

Symbolic Meaning in Digital Political Practice: An Analysis of Political Language on Social Media in the 2024 Makassar Mayoral Election

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Abstract

This study examines the construction, circulation, and contestation of symbolic meaning in political language on social media during the 2024 Makassar mayoral election. In contemporary local elections, social media has become more than a channel for transmitting campaign information; it functions as a symbolic arena in which political identities, local cultural claims, and affective attachments are continuously produced and negotiated. Using symbolic interactionism as the main analytical framework, this qualitative case study analyzes verbal and visual campaign symbols circulated through candidates' official Instagram, X, and Facebook accounts, together with public audience responses in the form of comments, likes, shares, and discursive counter-narratives. The findings show that slogans, hashtags, local linguistic markers, cultural attire, religious icons, and urban landmarks were strategically deployed to construct candidates as populist, culturally rooted, religiously legitimate, and future-oriented figures. However, these symbols did not generate a single stable meaning. Supporters interpreted them as signs of representation, hope, and collective identity, whereas skeptical users reframed the same symbols as empty rhetoric, elite manipulation, or performative populism. The study concludes that social media transformed the Makassar mayoral election into a symbolic performance in which political legitimacy was shaped not only by programs and policy claims but also by the capacity to control, circulate, and defend meanings in digital public space. The article contributes to political communication studies by foregrounding a locally specific Eastern Indonesian case and by showing how symbolic interaction, platform affordances, and local cultural repertoires intersect in digital electoral politics.

Keywords: symbolic language; political communication; social media; local election; Makassar; symbolic interactionism

INTRODUCTION

Local elections in Indonesia have increasingly become arenas in which political competition is mediated through digital platforms, visual imagery, and emotionally resonant linguistic symbols. The 2024 Makassar mayoral election is an important case because the city represents a dense urban political space where party competition, local identities, religious symbolism, and everyday popular culture intersect. In this context, campaign communication is not limited to the delivery of policy platforms. It also involves the production of symbolic meaning through slogans, hashtags, images, local idioms, and culturally recognizable performances. These symbolic resources allow candidates to construct political identities that appear close to ordinary citizens, respectful of local values, and capable of representing the aspirations of urban voters.

The increasing centrality of social media has changed how political meanings are produced and contested. Instagram, X, and Facebook provide political actors with rapid, low-

cost, and highly visible channels for communicating with voters. At the same time, these platforms enable citizens to respond immediately through comments, shares, memes, counter-slogans, and other forms of digital participation. As a result, campaign messages do not move in a one-directional flow from candidates to voters. They are reinterpreted, validated, resisted, or transformed by online audiences. Political communication on social media is therefore best understood as an interactive process in which meaning is continuously negotiated rather than passively received.

This study departs from the premise that political language is not neutral. Slogans such as “Makassar Maju Bersama” and hashtags such as “#AnakLorongBisaJi” work as symbolic devices that carry claims about identity, representation, authenticity, and belonging. The use of local linguistic markers such as “ji,” references to urban spaces such as lorong (alleys), and visual representations of cultural and religious symbols transform campaign communication into a symbolic struggle over who has the right to represent the city. Such symbolic struggle is especially significant in Makassar, where cultural values, urban class identities, and local pride continue to shape political imagination.

Previous studies on digital campaigning have demonstrated that social media changes the style, speed, personalization, and visibility of political communication (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Bossetta, 2018; Kreiss & McGregor, 2018). Other studies emphasize the importance of images, affect, and platform-specific affordances in shaping political visibility (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Papacharissi, 2015). However, studies of Indonesian electoral politics often focus on national elections, political polarization, campaign strategy, or the quantitative measurement of engagement. Less attention has been given to how symbolic meanings are constructed and negotiated in local elections outside Java, especially in Eastern Indonesia. This gap is important because local political communication is shaped by culturally specific repertoires that may not be fully captured by studies of national political campaigns.

The present study addresses this gap by analyzing symbolic meanings in political language on social media during the 2024 Makassar mayoral election. It asks three research questions: (1) What verbal and visual symbols dominated candidates' campaign communication on social media? (2) How did Makassar netizens interpret, negotiate, and contest the meanings of these symbols? (3) How did symbolic interaction on social media contribute to the formation of fragmented political realities and digital mobilization? By answering these questions, the study contributes to political communication scholarship by offering a local, interpretive, and culturally grounded analysis of digital campaigning in Indonesia.

Symbolic Politics and Political Language

The study of symbolic politics begins with the recognition that political life is not constituted only through institutions, policies, and electoral procedures, but also through signs, narratives, rituals, and emotionally charged symbols. Edelman (1964) argues that political objects and leaders gain meaning through symbolic processes that organize public perception and emotional response. Political language, therefore, does not merely describe political reality; it helps construct the reality through which citizens interpret power, legitimacy, threat, hope, and belonging. In electoral campaigns, slogans, metaphors, images, and gestures condense complex political claims into easily recognizable symbols.

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic power is also relevant because it highlights how language can legitimize social positions and reproduce domination through seemingly ordinary communicative forms. Political actors compete not only for votes but also for the authority to define what counts as legitimate representation, authentic leadership, and acceptable political identity. In the context of local elections, such symbolic power is often expressed through appeals to locality, cultural memory, religion, class proximity, and shared

urban experience. These appeals are not simply decorative; they can influence how voters imagine the relationship between candidates and the community.

Symbolic interactionism as an analytical framework

Symbolic interactionism provides the theoretical basis for understanding how political meanings are produced through social interaction. Mead (1934) emphasizes that the self and social reality are formed through interaction, while Blumer (1969) formulates three central premises: human beings act toward things based on the meanings those things have for them; meanings arise from social interaction; and meanings are modified through interpretation. This framework is particularly useful for analyzing political communication on social media because online audiences do not merely consume campaign messages. They interpret, reframe, circulate, and contest them.

In this study, campaign slogans, hashtags, images, local idioms, and visual representations are treated as symbols whose meanings are not fixed in advance. A hashtag may function as a sign of hope among supporters but as a sign of manipulation among opponents. A candidate's use of traditional clothing may be read as cultural rootedness by one group and as performative identity politics by another. Symbolic interactionism enables the analysis to move beyond content description toward the interpretive processes through which political meanings become socially meaningful, contested, and mobilizing.

Social media, platform affordances, and digital campaigning

Social media platforms have transformed campaign communication by enabling personalization, immediacy, and direct interaction between political actors and voters. Enli and Skogerbø (2013) argue that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter intensify candidate-centered communication by making individual politicians more visible than party organizations. Bossetta (2018) further shows that different platforms shape political communication through their architectures, including network structure, algorithmic filtering, datafication, and user-facing functions. These platform affordances influence what kinds of symbolic messages are likely to circulate, become visible, or attract engagement.

Visual communication is particularly important in platform-based politics. Instagram privileges images, short videos, aesthetic coherence, and visual branding, whereas X often amplifies concise slogans, controversy, and rapid discursive contestation. Facebook combines textual narration, visual material, and community-based sharing. These differences matter because symbolic political communication is mediated by the technical and cultural logic of each platform. A slogan, for example, may become a hashtag on X, a visual poster on Instagram, and a shareable narrative on Facebook. Therefore, the same political symbol can travel across platforms while acquiring different meanings and intensities.

Local culture, identity, and political symbolism in Makassar

Makassar provides a rich site for analyzing symbolic political communication because local politics is deeply intertwined with cultural identity, urban belonging, and collective pride. Bugis-Makassar social life is often discussed through values such as *siri'* (dignity, honor, or self-respect) and *pesse/pacce* (solidarity and empathy), which continue to inform public expectations of leadership, social responsibility, and moral legitimacy (Mattulada, 1998; Pelras, 1996). In electoral contexts, cultural values can be translated into campaign symbols that present candidates as protectors of local dignity, representatives of ordinary citizens, or guardians of communal solidarity.

Urban symbols are equally important. The term *lorong*, for instance, does not refer only to a physical alley. In Makassar's urban political imagination, it can signify grassroots life, neighborhood solidarity, informality, and the everyday struggles of lower- and middle-income citizens. When candidates use “*anak lorong*” as a symbolic identity, they attempt to collapse the distance between elite politics and ordinary urban experience. This symbolic

claim becomes persuasive only when audiences accept it as authentic; it becomes vulnerable when audiences perceive it as staged, opportunistic, or disconnected from actual policy commitments.

Based on this literature, the novelty of the present study lies in its focus on the interpretive negotiation of symbolic political language in an Eastern Indonesian urban local election. Rather than treating social media posts as isolated campaign content, the study examines how meanings are constructed through interaction among candidates, supporters, critics, and platform dynamics.

METHOD

Research design

This study employed a qualitative case study design. A qualitative approach was selected because the research aimed to understand meanings, interpretations, and symbolic negotiations rather than to measure causal relationships. The case study design was appropriate because the 2024 Makassar mayoral election provided a bounded political event with specific actors, platforms, cultural contexts, and campaign practices. The study was descriptive-interpretive in orientation, focusing on how political symbols were produced by candidates and interpreted by online audiences.

Data sources and corpus

The primary data consisted of campaign-related content published on the official Instagram, X, and Facebook accounts of mayoral and vice-mayoral candidates registered for the 2024 Makassar election. The analysis focused on textual captions, slogans, hashtags, campaign posters, short videos, visual symbols, and public audience interactions, including comments, likes, shares, and counter-narratives. Secondary data included online news reports, official election documents, campaign regulations, and academic literature on political communication, symbolic interactionism, and digital campaigning. The official campaign period for the 2024 Indonesian regional elections was used as the temporal boundary of the case, while additional contextual documents were consulted to support interpretation.

Author note: for final journal submission, the manuscript should explicitly report the number of accounts observed, the number of posts, the number of comments sampled, the exact observation dates, and the inclusion-exclusion criteria. These details were not available in the source manuscript and should be added to strengthen methodological transparency.

Data collection

Data were collected through passive digital observation, also known as digital ethnographic observation or netnographic observation. The researchers systematically monitored candidates' official social media accounts and archived relevant campaign materials using screenshots, URL records, field notes, and a data management spreadsheet. Particular attention was given to posts that contained prominent verbal symbols, repeated campaign slogans, local idioms, culturally marked images, religious references, and high levels of audience interaction. Public comments were documented to identify how users accepted, rejected, modified, or contested the intended meanings of campaign symbols.

Data analysis

The analysis followed an interpretive thematic procedure. First, the researchers conducted open coding to identify recurrent verbal and visual symbols. Second, these codes were grouped into broader categories, including populist identification, cultural legitimacy, religious morality, urban pride, collective progress, and counter-symbolic resistance. Third, audience responses were analyzed to examine how meanings were negotiated through comments, memes, sarcasm, endorsement, and criticism. Finally, the emergent themes were

interpreted through the lens of symbolic interactionism to explain how digital interactions contributed to the construction of political reality.

Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

To enhance trustworthiness, the study used data source triangulation by comparing campaign posts, audience responses, online news, official documents, and relevant academic literature. Analytical memos were written throughout the coding process to maintain reflexivity and to document interpretive decisions. Ethical considerations were addressed by focusing only on publicly available data, avoiding the disclosure of private user identities, and paraphrasing selected comments where necessary to reduce traceability. The study did not attempt to identify individual users; instead, it analyzed public discourse patterns at the level of symbolic meaning and interaction.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Dominant verbal symbols in campaign language

The first major finding concerns the strategic use of verbal symbols to construct political identity. Slogans such as “Makassar Maju Bersama” and hashtags such as “#AnakLorongBisaJi” appeared not merely as campaign labels but as condensed symbolic claims. “Makassar Maju Bersama” constructed an image of collective progress, implying that urban development should be inclusive, shared, and future-oriented. The phrase “bersama” was especially important because it positioned the candidate not as a solitary political actor but as part of a collective movement involving citizens, neighborhoods, and local communities.

The hashtag “#AnakLorongBisaJi” operated through a different symbolic logic. It drew on the imagery of the lorong as an urban grassroots space associated with ordinary people, neighborhood intimacy, and everyday resilience. The addition of the local particle “ji” strengthened the affective and cultural resonance of the message by making it sound familiar, conversational, and locally grounded. Through this phrase, the candidate was symbolically positioned as someone emerging from the same social world as ordinary voters. This rhetorical strategy attempted to reduce social distance between political elites and urban residents.

Visual symbols of culture, religion, and urban identity

The second finding relates to the use of visual symbolism. Candidates frequently appeared in visual materials with cultural, religious, and urban markers, including traditional clothing, local architectural icons, religious landmarks, and colors associated with party identity or campaign branding. These images functioned as symbolic resources that connected candidates to local pride, moral legitimacy, and a recognizable Makassar identity. Visual references to cultural attire and local landmarks did not simply decorate campaign materials; they worked as claims of belonging and authenticity.

Religious and cultural imagery also helped construct candidates as morally legitimate figures. Visual appearances near iconic mosques, community events, and culturally significant places suggested that the candidate was embedded in the moral and social life of the city. In a digital environment where visual content travels quickly and is often interpreted before detailed textual arguments are read, such images became powerful semiotic shortcuts. They enabled candidates to communicate complex claims about identity, religiosity, and leadership through instantly recognizable symbols.

Supportive interpretation and digital validation

The third finding concerns how supporters interpreted and validated campaign symbols. In many supportive comments, the symbol of “anak lorong” was interpreted as evidence that the candidate represented ordinary people rather than distant elites. Supportive users framed the

candidate as “one of us,” a person who understood neighborhood-level problems and could speak from within the social experience of urban residents. This interpretation shows that campaign symbols can produce affective proximity when audiences perceive them as authentic.

Supportive interactions also transformed campaign symbols into tools of digital mobilization. Users repeated hashtags, shared campaign posters, defended candidates in comment threads, and encouraged others to participate in the symbolic narrative. Through repeated interaction, a slogan became more than a message issued by a campaign team. It became a shared identity marker among supporters. This process reflects the central insight of symbolic interactionism: meanings are stabilized through social interaction. The symbolic meaning of a campaign slogan gained strength when it was repeatedly affirmed by a community of users.

Counter-interpretation and symbolic resistance

The fourth finding shows that symbolic meanings were actively contested. The same symbols that supporters interpreted as authenticity and hope were reframed by skeptical users as empty rhetoric, strategic performance, or elite manipulation. For example, narratives of collective progress were sometimes countered with sarcastic comments questioning who would truly benefit from such progress. Similarly, grassroots imagery was challenged by users who argued that symbolic identification with ordinary people was not enough without concrete policy commitments.

This counter-interpretation demonstrates that political symbols do not have fixed or uncontested meanings. Social media comment sections became arenas of symbolic struggle in which users attempted to validate, destabilize, or reverse the meaning intended by campaign actors. Sarcasm, memes, counter-data, and critical commentary functioned as tools of symbolic resistance. In this sense, digital audiences were not passive recipients of campaign communication. They participated in the construction and deconstruction of political meaning.

Fragmented political realities and digital mobilization

The final finding concerns the formation of fragmented political realities. Supporters and critics often inhabited different interpretive spaces, each reinforced by repeated exposure to similar narratives, comments, and platform recommendations. Within supportive networks, campaign symbols circulated as evidence of momentum, legitimacy, and popular enthusiasm. Within critical networks, the same symbols circulated as evidence of superficial branding or manipulative populism. As a result, social media did not create one unified public interpretation of the election. It produced multiple symbolic realities that existed side by side and often in conflict.

The fragmentation of meaning had practical consequences for digital mobilization. When a symbol was successfully interpreted as representing collective hope, supporters became active distributors of campaign narratives. They amplified hashtags, circulated images, and defended the candidate against criticism. Conversely, critics mobilized counter-symbolic narratives to weaken the candidate's symbolic legitimacy. Electoral communication therefore became a struggle not only over policy claims but also over the visibility, credibility, and emotional force of competing meanings.

Discussion

The findings confirm that digital political campaigning in Makassar operated through symbolic performance as much as through programmatic persuasion. The use of slogans, hashtags, local idioms, cultural attire, religious imagery, and urban landmarks shows that candidates attempted to build political legitimacy by connecting themselves to shared cultural and social meanings. This supports Edelman's (1964) view that politics often functions

through symbolic condensation, where complex political claims are simplified into emotionally powerful signs. In the Makassar case, the most effective symbols were those that connected candidates to locality, popular identity, and collective aspiration.

The study also extends symbolic interactionism by showing how digital platforms intensify the negotiation of political meaning. Blumer's (1969) argument that meaning arises through interaction is clearly visible in the way users interpreted, repeated, mocked, defended, and transformed campaign symbols. A slogan such as “#AnakLorongBisaJi” did not become politically meaningful simply because a candidate used it. It gained symbolic force when supporters recognized it as authentic and circulated it as part of their own political identity. At the same time, it became vulnerable when critics reframed it as performative populism. Meaning was therefore relational, interactive, and unstable.

The findings are consistent with studies of digital campaigning that highlight personalization and platform affordances. Enli and Skogerbø (2013) argue that social media increases the visibility of individual politicians, while Bossetta (2018) emphasizes that platform architecture shapes campaign communication. In this study, Instagram amplified visual identity and aesthetic symbolism, X facilitated slogan circulation and rapid contestation, and Facebook supported longer community-based narratives. These platform differences influenced how political symbols were produced, circulated, and contested. The same campaign narrative could operate differently across platforms depending on the dominant communicative logic of each medium.

The Makassar case also demonstrates the importance of local cultural repertoires in digital politics. Symbols such as lorong, local linguistic particles, traditional clothing, and religious landmarks gained meaning because they resonated with the city's social and cultural context. This finding suggests that digital politics should not be understood as culturally uniform. Even though social media platforms are global infrastructures, political meanings remain deeply local. The symbolic language of Makassar politics cannot be fully explained through general theories of online campaigning without considering local histories, urban identities, and cultural values such as dignity, solidarity, and neighborhood belonging.

At the same time, the study reveals a critical democratic concern. Symbolic communication can increase political engagement by making campaigns more emotionally accessible and culturally meaningful. However, it can also shift public attention away from substantive policy discussion. When campaign legitimacy depends heavily on symbolic identification, voters may evaluate candidates based on perceived authenticity, cultural closeness, or emotional resonance rather than on detailed programmatic commitments. This does not mean that symbols are inherently manipulative; rather, it indicates that democratic literacy is needed so citizens can interpret campaign symbols critically and connect them to policy accountability.

The findings have implications for political communication practice and electoral governance. Campaign teams should recognize that symbolic appeals are powerful but ethically sensitive, especially when they mobilize local identity, religion, or grassroots narratives. Election regulators and civil society organizations should promote clearer standards for ethical digital campaigning, particularly regarding misleading symbolic claims, manipulated visual content, coordinated harassment, and identity-based provocation. Finally, media literacy programs should help voters distinguish between meaningful cultural representation and superficial symbolic performance.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that political language on social media during the 2024 Makassar mayoral election functioned as a symbolic arena in which candidates, supporters, and critics competed to define political identity, legitimacy, and belonging. Verbal symbols such as

slogans and hashtags, together with visual symbols such as cultural attire, religious landmarks, and urban imagery, were strategically used to construct candidates as locally rooted, populist, religiously legitimate, and future-oriented leaders.

The meanings of these symbols were not fixed. They were negotiated through interaction among digital audiences. Supporters interpreted symbols such as “anak lorong” as evidence of representation and hope, while critics reframed the same symbols as performative populism or empty rhetoric. This confirms that political meaning in digital campaigns is produced through social interaction rather than simply transmitted by campaign actors.

The study contributes to political communication scholarship by offering a locally grounded analysis of symbolic interaction in an Eastern Indonesian electoral context. It shows that social media does not merely accelerate campaign communication; it transforms local elections into contested symbolic performances where political legitimacy depends on the capacity to produce, circulate, and defend meaning. Future studies should expand this analysis by using a larger comparative dataset, combining qualitative interpretation with engagement analytics, and examining how symbolic meanings influence actual voting behavior.

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