Developing an Integrated Analytical Framework for Examining Strategic Political Communication on Instagram: A Qualitative Content Analysis Approach

Muhamad Amirul Faiz Abd Ghani, Suhaimee Saahar@Saabar, and Khairul Azam Bahari
Centre for Media and Information Warfare Studies, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia· Department of Communication and Media, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia
amirulfaizghani@gmail.com

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Abstract

Instagram has emerged as an influential platform for contemporary political communication, enabling political actors to construct public image, communicate political values, and engage audiences through visual and interactive content. Existing analytical approaches, however, frequently examine political image construction, emotional appeals, rhetorical strategies, and audience engagement as isolated dimensions rather than as interconnected parts of a single communicative act. This study addresses that fragmentation by developing an integrated analytical framework grounded in self-presentation and impression management theory, within which political image construction, rhetorical analysis, emotional positioning, and audience engagement operate as observable modes of self-presentation, and Image Repair Theory operates as a bounded mode activated only where reputational threat is present. The framework was pilot tested on 108 valid Instagram posts published by Malaysian politician Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman between March and May 2018. The pilot demonstrates that the five dimensions can be operationalised within a single coding instrument, with self-presentation processes accounting for the large majority of posts (73.1 percent) and image repair activation confined to a specific, identifiable subset (26.9 percent), concentrated in political branding and crisis response content. The study contributes a theoretically grounded, empirically bounded, and transferable methodological framework for researchers examining strategic political communication on visual social media, and clarifies the analytical conditions under which each of its five dimensions is warranted.

Keywords: *Strategic Political Communication, Instagram, Self-Presentation Theory, Image Repair Theory, Rhetorical Analysis, Audience Engagement*

1.0 Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed contemporary political communication by enabling political actors to communicate directly with audiences while reducing dependence on traditional media gatekeepers. Digital platforms now play a central role in political branding, public engagement, issue advocacy, and reputation management, allowing political actors to strategically shape public perceptions through continuous interaction and content dissemination [1], [2], [3]. As political communication increasingly operates within hybrid media systems in which traditional and digital media interact to influence public discourse, social media platforms have become integral to contemporary political strategy [4]. Political actors increasingly rely on digital platforms to cultivate authenticity, visibility, and direct audience relationships, particularly among younger demographics who consume political information through social media environments [5].

Among the various social media platforms available today, Instagram has emerged as a particularly influential environment for political communication due to its visual centric design and popularity among younger audiences. Through photographs, videos, captions, hashtags, and interactive engagement features, Instagram enables political actors to combine political messaging with personal

narratives, emotional appeals, and visual storytelling [6]. Unlike text dominated platforms, Instagram allows politicians to communicate both professional and personal dimensions of their identities, thereby facilitating the construction of authenticity, credibility, and relatability [7], [8]. Audiences often follow political leaders on Instagram not only for political information but also for personal insight and perceptions of authenticity, reinforcing the platform's role in political self-presentation and relationship building [9].

Previous studies have examined various dimensions of political communication on Instagram, including political branding [10], political storytelling [11], visual political communication [12], and coding approaches for visual social media content [13]. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that Instagram functions as a strategic communication platform, but they also reveal a persistent methodological pattern: each study typically isolates a single communicative dimension rather than examining how several dimensions operate together within the same content.

This fragmentation is significant because a single Instagram post rarely communicates only one thing. A politician's post may simultaneously construct identity, evoke emotion, invoke credibility, and generate measurable audience response. Existing single dimension frameworks are not designed to reveal how these processes relate to one another, nor can they establish which analytical lens is actually warranted for a given piece of content. For example, treating Image Repair Theory as universally applicable to any self-promotional content, rather than confirming where reputational threat is genuinely present, risks conceptual overreach, a concern raised directly in review of an earlier version of this manuscript.

To address this gap, the present study develops an integrated analytical framework for examining strategic political communication on Instagram. Rather than simply listing five relevant concepts side by side, the framework treats self-presentation and impression management theory as the connective foundation that explains how political image construction, rhetorical appeals, and emotional positioning function as observable modes of self-presentation, how Image Repair Theory functions as a bounded mode activated only under specific conditions, and how audience engagement functions as the observable feedback signal that closes the communicative loop. This theoretical architecture, rather than the mere combination of concepts, is the paper's central contribution.

The framework was developed through an extensive review of political communication, reputation management, and social media scholarship and was subsequently pilot tested using a dataset of 108 valid Instagram posts published by Malaysian politician Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman between March and May 2018. Syed Saddiq was selected because, at the time of data collection, he served as Youth Chief of a major Malaysian political party and was among the country's most visible young political figures on Instagram during Malaysia's 14th General Election period, making his account a data rich case for testing a multidimensional framework across image construction, emotional, rhetorical, and reputational content simultaneously. Rather than focusing primarily on empirical findings, the study aims to demonstrate the theoretical architecture, structure, and applicability of the framework as a methodological tool for future research.

Accordingly, the objectives of this paper are: (1) to develop a theoretically integrated analytical framework for examining strategic political communication on Instagram; (2) to explain the conceptual relationships that connect its five analytical dimensions rather than treating them as an unconnected checklist; and (3) to demonstrate the framework's applicability, and its analytical boundaries, through a pilot analysis of Instagram content. The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How can self-presentation and impression management theory theoretically connect political image construction, Image Repair Theory, rhetorical analysis, emotional positioning, and audience engagement within a single analytical framework for examining Instagram based political communication?

RQ2: To what extent, and under what conditions, is each dimension of the proposed framework applicable to political communication content on Instagram?

RQ3: What methodological contribution does the proposed framework offer that existing single dimension approaches do not?

In addressing these questions, the study contributes a methodological framework that clarifies not only what political image construction, emotional communication, persuasive strategy, reputation management, and audience engagement look like on Instagram, but also how and when each is analytically warranted.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Strategic Political Communication

The evolution of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed political communication practices. Social media platforms have enabled political actors to communicate directly with audiences, bypass traditional media gatekeepers, and engage in continuous relationship building activities [1]. Consequently, political communication has expanded beyond the dissemination of policy information to encompass image construction, reputation management, audience engagement, and political branding [1], [5].

Strategic political communication refers to the deliberate use of communication activities to influence public perceptions and achieve political objectives. Ashfaq and Shami [2] argue that digital platforms have become important strategic tools through which political actors manage reputation, communicate values, and engage stakeholders within increasingly competitive communication environments. Political communication now operates within hybrid media systems in which traditional and digital media coexist and interact in shaping public discourse [4]. Within such environments, political visibility depends not only on media coverage but also on the ability of political actors to strategically use social media to construct identity, maintain relevance, and foster audience engagement.

2.2 Political Image Construction and Reputation Management

Political image refers to the collection of perceptions and impressions held by audiences regarding political actors, whereas reputation reflects broader evaluations of credibility, trustworthiness, legitimacy, and performance over time [14], [15]. Political communication therefore involves not only the transmission of information but also the cultivation of favourable perceptions among stakeholders. Identity, image, and reputation are interconnected constructs that collectively influence how individuals and organisations are perceived [15], [16], with reputation continuously reinforced through communication practices that build stakeholder trust, legitimacy, and credibility over time.

Authenticity has become a particularly important dimension of political image construction, as audiences increasingly expect political actors to demonstrate transparency, relatability, and consistency in their communication [17]. Politicians accordingly use personal narratives, community engagement activities, and everyday experiences to strengthen emotional connections with followers while simultaneously reinforcing political legitimacy [18].

2.3 Instagram as a Platform for Political Communication

Instagram has emerged as one of the most influential visual social media platforms within contemporary political communication. Through photographs, videos, captions, hashtags, and interactive engagement mechanisms, the platform enables political actors to communicate visual narratives that combine political messaging with personal storytelling [6]. Research demonstrates that Instagram facilitates political branding by allowing politicians to construct public identities through visual self-presentation [7], and that audiences are increasingly drawn to political leaders who communicate both professional and personal dimensions of their identities through social media platforms [9].

Previous studies have examined various dimensions of political communication on Instagram. Munoz and Towner [10] highlight the role of Instagram in political marketing and image construction, while Mohamed [11] demonstrates how Malaysian politicians use visual storytelling to communicate political narratives during an election period. Lindholm et al. [8] report that visual representations significantly influence audience perceptions of competence, credibility, and trustworthiness, and Veneti, Jackson, and Lilleker [12] emphasise the growing importance of visual political communication in constructing leadership identity and emotional resonance within digital environments. Russmann and Svensson [13] further outline methodological approaches for coding visual political content on Instagram, underscoring the platform's distinct analytical demands relative to text based media.

Collectively, these studies illustrate the strategic significance of Instagram within contemporary political communication. They also reveal considerable variation in analytical focus and methodological approach, reinforcing the need for a more comprehensive analytical approach capable of capturing multiple dimensions of communication simultaneously.

2.4 Existing Analytical Approaches and Research Gap

Existing research on political communication within social media environments has employed diverse analytical approaches. Some studies focus primarily on audience engagement indicators such as likes, comments, and shares [3], [18]. Other studies emphasise political branding, visual communication, or self-presentation strategies [7], [8]. Additional scholarship examines emotional communication, authenticity, rhetorical persuasion, or reputation management as distinct analytical domains [19], [17].

While these approaches generate valuable insights, they typically examine communication phenomena in isolation. Political image construction, emotional expression, rhetorical persuasion, audience engagement, and reputation management are treated as separate analytical domains despite their interconnected operation within actual communication practice. A single Instagram post may simultaneously communicate political identity, evoke emotional responses, reinforce credibility, and generate audience engagement.

This fragmentation creates a specific methodological gap. It is not simply that no study has combined these five dimensions before. Rather, single dimension approaches cannot establish the boundary conditions under which each analytical lens is warranted. A study focused solely on Image Repair Theory, for instance, has no internal mechanism for testing whether a dataset in fact contains reputational threat, and may therefore apply the theory indiscriminately across content for which it is not conceptually suited. An integrated framework applied within a single dataset makes this kind of boundary testing possible, because each dimension can be checked against the same coded content and its explanatory reach can be reported empirically rather than assumed.

Therefore, the present study proposes an integrated analytical framework, grounded in self-presentation and impression management theory, that combines Political Image Construction, Image Repair Theory, rhetorical analysis, emotional positioning, and audience engagement. By theorising how these dimensions relate to one another and by testing the empirical boundary of each, the framework offers a more comprehensive and more precisely scoped methodological approach for examining strategic political communication on Instagram than currently available single dimension alternatives.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodological approach to develop and pilot test an integrated analytical framework for examining strategic political communication on Instagram. Framework development was guided by theory driven qualitative content analysis, which enables researchers to derive analytical categories from established theoretical perspectives and apply them systematically to communication content [20], [21]. Such an approach is particularly useful when examining visual political communication on social media platforms, where multiple communicative dimensions often coexist within individual posts [13].

The framework was developed through a review and synthesis of literature relating to strategic political communication, political image construction, reputation management, Image Repair Theory, rhetorical analysis, emotional communication, and audience engagement [22], [20], [23]. Relevant concepts and analytical categories were identified, compared, and organised around self-presentation and impression management theory [24] as the connective foundation, rather than treated as a simple aggregation of five separate literatures.

A case study approach was adopted to assess the applicability of the framework because it allows detailed examination of a bounded phenomenon within its real world context [25]. Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman was selected as the case for two reasons. First, at the time of data collection he was one of Malaysia's youngest and most visible political figures, actively using Instagram in a manner that combined personal, political, and reputational content, making his account a suitable test bed for a framework designed to capture multiple communicative dimensions simultaneously. Second, his

Instagram activity during March to May 2018 coincided with Malaysia's 14th General Election, a period in which political image construction, emotional appeal, and reputation management were all likely to be actively deployed, providing a content rich basis for testing the framework's applicability across its five dimensions.

The pilot dataset comprised 108 Instagram posts collected from Syed Saddiq's publicly accessible account for the period March to May 2018, each fully coded across all five dimensions of the framework, and forms the basis of the pilot analysis reported in Section 5.0. The pilot dataset forms part of a broader doctoral study examining strategic political communication on Instagram between March 2018 and March 2020.

The pilot phase served as an instrument testing process to evaluate the clarity, usability, and analytical effectiveness of the framework prior to full scale application, rather than as a test of coding reliability in the conventional methodological sense. Coding for the pilot was conducted by a single researcher using a structured coding instrument developed specifically for the study. No formal intercoder reliability statistic, such as Cohen's kappa or percentage agreement, is reported at this stage. This is stated explicitly as a limitation of the pilot rather than implied, and a documented second coder procedure is planned prior to full scale coding of the complete dataset. Accordingly, this study describes the pilot as an assessment of the framework's applicability and feasibility, not as validation of the framework in the psychometric sense of that term.

4.0 Framework Development

The integrated analytical framework proposed in this study synthesises five analytical dimensions frequently associated with strategic political communication research: Political Image Construction, Image Repair Theory (IRT), rhetorical analysis, emotional positioning, and audience engagement. Unlike an approach that simply juxtaposes these five perspectives, the framework organises them around a single theoretical foundation, self-presentation and impression management theory, which explains both how the dimensions relate to one another and under what conditions each is analytically warranted. This section first explains that theoretical foundation before describing each dimension in turn.

4.1 Self-Presentation and Impression Management as the Integrative Foundation

The framework's theoretical foundation is Goffman's [24] theory of self-presentation and impression management, which conceptualises everyday communication as a continuous process through which individuals selectively present aspects of themselves to construct a desired public identity. Applied to political actors, this perspective treats routine political communication, including branding, storytelling, and issue positioning, as an ongoing performance of identity rather than as a response to any specific threat or accusation.

Within this foundation, the five analytical dimensions occupy distinct and theoretically specified roles rather than standing as an unconnected list. Political Image Construction, rhetorical analysis, and emotional positioning are treated as three observable modes through which self-presentation is enacted in a single Instagram post: image construction supplies the content of the identity being presented, rhetorical appeals supply the persuasive form of that presentation, and emotional positioning supplies its affective register. Image Repair Theory is treated as a bounded mode of self-presentation that is activated specifically when a post responds to an identifiable accusation, criticism, or reputational threat, rather than as a default lens applicable to all self-promotional content. Audience engagement, finally, is treated not as a sixth mode of presentation but as the observable feedback signal produced by audiences in response to these modes, which in turn shapes how political actors continue to present themselves over time.

This architecture, an input of Instagram content, four interacting modes of self-presentation of which one is conditionally activated, and an engagement feedback signal that loops back into ongoing presentation, is what makes the framework theoretically integrated rather than a checklist of five prevalent concepts. It also generates a testable expectation: because Image Repair Theory is conditionally activated, its coded presence should be concentrated in specific issue categories, such as

crisis or reputationally sensitive content, and largely absent elsewhere. Section 5.2 reports the pilot evidence for this expectation directly.

4.2 Political Image Construction

Political image construction constitutes the first mode of self-presentation within the framework. Political image refers to the collection of perceptions and impressions held by audiences regarding a political actor's character, leadership qualities, credibility, values, and public identity [14], [15]. Within social media environments, image construction is achieved through strategic self-presentation, symbolic communication, and visual storytelling.

Drawing on previous scholarship and the broader doctoral study, political image construction was operationalised through nine categories: personal branding, political branding and party identity, constituency and community engagement, youth empowerment, policy and governance, nation-building and national identity, crisis, defence, and response content, social issues, and reputation, credibility, and achievement. These categories are consistent with existing scholarship highlighting the importance of identity construction, leadership representation, and stakeholder engagement in contemporary political communication [7], [9].

4.3 Image Repair Theory as a Bounded Mode of Self-Presentation

The second mode incorporates Image Repair Theory, developed by Benoit [26], which has been widely applied in studies of crisis communication, reputation management, and public image restoration [27]. IRT proposes that public figures facing an accusation, offence, or reputational threat may employ one or more of five strategies, denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification, to defend or restore their reputation.

Because these strategies are conceptually tied to the presence of an accusation or offence, this framework treats IRT as applicable only to the bounded subset of content that responds to an identifiable reputational threat, rather than as a lens applicable to all proactive or everyday communication. This bounded treatment departs from earlier characterisations of the framework that described IRT as extending broadly into everyday reputation management, a characterisation raised as a concern in review of an earlier version of this manuscript. Reputational defence continues to operate within digital environments even outside formal crisis contexts [28], which supports retaining IRT within the framework, but only as one conditionally activated mode among several rather than as a default explanatory lens.

4.4 Rhetorical Analysis

The third mode incorporates rhetorical analysis based on Aristotle's persuasive appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos, which remain widely applied within communication studies as a lens for examining persuasive communication practice [29], [30]. Ethos refers to the communication of credibility, character, and trustworthiness. Pathos concerns emotional persuasion and audience connection. Logos relates to logical reasoning and evidence based argumentation. Within self-presentation theory, rhetorical appeals supply the persuasive form through which a presented identity is made convincing to an audience, and within Instagram communication they may be communicated through visual representation, textual narrative, issue framing, and symbolic content [31].

4.5 Emotional Positioning

Emotional positioning constitutes the fourth mode of self-presentation. Emotions play an increasingly important role in political communication, audience engagement, and digital participation [2], [19]. Within self-presentation theory, emotional positioning supplies the affective register of a presented identity, working alongside image construction and rhetorical appeal rather than as a separate or competing analytical domain. The framework incorporates a range of emotional categories, including pride, happiness, hope, determination, empathy, and other emotional expressions identified during pilot

coding, to examine how emotions are strategically communicated and how emotional narratives contribute to broader self-presentation and engagement objectives [32].

4.6 Audience Engagement as Feedback

Audience engagement represents the observable outcome of self-presentation within the framework, rather than a fifth mode of presentation in its own right. Social media platforms provide measurable indicators of audience interaction through metrics such as likes and comments. Audience engagement functions as an important indicator of communication effectiveness and audience responsiveness [3], [18], and reflects broader processes of relationship building and political participation within digital communication environments [33]. Within the framework, engagement indicators are examined not as an isolated quantitative outcome but as the feedback signal through which audiences respond to image construction, emotional communication, rhetorical strategy, and, where activated, image repair, thereby providing insight into which combinations of self-presentation are most visible and resonant.

4.7 The Integrated Framework and Its Methodological Contribution

Figure 1 depicts the resulting structure. Instagram communication content forms the input. Political Image Construction, rhetorical analysis, and emotional positioning operate as continuous modes of self-presentation, Image Repair Theory operates as a conditionally activated mode, and audience engagement operates as the feedback signal that closes the loop back into ongoing image construction, reputation management, and audience relationship building.

The framework's methodological contribution, and its answer to the question of what problem it solves that existing approaches do not, is twofold. First, because all five dimensions are coded within the same dataset, the framework allows researchers to observe how the dimensions co-occur within individual posts rather than assuming their relationship on theoretical grounds alone. Second, and more specifically, the framework allows researchers to empirically establish the boundary conditions of theories such as IRT that are often applied more broadly than their conceptual scope supports. Existing single dimension studies cannot generate this kind of boundary evidence, because a study designed only to detect image repair strategies has no comparison category against which to establish how much of a dataset actually falls outside its scope. The pilot evidence reported in Section 5.0 demonstrates this contribution directly. The outcome feeds back into ongoing self-presentation. Developed by the authors (2026) is as per figure 1.

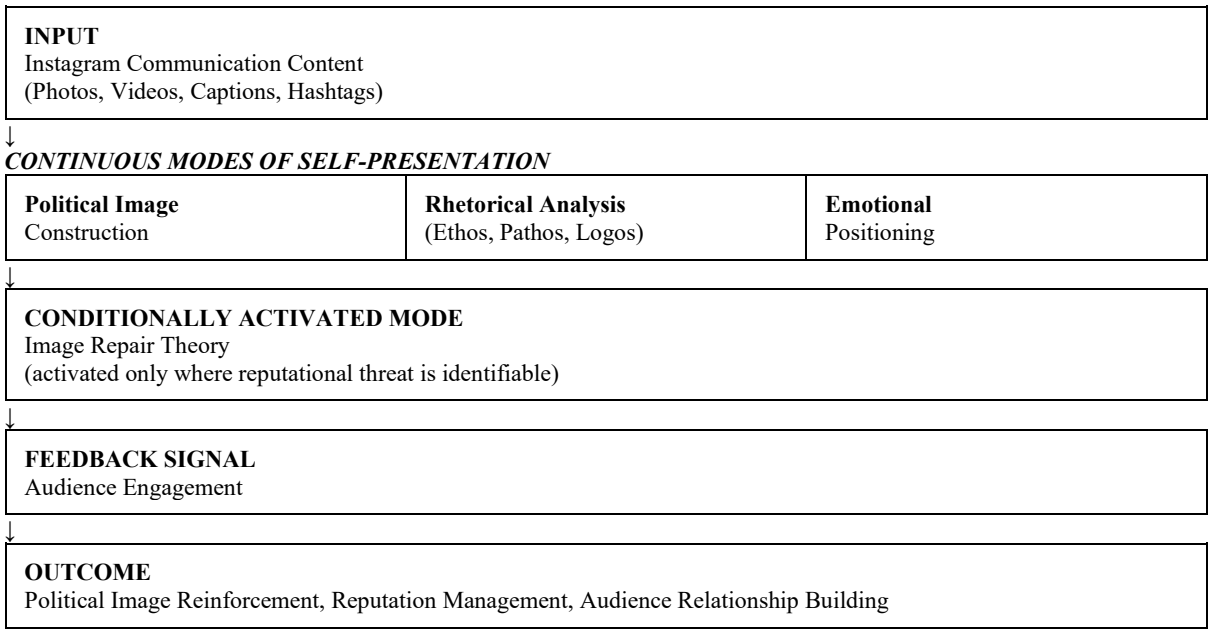


Figure 1. Integrated Analytical Framework for Examining Strategic Political Communication on Instagram

Illustrative Codebook Example

To strengthen the methodological transferability of the framework, and in response to review of an earlier version of this manuscript, Table 1 provides a condensed example of the operational coding instrument applied during the pilot. The full instrument specifies operational definitions and decision rules for every category across all five dimensions.

TABLE 1
Condensed Codebook Example

Dimension	Example Category	Operational Rule	Illustrative Coding Note
Political Image Construction	Political branding and party identity	Code where the post's primary content concerns party activity, campaign messaging, or affiliation with political leadership	A post featuring party event attendance with campaign hashtags
Image Repair Theory	Reducing offensiveness	Code only where the post responds to an identifiable prior criticism or accusation, using bolstering, minimisation, differentiation, or transcendence	A post responding to public criticism by highlighting a record of community service
Rhetorical Analysis	Pathos	Code where the post uses emotional storytelling, inspirational narrative, or affect laden language to connect with the audience	A caption describing personal hardship overcome through perseverance
Emotional Positioning	Pride	Code as the dominant emotion where captions or visuals emphasise achievement, national or community honour, or vindication	A post captioned in celebratory language following a community milestone
Audience Engagement	Likes and comments	Record the visible like and comment count for each post at the time of capture	A post with 15,000 likes and 400 comments

5.0 Pilot Application of the Framework

To assess the applicability of the proposed framework, and to test the boundary condition described in Section 4.1, a pilot analysis was conducted using 108 valid Instagram posts published by Malaysian politician Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman between March and May 2018, a period that included Malaysia's 14th General Election on 9 May 2018. The pilot dataset comprised photographs, videos, captions, hashtags, and audience engagement indicators, and formed part of a broader doctoral study examining strategic political communication on Instagram from March 2018 to March 2020.

The purpose of the pilot was not to generate comprehensive empirical conclusions about Syed Saddiq's communication strategy, but to evaluate whether the framework's five dimensions could be systematically coded within a single dataset and, specifically, to test whether Image Repair Theory activation was in fact bounded and concentrated, as the framework's theoretical architecture predicts, rather than diffuse across the dataset.

5.1 Application of Political Image Construction Categories

The framework successfully differentiated content across nine political image construction categories.

TABLE 2
Distribution of Political Image Construction Categories (n = 108)

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Political branding and party identity	31	28.7
Personal branding	21	19.4
Constituency and community engagement	17	15.7
Nation-building and national identity	14	13.0
Youth empowerment	11	10.2
Crisis, defence, and response content	6	5.6
Policy and governance	4	3.7
Social issues	3	2.8
Reputation, credibility, and achievement	1	0.9
Total	108	100.0

Political branding and party identity was the most frequent category (28.7 percent), followed by personal branding (19.4 percent) and constituency and community engagement (15.7 percent). The framework successfully differentiated between personal and political dimensions of communication. Posts documenting everyday activities and informal interactions were categorised under personal branding, while posts relating to political activities, party engagement, and institutional responsibilities were classified under political branding. Community based activities were captured through constituency and community engagement categories, while recurring discussions relating to education, leadership development, and youth participation were identified under youth empowerment.

This demonstrates that the image construction mode of the framework provides a structured mechanism for identifying recurring self-presentation strategies within Instagram communication, consistent with broader discussions of image and reputation formation in digital environments [14], [15].

5.2 Application of Image Repair Theory as a Bounded Mode

The second mode was examined specifically to test whether its activation was bounded, as the framework's theoretical architecture in Section 4.1 predicts.

TABLE 3
Presence of Image Repair Strategies (n = 108)

Strategy	Frequency (n)	Percentage of Dataset (%)
No identifiable image repair strategy	79	73.1
Reducing offensiveness	26	24.1
Hybrid (multiple strategies)	20	18.5
Corrective action	8	7.4
Denial	4	3.7
Evasion of responsibility	4	3.7
Mortification	0	0.0

As Table 3 shows, 79 of the 108 posts (73.1 percent) contained no identifiable image repair element, while 29 posts (26.9 percent) exhibited at least one strategy. This confirms the framework's prediction directly: rather than applying broadly across the dataset, image repair activation was concentrated specifically within the political branding and crisis, defence, and response categories, where an identifiable criticism, controversy, or reputational stake was present, and was largely absent from personal branding, constituency engagement, youth empowerment, and nation-building content. This bounded pattern supports treating Image Repair Theory as a conditionally activated mode of self-presentation rather than as a lens applicable to all proactive political communication, and directly addresses the concern, raised in review of an earlier version of this manuscript, that the framework's use of IRT risked conceptual overreach.

5.3 Application of Rhetorical Analysis and Emotional Positioning

The third and fourth modes examined rhetorical appeals and emotional communication.

TABLE 4
Distribution of Rhetorical Appeals (n = 108, not mutually exclusive)

Rhetorical Appeal	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Ethos	108	100.0
Pathos	108	100.0
Logos	42	38.9

Ethos and pathos were identifiable in every post (100.0 percent), communicated through leadership visibility, professional conduct, and emotional storytelling respectively. Logos appeared in 42 posts (38.9 percent), primarily within issue oriented posts involving advocacy and policy discussion.

TABLE 5
Distribution of Dominant Emotions (n = 108)

Emotion	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Determination or motivational tone	28	25.9
Happiness	20	18.5
Pride	20	18.5
Hope	13	12.0
Empathy	7	6.5
Humour	6	5.6
Gratitude	4	3.7
Other emotional categories	10	9.3
Total	108	100.0

Determination and motivational tone was the most frequently coded emotion (25.9 percent), followed by happiness and pride, tied at 18.5 percent each. These emotional categories appeared consistently alongside community engagement, youth initiatives, and nation-building narratives, demonstrating that the framework's emotional positioning mode captures affective dimensions of communication that image construction or rhetorical analysis alone would not fully address, consistent with previous scholarship on the significance of emotion in political communication [19], [32].

5.4 Application of Audience Engagement Analysis

The fifth element of the framework, audience engagement, was examined as the feedback signal produced by the four self-presentation modes described above.

TABLE 6
Average Engagement by Political Image Construction Category (n = 108)

Category	Average Likes	Average Comments
Policy and governance	67,754	442
Personal branding	54,794	1,197
Youth empowerment	50,935	725
Crisis, defence, and response content	45,344	1,636
Nation-building and national identity	43,568	1,247
Constituency and community engagement	36,656	364
Political branding and party identity	36,462	405
Reputation, credibility, and achievement	19,429	91
Social issues	7,907	273

Table 6 shows that political branding and party identity, despite being the most frequent category by volume, ranked seventh of nine categories in average likes, well below less frequent categories such as policy and governance, personal branding, and youth empowerment. This indicates that the engagement feedback signal is not simply a function of how often a category was posted, and demonstrates the analytical value of examining engagement as feedback to specific self-presentation content rather than as an undifferentiated aggregate outcome, consistent with prior findings that emotionally resonant and personally oriented content generates stronger audience response than purely informational content [3], [9].

5.5 Framework Applicability and Feasibility

Overall, the pilot application demonstrated that the proposed framework can be systematically operationalised across its five dimensions within a single coding instrument, and that the theoretical distinction between continuous and conditionally activated modes of self-presentation, set out in Section 4.1, is empirically observable rather than merely asserted. The framework also proved practical and flexible for qualitative content analysis of Instagram communication, with categories sufficiently comprehensive to capture diverse content while remaining structured enough to support systematic coding.

Because coding was conducted by a single researcher without a documented intercoder reliability procedure, these results should be read as evidence of the framework's applicability and feasibility, rather than as validation of the framework in a psychometric sense. A documented second coder procedure is planned prior to full scale coding of the complete March 2018 to March 2020 dataset, consistent with the methodological limitation stated in Section 3.0.

6.0 Discussion

The increasing significance of social media within political communication has generated growing interest in understanding how political actors use digital platforms to construct public image, communicate political values, and engage audiences. Existing scholarship, however, frequently examines these processes through isolated analytical perspectives. The pilot findings reported in Section 5.0 suggest that these dimensions are not only interconnected but that their relationship, and the boundary conditions of at least one of them, can be established empirically through an integrated framework.

6.1 Addressing Fragmentation in Instagram Political Communication Research

One principal contribution of the proposed framework is its ability to address methodological fragmentation within existing Instagram political communication research. Previous studies provide valuable insight into specific aspects of communication, including political branding [10], visual political communication [7], [12], audience engagement [3], [18], and perceptions of authenticity [17], but these perspectives are typically treated as distinct domains despite their interconnected operation within actual communication practice.

The pilot application demonstrates that political communication on Instagram often involves the simultaneous operation of multiple self-presentation modes within a single post. A single post may communicate leadership identity, evoke emotional responses, reinforce credibility, and stimulate audience engagement at the same time. Analytical approaches that focus exclusively on one dimension may therefore overlook important interactions between communication strategies and audience responses that only become visible when several dimensions are coded together.

6.2 Integrating Image Construction and Reputation Management

The framework further contributes to scholarship by integrating political image construction and reputation management within the same analytical model, while specifying the conditions under which reputation management, in the form of image repair, is actually activated. Previous scholarship suggests that image, identity, and reputation operate as interconnected constructs that collectively shape public perceptions of political actors [15], [16]. The pilot application suggests that image construction activities function as reputation management only under specific conditions, namely where an identifiable reputational stake is present, rather than uniformly across all content.

This bounded interpretation extends earlier applications of Image Repair Theory beyond crisis communication contexts by clarifying precisely where the theory applies within everyday political communication [28], and provides researchers with an empirically grounded mechanism, rather than a purely conceptual one, for examining how image construction and reputation management interact within visual social media environments.

6.3 Expanding the Role of Emotion and Persuasion

The framework also highlights the role of emotional communication and rhetorical persuasion as constitutive modes of self-presentation rather than as separate communicative domains. This is consistent with rhetorical scholarship suggesting that persuasive communication operates through the combined influence of credibility, emotional appeal, and logical reasoning [29], [31]. Existing studies increasingly recognise the role of emotion in shaping political participation and audience engagement [19], [32], yet emotional communication is often analysed separately from image construction and reputation management. The pilot application demonstrates that emotions, rhetorical appeals, and image construction operate together within Instagram content to strengthen audience relationships and reinforce political identity.

6.4 Methodological Contribution and Novelty

The primary contribution of this study is methodological rather than substantive. The study does not propose a new theory of political communication but offers a structured analytical framework that theoretically integrates five existing perspectives around a single foundation and empirically tests the boundary of one of them. This distinguishes the framework's contribution from a simple combination of prevalent analytical concepts in three specific ways.

First, the framework specifies theoretical roles for each dimension rather than treating them as an unordered list, with three dimensions operating as continuous modes of self-presentation, one operating as a conditionally activated mode, and one operating as a feedback signal, as set out in Section 4.1. Second, the framework generates a testable expectation from this architecture, namely that image repair activation should be bounded and concentrated rather than diffuse, which the pilot evidence in Section 5.2 confirms. Third, and consequently, the framework offers researchers a mechanism for establishing,

rather than assuming, where a given theoretical lens is empirically warranted within a dataset, which single dimension studies applying only one theory cannot do. This is the specific analytical problem that existing approaches do not solve: without a framework that codes multiple dimensions simultaneously, researchers have no internal basis for testing whether a theory such as IRT is being applied within or beyond its proper scope.

The framework also offers practical value for researchers examining political communication across different political contexts, social media platforms, and communication environments. Although developed for Instagram, its analytical dimensions and theoretical architecture may be adapted for platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, or X, where image construction, audience engagement, and reputation management similarly operate as elements of ongoing self-presentation.

6.5 Implications for Future Research

The findings suggest several directions for future research. First, the framework should be applied to the complete March 2018 to March 2020 dataset, together with a documented intercoder reliability procedure, to assess whether the bounded pattern of image repair activation observed in this pilot holds outside the election period examined here. Second, future research may extend the framework through explicit multi-platform comparison, for example contrasting Instagram's visual, personality driven self-presentation with TikTok's short form video format or X's text centred format, to examine whether the same continuous and conditionally activated modes operate consistently across platforms with different affordances. Third, future research may combine the framework's qualitative coding with computational methods, engagement analytics, or network analysis to provide richer insight into how self-presentation and audience feedback interact at scale.

6.6 Limitations

This study represents an initial stage of framework development. The pilot application involved a single political actor and 108 Instagram posts published between March and May 2018, a period that included Malaysia's 14th General Election. The findings should therefore be interpreted as preliminary evidence of the framework's applicability and feasibility, and specifically of the bounded activation of its image repair mode, rather than as substantive conclusions about political communication effectiveness or as validation of the framework in a psychometric sense. Coding was conducted by a single researcher without a documented intercoder reliability statistic, which is stated here as an explicit methodological limitation rather than implied. In addition, because the sampling period coincided with a general election, the concentration of political branding content and the specific pattern of image repair activation observed here may in part reflect that campaign context rather than the politician's routine, non-election communication. Future studies involving a documented reliability procedure, larger and more diverse datasets, multiple political actors, and non-election comparison periods are necessary to further evaluate the framework's robustness and transferability.

7.0 Conclusion

This study developed and pilot tested an integrated analytical framework for examining strategic political communication on Instagram. Rather than combining five prevalent analytical concepts without explaining their relationship, the framework organises Political Image Construction, Image Repair Theory, rhetorical analysis, emotional positioning, and audience engagement around self-presentation and impression management theory, in which the first three dimensions function as continuous modes of self-presentation, Image Repair Theory functions as a conditionally activated mode, and audience engagement functions as the feedback signal that closes the communicative loop.

The pilot application, involving 108 valid Instagram posts published by Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman between March and May 2018, demonstrated the framework's practicality and clarity, and confirmed the framework's central theoretical prediction: image repair activation was concentrated in political branding and crisis related content (26.9 percent of posts) rather than distributed evenly across the dataset, while political image construction, rhetorical appeal, and emotional positioning operated

continuously across the large majority of content. The pilot findings therefore provide preliminary support for both the framework's applicability and its specific theoretical architecture.

The study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on digital political communication by providing a methodological approach that moves beyond single dimensional analyses of social media communication, and by offering researchers a means of empirically testing, rather than assuming, where individual theoretical lenses such as Image Repair Theory are properly applied. From a methodological perspective, the framework contributes a transferable research instrument that may be adapted across different political contexts, communication settings, and social media platforms.

Nevertheless, this study represents an initial stage in framework development. The pilot application was limited to a single political actor, a single election period, and a dataset coded by a single researcher without a documented reliability procedure. Future research involving a documented intercoder reliability process, larger and more diverse datasets, comparative political contexts, and non-election comparison periods is necessary to further evaluate the framework's robustness, transferability, and analytical effectiveness. Overall, the study provides a theoretically grounded and empirically tested foundation for future methodological development within political communication research examining the increasingly complex and multidimensional nature of strategic communication within contemporary digital media environments.

8.0 References

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