

Research Article

Disinformation Campaigns Trough Social Media Tik Tok in Shaping Public Opinion and Polarizing Societies

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Abstract

This study examines how disinformation campaigns circulating on TikTok during Indonesia's 2024 presidential election shaped public opinion and intensified societal polarization. The research aims to identify dominant forms of disinformation, explain how these messages operate within social identity dynamics, and analyze their influence on public perceptions of competing candidates. Using a qualitative approach, the study collected and analyzed videos, images, captions, and user interactions that contained elements of hoax, false context, satire, propaganda, and scaremongering. Data were interpreted through thematic analysis supported by Social Identity Theory to understand how in-group and out-group categorizations were reinforced through misleading content. The findings show that TikTok became a key arena for political manipulation, where edited videos, recycled footage, fabricated narratives, and emotive framing were strategically used to mobilize supporters and attack opponents. These disinformation practices heightened affective polarization, reduced trust in democratic processes, and generated widespread confusion among voters. The study concludes that TikTok-based disinformation significantly contributed to deepening social divisions and shaping negative public opinion during the election period. Strengthening media literacy and developing rapid response mechanisms are essential to mitigate future disinformation impacts.

Keywords

Disinformation, Communication, Campaign, Misleading, Satire, False Connection, False Context, Scaremongering

1. Introduction

Following the Indonesian presidential and vice presidential election in 2019, the election of the president and vice president in 2024 led to polarization on social media. In 2018, the terms 'cebong' and 'kampret' appeared [1-4]. Then, in 2019 there were another famous term that was 'Kadrun' [5, 6]. These terms are a stigma embedded in anyone who wants to be labeled, which is underpinned by a specific motive. The term is often identified with the supporter of President Joko Widodo while the use of kampret to refer to Prabowo's supporter. Later in 2019, the term Kadrun appeared as an acro-

nym for the February 22nd and March 12th editions, which referred to the desert frogs. Later, the reference to the Desert Frogs repeatedly and was associated with a radical understanding on May 15, 2019.

Some of these terms have emerged and are widely used as a form of support for a particular fortress [7]. It shows that in society emerged groups that supported a particular figure. Later, Prabowo as a form of effort to unite the people wanting to join the Indonesian cabinet advanced government). It's meant so that the term kampret and buffalo disappears, and

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polarization no longer occurs. However, it turns out that Prabowo's joining Jokowi's cabinet does not necessarily eliminate polarization in the society. The elite can easily get rid of the trap, but not with the grass root that hasn't moved on yet.

This polarization continues as early as the president election in 2024. Supporters or sympathizers of the three presidential candidates and vice presidents expressed opinions that tended to mislead the public [8-10]. Social media is used as a means for each group to attack the other group with fake news or hoax. The fight between supporters of the presidential candidate and vice president doesn't just happen in the real world but in the social media world [11-13]. Different forms of attack are carried out by each fortress [14]. Attacks of all kinds include satire, hate speech, slander, and so on. What is becoming widespread is because the social media struggle is then raised and disseminated by mainstream media such as print and electronic media [15].

There are several consequences of the polarization caused by disinformation campaigns. First, causing social divisions [16, 17]. Disinformation campaigns, including the spread of fake news and hate speech, have been linked to deepening society's polarization. These campaigns can exacerbate ideological divisions and contribute to the creation of highly polarized societies. Second, undermining confidence and democratic processes [18]. The spread of misleading information can undermine confidence in democratic processes and institutions. This could lead to a loss of confidence in the media, the political system, and public discourse, thus undermining the foundations of democratic governance. Third, increasing social tension [19]. Disinformation campaigns have the potential to fuel social tension and conflict by strengthening the narrative of separation and promoting mistrust among different social groups.

The campaign process, which is supposed to contain the delivery of vision, mission, and programmes that will be carried out during the term of office if elected, is a matter of debate, quarrel, and nervous warfare through social media. The information circulated was just false, misleading, and confusing. The information contained narratives of the twisted and misled presidential candidate couple. The terrible impact of this misinformation is enormous. The consequences of the polarisation caused by disinformation campaigns include deepening public divisions, undermining confidence in democratic processes, rising social tensions, challenges to information aggregation and consensus-building, and impacts on public health and major social issues. Therefore, this communication event deserves an in-depth study of how the impact of this disinformation on the public in particular on the formation of public opinion on the couple of presidential candidates and vice presidents and also the polarization that occurs in the grassroots rather than among the elites. Therefore, the aim of this study is to describe the impact of disinformation messages that appear in Tik Tok during the campaign period until the general election ends.

2. Research Review

Communication theory matches with the title of "Disinformation Campaigns Through Social Media Tik Tok In Shaping Public Opinion And Polarizing Societies" is a social identity theory pioneered by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s [20-22]. This theory describes how individuals identify themselves and describe relationships with groups, communities, or other groups. In the context of this research, this theory can be used to understand how disinformation and non-real political reality depicts social identity. It can also be used for understanding how social media, such as TikTok, depict and shape social identities and influence ideological divisions.

The theory of social identity assumes that individuals have social identities deriving from their knowledge of the group and social categories that they consider to be part of them. This theory also assumes that individuals will identify themselves and others on the basis of differences in group status, legitimacy, and involvement in the group [23, 24].

The Social Identity Theory (TSI) can influence the behavior of individuals in a group because it explains how individuals identify oneself and identify others in a particular social category. This social identity is used to introduce the existence of social groups and to distinguish social groups from one another. Through the TSI, individuals will identify themselves and others based on differences in group status, legitimacy, and involvement in the group. This can affect the behavior of individuals within a group because it can cause individuals to behave more according to the social category they consider to be part of them. The TSI also indicates that individuals will be more self-reliant in their own group and more open to this group, as well as less biased towards other groups (out-group).

In the perspective of the TSI, group behavior occurs because of two important processes, namely categorization and social comparison. Categorization is the process in which an individual perceives himself to have the same social identity as that member, and an individual will also behave according to the category in which he belongs. Social comparison is a process where an individual compares this group with another group (out-group), which can cause an individual to consider his own group better and more open to this group, as well as less biased to other groups.

Recent research supports this idea: for example, a study by Jia (2025) found that information sharing, *self-presentation*, and enjoyment on social media significantly strengthen users' political identities, in line with SIT's prediction that affective activities and self-publication strengthen group cohesion [25]. In addition, quantitative research on emerging adults identified social media as a significant predictor of ideological orientation and polarization; This confirms that social identity and media use influence each other.

In the realm of online interaction and polarization, Kyrychenko et al. (2024) used machine learning analysis to

measure expressions of *ingroup solidarity* and *outgroup hostility* in social media posts, and found a strong correlation between group identity expressions and engagement (such as "likes" and "shares") [26]. These findings suggest that users not only "choose their content", but also express their group identity emotionally, which is then stimulated by the structure of the platform itself.

In the realm of politics on TikTok, the SIT + SIDE theory explains the mechanism well: disinformation content that voices "in-group" interests (e.g. supporters of a particular candidate) is more acceptable, as it reinforces a sense of group cohesion and loyalty; While the identity of the "out-group" is legitimized as a threat, it reinforces antagonism. This combination not only explains how disinformation is spread, but also why its impact can be so powerful: not just as a transfer of information, but as a deep and emotional reproduction of collective identity.

In the past five years, a number of studies confirm that TikTok has developed into an important arena in political discourse and the formation of public opinion. In Indonesia, a study by Rizanul, Egistin, Jasmine, and Juniarto (2025) shows that TikTok has a dual role: expanding the political participation of the younger generation while increasing exposure to misinformation and disinformation during political campaigns [27].

Arkana (2024) found that political parties, such as PSI, strategically utilize humorous content and *meme* formats on TikTok as a form of campaign targeting Gen Z voters, while a study by Putri and Kurniawan (2024) shows that political campaigns through TikTok in the 2024 Presidential Election rely on a politainment approach to form the image of the candidate [28]. On the other hand, research by Rijal, Fatgehipon, and Martini (2025) identified that college students as active users of TikTok tend to assess political content emotionally, in line with *post-truth* communication patterns that shift rational judgments of candidates [29].

In the context of the spread of hoaxes, Wulandari, Abdul, Tayibnapis, and Muzykant (2024) show that TikTok's short video format facilitates the virality of manipulative content, and sentiment analysis of the comment column shows a high level of negative and positive reactions to provocative narratives during the 2024 election [30]. These findings are consistent with global trends: computational research by Locatelli et al. [31] showed that non-political topics on TikTok tend to undergo "gradual politicization" in the run-up to elections, while a large study by Solovev, Drolsbach, Demirel, and Pröllochs [32] of more than 25,000 videos of German politicians found that content with negative emotions and attacks on *out-groups* resulted in *engagement* highest, showing how TikTok incentivizes politically divisive messages.

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how disinformation campaigns on TikTok influence public

opinion and political polarization during the 2024 Indonesian presidential election. A qualitative approach allows for in-depth examination of narrative patterns, discursive strategies, and identity-based reactions embedded in digital political content.

A purposive sampling technique was applied to identify TikTok content relevant to electoral disinformation. Videos were included if they: (1) referenced the 2024 presidential election, (2) contained indicators of disinformation (e.g., satire, false context, scaremongering, propaganda), and (3) demonstrated high engagement (likes, comments, shares). A total of 120 videos were collected between October 2023 and February 2024. Additionally, 15 active TikTok users aged 18–35 were recruited through snowball sampling to provide contextual perspectives and interpretive insights.

Data consisted of Primary content: TikTok videos, captions, hashtags, stitched/duet formats. Then, interaction data: comment threads, reply dynamics, and sharing behaviors. And lastly, supplementary data: screenshots of political memes, news coverage referencing TikTok content, and fact-checking reports.

Lastly, data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis, following three steps: (1) open coding to identify disinformation patterns. (2) Axial coding to generate thematic categories related to public opinion shaping and polarization. (3) Theoretical coding guided by Social Identity Theory (SIT) to interpret how disinformation reinforces *in-group* cohesion and *out-group* antagonism.

4. Results

Fake news or hoax during the campaign until voting takes place. The news has its pattern, one of them with a re-posting of a video that doesn't depict the current mood but an old video that's been taken and posted again. Besides, fake news is also in the form of pictures/photos with certain headlines. This model's hoaxes are easy to find on social media. Three possibilities are to create a book or a publication that contains false news and conditions of misleading a certain candidate. Then, some actually produce a false message by writing a story which contains an attack on a particular candidate, and some in the form of a caricature with the caption of a writing that poses a specific candidate or mocking a particular candidate. All these forms of fake news pop up and pop up on social media with ease.

In this section we will describe some models of fake news that pop up like mushrooms in the rainy season on social media. The fake news spread on TikTok's social media is known as the term hoax. Hoax is information that is not true or not supported by a reliable source. Hoax can use the terms clickbait, satire, false connection, false context, and propaganda to attract readers and cause social media users to spread incorrect information. Hoax can have a negative impact on the victims and society, such as causing false awareness, disrupting social, cultural, and political relations, and resulting in

negative funding to the party that resulted in hoax.

4.1. Satire/Parody

A satire is a type of artwork or writing that uses humor, irony, sarcasm, or irritation to criticize or comment on a topic, often with the purpose of subverting or underestimating [33-35]. In the news context, satire is a style of language that uses irony, parody, or sarcasm to criticize or laugh at something [36-39]. The purpose of satire is to show the error or injustice of something. Satire often uses humor to convey his message, but the message can also be serious. This satire was then circulated through social media.

Satire can be included in the category of hoax news [40-42]. It happens when a satire is misunderstood or disseminated without including the clear context that it is a work of satire [43]. Those who read or hear such satirical stories may not realize that it is merely a conspiracy or a joke, and they consider it to be true news. When satirics are disseminated without clarification that they are merely parody or jokes, people can be deceived and believe it as a fact, which then leads to the spread of fake news or hoax [44].

It is important for the audience to understand the context of an article or a message [45]. Reliable sources and additional research can also help ensure the truthfulness of the information received, especially in an era where news hoax and disinformation spread easily through social media and online platforms. Developing critical skills and media literacy is key to identifying and avoiding the spread of hoax, including misunderstood satirics [46-48].

4.2. False Connection

False connection is a type of fake news that presents titles, images, or descriptions that do not support content [49-51]. The most obvious feature in observing this type of content is the finding of different titles from the content of the news. False connection is called a fake news because it can mislead the reader. It's because the title, picture, or description is presented as if supporting the content, while it's not. If the reader reads only the title or the image, then they will believe that the news is true. But if they read the content, they will know that it is false.

False connection is a disinformation tactic in which real information or facts are linked or presented together in a misleading way, creating false associations or impressions between them. In the context of hoax, false connection occurs when elements of actual news or data that are separated or irrelevant are incorrectly linked, creating misleading narratives [52].

False connection is called as a fake news relating to the authenticity and truthfulness of information [53]. Although the information presented may be true, the way the information is linked or interpreted in a misleading way may lead to a wrong conclusion or give an inaccurate impression. It can

affect public perception of a subject or individual and lead to the spread of disinformation.

Examples of false connections in fake news may include combining two separate events to create the impression that one event causes the other, although both do not have a real causal relationship. In addition, an image or statement of a person is taken from its context and linked to other events to create the impression that the person supports or is involved in the matter, although not so.

In media and information context, understanding false connections is essential to developing a strong media literacy [54, 55]. It involves the ability to recognize how information is connected, as well as having the critical skills to question associations or conclusions drawn from such information [56]. Verifying the authenticity and source of information is also an important step in avoiding the spread of false connections and disinformation in general.

4.3. False Context

False context is one of the techniques of disinformation in which writing, image, sound, visual, sequence and flow contain a person's thoughts about an event, only the amount of information does not relate to the actual event. In the case of false context, the facts or statements presented are taken from a different situation or context or modified in such a way that they give a false impression of the truth or meaning of the information.

False context is a type of lie that uses true content, but is presented in the wrong context. This can be done by changing the title, image, or description of the original content. False contexts are called false news because they can mislead readers. This is because readers will believe that the news is true, although the content presented is actually true, but the context is wrong.

An example of a false context that may occur ahead of the 2024 presidential election in Indonesia is taking the statement or action of a candidate or political party from the past and introducing it in a new context in a misleading way. For example, cutting out a certain portion of a candidate's speech or interview to make it sound like support for a policy that the candidate does not actually support. Another way is to use pictures or videos of different events and present them as support of famous figures to one of the candidates. Other examples may involve audio or video editing that changes the context of the original statement, making it sound like a candidate or a political figure says something that actually has never been said.

In the case of false contexts, information changing its context can produce a misunderstanding and harmful to a party, especially in a political context where public opinion plays an important role in influencing the election outcome. Therefore, it is important to check the authenticity of information sources and search for information from various reliable sources to ensure that the information is presented in the

correct and accurate context. Understanding disinformation techniques such as false contexts is an important step in improving media literacy and tackling the spread of fake news.

False context is one of the kinds of fake news that often circulates on social media. Therefore, we need to be careful in consuming information on social networks [57-59]. First, check the news source by making sure that it's a trusted source, such as a credible mass media or government agency. Second, check your news date by checking whether the news is still new and up-to-date. Third, check out the news context, whether it is presented in the right context. Fourthly, to not easily believe news that is too sensational or provocative.

4.4. Scaremongering

Scaremongering is a kind of fake news aimed at provoking fear or panic in society [60-62]. Scaremongering is often packed with an attractive and provocative style, so it can attract the attention of readers or spectators [63, 64]. Scaremongering can also be used to specific goals, such as to drop political opponents or to create fear in society [65].

Scaremongering can be done in a variety of ways [66, 67]. First, use hyperbolic or dramatic language to describe risk or threat. Second, ignore facts or information contrary to the narrative you want to convey. Third, use scary or horrific images or videos.

Scaremongering can have a negative impact on society [68, 69]. Scaremongering undermines public confidence in the media. It's because it's going to be difficult for the public to distinguish between the right information and the wrong information. Scaremongering can increase the polarisation of the public. This is because scaremongering is often made to attack a particular group. Scaremongering can spread misinformation. It can have a negative impact on public decision-making. Therefore, people need to be careful in consuming information, especially information that comes from social media.

4.5. Propaganda Atau Disinformasi

Propaganda is a conscious attempt to disseminate information or messages with the aim of influencing and manipulating public opinions, attitudes, and actions [70, 71]. Social media has a big role in propaganda [72]. The first is because social media has wide access and is easily accessible to many people, which allows propagandists to reach many people in a short period of time. Second, social media allows direct interaction between propagandists and recipients of information, which allows propagandists to develop and secure their supporters. Third, ease in content creation. Social media allows propaganda to create content that is easy to create and consume, such as images, videos, and text.

Disinformation can harmful for the society [73-76]. Disinformation potentially undermines public confidence in the media. This is because it will be difficult for people to distinguish between true information and false information. This

is because disinformation is often made to attack a particular group. Besides, disinformation can spread false information. It can have a negative impact on public opinion.

5. Discussion

Based on the findings, it is clear that social media are supposed to help people communicate good things is being used for less good things like spreading false news, fake news and even hate speech in the form of pictures, videos and live broadcasts. Social media are not to unite but to divide the media that causes the users to fear and feel uncomfortable. Because of the continuous circulation of news and information, the spread of this fake news can have an impact on trauma and personal fear. As a result, emotions and even user behavior can change rapidly. The social media of Tik Tok has become a place of strong fighting, of arguments and debates, and of spreading hatred. What's happening is the polarization caused by the misuse of social media.

The consequences of the polarization caused by disinformation campaigns are diverse. Disinformation campaigns can undermine democratic involvement by persuading people to believe false information, thus undermining the free and fact-based exchange of information. They can also demonize political opponents, undermine policy debates, and undermine confidence in democratic institutions, making it more challenging to access accurate information and engage in constructive political discussions. Besides, disinformation confuses the lines between authentic political speeches and misleading content, promotes polarization, spreads confusion, and supports authoritarian leaders. These campaigns can also prevent the public from engaging in debate or seeking political posts, with certain segments of the population, such as women in politics, being disproportionately targeted by gender disinformation. Moreover, disinformation can change public perceptions of the integrity and competence of public figures, ultimately affecting decision-making and the overall democratic process.

Disinformation campaigns can also accelerate social tension and conflict by reinforcing the narrative of separation and promoting mistrust among different social groups. Disinformation campaigns can pose challenges to effective governance, including political deviations and institutional dysfunctions, by imposing additional transaction costs on information aggregation, political compromise, and building consensus [77]. Disinformation campaigns can also have broad implications for public health and major issues such as climate change, domestic terrorism, and global events. For example, the spread of false information during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to different perspectives and hindered a collective response to the crisis. In short, the consequences of the polarization caused by disinformation campaigns include deepening public divisions, undermining confidence in democratic processes, rising social tensions, challenges to information aggregation and consensus-building, and impacts

on public health and major social issues. Disinformation can also insult political opponents, undermine policy debates, and undermine confidence in democratic institutions, making it more challenging to access accurate information and engage in constructive political discussions.

Disinformation campaigns have a significant impact on the democratic process. They can distort democratic involvement by persuading people to believe false information, thus undermining a free and fact-based exchange of information. Disinformation can also insult political opponents, undermine policy debates, and undermine confidence in democratic institutions, making it more challenging to access accurate information and engage in constructive political discussions. These campaigns can also prevent the public from engaging in debate or seeking political posts, with certain segments of the population, such as women in politics, being disproportionately targeted by gender disinformation.

Desinformation campaigns can significantly affect public confidence in news sources. These campaigns have caused a sharp decline in public confidence in traditional journalism. The spread of false information and deliberate fraud, often referred to as "fake news", has accelerated this decline, especially in democratic systems. Furthermore, the manipulation of social media algorithms to disseminate targeted content has contributed further to the spread of disinformation and the decline in public confidence. As a result, the public's ability to distinguish between real news and fake news has been compromised, leading to increased confusion and scepticism about the credibility of news sources. It has created an environment in which people are more susceptible to misinformation, because their beliefs about news sources are influenced by their political affiliations and prejudices. The spread of disinformation has also led to a loss of confidence in journalism and the perception that there is no objective truth, increasingly undermining public trust in news sources.

6. Conclusions

It is concluded that disinformation campaigns on TikTok played a significant role in shaping public opinion and intensifying political polarization during the 2024 Indonesian presidential election. Through various forms of misleading content—such as satire, false context, scaremongering, and political propaganda—TikTok became a highly influential arena for identity-driven political contestation. The platform's algorithmic structure amplified identity-based messaging, reinforcing *in-group* solidarity and *out-group* hostility, which ultimately contributed to deeper social fragmentation.

The findings highlight three key implications. First, TikTok's design and engagement-driven algorithm create conditions that allow disinformation to circulate rapidly and emotionally, making users—especially young voters—highly vulnerable. Second, the strong connection between identity

politics and misleading content suggests the need for more targeted digital literacy programs that emphasize critical evaluation of political narratives. Third, there is an urgent need for multi-stakeholder collaboration involving government agencies, fact-checking institutions, civil society, and platform regulators to develop rapid-response mechanisms capable of detecting and mitigating viral disinformation.

Author Contributions

Agustinus Rustanta is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the outcome of this research work has been reported in this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



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