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# Instagram and Political Power: How Social Media Enhances the Self-Image of Political Actors

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*Abstrak*

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis penggunaan Instagram oleh politisi untuk menciptakan citra positif dalam mempengaruhi pemilih. Artikel ini akan menganalisis secara komperhensif penggunaan Instagram oleh calon gubernur dan wakil gubernur Sumatera Barat dalam kontestasi Pemilihan Kepala Daerah (Pilkada) 2024 menggunakan analisis konten kualitatif menggunakan kerangka Pierre Bourdieu: habitus, modal, field. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa Instagram telah menjadi arena politik strategis bagi para politisi, dimana kekuasaan simbolik diperjuangkan melalui unggahan visual, gambar, video pendek, dan hastag. Pasangan Mahyeldi─Vasco secara konsisten memanfaatkan modal simbolik, budaya, dan sosial untuk memperkuat branding mereka dalam berbagai posting, terutama melalui hashtag #Gerakcepatuntuksumbar. Sebaliknya, akibat ketidakkonsistenan dalam memposting informasi dan penggunaan hashtag, pasangan Epyardi─Ekos belum optimal memanfaatkan Instagram sebagai alat komunikasi politik. Strategi komunikasi politik melalui Instagram ini menjadi salah satu keunggulan pasangan Mahyeldi─Vasco dalam membentuk opini publik di Instagram. Studi ini menyoroti pentingnya aktor politik mengelola narasi, menjaga konsistensi posting, dan berkolaborasi dalam memanfaatkan modal untuk membangun dan memperkuat citra positif. Temuan ini memberikan kontribusi teoritis dan praktis dalam memahami dinamika politik di media digital serta memperluas pengetahuan tentang strategi komunikasi politik kontemporer dalam konteks pemilihan berbasis media sosial.

*This article explores and analyzes politicians' use of Instagram to create a positive image and influence voters. This study will comprehensively examine the use of Instagram by the candidates for governor and deputy governor of West Sumatra in the 2024 regional head elections (Pilkada) using a qualitative content analysis approach based on Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework: habitus, capital, and field. The research found that Instagram has become a strategic political arena where symbolic power is contested through visual posts, images, short videos, and hashtags. The Mahyeldi─Vasco pair consistently leveraged symbolic, cultural, and social capital to strengthen their branding in various posts, particularly through the hashtag #Gerakcepatuntuksumbar. Conversely, due to inconsistencies in posting information and hashtag usage, the Epyardi-Ekos pair has not optimally utilized Instagram as a political communication tool. This political communication strategy via Instagram has become one of the strengths of the Mahyeldi-Vasco pair in shaping public opinion on Instagram. This study highlights the importance of political actors managing narratives, maintaining post consistency, and collaborating on capital to build and strengthen a positive image. These findings contribute theoretically and practically to understanding political dynamics in digital media and expanding knowledge about contemporary political communication strategies in the context of social media-based electoral contests, particularly on Instagram*

## INTRODUCTION

Social media has fundamentally changed the landscape of political communication in Indonesia, especially in local politics (Johansson, 2016, p. 14). Based on We Are Social data (2024), more than 139 million people actively use social media, with a percentage of around 49.9 percent of the total population in Indonesia (We are Social, 2024). This state creates social media such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube as crucial arenas in the battle of narratives and ideas among political actors (Batoebara & Suyani, 2024; Kulau, 2024; Pratama et al., 2024; Riedl et al., 2023). Politicians use these social media platforms to create a positive image to gain support from their voting constituents (Suseno & Utami, 2022, p. 335).

Several previous studies have discussed the relationship between politics and social media in Indonesia's digital world. Through meta−analysis, Kurniawan et al. (2024) revealed that social media increases political participation. However, the impact is influenced by the characteristics of social media and the intensity of its use(Kurniawan et al., 2024). Matthes (2022) revealed that social media can mobilize the younger generation but is also prone to distracting them from substantial political issues (Matthes, 2022). Nadzir (2022) added that the phenomenon of digital populism and performative politics is increasingly dominant, so the substance of policy is displaced by imaging and fame (Nadzir, 2022). In the context of the 2024 elections, Prayudi and Probosari (2025) found that social media is the primary campaign tool that shapes public opinion (Prayudi et al., 2025). Satria et al. (2023) emphasized that social media has an important role in increasing the political literacy of novice voters due to their high intensity in using social media (Satria M et al., 2023). Suprihatin et al. (2024) explored that social media algorithms heavily influence political news preferences among millennials and Gen Z, creating information bias and echo chamber effects (Suprihatin et al., 2024). Suseno and Utami's study (2022) showed the success of jokowi's "Sneakers Politics" personal image strategy in attracting youth sympathy through social media (Suseno & Utami, 2022).

Overall, these studies demonstrate that social media is not only an instrument for political communication but also a space for challenging ideas, identities, and controls that shape the political awareness and participation of Indonesia's digital society. However, most of the studies discuss using various political communication strategies to strengthen the image of political actors in electoral contestation. Meanwhile, not many studies discuss comprehensively how a political actor extracts and utilizes the capital owned to gain empathy from the voting public, let alone in a more specific and comprehensive study in Bourdieu's framework with the concepts of Habitus, Capital, and Arena.

This article offers a multi−disciplinary study that collaborates Bourdieu's theoretical framework with the study of social media as a medium of political communication. The researcher does not only see the high engagement of a politician's social media account as an indicator of a politician's success, but this study explores the use of social media, which can be a very significant force for a politician to build a positive image through his social media. This approach

provides a new understanding of the dynamics of politics in Indonesia's digital space, especially in the study of social media in Bourdieu's theoretical framework. This article analyzes the social media politicians use as a medium of political communication. Politicians use social media to attract the voting public's attention and interest them in political propaganda delivered through their social media accounts. This study contributes to the development of Bourdieu's theory of analyzing social media as a medium of political communication. It enriches the scholarship of political communication studied from various scientific perspectives.

## METHOD

This qualitative study uses a content analysis approach to explore how social media, particularly Instagram, is used as an arena for political contestation within Pierre Bourdieu's social theory framework. This research focuses on the West Sumatra Province 2024 regional head election campaign, which took place during the official campaign period from September 25 to November 23, 2024. Bourdieu's theories of habitus, field, and various forms of capital (social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital) are used as analytical lenses to understand the candidates' digital political communication practices. The data in this study were collected from four Instagram accounts belonging to candidates for governor and deputy governor, namely Mahyeldi (@mahyeldisp), Vasco Ruseimy (@vasco_ruseimy), Epyardi Asda (@captainasda), and Ekos Albar (@ekosalbar). The upload data collected included visual content (photos and videos), narrative text, hashtag usage, and frequency and interaction patterns during the campaign period.

All data was then classified based on categorization derived from Bourdieu's framework, specifically related to how each candidate represented their capital in the digital space or Instagram field. The analysis process was carried out in several stages. First, data will be grouped based on the type of capital that appears in the upload. Second, identification of communication strategies used, such as the use of political hashtags, delivery of vision and mission, and self−image narratives. Third, interpretation of the meaning of visuals and texts in a symbolic framework. To ensure the validity of the data, researchers used source triangulation techniques by comparing social media posts with news from relevant online media. With this approach, this research is expected to provide a comprehensive and holistic picture of how local political actors utilize Instagram as a medium for self−image building, idea dissemination, and political communication strategies in the digital era.

## RESULT

### Bourdiue's Framework

Pierre Bourdieu is a contemporary French sociologist and philosopher who intensely discusses social structure, power, culture, and even education. His thinking is considered different from that of other thinkers, so it is interesting to study it in more depth. Some of Bourdieu's key concepts include Habitus, Capital, Arena, and Distinction (Yuliantoro, 2016). Habitus is a concept that describes the process of habitual value patterns of behavior resulting from

interactions between individuals and society that will affect one's social actions. Habitus results from a person's habituation and experience, mutual influence between individuals and social structures, is long－lasting, and can be passed down from generation to generation so that it affects a person's actions, both consciously and unconsciously (Yuliantoro, 2016, p. 42), Nanang (2012) adds that habitus can be understood through five forms, namely conditioning, skill results, interpretive frameworks, the existence of values and norms, and system structures that are in the process of restructuring (Martono, 2012, p. xliv). Meanwhile, capital is understood as a resource that is divided into four forms, namely economic in the form of financial support, cultural in the form of individual skills that are embodied, objectified, institutionalized, social capital in the form of potential resources related to mutually supportive social networks, and symbolic capital in the form of capital obtained based on recognition and authority obtained through community recognition (Martono, 2012, p. 33). Furthermore, the arena is interpreted as a competitive space that contains various interactions and events (Martono, 2012, p. 33).

This theoretical framework will comprehensively examine how politicians use social media as their political communication media to build a positive image as political actors and create empathy for voters who will choose them in the 2024 Pilkada electoral contest.

## Social Media and Politics

Social media has a central role in contemporary political dynamics, with effects that vary depending on a country's socio－cultural and political conditions. Chan and Jing Jing Yi (2023) revealed that the different effects of social media use depend on the level of affective polarization. In countries with low polarization, social media significantly affects people's political perceptions of the quality of democracy without any influence on democratic satisfaction. Furthermore, vice versa for countries with high polarization, social media can increase political participation but reduce satisfaction with the quality of democracy (Chan & Yi, 2024). In an individual context, Saefuddin Ahmad et al. (2024) showed that high political interest and news usage on social media correlated with increased online political participation. Social media also amplifies the participatory gap between individuals interested and disinterested in politics, especially among religious minorities who are more digitally mobilized than the majority (Ahmed & Gil－Lopez, 2024). In Indonesia, Ade Chandra et al. (2023) noted the challenges political parties face in attracting the younger generation of active social media users ahead of the 2024 elections. Social media during the COVID－19 pandemic deepened social interactions and access to political information for millennials, which impacted their views on politics and religion (Candra et al., 2023). Cobis and Cangara (2023) added that in autocratic countries, social media is an accountability tool that provides access to alternative information and facilitates public protests. Therefore, many authoritarian regimes respond by tightening censorship, banning specific platforms, or spreading disinformation (Cobis & Cangara, 2023). Meanwhile,

Noorikhsan et al. (2023) highlighted the need for political actors to adopt a new approach to digital political communication.

Social media, as part of cyber democracy, enables mutual interaction and information production by the public, but it also poses challenges in image management and the consistency of political messages. Social media plays a dual role in strengthening political participation while posing new challenges to democracy and political representation (Noorikhsan et al., 2023). Overall, social media has been a powerful tool in strengthening digital populism, but it also brings challenges related to communication ethics and the quality of information disseminated. These studies provide important insights into how social media facilitates political discourse and exacerbates political polarization by magnifying extreme voices.

## Social Media and Political Power in Bourdieu's Framework in the 2024 Elections.

Social media has become one of the most vital instruments in the contemporary political communication landscape. In the digital era, politicians compete in conventional arenas such as campaign stages or mainstream media and actively build and maintain their political image in virtual spaces such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter (now X). Social media is not only used as a one－way information channel but also as an interactive communication medium that allows politicians to form emotional, symbolic, and ideological relationships with their voters. In the context of the West Sumatra Provincial Election in 2024, Instagram is one of the platforms most intensely used by candidates to convey political messages, document campaign activities, and shape and manage their self－image in the eyes of the public, especially the younger generation who dominate the digital voter demographic.

The use of Instagram as a campaign medium can be observed through content analysis on four official accounts belonging to pairs of candidates for governor and deputy governor of West Sumatra, namely Mahyeldi (@mahyeldisp), Vasco Ruseimy (@vasco_ruseimy), Epyardi Asda (@captainasda), and Ekos Albar (@ekosalbar). These four accounts reflect different political communication styles and show varying levels of involvement in social media utilization. Mahyeldi's @mahyeldisp Instagram account has been active since 2015. Until the 2024 elections, this account had uploaded 3,397 content, consisting of photos and videos. Each upload is usually accompanied by a descriptive narrative in the form of a caption explaining the activity's context, the moral message or Islamic value raised, and a political invitation aimed persuasively at its followers. Mahyeldi's characteristic in using Instagram is a polite, religious approach and being close to the community. This aligns with his image as a moderate Islamic figure in West Sumatra. His 180,000 followers show the size of his support base and the reach of his political messages in the digital space.

The same goes for Ekos Albar, Epyardi's vice−governor candidate, who manages the @ekosalbar account. This account joined Instagram in November 2014 but only has 15 thousand followers with 82 uploads. The lack of uploads shows a lack of consistency in utilizing digital platforms as campaign media. As a political actor competing in an important contestation such as the Provincial Election, this figure shows a significant digital gap compared to the Mahyeldi−Vasco pair. From the data, it can be concluded that the Mahyeldi−Vasco pair was more successful in managing their Instagram accounts strategically and planning strategically. This impacts the formation of their political image during the 2024 Pilkada campaign period. In contrast, the Epyardi−Ekos pair could not optimize Instagram's potential as a political communication medium in implementing their campaign.

Following Bourdieu's theoretical framework, the author identifies the political communication strategies of the candidates for Governor and Deputy Governor of West Sumatra in 2024, using several elements of Bourdieu's theory, namely field, habitus, and capital.

a. *Field* (Arena)

Instagram is a social media platform widely used by young people aged 20−40 (Lim et al., 2022), serving as an arena for electoral contestation in the digital world during the 2024 West Sumatra Provincial Governor and Deputy Governor elections. Instagram has become a digital political stage for politicians, showcasing the symbolic power between candidates (Sandi Dwi Ariadi et al., 2024). Within Bourdieu's framework, Instagram is a political stage where politicians compete for influence during the political campaign. In this context, the Mahyeldi−Vasco pair significantly outperforms the Epyardi−Ekos pair in terms of the number of followers on their official Instagram accounts. Mahyeldi−Vasko has 20 times more followers, totaling 430,000, compared to Epyardi and Eko, who only have 21,408 followers. This number disparity highlights the significant difference in each candidate pair's reach in building their political communication with voters on Instagram.

In addition, the Mahyeldi−Vasco pair consistently uploaded content to their Instagram account daily during the 2024 regional election campaign. The content included documentation of campaign activities, presentations of the candidates' vision and mission, and visual representations of their interactions with voters in various regions of West Sumatra. They aimed to strengthen their political image as approachable and connected to the community. Meanwhile, the Epyardi−Ekos pair has not been very active in using Instagram as a political communication platform, as evidenced by the inconsistency in posting content, and their posts are limited to documentation of campaign activities.

Within Bourdieu's framework, Instagram becomes an arena where political actors compete with their opponents by utilizing their capital to gain trust and influence in the digital world. In this digital arena, power is determined by the creativity and ability of political actors to present themselves through their economic, cultural, and social capital, as well as their consistency in delivering messages.

b.  Habitus

Social media has become an essential arena in modern political communication for shaping public opinion and creating and strengthening the positive image of a political actor (Vera Hermawan, 2025, p. 160).One of the political communication strategies employed is using hashtags as a branding tool and unique code for disseminating campaign ideas and messages. Additionally, hashtags facilitate users' search for messages related to the hashtag, enabling them to identify associated trends (Omena, 2022, pp. 225−226)(Omena, 2022, pp. 225−226). In the context of the 2024 West Sumatra regional elections, the Mahyeldi−Vasco pair used the hashtag #Gerakcepatuntuksumbar as their campaign slogan, while the Epyardi Asda and Ekos Albar pair used the hashtag #otewesumbar. #Gerakcepatuntuksumbar is interpreted as an effort to accelerate development and progress for West Sumatra, and #otewesumbar is construed as the candidate's journey toward the Governor's seat of West Sumatra. The first pair consistently uses the hashtag #Gerakcepatuntuksumbar in every Instagram post, while the second pair does not always use the hashtag in their official social media posts. The use of the hashtag by the Mahyeldi−Vasco pair can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Hastag #gerakcepatuntuksumbar

The consistency of the number 1 pair shows a strategic effort to build a single narrative that is easy for the public to remember. This hashtag not only serves as a campaign identification tool, but also subconsciously becomes a tool to internalize the ideas and thoughts of the governor and deputy governor candidates to voters. This consistency also strengthens the personal branding of the two gubernatorial and vice−gubernatorial candidates of West Sumatra, number 1, and makes it easier to find content relevant to the campaign and reinforces the massive dissemination of messages on social media. On the other hand, the candidate pair number 2 with the hashtag #OteweSumbar is inconsistent in displaying the hashtag in their Instagram social media posts. This inconsistency has a negative impact on their digital campaign, particularly in the process of internalizing ideas and concepts to voters, and also makes it difficult for potential voters to access the digital campaign messages they are disseminating.

Hashtags on social media are used to create order in posts, ensure message reach, and facilitate post visibility (Cahyono, 2021, p. 191). Consistency in the use of hashtags in political campaigns plays a role in increasing the reach and visibility of messages among active social media users, strengthening political identity and image, and providing opportunities for voters to participate in campaigns conducted on social media through agreed−upon hashtags, thereby creating a positive effect on the strengthening of politicians' images. The results of this study show that the Mahyeldi−Vasko pair systematically tried to use hashtags to strengthen their positive image, convey their vision, and increase voter engagement in their campaign.

c. Modal

In the 2024 Sumatra regional election contest, capital control is essential in shaping a positive image, forming opinions, and attracting voters. Candidate pair number 1 shows a prominent advantage in this capital aspect. Mahyeldi, as the gubernatorial candidate, possesses substantial cultural and symbolic capital compared to other candidates, as reflected in the titles "Buya" and "Datuak" associated with his political image. The title 'Buya' describes the status of a religious scholar in Minangkabau culture, while the title "Datuak" describes a decent leadership role within the traditional Minangkabau tribal structure. These two assets strengthen his legitimacy as a respected figure among the people of West Sumatra, both from a religious and cultural perspective, and enable him to emotionally connect with the people of West Sumatra, who highly value traditional customs and religion following the Minangkabau philosophy of life. The use of these assets can be seen in Figure 2.
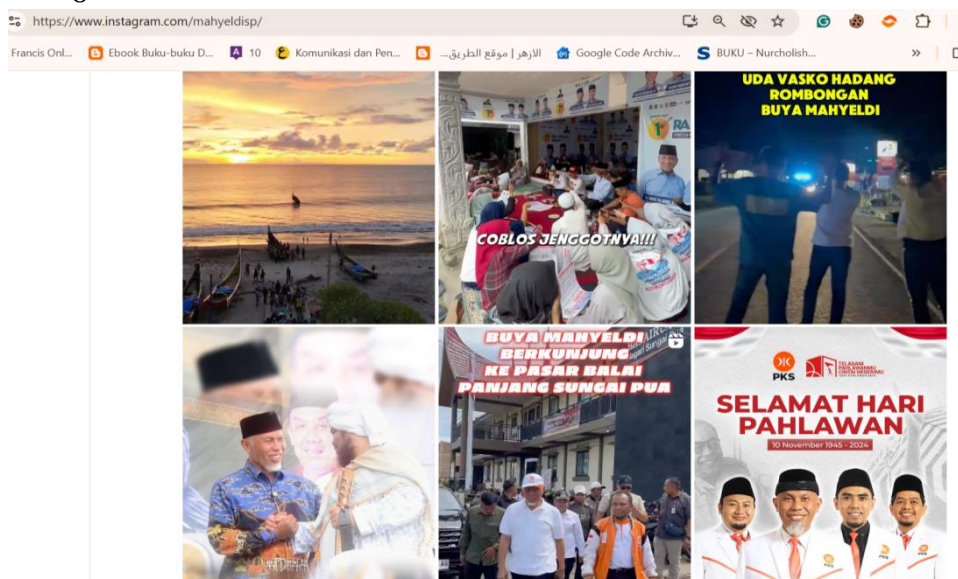


Figure 2. Mahyeldi's Instagram post

This situation is strengthened by his running mate, Vasco Ruseimy, who has successfully utilized his social capital comprehensively through posts on his Instagram account. Vasco has cultivated his image as a prominent young figure with an extensive political network. In several of his Instagram posts on the account @vasco_ruseimy, he showcases his closeness to national figures such as Raffi Ahmad (November 10, 2024), Giring Ganesha, and Fadli Zon (October 30, 2024), as well as local influencers and young leaders like Ferry Irwandi (September 8, 2024). This network not only enhances voter appeal but also strengthens the positive image of the first－ranked candidate pair supported by national figures. One of his posts with Raffi Ahmad can be seen in Figure 3.



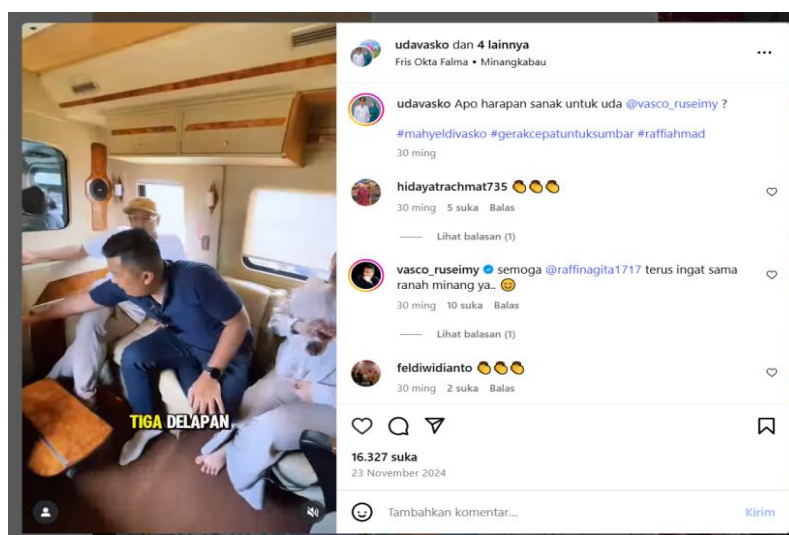Figure 3. Vasco's Instagram post

On the other hand, the Epyardi－Ekos pair did not try to maximize the use of the social, cultural, and symbolic capital they had during the campaign through Instagram posts. Their Instagram posts were more like documentation of their campaign activities, without in－depth exploration to strengthen their positive image as political actors. Although the @captainasda account features videos of several public figures, including Denny Cagur (October 28, 2024) and Ustad Abdul Somad (October 30, 2024), endorsing the candidates, these figures are not consistently or relevantly highlighted concerning the ideas being promoted.

The second candidate pair's lack of utilization of cultural, social, and symbolic capital on social media has resulted in them being less prominent in the digital space, particularly in terms of voter appeal. Meanwhile, the first candidate pair has an advantage because they combine Mahyeldi's symbolic and cultural capital with Vasco Ruseimy's social capital. This collaboration strengthens their position in the digital political arena and reinforces their positive political image, influencing voters' interest in the ideas and concepts they campaign for.

## DISCUSSION

This article finds that Instagram has become one of the arenas in contemporary political battles in the digital world, particularly in the 2024 electoral contest in West Sumatra. Instagram not only serves as a medium for documenting campaign activities but has also transformed into a strategic political tool used to influence voters and enhance a politician's electability in political contests. Instagram has become a battleground for candidates to convince voters, with politicians integrating social, cultural, and symbolic capital into their Instagram posts. In this context, Instagram plays a role as a symbolic battlefield for ideas. This finding reinforces the results of previous studies conducted by Martono (2012) and Yuliantoro (2016).

This study found systematic, measurable, and consistent efforts by the Mahyeldi－Vasco pair in utilizing Instagram as a medium for political communication with a broader reach. Some of the strategies employed by Mahyeldi－Vasco in the political discourse battle on Instagram include using visually appealing content, narratives aligned with the values prevalent in West Sumatra society, and consistent use of hashtags in every post. This hashtag strategy was also identified by Cahyono (2021), who found that hashtag usage can be used to enhance political engagement in campaigns and strengthen political identity.

Mahyeldi has highlighted his image as a religious figure and public official by maximizing the use of cultural and symbolic capital during the 2024 regional election campaign. Meanwhile, Vasco Ruseimy portrays himself as a young generation figure with a national network through his posts, featuring influencers and national officials in his Instagram posts. The combination of the Mahyeldi－Vasco pair on Instagram also contributes politically to contemporary political communication strategies. These results also confirm Omena's (2022) research that hashtags also influence opinion formation on social media. Additionally, this study reinforces Suseno and Utami's (2022) findings that social media also influences the formation of political actors' branding and contributes to increased electability.

This study emphasizes that Instagram is not merely a supplementary tool in contemporary political campaigns but has become a battlefield for politicians to shape voter opinions and enhance the electability of political actors in executive electoral contests. Instagram contributes to the development of contemporary political communication, particularly in increasing the participation of young generations and first－time voters in politics, as found in studies conducted by Kurniawan et al. Al (2024) and Prayudi et al. (2025).

This study also has limitations in terms of providing a comprehensive overview of the dynamics of digital political communication on social media, as Indonesia is a country with high internet penetration and social media usage rates. YouTube, TikTok, and X (Twitter) are also platforms used by politicians to influence voters. Therefore, a more in－depth study is required on political communication strategies in the recent world. Additionally, coming research should collaborate with numerous data sources, such as interviews and

observations, to provide a holistic understanding of political communication in the contemporary era.

This research contributes to the latest knowledge about how Instagram can be used as a medium for political communication using a contemporary sociological approach, specifically Bourdieu's theory, as examined in this article. This study also contributes to professionals in the fields of politics and political communication by highlighting the significance of integrating social, cultural, and symbolic capital in social media posts so that the messages conveyed have a significant impact on virtual communities.

**CONCLUSION**

This article finds that Instagram plays a strategic role in strengthening the positive image of politicians during the 2024 West Sumatra regional election campaign. Using Pierre Bourdieu's approach, the author finds that the Mahyeldi－Vasco pair successfully utilized Instagram as an arena for digital political contestation by integrating social, cultural, and symbolic capital in their posts on their official social media accounts. Additionally, the consistent use of the hashtag ＃gerakcepatuntuksumbar as a habitus reinforces their dominance in political discourse on Instagram. Mahyeldi－Vasco consistently posted daily during the 2024 regional election campaign, using visually appealing content and narratives that reinforced their positive image as responsive leaders close to the community. In addition, the Mahyeldi－Vasco pair has consistently posted daily during the 2024 regional election campaign, using engaging visuals and narratives that strengthen their positive image as responsible leaders who are connected to the community. This article also found that the success of a campaign on Instagram is not only based on the presence of politicians' accounts in the digital world but also depends on the consistency of posts, creativity in visual content and narratives, and the integration of capital to strengthen political image on Instagram. This study demonstrates the integration of Bourdieu's field theory, habitus, and field capital in digital political communication. These findings contribute to the field of political communication in the contemporary era.

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