Digital Political Communication in Emerging Democracy: A Comparative Study of Indonesia, India, and Brazil

Thomas Tokan Pureklolon[1], Arnoldus Pawe[2], Rudy Pramono[2]

[1]Magister Hubungan Internasional, Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik, Universitas Pelita Harapan, Indonesia

[2]Universitas Pelita Harapan, Indonesia

Correspondence: Rudy Pramono, Universitas Pelita Harapan, Indonesia.

Abstract

The victory of right-wing political parties in democratic countries worldwide has garnered significant attention and presented unique challenges. The structured and widespread use of social media platforms is alleged to play a crucial role, enabling these parties to actively shape influence, attract voter sympathy, and mobilize support on a broad scale. Using the evidence from the presidential and parliamentary elections in Indonesia, India, and Brazil, this research examines how the populist candidates in these major democracies effectively utilized appealing patterns and styles of political communication on the social media. Through a comparative analysis of the 33 articles published in the International journals between 2019 and 2023, the findings have revealed some similarities in the digital political communication patterns and styles among the victorious populist figures. This study specifically highlights the facts that these figures employ digital communication strategies centered on two key aspects, namely: (1) promoting populist narratives through the social media and (2) crafting personalized self-images. These strategies are shown to be instrumental in securing election wins for the populist leaders concerned.

Keywords: political digital communication, democratic states, populist narration, social media platforms

1. Introduction

The digital media have transformed political communication strategies, enabling political figures to connect directly with the public and allowing citizens to actively engage in politics (Indrawan et al., 2020; Chadwick, 2013). Recently, the digital media have become essential in election campaigns, advancing political and societal democratization (Choudry, 2020) and promoting cultural inclusivity (Guedes Farias et al., 2013).

The social media, in particular, play a crucial role in election campaigns across developing nations with substantial Internet use, such as Indonesia, India, and Brazil (Ferreira do Vale, 2022). Despite their differing political and cultural systems, the social media have become a key tool for political parties and candidates to communicate, gather support, and shape public personas (Ahmad et al., 2019; Farkas & Bene, 2021; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). In Indonesia, for instance, the social media are instrumental in amplifying political messages and mobilizing supporters (Setiawan et al., 2020). Their affordability and ability to reach young voters make it an attractive platform for political campaigns (Hamid et al., 2022), offering politicians continuous, accessible means to build connections with their constituents (Farkas & Bene, 2021; Hamid et al., 2022; Setiawan et al., 2020).

Digital campaign dynamics in these countries illustrate how the candidates use the social media to sway voter opinions. In India's 2014 and 2019 elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party used the social media to defeat the Indian National Congress, leading to Narendra Modi's victory as Prime Minister (Baishya, 2021; Kapoor & Dwivedi, 2015). Similarly, in Indonesia's 2019 presidential election, the social media significantly contributed to Jokowi's re-election (Setianto, 2020). Jair Bolsonaro's 2018 win in Brazil also underscores the social media's influence in modern political campaigns. These cases demonstrate the social media's growing role as a potent campaign tool in countries like Indonesia, India, and Brazil.

However, while digital campaigns have achieved political successes, they pose challenges and potential threats to democracy in these nations. With ongoing issues like limited education, welfare disparities, strong religious sentiments,

and low digital literacy, the unchecked influence of the social media, often subjective and biased, risks overwhelming unprepared audiences with rapid information flows (Aruguete et al., 2021; Intyaswati et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2014; Parliament et al., 2022). Social media campaigns can disrupt democratic integrity by fueling political polarization and spreading misinformation. In Brazil, for example, politicians commonly use the social media for polarizing contents and misinformation (Enli, 2017; Gilmore, 2012). In India, parties employ "buzzers" to amplify negative campaigns and glorify achievements (Sarma & Hazarika, 2023). In Indonesia, the social media are a key channel for spreading fake news, negative campaigns, and intensifying societal polarization (Mustika, 2019; Setianto, 2020). This environment fosters divisions, strengthens extremist perspectives, and encourages divisive debates (Aruguete et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2014; Schleffer & Miller, 2021).

While studies have explored digital campaign effects on political engagements, more research is necessary to compare its use across political and cultural contexts. Comparative analyses of the digital political communication in Indonesia, India, and Brazil could reveal insights into how these platforms shape voter mobilization and public opinions, highlighting both democratic opportunities and associated risks (Jones, 2008; Lubis et al., 2022). Additionally, the social media's role as an independent factor in democratic political phenomena remains underexplored, especially concerning populist groups in the election outcomes. This study, therefore, has investigated how populist communication on the social media affects election victories in these countries and explore how the social media shape the candidates' public images to effectively engage and mobilize their voters.

2. Methods

This study utilized a structured systematic review process to identify, evaluate, and analyze existing research evidence to answer specific questions (Grant & Booth, 2009; Munn et al., 2018). A clear methodology was applied to ensure that the results are transparent and reproducible (Berrang-Ford et al., 2015; Gough et al., 2012; Haque et al., 2023). The review process adheres to the core principles outlined in the 27-item checklist of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (Higgins & Cochrane Collaboration, 2020; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020), a widely recognized standard for conducting systematic reviews (Higgins & Cochrane Collaboration, 2020; Moher et al., 2009).

Eligibility Criteria

This systematic review examined peer-reviewed journal articles from the "Web of Science" and Scopus databases that focused on digital political communication in election campaigns. The articles included were published between January 1, 2019, and February 1, 2023, and are written in English. Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria are detailed in the following section.

Search Strategy

A search string was constructed to find relevant articles in the two selected electronic databases. The key terms used included "digital," "online," "political," "communication," and "election campaign." The Boolean operator "OR" was applied to broaden the results for each keyword, while "AND" was used to refine the search to articles containing all specified keywords. In the "Web of Science" and "Scopus" databases, the tags 'TS=' and 'TITLE-ABS-KEY' were placed before the search strings in advanced search mode. The full search process, following the PRISMA protocol, is outlined in the next section.

Study Selection

The search was carried out on March 2, 2023, following a four-stage article selection process. Initially, the search results were filtered by publication years (2020–2023) and limited to published, peer-reviewed journal articles, excluding review articles. This refinement yielded 1,520 articles. After an initial screening, 221 articles met the eligibility requirements, but upon full-text reviews, 1,520 articles were excluded for not meeting the established criteria. In the end, 30 articles were included in the systematic review. The details of this selection process are illustrated in Figure 1 (Appendix).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The criteria for selecting articles followed the inclusion and exclusion guidelines established by the PRISMA framework (McDonagh et al., 2008; Higgins & Cochrane Collaboration, 2020).

Table 1. The Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria of Review

Aspect	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Publication Year	2019-2023	< 2019 or > 2023
Publication Type	Article peer review	Book, book review, article review, proceeding, editorial, etc.
Publication Quality	Articles published in Reputable International Journals	Articles other than those mentioned in the inclusion criteria
Language	Articles published (written) in English	Articles published (written) other than English
Article completeness	Articles are written in full-text	The article is incomplete, for example, only in the form of an abstract
Research Focus	This research focuses on examining the concept of digital political communication, primarily through social media.	Research outside the context mentioned in the inclusion criteria

Data Extraction and Analysis

We utilized the SPIDER framework (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research Type) to guide the extraction of primary data from the articles under review. This framework is an evolution of the earlier PICO format (Higgins & Cochrane Collaboration, 2020; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020). Following data extraction, we employed a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) to examine the characteristics of the critical awareness scale in the selected articles. Additionally, we compared various research findings on digital political communication, focusing on Brazil, India, and Indonesia. The insights from this analysis were used to develop a comprehensive understanding of the issues and patterns in digital political communication within these countries.
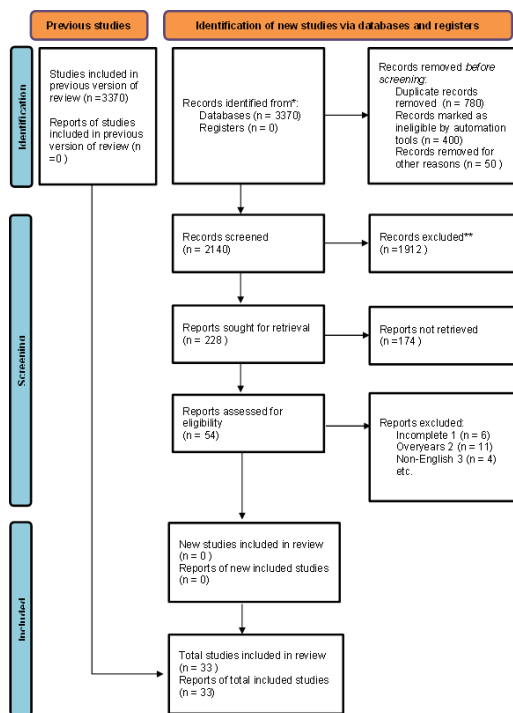

Figure 1. Literature Search Using the PRISMA Protocol

3. Results

Following a literature search guided by the PRISMA protocol and applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, 33 relevant articles were selected for analysis. While these articles used diverse approaches, methods, and viewpoints, they consistently focused on the strategies and patterns of the political communication on the social media. Of the selected articles, 10 specifically explored the social media dynamics during Indonesia's 2019 presidential election, examining the digital competition between the candidates from various angles. Additionally, 10 articles analyzed the 2019 Indian parliamentary elections, and 13 focused on Brazil's 2018 presidential election, each highlighting the role of the social media in the campaign dynamics. A full list of the articles can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Details of the Included Articles and Descriptions

No	Author	Title	Journal	Research Area	Election Type	Candidates	Main Issues Highlighted
1	*Budi Irawanto (2019)	Making It Personal: The Campaign Battle on Social Media in Indonesia's 2019 Presidential Election	ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute	Indonesian Case	Presidential Election	Joko Widodo	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
2	*Geçer, E., & Fadillah, N. (2020)	Creating a Populist Political Figure: An Indonesian Case	The Turkish Online Journal of Design, Art and Communication – TOJDAC	Indonesian Case	Presidential Election	Joko Widodo	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
3	*Khalyubi, W., & Perdana, A. (2021)	Electoral Manipulation Informationally on Hoax Production in 2019 Presidential and Vice-Presidential Election in Indonesia	Journal of Government and Political Issues	Indonesian Case	Presidential Election	Joko Widodo	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
4	*Saud, M., & Margono, H. (2021)	Indonesia's Rise in Digital Democracy and Youth's Political Participation	Journal of Information Technology and Politics	Indonesian Case	Presidential Election	Joko Widodo	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
5	*Masduki. (2021)	Media Control in the Digital Politics of Indonesia	Media and Communication	Indonesian Case	Presidential Election	Joko Widodo	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
6	*Santoso, D. H. (2021)	New Media and Nationalism in Indonesia: An Analysis of Discursive Nationalism in Online News and Social Media after the 2019 Indonesian Presidential Election	Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication	Indonesian Case	Presidential Election	Joko Widodo	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
7	*Wahyuni, S. et al (2021)	Political Efficacy of Jokowi-Amin Political Marketing in Social Media in the Indonesia Presidential Election 2019 in Jabodetabek	International Journal of Scientific Advances	Indonesian Case	Presidential Election	Joko Widodo	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
8	*Sujoko, A. (2020)	Satirical political communication 2019 Indonesia's presidential election on social media	Informasi	Indonesian Case	Presidential Election	Joko Widodo	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
9	*Andi, A. et al (2021)	Oligarchical Populism; The Analysis of President Joko Widodo's Political Communication	Technium Social Sciences Journal	Indonesian Case	Presidential Election	Joko Widodo	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
10	*Hui, J. Y. (2020)	Social Media and the 2019 Indonesian Elections: Hoax Takes the Centre Stage	ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute	Indonesian Case	Presidential Election	Joko Widodo	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
11	*Das, A., & Schroeder, R. (2021)	Online disinformation in the run-up to the Indian 2019 election.	Communication & Society	Indian Case	Presidential Election	Narendra Modi	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political

No	Author	Title	Journal	Research Area	Election Type	Candidates	Main Issues Highlighted
							Infrastructure
12	*Neyazi, T. A. (2020)	Digital propaganda, political bots and polarized politics in India	Asian Journal of Communication	Indian Case	Presidential Election	Narendra Modi	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
13	*Bhat, P., & Chadha, K. (2020)	Anti-media populism: Expressions of media distrust by right-wing media in India	Journal of International and Intercultural Communication	Indian Case	Presidential Election	Narendra Modi	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
14	*Baishya, A. K. (2021)	The conquest of the world as meme: Memetic visuality and political humor in critiques of the hindu right wing in India	Media, Culture and Society	Indian Case	Presidential Election	Narendra Modi	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
15	*Darshan, B. M., & Suresh, K. (2019)	The 'Social' in political communication: Social media enabled political discourse, engagement and mobilization in India	Humanities and Social Sciences Reviews	Indian Case	Presidential Election	Narendra Modi	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
16	*Rodrigues, U. (2020)	Political Communication on Social Media Platforms and Its Implications for the Public Sphere in India	Platform Capitalism in India	Indian Case	Presidential Election	Narendra Modi	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
17	Ahmad, T., Alvi, A., & Ittefaq, M. (2019).	The Use of Social Media on Political Participation Among University Students: An Analysis of Survey Results from Rural Pakistan.	SAGE Open	Indian Case	Presidential Election	Narendra Modi	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
18	B.M, D., & Suresh, K. (2019)	The Social in Political Communication: Social Media Enabled Political Discourse, Engagement and Mobilization in India	Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews	Indian Case	Presidential Election	Narendra Modi	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
19	*Kubin, E., & von Sikorski, C. (2021)	The Role of (Social) Media in Political Polarization: a Systematic Review	Annals of the International Communication Association	Indian Case	Presidential Election	Narendra Modi	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
20	*Adhana, D. K., & Saxena, M. (2018)	Role of Social Media in the Changing Face of Indian Politics: A Study with Special Reference to Facebook	International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews (IJRAR)	Indian Case	Presidential Election	Narendra Modi	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
21	*Ferreira do Vale, H. (2022).	Brazil's Digital Politics and the Crisis of Democracy (2013-2018)	Election and Democracy in the Digital Age—Status, Challenges, and Trends	Brazilian Case	Presidential Election	Jair Bolsonaro	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
22	*Mangerotti, P., et al (2021)	Populism, Twitter, and Political Communication: An analysis of Jair Bolsonaro's tweets during the 2018 election campaign	Brazilian Journalism Research	Brazilian Case	Presidential Election	Jair Bolsonaro	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
23	*Rossini, P., et al (2021)	Digital Media Landscape in Brazil: Political	Journal of Quantitative	Brazilian Case	Presidential Election	Jair Bolsonaro	Populist Democracy,

No	Author	Title	Journal	Research Area	Election Type	Candidates	Main Issues Highlighted
		(Mis)Information and Participation on Facebook and WhatsApp	Description: Digital Media				People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
24	*Ozawa, J. V. S., et al (2023).	How Disinformation on WhatsApp Went from Campaign Weapon to Governmental Propaganda in Brazil	Social Media + Society	Brazilian Case	Presidential Election	Jair Bolsonaro	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
25	*Soares, F. B., & Recuero, R. (2021)	Hashtag Wars: Political Disinformation and Discursive Struggles on Twitter Conversations During the 2018 Brazilian Presidential Campaign	Social Media + Society	Brazilian Case	Presidential Election	Jair Bolsonaro	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
26	*Di Nubila, K., et al (2023).	Technopopulism and Politainment in Brazil: Bolsonaro Government's Weekly YouTube Broadcasts	Media and Communication	Brazilian Case	Presidential Election	Jair Bolsonaro	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
27	*Lugo-Ocando, J. (2020)	The 'changing' face of media discourses on poverty in the age of populism and anti-globalization: The political appeal of anti-modernity and certainty in Brazil	International Communication Gazette	Brazilian Case	Presidential Election	Jair Bolsonaro	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
28	*Araújo, B., & Prior, H. (2021)	Framing Political Populism: The Role of Media in Framing the Election of Jair Bolsonaro	Journalism Practice	Brazilian Case	Presidential Election	Jair Bolsonaro	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
29	*Davis, S., & Straubhaar, J. (2020)	Producing Antipetismo: Media activism and the rise of the radical, nationalist right in contemporary Brazil	International Communication Gazette	Brazilian Case	Presidential Election	Jair Bolsonaro	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
30	*Aruguete, N., et al (2021)	News Sharing, Gatekeeping, and Polarization: A Study of the #Bolsonaro Election	Digital Journalism	Brazilian Case	Presidential Election	Jair Bolsonaro	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
31	*Novoselova, O. V. (2020)	Peculiarities of Modern Nationalist Messages in Online Political Communication: The Analyses of Donald Trump's and Jair Bolsonaro's Election Campaigns	Changing Societies & Personalities	Brazilian Case	Presidential Election	Jair Bolsonaro	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
32	de Albuquerque, A., et al (2023)	Online communication studies in Brazil: Origins and state of the art.	Online Media and Global Communication	Brazilian Case	Presidential Election	Jair Bolsonaro	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure
33	*de Freitas Santos, D. H., et al (2021)	Taking sides on Facebook: Political parties and the pension reform in Brazil	Cuadernos.Info	Brazilian Case	Presidential Election	Jair Bolsonaro	Populist Democracy, People's Interests and Political Infrastructure

Upon reviewing the 33 articles using the PRISMA protocol, two main communication patterns and styles emerged among each populist candidate. In Indonesia, Joko Widodo adopted a grassroots approach called *Blusukan*, which involved direct engagements with the public. Similarly, in India, Narendra Modi utilized a two-way communication model, expanding his base through both personal and social media interactions. Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, however, took a more confrontational approach, openly addressing populist issues and critiquing past government corruptions and nepotism. This direct and transparent style resonated strongly with the citizens seeking a government that is honest and free from corruptions.

Table 3. Communication Styles and Populist Issues Raised by Candidates

No	Name of Candidate	Populist Issues	Communication Styles of Campaign
	Joko Widodo	Dissatisfaction and disappointment with the policies and achievements of the previous ruling government	Direct communication
	Narendra Modi	Addressing some crucial issues, such as religious minority conflicts, economic growth, corruption, gang rapes, ethnic struggles, and the state's security and stability	A two-way communication
	Jair Bolsonaro	The rejection of democratic rules, the production and spread of hatred and disinformation, anti-corruption and anti-elite, and conspiracy theories.	Frontal communication

In addition to their distinctive communication styles, there are at least two critical factors contributing to the electoral victories of Jokowi, Modi, and Bolsonaro: populist issues and self-image representations. As shown in Table 3, during his 2014 presidential campaign, Jokowi emphasized the needs for revolutionary changes across various sectors, including government policies, while criticizing the previous administration for not being supportive of the common people. Similarly, Modi addressed the ongoing crises facing India, pledging to lead the country out of this multi-faceted predicament during his campaign. Bolsonaro, on the other hand, focused on populist issues, sharply condemning the previous regime and vowing to dismantle the criminal organizations that had plagued Brazil for years.

Furthermore, the representations of self-image played a significant role in how the public perceived these candidates. Through their social media presence, they cultivated a positive self-image as relatable figures who genuinely cared about the welfare of ordinary citizens. This portrayal was often more influential than the backing of their respective political parties.

4. Discussion

Emphasizing Populist Issues

The success of certain candidates in the elections in Indonesia, India, and Brazil was significantly influenced by the digital campaigns that highlighted populist issues. This can be observed through the social media strategies employed by each candidate's supporters. The social media platforms played a vital role in garnering broad voter support and shaping a compelling self-image for the candidates. Throughout the election, the competition over populist discourse unfolded primarily on the platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp, allowing the candidates to expand their networks and influence in order to win their voter sympathy.

The victories of Joko Widodo in Indonesia, Narendra Modi in India, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil were closely tied to their active engagements on the social media. Each was recognized as a prominent and appealing figure on various platforms, with Modi boasting 85 million Twitter followers and 13.7 million on Facebook (Neyazi, 2020); Jokowi having 30 million followers on Twitter and 9.7 million on Facebook (Khalyubi & Perdana, 2021); and Bolsonaro amassing 17 million Twitter followers and 10 million on Facebook (Rossini et al., 2021). Their distinctive styles and communication strategies clearly demonstrated how the social media contributed to their electoral successes. Additionally, the intensive promotion of populist issues was a key factor in their achievements.

During their social media campaigns, Jokowi cultivated a self-image as a simple, approachable individual who genuinely cared for ordinary people. This aligns with Kurt Weyland's definition of populism as a strategy for building a candidate's persona to gain broader public sympathy, suggesting that Jokowi can indeed be considered a populist figure (Weyland, 2017). Moffit emphasized that populist approaches often manifest in the dynamics between ordinary people and elites, characterized by negative attitudes and a critical stance towards established authority (Moffit, 2016). Since his gubernatorial campaign in Jakarta in 2012, Jokowi had consistently expressed dissatisfaction with previous officials,

whom he believed did not support the needs of everyday citizens. His offline and online campaigns during the 2014 presidential election echoed similar concerns, as he criticized the administration of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono for failing to implement significant changes during his two terms.

In Jokowi's view, the plight of the poor was exacerbated by stalled infrastructure development and stagnant economic growth, issues he attributed to rampant corruption. Consequently, his campaign promised to root out corruptions and establish a transparent government (Hui, 2020; Saud & Margono, 2021b).

Similar to Jokowi, Narendra Modi's online image was crafted with consideration for the social, cultural, and psychological aspects of the masses. His posts, news updates, and statements on the social media were designed to resonate with these factors. Modi was portrayed both as a leader who valued culture and tradition and as a modern figure championing progress, effectively presenting himself as a traditional yet global leader. The rise of social media has played a significant role in shaping this public image of Modi (Baishya, 2021c; Rajadesingan et al., 2020).

Since the 2014 elections, Modi's charismatic persona and social media strategy have significantly contributed to the success of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). He and his campaign team consistently emphasized populist issues during his campaign, often addressing pressing concerns faced by the Indian populace (Pal, 2015b). To tackle these issues, Modi used Twitter to project himself as "the development hero," appealing to younger voters with a message focused on progress and competition on the global stage. For instance, on May 15, 2014, Modi tweeted, "India has Won," which became the most retweeted post in Indian history. His progressive rhetoric galvanized voters, leading to his election as Prime Minister. This has demonstrated how the social media facilitated Modi's re-election in the 2019 Indian parliamentary elections (Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020; Baishya, 2021c; Neyazi, 2020).

Modi's engagement on the social media surpassed that of his government officials who communicated specific policy updates (B.M & Suresh, 2019). When addressing critical populist issues like conflicts involving religious minorities, economic challenges, corruptions, gang violence, ethnic tensions, and national security, Modi's campaign team effectively reframed the narrative to support the policies aimed at addressing these problems. Furthermore, the government activities and initiatives were disseminated through the social media, proving to be an effective way to inform the public about the government programs. Campaigns like "Clean India" (Swachh Bharat Abhiyan) were prominently featured on the social media to foster a positive image of Modi's administration and enhance his electoral appeal (Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020; Bhat & Chadha, 2020; Das & Schroeder, 2021).

In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro also leveraged the digital communication to secure his victory in the 2018 presidential election.The social media became a potent tool for Bolsonaro, characterized as a techno-populist who aimed to manipulate public opinions by tapping into the frustrations of marginalized groups and inciting anger through algorithms and big data. Instead of fostering ideological consensus, techno-populists like Bolsonaro often cultivated chaos and divisions to exploit hate speech in the digital realm (Di Nubila et al., 2023). A recurring theme in Bolsonaro's populist messaging on Twitter was the vilification of government elites. For instance, during the second round of the 2018 election, he tweeted using hashtags like #criminal faction, #red bandits, and #imprisoned leader, which targeted and accused the members of the Labor Party in power (Davis & Straubhaar, 2020; Rossini et al., 2021). Research by Mangerotti et al. indicated that 122 publications reflected a focus on populist issues, with 55 cited during the first round and 67 in the second round of the elections led by Bolsonaro's team (Mangerotti et al., 2021).

In addition to attacking the elites, Bolsonaro's populism also encompassed critiques of anti-corruption efforts, social movements, and gender ideologies that prioritized minority rights. He pledged to arrest political opponents whom he blamed for ongoing crises and instability. Bolsonaro's communication strategy heavily relied on the social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to connect with his electoral base. This approach exemplified the political mobilization through direct communication via decentralized networks (Aruguete, Calvo, & Ventura, 2021; Lugo-Ocando, 2020; Soares & Recuero, 2021). The experiences of these three major democratic nations highlight how populist themes can be effectively utilized in political campaigns via the social media, presenting a more engaging communication strategy compared to the traditional offline methods.

Personalizing Self-Image Representation

Jokowi's political career began in 2005 when he became the mayor of Solo, winning re-election in 2010 with an impressive 90% approval rating. His successful leadership and reform initiatives in Solo paved the way for his candidacy for governor of Jakarta in 2012. Two years later, Jokowi ran for president, ultimately winning the election and securing a second term in 2019 (Andi et al., 2021; Khalyubi & Perdana, 2021). His political legacy has introduced a new dynamic to Indonesia's political landscape, which has traditionally been dominated by political elites, military figures, wealthy businessmen, and oligarchs. Jokowi's background, coming from humble beginnings, has challenged this established dominance (Andi et al., 2021; Wahyuni et al., 2021).

Jokowi was particularly known for his pro-ordinary person (pro-wong cilik) persona. He often engaged in *blusukan*, or surprise visits to traditional markets and rural areas, allowing him to connect directly with the lower classes. This approach has become a hallmark of his communication style and set him apart from the other candidates (Andi et al., 2021). Mietzner refers to Jokowi's *blusukan* as a form of technocratic populism, emphasizing practical solutions over mere rhetoric. This method underscored Jokowi's focus on tangible achievements rather than just talk from behind an office desk.

This approach resonated with the public, especially since his predecessor was perceived as more talkative than action-oriented. Jokowi's representation as someone who embodied the concerns of ordinary citizens made him relatable to both the lower and upper classes (Mietzner, 2015). Research by Ekmel Gecer & Nur Fadillah supports the idea that *blusukan* helped Jokowi garner political support from the middle class and grassroots communities, particularly from those who had suffered under the previous government policies.

Consequently, Jokowi promised to enhance the living standards and welfare by pledging to establish a clean government and improve services in health and education for all Indonesians. His image of being "close to the people" has significantly contributed to his popularity. In this context, Jokowi's personal brand has proven more influential than the political parties behind him (Geçer & Fadillah, 2020).

Personalizing self-image on the social media was also a critical strategy for Narendra Modi in winning the 2019 election. Unlike Indonesia's direct presidential election system, India's parliamentary system allows the majority party or coalition to appoint the prime minister, based on the Westminster model with two houses: the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) and the Lok Sabha (Lower House) (U. Rodrigues, 2020). Despite these differences, Modi and Jokowi share a similar communication style on the social media. While Jokowi was famous for his *blusukan* approach, Modi engaged in direct dialogues and communication with the public, even following back his supporters on Twitter to emphasize his accessibility and attentiveness to their needs.

Research by Rodriguez and Pal highlights that Modi has utilized Twitter over the past five years to connect with his followers, primarily sharing updates on his daily activities through the social media platforms like his NaMoApp and his public radio program, Maan-ki-Baat (what's in my heart). Through these channels, Modi consistently promoted optimism and a vision for a better future for India, particularly aimed at younger voters (Pal, 2015b; U. Rodrigues, 2020).

Modi's strategy of connecting with ordinary citizens was evident in his unique follow-back approach. While other BJP leaders like Rajnath Singh, Sushma Swaraj, and Arun Jaitley were active on the social media, they did not reciprocate follow-backs like Modi did. This tactic had played a crucial role in shaping Modi's online image, helping him convey a sense of closeness and awareness of the people's concerns. Modi effectively used social media to consistently express his political interests, contrasting sharply with his competitor, Rahul Gandhi, who was more passive in his social media engagements (Rajadesingan et al., 2020).

Similarly, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil embraced a technopopulist and direct communication style. His strategy relied on populist themes, including anti-democratic sentiments, the spread of hate and disinformation, and criticism of elites and corruption. Bolsonaro's campaign team leveraged both the digital platforms and direct interactions to disseminate these messages.

A study by Karina Di Nubila et al. found that 83% of the contents on Bolsonaro's official YouTube channel expressed populist sentiments, framing opponents as enemies and terrorists. Additionally, 73% of videos aimed to discredit the media and journalists, while nearly half contained hate speech (47.5%). Fake news was present in 29.7% of the videos, and anti-elite discourse appeared in 9.3% (Di Nubila et al., 2023).

Bolsonaro's podcast primarily targeted his political adversaries, particularly from the Worker Party. For example, in an October 16, 2020 video, he accused the Labor Party of misusing National Bank funds for corrupt practices. He emphasized his commitment to "no corruption in my government" as a response to past administrations (Di Nubila et al., 2023; Novoselova, 2020).

Bolsonaro's technopopulism continued in his post-election as he intensified his communication efforts through the official social media channels, backed by the Social Liberal Party. From his first month in office, he strengthened his political stance and message via the social media. He even encouraged followers to disregard traditional media in favor of his official YouTube channel to optimize the spread of his messaging (Araújo & Prior, 2021; Rossini et al., 2021). These efforts facilitated direct communication between elite politicians and grassroots supporters, as Bolsonaro cultivated a public image that intertwined verbal sentiment, primordial identities, hate speech, and the dissemination of misinformation.

From there, the emotional dynamics of the social media campaigns, while not directly visible in the elections, were evident in the victories of Joko Widodo, Narendra Modi, and Jair Bolsonaro. These three figures built strong

self-images and effectively utilized emotions to reach out to their voters. Jokowi, for example, used blusukan activities that showed his closeness to the common people on his social media, thus evoking a sense of sympathy and attachment from the lower class. As a leader combining traditional and modern values, Modi successfully tapped into national pride and socio-economic anxiety to appeal to a wide audience. Meanwhile, Bolsonaro activated public anger and dissatisfaction with the political elite through controversial frontal messages.

Influencers and social networks also play a major role in supporting their political campaigns. Influencers and active followers on the social media, acting as social networks, extended the reach of the candidates' messages and reinforced their populist narratives. Jokowi and Modi leveraged their millions of followers on the platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook to form strong communities of support. In Brazil, Blosonaro built a strong digital supporter base, reinforcing his populist narrative and personal identity among voters who felt neglected by the elites.

In addition, these three figures used algorithms and information to convey a positive image of themselves to their voters. Modi's campaign team in India used "Buzzers" to spread positive messages about his achievements and explain political opponents with negative narratives. Bolsonaro in Brazil maximized platform algorithms to increase the visibility of messages that stirred public emotions and spread disinformation to steer public opinion through algorithmically amplified content, ultimately leading to disinformation that could threaten democracy.

Another factor is the comparison of the diverse cultural and social contexts among Indonesia, India, and Brazil. These different cultural contexts affect public acceptance and responses to populist campaigns. In Indonesia, Jokowi's modest style and closeness to the ordinary people was well received in the collective culture. In India, Modi capitalized on strong cultural identity and traditional pride, while in Brazil, Blosonaro used anti-elites that resonated with the discontent of the people. The strategies used above, along with emotional approaches, the roles of the influencers and social networks, algorithms, cultures, and the social media, have had a great impact on the three figures above in winning the presidential elections.

5. Conclusion

Joko Widodo, Narendra Modi, and Jair Bolsonaro are notable figures who have successfully won elections in their respective countries, largely due to their extensive engagements on the social media. All three leaders were active on these platforms and boasted significant followings. Despite differences in the governmental systems and social and cultural contexts, they shared commonalities in their campaigns, which predominantly emphasized populist themes.

For instance, Jokowi consistently expressed his concerns about the country's turmoil caused by corruption during his campaigns, criticizing the previous government's mismanagement. Similarly, Modi in India and Bolsonaro in Brazil adopted a comparable approach; Modi promised to establish a clean government and enhance India's economy to compete with developed nations, while Bolsonaro sharply criticized his opponent from the Labor Party, blaming them for Brazil's multidimensional crisis.

In addition to leveraging populist narratives, the success of these leaders can also be attributed to their political communication styles, which effectively resonate with the grassroots sentiments. Jokowi was well-known for his blusukan approach, where he engaged directly with small traders in markets or chats with farmers in remote areas, cultivating a self-image as a champion of the ordinary people—a strength his opponents lacked. Modi, through his social media presence, had crafted an image of a leader who was always open to hearing his constituents' concerns, which enhances his appeal. His willingness to follow ordinary supporters on Twitter exemplifies his direct communication style. On the other hand, Bolsonaro operated as a technopopulist, relying heavily on his official social media for political activities, where his confrontational populist style significantly contributed to his success in the 2018 presidential election.

However, this study acknowledges some limitations in providing quantitatively precise data regarding the impacts of the social media on shaping each candidate's self-image and attracting voter sympathy. The research mainly aims to categorize the existing facts about the role of the social media in the electoral successes of right-wing populist figures in Indonesia, India, and Brazil, which are among the world's largest democracies. To enrich these findings, future studies should explore the validity of the social media's influence on voter behavior and investigate whether other significant factors beyond the social media contribute to the increased acceptability of the populist issues as political propaganda in the democratic nations.

Authors contributions

Not applicable.

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