symbolic associations with political

figures. In this process, the public not only distributes messages but also helps construct and reinterpret the candidate's political identity.

The content titled "Generals Enter FYP Again" demonstrates how TikTok's algorithmic logic plays a role in expanding exposure to political representation. These videos don't emphasize policy messages, but instead present visual experiences that emphasize social proximity and digital popularity. Political identities are thus formed through collective experiences produced horizontally by the platform's users.

This process demonstrates that digital political communication on TikTok is not merely about distributing information but also about the participatory production of political meaning. Users act as co-creators, actively constructing political imagery through remixes, commentary, and visual reproduction. This mechanism demonstrates a shift in political communication from a representational model to an affect-based performative practice.

The pattern of participation and level of public involvement in various visual representations can then be observed through TikTok content engagement data summarized in Table 1 below.

No	Content Title / Short Description	Upload Date	Engagement (Like/Comment/ Share)	Content Format	Dominant Visual Theme
1	"Cheeky but Firm," Prabowo Says Goodbye to Journalists After Debate	08-01-2024	2.8 million /45,000 / 28.300	Musealization + montage	Emotion & populism
2	Speech clip with slow-motion effect + struggle song	02-12-2023	950.000 / 16.000 / 48.000	Dramatic in between	Nationalism & militarism
3	Prabowo wore a sarong and a peci when he attended the Islamic boarding school	14-01-2024	730.000 / 13.500 / 31.000	Narrative vlog	Religiosity & simplicity
4	Funny interaction clip with market traders	25-01-2024	1 million / 22,000 / 53,000	Light sketch	Populism & people's closeness
5	"General Gemoy Enters FYP" duet remix from fan content	05-02-2024	1.4 million / 29,000 / 74.000	Remix duet	Affective audiences & UGC parties

Table 1. Engagement Statistics for Prabowo Subianto-Themed TikTok Content During the 2024 Presidential Election Campaign
Source: Documentary observation, TikTok Indonesia, October 2023 – February 2024

Public engagement data shows a consistent pattern, with content featuring humor, emotional connection, and social interaction achieving higher engagement rates than formal content. These findings indicate that the success of Prabowo Subianto's political rebranding aligns with TikTok's visual cultural logic, which emphasizes participation, affection, and symbolic reproduction by digital communities.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research shows that TikTok has developed into a cultural space that plays a significant role in the process of political identity formation in the digital communication era. An analysis of Prabowo Subianto's representation during the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election campaign shows that the construction of political imagery is not entirely controlled by formal institutions or campaign teams, but is formed through the participatory practices of digital communities that actively produce and reproduce political content. The transformation of Prabowo's representation from a militaristic and formal figure to a populist, empathetic, and humorous figure, as represented in the narrative "Prabowo Gemoy," demonstrates that political rebranding occurs through the interaction between digital publics, the platform's algorithmic logic, and collectively circulating visual symbols.

The findings of this study confirm that identity politics in the social media ecosystem is performative, affective, and horizontal. The formation of political perceptions no longer relies solely on the delivery of rational programs or discourse, but rather on the ability of visual and emotional representations to build symbolic closeness with the public. The integration of the concepts of digital political branding, emotional branding, and affective publics demonstrates that the success of digital political communication is determined by affective resonance, which allows political figures to become part of popular cultural practices that live within the social media space.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of digital political communication studies by demonstrating that the construction of political identity on algorithm-based platforms can occur in a decentralized manner through digital public participation. Political identity, in this context, is not produced linearly by political actors but is negotiated collectively through practices of visual representation and social interaction in digital spaces.

Practically, the findings of this study indicate that political communication strategies in the social media era need to adapt to the characteristics of digital communication, which emphasize affection, spontaneity, and public involvement as co-creators of political meaning. Platforms like TikTok demand a communication approach that focuses not only on delivering formal messages but also on creating symbolic experiences that enable active public participation.

This research also opens up opportunities for further research into the role of affect, visualization, and algorithmic mechanisms of social media in shaping political preferences, particularly among young voters. Future studies could develop a comparative approach across digital platforms and examine the dynamics of political meaning production in the context of algorithmic intelligence-based political communication.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that political communication on algorithm-based platforms like TikTok is shifting from a candidate-centric communication model to a participatory and affective practice of producing political meaning. Political identities are no longer produced linearly by political actors, but are instead formed through symbolic interactions between digital audiences, visual representations, and algorithmic distribution mechanisms.

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