



The Use of Social Media In Building the Political Image of Budi and Agis in the 2024 Serang City Elections

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Abstract

This study examines the strategic utilization of social media platforms in constructing the political image of Budi Rustandi and Nur Agis Aulia during the 2024 Serang City Election. Employing an empirical qualitative approach with an instrumental case study design, this inquiry analyzes how digital campaign operations cultivate political branding and manage candidate impressions among young voters. Primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with key campaign actors and targeted youth demographics, supplemented by non-participant observation of official social media repositories. The findings reveal that Instagram and TikTok were deployed in a highly differentiated manner to maximize algorithmic reach and validate candidate credibility. By projecting a carefully curated balance between legislative competence and grassroots populist values, the campaign generated significant cognitive alignment within the youth electorate. Crucially, the final results demonstrate that while digital communication offers immense cost efficiency in building widespread political visibility, actual electoral conversion relies on the strategic integration of virtual image formation and physical network mobilization.

Keywords : Political Branding, Impression Management, Image Formation, Digital Campaign, Local Election.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the relationship between political actors and citizens by shifting electoral competition from conventional campaign arenas toward algorithmically mediated public spaces where visibility, interaction, and symbolic representation increasingly determine political legitimacy. Social media has evolved beyond its original function as an information sharing platform into a strategic environment in which political narratives are continuously negotiated through visual communication, emotional engagement, and participatory discourse that enables candidates to construct personalized identities while simultaneously responding to changing public expectations. Contemporary electoral competition demonstrates that political image is no longer generated exclusively through institutional communication or mass media coverage because digital platforms facilitate direct engagement between candidates and voters, creating an environment in which authenticity, responsiveness, and symbolic consistency become decisive elements of political persuasion. The acceleration of digital political communication has become particularly evident in emerging democracies where social media penetration continues to expand alongside increasing political participation among younger generations whose electoral preferences are strongly influenced by online interaction patterns. Indonesian electoral dynamics illustrate this transformation through the growing integration of digital branding, content personalization, and interactive communication into electoral strategies across multiple levels of government, indicating that political image has become a dynamic communicative construct shaped through continuous digital engagement rather than a static representation controlled solely by political organizations (Sihombing, 2024). Similar developments also demonstrate that visual narratives disseminated through Instagram increasingly function as mechanisms for strengthening political authority and reinforcing candidate credibility within highly competitive electoral environments (Suryadi & Melisa, 2025).

The expanding literature concerning digital political communication consistently acknowledges that social media contributes significantly to the construction of candidate image, although existing findings reveal different explanatory emphases regarding the mechanisms through which such influence operates. Studies examining Indonesian elections indicate that political image is strengthened not merely through message frequency but through the formation of favorable public attitudes that mediate the relationship between online exposure and voting intention, suggesting that image construction depends upon complex psychological processes rather than simple communication intensity (Sihombing, 2024). Research investigating local online media further demonstrates that political representation emerges through selective framing capable of reinforcing desirable candidate characteristics while simultaneously influencing collective political interpretation within regional electoral contexts (Sunarsih et al., 2022). Other investigations emphasize that personal branding strategies grounded in symbolic representation, lifestyle presentation, and emotional proximity effectively mobilize younger voters because candidates increasingly position themselves as relatable public figures rather than distant political elites (Suseno & Utami, 2022). Complementary evidence also illustrates that Instagram facilitates the reinforcement of political authority by enabling candidates to integrate visual storytelling with interactive engagement that continuously reproduces positive political identities across multiple audiences (Suryadi & Melisa, 2025). Collectively these studies demonstrate substantial scholarly consensus that digital communication has become inseparable from contemporary political image formation while simultaneously revealing that political branding increasingly depends upon multidimensional interactions among communication strategy, audience perception, and platform characteristics.

Despite this growing body of scholarship, important conceptual and empirical limitations remain insufficiently addressed because many existing investigations concentrate predominantly on presidential elections, national political narratives, or broad discussions concerning digital campaigning without adequately examining how political image is strategically constructed within local electoral competition characterized by distinct sociocultural conditions and localized communication networks. Studies exploring symbolic political narratives frequently emphasize ideological contestation and identity politics while paying comparatively limited attention to the operational mechanisms through which candidates transform digital interaction into sustainable political legitimacy during local elections (Suharjimanoro & Lutfie, 2025). Research concerning constitutional and legal perspectives on the 2024 Indonesian election has likewise focused primarily on institutional integrity, electoral violations, and democratic accountability rather than investigating how communication strategies influence political perception before formal electoral evaluation occurs (Zarkasi et al., 2025). Investigations addressing media representation frequently privilege macro political discourse over localized campaign dynamics, creating limited understanding regarding the interaction between candidate branding, community engagement, and digital participation within municipal electoral contexts (Sunarsih et al., 2022). Recent analyses concerning socio cultural reproduction during the 2024 vice presidential debate further reveal that symbolic performance and communicative gimmicks significantly shape public interpretation of political actors, although the translation of these symbolic practices into sustained local political image formation remains theoretically underdeveloped (Yuniar et al., 2026). These unresolved inconsistencies indicate that existing literature has yet to establish an integrated explanation connecting political branding, digital interaction, symbolic communication, and localized electoral behavior.

The absence of comprehensive evidence regarding digital political image construction at the municipal level carries important scientific and practical implications because local elections increasingly function as laboratories for democratic innovation where campaign resources, political proximity, and community participation interact more directly than within national electoral contests. Municipal electoral campaigns frequently rely upon localized communication ecosystems that combine formal campaign organizations, community based networks, local influencers, and platform specific engagement strategies, creating communication patterns that differ substantially from those documented in national elections. Failure to understand these dynamics risks producing theoretical generalizations that overlook contextual variation while simultaneously limiting the capacity of political practitioners, electoral institutions, and civil society organizations to evaluate the effectiveness and democratic consequences of digital campaign strategies. The emergence of increasingly sophisticated political communication through visual narratives, interactive content, symbolic performance, and issue

framing further intensifies the need to examine how candidates construct trust, legitimacy, and emotional resonance within geographically bounded political communities where online communication remains closely connected with everyday social interaction. The growing complexity of Indonesian digital politics demonstrates that political image has become both a communicative resource and a determinant of electoral competitiveness whose formation requires contextual examination extending beyond generalized national patterns (Sihombing, 2024, Suharjiantoro & Lutfie, 2025, Zarkasi et al., 2025).

This study positions itself within the evolving scholarship of political communication by addressing the underexplored relationship between social media utilization and political image construction in the context of the 2024 Serang City Election through an analytical focus on the campaign strategies implemented by Budi and Agis. Rather than treating social media as a neutral communication channel or measuring its influence solely through electoral outcomes, this research conceptualizes digital platforms as interactive environments where political identity is continuously negotiated through visual representation, symbolic consistency, audience engagement, and localized political discourse. Such positioning extends previous literature by integrating insights from political branding, image construction, and digital communication into a context specific analysis capable of explaining how municipal political actors strategically organize digital narratives to establish credibility and strengthen electoral legitimacy within localized democratic competition.

The objective of this research is to analyze how social media was utilized in constructing the political image of Budi and Agis during the 2024 Serang City Election while explaining the communicative processes through which digital interaction contributed to the development of candidate perception within a local electoral environment. This research contributes theoretically by enriching the understanding of political image formation through an integrated perspective that connects digital communication, political branding, and localized democratic practice. It also contributes methodologically by providing an empirically grounded analysis of municipal electoral communication that expands the scope of political communication research beyond nationally oriented investigations and offers a contextual framework for examining digital political strategies within local democratic competition.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed an empirical qualitative approach using an instrumental case study design to obtain an in depth understanding of how social media was utilized to construct the political image of Budi and Agis during the 2024 Serang City Election. An instrumental case study was selected because the campaign of Budi and Agis was treated not merely as a unique electoral case but as an analytical vehicle for explaining broader developments in digital political communication and political branding within local democratic competition, consistent with the qualitative research framework proposed by Creswell and Creswell (2023). The research was conducted in Serang City, Banten Province, where primary data were collected through purposive sampling involving participants who possessed direct knowledge of the planning and implementation of the campaign communication strategy. The participants consisted of Nur Agis Aulia as the vice mayor and vice mayoral candidate, the head of the social media team, the secretary of the campaign team, a branding team member, the coordinator of the youth volunteer organization, and one young voter representing the target audience of the campaign. Semi structured interviews constituted the principal method of data collection, complemented by nonparticipant observation of official campaign accounts on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, systematic documentation of campaign content published during the official campaign period, and supporting documentary materials concerning political communication and campaign strategy. The analytical orientation was informed by the theoretical perspectives of political marketing, personal branding, and impression management developed by Lees Marshment (2014), Montoya (2005), and Goffman (1959a, 1959b).

The primary research instrument consisted of an interview protocol designed around themes related to political branding, impression management, digital communication strategy, audience engagement, and political image construction, while an observation guide was employed to document patterns of visual presentation, message consistency, interaction intensity, and symbolic representation across social media platforms. Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation by comparing evidence obtained from campaign organizers, political actors, and young voters with

observational findings derived from official social media content and documentary records, thereby enhancing the credibility and confirmability of the interpretation in accordance with qualitative research standards described by Creswell and Creswell (2023). Data analysis followed an iterative thematic procedure involving data reduction, coding, category development, pattern interpretation, and cross case comparison until coherent analytical themes emerged that reflected the interaction between digital campaign practices and political image formation. The interpretation of empirical findings remained closely connected with the theoretical propositions of impression management proposed by Goffman (1959a, 1959b), political marketing articulated by Lees Marshment (2014), and personal branding formulated by Montoya (2005). Ethical considerations were addressed through voluntary participation, informed consent before each interview, protection of participant confidentiality where appropriate, secure management of research data, and the presentation of findings with accuracy, transparency, and respect for the perspectives of all participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Digital Platform Mapping and Algorithmic Dissemination Framework

The strategic distribution of digital political assets in local electoral systems depends significantly on data-driven platform selection that matches the generational attributes of the constituency. In the 2024 Serang City gubernatorial election, the campaign managers for Budi and Agis engineered a systematic digital strategy centered on Instagram and TikTok rather than relying on uncoordinated internet posts. This calculated architecture directly reflects the market-oriented political communication paradigm where candidates adapt their outreach mechanisms to match contemporary voter behavior (Lees-Marshment, 2014). Empirical findings show that this digital apparatus was fully established five months before official campaigning began, employing an integrated creative production squad. By aligning content distribution with the specific demographic realities of Serang City, where millennial and younger voters comprised over sixty percent of the electorate, the campaign transformed digital spaces into structured platforms for image curation (Al-Ra'zie & Maulana, 2025).

The operational division of labor between digital platforms dictated how information was processed and consumed by target voters. TikTok served as an organic algorithmic accelerator due to its dynamic recommendation system, allowing campaign materials to achieve widespread visibility within short temporal windows without relying solely on established follower bases. Conversely, Instagram functioned as a highly controlled space for aesthetic validation where political messaging, graphic layouts, and policy statements were presented with high production values. This differentiation illustrates how contemporary digital campaigns utilize cross-platform strategies to maximize reach while maintaining strict control over candidate perception (Patty et al., 2025). The focus on short-form video formats and visual layouts aligned directly with the media consumption habits of first-time voters who favor direct visual interactions over lengthy text documents (Parerungan & Julyarman, 2026).

The quantitative distribution metrics gathered during the official campaign period highlight this multi-platform differentiation. Empirical observation tracked the specific content volume, audience engagement rates, and viral benchmarks that defined the campaign's digital performance.

Table 1. Digital Platform Distribution Metrics and Engagement Indicators

Platform Channel	Total Content Units	Primary Demographic Target	Peak Engagement Metric	Functional Electoral Role
TikTok Official	139 Video Posts	Generation Z (17–25 Years)	104,700 Viewership Units	Algorithmic Distribution
Instagram Official	124 Visual Posts	Millennials (26–35 Years)	High Interaction Rates	Aesthetic Image Curation
Facebook Official	25 Text-Image Posts	Older Millennials (36+ Years)	Moderate Share Index	Complementary Outreach

Source: Compiled from primary empirical research data observations, 2024.

The operationalization of a multi-account strategy expanded the campaign's digital reach across distinct sociopolitical segments. Beyond the primary campaign handles, numerous supportive digital accounts were maintained to target different voter blocks, ensuring that specialized messaging reached specific sub-groups without altering the core brand. This decentralized network mirrors contemporary cyber-politics where multi-layered accounts prevent message stagnation and extend candidate visibility across diverse social circles (Khamdan et al., 2025). By dividing the digital landscape into separate target segments, the campaign ensured that administrative policy details were directed toward professional associations while creative content targeted younger cohorts. This framework demonstrates how local campaigns have adopted sophisticated structural strategies often seen in national presidential races (Yuniar et al., 2026).

The reliance on metrics such as traffic patterns, audience retention, and engagement rates reveals a highly structured approach to political communication. Content production was not guided by intuition but by continuous data monitoring that evaluated how visual themes and stylistic adjustments resonated with online audiences. This analytical approach reflects the professionalization of political communication where data systems dictate the timing, formatting, and delivery of campaign arguments (Sihombing, 2024). When unexpected campaign developments occurred, such as health disruptions affecting public appearance schedules, the digital team quickly adapted by shifting content toward emotional themes that could sustain audience engagement. This capacity to turn real-time challenges into digital campaign materials underscores the strategic agility required in modern digital political communication (Runturambi et al., 2024).

The structured management of digital spaces also required careful platform moderation to maintain a positive candidate image. By treating comment sections and interactive features as active spaces for public relations, the campaign team worked to project openness while insulating the candidates from disruptive digital pushback. This protective practice aligns with patterns seen in broader regional political ecosystems where digital managers carefully guide public discussions to shield candidates from online attacks (Hermawan, 2026). The systematic moderation of digital content allowed the campaign to highlight positive endorsements while managing critical feedback. Consequently, the digital platform operated as a highly controlled space where candidate narratives could be consistently reinforced without significant public disruption (Seto, 2022).

The integration of digital platforms with structured campaign initiatives created an ongoing loop of political socialization for young voters. Rather than treating social media as a passive billboard, the campaign utilized interactive formats to build digital habits among first-time voters, encouraging them to view online engagement as an extension of their civic participation (Akbar, 2025). This integration shows how digital tools can enhance political literacy when applied within a structured campaign design (Rasyid, 2025). By maintaining an active digital presence, the campaign established an accessible channel that converted abstract platforms into spaces for political learning. This sustained presence played an important role in making the candidates familiar figures within the digital routines of the local electorate (Lutfiyah et al., 2025).

The visual language used across these platforms relied heavily on symbols designed to convey accessibility, innovation, and leadership capacity. Every image, video transition, and text caption underwent review to ensure alignment with the overarching themes of local renewal and administrative transformation (Sunarsih et al., 2022). This visual approach reinforced the candidates' presence within local cultural contexts, ensuring that modern digital styles did not alienate traditional voting blocs (Erviana et al., 2025). By blending contemporary video techniques with local cultural references, the campaign created a distinct visual identity that separated the candidates from more conventional opponents. This visual differentiation proved vital in securing visibility within crowded digital spaces (Suryadi & Melisa, 2025).

The focus on digital distribution channels also required significant financial investments directed toward local information hubs and digital amplification networks. By partnering with prominent regional news aggregators and social media influencers, the campaign expanded its reach beyond its immediate follower base to access broader local audiences. This approach reflects how digital campaigns integrate paid distribution networks to establish a dominant presence within local information ecosystems (Pinem & Harahap, 2025). These partnerships ensured that campaign messaging appeared consistently within local news feeds, increasing the authority of the candidates'

platform. This strategic combination of organic content and paid amplification allowed the campaign to maintain high visibility throughout the official election cycle (Baskara et al., 2025).

The use of digital media also provided a strategic alternative for addressing deep-seated local identity dynamics. By focusing digital content on socio-economic development, youth empowerment, and administrative modernization, the campaign bypassed divisive cultural rhetoric, using inclusive digital symbols instead (Akmaliah & Nadzir, 2024). This choice of focus helped reduce potential social tensions often associated with competitive regional elections (Misbahuddin et al., 2025). The positive orientation of the digital content allowed the campaign to build a broad base of support that crossed traditional political lines. This strategic approach highlights how digital media can be used to construct a modern political brand that prioritizes forward-looking platforms over conventional political rivalries (Suharjimanoro & Lutfie, 2025).

The analytical framework governing this platform mapping confirms that digital campaigns require a close alignment between technological capabilities and empirical research design. By matching platform choices with demographic data and maintaining systematic content production, the campaign successfully executed a modern digital strategy within a local election (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This digital infrastructure served as the operational foundation for the broader elements of personal branding and impression management. The systematic distribution of content across Instagram and TikTok ensured that subsequent efforts to project specific candidate traits were supported by a reliable and far-reaching communication network.

Dramaturgical Impression Management: Front-Stage Curation and Strategic Self-Presentation

The empirical investigation reveals that the political campaign of Budi Rustandi and Nur Agis Aulia in the 2024 Serang City Election was systematically constructed through a meticulously planned front-stage curation designed to project an image of competence and grassroots accessibility. According to the foundational dramaturgical framework established by Erving Goffman (1959a), political actors consciously manage their public personas within specific social arenas to foster desirable perceptions among the audience. Within this framework, official digital platforms functioned as a highly controlled front stage where the candidate duo enacted their strategic self-presentation to capture the political imagination of young voters in Serang City. The synchronization of digital elements served not as a series of spontaneous online activities but as an elaborate theatrical performance designed to convey specific ideological values and programmatic capacities (Goffman, 1959b). This structured projection of public identity allowed the campaign to establish an emotional connection with the electorate, bridging the gap between formal political institutions and the informal socio-cultural aspirations of youth subcultures (Katili et al., 2025).

The maintenance of this front-stage performance required a rigorous behind-the-scenes operation, illustrating the critical role of the back stage in political impression management. Behind the seamless visual aesthetic presented to the public, the campaign deployed a dedicated infrastructure consisting of thirteen local content creators who were responsible for the daily execution of digital artifacts under strict quality standards. This professionalized back stage operated under formalized standard operating procedures where every graphical asset, video snippet, and text caption underwent hierarchical scrutiny before publication to prevent unintended symbolic distortions (Santoso & Sinaga, 2024). Furthermore, the operation was structurally reinforced by the utilization of premium social media monitoring tools that tracked digital metrics and public responses in real time. This sophisticated surveillance mechanism allowed the campaign team to perform continuous censorship and rapid damage control, transforming potential public relations crises into managed opportunities for proactive political messaging (Yuniar et al., 2026).

To deepen the analytical understanding of these digital adaptations, the strategic deployment of specific impression management tactics can be systematically mapped against the empirical manifestations observed during the election period.

Table 2. Strategic Impression Management Matrix of the Budi–Agis Campaign

Impression Management Tactic	Digital Content Manifestation	Targeted Public Perception	Primary Media Channel
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Ingratiation	Interactive multi-axis public dialogue forums, collaborative community engagement, and digital responses to civic complaints	Empathetic, accessible, responsive, and deeply connected to local welfare	Instagram and TikTok
Self-Promotion	Non-fictional highlights of legislative experience, administrative competence, and social entrepreneurship milestones	Highly qualified, professional, competent, and institutionally capable	Instagram and Facebook
Exemplification	Documentary coverage of agricultural integration, livestock management, and micro-enterprise assistance	Morally committed, hard-working, visionary, and economically grounded	TikTok and Instagram

Source: Primary empirical interview protocols and social media monitoring documentation, 2024.

The systematic operationalization of the ingratiation tactic was primarily achieved through the digital amplification of interactive public dialogue forums known as Grebeg Bugis. This specific content format allowed the candidates to showcase high responsiveness toward pressing local issues, such as structural unemployment, infrastructure deficits, and creative economy stagnation (Erviana et al., 2025). By visually displaying direct interactions between the politicians and ordinary residents, the campaign successfully transformed traditional political monologues into participatory digital dialogues. This method aligns with modern political communication models where the projection of an empathetic persona is prioritized to break down the perceived psychological barriers between regional leaders and the younger demographic (Suryadi & Melisa, 2025). The interactive nature of these broadcasts fostered a sense of political inclusion among viewers, converting passive social media users into active members of an virtual political community (Suseno & Utami, 2022).

Concurrently, the campaign utilized self-promotion as a complementary tactic to emphasize institutional readiness and balance the grassroots focus of their messaging. This dimension of the performance was characterized by the deliberate exhibition of Budi Rustandi’s extensive legislative tenure alongside Nur Agis Aulia’s accomplishments as an agricultural entrepreneur. The strategic dissemination of these professional narratives was intended to reassure the public of the duo’s technical competency in regional governance and fiscal administration (Baskara et al., 2025). By contrasting Budi’s political mastery with Agis’s innovative entrepreneurial record, the campaign created a comprehensive identity that appealed to both traditional voters and reform-minded youth. This dual-narrative approach demonstrates that contemporary self-presentation requires a balanced combination of administrative authority and innovative outsidership to maximize electoral appeal in local democratic contests (Lees-Marshment, 2014).

The final tactical component involved exemplification, which was visually codified through extensive documentary coverage of candidate visits to local farms, traditional marketplaces, and small businesses. Nur Agis Aulia’s established public identity as the "Juragan Kambing" provided an authentic empirical foundation for this tactic, making the visual representation of agricultural engagement highly credible to the public (Montoya, 2005). These digital field reports were carefully produced to project a moral commitment to economic self-sufficiency, positioning the candidates as

active problem solvers rather than detached political elites. The repetitive exposure of these industrious imagery reinforced the perception that the political platform was directly rooted in the socio-economic realities of the working class. Consequently, the digital space became an analytical vehicle for validating the candidates' personal authenticity, an attribute that has become increasingly vital for capturing votes in highly competitive local elections.

A critical dimension of this dramaturgical execution was the strategic investment in a paid amplification network to ensure extensive distribution across the regional media ecosystem. The campaign deliberately secured commercial partnerships and paid endorsements with high-traffic local informational hubs, including prominent regional digital portals and independent municipal aggregators. This media strategy allowed the digital team to bypass standard organic distribution limits, ensuring that curated campaign narratives achieved dominant visibility within the local information feed. The use of paid networks represents a calculated effort to manage the local information environment, effectively creating an echo chamber that consistently validated the political viability of the candidates. This pattern of resource allocation indicates that contemporary impression management depends as much on the structural control of distribution networks as it does on the creative production of political content.

Multi-Dimensional Image Formation and the Reality of Offline Electoral Conversion

The construction of the political image of Budi Rustandi and Nur Agis Aulia during the 2024 Serang City Election can be comprehensively evaluated through Kenneth Boulding’s multi-dimensional framework consisting of space, time, relationship, and value. On the dimension of space, the campaign achieved immense dominance within the local digital ecosystem through a calculated mixture of official accounts, paid media endorsements, and decentralized volunteer channels. The time dimension was strategically operationalized by initializing digital content production five months prior to the official campaign window, generating a persistent accumulation of positive visibility that reinforced voter familiarity. Social relationships were successfully cultivated via youthcentric community initiatives like Serang Menyala and the Youth Volunteer Organization (Gemaz), which embedded the candidate brand into local network structures. Finally, the value dimension was articulated through consistent policy narratives, juxtaposing Budi's extensive legislative experience against Agis's established reputation as the populist grassroots "Juragan Kambing".

The psychological trajectory of young voters responding to these spatial and temporal stimuli operates through an intricate cognitive mechanism that extends far beyond mere passive exposure to digital algorithms. Initial contact with the candidates’ curated algorithmic output triggers primary perceptual cognitive processing among first-time and youth demographics in Serang City (Al-Ra'zie & Maulana, 2025). This digital exposure cultivates an intrinsic motivation for additional political information search, driving young citizens to actively evaluate candidate platforms and verify authentic civic engagement (Sihombing, 2024). Empirical responses demonstrate that this information-seeking behavior successfully translates cognitive comprehension into positive political attitudes and resilient voting intentions among youthful cohorts (Akbar, 2025). The transition from computational visibility to stable psychological support illustrates how decentralized digital channels foster political socialization and habituate youth participation in localized democratic spaces (Parerungan & Julyarman, 2026).

To clarify the analytical relationship between structural digital inputs and subsequent psychological outputs among the target demographic, specific operational indicators can be systematically mapped.

Table 3. Multi-Dimensional Image Formation Framework and Voter Response Indicators

Image Dimension	Digital Campaign Stimulus	Media Ecosystem Type	Youth Cognition Indicator
Space	Omnipresent distribution of targeted visual assets across	Integrated multi-channel paid and earned media hubs	Heightened mental availability and baseline candidate recognition

	multi-platform networks		
Time	Extended multi-month content scheduling and persistent archival visibility	Longitudinal digital campaign architecture	Cumulative trust building and sustained recognition
Relationship	Strategic deployment of youth community hubs, esports leagues, and creative contests	Decentralized collaborative peer networks	Social affinity, peer group validation, and identity alignment
Value	Interactive policy dialogues, community focus groups, and populist economic narratives	Reciprocal participatory information channels	Substantive ideological agreement and positive voting intention

Source: Adapted from Boulding (1956) and verified through empirical stakeholder triangulation, 2024.

While the multi-dimensional framework explains how digital channels effectively optimize candidate visibility, a critical paradox emerges regarding actual offline electoral conversion. The empirical data reveals that despite the extensive digital machinery deployed, the campaign leadership explicitly recognized that definitive electoral conversion must be secured through physical operations. Virtual popularity functions primarily as a psychological catalyst to enhance regional visibility and expand messaging reach among the younger electorate. The actual conversion of these digital attitudes into official ballots relies fundamentally upon traditional party machinery, physical coalition networks, and direct face-to-face community mobilization. This convergence demonstrates that while social media serves as an efficient tool for image construction, physical campaign networks remain indispensable for securing local executive power.

The efficiency of this digital-to-offline convergence is empirically demonstrated by analyzing the final electoral outcomes and the formal financial statements of the campaign. The Budi–Agis pairing secured an absolute electoral victory by accumulating 212,262 votes, which constituted 59.7% of the total valid votes cast in Serang City. Crucially, this decisive political victory was achieved with a formal campaign expenditure of only Rp750,015,067.81 as recorded in the official campaign financial reports. This figure stands in sharp contrast to their primary competitors, Ratu Ria Maryana and Subadri Ushuludin, who expended a much larger budget totaling Rp2,338,450,000.00. This financial discrepancy indicates that strategic investments in digital micro-targeting and coordinated local media endorsements can optimize resource efficiency, allowing campaigns to maximize outreach while minimizing traditional field costs.

This financial disparity raises critical academic concerns regarding the growing commercialization of digital political spaces and the emergence of asymmetrical digital democracies. The capacity to deploy sophisticated data analytics, secure premium monitoring systems, and purchase extensive endorsements from prominent municipal information hubs requires substantial financial power. This economic requirement presents a significant barrier to entry for reformist candidates who possess innovative policies but lack substantial campaign capital (Hermawan, 2026). When digital public squares are dominated by wealthy political operations, the democratic ideal of equitable civic communication becomes severely compromised (Patty et al., 2025). Consequently, the local digital landscape risks transforming from an open participatory arena into a commercialized environment where political visibility is heavily dependent on financial investments.

This structural asymmetry is further complicated by the socio-cultural dynamics of local electorates, where transactional political expectations frequently intersect with digital messaging. In many regional Indonesian contexts, local political behavior is shaped by long-standing clientelistic

networks and immediate material reciprocity (Pinem & Harahap, 2025). The deployment of digital campaigns must constantly navigate these traditional offline expectations, balancing modern media platforms with established community norms (Akmaliah & Nadzir, 2024). Successful campaigns often weave digital narratives around existing socio-religious identities and local economic grievances to maintain cultural relevance (Khamdan, 2025). Thus, the digital image is rarely a detached aesthetic construct; rather, it represents a calculated negotiation with the deep-seated sociological realities of the local constituency.

Furthermore, the integrity of digital image construction is subject to increasing scrutiny from regulatory bodies and legal frameworks governing regional elections. The spread of anonymous black campaigns, computational propaganda, and manipulative digital assets presents an ongoing challenge for electoral oversight commissions (Zarkasi et al., 2025). Candidates must actively manage their online reputations against strategic digital attacks while ensuring that their own platforms remain within legal parameters (Suharjimantoro & Lutfie, 2025). This defensive requirement highlights that digital spaces are highly contested environments where political survival demands constant vigilance and reactive media management (Runturambi et al., 2024). A candidate's public image is therefore continuously shaped by this defensive digital posturing, making institutional monitoring a key variable in modern campaign success.

The digital campaign of Budi and Agis illustrates a broader shift toward the marketization of local government elections in Indonesia. Political candidates are increasingly constructed, packaged, and distributed to the electorate using advanced commercial marketing methodologies (Lees-Marshment, 2014). This trend risks prioritizing curated media personas over substantive policy debates and long-term governance capabilities (Sunarsih et al., 2022). When superficial visual trends and brief digital videos become the primary methods of political interaction, the depth of democratic discourse can be diminished (Seto, 2022). Media channels can easily be manipulated to project idealized versions of leadership that may not reflect actual governance capacities or policy commitments (Fanani et al., 2026).

This tension between digital presentation and governance reality underscores the importance of media literacy among the local electorate. If young voters rely entirely on social media feeds for political information, they remain vulnerable to strategic emotional manipulation and superficial messaging (Rasyid, 2025). Developing critical digital literacy is essential to ensure that the youth demographic can distinguish between curated media performances and realistic policy proposals (Lutfiyah et al., 2025). The 2024 Serang City Election demonstrates that while digital tools can optimize campaign efficiency and bypass expensive traditional structures, they also require a highly discerning electorate to maintain democratic accountability. Future political contests will undoubtedly replicate these digital strategies, making the analytical critique of digital image formation a necessity for understanding contemporary local democracy (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The empirical evidence demonstrates that the strategic utilization of Instagram and TikTok by Budi Rustandi and Nur Agis Aulia during the 2024 Serang City Election functioned as a highly sophisticated mechanism for political image construction and audience micro-targeting. Through the lens of political branding, impression management, and multi-dimensional image formation, the campaign successfully combined calculated visual curation and structural digital distribution to cultivate strong cognitive resonance and positive voting intentions among the dominant youth demographic. While the digital apparatus optimized communication efficiency and achieved immense spatial dominance at a significantly lower financial cost compared to traditional political campaigns, the final electoral victory remained fundamentally dependent on the synchronized convergence of online visibility and offline grassroots party mobilization. Ultimately, this local political phenomenon underscores a profound shift toward the professionalization of regional electoral communication in Indonesia, highlighting how digital media can transform candidate branding while simultaneously exposing structural asymmetries regarding financial capacity and equitable access within the contemporary digital public square.

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