

Algorithmic Self-Presentation and Political Performativity in the Social Media Era

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ABSTRACT

Algorithm-driven social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram have transformed political communication from an ideological activity into an algorithmic performance. This study examines how political actors construct self-presentation through the logic of algorithmic visibility, emphasizing emotional and visual aspects rather than rational persuasion. Using qualitative visual content analysis of political videos, this study compares the Prabowo-Gibran campaign (Indonesia, 2024) with the digital performativity of Donald Trump and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) in the United States from 2020 to 2024, showing how political identity and electability are negotiated through platform algorithms. The study's results reveal two main patterns of algorithmic self-presentation: political entertainment in Indonesia and ideological polarization in the United States. Indonesian politicians adapt to TikTok's entertainment logic through humor, warmth, and performed authenticity, fostering a sense of closeness and empathy. By contrast, American politicians display emotional confrontation and ideological positions that align with algorithmic preferences for provocative, polarizing content. This study introduces the Digital Electability space, an arena where algorithmic visibility and performance metrics have replaced conventional political persuasion. Theoretically, it integrates Self-presentation (Erving Goffman), Algorithmic power (Taina Bucher), and Performativity (Judith Butler) to develop the concept of political algorithmic performativity.

KEYWORDS - Algorithmic Self-Presentation, Social Media, Political Performativity, Digital Electability Space

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology and the rise of algorithm-driven social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram have reshaped how politicians communicate, present themselves, and build electability in public spaces [1]. In the previous era, political communication was more oriented toward ideas, institutional images, and ideological narratives. However, in the algorithmic era, politics has transformed into digital performance that is adjusted to the logic of the platform, namely, visibility, engagement, and entertainment algorithms [2]. This phenomenon is referred to as algorithmic self-presentation, the strategy by which political actors adjust to algorithmic rules to gain visibility and closeness to the audience [3]. On social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, algorithms not only distribute messages but also function as mediatic actors that help determine who is seen and who is not [4]. As a result, political communication is no longer completely controlled by humans but becomes the outcome of negotiations among politicians, audiences, and algorithmic systems [5].

In the Indonesian context, this phenomenon is evident in the Prabowo-Gibran digital political campaign (2024 elections), which successfully created the "Prabowo Gemoy" (adorable Prabowo) image through TikTok and Instagram content. The political image, previously synonymous with militaristic and formal traits, has been transformed into a persona that is funny, relaxed, and close to young voters [6]. This strategy leverages TikTok's algorithms, including trending audio, short duration, visual effects, and fan participation (duets, remixes), to expand the reach of political content and build an entertaining political impression. Similar phenomena occur in other countries, including the United States. American politicians, such as Donald Trump and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), use social media to project strong, assertive, and heroic personas rather than friendly and funny ones. American political culture emphasizes individualism, the courage to speak out, and ideological consistency, so digital performance there emphasizes political positions more than social proximity. Algorithmic self-presentation takes different forms across cultural contexts. In Indonesia, algorithms are used to build social

closeness and political humor, whereas in America they are more often used to strengthen ideological confrontations and hyper-personal branding [7].

This difference shows that although digital platforms are global, their algorithms are cultural and contextual, adapting to each country's communication culture and user behavior. In Indonesia, emotional performativity is used to appear simple, humorous, and loving [8]. Algorithms reinforce entertainment politics and mild populism, turning political imagery into a funny spectacle that fosters emotional closeness. In America, the more prevalent ideological perspective is one that emphasizes appearing strong, heroic, and decisive. Algorithms reinforce confrontational politics and hyper-personal branding, turning political imagery into an ideological identity battle [9]. Both emotional performativity and ideological performativity are strategies to appear under the logic of algorithms, adapted to the culture of the audience and local algorithms. Based on the above background and comparative analysis, the research question is: What forms of algorithmic self-presentation and political performativity do political actors on social media employ?

2. METHODS

This study uses a comparative case study design [10], with two main units of analysis: the first is the case in Indonesia, namely the Prabowo-Gibran political campaign (2024) on TikTok and Instagram, focusing on entertainment politics and soft populism. The second is the case in the United States, Donald Trump and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's (AOC) political campaigns on TikTok and Instagram (2020–2024), focusing on confrontational politics and hyper-personal branding. The purpose of this design is to identify similarities and differences in algorithmic patterns and digital political performative styles across two distinct cultural contexts and political systems. The research is a multi-site, multi-level analysis in which each case is treated as a unique social context yet compared conceptually using the same theoretical framework (algorithmic self-presentation & political performativity).

Data Collection Techniques. This study uses qualitative data collection as the primary method. The Digital Observation Technique (Digital Ethnography / Netnography) involves non-participant observation of TikTok and Instagram accounts belonging to major political figures (Prabowo Subianto, Donald Trump, AOC) [11], [12]. The Visual Content Analysis Technique involves collecting political content in the form of TikTok videos and Instagram posts (feeds & reels) that are relevant to political campaigns in both countries [13], [14].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis was conducted using a qualitative visual content analysis approach that focuses on self-presentation, algorithmic adaptation, and political performativity. The goal is to understand how politicians present themselves in accordance with the logic of platform algorithms and within the context of political culture.

1. Performed Authenticity.

Indonesian context. In the TikTok and Instagram content of the Prabowo-Gibran campaign (2024), the political image is constructed through planned authenticity. Politicians appear spontaneous, funny, and close to the public, but the performance is algorithmically designed to drive engagement. The use of close-up angles, funny sound effects, and text overlays creates visual closeness. TikTok's algorithm favors positive expressions (smiles, laughter) and fast rhythms (10-15 seconds). This content gives an authentic impression, even though it is highly curated, creating a sense of performed authenticity. Authenticity here is the result of collaboration between humans and machines; not natural, but algorithmic.

In the United States, Donald Trump and AOC display authenticity through ideological authenticity and personal expression [15], [16]. Trump appears spontaneous, emotional, and provocative; AOC looks natural, speaking directly from home or in the kitchen with a cell phone camera. Authenticity here is not about emotional closeness but about ideological authenticity and personal belief. The simple video format, without over-editing, reinforces the impression of honesty and live broadcasting. Algorithmic authenticity is formed through rawness (the raw appearance that the Reels algorithm prefers).

2. Algorithmic Visibility.

Indonesian and American politicians negotiate with the platform's algorithmic logic, adjust content to stay relevant, appear on the FYP, and maintain engagement. In Indonesia, adaptation to Entertainment Logic is evident. Characteristics of algorithmic adaptation in Indonesia: use of trending sounds (TikTok viral songs), light and humorous captions, and reuploading content during prime time (night). TikTok's algorithm assesses content based on watch time and rewatch rate. The campaign team's strategy ensures that the video is 9–15

seconds long, with the emotional peak in the 3rd–5th second (the optimal retention zone). As a result, political content is packaged as entertainment rather than propaganda.

The context of the United States. Adaptation to Emotional Logic. US politicians use algorithms that amplify intense emotions (anger, pride, outrage). Trump used a short soundbite with a firm gesture. AOC uses moral rhetoric: "This is not about politics; it's about humanity." Instagram and TikTok in America prefer content with high emotional polarity. The more pro-con comments, the higher the chances of appearing on Explore/FYP. In the US, algorithms work as polarizing machines; in Indonesia, they work as entertainment machines.

3. Emotional Performativity.

Emotional performance is how politicians present themselves affectively to build digital connections. This includes facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, and visual narrative. Main expressions: in Indonesia, smiles, laughter, and friendly gestures; in America, angry, firm, and heroic expressions. Visual narrative: funny but caring (Indonesia); strong and brave (American). Affective goals: building sympathy and warmth (Indonesia); affirming power and beliefs (American). In Indonesia, political performance is arranged to entertain and unite. In America, political performance is structured to spark loyalty and resistance. Both forces operate under the same algorithmic logic: the stronger the affect, the higher the visibility.

4. Politics as Entertainment versus Politics as Polarization.

Indonesian Context: Political Entertainment. Politics is packaged in a light, funny, and even meme-friendly format. The Prabowo dancing show is used by users as a challenge template. Young creators produce a politically themed audio remix: the Gemoy (Adorable) Challenge for Change. Politics is no longer a discourse of ideas but a cultural performance. Digital electability is built through entertainment engagement, not rational persuasion. American Context: Algorithmic Polarization. American political content features an ideological identity battle: The Trump vs. Biden video, Save America vs. Democracy, is at stake. AOC fought the conservative narrative through a political duet on TikTok. In America, algorithms are becoming a divisive force. The more intense the debate, the higher the visibility score.

Building on the integration of the theories of Self-Presentation (Goffman), Algorithmic Power (Bucher), and Performativity (Butler), these findings show: Politicians no longer appear for the public but for algorithms. Every gesture, duration, and narrative is calculated to be liked by the machine. This is a new form of algorithmic dramaturgy. Authenticity is the performance produced. Prabowo and Trump are both the result of image construction to achieve digital visibility. Politics has shifted to an attention economy. Digital electability is a new form of political capital, resulting from the visibility loop algorithm.

These findings show that the practice of political communication on social media has shifted from ideological representation to algorithmic performance. Politicians are no longer just sending messages to the public but are staging self-images designed to be accepted and reinforced by the social media algorithms of TikTok and Instagram. This condition reinforces Goffman's theory of Self-presentation, with an expanded context. The social stage is now not only a space for human interaction but also a digital stage controlled by algorithmic systems. If Goffman divides interactions into front-stage and back-stage, then in the context of social media there is now an algorithmic-stage, a space in which political performance is produced to satisfy the logic of machine visibility.

Algorithms no longer function only as a means of content distribution but rather as mediatic actors that influence the form of political communication. This concept aligns with Bucher, who argued that algorithms have governing power, the ability to determine what appears, who is seen, and when a message reaches the audience. Algorithms have their own performative ideology, which shapes how politics should appear to be seen. These findings broaden the understanding of algorithmic self-presentation. Not only do humans adapt to machines, but machines also define publicly accepted aesthetics and political affects.

4. CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of algorithmic self-presentation on TikTok and Instagram shows how politics has shifted from messaging to performance. The main difference between Indonesia and America is not in the technology but in the affective style and culture of performance. In Indonesia, algorithms reinforce the politics of familiarity and entertainment. In America, algorithms reinforce the politics of confrontation and ideologization. Both show that in the algorithmic era, politics is no longer about the content of the message but about how to appear before machines. Politics in the age of social media is algorithmic politics. Politicians not only communicate with the public but also negotiate with machines, producing performances that conform to the platform's logic to

maintain a digital presence. Today's politics is played not only on the people's stage but also on the algorithmic stage. The public space has been transformed into a digital electability space, where power is determined not only by parties or conventional media but also by how visible a person is to algorithms. This phenomenon poses new challenges for democracy. How can political depth be maintained amid a performance culture increasingly dictated by machines?

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During manuscript preparation, the authors used Grammarly and ChatGPT (OpenAI) to improve English and ensure grammatical accuracy. After using these tools, the authors thoroughly reviewed and edited the text and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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