

Reconstructing Prabowo Subianto's Personal Branding for the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election: A Case Study of the "Gemoy" Campaign on TikTok

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Abstract

Prabowo Subianto was finally elected as President of the Republic of Indonesia in the 2024 General Election with the personal branding "Gemoy." This phenomenon grew rapidly on social media, especially TikTok, and affected his political image. Although previous studies have primarily examined the meaning of this branding qualitatively, this study fills the gap by quantitatively analysing the frequency, hashtag and sentiment of conversations on TikTok and their contribution to image formation. These public interactions are then analysed using Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT). This study uses a constructivist paradigm with a qualitative approach. The Netnography method is applied by utilising social media monitoring analytical tools to capture public conversations on the TikTok platform between 1 September 2023 and 14 February 2024. The results show that the "Gemoy" narrative is a fantasy theme constructed by Prabowo and his campaign team in a communicative drama with elements of characters, actions, and settings that form a collective imagination among the public. This study contributes to strengthening the understanding that social media can be strategically orchestrated to build personal branding of political figures, providing new insights for the study of political communication in the digital era.

Keyword: Prabowo Gemoy, personal branding, symbolic convergence theory

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Introduction

Prabowo Subianto was finally elected as the Republic of Indonesia in the 2024 General Election, following two previous electoral defeats to his rival, Joko Widodo. In the 2024 election, Prabowo has a notable divergence personal branding compared to his previous campaigns in 2014 and 2019. In 2014, Prabowo presented himself as a presidential candidate with an assertive character and somewhat authoritarian image (Bollier, 2014). Even more, during the 2019 election, Prabowo adopted a more assertive persona, as a strongman nationalist populist, and utilizing the narrative “make Indonesia great again,” like a main theme in Donald Trump's successful 2016 US presidential campaign (Massola, 2018). Conversely, in 2024, Prabowo cultivated a novel public image, especially on social media by adopting “Gemoy” as the personal branding, which describe of being chubby, humorous, and cute (Tan & Husada, 2024). This “Gemoy” branding is posited as one of the substantial factor to his electoral success.

In communication theory, the strategies employed by Prabowo and his campaign team can be analyzed through the lens of Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT). The theory can elaborate how Prabowo strategically constructed and disseminated symbols, narratives, and shared stories to promote a sense of collective identity among his supporters and potential constituents. The personal branding as “Gemoy” during the 2024 General Election describe a fantasy theme, strategically framed in a communicative drama. This drama consist of distinct characters, actions, settings, and subsequently pushed into widespread fantasy chains across various social media platforms, especially on TikTok.

Most of studies investigate the phenomenon of Prabowo Gemoy are primarily with linguistic theories such as semiotics (Prasetyawan et al., 2025) and textual analysis approach (Gauri, 2024) . While the existing study with communication theory approach is restricted in personal branding theory only. Methodologically, other previous studies have mostly adopted qualitative methods, focusing on content analysis of the campaign. While this research addresses a notable gap in the literature by adopting a communication theory framework, namely Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) (Bormann et al., 2001). Furthermore, the research utilizes a mixed-methods approach, by integrating qualitative data with quantitative data obtained from a social media listening tool which has built with Indonesian Natural Language Processing (NLP). This approach is expected to significantly contribute to a more comprehensive and in-depth academic discourse on the Prabowo Gemoy political campaign phenomenon.

Literature Review

Personal Branding Within the Political Sphere

Personal branding represents a strategic approach focused on the establishment of a particular image and identity that differentiates an individual with others. Hill and Sen (Hill & Sen, 2013) in their book “The Internet in Indonesia's New Democracy,” define that in the digital age, personal branding stands beyond personality; but also related to an individual's capacity to cultivate intense emotional connections with their audience via digital platforms. In Indonesia, the phenomenon of personal branding has run into substantial transformation, especially with the advance of social media features which enables public figures and politicians to forge closer relationships with their constituents (Putri et al., 2022).

Referring to Kotler (Kotler & Keller, 2025), personal branding covers several key dimensions that a political candidate must strategically manage. These dimensions start with Attributes, which related to the candidate's capacity to highlight their distinctive excellences, exceptional qualities, or unique strengths. The next dimension is Benefits that involve the translation of their distinctive excellences, qualities and strengths into some tangible emotional and functional advantages perceived by the constituents.

Another dimension is Values (Kotler & Keller, 2025), which related to the core principles of the political candidate. Values brings up an emotional connection between the candidate and voters who share similar perspectives and belief. Next, Culture is the dimension that emphasize the significance of local values that represent cultural perspectives relevant to the target audience. Personality also constitutes as a substantial dimension as candidates must show a positive, charismatic, and relatable attitude and behavior, thereby enhancing their attractiveness to the public. At last, the User dimension requires that candidates thoroughly comprehend their constituents, understand their expectations, needs, and preferences.

These dimensions reflect that personal branding covers not only a candidate's desired public perception, but also their self-understanding and what they aim to represent in the society. Primarily, personal branding related to two main indicators: “how you see yourself” and “how others see you” (Gorbatov et al., 2018).

TikTok for Political Campaigns

TikTok is initially known as a social media platform for sharing entertainment content like dances, lip-sync videos, and fashion recommendations (Koç, 2023). Over time, it has transformed into a complex social media platform with a variety of features, such as a source of recommendations, a marketplace to buy and sell, and a reference for information, particularly for Generation Z. According to a 2025 Pew Research Center survey (Methods et al., 2025), approximately 52% of TikTok users report using the platform as a primary source for news. Since 2020, TikTok has become a significant tool for disseminating political information and campaigns. Politicians and political parties from around the world are increasingly using the platform as one of the key strategies to raise public support (Ali et al., 2022).

The platform's algorithm customizes content for each user through its “For You” page, which provides content recommendations based on their in-app activities. This feature showcases a diverse range of content, including videos that are already viral or even with fewer views that still align with users' preferences. This strategy allows any TikTok user to get the opportunity to go viral (Cervi, 2021). This could be an advantage for politicians, enabling them to reach their audience and maintain engagement to get support and votes.

Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT)

Theoretically, personal branding can be effectively analyzed through the lens of Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT). Introduced by Ernest Bormann, this theory explains how symbols, narratives, and stories create a sense of solidarity within a group (Bormann, 1985). In the context of political communications or political campaign, this theory explains how a particular narrative can influence people's perspectives and establish unity among supporters (Bjola, 2021). For example, the use of “Gemoy” as a narrative in Prabowo's political campaign illustrates how this theory is applied in a real-world context.

In his 1985 work, Bormann identified three key aspects that form the basis of Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT). The first is the identification and arrangement of recurring communication patterns, which signals the emergence of a collective consciousness within a group. These patterns evolve over time as a result of ongoing interactions. The second is the description of dynamic tendencies within a communication system, which explains why group consciousness surfaces, persists, diminishes, and eventually disappears. The third aspect consists of the factors that explain why individuals within a group engage in sharing certain narratives or fantasies (Bormann, 1985).

In addition, Bormann also proposed two main assumptions that underpin this theory. First, reality is constructed through communication, which creates reality by connecting words used to share life experiences or internal knowledge. Second, an individual's meaning of a symbol can converge, so that the meaning is transformed into a shared reality. According to this theory, reality is considered a series of narratives that explain how something can be believed by the people involved.

The narratives within symbolic convergence theory (SCT) typically begin in small groups and then spread to a wider audience or the general public. This aligns with Bormann's six epistemological assumptions of SCT (Suryadi, 2010). First, the meaning, emotion, and motivation for an action are found in the manifest content of a message. Second, reality is symbolically constructed. Third, fantasy chains create symbolic convergence in a dramatic form. Fourth, fantasy theme analysis is the primary method for capturing symbolic reality. Fifth, fantasy themes can emerge in various evolving discourses. Sixth, there are three primary visions in the grand analogy: moral, social, and pragmatic.

In the public perspective, the “Gemoy” image reflected Prabowo's effort to build a more informal and familiar relationship with his constituents. By leveraging this symbol, Prabowo's campaign successfully cultivated an impression of him as a humorous, interesting, and populist figure. This narrative not only consolidated his supporters but also strengthened the public's perception of him as a leader who is close to the people. This process illustrates how an initially minor narrative can evolve into a major trend, driven by massive dissemination on social media platforms like TikTok.

The identification of fantasy themes, a central concept within Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) (Zanin et al., 2016), is critical for analyzing this phenomenon. Themes like “Gemoy” establish a collective reality that gains public acceptance and is constantly reinforced by consistent communication across diverse digital platforms. Furthermore, the fantasy chain reveals how this narrative can evolve into a broader social movement, showcasing its influence in shaping collective consciousness.

As explained by Bormann's (1985), symbolic convergence occurs when shared narratives create an emotional bond among group members. This phenomenon was evident in the Prabowo campaign, where a sense of solidarity formed among his supporters. The high volume of conversations about “Gemoy” on social media demonstrates how this narrative effectively unified supporters and built a solid support base. However, it remains to be evaluated whether this narrative produced only symbolic unity or also contributed to concrete collective action.

Therefore, the success of the “Gemoy” narrative proves that political communication in the digital era requires not only technical strategies but also an approach that can evoke an emotional response and foster a sense of collective awareness among the public.

Research Questions

- How was the “Prabowo Gemoy” narrative constructed and spread through TikTok during the 2024 Presidential Election campaign?
- How did the fantasy themes in the “Prabowo Gemoy” narrative create symbolic convergence and form the political image of Prabowo Subianto among TikTok users?

Methodology

Paradigma & Metode Penelitian

This research is grounded in the constructivist paradigm, which views social reality as the outcome of a collective construction of meaning. From this perspective, the personal branding of “Gemoy” associated with Prabowo Subianto is not seen as a fixed entity, but rather as the result of a process of symbolic interaction within the digital sphere. The study employs a qualitative approach using Netnography to systematically and contextually observe, collect, and analyze public interaction data regarding “Prabowo Gemoy” on social media platforms.

Data Collection

Data was gathered by monitoring content and conversation on social media using the social listening tool, Socindex. This tool facilitates data crawling with a Natural Language Processing (NLP) system, which has an 83% accuracy rate for Indonesian content. The collected data consists of text, image, and video conversations about Prabowo Gemoy on TikTok. The data was collected between September 1, 2023, and February 14, 2024, a period that encompasses the campaign season of the Indonesia General Election 2024.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was carried out using a qualitative thematic approach, and then the researchers elaborated the image of “Gemoy” Prabowo Subianto through the lens of Ernest Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT). This analysis proceeded in three stages: 1) Identifying dominant themes in the content and comments; 2) Symbolically interpreting the narratives and imaginaries that emerged; 3) Mapping the symbolic convergence that ultimately created a collective image of Prabowo as a “Gemoy” figure.

Results

This section presents the main findings regarding the “Prabowo Gemoy” phenomenon on social media, including analyses of Share of Voice, sentiment analysis, hashtag usage, word clouds, and the top liked and commented content across all social media platforms.

Share of Voice Social Media

Table 1

Share of Voice Based on Social Media Platforms

Platform	Jumlah Percakapan	Persentase (%)
Twitter	31.663	16.07%
Facebook	3.210	1.63%
Instagram	8.974	4.55%
TikTok	122.459	62.14%
Youtube	30.753	15.61%
Total	197.059	100.00%

The data gathered by Socindex tool, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, revealed that a total of 197,059 conversations discussing the topic “Prabowo Gemoy.” Among these platforms, TikTok was the most dominant channel, accounting for 122,459 conversations, or 62.14% of the total. This data indicates that TikTok served as the primary space for disseminating the narrative and was the most active public forum for discussing Prabowo's image within the “Gemoy” branding framework. Twitter followed with 31,663 conversations (16.07%), and YouTube was close behind with 30,753 conversations (15.61%). In contrast, conversation volumes on Instagram and Facebook were significantly lower, at 8,974 (4.55%) and 3,210 (1.63%), respectively.

TikTok Share of Voice Based on Sentiment

Table 2

Sentiment Analysis on the TikTok Platform

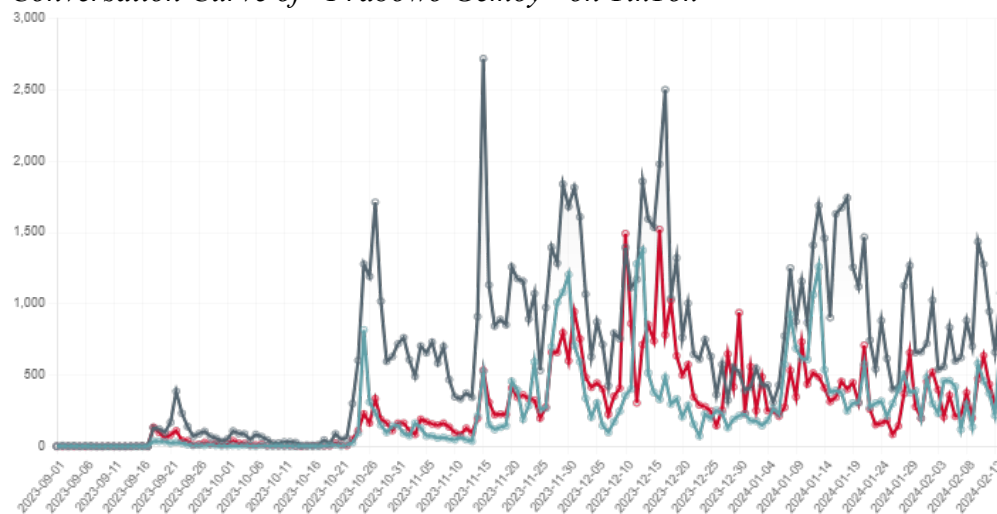
Sentimen	Jumlah Percakapan	Persentase (%)
Positif	11.398	9.31%
Netral	85.489	69.81%
Negatif	25.572	20.88%
Total	122.459	100%

Based on data from the Socindex tool, there were 122,459 conversations regarding the topic of “Prabowo Gemoy” on the TikTok platform. From this total, neutral sentiment was dominant with 85,489 conversations, or 69.81%. This indicates that most users conveyed narratives without a clear emotional and sentimental tone. Positive sentiment was present in 11,398 conversations, or 9.31%, reflecting public support, interest, or a favorable response to the “Gemoy” personal brand. In contrast, negative sentiment, which totaled 25,572 conversations or 20.88%, shows the presence of criticism, mockery, or rejection of the narrative. The combined high proportion of neutral and positive sentiment collectively suggests that the “Gemoy” campaign was inclusively received by the public, despite also attracting a significant amount of contradiction.

Dynamics of Conversation on TikTok

Figure 1

Conversation Curve of “Prabowo Gemoy” on TikTok



Based on Figure 1, it is seen that the conversation related to the “Prabowo Gemoy” topic on the TikTok platform fluctuated. At the beginning of September 2023, the volume of the conversation was still relatively low. This indicates that the “Gemoy” narrative had started to appear on social media, however, it had not yet become a dominant topic discussed by the public.

A primary surge in the conversation was noted around the candidate registration period from late September to October 2023. This moment became a starting point for Prabowo to increase his exposure through the “Gemoy” personal branding approach. After the candidates were registered, the “Gemoy” narrative began to be discussed consistently and showed characteristics of a structured political communication strategy.

The highest peak in conversation was noted on November 15, 2023, relating to the moment when Prabowo danced during the official drawing of presidential election ballot numbers. This dancing act became closely connected with the “Prabowo Gemoy” or “Joget Gemoy ala Prabowo” narrative that went viral on social media, which reinforced the symbolic association between Prabowo’s casual communication style and the intentionally constructed “Gemoy” image.

The next significant spike in conversation occurred in December 2023, which coincided with the first nationally broadcast presidential debate. This debate was a key trigger for the increased intensity of the discussion, as it placed Prabowo under a broad public spotlight. In turn, this prompted the “Gemoy” narrative to resurface in various forms of content, generating a mix of supportive, critical, and entertainment-focused responses from the public.

Overall, the fluctuating curve indicates the dynamic nature of public attention towards the “Gemoy” personal brand attached to the figure of Prabowo Subianto during the campaign period. Prabowo actively capitalized on strategic moments such as the official candidate announcement, the ballot number selection, and public debates to project his “Gemoy” characteristics. This approach successfully triggered a high public response and solidified the “Gemoy” symbol as a political image that was widely accepted, discussed, and interpreted.

Hashtags

Tabel 3





Most Popular Hashtags in the “Prabowo Gemoy” Conversation

No	Hastag	Jumlah
1	gemoy	825
2	Prabowo	744
3	prabowogibran	557
4	prabowosubianto	536
5	Gibran	348
6	prabowogibran2024	198
7	gibranrakabuming	192
8	prabowogemoy	187
9	gibranrakabumingraka	183
10	prabowopresiden2024	158
11	Akhirnyapilihprabowo	157
12	allinprabowo	126

There were twelve main hashtags most often used in the discourse concerning “Prabowo Gemoy” on TikTok. Among these, the hashtag #gemoy was predominant, appearing in 825 mentions, which signifies that the term “gemoy” has emerged as a key feature of the digital narrative being built. This tag has a symbolic meaning, representing a form of political communication that is more light-hearted, emotional, and relatable for the youth audience on social media.

The hashtag #Prabowo appeared 744 times, indicating that the figure of Prabowo Subianto is central to the construction of the “Gemoy” image. The presence of the #prabowogibran (557 times) and #prabowogibran2024 (198 times) hashtags shows that the “Gemoy” narrative was actively integrated into the campaign strategy of the 2024 presidential and vice-presidential candidate pair. Other hashtags such as #gibran, #gibranrakabuming, and #gibranrakabumingraka also appeared in the top 10 list, affirming that the “Gemoy” personal branding narrative does not stand alone. Rather, it was strategically paired with Gibran Rakabuming as the vice-presidential candidate.

In conclusion, the utilization of this hashtag indicates that the “Gemoy” branding is a significant component in forming the public's perception of and engagement with Prabowo, employing a style of language that is emotional, popular, and easily accessible to social media users.

	<p>Prabowo Subianto as the main protagonist/subject.</p>	<p>Prabowo uses a plow while running, narrated with the caption “Pak Prabowo is so Adorable” (Gemas Banget)</p>	<p>The video is recorded against the backdrop of a plowed rice field.</p>
	<p>Prabowo Subianto as the main actor/subject.</p> <p>ONIC Nita Vior, a Gamer and Brand Ambassador (also referred to as a youth influencer), acts as an actor in the video.</p>	<p>Vior responds to a question, stating she would support Prabowo Subianto in the election because he is “Gemoy,” and she imitates the “Gemoy dance” style.</p>	<p>The video is set in a dining venue.</p>
	<p>A T-shirt printing business/printer.</p>	<p>The narrative questions why only Prabowo's T-shirts are selling well, while printing numerous shirts depicting “Prabowo Gemoy” with the assistance of AI.</p>	<p>During the campaign period, T-shirts are often utilized as campaign merchandise/tools.</p>
	<p>Prabowo Subianto and Raffi Ahmad (Actors/Subjects).</p>	<p>A Joint TikTok Live Session with artists; Prabowo & Raffi host a live session, inviting other influencers and artists (e.g., Aurel, Atta Halilintar, Gading Marten, Kiky Saputri, Ivan Gunawan) to perform the “Gemoy Dance.”</p>	<p>During the presidential campaign, Indonesian influencers and artists actively participated in promoting support and the “Prabowo-style Gemoy Dance.”</p>

Analysis of the prevailing content indicates that the “Gemoy” representation is enacted through diverse modalities, such as comedic interactions, choreographic routines, campaign merchandise (T-shirts), and strategic collaborations with prominent public figures. This multimodal variation serves to solidify the symbolic construction of the “Gemoy” persona as one that is engaging, affable, and relatable to a mass audience.

Discussion

Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) emphasizes the importance of fantasy themes for shaping a shared social reality by means of group communication. In the context of political campaigns, SCT is useful to explain how a specific narrative, for instance, “Prabowo Gemoy,” is able to unify the public into a collective imagination, which in turn forms the social and political identity of the candidate.

Fantasy Theme “Gemoy” as An Emotional Symbol

In Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT), a fantasy theme is a narrative or symbol that becomes a center of people’s conversation and imagination (Bormann, 2001). The term “Gemoy” has transformed itself from a popular slang into a unique symbol in the political branding of Prabowo Subianto. Based on word cloud and hashtag analysis, the word “gemoy” is not only massive quantitatively, but it also carries specific emotional meanings, such as funny, entertaining, and non-threatening. This “Gemoy” creates a symbolic convergence, particularly through TikTok, as the public forms a shared imagination of Prabowo's figure as a leader that is humanist, cheerful, and close to the people; an image which is a contrast to the masculine-militaristic representation that was previously attached to him.

Fantasy Chain Reaction of the Viral Gemoy Dancing

According to Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT), the phenomenon is where a fantasy theme spreads widely as a fantasy chain reaction (Raj Kafle, 2014). In this case, the “Gemoy” dance performed by Prabowo during important moments, for instance the candidate debates and campaigns, was then amplified on social media by his team and this created an escalating reaction on TikTok. The evidence from the Share of Voice data which reached 62% on the TikTok platform compared to other social media platforms. The contents that acquired the highest engagement such as likes, comments, and shares were those that showed Prabowo dancing, interacting with youths, or utilizing visual symbols such as the AI t-shirt with a gemoy theme.

This chain reaction is an indication that the audience was engaged in the “role-playing” inside a symbolic world that they perceived to be entertaining and enjoyable. It also has the effect of positioning “Gemoy” as an alternative political identity that is easier to accept, particularly by the younger generation.

Rhetorical Vision of Prabowo's Image as a Humanist Leader

Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) culminates in the formation of a rhetorical vision, which is a grand narrative combining various fantasy themes into a single collective perception (Bormann, 2001). In this case, the “Prabowo Gemoy” narrative has produced a rhetorical vision that positions Prabowo as a friendly and entertaining leader (through dance content and memes), close to the younger generation (through collaborations with young influencers and gamers),

and not stiff or formal (through his style of language and gestures during the campaign). All of these structured and massive activities have successfully changed the image of Prabowo from a candidate who was previously considered a masculine-militaristic figure. This can be seen in the sentiment data, where a high proportion of positive conversations illustrates that the public enjoyed this representation as both entertainment and a political campaign.

Sharing of Social Reality and the Effectiveness of Political Communication

The effectiveness of this strategy lies in its success at creating a shared social reality through a symbol that is easily understood and reproduced. “Gemoy” is not a directly political term, but its strength is in its ability to bridge the world of politics with pop culture. In this case, SCT explains how political communication can be more accepted if it is packaged in a light and symbolic narrative form. In other words, this narrative bridges politics through pleasant entertainment, which lets the public indirectly form an emotional attachment with the candidate through a pleasant symbolic form.

Using the Symbolic Convergence Theory approach, it can be concluded that the “Prabowo Gemoy” narrative succeeded in forming a symbolic convergence through a shared fantasy theme that was pleasant, viral, and built a new, more inclusive image. This strategy becomes a new form of digital political communication, where symbols, emotions, and popular culture merge in shaping the rhetorical vision of a presidential candidate.

Conclusion

This research concludes that the “Gemoy” campaign of Prabowo Subianto is a form of strategic reconstruction of personal branding in the digital era, successfully transforming his image from a firm and militaristic figure to an entertaining, more down-to-earth, and approachable figure. By applying Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT), the “Gemoy” narrative is understood as a fantasy theme that unites the public into a shared symbolic world through collective imagination and emotional resonance. The phenomenon of a fantasy chain reaction, which appeared through viral content on TikTok, further strengthened the spread of this narrative.

The findings of this research indicate that social media not only serve as a channel for political communication but also as a performative space to construct a shared symbolic reality. The emotional dimension within the “Gemoy” narrative makes political communication more inclusive, while also bridging politics with the dancing culture, particularly among young voters. Thus, this study offers a theoretical contribution to the field of political communication by demonstrating that symbolic convergence can be formed through narratives that are light, entertaining, and emotionally-oriented, not merely through ideological messaging.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The analysis was confined to the TikTok platform and the 2023–2024 campaign period. Therefore, it is suggested for future research to broaden the analysis to the period following Prabowo's election and his leadership as president. In conclusion, the reconstruction of Prabowo Subianto's personal branding through the “Gemoy” narrative signifies a paradigm shift in Indonesia's political communication, moving from conventional image-making towards a digitally-based form of political communication. This research expands the academic discourse regarding political communication in the digital era by asserting that digital activities can also successfully shape a strong rhetorical vision, capable of influencing public perception and contributing to electoral success.

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