

Managing empathic political communication: Digital identity of Indonesian women legislators on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

Background: In the ever changing world of digital politics, women in politics often have to cope with the double challenge of preserving their institutional authority while also meeting gendered expectations of being relevant. Empathy is frequently seen as an inherent personality trait; nonetheless, its use as a strategic tool in digital political strategy remains inadequately explored, particularly within the framework of the Indonesian legislature. **Purpose:** This study aims to investigate how empathic political communication is strategically managed and configured as a form of symbolic capital by female members of the Indonesian House of Representatives on social media. **Methods:** Employing qualitative multimodal content analysis, this study examines the textual, visual, and interactional elements of posts published between July and October 2025. **Results:** The findings show the empathy functions not only as an emotional expression but also as a strategic communication resource. This is configured through four main patterns: building moral legitimacy, gender-based political branding, crisis responsive communication, and grassroots relation engagement. These patterns produce political identities such as moral advocates, caring mothers leaders, institutional guardians, and grassroots allies. Thus, empathy operates as a symbolic political capital used to strengthen legitimacy, maintain public trust, and negotiate gender expectations in digital politics. **Conclusion:** The study concludes that empathetic social media communication is a political strategy deliberately cultivated by female legislators to navigate authority, legitimacy, and gender-specific public expectations, rather than being merely spontaneous emotional expressions. In the Indonesian legislature, empathy is an important symbolic instrument for building a genuine digital political identity while maintaining in touch with the people. **Implications:** This research contributes to the literature by conceptualizing empathy as a communication management resource rather than a purely emotional trait.

Keywords: Digital identity; empathy; Instagram; political communication; women legislator

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media and its regulatory role in political communication have moved from the fringes of social life into the correspondingly new world of social media self-management, a process always used as an arena for the construction of political identity and public participation (Van Aelst et al., 2017). In an increasingly dispersed and fragmented media, digital space provides actors with the ability and space to engage in “disintermediation,” where in actors bypass the traditional mediation role of politically biased news outlets or political consultants in order to reach out and communicate with their constituents directly (Van Aelst et al., 2017). For that reason, emotions and signals of relations have become cornerstones of political visibility and alternatives to political legitimacy.

Past studies have highlighted how social media reinforces political personalization and authenticity (Bennett & Livingston, 2020; Enli, 2017). While on social media, where emotional performance is valued, authenticity is rewarded; hence, politicians construct their own authentic selves or brands, creating a “personal performer,” the authentic person that an interested public can relate to in order to value them. Instagram helps create political images by using stories and symbols (Lalancette &

Raynauld, 2019). The platform’s design affects political messages by focusing on content that seeks emotional engagement (Bossetta, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018). In this mixed-media system (Chadwick, 2017; De-Lima-Santos et al., 2024; Haßler et al., 2024), visual and sensory political communication are the keys, with emotion being central.

The roles of institutions and digital identities are not just tools for governance but are essential and urgent. Among the emotions in digital politics, empathy is particularly important. Emotions are a key part of political talk that affects legitimacy, trust, and moral standing (Marcus, 2023; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). In political psychology, empathy involves feeling others’ emotions and understanding their views, which influences moral judgments and how we rate others (Batson, 2011; Decety & Cowell, 2014). In politics, talking about empathy during crises, supporting underrepresented groups, and meeting people directly can strengthen a politician’s legitimacy. In politics, talking about empathy during crises, supporting underrepresented groups, and meeting people directly can strengthen a politician’s legitimacy. Empathy is a way for politicians to show that they care and have moral value based on social norms. Despite much research on emotions in politics, most studies look at emotions broadly without focusing on empathy as a unique

political tool. Research on emotional appeals often focuses on their role in elections, while studies on digital communication focus on mobilization, branding, or populism (Gerbaudo, 2017; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). There is little focus on how empathy is regularly used in the daily digital actions of politicians. In a digital culture that always wants attention, empathy is part of a communication strategy. It is not just an emotional response but a regular communication practice.

There are additional layers to the gender dimension of political communication. Female legislators are routinely required to ‘perform competence, while also being seen to perform relational warmth’ (Bauer et al., 2024; Campus, 2013; Steffan & Grabe, 2025; Trimble et al., 2013). Media systems tend to scrutinise female leaders through an emotional register more than they do their male counterparts (Trimble et al., 2022). Here, empathy is presented as a mechanism for negotiating gender legitimacy, where female legislators must simultaneously embody institutional authority and relational closeness in a scrutinized public space.

Furthermore, studies of female legislators’ digital practices are concentrated in Western democracies (Campus, 2013; Holm et al., 2024; Prihatini, 2020). Research in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, is underrepresented, especially with regard to how female

legislators manage their construction of digital political identity. As one of the largest democracies and one with high levels of social media use, Indonesia is an important context for examining the construction of digital political identity. Understanding the practices of Instagram use by Indonesian female legislators will add to our contextual knowledge and debates in theory and practice on global digital political communication.

Against this backdrop, this study pursues three interrelated research goals. First, it examines how six female members of the DPR RI deploy empathy as a deliberate communicative strategy on Instagram. Second, it identifies and analyzes the specific forms of moral, gendered, institutional, and relational through which empathic communication is configured in their daily digital political practice. Third, it theorizes empathy as an instrument of symbolic capital and digital identity construction within a non-Western democratic context, contributing to global debates in strategic political communication. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: How do female members of the Indonesian House of Representatives strategically configure empathy as a communication management resource to construct digital political identities on Instagram?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a content analysis with a multimodal analysis approach to understand the strategies of empathetic political communication on Instagram. This approach maps the meaning and understandings manifested in texts and images (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The multimodal method examines how textual and visual semiotic domains interact to create a complete political identity (Brands et al., 2021). We worked with six female members of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia (DPR RI) from different political parties. Participants were chosen using purposive sampling with criteria, including an Instagram account, active uploading activity, and involvement in issues or policies. This study involves six female members of the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI) as research informants, each representing a different political party. They are Rahayu Saraswati from Gerindra, Ida Fauziah from PKB, Atalia Prataya from Golkar, Desy Ratnasari from PAN, Ledia Hanifa from PKS, and Rieke Diah Pitaloka from PDIP. All informants currently hold the same institutional status as members of the DPR RI.

The primary data included posts from the Instagram accounts of the six female politicians from July to October 2025. Each post from the six female politicians served as the unit of

analysis, comprising the caption text, image (photos/reels), and audience engagement. Elements of empathy were coded as evidenced by showing solidarity, recognizing proximity and crises, advocating for the marginalized, and/or relationality with constituents. Data were gathered for each official account during August to October 2025 by scraping for posts. Each post was documented on a coding sheet with the following data: date, issue category, caption text, how the post is pictorialised, coded, and engagement indicators. Data analysis occurred in three stages. Stage 1: open coding of textual and graphic features for empathic indicators (Schreier, 2012); stage 2: thematic coding of codes into themes based on recurring patterns; and stage 3: strategic interpretation through linking of themes to the literature on strategic political communication (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research on six female Indonesian lawmakers shows that their empathetic communication on Instagram is planned rather than spontaneous. They use stories, pictures, and signals to express empathy and manage digital politics. Politicians face the challenge of managing emotions, known as 'affective self-branding.' Empathy is carefully created by choosing issues, framing stories,

arranging visuals, and aligning narratives to connect with the audience. Recurring patterns in communication demonstrate that empathy is consciously managed. The communication of shared knowledge through these patterns is intentional rather than coincidental. Within the realm of digital politics, emotional engagement is a crucial aspect of ongoing communication management strategies (Bossetta, 2018; Kreiss, 2016). Gender norms play a significant role in shaping empathy. Female leaders frequently encounter a double standard, as they are required to exhibit both competence and compassion. In online environments that prioritize personal imagery, the pressure to conform to gender expectations intensifies. Empathy serves as a means for female leaders to harmonize authority with care, resulting in a leadership approach characterized by distinct strengths.

This organization of empathy does not imply uniformity among female lawmakers in their empathetic expressions. Rather, it illustrates that emotional behaviors are interpreted from a gendered perspective and can be strategically employed in the political arena. Thus, sympathy becomes a mechanism for navigating power dynamics and interpersonal relationships, with empathy influencing political identities and perceptions of legitimacy (Campus, 2013; Trimble et al., 2022). Four patterns of empathy management were found by analyzing the cues

of the informants. These patterns are strategies used in different situations, roles, and audiences. The difference across cases is not whether empathy is present, but how it is managed and used in discussions about governance, advocacy, personalization, and representation. Thus, empathy management is seen as multilayered communication involving normative positioning, institutional stabilization, relational personalization, and grassroots proximity. Each layer reflects the communication logic through which empathies are organized to produce moral authority, institutional credibility, gender negotiation, or representative legitimacy in a digitally remediated political space. Based on the analysis results, the empathy configuration shows different distributions among each informant and issue domain. Four configurations of empathy management were identified, each corresponding to different strategic functions and producing recognizable types of political identity. The distribution of the second figurations across various informants and issue domains is summarized in Table 1.

Based on the research results presented in Table 1, empathy in Instagram content does not merely function as a means to build engagement with the audience but also plays a role as a symbolic strategy in managing moral legitimacy. Empathy is often used to engage

Table 1 Summary of the distribution of these empathy configurations among informants and issue domains

Informants	Dominant Empathy Configuration	Main Issue Context	Textual Patterns	Visual Patterns	Strategic Function
Rahayu Saraswati (Gerindra)	Moral legitimacy, grassroots relationships	Protection of women, social violence, advocacy for justice	Normative language, calls for justice, advocacy framing	Interaction with affected communities, field visits	Moral legitimacy and strengthening representation
Rieke Diah Pitaloka (PDIP)	Moral legitimacy, crisis response	Social inequality, controversial issues	Assertive language, demands for accountability, framing solutions	Serious expression, formal composition	Ethical authority and stabilization of legitimacy
Ida Fauziyah (PKB)	Crisis response, institutional management	National policy, labor issues, crisis response	policy commitments, regulatory framing	Institutional context, official symbols	Institutional stability and credibility
Atalia Praratya (Golkar)	Gender branding, grassroots relationships	Family, community empowerment	Personal storytelling, reflective tone	Closeness to family and community, warm expression	Gender negotiation and relational legitimacy
Desy Ratnasari (PAN)	Gender branding	Women's solidarity, personal reflection	Emotional and inspirational language	Relational image, warm expressions of the majority	Empathetic connection and personal branding
Ledia Hanifa (PKS)	Grassroots relationships, gender branding	Education, local community engagement	Participatory narrative, inclusive language	Physical proximity to residents, informal settings	Social representation and relational legitimacy

Source: Reseach result, 2025

with Instagram content. For example, Rahayu Saraswati and Rieke Diah have posted about social justice and ethics. Ida Fauziyah shares posts on policy statements. Atalia Praratya and Desy Ratnasari have used empathy in personal posts, while Ledia Hanifa has focused on community activities. Displaying empathy is a common way to gain moral legitimacy. It is linked to justice, responsibility, and accountability. Empathy helps demonstrate political legitimacy by focusing on the public interest. This is evident in posts about vulnerable groups, such as victims of human trafficking

or violence. Empathy is important in content related to ethical issues. In politics, this moral view makes emotional expression seem more credible. Here, empathy is not merely a personal feeling. It is shaped by the laws and focuses on justice and victim protection. Empathy is part of political power, showing accountability and legitimacy. This expectation is often placed on political leaders, especially women, who are praised for showing empathy but may lose authority. The findings are illustrated in Table 2, which shows empathy management based on moral legitimacy.

Table 2 Empathy Management Based on Moral Legitimacy

Informant	Dimension	Categorization	Strategic Function
Atalia Praratya, Desy Ratnasari, Ledia Hanifa	Context	Human trafficking, protection of women, social inequality, violence against children, social inequality	Ethical Positioning
Atalia Praratya, Desy Ratnasari	Textual Framing	Normative diction (justice, responsibility, protection), explicit moral appeals, references to policy	Construction of moral authority
Atalia Praratya, Desy Ratnasari	Visual framing	Field visits, interactions with affected groups, formal composition	Symbolic alignment with vulnerable communities
Atalia Praratya, Desy	Tone	Firm, normative, advocacy-oriented	Strengthening legitimacy

Source: Reseach result, 2025

In addition to developing moral legitimacy, empathy management also functions as a sort of gendered brand management, specifically a technique for shaping the image of female politicians through portrayals of caring, proximity, and sensitivity to public issues. In the original context, empathy was linked to justice and authority. Here, empathy is tied to how people present themselves and identify with gender. Empathy shows authenticity, care, and personal stories, becoming part of digital political communication. Instead of supporting structures, empathy is seen as warmth from closeness and trust between authority and individuals. It is not about policy speeches or community solidarity. This fits with social media’s focus on personalization and visibility (Kreiss, 2016; Van Aelst et al., 2012). However, this is not just personal or non-political. Empathy in gendered stories involves judging female leaders on warmth and competence (Campus, 2013; Trimble et al., 2022). In fast-paced online

environments, empathy helps balance warmth and authority: “Research on women in politics shows that gender stereotypes about personal qualities can conflict with ideals of capability and virtue. Women are sometimes seen as lacking the character needed to overcome these stereotypes.” Gendered branding is not impulsive but follows gender norms. This is shown by Atalia Praratya and Desy Ratnasari on Instagram and Ledia Hanifa in community settings. By using this approach, empathy helps create a leadership image that combines professionalism with a relational focus. The findings are illustrated in Table 3, which shows gender-based empathy branding management.

Multimodal analysis shows that gendered GM emphasizes units of empathy that legitimize relationality, as Atalia Praratya provokes political sentiments with themes such as motherhood and gratitude, blending the home with public spheres and projecting a caring identity of power. The qualities ascribed

Table 3 Gender-Based Empathy Branding Management

Informant	Dimension	Categorization	Strategic Function
Atalia Praratya, Desy Ratnasari, Ledia Hanifa	Context of the Issue	Family narratives, women's solidarity, community empowerment	Gender-based positioning
Atalia Praratya, Desy Ratnasari	Textual Framing	Personal storytelling, reflective tone, emotional vocabulary (motherhood, gratitude, struggle)	Relational identity and credibility
Atalia Praratya, Desy Ratnasari	Visual framing	Physical closeness with children or family, warm facial expressions, soft colors	Emotional accessibility
Atalia Praratya, Desy	Tone	Inspirational, empathetic, reflective	Personal branding and public engagement

Source: Reseach result, 2025

to a loving mother are leveraged into her profile responsibilities. Empathy brings private affect into the public realm, as Desy Ratnasari's reflective and incitatory language, highlighting empathy and solidarity, is tied to a narrative of women's empowerment, struggle, perseverance, and nation-building. Empathy as a "product of leadership" occurs when the leader expresses empathy for their followers, yearning for the person to grow, become a good person, thus articulating the power that extends accountability as relationality and vice versa, and consolidating their bond. Ledia Hanifa invokes empathy in philanthropy and education through listening and sharing people's experiences. Gendered empathy is not just maternal but is connected to leadership's insecurities. Visual presentation practices aim for warmth, with "well-practiced expressions of warmth, pastel colors that soften their faces, colors that drench videos filled with scenes of the home and family and community, reduce the legislator's visage to something

more relatable and less hierarchical." However, this is also courtly behavior, mediated and deliberate rather than spontaneous, and sensibly calibrated to platform aesthetics and audience expectations (Bennett & Livingston, 2020). It is a form of gendered branding management, via the nation's most visible public space, that depicts her as a relational leader, principled authority, and emotionally reachable. Empathy as a branding tool played as a form of gendered representation, strengthening rather than undermining authority, tying leadership to care and authenticity in ways that do not diminish domesticity or retreat from one's public standing for the warmth of loving relationships.

From here, empathy no longer serves merely to build relational images and moral authority but also becomes an important way to navigate the dynamics of public debate and crises, institutional management, and crisis response. If moral legitimacy supports justice and gender identity connects with empathy,

Table 4 Crisis Response and Institutional Empathy Management

Informant	Dimension	Categorization	Strategic Functions
Ida Fauziyah, Rieke Diah	Context of the Issue	Nationally controversial issues, public policy debates, social tragedies	Institutional accountability
Ida Fauziyah, Rieke Diah	Textual Framing	Expressions of condolence, acknowledgment of collective anxiety, clarification of formal policy	Legitimacy stabilization
Ida Fauziyah, Rieke Diah	Visual Framing	Institutional setting, formal composition, serious posture	Professionalism and authority
Ida Fauziyah	Tone	Controlled, formal, solution-oriented	Institutional credibility

Source: Reseach result, 2025

then empathy becomes important in public debates and crises. In such situations, empathy is demonstrated in official communication when legitimacy is uncertain and public attention is high. During crises in digital political communication, emotions are important. Empathy is not shown as personal warmth but as a careful acknowledgment of public concerns. This is done through polite language, references to rules, and controlled facial expressions. This type of empathy is called “affective stabilization,” which refers to recognizing emotions while showing institutional competence (Marcus, 2023; Van Aelst et al., 2012). This approach clarifies Ida Fauziyah and Rieke Diah Pitaloka’s Instagram activities. They use empathy when responding to national events, policy debates, or public tragedies. Here, empathy is part of leadership and aims to ensure governance and stability. The findings are displayed in Table 4, crisis response and institutional empathy management.

Multimodal findings indicate that crisis-

response management transforms empathy into an institutional instrument to evoke reassurance. Textually, empathy is enacted in a structured recognition of public concerns, followed by an elucidation of policies and the corrective responses involved, and then by oversight as a function of administration. Emotions are still present, but they are contained and subordinate to procedure. This sequence first acknowledges, then offers solutions, serves to reiterate accountability without necessarily nullifying authority. Ida Fauziyah tends most toward this pattern. In addressing sensitive national issues or crises, she uses formal language and a policy framework. She expresses empathy by recognizing collective anxiety or grief, but immediately connects it to institutional responses and regulatory procedures. Thus, empathy appears as part of administrative competence, not as emotional vulnerability. Rieke Diah Pitaloka works from a similar pattern (if with a spicy touch of normative criticism), coupling empathetic acknowledgement with demands for

structural accountability in controversial issues, so that empathy spurs corrective action rather than simply communicating sympathy.

This type of imagery is characterized by institutions, status, formality, controlled bodies, and controlled faces. Rather than warm imagery in gender-based branding, this is serious, stable, and in control. The control of emotion is a message in itself; we can rely on our leaders when things are uncertain. From a gender perspective, this is relevant because female leaders often do not believe they are decisive enough in a crisis (Campus, 2013). Framing empathy in this way distracts from tropes of too much emotionality and brings its meaning as its duty, not its flaw.

Consequently, this arrangement crafts an identity as ‘guardians of the institution’. Empathy is a ‘elsewhere’ symbolic resource that ‘assures’ the public and ‘counters’ administrative control. Empathy does not threaten power but reinforces a reputation when that reputation is at stake. In managing crisis response, we see how empathy can be remapped from relational expression to governance performance in digital political leadership

This management of representation configures the emphasis in the interaction to be on the goals of direct presence, participatory interaction, and representational proximity at the heart of its communication strategy

(Abellan, 2025; Whiteley, 2018). Empathy in this pattern of management is not generated through normative claims about authority or formalist institutional language, but through near presence with constituents and shared experiences with them (Duncombe, 2019; Suiter & Fletcher, 2020). In digitally mediated political communication, visibility and proximity are signals of representation and this pattern shows how empathy is strategically built into everyday encounters through meetings at the market, holding educational forums and community meetings, and visiting MSMEs (Theocharis et al., 2023). Rather than giving a structural representation or crisis response frame, posts of this type cultivate empathy through “being present in person.” The focus has shifted from policy language to dialogic engagement, such that empathy emerges as a quality of attention representation. This arrangement can be seen most consistently in the Instagram communications of Ledia Hanifa, Ida Fauziyah, and Rahayu Saraswati, with Atalia Praratya also using it in a community-focused manner. In this practice, empathy as responsiveness is accomplished through listening, dialoguing, and proximity. These findings are consistent with bodies of work illustrating how the affordances of digital platforms allow politicians to visibly perform relational closeness as a tactic of visibility management (Bennett & Livingston,

Table 5 Community-Based Empathy Management

Informant	Dimension	Category	Strategic Function
Ledia Hanifa, Rahayu Saraswati, Atalia Praratya	Context	Market visits, SME education, community meetings	Community representation
Ledia Hanifa, Ida Fauziyah	Framing	Participatory narrative	Relational legitimation
Ledia Hanifa, Rahayu Saraswati	Visual	Physical visits to communities, social interaction	Tangible social presence
Ledia Hanifa	Tone and style	Conversational, participatory, down-to-earth	Representational authenticity

Source: Reseach result, 2025

2020; Kreiss, 2016). The findings are displayed in Table 5, community-based empathy management.

Multimodal analysis shows that grassroots relational empathy management builds empathy through visibility, interaction, and symbolic equality, not through explicit emotion. Textually, empathy is signalled through language such as “together,” “listening,” and “aspirations,” referring to shared engagement. In this sense, empathy is not sympathy but participation that grants relational legitimacy. Ledia Hanifa tends to pull this pattern across data, through documentation of community dialogues and educational visits that signal exchange, not authority. Ida Fauziyah produces it too in informal community contexts, then mixes it with institutional style. Rahayu Saraswati combines her place of moral power (we might elsewhere as political power) with field visits, while Atalia Praratya uses it from a place of empowerment relevant to relational branding through and from gender

Visually, there is less distance between legislators and voters, and markets and classrooms are designed for meetings, and legislators stand alongside each other in equal proximity. This configuration signifies a lesser power difference and presents an image of approachable leaders. Gendered, this practice fulfills gender norms of relationality for female politicians; it is a means of conveying communication proximate closeness into political currency. Strategically, the configurations convey an image as “grassroots ally,” where empathy is a source of participatory legitimacy based on proximity, closeness, and approachability in the digital political sphere.

These findings suggest that the style in which empathy is regulated can indeed generate emotional cues and may also be part of how political communication identity is constituted in digital culture. In serving as a regulatory structure, empathy is one way in which each of these legislators named on Instagram, Rahayu Saraswati, Ida Fauziyah,

Table 6 Political communication identity constructed Through Empathy Management

Informant	Dominant Empathy Configuration	Political identity	Leadership style	Framing and strategy	Strategy function
Rahayu Saraswati	Moral-Legitimacy; Grassroots	Ethical Reform Advocate	Justice-driven leadership	Advocacy and oversight	Moral authority + representational legitimacy
Rieke Diah Pitaloka	Moral-Legitimacy; Crisis	Principled Institutional Critic	Normative accountability	Structural reform orientation	Ethical firmness + governance seriousness
Ida Fauziyah	Crisis-Responsive; Institutional	Institutional Stabilizer	Administrative leadership	Policy and governance competence	Stability and credibility
Atalia Prataya	Gendered Branding; Grassroots	Relational Public Leader	Care-oriented leadership	Community empowerment framing	Warmth + accessibility
Desy Ratnasari	Gendered Branding	Inspirational Public Figure	Motivational leadership	Symbolic solidarity politics	Emotional relatability
Ledia Hanifa	Grassroots-Relational	Community-Embedded Representative	Participatory leadership	Local representation	Accessibility + grassroots legitimacy

Source: Reseach result, 2025

Atalia Prataya, Desy Ratnasari, Ledia Hanifa, and Rieke Diah Pitaloka, might exercise the legislative civil servant, the leadership persona, or the representative position. Digital political identity is personalized and visible in specific places through constructing coherent accounts, visual fidelity, and alignment (Farkas & Bene, 2021). The repetition of successful empathy structures means that the person is recognized as a media identity. This is a unit of the media, a political public figure who speaks with authority, credibility, availability, and legitimacy. Note that what is at stake is imagined to be a 'political' thing, as well as emotional. Hence, legislators compose levels of communication and political identity through empathy management. This will involve key elements, such as ethical authority,

institutional leadership, relational leadership, and representational connectedness. In this way, empathy provides the opportunity for the political position to be refashioned, stabilized, or even localized. The findings are displayed in Table 6, Political communication identity constructed through empathy management.

Based on the presentation regarding the empathetic communication practices carried out by female legislators, it is clear that empathy not only functions as an affective expression but also represents the construction of political identities they build in the digital public space. In this context, these identities can be mapped into several forms.

The shaper of moral legitimacy. Saraswati's work shows how this identity is

negotiated through the ongoing maintenance of moral legitimacy. Empathy is interpolated into advocacy storylines and policy-oriented oversight. The political communication identity created emerges as an engine for moral reform an assembly of emotional responsiveness with structural accountability. At times, this empathy undermines authority; more radically, it enhances it. Through its normative word choices and visual alignment with vulnerable communities, leadership becomes seen as moral, a 'reform paradigm'. These identities navigate the tensions of advocacy and authority by cementing ethical commitments as the driving force of the institution.

Principled institutional critics. Rieke Diah Pitaloka maps the "discourse of empathy" to a "discourse of firm accountability." Her mode of communicative identity construction reflects principled resistance within institutional frameworks. Empathy conveys identification with public distress, whereas language insists on conforming to norms. "It is in this way that I can identify myself: as someone who possess moral sensibility but is politically courageous." Empathy strengthens the rhetoric of criticism of the institutions as "not just a mere expression of personal feelings.

Institutional Stabilizer. For Fauziyah, empathy management produces a political communication identity that stresses

governance competence. In crises, empathetic acknowledgement is integrated into policy clarification and administrative responses. This negotiated identity depicts a stabilizing "other"; an emotional aware leader who is not "less of a leader" by virtue of their emotions. Empathy management is tightly choreographed to signify culpability, not vulnerability. This configuration is important for female political actors as it resists emotion-based stereotypes by placing empathy in the formal context of leadership

Gender oriented public leaders. The same peacebuilding and reconciliatory discourse heavily feature in the branding of female election candidates, including Atalia Prataya and Desy Ratnasari, who heavily feature notions of relational leadership in their campaigns. They tap into the hilt in framing their political personae and communicative performance to tropes of care, inspiration, and emotive vulnerability. Yet in doing so, it is not simply appropriating through personal branding, but is responding to behavioral expectations for women in politics, a negotiation around the signifier. By trellising personal narrative to the inherent goal of public service, both create a 'people person' figure for the leadership position: empathy becomes a communicative resource re-figuring domestic symbols and political power.

Integrated Representation within the community. This identity, however, can best

be expressed by the grassroots' relational management of Ledia Hanifa. Empathy is forged through dialogue and proximity to the people. The result of this communication strategy is a representative who is appropriately grounded in the community, rather than a representative whose authority relies on a formal hierarchy of status. Here, the presence of empathy is evidence of care.

The empirical findings of this study reveal that empathy functions not merely as an emotional resource but as a central strategic medium through which female legislators construct and sustain digital political identities. An analysis of Instagram practices among six DPR RI members demonstrates that empathy is not a peripheral feature of political communication nor an unintended byproduct of personal expression but a deliberately managed symbolic resource that enables legislators to navigate the intersecting demands of gender expectations and institutional constraints. Through four configurations of moral legitimacy construction, gender-based political branding, crisis-responsive institutional communication, and grassroots relational engagement, each legislator translates empathic expression into a distinct political identity: moral advocate, relational public leader, institutional stabilizer, or grassroots ally. In doing so, these findings challenge prevailing assumptions that

treat empathy as a spontaneous, individual disposition, foregrounding instead its role as a structured communication practice through which moral authority, institutional credibility, and relational legitimacy are actively produced. A key theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating that political identity formation among female legislators is not simply reactive to gender stereotypes but is proactively shaped through the strategic management of empathy as symbolic capital (Renstrom & Ottati, 2020). Digital political profile appears to emerge through ongoing communication management on sites such as the one popular with the people, Instagram (Lee & Kweon, 2013; Widiyanti & Pamungkas, 2025; Zein & Setiaman, 2023). Empathy has a significant impact on political branding because it enables women politicians to enhance attractiveness and moral authority (Muna et al., 2020). In crisis management, it also assists politicians to maintain their popular identity (Casas-Mas et al., 2025). On digital platforms like Instagram, political engagement involves a continuing repertoire of communicative strategies involving empathy for both emotion and messaging (Enli, 2017).

Empathy in this model is closely aligned with the playing of political characters. Such is the case with Rahayu Saraswati and Rieke Diah Pitaloka, where moral legitimacy management frames themselves as champions of moral

righteousness, while at the same time reflecting that justice-centered narrative, that giving voice to those marginalized. It thereby justifies their moral claims, as well as authenticates them as political professionals. The ongoing invocation of normative and representational images of field trips (or modes of encountering vulnerable communities) articulates commitment to social justice as they play their identity as advocates and leaders. Yet this study reveals an especially important nuance: that for political identity to be constructed through empathetic engagement is not simple, and is bound to the context. Each legislator is conscious and deliberate in framing her use of empathy with respect to specific issues and expectations of her audience, agenda, and purpose. Ida Fauziyah, for example she makes crisis-responsive posts through which she frames empathy in relation to institutions, all the while signaling capacity in administration as well as in the practice of policy-making; she constructs herself as a stabilizing institution in times of crises. An interesting takeaway is how gendered norms define the contours of empathy in the construction of given political identities: the warmth of women is set against their professional competence

These considerations are further heightened in remote, digitally mediated instances where accessibility, proximity, and personalized experience matter (Vanolo, 2016).

Female legislators then use the capacity to empathetically emblemize strategically to leverage authority and provide care. Rather than being delegitimized as “weakness” or “sentimentality” out of a fear of the feminine, empathy becomes the tool for negotiating the expectations around gendered leadership. Gendered branding management is especially vulnerable to this tactic: Empathy is easily made amenable to the care-oriented story of motherhood or community empowerment, reflective of the expectation of women for public life regarding emotional relatability as needful to being a leader. But not mere “emotion” on those terms is what these women appropriate to shape their presentations on empathy; they don’t just use emotion for identity effect but trace out emotive political identities out of them, using them as a malleable mode that allows for the best infusion of authority within approachability (Pellegrino, 2011). In using empathy for gendered branding use, we form images that are relatable and authoritative, refuting the old saw of how emotionality is hostile to power. It raises the question of whether one can consider displays gendered in this way as completely calculated, or how this persona that is constructed can be genuine in different locations.

This work argues that it is not our expression of empathy that detracts from the agency of

political force of women, but rather emerging with those displays of gendered empathy is a deliberate type of capital of relational legitimacy that benefits public visibility, with the proviso that this display of capital is in and of itself subject to the socially visible forces of gender (Waskul & Vannini, 2016). That the empathetic methods along the lines of the forming of political legitimacy will always be an important talking point in these results showing that not only do they act as method for the building of emotional relations but carry out well into the enactments that reinforce our trustworthiness of government with moral-legitimacy measures aiding in times of crisis or national controversy all seems to point to how of the strategic importance of the democratic way of representation strengthening as against its apparent value of weakening authority. Further probing of grassroots relational management strategies as exemplified by Ledia Hanifa is able to reveal how a kindlier attitude toward engagement might work to effect grassroots representation with skin in the game rooted in representational authenticity one of the more salutary critiques to the conceptualizations of affective expressions without strategic motive fostering democratic responsibility and also contributing to the widening representation margins in the underrepresented digital communities from which the depth of

engagement between members of the governed tends to disappear, but which is nevertheless a necessary feature of relational durability

CONCLUSION

This study foregrounds the strategic management of empathy in digital political communication, particularly as it relates to women politicians balancing gendered expectations and institutional authority. Empathy is not simply an emotional outburst but a strategic component for building and managing political subjectivities digitally. Legislators enact empathy through “making”; they mobilize aspects of themselves as symbolic capital through multimodal communications, enhancing their moral authority, institutional credibility, and relational legitimacy. However, the limits of empathy are also elaborated here, pointing to the discomfort between authenticity and strategic performance, the need for more moments of self-aware reflection, and work on how emotional labor in political communication is both a necessity and a political act. Our findings provide insights into how empathy can be organized to forge political identities, affirm legitimacy, and negotiate gendered political communication in the digital sphere. Future research should conduct a diachronic and comparative analysis of how gender, platform affordances, and cultural contexts produce

varied strategic uses of managed empathy in digital political communication.

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