



THE POLITICAL IMAGING OF BOBBY AFIF NASUTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN WINNING THE 2024 NORTH SUMATRA GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the political image-building strategy employed by Bobby Afif Nasution through social media in his effort to win the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election (Pilgub Sumut). Utilizing a qualitative approach, the research draws on data from observations of TikTok and Instagram content, interviews with active voters, and digital documentation collected during the campaign period. The analysis reveals that Bobby Nasution's imaging strategy consists of four key aspects: personal branding, two-way interaction with the public, digital campaigning, and electability enhancement through positive narratives. This approach demonstrates the effective application of political and digital communication theories, evidenced by his consistent efforts to portray himself as a young, religious, and people-oriented leader. The strategy successfully shaped a positive public perception without employing negative narratives against political opponents, while strengthening emotional closeness with voters, particularly the younger generation. This study highlights the crucial role of social media as a primary channel for political communication in the context of modern electoral contests.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Zikir is a verbal recitation accompanied by heartfelt remembrance of Allah, involving utterances or reflections that purify and cleanse Him from unworthy attributes, followed by praise and commendations highlighting His perfect attributes, which exemplify greatness and purity. Zikir to Allah SWT refers to dzikrullah, or the act of reminding oneself of Allah SWT as the Supreme and Most Sacred Deity deserving of adoration. At that time, we shall adhere to all His directives and refrain from all His prohibitions. Subsequently, we shall pursue the sacred path to augment our understanding of Him.

Spiritualism is frequently linked to the concept of dhikr. Certain research indicate that spiritualism may resemble terrorism, since some individuals exploit dhikr as a political instrument or to intimidate others. Conversely, some assert that spiritualism facilitates an individual's connection with their deity, soothing their spiritual or psychological condition. What is the authentic significance of dhikr for individuals who regularly engage in it, given that dhikr encompasses several methodologies?

Zikir is renowned as an integral aspect of Sufism. Sufism refers to a doctrine focused on the development of spiritual consciousness to maintain proximity to God. By purging the heart of all afflictions, including arrogance, avarice, superiority, blind fanaticism, envy, ostentation, and others. Sufism has evolved into a facet of

Islam that underscores Islam Rahmatan li al'alamin by promoting akhlak al-karimah in everyday life, stemming from the application of Sufi principles.

Zikir may be conducted both independently and in a group setting. Independent dhikr is primarily conducted by persons who recite sentences extolling Allah at any time and location, with the phrases commonly include Subhanallah, Alhamdulillah, Laailaahailallah, and Allahu Akbar. Numerous evidences elucidate the significance and virtue of these four dhikrs, as well as the benefits and blessings that a servant will attain in both this life and the afterlife.

Additionally, there exists congregational dhikr. Congregational dhikr is typically conducted by structured organizations, including assemblies and Sufi orders. Indeed, a fundamental aspect of the order, consistently and obviously observed, is dhikr. Previous researchers, like Sholeh Hoeddin, have extensively discussed dhikr, notably in the work titled "The Concept of Repentance in the Naqshbandi Mujaddidi Order," published in *Teosofi: Journal of Sufism and Islamic Thought*. The work by Muhamad Basryul Muvid, titled "The Concept of the Samaniyah Order and Its Role in the Formation of Moral, Spiritual, and Social Values in Post-Modern Society," along with the article authored by Umar Muktar Azizi, Suheri Harahap, Ahmed Fernanda Desky, and Irwansyah, entitled "The Dynamics of the Samaniyah and Naqshbandi Orders in Religious Social Life in Sampali Deli Serdang," published in the *Journal of Mandalika Literature*, are noteworthy contributions. All three works examine the practice of dhikr within these orders. This study will elucidate the concepts of Sammaniyah dhikr and Naqshbandiyah dhikr, while also providing a comparative analysis of the two practices within these orders.

The Sammaniyah order is recognized for its audible dhikr, which incorporates components of tawassul to the spiritual teacher (sheikh) and the saints. The practice of dhikr serves not only to remember Allah but also to get blessings and spiritual direction from the mursyids. Conversely, the Naqshbandiyah Order prioritizes silent dhikr, executed internally without vocalization, emphasizing self-discipline and profound inner consciousness. This disparity indicates that while both seek to attain the purity of the soul, their methodologies and approaches are markedly divergent. This distinction is essential for comprehending how dhikr functions as a method for cleaning the soul and cultivating spiritual character.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research approach. This approach is chosen because it focuses on an in-depth understanding of the processes, meanings, and strategies behind Bobby Afif Nasution's political imaging on social media. Qualitative research is relevant in this context because political imaging involves subjective aspects such as public perception, personal narratives, the use of symbols, and social interactions—factors that cannot be measured numerically.

According to Sugiyono (2012), research methodology is defined as a scientific approach used to obtain data with the aim of describing, verifying, developing, and discovering knowledge or theory in order to understand, find solutions, and anticipate problems in human life.

This research consists of three stages. The first is the descriptive stage, in which the study describes social media content on TikTok and Instagram during the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election campaign period. The second is the reduction stage, in which the researcher reduces the information obtained in the first stage to focus on specific issues. The third is the selection stage, where the researcher elaborates on the selected focus in more detail and conducts in-depth analysis. The outcome of this stage is the construction of themes based on the data collected, which may result in new knowledge, hypotheses, or even theories (Gunawan, 2013).

Research Object and Subject

In this study, the object of research is the political image-building content produced by Bobby Afif Nasution and uploaded to his TikTok and Instagram accounts during the campaign period. This includes the messages, visuals, and communication strategies used in his digital campaign. The subject of the study is Bobby Afif Nasution and his personal social media accounts during the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election campaign.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection in this research involves several techniques. The observation technique is used to understand the context and conditions in the field. The researcher conducted direct observations of Bobby Afif Nasution's personal TikTok and Instagram accounts. This observation also includes analysis of the goals, video concepts, and narratives used in his social media content.

Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with active voters in the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election who use TikTok and Instagram. These interviews aim to obtain detailed insights into the political imaging

strategies employed and whether the participants perceived those strategies in a meaningful way. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format to allow flexibility in exploring specific information based on the respondents' experiences and perspectives.

Documentation is used as a complementary data collection technique, involving the gathering of related materials. This includes grouping social media content and recording interview evidence from the participants.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data Reduction: The analysis begins with collecting and selecting relevant posts, images, videos, and captions from Bobby Nasution's social media during the campaign period (25 September 2024 – 23 November 2024). Irrelevant data or content not related to political imaging strategies are excluded. **Categorization:** The data are then categorized into several political imaging types: (1) *Personal Branding Tool:* Content portraying Bobby Nasution as a young, visionary leader close to the people, conveyed through digital narratives. (2) *Political Interaction Medium:* Content involving greetings or responses to citizens' questions, using social media for two-way communication through comments, live streaming, or discussions. (3) *Digital Campaign Tool:* Content presenting his vision, mission, and policy programs. (4) *Electability Strengthening Strategy:* Content that reinforces his political image, such as visually engaging video designs and edits.

Data Interpretation: In this stage, the researcher analyzes how Bobby Nasution's political imaging strategies on social media shape public opinion. The effectiveness of these strategies in increasing his popularity and electability during the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election is assessed. The analysis results are then linked to the interview findings to draw conclusions regarding the impact of Bobby Afif Nasution's political imaging strategies.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Bobby Afif Nasution's Political Imaging Strategy on Social Media. Bobby Afif Nasution's political imaging strategy on social media demonstrates the use of political communication that is not only symbolic but also adaptive to the characteristics of digital media. Based on a series of analyses and interviews with Bobby Afif Nasution's active voters, four main types of political imaging on social media were identified as part of his strategy to win the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election: personal branding, public interaction, campaigning, and electability enhancement through content posted on Instagram and TikTok.

1. Personal Branding on Social Media

Social media can be used as a tool for personal branding by anyone. For a public figure seeking voter support, defining and shaping a personal concept that resonates with the public is crucial. Bobby Afif Nasution utilized various social media content for personal branding purposes.

In the context of political image theory proposed by Newman (1999), Bobby Afif Nasution constructed both a personal and leadership image through posts that highlighted his closeness with family, religious devotion, and warmth toward the people. This aligns with the personal image dimension, in which a candidate presents themselves as trustworthy, warm, and approachable. Content such as communal *dhikr* on National Santri Day or campaign appearances alongside his wife was used to reinforce the impression of a "young, religious leader who values family."



Figure 1. (a) October 19, 2024; (b) October 22, 2024; (c) November 9, 2024

This image-building effort reinforces the "political storytelling" strategy—delivering narratives that emphasize the human side of the candidate to build an emotional connection with voters (Newman, 1999). Instagram visuals and captions serve as the primary tools for conveying these narratives. Moreover, the consistent use of imagery highlighting Bobby Afif Nasution's joyful expressions strengthens his image as a leader who is approachable and connected to the people.

2. Political Interaction and Responsiveness

According to the social media in politics theory by Howard and Parks (2012), social media serves as a space for dialogue between candidates and voters. In this context, Bobby Afif Nasution demonstrated two-way interaction through content that showcased him engaging directly with citizens, receiving feedback, and visiting marginalized or remote areas. Examples of this can be seen in several of his social media posts:

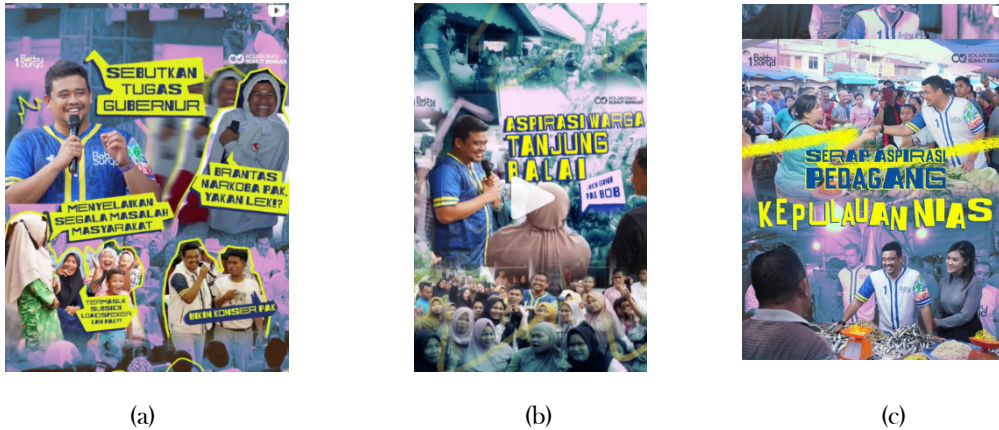


Figure 2. (a) October 24, 2024; (b) November 03, 2024; (c) October 21, 2024

These posts affirm that social media is no longer merely a one-way communication tool, but rather a platform to demonstrate a leader's responsiveness and symbolic—as well as actual—presence among the people. Such interactions shape public perceptions of leadership, conveying that the candidate is not only offering programs but is also willing to listen and be present with the community.

Direct engagement with marginalized communities, showing a willingness to listen to the aspirations of people living in areas often overlooked by mainstream media, helps construct the image of a leader who genuinely cares for the lower-middle class. The enthusiastic responses from residents indicate that Bobby Afif Nasution was well received by the people in these regions. As a result, even communities that are typically out of the media spotlight may be influenced to support Bobby Afif Nasution.

Video editing techniques, choice of camera angles, and selection of moments all serve to reinforce a political image that is interactive, humorous, approachable, modern, and humble. As expressed by one respondent, a teacher, Bobby's approach creates the impression of “a leader who is not rigid and relates well to the people's problems.” This strengthens the candidate's position by forming an emotional bond with voters.

3. Social Media as a Campaign and Mobilization Channel

Bobby Nasution's strategy of using social media in his political campaign reflects what Castells (2012) refers to as the “networked public sphere.” Social media enables the widespread dissemination of political messages and allows direct connection with voters—bypassing traditional media intermediaries. This is evident in several of his social media posts:



Figure 3. (a) November 01, 2024; (b) November 23, 2024; (c) November 13, 2024

The content explicitly encourages the public to vote, reinforcing the memory that Bobby Afif Nasution is candidate number 1 for Governor. The public is invited not to hesitate in supporting him. Bobby Afif Nasution also presents himself convincingly through educational messages such as *“a governor must be a protector of the people.”*

A key point that emerges from this imaging strategy is how Bobby Nasution uses social media to convince the public that he is a worthy candidate for governor, promoting his vision and mission without engaging in hate speech against his opponents. Instead, Bobby Afif Nasution emphasizes collaboration, sustainability, and unity. In a political climate that is prone to polarization, this approach builds the image of a mature, visionary, and inclusive leader.

Unlike conventional campaign methods, Bobby’s communication style on social media appears more inclusive and personal. He avoids burdening the public with grand, large-scale campaign events and extravagant stages. Instead, Bobby Afif Nasution chooses modest, community-centered campaigns, directly showcasing public responses that reflect strong acceptance of his presence.

In addition to fostering emotional closeness, this method also significantly reduces campaign expenses, thereby reinforcing an image of simplicity, authenticity, and protectiveness.

4. Strengthening Electability Through Positive Narratives

The ultimate goal of political image-building is to increase electability and achieve victory in democratic elections. An image of being honest, intelligent, and caring strongly influences a candidate’s electability. Campaign strategies that incorporate personal approaches and realistic policy programs can build greater trust among voters. The following are examples of content used by Bobby Afif Nasution on social media to strengthen his electability:

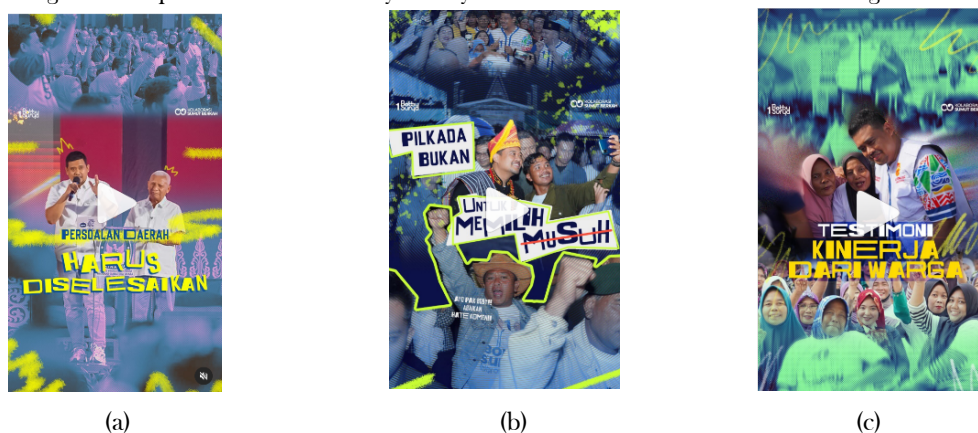


Figure 4. (a) November 07, 2024; (b) October 07, 2024; (c) October 24, 2024

A key takeaway from this image-building strategy is that Bobby Nasution does not use social media merely as a tool to attack opponents, but rather to construct a positive political narrative that emphasizes collaboration, sustainability, and unity. In a political climate vulnerable to polarization, this approach contributes to the image of a mature, visionary, and inclusive leader.

Content that explicitly encourages the public to vote, showcases citizen testimonials on successful programs, and employs casual and emotional language style serves as an example of political hard selling in a digital format. This represents a form of electoral mobilization that not only educates but also persuades and fosters voter commitment.

A strong narrative is the key to the success of this strategy. As one university student noted, *“A political figure who uploads such content clearly possesses political communication skills and understands that modern politics is all about narratives—narratives that make viewers subconsciously compare candidates with their opponents.”*

4. CONCLUSION

Bobby Afif Nasution's political imaging strategy on social media demonstrates the use of adaptive and effective political communication in the digital era. His personal branding approach—visualizing closeness with family, religious devotion, and simplicity in daily life—constructs a warm, human, and trustworthy leadership narrative. The application of Newman’s (1999) theory of political imaging proves relevant in shaping positive public perceptions, particularly through strong visual and narrative content on Instagram and TikTok.

In addition to personal branding, Bobby emphasizes the importance of direct interaction with the public on social media as a form of responsiveness. According to Howard and Parks (2012), the digital space is not merely a medium for message dissemination, but a platform for two-way dialogue that reflects the candidate’s concern and presence. This strategy portrays a leader who is humble, humorous, and close to the people, especially those in marginalized communities often neglected by mainstream media and political elites.

The entire campaign conducted by Bobby Afif Nasution was not solely aimed at gaining popularity, but was also directed at increasing electability through a positive political narrative. He successfully avoided polarization and hate speech, opting for an inclusive and educational approach that highlighted collaboration and sustainability. This approach built the image of a visionary and emotionally mature leader, and clearly demonstrated how social media can serve as a powerful tool for building voter loyalty effectively and efficiently in the increasingly competitive political landscape.

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