

The Use of Instagram as a Political Communication Strategy by Rico Waas in Forming Personal Branding as a Candidate for Mayor of Medan

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze the use of Instagram as a political communication strategy by Rico Waas in forming personal branding as a candidate for Medan Mayor. This research is analyzed using the AIDA model (attention, interest, desire, action) coined by Elias St. Elmo Lewis and the 3 essentials of personal branding coined by McNally & Speak, also using the theories of new media, political communication, and agenda setting theory. This research uses a qualitative approach based on the interpretative paradigm. In collecting data, researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 6 informants who are Rico Waas' media team, and 3 informants as source triangulation informants. The results of this study show how the AIDA model works in shaping Rico Waas' personal branding as a Medan mayoral candidate. The Rico Waas campaign seeks to influence what the public considers important

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital era, where information spreads rapidly through social media and online platforms, the importance of visual communication is increasing. More than 4.5 billion people worldwide use social media, making it an effective means of conveying political messages. Therefore, a deep understanding of visual communication is crucial for prospective leaders, including candidates, in building an image and attracting voters (Meggs, 2016). This shows that good communication, especially through digital platforms, is essential to reach a wider audience (McNair, 2017).

Political communication also serves as a means of building trust and credibility. Open and transparent communication can improve the relationship between candidates and voters. In this context, candidates need to ensure that all information conveyed through their visual communication is accurate and accountable. This will help build a positive image in the eyes of voters and increase their likelihood of voting in the upcoming election (Grunig, 2013). Candidates, by utilizing visual communication, can create an image as a leader who is close to the people, thus increasing their appeal in the eyes of voters (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Candidates who are active on social media and interact with their followers tend to have a better image (Burson-Marsteller, 2018).

Rico Tri Putra Bayu Waas, born in Medan on July 5, 1986, is a young politician who is active in North Sumatra. He is an alumnus of SMA Negeri 2 Medan and earned a D-3 degree from the Trisakti Graphic Technology Academy and a bachelor's degree from Bina Nusantara University. Before entering politics, Rico had professional experience as a head designer at Nasdempost and a designer at PT Gilkor, as well as running Warung Ijo Wedding Organizer. Currently, he serves as deputy chairman of the North Sumatra Regional Leadership Council (DPW) and chairman of the DPW Gerakan Restorasi Perdagangan and UMKM (Garpu) Nasdem. Consistency in branding can increase consumer trust and loyalty (Sweeney & Soutar, 2020). In the context of politics, this also applies, where consistency in visual communication can build voter trust in candidates (Hootsuite, 2023; Ohorella et al., 2024).

Effective use of visual communication can form a positive image and increase its appeal in the eyes of voters. One of the main impacts of visual communication is its ability to create positive associations. Through attractive images and designs, candidates can communicate their values and vision and mission in a way that is easy to understand. Positive visuals can increase public perception of a prospective leader by up to 70% (Brunner, 2021). 65% of social media users are more likely to share content that has visual elements (Pew Research Center, 2023).

Visual communication has a significant influence on public perception of mayoral candidates. Information conveyed visually is easier to understand and remember than information conveyed verbally. In the context of Rico Waas' campaign, the use of attractive images and videos can help strengthen the message he wants to convey and form a positive perception in the eyes of voters. For example, mayoral candidates often use photos showing themselves interacting with various levels of society, from farmers to students. This creates

the impression that he is a caring figure and understands the needs of the community. Candidates who are able to show closeness and concern for the community tend to get greater support. In addition, visual communication can also influence voters' emotions. Emotionally arousing images can increase voter engagement and create deeper resonance with the message being conveyed. In their campaigns, mayoral candidates can use heartfelt visual elements, such as moments of togetherness with the community, to create a strong emotional connection (Sikumbang et al., 2024).

Although many studies have been conducted on political communication in general, there are still few that specifically examine the use of visual communication by political candidates in the regions. This is a challenge for researchers to dig deeper into how visual elements can shape image and personal branding. Overall, the background of this study highlights the importance of visual communication in a political context, especially in the run-up to the Medan Mayoral election. By utilizing the right communication strategy, Rico Waas is expected to be able to build a strong personal branding and attract voters' attention. Through this research, it is hoped that it can contribute to the development of communication science, especially in the field of political communication (Rtiongga et al., 2024). The results of this study can be a reference for other prospective leaders in designing more effective communication strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

New media not only functions as a communication tool, but also as a means of building community and identity, which is very relevant in today's political context (Armandsottir et al., 2020). One of the main characteristics of new media is its ability to present information in multimedia form. This means that content can be text, images, audio, and video combined in one platform. Meanwhile, visual communication is a process of interaction between humans who express ideas through visual media. The feedback is in the form of an understanding of the meaning of the message recipient as intended by the sender of the message (Kenney, 2009).

The characteristics of visual communication include several aspects that play a role in the effectiveness of message delivery. First, visual communication is direct and easy to understand. Visual elements can convey complex meanings more simply than text. Second, visual communication has a strong emotional appeal, which can influence public opinion and attitudes. For example, the use of bright colors and attractive designs in the Rico Waas campaign can create a positive impression and generate support from the public. Third, visual communication makes it possible to reach a wider audience, especially the younger generation who are more active on social media. By utilizing these platforms, Rico Waas can spread his political message more efficiently (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). For example, the use of short videos showing his social activities can show his commitment to the community and increase emotional closeness with voters (Ware, 2018).

The characteristics of visual communication are direct, easy to understand, and have a strong emotional appeal (Brunner, 2021). By manipulating visual elements such as typography, layout, and the use of video, Rico Waas can strategically communicate his values and vision and mission in an attractive and memorable way (Ware, 2018). This emphasis on visual aesthetics quickly attracts the attention of users who want to document moments, explore photography and videography creativity, and connect with other individuals based on similar visual interests (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). These features foster a sense of community and connection between users, allowing the formation of social networks based on interests, friendships, or even professional goals (Baym, 2010).

The phenomenon of influencer marketing is also growing rapidly on this platform, where individuals with large followings collaborate with brands to promote products and services (Lu, Vickers, & Rowland, 2020; Ritonga et al., 2024). From a chronological perspective, the algorithm now prioritizes content based on factors such as user interests, the recency of posts, and previous interactions with a particular account. This change aims to improve the user experience by presenting more relevant content, although it also raises questions about organic visibility (O'Brien, 2020). In addition, Instagram's role in social movements, online activism, and the spread of information (both accurate and false) has also been the focus of studies (Frith, 2015).

Politicians who use social media effectively have higher levels of engagement with their voters (Kearney, 2020). Good communication can build a positive image and increase the attractiveness of candidates in the eyes of voters, making them more likely to provide support (Scammell, 2014). The use of social media also allows campaigns to reach a wider audience at a relatively low cost (Smith, 2020). Techniques such as canvassing, digital reminders, and the use of apps to organize voters are very effective in increasing voter turnout on election day. Good mobilization can make a significant difference in the outcome of an election, especially in a close election (Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy, 2019). Technology also allows for real-time monitoring of voter response, so that campaigns can make adjustments as needed to improve campaign effectiveness. The use of data analytics helps in better and faster decision-making (Scammell, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative approach in this study was chosen because it can provide a deep understanding of the visual communication phenomenon used by Rico Waas in building personal branding as a candidate for Mayor of Medan. In this study, researchers will use various data collection techniques to obtain comprehensive information. This study does not only focus on numerical data, but more on the narrative and social context surrounding the visual communication practices carried out by Rico Waas. With this approach, it is expected to reveal effective and relevant communication strategies in the context of local politics in Medan. The subjects of this study consisted of several groups, Rico Waas' campaign and media teams, potential voters, and political communication experts. The campaign and media teams will provide insight into the strategies and processes behind the creation of content and the formation of

personal branding. Potential voters will provide perspectives on how they receive and interpret the visual messages conveyed. In addition, interviews with political communication experts will provide a broader theoretical context regarding the practice of visual communication in a political context. Data collection techniques are methods used to collect relevant and reliable information to answer research questions. This technique includes various methods that can be used, such as surveys, interviews, observations, and document collection. Each technique has advantages and disadvantages that researchers need to consider before deciding on the method that best suits their research objectives (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The data analysis technique used in this study follows the approach of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014). Miles, Huberman, and Saldana offer an influential framework for qualitative data analysis, emphasizing systematic and inclusive procedures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Use of Instagram as a Political Communication Strategy for Rico Waas as a Candidate for Mayor of Medan

Instagram, as a very popular social media platform, has changed the way we communicate, interact, and express ourselves in the digital era. This change can be understood through New Media theory, which highlights how digital technology has changed the characteristics of traditional media. New Media, which includes digital, interactive, and networked forms of communication, has very different characteristics from traditional media. Instagram also encourages participatory culture, where users are involved in creating trends and participating in social movements. However, the use of Instagram can also lead to self-commodification, where users try to "sell" themselves to gain popularity.

The importance of automation in platforms such as Instagram, which uses algorithms to filter content. Participatory culture on platforms such as YouTube, which is also relevant to Instagram. These platforms allow users to be part of a creative community and collaborate in creating meaning. With its digital, interactive, and networked characteristics, Instagram enables the democratization of media production, personalization, identity construction, participatory culture, and self-commodification. Understanding Instagram in the context of new media theory allows us to be more critical in using and analyzing this platform. In using Instagram as a medium, researchers use the AIDA Model in analyzing Rico Waas' political communication strategy. AIDA stands for Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action, a framework that has long been used in marketing to describe the stages consumers go through in the purchasing process. This model is also relevant in a political context, where candidates and their campaign teams seek to influence voters.

The discussion of the AIDA Model, personal branding, and Rico Waas' political communication strategy can be explored in depth through the lens of Agenda Setting theory, which argues that the media has significant power in determining what issues are considered important by the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). At the Attention stage in the AIDA Model, Rico Waas' campaign strategically leveraged pressing local issues such as health and education. By consistently highlighting these issues on platforms such as Instagram, the

campaign team attempted to move these issues to the top of the public agenda (Patel, 2022). Focusing on issues relevant to the daily lives of the people of Medan City, which were then documented and published in real-time, not only attracted initial attention but also implicitly set the agenda that Rico Waas was a candidate who cared and was responsive to citizens' priorities.

This shows how the candidate not only responded to the media agenda but also proactively tried to influence the public agenda to benefit personal branding. At the Interest and Desire stages, Agenda Setting theory played a role in directing public perception of Rico Waas' characteristics. The campaign team consistently presented Rico Waas as a "young, caring, and humanist" figure through soft selling of visions and missions, infographic visualizations, and documented direct interactions. By continuously publishing content that reinforces this positive image, the campaign attempted to set an image agenda. The media and the public were invited to focus attention on these positive attributes, so that these characteristics became an integral part of the public discussion about Rico Waas and formed a deep desire to support him (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Ware, 2018).

The emphasis on the slogan "Medan for All" and support for local MSMEs, which were visualized inclusively, were efforts to place the issue of unity and the local economy on the public agenda, and closely link it to Rico Waas' personal branding as a leader who embraces and supports the community. Finally, at the Action stage, the Agenda Setting theory became very relevant in influencing voter decisions. Although the campaign team avoided direct invitations to vote outside the official campaign period, their strategy of seeking public comments to be used as content ideas and responding to public complaints effectively set an agenda of responsiveness and concern.

It is not just about delivering information, but about positioning Rico Waas as a candidate worthy of trust and support, by placing voters' need for a leader who listens and acts at the top of the public agenda. Increasing insight and interaction on social media, as well as highlighting a consistent and authentic positive image across various channels, collectively seek to set the agenda that Rico Waas is the choice that best meets voters' need for trustworthy and relevant leadership, thus encouraging real action in the form of voting.

Rico Waas' Political Communication Strategy in Forming His Personal Branding as a Candidate for Mayor of Medan

- **Distinctiveness**

Distinctiveness, in the context of personal branding, is about how an individual successfully displays unique attributes, qualities, or value propositions so that he or she is easily distinguished from other individuals, especially competitors. Without distinctiveness, a candidate risks getting lost in the crowd and failing to attract initial attention. The formation of Rico Waas' personal branding, shows an understanding and effort to apply three pillars, namely creating uniqueness by showing age attributes, appearance, and a combination of certain traits (McNally & Speak, 2002). There is also an effort to build relevance by adjusting the image and message to align with the needs and demographic characteristics of the Medan community. Finally, there is an

awareness of the importance of consistency in conveying the designed image. The ultimate success of this personal branding depends on how well these three elements are executed synergistically, authentically, and sustainably in the field. The perception formed in the minds of the Medan community will be the real judge, personal branding is essentially what other people say and feel about you when you are not in the room (McNally & Speak, 2002). If these three pillars are successfully upheld solidly, then the foundation for strong and influential personal branding will be formed.

In Rico Waas' campaign narrative, efforts to build distinctiveness are clearly visible. His campaign team identified "handsomeness" as one of the "initial assets" that can be exploited as a visual differentiator, a strategy that may be considered relevant to "selling the image of 'handsome' in Medan." Furthermore, Rico Waas' positioning as a "millennial leader" inherently creates differentiation with candidates from older generations. This strategy is emphasized by "showing these advantages compared to other candidates, especially in terms of age." The narrative also explicitly builds contrast with "the image of leaders who are older and less close to the community," which indirectly positions Rico as a fresher and more familiar alternative. The combination of attributes such as "smart," "entrepreneurial spirit," "young," and "caring," if communicated effectively, has the potential to create a distinctive and attractive candidate profile. In a crowded market, the only way to penetrate the minds of consumers (or voters) is to create a unique and different position. They argue that being the first or being different is key. In the case of Rico Waas, the emphasis on youth and the millennial image is an attempt to claim a different position in the Medan political landscape (Ries & Trout, 2001).

- **Relevance**

Uniqueness alone is not enough if the attributes displayed have no meaning or value for the target audience. This is where the role of relevance becomes central. Relevance means that the brand that is built must be in line, important, and meaningful for the needs, desires, values, and aspirations of the target audience. A unique but irrelevant brand will fail to build an emotional and functional connection with its public.

Rico Waas' campaign team demonstrated an awareness of the importance of this relevance. There is an explicit statement that the image built must be "relevant to the people of Medan." The focus on "attracting the attention of young voters (Gen Z) who dominate the election" with the image of a "millennial leader" is a direct attempt to be relevant to the largest and most potential demographic segment. Not only that, the effort to "bring Rico Waas closer to the community, especially mothers," with the image of a "humanist" and "caring" shows a strategy to be relevant to other influential groups. Rico Waas' emphasis on "his ability to listen to the people's aspirations" and his promotion as a "responsive and fast-acting leader" directly addresses the public's need for a leader who is solution-oriented and willing to listen, making him relevant to their expectations.

The importance of customer (or in this case, voter) orientation. Successful marketing begins with a deep understanding of the needs and wants of the target market, then offering superior value (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Rico Waas' strategy of focusing on issues close to the people and tailoring his image to key demographics reflects this principle of relevance.

- **Consistency**

Once distinctiveness and relevance are established, the third crucial pillar is consistency. Consistency means that the message, image, actions, and values displayed by an individual must be uniform, coherent, and continuous across all touchpoints (such as social media, public appearances, face-to-face interactions) and over time. Inconsistency can damage trust, confuse audiences, and weaken a brand that has been painstakingly built.

In Rico Waas' campaign narrative, there is an emphasis on "the image formed focusing on a figure who is polite, young, humanist, and close to the community," which is the core message to be conveyed consistently. The media team is reported to have "consistently built an image that emphasizes his positive characteristics." The use of various channels, from social media to direct approaches, should ideally convey this uniform message and image. Interestingly, the media team mentions the evolution of the image from "a 'cool' and non-temperamental figure" to "a humanist leader who has no boundaries with the community." In the context of consistency, it is important that once this new ("humanist") image is established, it is this image that must then be consistently projected and reinforced. If this transition is not managed well, it can create a perception of inconsistency. However, if it is seen as a sharpening or evolution of the brand that is then firmly held, then consistency is maintained in the new image.

Brand identity must be managed consistently in order to build strong brand equity. Consistency in message and presentation helps strengthen brand associations in the minds of audiences and builds credibility (Aaker, 1996). The work of Rico Waas' media team is to ensure that every action, statement, and content produced continuously reflects the persona of a "millennial leader who is polite, young, humanistic, intelligent, caring, and responsive.

The discussion of the three pillars of personal branding in the context of Rico Waas' campaign can be significantly enriched by integrating the Agenda Setting theory. In the distinctiveness pillar, Rico Waas' campaign seeks to position his unique attributes as the main issue in the minds of the Medan public (McNally & Speak, 2002). Agenda Setting Theory explains that the media not only reports what happens, but also influences what the public should think about certain issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). By strategically presenting and emphasizing these distinctive attributes across various platforms, the campaign seeks to have the media and public discussion prioritize Rico Waas' "young" and "humanistic" as the main points that differentiate him from other candidates. This is an attempt to set the agenda that Rico Waas is a unique and fresh choice, not just an ordinary candidate.

In the relevance pillar, Agenda Setting Theory becomes a vital tool to ensure that the distinctiveness built by Rico Waas is really important to voters. The campaign explicitly focuses on "attracting the attention of young voters (Gen Z)" and "bringing Rico Waas closer to the community, especially mothers," with a "humanist" and "caring" image. Efforts to present Rico Waas as a "responsive and fast-acting leader" directly aim to make issues such as responsiveness and caring a priority on the public agenda. By consistently highlighting how Rico Waas listens to the aspirations of the community and provides solutions, the campaign seeks to influence the public agenda so that issues related to the needs and desires of the community (Kotler & Keller, 2016) become more prominent, and at the same time, linking Rico Waas' personal branding closely to the fulfillment of those needs.

This is a second-level Agenda Setting strategy (agenda-building) where not only the issues are raised, but also the attributes associated with the issues. Finally, the consistency pillar is very important in strengthening the agenda that has been set through distinctiveness and relevance. The "young, humanist, and close to the community" image built by the campaign team must be uniformly and continuously projected at all points of contact and platforms (Aaker, 1996; Taneja et al., 2020).

Agenda Setting Theory states that the repetition and emphasis of certain messages by the media will strengthen the issue or image in the public mind (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Therefore, the media team's efforts to ensure that every action, statement, and content consistently reflects Rico Waas' personal branding are key to building and maintaining a strong agenda in the eyes of the public, changing the perception of "who Rico Waas is" into a widely accepted agenda, which ultimately influences voter decisions. Overall, Rico Waas' personal branding was formed through an integrated strategy, starting with building clear distinctiveness, then reinforced with relevance, and consistency. This is an important pillar with the media team's efforts to uniformly and continuously project personal branding as a polite, young, humanistic, and close-to-the-community leader candidate in various communication channels, ensuring that every action and message strengthens the persona that has been built.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Rico Waas' political communication strategy in his Instagram campaign uses the AIDA model, starting with attracting voters' attention and interesting visual content that highlights his identity as a young and caring local son. Next, they build interest by publishing relevant content such as speech excerpts and visions and missions, and interacting directly with the community. To create desire, the campaign team uses the slogan "Medan for All" and builds emotional connections with voters through positive images and closeness to local cultural values, reinforced by the support of community leaders. Finally, they encourage the action of choosing Rico Waas with an agenda setting strategy, highlighting relevant local issues and meeting the information and validation needs of voters. Rico Waas' political communication strategy in forming personal branding is seen from the three pillars of personal branding. First, Distinctiveness is reflected in the emphasis on attributes of young age, attractive appearance, and a combination of positive traits such as being intelligent, caring, and humanistic. Second, Relevance is seen from the campaign team's efforts to adjust the image and message to align with the needs and demographic characteristics of the Medan community, especially young voters and mothers. Third, Consistency is demonstrated through the delivery of a uniform and continuous image across all touchpoints, both online and offline. This is an important pillar with the media team's efforts to uniformly and continuously project personal branding as a polite, young, humanist, and community-friendly leader.

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