

## **Digital Political Communication Strategy of MULIA on Instagram: A Political Branding Perspective in the Makassar Mayoral Election**

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### **Abstract**

*The rapid development of digital media has transformed political communication, particularly in local elections where social media function not only as channels of information but also as spaces for constructing political narratives and voter engagement. This study analyzes the digital political communication strategy of the MULIA candidate pair Munafri Arifuddin and Aliyah Mustika Ilham through Instagram during the Makassar mayoral election. Using a qualitative approach, this research applies critical discourse analysis developed by Norman Fairclough combined with agenda-setting theory from Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. Data were collected through digital observation, documentation of campaign materials, and interviews with the campaign media team. A total of 419 Instagram posts published during the campaign period were analyzed to identify patterns of issue framing, political image construction, and digital campaign strategies. The findings show that the campaign implemented structured communication strategies including strategic issue selection, agenda setting, political marketing stages (awareness, likeability, and electability), and emotional branding through Hero and Caregiver archetypes. Instagram functioned not merely as a dissemination tool but as a discursive arena where political identity, legitimacy, and emotional connections with voters were constructed. The study highlights the growing importance of digital political communication in shaping public perception and influencing electoral participation in local democratic contests.*

**Keywords:** *Agenda Setting; Digital Political Communication; Instagram; Political Marketing; Political Strategy.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Regional Head Elections (Pilkada) constitute a democratic mechanism that provides citizens with the opportunity to participate directly in selecting leaders at the provincial, regency, and municipal levels. This participation is not merely a formal electoral process but also represents a form of political communication that facilitates the exchange of ideas, visions, and aspirations between candidates and the public. In the context of modern democracy, political communication is no longer confined to conventional media but has undergone a significant transformation through the use of digital media, particularly social media. Social media enables candidates to construct political images, disseminate messages directly, and establish more personal relationships with voters (Dharta et al., 2025). This

transformation indicates that electoral success is determined not only by structural political power but also by the capacity to strategically manage digital communication.

In Indonesia, the use of social media has grown rapidly over the past decade. A *DataReportal* report 2025 indicates that the number of social media users in Indonesia has reached more than 139 million, with approximately 99.9 million users or about 35.7% of the total national population using Instagram (Kemp, 2025). This high level of penetration makes Instagram one of the most effective channels for political communication, particularly among younger voters and urban populations. Instagram possesses visual, interactive, and algorithmic characteristics that enable the rapid and wide distribution of political messages while shaping public perception through visual representation and symbolic narratives (Casaló et al., 2020). Furthermore, a report from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) shows that internet penetration in South Sulawesi has exceeded 78%, indicating broad public access to digital media, including social media platforms (APJII, 2024). As a major urban and economic center in Eastern Indonesia, Makassar exhibits a highly digitally connected population, making social media a strategic arena for local political contestation.

In the Makassar mayoral election for the 2025–2030 period, the dynamics of political communication became increasingly complex with the involvement of multiple social media platforms. According to data from the Komisi Pemilihan Umum (General Elections Commission), the number of registered voters in Makassar reached 1,037,164, reflecting a substantial political audience that candidates needed to engage. Four candidate pairs competed with high campaign intensity, both offline and online. One of the most prominent candidates in terms of social media utilization was the pair Munafri Arifuddin and Aliyah Mustika Ilham, known by the acronym MULIA. This pair actively utilized Instagram as a primary medium for disseminating political messages, constructing public image, and interacting with citizens through their official campaign account. With 28.9 thousand followers, the account functioned as a strategic communication space enabling systematic and planned message dissemination.

The success of the MULIA pair in winning the election with 54.72% of the vote, equivalent to 319,112 votes (Sir, 2025), demonstrates that digital political communication played a significant role in shaping voter perceptions and preferences. Instagram was used not merely as a publication platform but also as an instrument for image construction, political legitimation, and symbolic proximity with the public. The content disseminated addressed relevant public issues, such as clean water crises, public service delivery, and urban development, packaged in visually engaging and communicative formats. This demonstrates that digital political communication functions not only as a tool of information dissemination but also as a persuasive mechanism that shapes voters' social and political realities (Loader et al., 2016).

Social media has become a central instrument in modern political campaigns. Previous studies indicate that social media enables political personalization, allowing candidates to construct closer relationships with voters through visual representation and personal narratives (Enli, 2017). Other studies have demonstrated that Instagram plays a crucial role in shaping political branding and enhancing voter engagement through visual content, storytelling, and direct interaction (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017). In Indonesia, research on digital political communication has largely focused on the national level, particularly on social media use in presidential elections or the political communication of national figures (Jurriëns, 2020). However, studies specifically examining political communication strategies of local election candidates, especially in the context of Instagram as a primary campaign medium, remain relatively limited. Moreover, most previous research has focused on the effects of social media on political participation, while in-depth analyses of how political communication strategies are designed, produced, and distributed through Instagram remain scarce, particularly in the context of local elections in Eastern Indonesia.

Despite the growing number of studies on digital political communication, several important gaps remain. First, most studies in Indonesia focus on national political contests, particularly presidential elections and major political figures, while research examining digital campaign strategies in local elections remains limited. Second, existing studies tend to emphasize the effects of social media on political participation, engagement, or voter behavior, while fewer studies investigate how campaign teams strategically construct political messages, manage issues, and build candidate images through social media platforms. Third, although Instagram has become an important platform in contemporary political campaigns due to its visual and interactive characteristics, scholarly attention to Instagram as a strategic arena of political communication in local elections remains relatively limited. This study is important because most scholarship on Instagram politics has focused on Western democracies, leaving emerging local democracies such as Indonesia underexplored.

Therefore, this study examines how Instagram was strategically utilized by the MULIA candidate pair to construct political narratives, manage campaign issues, and influence voter perceptions in the Makassar mayoral election. Positioned at the intersection of digital political communication, social media studies, and local electoral communication, this research provides an in-depth analysis of how political communication strategies are designed and implemented through Instagram in a local electoral context. The study contributes to the development of digital political communication scholarship by offering empirical evidence from Makassar and by demonstrating how Instagram functions as a strategic arena for agenda setting, political branding, and voter engagement.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach grounded in the perspective of Political Communication and New Media, as this approach enables the researcher to examine how political communication utilizing digital media functions as a strategic instrument in shaping public perception, political image, and political orientation. In the context of contemporary political communication, new media do not merely function as channels for information distribution but also as discursive spaces that enable political actors to construct political reality, control communication agendas, and establish symbolic relationships with the public in a direct and interactive manner. Through this approach, the researcher is able to understand how social media shape and influence the dynamics of political communication, including the processes of candidate image construction, political issue management, and the production of meaning that influences how the public interprets political reality (Schillemans, 2014).

Methodologically, this study employs framing analysis within the framework of Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This approach is used to examine how political messages are constructed and represented on social media as discursive practices closely linked to power relations and political interests. Fairclough's model analyzes discourse through three primary dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice (Fairclough, 2001). The textual dimension is used to analyze linguistic structures, visual symbols, and narrative patterns within Instagram content. The discursive practice dimension is used to understand how content is produced, circulated, and consumed within the social media environment. Meanwhile, the social practice dimension is used to analyze how discourse relates to broader social and political contexts, particularly within the electoral contestation of the Makassar mayoral election.

In addition, this study incorporates agenda-setting theory as an analytical framework to understand how social media are used to select, emphasize, and prioritize specific issues in order to influence the structure of public attention. Agenda-setting theory explains that media possess the capacity to influence what the public perceives as important through processes of issue selection, emphasis, and systematic repetition (Valenzuela & McCombs, 2019). In the context of social media, political actors no longer depend entirely on traditional mass media but are able to directly control the production and distribution of political messages to construct and manage their own communication agendas.

The primary data source for this study was obtained from posts on the official Instagram account of Munafri Arifuddin and Aliyah Mustika Ilham, namely the Instagram account @muliamakassar, which represents their political communication strategy in the 2024 Makassar mayoral election. This account was selected because it serves as the official communication channel

actively used to disseminate political messages, construct candidate image, and communicate strategic issues to the public.

Data collection was conducted through digital observation and documentation techniques, involving the systematic observation, identification, and archiving of all content posted on the Instagram account @muliamakassar during the campaign period, from September 25 to November 23, 2024. Based on the observation, a total of 419 pieces of content were identified, consisting of various formats such as photographs, video reels, infographics, and visual narrative content. All collected content was subsequently analysis to identify patterns of political communication, framing strategies, candidate image construction, and agenda-setting practices employed in the digital political communication of the MULIA candidate pair. The content was also classified based on content type, issue themes, narrative structure, and forms of visual representation in order to understand how political messages were systematically constructed.

The data analysis technique employed in this study follows a descriptive qualitative analysis approach based on the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (Miles et al., 2013), which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, the researcher conducted processes of data selection, simplification, and categorization based on issue themes, framing strategies, and candidate representation. In the data display stage, the data were systematically organized into analytical descriptions to identify patterns of political communication. Finally, in the conclusion-drawing stage, the researcher interpreted the data using Fairclough's framing analysis and agenda-setting theory in order to understand how digital political communication functions as a strategic instrument in constructing candidate image and directing public attention toward specific issues.

Through this approach, this study does not merely analyze Instagram content as communication texts but also as discursive practices that function in the construction of political reality and the formation of social meaning. Accordingly, this methodological framework enables the researcher to reveal how social media function as instruments of symbolic power in digital political communication, particularly in shaping public agendas, framing political reality, and influencing public perception within the context of the 2024 Makassar mayoral election.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **Innovative Political Communication of the Munafri Arifuddin–Aliyah Mustika Ilham (MULIA) Campaign Team on Instagram**

The development of social media has driven a significant transformation in political communication practices, particularly in how candidates and campaign teams establish more direct, interactive, and personalized relationships with voters. In this context, the campaign team of Munafri Arifuddin and Aliyah Mustika Ilham (MULIA) strategically utilized Instagram as one of the primary platforms to disseminate political communication messages to the public. The use of Instagram reflects a paradigm shift from conventional campaign patterns toward a more adaptive, interactive, and digitally oriented political communication approach rooted in the dynamics of new media culture.

Political communication constructed through this platform functions not only as a channel for information dissemination but also as an instrument for shaping political image, strengthening candidate positioning, and fostering emotional proximity with voters, particularly younger generations who constitute the dominant users of social media. The campaign team actively adapted its content strategy to align with emerging digital trends, audience preferences, and the visual communication characteristics that constitute Instagram's primary strength. As a result, the messages conveyed were not only informative but also persuasive and relevant to the everyday experiences of voters. In practice, the MULIA campaign team implemented innovative political communication strategies that reflect the transformation of campaign practices in the digital era, as outlined below:

1. Strategic Selection and Framing of Issues (Agenda Setting)

The issue selection and framing strategy implemented by the campaign team of Munafri Arifuddin and Aliyah Mustika Ilham (MULIA) reflects political communication practices aligned with agenda-setting theory, which emphasizes the capacity of political actors to influence the structure of public attention through the systematic selection, emphasis, and distribution of issues. Agenda-setting theory, the media do not directly determine what people should think (what to think), but they exert significant influence over what people think about (what to think about). In other words, the visibility and intensity with which issues are presented in media contribute to shaping the hierarchy of public priorities (Entman, 2025). In the context of digital political communication, this function is no longer exclusively exercised by traditional media institutions but is also performed directly by political actors through social media platforms, including Instagram, which enable candidates and campaign teams to independently control the production and distribution of political messages (Mccombs & Shaw, 1972).

This issue selection process can be understood as part of discursive practice, namely the production and control of discourse aimed at shaping social meaning and public perception (Fairclough, 2015). The MULIA campaign team did not produce messages spontaneously but

through a structured curation process grounded in strategic analysis. The media and content division, composed of professional personnel such as social media managers, visual content producers, political communication consultants, and photographers, demonstrates that the production of political discourse has become an institutionalized practice designed systematically. This aligns with Fairclough's perspective that discourse production in political contexts constitutes a form of symbolic power practice, whereby political actors attempt to control representations of reality in order to build legitimacy and influence (Isnaeni et al., 2025).

Based on the researcher's interview with the Coordinator of the Media and Content Division, each issue intended for publication underwent prior processes of discussion, evaluation, and in-depth analysis to assess its potential impact on public perception. This process reflects the function of gatekeeping, defined as the mechanism of selecting and filtering information before it is disseminated to the public (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). Within the framework of agenda-setting theory, gatekeeping serves as the initial mechanism that determines which issues gain visibility and which are excluded. Thus, the campaign team functions not merely as a transmitter of messages but also as an actor that shapes the structure of symbolic reality accessible to the public. This process demonstrates that political reality consumed by the public is not a direct reflection of objective reality but rather a constructed reality produced through strategic processes of selection and representation.

Issue framing was conducted through visual and narrative approaches tailored to the characteristics of digital communication, which emphasize visuality, emotional resonance, and personal proximity. From the perspective of second-level agenda setting, or attribute agenda setting, media do not merely determine which issues are important but also shape how issues and political actors are represented through specific attributes (Zaklama, 2025). The MULIA campaign team not only highlighted particular issues but also constructed the symbolic attributes of the candidates through narratives emphasizing social proximity, social concern, and leadership capacity. This representation functions to shape public cognitive associations with the candidates, ensuring that they are not only recognized but also positively perceived within the cognitive structures of voters.

Within Fairclough's critical discourse analysis framework, this process constitutes a form of representational practice, referring to how social actors are represented through discourse to shape meaning and public perception (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The language used in political communication content is not neutral but functions as an ideological instrument that shapes how the public interprets political reality. Through communicative narratives, authentic visual representations, and symbols of social proximity, the campaign team actively

constructed the candidates' discursive identity as figures who are relevant and representative of public interests.

As stated by the Coordinator of the Media and Content Division, each issue published had undergone comprehensive assessment to evaluate its potential positive and negative impact on the candidates' image. This indicates that the agenda-setting strategy implemented constituted a form of intentional social construction of reality, in which political actors actively attempt to influence the structure of public attention and perception. From a political communication perspective, agenda setting represents a form of symbolic power, defined as the ability to influence how the public understands and interprets social reality through the control of information flows (Gilardi et al., 2021).

Therefore, the issue selection and framing strategy implemented by the MULIA campaign team demonstrates the integration of agenda-setting practices with the production of political discourse in digital spaces. The campaign team not only disseminated information but also actively constructed political reality through strategic processes of issue selection, representation, and distribution. From Fairclough's perspective, this practice illustrates that political communication constitutes a field of symbolic struggle, wherein political actors seek to build legitimacy and influence through the control of meaning and representation within the public sphere. Consequently, mastery over communication agendas on social media has become a critical instrument in shaping public consciousness and influencing the dynamics of political power in the digital era.

The findings indicate that agenda-setting practices on Instagram were not merely communicative activities but constituted a form of digital symbolic power. Unlike traditional media agenda-setting where journalists control issue visibility, the MULIA campaign team directly curated and distributed political issues through their own platform. This shift demonstrates a transformation of agenda-setting authority from institutional media to political actors themselves.

From the perspective of agenda-setting theory, this finding expands the classical framework proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, which originally emphasized the role of mass media in shaping public priorities. In the digital environment, political actors are able to bypass traditional media gatekeeping and perform agenda-setting independently. The MULIA campaign illustrates how social media enables candidates to strategically construct issue salience through repetitive visual narratives, hashtags, and algorithm-driven visibility. This study therefore proposes the concept of self-mediated agenda setting, where political actors act simultaneously as message producers, media institutions, and agenda builders. This model reflects the transformation of political communication in the platform era.

## 2. Implementation of Political Marketing: Awareness, Likeability, and Electability

The implementation of political marketing by the campaign team of Munafri Arifuddin and Aliyah Mustika Ilham (MULIA) demonstrates political communication practices that are not merely informative but also strategic in shaping the structure of public awareness, perception, and political preferences. From the perspective of political marketing, political communication is understood as a strategic process aimed at building relationships between candidates and voters through the systematic management of political image, symbols, and meanings (Newman, 2016). However, within the context of social media, this practice functions not only as a political marketing strategy but also as a discursive practice that produces and reproduces political reality through the construction of particular forms of discourse (Fairclough, 2001).

Political communication can be understood as a social practice encompassing three primary dimensions: text (message production), discursive practice (the processes of message production and consumption), and social practice (the broader context of power and ideology) (Gonçalves, 2018). The political marketing strategy implemented by the MULIA campaign team through Instagram can therefore be interpreted as part of a discursive practice aimed at constructing the candidates' political identity, influencing public perception, and establishing symbolic legitimacy within the digital public sphere.

The first stage involves the development of awareness, defined as the process of introducing the candidates to the public through the consistent production and distribution of political discourse. At the textual level, awareness is constructed through visual and narrative representations that repeatedly present the candidates' identity, including social activities, interactions with the community, and leadership symbols. At the level of discursive practice, such content is systematically produced by the media and content team to ensure the continuity of the candidates' visibility within digital spaces. At the level of social practice, this increased visibility functions to position the candidates within the structure of public consciousness as relevant political actors. This process aligns with agenda-setting theory, which emphasizes that media visibility plays a crucial role in determining the perceived importance of political actors or issues in public perception (M. McCombs, 1977). In other words, the more frequently candidates appear in media spaces, the greater the likelihood that they will be recognized as significant actors within political reality.

The second stage involves the construction of likeability, defined as the process of establishing emotional and symbolic connections between the candidates and voters through the construction of a positive public image. From Fairclough's perspective, this stage

constitutes a representational practice in which candidates are represented through discourse that emphasizes values such as social proximity, empathy, and social concern. Such representations are not neutral but result from deliberate processes of selection and meaning construction designed to shape specific public perceptions. Within the political marketing framework, the development of likeability represents a form of image management, namely efforts to create positive associations between candidates and desired attributes (Keller, 2007). By constructing the candidates' image as figures closely connected to the community, the campaign team not only fosters emotional proximity but also strengthens the candidates' social legitimacy as representatives of public interests.

The third stage involves strengthening electability, defined as the process through which established awareness and emotional proximity are converted into political support. From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, this stage illustrates how political discourse functions as an instrument of power capable of influencing social action, particularly voting decisions. Communication content increasingly emphasizes the candidates' competence, leadership capacity, and vision, thereby aiming to establish rational legitimacy in addition to emotional legitimacy. This process demonstrates how political discourse not only shapes how the public understands political actors but also influences their political behavior and decision-making (Fauzan, 2013). Within the political marketing framework, this stage represents the conversion phase, namely the transformation of positive perceptions into tangible electoral support (Newman, 2016).

The findings indicate that the stages of awareness, likeability, and electability in the MULIA campaign functioned not merely as marketing techniques but as a structured process of discursive identity construction. Through repetitive visual narratives, community engagement imagery, and emotionally resonant storytelling, the campaign gradually positioned the candidates within the cognitive and affective structures of voters.

From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, this process illustrates how discourse operates as a mechanism of symbolic power that normalizes particular political identities. Rather than simply promoting candidates, the campaign systematically constructed meanings of leadership, empathy, and competence that shaped how voters interpreted political reality. This study therefore suggests that political marketing in social media campaigns operates as a form of discursive normalization, in which repeated narratives gradually define what appears credible, relatable, and politically legitimate in the digital public sphere.

### **3. Emotional Approach through the Hero and Caregiver Archetypes**

The emotional approach implemented by the campaign team of Munafri Arifuddin and Aliyah Mustika Ilham (MULIA) demonstrates a political communication strategy that extends

beyond programmatic rationality to encompass the construction of symbolic meaning and emotional attachment with voters. In contemporary political communication, a candidate's success is determined not solely by the quality of policy programs or vision, but also by the ability to build emotional resonance through symbolic narratives that connect the candidate's experiences with voters' value structures, expectations, and identities (Castells, 2015). Emotions, in this context, constitute a crucial instrument in shaping political preferences, as voting decisions are often based on affective perceptions such as trust, empathy, and symbolic proximity rather than purely rational considerations.

One of the primary strategies employed was the utilization of archetypes as a narrative framework to construct the candidates' political identity through Instagram. Carl Jung's concept of archetypes explains that archetypes are universal symbolic patterns embedded within the collective unconscious, functioning as foundational structures for understanding character, roles, and social identity. In political communication and political branding, archetypes operate as symbolic instruments for building a candidate image that is easily recognizable, comprehensible, and emotionally resonant with the public (Mark & Pearson, 2001). Through the use of specific archetypes, candidates are perceived not merely as individuals but as symbolic representations of particular values, such as courage, care, or leadership.

In the MULIA campaign, Munafri Arifuddin was strategically constructed through the Hero archetype, portrayed as a figure who confronts challenges, experiences setbacks, and rises again with renewed determination. This representation was evident in various content pieces highlighting his personal struggles, including previous electoral defeat and his success in leading PSM Makassar to notable achievements. From the perspective of Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, this representation constitutes a discursive practice aimed at shaping the candidate's symbolic identity through narrative construction (Fairclough, 2016). The narrative of struggle and resurgence functions as a symbolic mechanism for building moral and emotional legitimacy, positioning the candidate as resilient, persistent, and committed to society.

Meanwhile, Aliyah Mustika Ilham was constructed through the Caregiver archetype, representing values of empathy, compassion, and social service. This representation was reflected in content depicting her interactions with vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, mothers, and marginalized communities. From the perspective of representation theory, this practice constitutes a process of social identity construction through symbols and narratives designed to generate specific associations within public consciousness (Scheurle,

2016). By portraying the candidate as empathetic and caring, the campaign team constructed an image of leadership that combines administrative competence with social sensitivity. Within the framework of political branding, the Caregiver archetype functions to establish emotional legitimacy by representing the candidate as a protector and servant of the people (Mures & Ventsel, 2025).

The simultaneous use of the Hero and Caregiver archetypes also reflects a strategy of differentiation and complementarity in political identity construction. From a political marketing perspective, this combination allows candidates to appeal to a broader emotional spectrum: strength and leadership embodied by the Hero archetype, and empathy and care represented by the Caregiver archetype (Smith & French, 2009). Consequently, the candidate pair is perceived not only as strong and competent but also as compassionate and socially attentive. This strategy reinforces the symbolic cohesion of the pair as a complementary and unified political identity.

Based on the researcher's observation of the Instagram account @muliamakassar, it was found that of 419 pieces of content uploaded during the campaign period, approximately 160 explicitly represented the Hero and Caregiver archetypes. The high frequency of such representations indicates that the use of archetypes was not incidental but rather part of a structured and repetitive discursive practice. Within second-level agenda-setting theory, the consistent repetition of specific attributes contributes to shaping the candidate's image within the public's cognitive structure (Mccombs & Shaw, 1972). In other words, the more frequently candidates are represented through particular attributes, the stronger those associations become in public perception.

Furthermore, content production grounded in field findings, such as the provision of free clean water, free fogging services, and direct community engagement reinforced the construction of the Hero and Caregiver archetypes through representations anchored in social reality. The Instagram content of the MULIA campaign demonstrated direct responsiveness to real issues faced by the community, particularly those identified through on-the-ground observations. One example is an infographic post hashtag #WATTUNNAMI BERBAGI AIR GRATIS, which not only informed the public about the availability of free clean water assistance but also provided a hotline number for residents affected by drought in Makassar. Another example is a video reel featuring direct testimonials from residents regarding the impact of drought and their appreciation of the MULIA pair's concern. A third example is content titled #WATTUNNAMI FOGGING GRATIS, responding to widespread complaints about mosquito and insect infestations.

These contents functioned not merely as program promotion but as representations of authentic social dialogue outcomes. By utilizing data directly derived from field observations, the media team developed narratives that addressed both the emotional and rational dimensions of the community. The content reflected the MULIA pair's alignment with grassroots communities, thereby strengthening their image as responsive and solution-oriented leadership candidates in Makassar. Most of the uploaded content appears to have originated from on-the-ground observations which were later transformed into campaign narratives across different media formats.

From Fairclough's perspective, this practice demonstrates a dialectical relationship between discourse and social practice (Qudratullah et al., 2025), whereby social experiences are articulated through digital discourse to build political legitimacy (Fairclough, 2016). By integrating empirical realities into campaign narratives, the campaign team not only constructed symbolic images but also reinforced perceptions of candidate authenticity. Authenticity constitutes a critical factor in digital political communication, as the public tends to place greater trust in candidates perceived as authentic and consistent (Enli, 2017).

This strategy was further reinforced through Get Out the Vote (GOTV) practices, which leveraged emotional mobilization to encourage political participation. Within political mobilization theory, emotional engagement plays a crucial role in stimulating voter participation, as emotions such as hope and symbolic identification can increase motivation to act (Green & Gerber, 2015). By utilizing Instagram's interactive features, the campaign team fostered emotional engagement that strengthened the relationship between candidates and voters, thereby increasing the likelihood of electoral participation.

The findings demonstrate that the use of the Hero and Caregiver archetypes positioned emotional narratives at the center of the MULIA digital campaign. Through repeated symbolic representations, the campaign constructed affective identification between candidates and voters, combining strength and compassion as complementary leadership qualities. This study contributes to the literature on digital political communication by suggesting that archetypal storytelling on social media functions as a mechanism of emotional governance through which political actors shape public feelings and identification.

More broadly, the analysis reveals that Instagram functioned not merely as a campaign communication channel but as a site for the production of political reality. Through issue selection, narrative framing, and symbolic imagery, the campaign actively shaped interpretations of urban problems and positioned the candidates as credible political actors. In

this sense, digital political campaigns operate as discursive ecosystems in which meaning, legitimacy, and political authority are continuously negotiated within the digital public sphere.

### **Strategic Issues Raised in the MULIA Campaign**

One of the crucial dimensions of digital political communication strategy is the selection of strategic issues that are framed persuasively and aligned with the needs and aspirations of the public. In the context of the campaign of Munafri Arifuddin and Aliyah Mustika Ilham (MULIA), social media particularly Instagram was actively utilized to shape public opinion through the promotion of substantive issues that directly addressed the problems faced by the citizens of Makassar. According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), “mass media may not be successful in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.” This statement emphasizes that issues frequently highlighted in media discourse are more likely to be perceived as important by audiences. Based on documentation from the official Instagram account @muliamakassar, several strategic issues were consistently emphasized by the MULIA campaign:

1. Inclusive Education and Equal Access to Schooling

In several posts, the MULIA campaign emphasized the importance of inclusive and non-discriminatory education. Inclusive education was positioned as a central narrative within the candidates’ urban development vision. The focus on persons with disabilities and equal access to educational facilities not only strengthened the candidates’ image of social concern but also targeted key voter groups, including parents, educators, and education activists. This issue was strategically employed to shape public perception that the MULIA pair represented egalitarian and humanistic reform within the education system.

Visual analysis further reinforced this narrative. The design of the posts used strong color emphasis on key phrases such as “non-discriminatory” and “must be prepared,” highlighting the importance of these messages. The visual presence of Aliyah Mustika Ilham as the communicator of this vision strengthened emotional associations with women and education, while simultaneously projecting a communicative, empathetic, and caring leadership persona.

2. Inclusive Development and Anti-Discrimination

The MULIA campaign explicitly promoted inclusive development as a core political identity. In one campaign post, the candidates emphasized that inclusive development should not remain merely symbolic rhetoric but must be realized through concrete policies benefiting all segments of society, regardless of background, social class, or political affiliation. This message was reinforced by a visual campaign statement: “Inclusive development programs must not remain slogans; MULIA will provide concrete evidence through development without discrimination”.

This narrative was strategically constructed to guide public opinion toward perceiving the candidates as advocates of social justice, while simultaneously differentiating them from political competitors often perceived as elitist or sectarian. Through this framing, the candidates positioned themselves as progressive and socially inclusive leaders.

### 3. Public Transportation and Accessibility Solutions

The MULIA campaign also addressed functional issues directly affecting daily urban life, particularly public transportation accessibility. In one Instagram post, the candidates expressed their commitment to providing widely accessible and equitable public transportation services. This narrative explicitly targeted working-class voters, students, and urban residents who depend on public transportation for daily activities. Strategically, this issue was employed to construct public perception that the MULIA pair possessed a deep understanding of complex urban realities and the capacity to deliver systemic and technocratic solutions.

The emphasis on “information accessibility” and “route coverage” demonstrated that their narrative extended beyond general promises to address operational dimensions of urban transportation systems issues frequently identified as public concerns. By emphasizing efficiency, affordability, and service expansion, the candidates cultivated an image of managerial competence necessary for addressing longstanding metropolitan challenges.

### 4. Parking Management and Employment Solutions

The issue of illegal parking, traditionally viewed as a matter of urban order was strategically reframed by the MULIA campaign team as part of a broader narrative integrating urban spatial management with employment creation. In their campaign messaging, the candidates stated: “MULIA will resolve illegal parking issues by recruiting parking attendants with minimum wage salaries, while simultaneously creating employment opportunities”.

This approach reflects a layered communication strategy, in which a specific technical issue (illegal parking) was connected to broader socio-economic solutions (employment generation and labor formalization). The use of terminology such as “integration,” “vehicle taxation systems,” and “parking infrastructure investment” reinforced the candidates’ image as technocratic and solution-oriented leaders. From an agenda-setting perspective, this strategy illustrates an intentional effort to shift public opinion from merely complaining about everyday urban problems toward viewing them as opportunities for systemic transformation. Consequently, the candidates positioned themselves as transformative actors capable of addressing both immediate concerns and structural challenges.

### 5. Flooding, Access to Clean Water, Nutrition, and Stadium Infrastructure

Visual content featuring Munafri Arifuddin and Aliyah Mustika Ilham during an open debate forum demonstrated a highly symbolic and rhetorically structured political communication strategy aimed at shaping public perception through social media. The repeated rhetorical phrase “There must be no more...” was used to emphasize rejection of various problematic social conditions, including flooding reduced to recurring water stagnation, limited access to clean water, stunting and malnutrition, disorganized urban development, and the absence of a city stadium. This rhetorical style created a sense of urgency and framed existing conditions as crises requiring immediate intervention.

From an agenda-setting perspective, these statements were not intended to directly dictate public opinion on each issue but rather to direct public attention toward perceiving these five issues as critical priorities. Visually, the candidates were portrayed standing side by side on a debate podium, displaying calm yet firm expressions and wearing coordinated attire. This visual composition conveyed an image of equality, unity, and cohesive collective leadership. The combination of rhetorical emphasis and visual symbolism worked simultaneously to construct public perception that the MULIA pair was not only responsive to real societal problems but also possessed firm, progressive, and solution-oriented leadership capacity. This strategy reflects a deliberate political communication practice designed to guide public perception, direct voter attention toward prioritized issues, and reinforce the candidates’ credibility as the most capable actors to address these challenges effectively.

#### 6. Urban Cleanliness and Household Economic Burden

Through this approach, the MULIA campaign sought to shape public opinion by demonstrating strong social sensitivity toward the everyday realities of citizens, as well as the capacity to translate technical policies into tangible household-level benefits. From an agenda-setting perspective, this strategy aimed to position urban cleanliness and household financial burdens related to public service contributions as urgent public concerns deserving electoral prioritization.

Furthermore, by linking environmental concerns with household economic conditions, the candidates presented themselves as capable of designing holistic, measurable, and welfare-oriented policies. The integration of visual symbolism, locally resonant rhetoric, and concrete policy narratives transformed these campaign posts into effective instruments for guiding public opinion within a cognitive framework aligned with the MULIA campaign’s political agenda.

All content uploaded to the Instagram account @muliamakassar demonstrates that the campaign team of Munafri Arifuddin and Aliyah Mustika Ilham (MULIA) strategically utilized social media to communicate strategic issues that were timely and contextually aligned with

the needs of Makassar's citizens. Through this platform, the campaign constructed a positive narrative emphasizing technocratic competence, social concern, and advocacy for vulnerable groups, while simultaneously shaping public opinion through emotionally resonant visualizations, assertive narrative framing, and the use of inclusive and populist diction. In this regard, Instagram did not merely function as a passive communication channel but served as an active instrument for systematically constructing public opinion and shaping the electoral image of the candidates.

The selection of strategic issues within the MULIA campaign can be analyzed through the agenda-setting theory framework introduced by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. In their seminal Chapel Hill study during the 1968 United States presidential election, they demonstrated that media do not determine what the public should think, but rather what the public should think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Accordingly, the intensity, frequency, and prominence of specific issues on the @muliamakassar Instagram account played a significant role in shaping the hierarchy of public priorities regarding key urban issues in Makassar.

Furthermore, the development of agenda-setting theory into second-level agenda setting, or attribute agenda setting, explains that media not only influence which issues are considered important but also shape the attributes associated with those issues and political actors (M. E. McCombs & Shaw, 2017). In this context, when the MULIA pair consistently highlighted issues such as inclusive education, non-discriminatory development, public transportation, and urban cleanliness, they were not only increasing issue awareness but also attaching symbolic attributes such as "inclusive," "humanistic," "solution-oriented," and "technocratic" to their political identity. These attributes contributed to constructing a favorable cognitive and symbolic association between the candidates and these valued characteristics in the public mind.

The issue packaging strategy employed by the MULIA campaign can be analyzed through framing theory, as developed by Robert M. Entman. According to Entman, framing involves selecting certain aspects of reality and making them more salient in communication texts in order to promote specific problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and policy recommendations (Entman, 2007). For example, the issue of illegal parking was not framed merely as an urban order problem but as an opportunity to create formal employment with minimum wage guarantees. This reframing illustrates how the campaign transformed a technical urban management issue into a broader narrative of social welfare and economic empowerment.

Within the digital communication environment, this practice is also consistent with the concept of the mediatization of politics (Strömbäck, 2008), which explains that political actors increasingly adapt their communication strategies to conform to media logic. As a visually oriented platform, Instagram encourages the use of symbolic visual elements, bold typography (such as the repeated phrase “There must be no more...”), and cohesive candidate imagery to enhance persuasive effectiveness. These visual and symbolic elements function not only as aesthetic components but also as strategic tools for reinforcing political messaging and shaping public interpretation.

The consistent emphasis on issues such as flooding, access to clean water, stunting, and stadium infrastructure can also be understood through the lens of issue ownership theory (Lefevere et al., 2015). This theory explains that political candidates seek to “own” specific issues so that the public associates their candidacy with competence in addressing those issues. By consistently highlighting urban welfare and infrastructure concerns, the MULIA pair sought to establish themselves as the most credible and capable actors in resolving the structural challenges faced by Makassar.

From the perspective of modern political communication, the emphasis on urban cleanliness and household economic burdens also reflects a problem solution messaging strategy, a persuasive communication technique that identifies concrete societal problems while simultaneously offering practical and actionable solutions. This approach strengthens the candidates’ image as responsive leaders and reduces the perceived gap between campaign rhetoric and the everyday realities experienced by citizens.

Thus, the strategic selection and framing of campaign issues demonstrate that Instagram functioned not merely as a medium for message dissemination but as a structured arena for the construction of political reality. Through systematic issue selection, symbolic representation, and strategic framing, the MULIA campaign actively shaped public perception, constructed political legitimacy, and influenced the cognitive framework through which voters understood urban governance and leadership.

Table 1.  
Theoretical Analysis of Strategic Campaign Issues of the MULIA Candidate Pair on Instagram

No	Strategic Issue	Form of Representation on Instagram	Agenda Setting Analysis	Framing Analysis	Issue Ownership & Political Marketing	Expected Electoral Impact
1	Inclusive education and equitable access to schooling	Visual representation of Aliyah Mustika Ilham accompanied by the narrative “not discriminating” and emphasizing equal educational access	The repeated emphasis on education shapes public perception that inclusive education constitutes a primary and urgent policy priority for the city	Education is framed as a universal right and a symbol of social justice rather than merely an administrative service	The candidate is positioned as an empathetic and humanistic leader concerned with vulnerable groups, strengthening the awareness and likeability stages of political marketing	Mobilizes support from parents, educators, educational communities, and civil society groups
2	Inclusive development and anti-discrimination	Narratives of non-discriminatory development accompanied by visual symbols of social equality	The development agenda directs public attention toward distributive justice as a structural issue requiring political intervention	Development is framed as an instrument of social justice and a solution to structural inequality	The candidate constructs issue ownership over social justice and inclusivity, reinforcing a progressive and egalitarian leadership image	Strengthens symbolic legitimacy and emotional resonance among diverse social constituencies
3	Public transportation and accessibility	Narratives promoting affordable, efficient, and inclusive public transportation solutions	Transportation is positioned as a fundamental urban necessity and an indicator of modern urban governance	Transportation is framed as a mechanism for improving quality of life, social mobility, and economic productivity	The candidate is positioned as a technocratic and solution-oriented actor capable of addressing urban problems	Increases support from urban workers, students, and the urban middle class
4	Parking management and job creation	Narratives concerning the recruitment of parking attendants with minimum wage standards and modern parking system visualization	Parking is redefined from a technical urban issue into a broader public economic concern	Informal parking is framed as an economic opportunity and a source of formal employment creation	The candidate constructs an image as a pragmatic and economically oriented leader focused on public welfare	Enhances perceptions of managerial competence and increases candidate electability
5	Flooding, clean water, nutrition, and	Normative rhetoric such as “There must be	Repetitive rhetorical emphasis	Urban problems are framed as	The candidate is positioned as a transformative	Strengthens public perception of

	urban stadium infrastructure	no more...” accompanied by debate visuals	creates a sense of urgency and elevates these issues as public priorities	structural crises requiring decisive leadership and systemic change	leader with strong and decisive leadership qualities	leadership capacity and governing readiness
6	Urban sanitation and household economic burden	Narratives emphasizing reduced sanitation fees and efficient waste management systems	Sanitation is reconstructed as an issue of public welfare and economic protection	Sanitation is framed as a dimension of economic justice and state responsibility toward vulnerable populations	The candidate is positioned as a responsive and people-oriented leader attentive to grassroots economic concerns	Increases electoral support from lower-income groups, households, and economically vulnerable voters

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusion

This study examines how digital political communication strategies were constructed and implemented in the Makassar mayoral election through the Instagram account of the MULIA candidate pair Arifuddin and Aliyah Mustika Ilham. The findings show that digital political communication is not merely a means of disseminating campaign information but a strategic practice for constructing political meaning, directing public attention, and building emotional connections with voters. Through the systematic use of Instagram, the campaign team organized messages, framed strategic issues, and created symbolic representations that strengthened the candidates’ political positioning. The study confirms that social media function as a discursive arena where political actors shape public perception. The MULIA campaign employed structured communication strategies including issue selection based on public concerns, agenda-setting practices, political marketing stages of awareness, likeability, and electability, and emotional narratives through symbolic archetypes. These strategies enabled the candidates to build both cognitive recognition and emotional attachment among voters. Overall, the research demonstrates that digital platforms provide political actors with greater control over the production and distribution of political discourse. Effective digital campaigns rely not only on technological use but also on coherent narrative construction, strategic issue framing, and consistent symbolic communication, which together contribute to shaping political legitimacy and voter support in contemporary local elections.

### Suggestion

Future research should further explore the dynamics of digital political communication by comparing campaign strategies across different social media platforms and electoral contexts. Such comparative studies would help explain how variations in media logic, audience characteristics, and political environments influence the effectiveness of digital campaigns. In addition, future studies may

incorporate audience reception analysis to better understand how voters interpret and respond to political narratives circulated through social media. From a practical perspective, political actors and campaign teams are encouraged to develop more responsible and substantive digital communication practices. Social media should not only be used for image-building but also as a space for transparent dialogue, policy explanation, and civic engagement. Strengthening digital literacy among the public is also important so that citizens can critically evaluate political messages circulating online. By promoting ethical, informative, and participatory communication practices, digital media can contribute positively to the quality of democratic life.

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