Political Image Transformation through AI-based Digital Representation

Laskarko Patria

Communication Department, Faculty of Digital Communication and Hotel & Tourism, Bina Nusantara University, Jakarta 11480, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore the construction of political representation in the AI-infused digital campaigns in a contemporary age where political images are constructed for the purpose of inspiring young voters in the pop culture times. This is a departure from the traditional process of building images of the candidates, characterized by more emotionally resonant, humorous, and visually striking symbols that are designed for a digital audience. This study employs a qualitative design, including a case study method and thematic analysis of visual and narrative content of posts circulating on multiple social media sites, combining a case study and thematic analysis methods. Using the framework of Stuart Hall's theory of representation, we examined how symbols in visual language and popular culture travel, circulate, and produce political significance. The finding from this analysis suggests that digital-based political representations does not merely send messages. Popular aesthetics also transform people's perception of the world, and bring people together. This projection is a means of creating a relatively generic, palatable image, despite it never being entirely reflective of the real political actor being represented. These findings shed light on the necessity of having a critical understanding of the power dynamics surrounding image circulation in the contemporary digital landscape.

KEYWORDS- Political Image, Visual Symbolism, Artificial Intelligence, Representation, Digital Campaign

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years digital actually has been developed a lot to the point where today the Indonesian society has been accustomed to it. This is a transition that is ongoing not only in terms of communication, work or entertainment, but in understanding and engaging in politics as well. Today, social media and visual content, along with artificial intelligence (AI) have redefined the political communication architecture of modernity. How Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka ticket employs AI to boost image, messaging, and affect with the very digitally-savvy & materially poor younger generation in this fascinating turn in the road of the 2024 presidential election [1].

What's remarkable about this phenomenon is not only the fact that AI is used as a campaigning tool, but the manner in which technology is used to repair the reputation of a political personality. Prabowo has been portrayed for decades as the hard military man, but he is being repackaged as a "Gemoy" personality, cute, fun, and more in touch with youth culture. It wasn't an organic transformation, but one that has been engineered for distribution in digital content, animation, memes and AI-generated avatars on TikTok, Instagram, and CapCut.

Representation theory, which underpins this research, is one of the key cornerstones of the study of culture and media communication. For Stuart Hall, a pioneer of the Cultural Studies school, representation was not just the act of reproducing reality, but a practice that included the construction of social reality itself [2]. It means that representation is not passive; it is active and ideological, representation has a meaning, it constructs a meaning, and at the same time it can regard the way in which people think about an object, a figure, and an event.

Hall even sees representation as the way society communicates its meaning, how people in society exchange meaning through their use of language, images, and symbols [1]. We do not only mean words here, but language also encompasses visual language, color, gesture, design, and story in digital media. Thus, the research question for this study, according to the above description, is: What aspects of the political image through artificial intelligence based digital campaigns are achieved?

Under this situation, it should be noted that political communication cannot be only seen as a process of sending messages from professional communicators (politicians) to non-professional communicators (voters) but rather as engaged and social practice. The political representation is not a reflection of reality but an outcome of a symbolic process acted out by a myriad of actors, campaign teams, the media and even technology itself.

While representation has always played a key role in the study of political communication, this line of research has been gaining more attention given the increasing amount of visual and interactive nature of the modern media. Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall famously stated that representation is an active process of creating meaning. Media not only reflects but also produces reality through socially and historically constructed symbols, language and discourse.

In several studies, representation theory studies how politicians are configured as symbolic "products." Kapczynski explained that foreign film, particularly American movies imported by the Allied Forces, were tools of a "re-educational" project on German society [3]. This is linked to the work of reprogramming the onlooker, that is, remapping the way in which audiences imagine themselves, and the conditions of post-Nazi reality. In that regard, cinema is hardly a neutral representational instrument, but rather pregnant with ideological baggage, whose purpose is to reframe the past, recontextualize national identity, and regulate the relationship between the individual and the state, as well as the German state with the outside world.

A reading of a film where intellectuals are not only objects of representation rather than mere representations, that intellectuals feature as subjects of representations, who featured as agents of productions of aesthetic and politics. Focus on how cinematic representation become battlegrounds of cultural struggle [4]. On the other hand, work on music highlighted the political representation of beauty standards in music media as a facet of social framing [5]. And, work examining representations of cultural symbols through the YouTube channel Liziqi showed how representation is constantly dynamic and context-based, through how representations are both produced and consumed across contexts [6].

At the same time, a different study applied representation theory to the digital meme, showing the opposite side of the coin of actually active public inappropriately recreating meaning via social media, and not only passively consuming it [7]. This necessarily relates to the Prabowo-Gibran ticket campaign which employs digital participatory campaign, where the public participates in sharing and modifying the political visual contents.

Nevertheless, there is little research on the political representation that uses AI technology that can be appropriately carried out especially in the Indonesian context. Though, there has very little research on the way in which organisations wield AI to transform how the political entity is represented, and the way the public responds to those representations. Thus, this study endeavors to cover it in the context of the 2024 Prabowo-Gibran campaign. Based on Stuart Hall's representation theory, this study will examine how political representation in the digital space the representation of image "Gemoy" as an image of political representation is constructed and interpreted.

2. METHODOLOGY

Rather, the constructivist paradigm does not see social reality as a static phenomenon which exists outside of us in an objective way, but rather as a social construction resulting from interaction, symbolization and meaning [8], [9]. This paradigm allows researchers in this field, especially in analysing AI-based political campaigns, to view that political representation, and with it, the "Gemoy" image of Prabowo, does not reflecting a passive mimetic device of the objective reality, but as an outcome of processes of symbolic production conducted strategically by the campaign team and actively acted upon by the public.

From our constructivist paradigm then we can take a far more fundamental approach to the subject matter of representation practices, as we are not merely putting a ruler over the surface to measure what exists, but tracing what meaning is emergent, negotiated and even disputed by each of the parties involved [10].

A case study method is a qualitative approach that can reflect the complexity of meaning and symbolic dynamics in digital political communication [11]. The case study is specifically selected on the campaign of Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka in the 2024 Presidential Election, which case is the extensive use of AI to build political image. Researchers employing this method can better understand the context of political message production, the types of representations are constructed and the subsequent public reactions and interpretations that arise [8], [12].

Thematic analysis is used to determine, interpret and report patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data. Thematic analysis is a method of flexible applied research that can be adapted and utilized in cultural and communication studies when researchers desire an exploration of multifaceted and nuanced contextual symbolizations [13]. The analysis feeds into constructing of political images on the basis of AI-based digital media where the representation of political candidates as a semantic centre of digital campaigns are framed along with symbols, visual narratives and popular culture elements used to align with the representation of the substantial worth held and the substantial welfares held-deployed and the spectrum degenerated.

It is the technique of documentation and observation [14]. The second type is documentation techniques that captures digital campaign materials with Prabowo's "Gemoy" image, in the form of memes, tik tok, animation, avatar, official campaign website, Instagram, capcut, and Youtube. Observation Methods–track user interaction through social media (comments, reposts, remixes, and reaction) towards representative Prabowo–Gibran content.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides the result of processing the digital campaign contents of this Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka pair based on analysis with the main focus on how to develop the "Gemoy" image on Prabowo Subianto. The examination focuses on visual, symbolic, and narrative elements appearing on online platforms, and connects them to the popular culture landscape available to the youth vote, and particularly Generation Z, using an analytical lens drawn from Stuart Hall's theory of representation which positions media as a site for the production of meaning, ultimately arguing that symbols not only mirror reality but are both a creator and framing of a reality [15].

One representation of "Gemoy" in visual campaign content. One of the things that stood out the most from the Prabowo-Gibran campaign was the transformation of Prabowo's image from an intimidating, ferocious military man to a comedic, charming, and approachable public figure, encapsulated with the term Gemoy. It comes from Korean and Japanese talking about something borrowed from popular culture, childishly "cute" or "charming". This movement is made apparent through an array of visuals:

a. Animations and Avatars. Prabowo is portrayed as a small round-bodied animated character with chubby cheeks and elementary school uniform. Some photos make her eyes as large as Japanese cartoon characters, to impart an air of innocence and non-threateningness.

b. Joget Gesture. Joget steps shown by Prabowo on stage were then mimicked until viral in the form of (TikTok, Reels) short videos. The clips of the graduates dance were trimmed under the remix music and funny effects to diminish the formal impression in the clips or photos and substitute it for a cozy and companionable atmosphere.
c. Color and Typography. Gemoy visual campaign, bold, pastel, bright colors (light blue, pink, and clear white background) This indicates a significant departure from the earlier dominance of dark green or brown military color tones in Prabowo's campaigns.
d. Symbols and Keywords. Many memes, CapCut templates, and banners have "Gemoy," "Funny President," and "Gemoy Dance" as their entire storyline. Actually, the word "Gemoy" itself is written large on public billboard displays.

All these hints suggest this externalization of power, vis-a-vis new representation was not constructed in the interest of reinforcing the legitimacy of authoritarian power, but in order to engender an emotional bond with the public, especially its youth. Adjusting to Trendiness and Gen Z type attributes The "Gemoy" campaign is not born out of a vacuum. It appears in an iconographic culture that is both visual and dynamic. The main target of this campaign, Generation Z, is all too familiar with digital culture, memes, short videos, sound remixes, and avatars. In this context, political representation is no longer the long discourse and normative vision but the capacity to speak to the heart and project an image.

The "Gemoy" image has a few links to popular culture:
a. Culture of Memes. Memes are the main vehicle of "Gemoy" image transfer. Even non-political social media accounts share Prabowo's character, be it in funny, dancing or cartoon-faced, over and over.
b. Remixes and viral sound. A lot of TikTok users remix Prabowo laughing, funny speeches, or singing in turn, this element mirrors the remix culture among digital natives where political candidates become "fandom figures" rather than merely public officials.
c. Consumer participation. A lot of the campaign content is user-generated content. The "Gemoy" character was

transformed into stickers, videos and parodies by netizens, affirming popular reinterpretation as participatory and within the campaign.

d. Visual Campaign (Pop-Culture Aesthetics). This campaign is heavily inspired by certain aesthetics, for example, Japanese "kawaii" aesthetics (cute), Korean Animation aesthetics (even TikTok styles). It is not merely the visual-cum-strategy element, but also the fact that politics has become a packaged entertainment item.

Meaning production and emotion politics the image of "Gemoy" is not only a matter of the eye but also the heart. Politics in the post-truth era is not always about a rational foundation. More critical is the way political messages can affect the public mood. Arguably more familiar than any other political figure in Indonesia, Prabowo is portrayed here as a smiling, affable chap, ever ready to brighten up someone's day, and this makes the past a rather murky subject, shifting the conversation towards a bright, happy and light present. At this point representation strategies are quite literally a game changer. The candidate starts being relatable and even funny by making the public "smile" with funny dances or animations. If social media interaction is any reflection of success in representation, this appears to be the case, with a lot of online engagement and support from the 18-33 demographic.

Representation or Manipulation. It should be a moment of critical reflection, as appealing as this campaign may seem through Gemoy representation, is it in its own way a representation of reality they distance themselves from and possibly a reality of who they really are, in all honesty? Representation is not just "showing" it is about framing the reality chasing after representation too far could lead to symbolic manipulation, in that a population can be molded to believe in a surrogate image rather than an objective reality. This campaign has raised fears that the "Gemoy" image is a front to whitewash an authoritarian past, to shield from criticism, and to recast a controversial figure as a populist who transcends politics. This suggests that campaigns driven by AI and/or popular culture succeeded in creating new political representations that performed extremely well, both visually and emotionally.

This research shows that Prabowo's image as a "Gemoy" was an image built through a series of symbolic representations that were systematically manufactured by the campaign team with the help of artificial intelligence (AI), and spread massively through social media. These results verify the notion that the political campaigns of the digital age are not simply about transmitting information, but are necessarily a complicated process of meaning building. Political image is increasingly pavilionised as a product of visual and affective technology, which must be competitive in a public realm that is hyper-speeded, hyper-crowded, and aggressively distracting.

This is known as encoding from Stuart Hall's perspective of representation theory - the phase when campaign team creates those symbols, frames and pictures to encode the meanings the campaign team wish for the viewers to decode. But Hall also stresses that the sender of the message does not have full control over the meaning. Whilst decoding, however, an audience can take that meaning on-board, negotiate that meaning in relation to their own social, cultural and political view or even reject it outright.

As the "Gemoy" phenomenon indicates, political representation is changing from a dominant older image for political power into a warmer, more intimate one. The Prabowo-Gibran campaign has shifted from presenting their technocratic credentials or achievements to showing their symbolic proximity to the people, particularly Gen Z and younger cohorts who consume politics in visual and bite-sized packets. Here, AI is perfectly complimentary to the politics of spectacle, supercharging the creating and distribution of political memes, everything from moving avatars, face filters, voice remixes and CapCut campaign templates.

And when associating it with Jean Baudrillard's idea of simulacra, where the image is more real than the reality. The "Gemoy" image is not simply an image of Prabowo, but has become a new reality that lays beyond the personality of the actual candidate. Society, and particularly Gen-Z voters, are being exposed to Prabowo not based on his long track record of work but on a rather comical and entertaining image on social media. The question is, how far design can go to create political representation before it turns into a form of manipulation? Here, the political campaign is an act of entertainment and comedy, whereas democracy itself is a claim for deliberation and critical thought. Hence, the media, academia, and civil society will play a major role in interceding to make sure that representation practices do not cross the threshold of truthfulness.

The new way to build politicians with voters, no more programs and visions for work, but who can "relate" more, who goes more viral on social networks. As a result, campaigns devolve into an exercise in generating impressions, not communicating substance. Political representation appears to be more fluid, flexible, and malleable than before, but also more susceptible to illusion itself. When you pair that with radio stations and pop culture, technology, and symbolic power, politics can become the art of killing birds with one stone. And it is not about who has the highest qualifications but rather, who excels at shaping public perception, both effectively and emotionally.

4. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

First, the size of the data is so restricted, you can only train the model on this much data. This research is centered on the Prabowo-Gibran campaign and the image of Prabowo as "Gemoy" (cute) which was constructed through Social Media, especially from AI-based digital media. This is a direct comparison the researcher did not make with the campaigns of other pairs from the 2024 election cycle. Therefore, this finding is relatively quite specific and cannot be generalized for all Indonesian political campaign phenomena.

Second, shortcomings in the view of the audience. While representation theory based on symbolization is used in this research, on the symbolic audience not much research has been conducted through upper field interviews at broad level. How we interpret viewer responses to the "Gemoy" image is based on social media observation and symbolic analysis, not on ethnographic approaches or large-scale surveys. It is definitely a very interesting field worth further exploring.

Third, limitations in temporal scope. It was a time frame close to the 2024 campaign and election. As a result, he has documented phenomena that remain extant and fluid. Political representation is a dynamic practice shaped by social and political settings. It follows that the sense of purpose uncovered in this research could change over a longer time frame.

Fourth, there are limits on the technical and algorithmic sides. We are not adequately examining the social media algorithms and AI platforms that are distributing and amplifying certain representations. To be sure, the Disneyfied success of "Gemoy" spreading is also dictated by the infrastructure of digital content distribution based on algorithmic logic and engagement. This need takes a technical multidisciplinary approach which cannot be hope to address completely here.

Fifth, legal and ethical limitations. While this research raises practical ethical concerns over representation and political image manipulation, it does not map out the legal and regulatory landscape governing the employment of AI in political campaigns in depth either. This is a subject that we can explore further through interdisciplinary study between communication science, law, and digital ethics.

Apart from these limitations, nonetheless, this study represents an important first step in charting how practices of political communication are changing with the digital turn, especially regarding the production and consumption of AI-societal political representation. Hopefully, these constraints will allow follow-up research that is more general, more profound, and more inter-disciplinary.

5. CONCLUSION

In the 2024 Indonesian presidential election campaign situation, there is a unique political phenomenon, in the form of the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to reconstruct the identity of a political figure, both through visual symbols and through language this research is based on. Focusing on the Prabowo Subianto–Gibran Rakabuming Raka campaign, especially how the Prabowo "Gemoy" image was created, this study uses Stuart Hall's theory of representation to explain how meaning is produced, circulated, and consumed by the public in the context of popular culture and digital media. Analysis result indicates that the "Gemoy" representation are the symbolic constructions that dublicated intentionally to re-construct Prabowo image to be more friendly, fun, and contemporarily approach the young generations. These include relying on visual mediums, kids TikToks, pastel colors, viral choreography, and meme-and-CapCut content used as a means to forge a sort of low-stakes, fun political culture.

That's a representation that fits the bill for the digital popular culture percolating among Gen Z (digital natives), a generation who are more responsive to style, entertainment, and visuals than to traditional political messaging. But with the success of this campaign come ethical questions we can not look past, is this a likeness, or a caricature, separating actor from image from truth? The "Gemoy" portrayal is not simply a medium possible to use communication, but also a power-based medium that forms how its using public view and feel about

politics. Then here, the public is not merely a receiver of messages but a player in negotiating meaning, mimicking, and framing that image by engaging digitally.

This study, on a theoretical basis, confirms the suitability of Stuart Hall's theory of representation in understanding the political imaging process during the algorithmic and visual age. This is a very important finding, and it offers timely advice to the public and to organizers from democracy groups, digital-age politics are not simply about what is said, but about how reality itself is produced symbolically. In visual democracy, it follows that whoever controls the narrative of representation, has a good chance of controlling it in the minds of the public. As the technology churns out image after image, the keys to preserving the quality of democracy will therefore be media literacy, critical awareness, political transparency.

REFERENCES

1. A. A. Akbar, "Prabowo-Gibran Digital Team luncurkan paltform prabowogibran.ai," *AntaraNews.com*, 2023. https://www.antaranews.com/berita/3880488/prabowo-gibran-digital-team-luncurkan-paltform-prabowogibranai (accessed Aug. 08, 2024).
2. S. Hall, *REPRESENTATION : Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: SAGE Publication, 1997.
3. C. Burman, "Facing the Foreign: The Aftermath of World War II and Estonian as Otherness in Two Films by Ingmar Bergman," *Balt. Screen Media Rev.*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 4–19, Dec. 2018, doi: 10.2478/bsmr-2018-0001.
4. S. Ponzanesi and A. C. Mendes, "Screening postcolonial intellectuals: cinematic engagements and postcolonial activism," *Transnatl. Screens*, pp. 1–9, Jun. 2022, doi: 10.1080/25785273.2022.2094612.
5. D. O. Lamdia, A. D. Santoso, and R. S. Andarini, "Contesting the Portrayal of Beauty As It is in Music Videos: A Semiotic Analysis of the Video of Yura Yunita-Tutur Batin," *Muwazah*, pp. 75–98, May 2023, doi: 10.28918/muwazah.v15i1.2285.
6. J. Li, H. M. Adnan, and J. Gong, "Exploring Cultural Meaning Construction in Social Media: An Analysis of Liziqi's YouTube Channel," *J. Intercult. Commun.*, pp. 1–12, Dec. 2023, doi: 10.36923/jicc.v23i4.237.
7. J. Nowak, "Internet meme as meaningful discourse: Towards a theory of multiparticipant popular online content," *Cent. Eur. J. Commun.*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 73–89, May 2016, doi: 10.19195/1899-5101.9.1(16).5.
8. J. W. Creswell and J. D. Creswell, *Research Design Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. California, USA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2018.
9. M. Crotty, *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage., 1998.
10. A. Salim, *Teori & Paradigma Penelitian Sosial*. Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana Yogya, 2001.
11. C. W. Mills, *The sociological imagination*. Oxford University Press, 1959.
12. R. K. Yin, *Case study research: Design and methods*, 4th ed. SAGE Publications, 2009.
13. N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln, M. D. Giardina, and G. S. Cannella, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. SAGE Publications, Incorporated, USA, 2024.
14. M. B. Miles and A. M. Huberman, *Qualitative data analysis*, 2nd ed. SAGE Publications, 1994.
15. J. Kidd, *Representation*. New York, USA: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, USA, 2016.