

Analysis of the Content of Religion-Based Identity Politics Branding for the 2024 North Sumatra Gubernatorial Election on Social Media

Akbar Aldi Kautsar¹, Hasan Sazali², Afwan Syahril Manurung³
^{1,2,3}Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse how religious identity is used as a political branding strategy in the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election, and the communicative and social implications of this practice in the digital space. Using a qualitative content analysis, this study examined the official accounts of candidate pairs, digital volunteers, political influencers, and public conversations across various forms, including images, campaign videos, captions, tweets, comments, and hashtags. The results of the study show that religion-based identity politics is the dominant strategy in social media. Candidates and campaign teams actively utilise religious symbols, narratives, and figures to build a religious, trustworthy, and moral image. The endorsement of religious figures through digital testimonials strengthens the candidate's moral legitimacy, while religion-based content is disseminated not only top-down by official accounts but also horizontally through supportive communities and anonymous accounts. Religious content has been shown to have higher digital engagement than neutral content; however, it has also led to polarisation in the commentary space over the legitimacy of using religious symbols in politics.

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Corresponding Author:

Akbar Aldi Kautsar

Fakultas Dakwah dan Komunikasi, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara

Email: akbar4004243012@uinsu.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2024 North Sumatra Governor election is one of the strategic moments in the dynamics of local democracy in Indonesia. The regional elections are no longer just a conventional electoral competition; they have become an intense digital political communication arena, driven by the rapid spread of information technology and social media. This transformation marks a paradigm shift in political campaigning, from a face-to-face and mainstream media approach to a digital platform-based strategy that enables fast, massive, and repeatable distribution of messages [1].

From the perspective of political communication, social media is seen as a new public space (Digital Public Sphere) which functions not only as a means of disseminating information, but also as an arena for the formation of meaning, identity, and public opinion [2]. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have become a key instrument in electoral campaigns in various countries, including in developing democracies, due to their ability to build emotional closeness, personalise candidates, and mobilise identity-based support [3], [4]. In the context of the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election, successful candidates and teams use social media not only to convey their vision, mission, and work programs, but also to build a political image (Political Branding).

According to the theory of political branding, political candidates are positioned like a brand (fire), constructed through symbols, narratives, values, and emotions to create differentiation and voter loyalty [5], [6]. One of the prominent branding strategies in political contestation in pluralistic societies is the branding of religion-based identity politics. Faith-based identity politics branding refers to a systematic attempt to construct a candidate's image by associating them with specific religious values, symbols, practices, and authorities. This strategy does not solely represent the candidate's personal religiosity but also serves as a political communication tool to create symbolic and affective closeness with a group of voters who share a common religious identity [7].

Research by Barton et al. [8] suggests that religion is often commodified in electoral politics as a source of moral legitimacy and collective identity, especially in societies with high levels of religiosity. North Sumatra, as a multicultural and multireligious region with diverse ethnicities and beliefs, including Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, provides a complex socio-political context for the practice of identity politics. In a pluralistic society, religious identity can serve as a source of social cohesion; however, it can also fragment when used exclusively in political contestation [9]. Religion-based identity politics on social media tends to increase polarisation and strengthen divisions between "ingroup" and "outgroup", especially when campaign messages are packaged in a narrative of morality and claims of a single truth [10].

Social media, as a campaign medium, possesses the characteristics of openness and algorithmization that enable political messages to spread without strict editorial control. Platform algorithms tend to amplify emotional and controversial content, so religious symbols and narratives are often used to amplify political messages [11]. The phenomenon of the echo chamber and the Filter Bubble has the potential to narrow the space for dialogue across identities and strengthen sectarian politics, as found in various studies of digital political communication [12]. Through the content analysis approach (Content Analysis), this study seeks to systematically examine how religious symbols, narratives, and representations are used in the content of the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election campaign on social media. The analysis is not only focused on the messages produced by candidates and campaign teams, but also on netizens' responses in the form of comments, re-uploads, memes, and criticisms, which are an integral part of the political digital communication ecosystem.

Previous research has demonstrated that social media user interactions significantly influence public perceptions of a candidate's religious image [13]. This research aims to

understand the relationship between religion, social media, and electoral politics in the context of Indonesian local democracy. This study seeks to answer, among other objectives, whether social media played a role in the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election as an inclusive deliberative democratic space or as a medium for reproducing exclusive and divisive religious identity politics. The findings of this study are expected to make theoretical contributions to the study of digital political communication and political branding, as well as practical contributions to the development of ethical recommendations regarding the use of religious identity in political campaigns on social media. Thus, this research is a crucial reflection on the future of a civilised, diverse local democracy, a key strength of the Indonesian nation.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a content analysis method. Subakti et al. [14] state that the qualitative approach aims to understand the phenomena experienced by the research subject, including behaviour, perception, motivation, and action. Judging [15], it was added that qualitative research has two main objectives: to describe and to explain, most of which are narrative and explanatory. In this study, the method employed is qualitative content analysis, a technique that focuses on the content of a text or document. Cohen et al. [16] define content analysis as a research method that employs a set of procedures to draw valid conclusions from textual data. This study aims to evaluate students' short stories, with a particular focus on the intrinsic elements they contain. This approach is used to identify, classify, and analyse political messages that incorporate religious identity in gubernatorial candidates' social media branding strategies during the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election campaign.

The object of this research is social media-based political campaign content that represents religious identity, both produced and circulated by the official accounts of gubernatorial candidates, campaign teams, digital volunteers, active supporters, including political influencers, and netizens through public comments relevant to religious and identity issues. The social media platforms analysed include Instagram, Facebook, Twitter (X), and TikTok, selected based on their popularity and the intensity of use in digital political campaigns in Indonesia. Research data sources encompass various forms of content, including digital images and posters, campaign videos, captions, tweets and comments, and popular hashtags containing religious and political content [17]. The validity of the data in this study is maintained through several strategies, namely source triangulation by comparing findings between social media platforms and between digital actors to ensure data consistency, peer debriefing through discussion of analysis results with peers or supervisors to minimize the biases of researchers' interpretations, and trail audits by storing digital content archives and documentation of the entire data collection and analysis process systematically as a form of Transparency and Methodological Accountability [18].

This research has several methodological limitations that the researcher is aware of. First, from the aspect of sample limitations and representativeness, the research data was focused on content from specific social media platforms and within a limited campaign time span. Therefore, the findings of this study are not intended to be statistically generalised to

the entire social media ecosystem or to all voter behaviour in North Sumatra. However, this study aims to produce an in-depth understanding (analytic generalisation) of the patterns, strategies, and tendencies of the use of religious identity in digital campaigns. Regarding weaknesses in proving causality, the qualitative content analysis method is not designed to establish a direct cause-and-effect relationship between the content of a campaign based on religious identity and changes in people's voting attitudes or behaviours. This study does not measure the quantitative impact or electoral effect of campaign messages; instead, it focuses on analysing the representation, narrative, and political communication strategies employed. Thus, research findings are more interpretive and exploratory, opening the door to further research using quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to test causal relationships empirically.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

A content analysis of social media content from the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election campaign found that representations of religious identity emerged consistently and could be classified into several main categories. These categories include religious visual symbols, religious practices, and associations with religious figures or institutions. In the religious visual symbols category, campaign content featured candidates with religious attributes such as religious attire, symbols of places of worship, and religious-themed visual elements in digital poster designs. In the religious practices category, candidates were depicted engaging in religious activities, such as praying together, attending religious holidays, or interacting with congregations. Meanwhile, the religious association category was evident through the candidates' presence with religious figures, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), churches, or specific religious communities. Through the coding process, these representations demonstrated that religious symbols and practices were not incidental but instead were used repeatedly and deliberately. This suggests that religious identity was constructed as symbolic political capital to establish moral legitimacy and foster emotional closeness with voters based on their religious affiliation.

Table 1. TikTok Content Analysis Framework

Unit of Analysis	Content Categories	Analysis Indicators	Forms of Representation	Analytical Meaning
Campaign Video	Visual Religious Symbols	Worship attributes, religious attire, and the setting of the place of worship	Candidates wearing religious attire, religious symbols	Construction of visual and personal religious images
Campaign Video	Worship Practices	Joint prayer, commemoration of religious holidays	Documentation of religious services, interactions with the congregation	Moral legitimacy through performative religiosity
Audio & Text Overlay	Affective Narratives	Religious diction, moral appeal	Short captions, running text, voice-overs	Formation of emotional closeness among voters
User Interaction	Affirmative Responses	Likes, prayer comments, symbolic support	Religious emojis, spiritual praise	Collective reproduction of religious identity
User Interaction	Critical Responses	Satire, criticism of the politicisation of religion	Negative or satirical comments	Resistance to identity exclusivism

Source: Researcher 2025

The content analysis of campaign captions, slogans, and texts shows that religious narratives can be categorised into several main themes: moral leadership, trustworthiness

and justice, and partisanship toward the community. These themes emerged predominantly in the verbal messages accompanying the campaign's visual content. The moral leadership narrative is characterised by religious diction that emphasises morality, honesty, and spiritual responsibility. The narrative of trustworthiness and justice is often linked to political promises and work programs, thus positioning public policies as embodiments of religious values. Meanwhile, the narrative of partisanship toward the community reinforces the impression that candidates represent the collective interests of particular religious groups. Analytically, these findings demonstrate that religion serves as an interpretive framework in political branding, where political choices are constructed as moral and religious rather than purely rational or programmatic.

Table 2. Twitter Content Analysis Framework (X)

Unit of Analysis	Content Categories	Analysis Indicators	Forms of Representation	Analytical Meaning
Text tweets	Religious Normative Narratives	Moral diction, religious legitimacy	Religious Opinion, Ethical Call	Religion as a Legitimation of Leadership
Campaign tweets	Moral-Political Framing	Religion is linked to the program	Claims of Justice, Trust, and Partisanship	Politics as a Moral Obligation
Hashtags	Collective Identity	Religiously-themed hashtags	Religious-Political Hashtags	Identity Mobilisation and Polarisation
Retweets and quotes	Contestation of Meaning	Ideological support or criticism	Public Debate	Twitter as an Arena of Discursive Conflict
Replies	Critical Responses	Accusations of politicising religion	Normative Criticism	Resistance to Religious Framing

Source: Researcher 2025

Cross-platform content analysis reveals significant differences in the form and intensity of religious identity representation. On Instagram and TikTok, content is dominated by visual-emotional categories, including short videos of religious activities, portraits featuring religious figures, and affective personal narratives. This type of content emphasises the symbolic and emotional connection between candidates and voters. Conversely, on Facebook and Twitter (X), religious identity content appears more frequently in normative and argumentative narrative categories, such as text posts, political opinions, and moral discourse linking religion to leadership legitimacy. These differences indicate that content strategies are tailored to the audience characteristics and algorithmic mechanisms of each platform. Analytically, these findings reinforce the argument that the political branding of religious identity is adaptive and contextual, designed to maximise message resonance across various digital platforms.

Content analysis of netizen comments and interactions yielded two main response categories: affirmative and critical. Affirmative responses were characterised by expressions of support, prayers, and a strengthening of the candidate's religious identity. These comments often reproduced the same religious narratives as campaign messages. Conversely, critical responses emerged in the form of rejection of the politicisation of religion, satire, and calls to separate religion from electoral interests. These critical comments demonstrate some netizens' awareness of the risks of exclusivism and social polarisation.

From a content analysis perspective, the existence of these two response patterns suggests that religious identity politics content is not received uniformly, but instead triggers a contestation of meaning in the digital public sphere. The analysis reveals that social media

played a more significant role in the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election as a platform for reproducing identity politics rather than as a space for inclusive deliberation. This is evident in the dominance of emotional and moral content, as well as netizen interaction patterns, which tend to reinforce the identity positions of each group. Through algorithmic mechanisms, emotional religious identity content tends to gain higher visibility, thus reinforcing the echo chamber phenomenon.

This condition limits cross-identity dialogue and reinforces the dichotomy of *"ingroup"* and *"outgroup"* in digital political discourse. The overall content analysis reveals that religious identity and political branding have proven effective communication strategies for building the image and loyalty of certain voters. However, this strategy also has profound implications for the quality of local democracy, particularly in a multicultural society like North Sumatra. Social media plays a dual role as a means of political mobilisation and a space vulnerable to identity-based social fragmentation. Therefore, the use of religious identity in digital campaigns should be situated within the ethical framework of political communication to prevent democracy from being reduced to mere symbolic competition between identities.

3.2. Discussion

Analysis of the Content of Religion-Based Identity Politics Branding for the 2024 North Sumatra Gubernatorial Election on Social Media

The study's results indicate that the use of religious symbols, both visually and narratively, is the dominant strategy for shaping candidates' images during the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election campaign. Of the 150 posts analysed during the three-month campaign span, approximately 45% contained religious elements, including religious attributes (such as peacocks, robes, crosses, and rosaries), places of worship settings (mosques and churches), and scripture quotes. These findings reflect the practice of political branding, as described by [6], in which the candidate's image is built through symbolic associations with moral values and a collective identity that resonates with voters, in line with the research of Mardhiah [19] and Hefner [10].

Religious symbols in political campaigns serve as a source of moral legitimacy and a strong representation of public identity. It is essential to note that the findings of this content analysis reveal a correlation between the intensity of religious messages and high response rates or public sentiment on social media; however, they do not directly establish a causal relationship between religious branding and changes in people's voting behaviour. Qualitative content analysis methods enable the mapping of patterns of representation and response, but are not designed to measure electoral impact or changes in voter preferences over time. Without the support of panel survey data, experiments, or studies of voter behaviour before and after the campaign, these findings should be understood as indicative of broader political communication trends, rather than as deterministic evidence of the direct influence of religious branding on voters' political choices. Religious symbols in campaign content also serve as a central element in a candidate's narrative.

Candidates are often featured in religious activities, such as leading prayers, attending religious celebrations, or receiving blessings from religious leaders. This practice

aligns with Fadhil's [20] findings on the role of religious symbols and rites in Indonesian electoral politics, as well as with the concept of character narrative in political branding, which emphasises candidates' images as moral and religious figures [21]. However, the interpretation of religious symbols and narratives is inseparable from the potential subjectivity of researchers, especially during coding and categorisation. Coding bias is one of the important limitations of this study. The determination of categories such as "religious identity narratives", "moral claims", or "religious segmentation" is highly dependent on the researcher's interpretation of the context of the symbols and language used. Without inter-coder reliability procedures or support for transparent natural language processing (NLP)-based analysis, the interpretation of religious identity content can be subjective. Therefore, the results of this analysis should be read as a reflective, contextual construction of meaning, not as a completely objective classification.

This limitation also presents opportunities for further research that combines qualitative analysis with quantitative or computational techniques to enhance the reliability of findings. The study's findings also reveal a strategy of segmenting campaign content by audience religious identity. The narrative for the Muslim community emphasises trust, justice, and morality, while the Christian community's campaign message tends to elevate the value of service and the morality of leadership. This strategy aligns with Plooy's [22] view on the use of identity politics in the context of populist democracy, as well as with the concept of collective identity proposed by Prasatya [23]. However, without historical comparisons with previous contests, such as the 2018 North Sumatra gubernatorial election, it is not easy to ascertain whether this segmentation pattern is an innovation in the 2024 gubernatorial election or simply a continuation of the previously entrenched practice of identity politics. The absence of historical comparative analysis is another limitation in this study. Previous studies have shown that religion-based identity politics has played a significant role in the 2018 North Sumatra gubernatorial election.

Without comparing the patterns of symbols, narratives, and public responses between the two contests, this study has not been able to comprehensively explain whether social media in the 2024 gubernatorial election reinforces, changes, or simply reproduces the old pattern of religious identity politics. Therefore, the findings of this study are more appropriately positioned as a contemporary portrait of religion-based political branding rather than as a long-term evolutionary analysis. The campaign's communication style, grounded in religious identity, tends to be emotional and symbolic, with the candidate portrayed as a representative of the people's voice and the guardian of the faith's values. This strategy has been proven to result in higher engagement rates than programmatic content.

These findings align with those of Nordin et al. [24], which suggest that emotion- and identity-based content has greater potential for virality on social media. However, high engagement is also accompanied by debate, criticism, and hate speech, indicating a risk of social polarisation. As stated by Nastase et al. [25], identity can serve as both a tool of cohesion and exclusion, depending on how it is constructed in public spaces. Overall, this study confirms that social media plays a crucial role in strengthening horizontal religious identity politics. Religious identities are not only built top-down by candidates and campaign teams, but are also reproduced laterally by digital communities through reposts, comments,

memes, and alternative narratives. However, these findings must be considered in light of the existing methodological limitations.

This research contributes to understanding the practice of branding religious politics in the context of the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election, while emphasising the importance of follow-up research that is comparative, longitudinal, and methodologically multimodal to assess the real impact of religious identity politics on voter behaviour and the quality of local democracy.

4. CONCLUSION

Religion-based identity politics branding has proven to be a dominant strategy in the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial candidate campaign on social media. Candidates and campaign teams actively utilise religious symbols, narratives, and figures to build an image as religious, trustworthy, and moral leaders. This strategy is realised through the use of religious attributes in campaign visuals, scripture passages, and representations of candidates' involvement in religious activities. This pattern reveals a precise segmentation of political communication by voters' religious background, with content tailored in terms of narrative, language, and publication timing to foster emotional connections with the targeted religious community. The role of religious leaders as digital endorsers is also a crucial element in providing moral legitimacy and enhancing public trust in candidates. The implications of this research are both theoretical and practical, as well as normative. Theoretically, these findings enrich the study of political communication and political branding by demonstrating that religious identity serves not only as a cultural symbol but also as a strategic instrument in shaping political imagery in the digital space. In practice, this study provides political practitioners and campaign teams with an understanding of the effectiveness and risks of using religious identity in communication strategies, especially the potential for polarisation and social conflict arising from exclusive, dichotomous narratives. Meanwhile, normatively, the results of this study affirm the importance of regulations, campaign ethics, and digital literacy within the community to ensure that the use of religious symbols in politics does not harm social cohesion and the quality of local democracy. Thus, social media needs to be understood not only as an efficient campaign tool but also as a public space that requires responsible communicative management to maintain social integration and inclusive democracy.

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