

Construction of the Mayor's Image in the Digital Space: Analysis of Netizen Comments on Eri Cahyadi's Culvert Project Evaluation Video on Instagram

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Political Image, Instagram, Netizen Comments, Local Leadership, Thematic Content Analysis

Received : 15 May

Revised : 20 June

Accepted: 30 July

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the image construction of Surabaya Mayor Eri Cahyadi in the digital space through netizen comments on an Instagram post featuring an evaluation of a culvert project. The research data comes from 213 comments successfully exported using ESUIT from a post that sparked a much broader public conversation, with a total reported interaction of 2,708 comments, 292 reposts, and 625 video shares. This study used a qualitative-descriptive approach with thematic content analysis techniques to identify patterns of meaning in netizen comments. The results revealed four main themes: requests for infrastructure improvements, criticism of governance, support for the mayor, and public satire or anger. These findings demonstrate that the mayor's image is not formed solely by visual posts but is instead negotiated through public interactions assessing the leader's performance, accountability, and emotional closeness. Thus, the Instagram comment space functions as an arena for social evaluation and public audit of local leadership

INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media has shifted the space for shaping political image from an arena fully controlled by elites to an interactive space that involves citizens directly (de-Lima-Santos et al., 2024). Instagram, as a visual-based platform, allows public officials to show closeness, responsiveness, and work performance through photos, videos, and personal narratives that are easily felt emotionally by the audience (Indrapuspita et al., 2023; Messini, 2025). In this context, political image is no longer shaped just by official government messages, but is negotiated through comments, responses, and public assessments that appear on posts related to policies or field actions (Farkas & Bene, 2021; Karim Amrullah et al., 2024).



Image 1. Instagram reels of Eri Cahyadi

This phenomenon is relevant in the case of a video post evaluating a culvert project featuring Eri Cahyadi as the mayor of Surabaya (Cahyadi, 2026). Eri Cahyadi's Instagram account serves as a public communication space that showcases his official identity while also acting as a channel to connect with residents through the service slogan “#LaporCakEri”. In the post that is the focus of this study, public conversation expanded widely, with total interactions reportedly reaching 2,708 comments, 292 reposts, and 625 video shares, while the data successfully exported from ESUIT was only 213 comments. The gap between the volume of conversation and the accessible sample is important to note because it shows that this analysis is based on available data, not on the entire population of comments.

From a substantive perspective, the public conversation on that post shows that residents evaluate local leadership mainly based on aspects that are most concrete and close to everyday experiences, like roads, sidewalks, street lighting, drainage, and the quality of project work (Ceron & Negri, 2016). The comments weren't just complaints; they also included calls for accountability, critiques of departmental performance, emotional support for the mayor, and even sharp political jabs (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2024). This pattern aligns with studies on social media comments, which show that the comment section often becomes a space for activated public opinion, not just a place for spontaneous reactions (Eko Putro et al., 2019; Harmer & Lewis, 2022).

Theoretically, this research is important because it shows how the image of local leaders is built through the relationship between visual communication, public response, and evaluation of bureaucratic performance (Farkas & Bene, 2021; Fsm, 2018; Zulli & Towner, 2021). Netizen comments not only evaluate posts as social media content but also interpret them as evidence of government work and as symbols of leadership quality (Alafwan et al., 2023; Fu et al., 2023). Therefore, this study positions Instagram as a space for negotiating political meaning, where the mayor's image is tested, supported, or rejected by the public through the comments section (De Fina, 2025; Garg & Suri, 2026; Molek-Kozakowska et al., 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Netizens' comments on the video evaluating Eri Cahyadi's culvert project make the most sense when viewed through three dimensions: leadership image strategy, patterns of netizen responses, and the democratic consequences of the comment space. On Instagram, a regional leader's political image is shaped not only by official posts but also by two-way interactions, public perception, and the platform's logic that emphasizes visuals, emotions, and virality (Adila & Eddyono, 2025; Kaparang et al., 2023; Pardede & Iswadi, 2025).

Visual Political Communication and Image Management

Visual political communication, political image management, and personal branding on social media revolve around three interconnected questions: how politicians present their image, how they build a candidate-centered brand, and how that presentation fosters parasocial bonds.

Visual Image Management

On various platforms, politicians use images to highlight themselves rather than their party, making visuals a key tool for personalizing and managing their image (Farkas & Bene, 2021). Visuals are great for showing a personal image, while social media platforms reinforce this by allowing a direct, candidate-focused self-presentation (Farkas & Bene, 2021).

On Instagram, a professional image and closeness with citizens are the types of messages that often recur in politicians' image management (Bast, 2024). Candidates in seven democratic countries more often use the ideal candidate framework rather than the populist campaigner framework, with Instagram as the go-to platform for visually presenting themselves (Steffan, 2021).

Visual strategies vary depending on the case: some leaders post campaign-centered images, while others go for voter intimidation and identification (Mazzoni & Mincigrucci, 2022).

Personal Branding and Parasocial Bonding

Political personal branding strategy seems to work by focusing on the candidate's personality, values, and life story as the main message, often putting the party, policies, and collective actors in the background (Da Silva e Silva & Leandro, 2025).

The logic of this brand imaging is increasingly connected: political brands are not just messages, but also social spaces where supporters together create meaning and community (Billard & Moran, 2020).

Parasocial Bond

Parasocial relationships are one-sided emotional connections with a media figure, and social media platforms seem really conducive to forming these relationships (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). In political communication, personalized content boosts the sense of social presence and parasocial interaction, helping followers feel like they know the candidate personally (McGregor, 2018).

Pictures showing politicians in private moments, with their faces and emotions, generally get more interaction on Instagram (Peng, 2021).

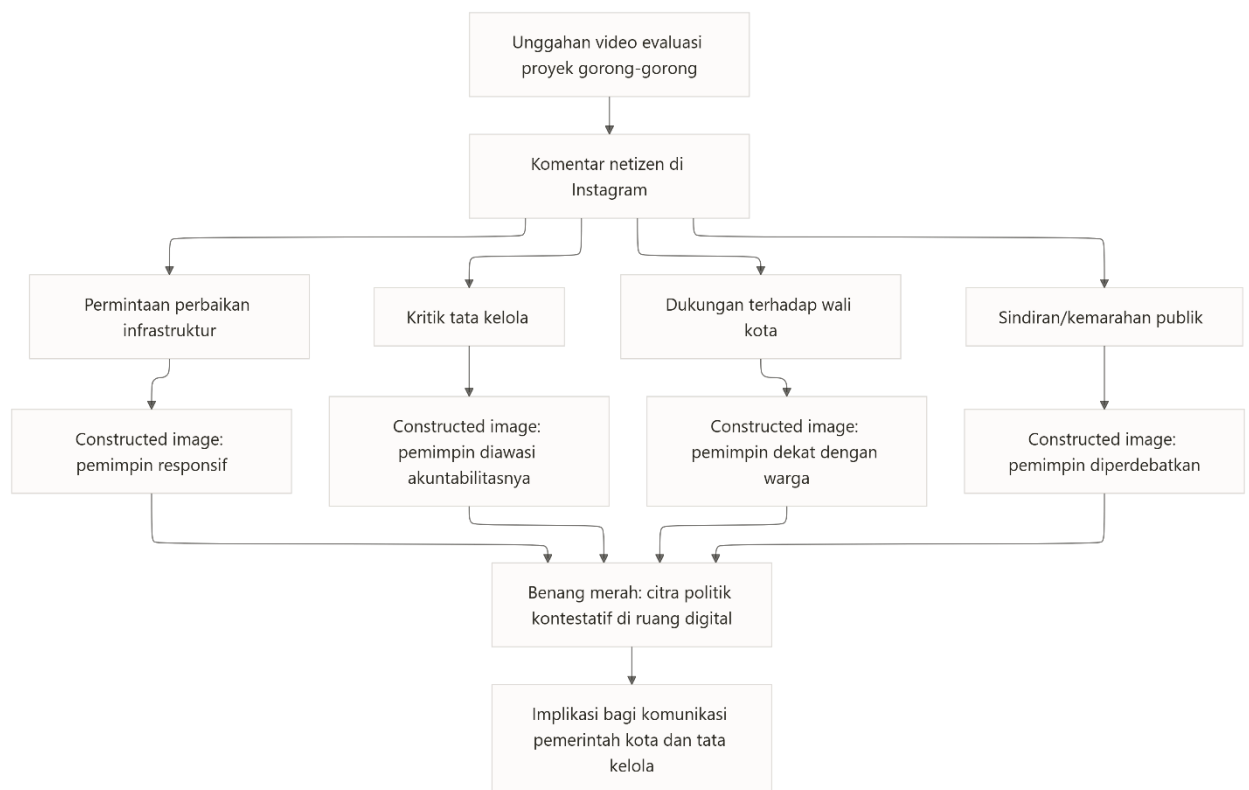
Parasocial power tends to increase along with perceptions of attractiveness, similarity, and fairness in interactions, mechanisms that are likely relevant beyond the context of commercial influencers (Yuan & Lou, 2020).

Parasocial relationships can deepen connections and community, but they also come with risks, including manipulation, misinformation, and negative comparison dynamics (Hoffner & Bond, 2022).

Overall, the literature shows that visual political communication is not just decoration. It's a key infrastructure for image management, personal branding, and sometimes parasocial bonds, but its impact really depends on platform norms, national context, and whether politicians choose a professional distance or a planned closeness.

Theoretical Framework

Chart 1. Theoretical Framework



This framework shows the flow where video uploads trigger interactions, and then public comments produce four main themes, each contributing a different image of the mayor (Alafwan et al., 2023; Ceron & Negri, 2016). The image that forms isn't singular but rather contestable, because each theme highlights a different dimension of leadership: responsive, accountable, approachable, or questionable (Soffer & Gordoni, 2020). From this, the common thread in the research becomes clear: social media is a space where local leadership is tested through layered narratives from citizens.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive design with thematic content analysis to look at netizens' comments on an Instagram post about the evaluation of a culvert project (Alafwan et al., 2023; Fu et al., 2023). The main data comes from a CSV export from ESUIT containing 213 comments from 142 unique authors, so the unit of analysis in this study is the comments that were actually accessible, not all comments on the post. The data was chosen purposively based on availability and theme relevance, following common practice in online comment studies that use active samples from digital conversations (Feltwell et al., n.d.; Fu et al., 2023).

The analysis process was done through repeated reading, assigning initial codes, grouping codes into themes, and then drawing meanings between themes to see the construction of the mayor's image. Comments were read inductively so that themes emerged from the data, rather than being forced from pre-existing categories (Handayani, 2023). In this study, four main themes that consistently appeared were requests for infrastructure improvements, criticism of governance, support for the mayor, and public sarcasm or anger (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2024).

To ensure accuracy in interpretation, comments that contain more than one meaning are recorded under the most dominant theme, while comments that are administrative responses are treated as part of the conversation framing the government's responsive or defensive image (Fu et al., 2023). This approach aligns with studies of social media comments that emphasize that the meaning of a comment depends on the conversational context, the speaker's position, and the relationships between participants (Harmer & Lewis, 2022; Irizar et al., 2022). Since the focus of the study is political image, not automatic sentiment classification, manual reading is prioritized over purely computational models.

RESEARCH RESULT

Out of the 213 comments analyzed, the most dominant theme was requests for infrastructure improvements, followed by criticism of governance, support for the mayor, and public sarcasm or anger. In a thematic reading based on keywords and content context, the infrastructure improvement theme appeared in about 49 comments, governance criticism in about 26 comments, support for the mayor in about 26 comments, and public sarcasm/anger in about

17 comments. These numbers are thematic-operational, not population estimates, since a single comment can contain more than one meaning.

Table 1. Main Thematic Findings

Theme	The main point of the comment	Comment illustration	Sociological meaning
Request for infrastructure repairs	Damaged roads, bumpy asphalt, box culverts, street lights, drainage	"wavy roads", "box culvert ... not even", "street lights ... many are out"	People judge leaders by the physical results that are immediately visible
Governance critique	Agency, contractor, supervision, performance, transfer/remove	"e-remek supervision", "remove all department heads"	Technical problems are seen as managerial failures
Support for the mayor	Appreciation, prayers, defense, spirit	"Keep up the spirit, Mr. Mayor, in fixing up the city", "a good and trustworthy leader"	Responsive image and emotional closeness still get legitimacy
Public sarcasm/anger	Accusations of buzzers, changing the mayor, harsh language	"Better change the mayor", "how much are the buzzers paid, boss?"	The comment section has become a space for delegitimization and clashes over meaning

Table 2. Main Findings

Theme	Frequency in a sample of 213 comments	Key findings	Example of a comment quote
Permintaan perbaikan infrastruktur	49	Residents mostly pointed out broken roads, bumpy asphalt, culvert boxes, street lights, and drainage.	"bumpy roads... poor pregnant mom"

Theme	Frequency in a sample of 213 comments	Key findings	Example of a comment quote
Governance critique	26	Comments assess the project issues as a failure of supervision, the department, the contractor, and bureaucratic coordination.	"Supervision is a mess. The fish rots from the head."
Support for the mayor	26	Some comments give appreciation, prayers, and legitimacy to the evaluation actions of the mayor.	Go for it, Mr. Mayor, fixing up the city
Public sarcasm/anger	17	There were harsh, frustrated, and delegitimizing comments, including calls to replace the mayor.	"Better change to the mayor"

The findings show that public conversations on this post are dominated by very concrete infrastructure issues. Out of 213 comments analyzed, requests for infrastructure improvements came up the most, with 49 comments, mainly repeating concerns about bumpy roads, damaged asphalt, uneven box culverts, and broken streetlights. This pattern confirms that residents judge local leadership based on things they experience in daily life, rather than just official government narratives.

The second prominent theme is governance criticism. A total of 26 comments pointed attention not just to the physical damage of the project, but also to supervision, the performance of the agency, contractors, and internal government coordination. This shows that the public doesn't see the problem as a standalone technical issue, but rather as a symptom of weak bureaucratic management. In other words, infrastructure projects are seen as an indicator of the quality of local government organization.

On the other hand, there is also support for the mayor with 26 comments. This support comes in the form of appreciation, prayers, and approval of the mayor's actions in evaluating or quickly responding to citizen complaints. This is important because it shows that the mayor's image isn't entirely negative; there is still room to build an impression of responsive and community-focused leadership.

However, the conversation also contained 17 comments with sarcasm and public anger. In this theme, the comments tend to be harsh, questioning the government's performance, and even calling for the replacement of the mayor. The presence of this theme shows that Instagram comment sections function as both a space for public evaluation and a site of conflict over meaning, where support and delegitimization happen at the same time. Overall, these findings indicate that Eri Cahyadi's image in digital conversations is formed in a contested way: he is positioned as a leader expected to address real problems, but is also criticized when the results are considered insufficient. The common thread of this study is that netizens' comments not only reflect opinions, but also help shape the meaning of city leadership in the digital space.

Table 3. Formed Image Indicators

Image indicator	Public reading direction	Contoh tematik bukti	Implikasi
Responsif	Positif	Komentar terima kasih atas tindak lanjut	Memperkuat kesan pemimpin hadir
Kompeten	Campuran	Kritik pada hasil dan proyek pengawasan	Kompetensi dinilai dari outcome
Dekat dengan warga	Positif	Komentar bernada panggilan personal dan doa	Personal branding bekerja di level emosi
Akuntabel	Kritis	Tuntutan copot pejabat dan evaluasi total	Akuntabilitas dipahami sebagai hasil nyata

This table shows that Eri Cahyadi's image in netizen comments is shaped through four main indicators: being responsive, competent, close to the citizens, and accountable. The responsiveness indicator emerges when the public appreciates the mayor's presence in responding to complaints and following up on issues in the field. Public perception of this aspect tends to be positive because quick action is seen as proof that the leader is present and not distant from the citizens' problems. In the context of digital political communication, such quick responses strengthen the impression of a leader who is agile and cares about the community's needs. The competence indicator shows a more mixed perception. Some comments acknowledge efforts in improvements and evaluations, but others question the bureaucracy's ability to produce work that is neat, secure, and up to standard. Because of that, competence isn't just judged by a leader's intentions or presence, but by real results seen in the field. If the project results aren't up to expectations, then the image of being competent becomes vulnerable to public questioning.

Indicators of closeness with residents can be seen from comments that use familiar language, prayers, personal support, and terms that show emotional closeness. This pattern suggests that some of the public sees Eri Cahyadi's leadership as communicative and easy to approach. This kind of closeness is important for shaping an image because it helps create a symbolic relationship between the leader and the residents. However, this closeness still needs to be backed by real performance so it doesn't just stay at the level of a personal impression. Meanwhile, indicators of accountability appear in comments demanding responsibility for work quality, supervision, as well as the performance of departments and contractors. The public's reading of accountability is critical because residents not only want explanations but also concrete improvements and consequences for those deemed negligent. This shows that Instagram comment sections work as a social monitoring arena, where the public judges whether the government is really accountable for its policies and work outcomes. Overall, this table shows that the mayor's image isn't formed alone, but through interactions between praise, expectations, criticism, and demands. In this way, digital spaces become places where leadership is both perceived and openly tested by citizens.

DISCUSSION

Theme of findings	Relevant theory	Relationship
Infrastructure as a hub for comments	Visual political communication, image management	A leader's image is measured by visible results
Criticism of the office and the contractor	Opini leadership, public accountability	The public sees leadership as a system, not just a figure
Emotional support	Personal branding, parasocial bonding	Symbolic closeness creates legitimacy
Sarcasm and delegitimization	Online conflict and polarizing comments	Comments have become a battlefield of meaning

Table 3 shows that each theme of the findings has a clear theoretical foundation and reinforces each other in explaining how the mayor's image is formed in the digital space. The theme of infrastructure as a focal point of comments is closely related to theories of visual political communication and image management, because the public mainly evaluates leadership based on results that are visibly apparent in the field (Alafwan et al., 2023; Garg & Suri, 2026). In this context, damaged roads, bumpy asphalt, broken lights, and messy box culverts are not seen as just technical issues, but as visual signs that directly influence public perception of leadership quality.

The theme of criticism toward agencies and contractors is related to the theory of opinion leadership and public accountability. This relationship shows

that the public doesn't just see leadership as the individual performance of the mayor, but as a work system involving bureaucracy, oversight, and technical implementers (Davidson, 2020). So, when comments focus on an agency or contractor, what's really being tested is the government's ability to manage the chain of responsibility effectively (Weeks et al., 2017).

The theme of emotional support aligns with theories of personal branding and parasocial bonding, which explain that symbolic closeness between officials and citizens can create social legitimacy (Farkas & Bene, 2021). Comments containing prayers, appreciation, or personal support show that part of the public feels an emotional connection with the mayor, even though that relationship is built through digital media (de-Lima-Santos et al., 2024). In this framework, a leader's image is strengthened not just by policies, but also by the sense of presence and familiarity that citizens feel.

Meanwhile, the themes of sarcasm and delegitimization relate to online conflict and comment polarization theory, which explains that comment sections can turn into arenas for battles over meaning, identity, and legitimacy. Comments that are harsh, sarcastic, or attacking show that social media not only facilitates support but also strengthens opposition and public distrust towards political figures. So, comment sections serve as spaces where a leader's image is openly debated, rather than passively accepted.

Overall, Table 3 shows that the findings of this study don't stand alone, but are closely connected to the theory of digital political communication. The common thread is that a mayor's image on Instagram is shaped through the interaction of visual signs, public evaluation, emotional closeness, and meaning conflicts, making the comment section an important space for both producing and testing leadership legitimacy.

Netizens' Comments as an Evaluative Narrative on Leadership

Research shows that netizen comments don't just respond to videos evaluating culvert projects, but actually shape an evaluative narrative about the mayor's leadership. From the perspective of visual political communication, video uploads are meant to act as visual messages that should strengthen a responsive image, but public comments add a layer of harsher and more concrete evaluation (de-Lima-Santos et al., 2024; Garg & Suri, 2026). So, the political image that emerges isn't fully controlled by the account owner; it's an image negotiated with the public through open interaction in digital spaces (Alafwan et al., 2023; Farkas & Bene, 2021).

Infrastructure as the Center of Public Evaluation

The dominant theme of requests for infrastructure improvements shows that the public evaluates leaders based on results that are most easily seen in everyday life. Bumpy roads, uneven culvert boxes, and broken streetlights are understood not just as technical shortcomings, but as a symbol of local government's performance. This aligns with the theory of image management, which states that public officials' image largely depends on their ability to maintain a perception of competence through evidence visible to the public (Bast, 2024; Zulli & Towner, 2021). In this context, when physical work results don't

meet expectations, a responsive image risks being seen as questionable (Davidson, 2020; Weeks et al., 2017).

Governance Criticism as an Evaluation of the Government System

The theme of governance criticism deepens these findings because the public doesn't just stop at complaining about infrastructure, but links it to bureaucracy, agencies, contractors, and oversight performance. This means the public doesn't see project failures as single incidents, but as structural symptoms of how the city government works. Theoretically, this finding supports the literature on opinion leadership and the influence of social media, which suggests that public perception of elites is often shaped by how responsibilities are divided within government networks. So, the mayor's image in these comments isn't just a personal image, but also an image of the government's organizational capacity.

Emotional Support and Public Legitimacy

On the other hand, the theme of support for the mayor shows that the comment section also produces legitimacy. Comments that cheer on, pray for, or praise the mayor's work indicate that there is still a public that sees this leadership as something worthy of appreciation. In personal branding and visual political communication theory, such support emerges when the audience feels a symbolic closeness to a political figure who appears genuine, responsive, and relatable in everyday language (Maella et al., 2022; NFS Maella et al., 2019). This support is important because it shows that the political image isn't entirely negative; it still leaves room for sympathy and affection.

Sarcasm, Anger, and Delegitimization

However, the themes of sarcasm and public anger show another dimension of the digital space, namely polarization and delegitimization. Accusations of buzzers, calls to replace the mayor, and expressions of frustration indicate that Instagram comments are not only a space for criticism but also an arena for contesting truth and trust. These findings align with research on online comments, which shows that comment sections often become battlegrounds for identity rather than pure deliberative dialogue. In this context, the mayor's image is built in a contradictory way: on one hand, seen as a hands-on leader, on the other, seen as a symbol of a system that hasn't been working effectively.

The Main Thread of the Research

The main thread of this research is that local leadership in the digital space is judged by the public through the connection between visual actions, field results, and bureaucratic responses. The gutter project evaluation video acted as a trigger, but netizen comments shifted the focus from documenting work to verifying work performance. Because of this, the comment section acts as a cheap, fast, and public social audit mechanism. Conceptually, this study shows that digital political image is formed in three layers: the visual layer, the comment layer, and the public evaluation layer of real results.

Research Implications

The theoretical implication is that this finding enriches the study of image management, because it shows that an image is not just the result of visual curation, but also a product of audience resistance and support (Maella et al., 2026). Methodologically, studying Instagram comments can be used as a tool to capture public perceptions that are currently active, especially on local policy issues that are close to residents' lives. Practically, city governments need to pay attention to online comments as signals for policy, not just communication disruptions, because these conversations provide direct clues about public service points that are still unsatisfactory.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that netizens' comments on posts evaluating culvert projects are not just reactions to visual content, but also help shape an evaluative narrative about Eri Cahyadi's leadership. The mayor's image in the digital space is formed in a contested way: on one hand, he is seen as a responsive leader who stays close to the people, but on the other, he is also criticized for infrastructure and governance issues that are not yet satisfactory. The dominance of comments about damaged roads, box culverts, lighting, and project supervision shows that the public judges local leadership based on visible results and their impact on daily life. Additionally, comments expressing support indicate that the digital space also produces legitimacy, while sarcastic and angry comments show the presence of polarization and delegitimization in public conversation. So, this study shows that political images on social media aren't just built through visual curation, but through a negotiation between official messages, citizens' experiences, and the public's evaluation of government performance. In practice, this means the city government needs to pay attention to online comments as important feedback for improving public services, bureaucratic coordination, and communication strategies with residents.

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