The Digital Brand Gap: Identity–Image Disconnection in Indonesian Political Parties on Social Media

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Abstract. This study examines the growing misalignment between political brand identity and public brand image in the context of Indonesia's digital political landscape. Drawing on a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the SALSA framework (Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, and Analysis), the study synthesizes 32 peer-reviewed publications from 2020 to 2025 that explore digital political branding, algorithmic mediation, and voter perception. Findings reveal that although political parties construct brand identities through curated narratives on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (X), public interpretations often diverge due to meme culture, satire, influencer framing, and algorithmic amplification. This identity–image gap is not merely a failure of communication but a structural outcome of the participatory, emotionally charged, and volatile nature of digital discourse. The study introduces the **Digital Brand Gap Framework**, which conceptualizes the interplay between strategic identity construction, social media mediation, and public reinterpretation. It offers both theoretical contributions to digital political communication and practical insights for designing adaptive, dialogic branding strategies in contemporary democracies.

Keywords: political branding, brand identity, brand image, digital politics, social media, Indonesia, algorithmic mediation, narrative distortion

Introduction

The rise of social media has profoundly transformed political communication, particularly in emerging democracies like Indonesia. As Johansson (2016) observes, social media platforms provide alternative avenues for political engagement beyond traditional media structures. Political parties today no longer rely solely on conventional mass media to disseminate their narratives; instead, they must navigate a dynamic and decentralized digital ecosystem shaped by public interaction, algorithmic exposure, and viral content (Prayudi, Susilo, & Probosari, 2025; Kristiyono & Widodo, 2025). The 2024 Indonesian presidential election, for instance, highlighted how candidates successfully utilized platforms like Instagram and X to enhance their emotional branding and connect with young voters (Utami & Fathana, 2024). Moreover, according to Karmila et al. (2024), social media not only functions as a communication tool but also facilitates the construction of political identity, intensifying both personalization and polarization in political discourse. These shifts have compelled political parties to adopt branding strategies—crafting visual identities, slogans, and symbolic messages—to appear more relatable and distinct in the digital political marketplace (Ahmad & Popa, 2014).

While brand identity reflects the intentional and strategic portrayal of a party's values, mission, and leadership, brand image denotes how these efforts are perceived, interpreted, or even distorted by the public. On social media, this relationship is highly unstable. User-generated content, meme culture, and influencer narratives often reframe or counteract the messages political actors seek to communicate. This produces a growing identity–image gap, where the official party narrative clashes with collective public perception. The volatility of this gap is intensified by the speed and interactivity of digital communication. As Karmila et al. (2024) argue, social media amplifies symbolic cues and identity politics, making political branding vulnerable to reinterpretation within emotionally charged echo chambers. In the context of the 2024 Indonesian election, Utami and Fathana (2024) found that

while candidates heavily invested in polished branding strategies, viral posts and memes often subverted these efforts by reshaping public discourse through humor or critique. Moreover, Ahmad and Popa (2014) emphasize that in emerging democracies like Indonesia, where political loyalty is fluid, the identity–image gap can decisively influence electoral behavior, especially among digital-native voters who trust peer-generated narratives over official party content. Thus, political actors must not only craft strategic identities but also actively monitor and engage with evolving public interpretations to minimize dissonance between brand identity and image (Kristiyono & Widodo, 2025).

In Indonesia, the problem is particularly acute. Political parties such as PSI, PKS, and PDIP have invested heavily in digital campaigns across platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter (X), projecting curated identities aimed at specific voter segments. For example, Utami and Fathana (2024) found that presidential and vice-presidential candidates in the 2024 election crafted emotional and experiential branding strategies to resonate with young, digitally engaged demographics. However, public discourse frequently undermines or reinterprets these efforts, resulting in unintended or even negative brand associations (Ahmad & Popa, 2014). Viral memes, parody accounts, and influencer commentaries have the power to subvert official messages, creating alternate readings that may diverge from the original intent (Karmila et al., 2024). Consequently, the political branding process becomes not only a matter of strategic communication but also a contested field of meaning-making mediated by digital actors beyond the party's control. As Kristiyono and Widodo (2025) emphasize, social media's participatory nature enables a multiplicity of voices to shape political narratives, often blurring the line between planned messaging and public reappropriation.

Despite increasing scholarly attention on political communication in digital spaces, few studies have comprehensively examined how the disconnect between brand identity and brand image emerges and evolves. While there is growing interest in the use of social media for campaigns, much of the literature tends to be siloed—either emphasizing the strategic efforts of political actors (Ahmad & Popa, 2014) or analyzing voter behavior and sentiment online (Karmila et al., 2024; Prayudi, Susilo, & Probosari, 2025). For instance, Kristiyono and Widodo (2025) focus on the structural role of social media in digital democracy, but do not directly address how misalignments between projected and perceived identities unfold over time. Similarly, Utami and Fathana (2024) analyze branding effectiveness across platforms, yet stop short of integrating these findings with the dynamics of public reinterpretation. This fragmentation results in a limited synthesis of how political communication strategies and audience reception co-construct political meaning in the Indonesian context.

To address this gap, this study conducts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the SALSA framework (Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, and Analysis). It synthesizes findings from 32 studies published between 2010 and 2024, providing a comprehensive conceptual model of political branding dissonance in Indonesia's social media landscape. This review is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1   : How do Indonesian political parties construct brand identity through social media strategies?
RQ2   : How is political brand image formed, altered, or distorted by public interaction in digital spaces?
RQ3   : What are the key factors contributing to the identity–image gap in Indonesia's political social media environment?

Methods

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the SALSA framework—Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, and Analysis (Booth et al., 2012)—to explore the disconnection between political brand identity and brand image in Indonesia's social media context. The search process was conducted across five major academic databases: Google Scholar, and Garuda. Keywords such as "political branding," "brand identity," "brand image," "social media," "Indonesia," and "digital campaign" were used. The inclusion criteria consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, conceptual papers, and literature reviews published between 2020 and 2025, written in either English or Indonesian, and focused on political branding in the digital sphere.

This figure 1 illustrates the application of the SALSA (Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, and Analysis) method. The process began with identifying 247 relevant sources from scholarly databases, followed by the appraisal and screening of 93 articles based on relevance and duplication. A final set of 32 articles was synthesized thematically. The analysis stage culminated in the formulation of the Digital Brand

Gap Framework, which conceptualizes the dissonance between political brand identity and public image within algorithm-driven social media environments.
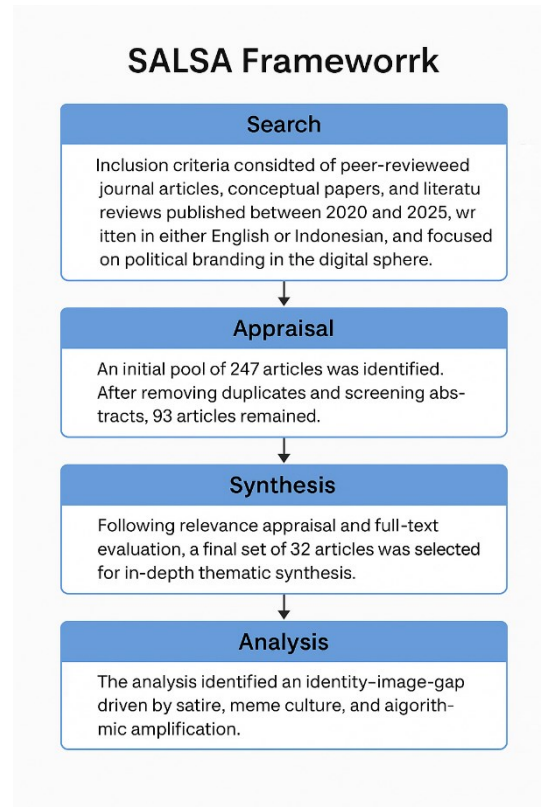

Figure 1. SALSA Framework applied to the systematic literature review process on political branding in Indonesia's digital landscape.

During the appraisal stage, each article was reviewed for conceptual relevance, methodological rigor, and contribution to understanding the brand identity–image dynamic on social media platforms. The synthesis phase involved organizing selected articles into a matrix detailing author(s), year, platform studied, identity/image focus, methodological approach, and key findings. Several key themes emerged, including digital personalization strategies, elite versus public framing, viral distortion, and digital perception gaps. In the analysis phase, findings were interpreted to construct a Digital Brand Gap Framework, which conceptualizes the flow between political brand identity (party-driven), media mediation (public interaction, algorithms, influencers), and brand image (public perception). The model highlights the dynamic and contested nature of political branding in the digital era.

Result and Discussion
Digital Brand Identity: What Do Parties Claim on Social Media?

Brand identity represents the ideal image a political party seeks to construct through strategic communication on digital platforms. In Indonesia, political parties utilize platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (now X) to project curated identities that resonate with targeted voter demographics. Dwipayana and Wibawa (2020) emphasize that symbolic visualization—such as color consistency, logos, and slogans—forms the cornerstone of digital brand identity strategies. Their study underlines how visual coherence and message clarity enhance audience recognition and loyalty. Likewise, Anggara et al. (2024) note that PSI builds its personal branding through millennial-styled messaging on social media, incorporating humor, pop culture, and anti-elite rhetoric to distinguish itself from establishment parties. For example, PSI leans heavily on TikTok to engage younger voters using bright visuals, trending audio, and informal language, branding itself as youthful, progressive, and anti-corruption (Anggara et al., 2024). PKS, by contrast, adopts a moral-religious tone on Instagram, regularly sharing da'wah content, social outreach, and imagery of religious leaders to appeal to conservative Muslim constituencies (Karmila et al., 2024). PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle), meanwhile, focuses its digital presence on Twitter/X, leveraging nationalist rhetoric,

historical imagery, and leadership figures like Ganjar Pranowo to reinforce themes of continuity and national unity (Hadmar et al., 2024). These parties don't merely promote their platforms—they brand themselves as cultural symbols through tailored narratives.

As noted by Subekti (2025), political parties that invest in professionally curated digital content—particularly through visually engaging platforms like Instagram and TikTok—are more likely to capture the attention of undecided voters and digitally native youth segments. These platforms enable parties to craft and amplify distinct brand identities that align with targeted audience values and aesthetics. In the Indonesian context, digital brand identity is often constructed through a combination of ideological messaging, visual symbolism, and narrative positioning. Ideological values such as nationalism, religiosity, social justice, populism, and anti-elitism are frequently emphasized to resonate with voters' core beliefs. This is often visually reinforced through the use of symbolic color schemes—for instance, red in PDI-P to evoke nationalism, white in PKS to signify religious purity, and orange or yellow in PSI to suggest youthfulness and energy. Political figures themselves serve as brand anchors, embodying the party's narrative and identity. Prominent individuals such as Ganjar Pranowo, Anies Baswedan, Kaesang Pangarep, and Sohibul Iman are not merely candidates, but symbolic extensions of their parties' brands.

In terms of narrative framing, parties often position themselves as youth-oriented, inclusive, Islamic, reformist, or legacy-driven, depending on their strategic orientation and voter segmentation. These identity constructions are fluid and adaptive, continuously shaped by algorithmic feedback, audience engagement, and the ever-evolving digital discourse. As a result, political branding in Indonesia has become a highly dynamic process—negotiated not only through institutional strategy but also through interactive, participatory digital culture.

Public Brand Image: How Does Social Media Shape Perceptions?

Brand image refers to the public's collective perception of a political party, which may or may not align with the party's intended brand identity. This image is not built solely through official communications, but is co-produced in the digital public sphere—where commentary, parody, and viral discourse shape and sometimes distort how parties are seen. Febriani and Nurdin (2021) emphasize that digital interaction—especially in the form of memes, quote-retweets, and threaded commentaries—plays a significant role in forming brand image on platforms like Twitter and Instagram. Similarly, Karmila et al. (2024) highlight that the perception of political parties is deeply tied to symbolic narratives that emerge through influencer discourse, echo chambers, and emotionally resonant user-generated content.

A political party's brand image in the digital era is shaped not solely by its official messaging but also—often more powerfully—by public response and reinterpretation. Social media users actively participate in constructing, contesting, or undermining political narratives through various forms of engagement. Public comments and quote-retweets frequently amplify, challenge, or ridicule intended messages, while memes and satirical content reframe political figures or slogans within ironic or oppositional contexts. The influence of buzzers and digital influencers—either mobilized organically or as part of coordinated campaigns—further complicates the landscape, as they actively shape sentiment by defending or attacking particular parties. Additionally, a party's response—or silence—in the face of viral controversies can significantly affect its perceived credibility and authenticity.

These dynamics are evident in the case of Partai Solidaritas Indonesia (PSI). Although PSI strategically brands itself as youthful, progressive, and anti-corruption, its public image on platforms like Twitter/X has increasingly been associated with "pro-government buzzers." This perception stems from the party's close alignment with ruling coalitions and its frequent defense of dominant state narratives, leading some netizens to accuse PSI of being inauthentic or opportunistic (Anggara et al., 2024; Febriani & Nurdin, 2021). Conversely, Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) maintains a carefully curated image of moral integrity and family values, particularly on Instagram. However, this official identity is often challenged by critics who portray the party as intolerant and exclusive, especially in online discussions involving minority rights and pluralism. Despite the party's efforts to appear inclusive, its digital image continues to be contested and reframed by opposing narratives (Karmila et al., 2024). In essence, a political party's brand image emerges not as a fixed projection but as a contested construct, shaped simultaneously by strategic communication and spontaneous public discourse. The

social media environment functions as both amplifier and disruptor, where identity construction is perpetually mediated through public sentiment, digital culture, and platform logic.

Identity–Image Gap: Distortion and Dissonance in Social Media

The disconnection between a political party's projected identity and the public's perception — known as the brand identity–image gap — is increasingly evident in Indonesia's social media landscape. This gap reflects the tension between strategic identity construction by political actors and collective reinterpretation by digital publics. As Pilch and Turska-Kawa (2015) describe it, this phenomenon represents the "brand contradiction effect," where the party's intended image is reframed — or even subverted — by audience responses.

Multiple studies confirm that this gap is produced through complex mechanisms such as visual framing, emotional resonance, and virality. For instance, Alyatalatthaf et al. (2025) highlight that Instagram-based portrayals of political figures are carefully curated for appeal, yet often provoke ambivalent or hostile feedback in more discursive platforms like Twitter. This mismatch between curated identity and spontaneous public reaction is at the core of the image distortion process. Similarly, Edawarma et al. (2025) argue that Gen Z political preferences are shaped more by digital trust, peer networks, and content interactivity than by party messaging, making authenticity a key determinant of alignment between identity and image. Subekti (2025) further emphasizes that parties using Instagram and TikTok for candidate-centric branding often face backlash when public expectations are unmet, especially during crises. Hadmar et al. (2024) illustrate how even high-output Twitter accounts from parties like PDIP are vulnerable to recontextualization by memes, quote-retweets, and satirical reinterpretations.

This identity–image gap is not a static discrepancy but a dynamic rupture that is continually widened by multiple forces inherent to the digital environment. One key driver is the reframing of political narratives by digital communities. Through memes, satirical posts, and user-generated content, online audiences often reinterpret or subvert official messages, transforming intended symbolism into irony, parody, or outright critique. In addition, shifting political contexts — such as scandals, leadership changes, or emerging socio-political issues — can render a party's previously coherent identity outdated or disconnected from public sentiment. Messages that once resonated may quickly lose their relevance or become targets of backlash as public priorities evolve. The gap is further amplified by disinformation flows and algorithmic exposure patterns, which allow misleading narratives or emotionally charged content to spread more rapidly than official clarifications. Algorithms favor engagement over accuracy, often elevating provocative content regardless of its fidelity to the party's intended image. Finally, the absence of timely response — particularly during crises or viral controversies — contributes to widespread negativity. When parties fail to address digital criticism directly or transparently, they risk being perceived as evasive or complicit, further undermining trust and reinforcing negative perceptions.

For instance, PSI, though branded as youthful and anti-corruption, is often perceived as a partisan amplifier of state narratives — earning the label "buzzer party" from critics (Anggara et al., 2024). PKS, which projects religious virtue and moral leadership, is frequently critiqued for positions seen as exclusionary or lacking tolerance toward pluralism (Karmila et al., 2024). Even PDIP, with a disciplined nationalist identity, is accused by some netizens of authoritarian tendencies, especially due to centralized messaging and cadre rigidity (Hadmar et al., 2024). In essence, the digital identity–image gap is not simply a communication failure. It is a structural condition of contemporary political discourse shaped by participatory media cultures, fragmented publics, and platform algorithms. In this environment, political parties are no longer the sole architects of their brand image — meaning is co-constructed in real time by digital users, influencers, and contextual signals beyond the party's control.

Mechanisms of Distortion and Mediation

Social media does not merely serve as a neutral platform for political messaging — it actively mediates, reframes, and redistributes meaning in ways that often diverge from a party's original intent. The distortion of political brand identity occurs through complex, layered mechanisms involving platform algorithms, participatory digital culture, and the strategic behavior of both organic users and orchestrated actors. First, platform algorithms prioritize content that drives engagement, often

elevating emotionally charged, polarizing, or controversial posts. This logic amplifies narratives that are simplified, exaggerated, or conflictual, creating echo chambers in which certain perceptions of a political party—whether accurate or distorted—are reinforced and rarely challenged. These algorithmic effects are well documented in studies by Hasibuan et al. (2024), Huszár et al. (2021), Garaschuk (2024), and Duskin et al. (2024), who note that algorithmic curation intensifies ideological entrenchment and limits exposure to alternative viewpoints. Second, the rise of buzzers and digital influencers has introduced a layer of engineered amplification. These actors, whether formally aligned with political interests or operating independently, contribute to both the propagation and distortion of party identity. Their narratives often resonate more strongly than official campaigns, especially when they align with public anxieties or trending topics (Fitria, 2023; Handini & Dunan, 2021; Sianipar et al., 2021).Third, public participation itself becomes a site of meaning construction. Comment sections, quote-retweets, and user interactions act as discursive arenas where political messages are debated, contested, or dismissed. As noted by Alyatalatthaf et al. (2025) and Miarta (2024), visual content and slogans alone cannot guarantee favorable reception—audience interaction ultimately determines the durability and interpretation of political messages. Finally, timing and responsiveness play a critical role. When parties remain silent during viral controversies, they risk ceding control of their narrative to critics or opportunistic actors. As shown by Budiana (2024) and Umami and Al Qindy (2023), delayed or absent responses during online crises often enable buzzers and opposing voices to dominate the narrative, deepening public skepticism.

In short, distortion and mediation are not anomalies in political communication—they are structural characteristics of the digital ecosystem. For Indonesian political parties, navigating these mechanisms requires not only strategic message delivery, but also engagement agility and a deep understanding of platform-specific cultures.

Conceptual Model: Digital Brand Gap Framework

The Digital Brand Gap Framework conceptualizes the dynamic process through which political brand identity is constructed, mediated, and ultimately reinterpreted within Indonesia's digital public sphere. This model integrates the interaction between strategic communication by political actors and participatory reinterpretation by digital audiences, highlighting the mechanisms through which identity–image misalignment emerges. At the core of the framework is the Brand Identity, which refers to the intentional and curated image projected by political parties through digital platforms. This identity is crafted using a combination of ideological narratives, symbolic colors, iconic figures, and tailored content strategies. It represents how parties wish to be perceived by voters—coherent, strategic, and often emotionally appealing. However, once disseminated, this identity enters the layer of Social Media Mediation—an open, participatory space governed by the logic of algorithms, user interactions, influencers, and buzzers. In this space, content is no longer fully controlled by the party. Instead, it is filtered, amplified, or contested through user-generated content, meme culture, quote-retweets, and platform-specific dynamics. This mediation often reshapes the original intent, exposing political messages to reinterpretation, ridicule, or virality. The outcome of this mediation is the Brand Image—a collective perception formed in the minds of digital citizens. This image may align with or deviate from the intended identity, depending on how content is received, circulated, and emotionally processed by the audience. Factors such as public sentiment, political polarization, and previous party credibility contribute significantly to the construction of this image. At the intersection of these components lies the Gap or Distortion, which refers to the misalignment between the projected identity and the perceived image. This distortion can manifest in multiple ways—such as ironic reframing, viral backlash, or the labeling of parties as inauthentic. It is not simply a failure of communication, but a product of complex socio-technical interactions, reflecting the reality that political meaning is co-constructed and contested in the digital arena.

Thus, the Digital Brand Gap Framework offers a diagnostic lens for understanding how digital political branding is simultaneously a process of projection, negotiation, and reconstruction. It underscores the importance of narrative agility, social listening, and real-time engagement for political actors operating within algorithmically-driven public spaces.
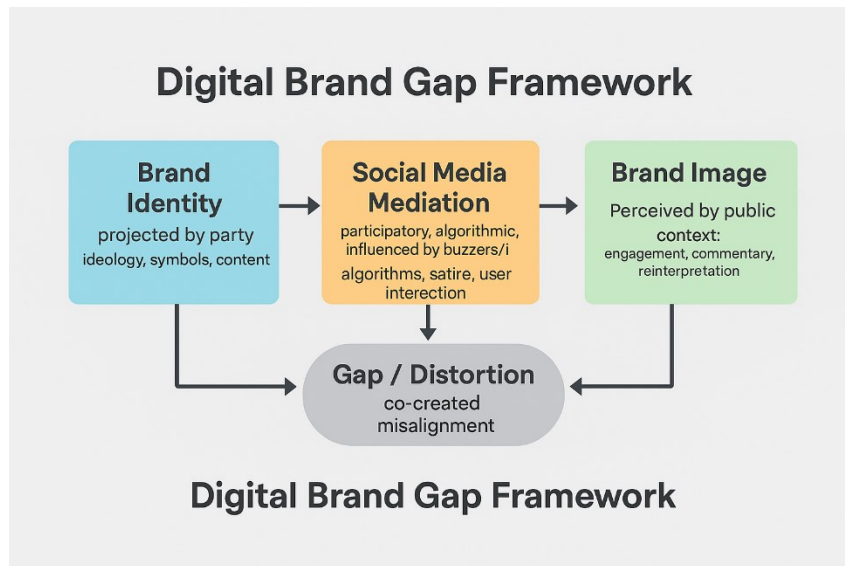
Figure 2. Digital Brand Gap Framework

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the evolving dynamics of political branding within Indonesia's digital ecosystem, revealing a persistent and structurally embedded disconnection between political brand identity and public brand image. Through a systematic literature review and the development of the Digital Brand Gap Framework, the research demonstrates how social media has transformed political communication from a top-down dissemination of messaging into a participatory, emotionally charged, and highly volatile field of narrative construction and deconstruction. Political parties can no longer rely solely on curated identity strategies; once exposed to the algorithmic and discursive logic of digital platforms, these identities are rapidly reinterpreted by publics through satire, virality, opposition framing, and collective commentary. As a result, the brand image formed is often distorted, misaligned, or even hostile to the original intent, producing what this study conceptualizes as the identity–image gap. This framework offers a conceptual lens to understand how digital branding is co-produced through interactive processes rather than unilaterally designed. It reveals that such gaps are not merely communicative failures but symptoms of deeper systemic dynamics within platform-based political participation. Consequently, parties must embrace a dialogic, adaptive, and emotionally intelligent approach to political identity—one that prioritizes real-time responsiveness, narrative agility, and sensitivity to online sentiment. Political communication in this context requires strategic humility and the willingness to engage rather than simply broadcast.

The findings also contribute theoretically to the expansion of political branding discourse by situating branding within the broader spectrum of co-creation and public contestation in digital democracies. At the same time, they offer practical insights for political actors seeking to remain credible in the face of real-time backlash, algorithmic distortions, and evolving cultural codes. Political parties must move beyond symbolic control toward strategies that integrate social listening, community collaboration, and empathetic engagement with voters as active meaning-makers. Looking forward, future research may build upon this framework through digital ethnographies of youth voter communities, social network analyses of message flows, big data text mining during campaign periods, or experimental studies on the visual framing of political identity. Overall, this study affirms that the success of political branding in the digital age is less about crafting perfect messages and more about the capacity to adapt, listen, and co-navigate meaning with the public in a continuously shifting digital terrain.

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