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Rethinking Algorithmic Populism: Toward an Affective Algorithmic Populism Framework in Indonesian Digital Politics

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Abstract: Ico Maly (2018, 2020) introduced the concept of algorithmic populism as a framework for understanding how populist claims are constructed through the operation of algorithms within digital platforms. However, most empirical studies underlying this concept originate from Western Europe and Latin America, where digital populism tends to be rage-driven, built on anger, confrontation, and narratives of hatred. In this regard, this article argues that this characterization is inadequate to explain the dynamics of digital populism in Indonesia, where affective mechanisms are based on humor, personal closeness, and relaxed, open performances. Empirically, this argument is anchored in the 2024 Indonesian presidential election, the country's first TikTok election, and specifically in Prabowo Subianto's *Gemoy* (roughly, cute or endearing) campaign, in which a previously confrontational strongman was rebranded through humor, warmth, and playful dance content that came to dominate engagement on the platform. Using a conceptual analysis approach using the theory adaptation strategy (Jaakkola, 2020) supported by a semi-systematic literature review (Snyder, 2019; Paul & Criado, 2020) with a transparent search protocol in four scientific databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and SINTA) for the period 2014–2026, this article identifies three limitations of the existing framework: geographic bias, the assumption that negative emotions (anger) fuel algorithms, and the lack of cultural context. Therefore, this article proposes the development of a concept called Affective Algorithmic Populism. This development encompasses three dimensions that distinguish it from Western variants: positive affectivity, an open performative mode, and a cultural grammar in the form of an inclusive affective community. Finally, in the closing section, this article offers a research agenda for the development of algorithmic populism studies in the Global South.

Keywords: algorithmic populism, digital populism, affective politics, presidential election, TikTok.

INTRODUCTION

The question of how digital platforms shape political power has become one of the most pressing issues in political science and communication studies today. As social media

shifts from mere networks of friends to algorithm-driven ecosystems, scholars have sought to develop frameworks that explain how politicians, audiences, and platform infrastructure interact to generate new forms of political communication (Maly, 2018; Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018). Among the various frameworks offered, algorithmic populism is one of the most influential. This concept was systematically developed by Ico Maly (2018; 2020; 2022) to illustrate how populist claims are no longer formed solely through rhetoric, but also through the dynamic relationship between politicians, audiences, and the platform's algorithmic logic.

However, while this framework is theoretically rich, it is built almost entirely on Western European and Latin American experiences (Ceccobelli & Mosca, 2024). The cases that form the foundation of this concept are the Vlaams Belang in Belgium (Maly, 2020), the Forum voor Democratie in the Netherlands (Van Raalte, Maesele, & Phelan, 2021), the Bolsonaro movement in Brazil (Cesarino, 2019; 2020), and the TikTok campaign in Ecuador (Rodas-Coloma, Cabezas-González, Casillas-Martín, & Nevado-Batalla Moreno, 2026). In these cases, digital populism emerged as something based on narratives of anger, anti-immigrant sentiment, and confrontational mobilization (Rage-Driven) (Radulescu, 2025). Consequently, negative emotions like anger are tacitly treated as fuel for universally applicable algorithms, rather than as context-dependent variables.

The 2024 Indonesian presidential election, widely referred to as Indonesia's first "TikTok election" (Kompas, 2023), offers an empirical context that directly challenges this argument. Indonesia currently has the largest number of TikTok users in the world, reaching 157.6 million by mid-2024 (DataReportal, We Are Social, & Meltwater, 2025). The platform has also become a key arena for electoral contestation, with a total of 107 million posts and over 17.3 billion responses throughout 2024 (ANTARA, 2024). Furthermore, Drone Emprit data (2024) revealed an interesting finding: the candidate pairs dominating interactions on TikTok are not the ones posting the most content. In this case, content based on humor, warmth, and personal openness dominates interactions on TikTok. TikTok is a particularly instructive arena for this inquiry. Unlike earlier platforms organized around a *social graph* of pre-existing followers (Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram), TikTok distributes content through an *interest graph* via its For You Page, allowing affect-laden content to reach mass audiences irrespective of a candidate's follower base and structurally rewarding participatory, entertaining, and emotionally resonant formats over confrontational or programmatic ones (Guinaudeau et al., 2022; Cervi & Divon, 2023). This architecture renders visible, more sharply than any previous platform, how *positive* affect, and not anger alone, can become algorithmically advantageous, making TikTok the ideal empirical site for interrogating the affective assumptions embedded in existing algorithmic populism theory. In this context, current algorithmic populism cannot explain this phenomenon.

Therefore, based on these issues, this article has three objectives. First, to systematically identify the geographical and cultural limitations of the algorithmic populism framework. Second, to propose a conceptual development called Affective Algorithmic Populism, which is more appropriate for the context of Indonesian digital politics. Third, to formulate a research agenda for developing the study of algorithmic populism in the Global South. Thus, through these three objectives, this article seeks to provide theoretical contributions to the literature on populism while also laying a conceptual foundation for empirical research on platform-mediated political communication in Indonesia.

METHOD

This article uses a conceptual analysis approach with a theory adaptation strategy as formulated by Jaakkola (2020), combined with a semi-systematic literature review as a data collection and processing technique (Snyder, 2019; Paul & Criado, 2020; Templier & Paré, 2015). The choice of this approach is determined by the article's objective, which is not to

report empirical findings from field data but rather to produce theoretical contributions in the form of developing and expanding concepts.

In Jaakkola's typology (2020, p. 22), theory adaptation is a conceptual strategy aimed at changing or developing an existing concept by incorporating new perspectives or contexts that have not previously been accommodated. This strategy differs from theory synthesis (which combines several theories into a new framework), typology (which builds conceptual classifications), and models (which formulate causal relationships between variables). Theory adaptation is suitable for situations where a concept is well-established but has contextual limitations that need to be addressed through confrontation with the empirical realities of a different context (Jaakkola, 2020).

The application of adaptation theory in this article proceeds through three analytical steps. First, conceptual deconstruction, which involves identifying the underlying assumptions of the criticized concept, the boundaries of its context, and elements that the concept cannot yet explain. In this article, this step is applied to Maly's (2018; 2020; 2022) algorithmic populism framework by examining the empirical context in which it was developed and its implicit assumptions. Second, comparison and contextualization, which involves comparing the criticized concept with evidence from different contexts to distinguish which mechanisms are universal and which are context-specific features. Here, the Western-based literature on algorithmic populism is compared with literature on Indonesian populism and Southeast Asian digital politics. Third, conceptual synthesis and development, which involves formulating an extension or modification of the concept that can capture phenomena not captured by the previous version. The result of this step is the concept of Affective Algorithmic Populism proposed in this article.

Type and Purpose of the Literature Review

Snyder (2019) distinguishes three types of literature reviews: systematic reviews (which aim to synthesize and compare evidence using a highly systematic search strategy), semi-systematic reviews (which provide an overview of a research area and track its development over time, using a search strategy that may or may not be fully systematic), and integrative reviews (which critique and synthesize the literature to generate new theoretical perspectives, usually not systematic in the strict sense). This article adopts a semi-systematic review approach combined with elements of an integrative review, as recommended by Paul and Criado (2020) for studies that aim to develop theory rather than simply measure empirical effects.

This selection was based on the characteristics of the study object. The algorithmic populism framework is a relatively new, still developing concept, theorized from various disciplinary traditions (communication studies, political science, digital sociology, cultural anthropology). According to Snyder (2019), these characteristics are more suitable for handling with a semi-systematic review than a rigorous systematic review, because the goal is not the aggregation of quantitative effects but rather a cross-disciplinary conceptual mapping. Templier and Paré (2015) also emphasize that the quality of a literature review is not determined by absolute adherence to a single review protocol, but rather by methodological coherence between the study's objectives, search strategy, and analytical techniques used.

Literature Search Protocol

To meet the transparency principles emphasized by Snyder (2019) and Paul & Criado (2020), this article applies an explicit search protocol to four scientific databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and SINTA (Science and Technology Index, Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia). These four databases were selected based on complementarity considerations.

The search period was set from January 2014 to March 2026. The 2014 cutoff was chosen for two reasons: (1) the concept of algorithmic populism only began to be systematically theorized after the mid-2010s, with Maly's contribution appearing in 2018; and (2) 2014 marked the first Indonesian presidential election to utilize social media intensively as a campaign arena, making it relevant for tracing the evolution of digital populism in Indonesia. The March 2026 cutoff ensures the freshness of the literature, including early 2026 publications on the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election and the current dynamics of algorithmic populism.

Search keywords were designed in English and Indonesian using Boolean operators. The main keywords included: ("algorithmic populism" OR "digital populism" OR "platform populism") AND ("TikTok" OR "social media" OR "affective politics"); ("populism" AND "Indonesia" AND ("election" OR "presidential")); and ("algorithmic populism" OR "digital populism" OR "digital political communication") for SINTA. These keywords were derived from an initial mapping of seminal works (Maly, 2018; 2020; 2022; Mietzner, 2020; Lim, 2017; 2025) that served as "seed papers" for the search.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To maintain the relevance and quality of the analyzed literature, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were formulated as follows. Inclusion criteria included (1) peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and academic monographs published by leading publishers; (2) publications that substantively discuss algorithmic populism, digital populism, platform populism, or Indonesian populism (not merely a mention); (3) publications in English or Indonesian; (4) publications that covered the 2014–2026 timeframe; and (5) publications that presented conceptual analysis or empirical findings (not editorials or book reviews). Exclusion criteria included (1) publications that discussed populism without a digital or algorithmic dimension; (2) non-academic publications (except for industry reports that provided descriptive data, such as DataReportal and Drone Emprit, which were included separately as contextual data sources); (3) publications that solely discussed TikTok or social media without any connection to political communication or populism; and (4) publications that were duplicative or earlier versions of more comprehensive publications.

Selected non-academic sources, such as industry reports (DataReportal, We Are Social, Meltwater, Drone Emprit) and prominent media coverage (Kompas, Tempo, ANTARA), were included in the empirical context analysis in a limited and transparent manner, following the practice recommended by Templier and Pare (2015) for literature reviews addressing new phenomena for which academic literature is not yet fully available. These sources were used only to provide descriptive field data (number of users, volume of interactions), not for the substance of theoretical arguments.

Literature Selection Process

The literature selection process followed four stages adapted from the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines for semi-systematic review contexts (see Snyder, 2019). The identification stage yielded a total of 312 publications from the database searches using the keywords mentioned above. The screening stage involved reading titles and abstracts to filter out clearly irrelevant publications, leaving 148 publications. The eligibility stage involved reading full texts to assess compliance with inclusion/exclusion criteria, leaving 67 substantively relevant publications. The final inclusion stage considered additional criteria of theoretical density, empirical novelty, and direct relevance to the argument, resulting in 38 core publications that form the backbone of this article's conceptual analysis.

This approach follows the logic of purposive sampling in qualitative literature synthesis as developed by Benoot, Hannes, and Bilsen (2016). Purposive sampling in

qualitative literature reviews aims to select studies that are data-rich and most relevant to the study's objectives, rather than studies that statistically represent the entire literature population. In conceptual analysis, the strength of an argument is not determined by the representativeness of the sample, but rather by the ability of a new framework to explain phenomena that cannot be explained by the existing framework (Jaakkola, 2020).

This article then treats the literature on algorithmic populism from Western Europe and Latin America as a starting framework for critique. This selection is not the result of a subjective selection to support a particular argument, but rather a direct reflection of the existing literature. Ceccobelli and Mosca's (2024) comprehensive review, itself a meta-systematic review of the literature on populism and digital campaigns, explicitly documents that the field is dominated by case studies from Western Europe (especially the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, the UK, France, and Spain) and Latin America (especially Brazil, Venezuela, and Argentina). The seminal works that established the concept of algorithmic populism as a technical term, namely Maly (2018; 2020; 2022), Van Raalte et al. (2021), Cesarino (2019; 2020), and more recently, Rodas-Coloma et al. (2026), all use cases from these two regions. In other words, the empirical basis of this concept is factually built on cases from these two regions.

This article's argumentative strategy is not to assert that literature from other regions does not exist, but rather that the literature explicitly employing the algorithmic populism conceptual framework almost entirely originates from these two regions. The lack of studies on algorithmic populism in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa is not an assumption by the authors, but rather an explicit finding documented by Ceccobelli and Mosca (2024, pp. 105–108), who stated that "studies remain fragmented and rarely comparative, with a strong bias toward Western European cases." Therefore, treating Western European and Latin American literature as the initial framework to be adapted represents an empirically justified methodological position, not a biased subjective choice.

Furthermore, within Jaakkola's (2020) adaptation theory framework, this procedure is referred to as "identifying the boundary conditions of an existing theory." Identifying these boundary conditions is a valid, even necessary, methodological step when the goal of the analysis is to develop concepts that can be "transitioned" to fundamentally different contexts.

Domains of the Analyzed Literature

The literature included in the final analysis can be grouped into four intersecting conceptual domains: (1) theories of populism and algorithmic populism (Mudde, 2004; Moffitt, 2016; Maly, 2018; 2020; 2022; Cesarino, 2019; 2020; Van Raalte et al., 2021; Ceccobelli & Mosca, 2024; Rădulescu, 2025; Rodas-Coloma et al., 2026); (2) digital political communication and platform logic (Van Dijck et al., 2018; Bucher, 2018; Klinger & Svensson, 2018; Guinaudeau et al., 2022; Cervi & Divon, 2023; Cervi et al., 2023; Medina Serrano et al., 2020; Penn State University, 2022; Brady et al., 2017; Papacharissi, 2015; Zulli & Zulli, 2022); (3) Indonesian and Southeast Asian populism (Mietzner, 2015; 2020; Yilmaz et al., 2024; Lim, 2017; 2020; 2024; 2025); and (4) TikTok's campaign in the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election (Jalli, Unggraini, & Setianto, 2025; Djumadin, 2025; Rakatiwi & Sazali, 2024; Kulau, 2024; Drone Emprit, 2024).

Validity Criteria for the Conceptual Analysis

In the social science tradition, the validity of a conceptual analysis is not determined by the representativeness of a statistical sample, but rather by three criteria formulated by Jaakkola (2020): (1) the strength of the argument; (2) the internal coherence between the components of the proposed framework; and (3) the ability of the new concept to explain empirical phenomena not yet explained by previous concepts. These three criteria serve as the evaluative standards adopted by this article.

To enhance methodological transparency, a summary of the literature review protocol is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the Semi-Systematic Literature Review Protocol

Protocol Component	Specification
Type of study	Semi-systematic literature review with integrative review elements (Snyder, 2019; Paul & Criado, 2020)
Conceptual strategy	Adaptation theory (Jaakkola, 2020)
Database	Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, SINTA
Publication period	January 2014 – March 2026
Languages	English and Indonesian
Main keywords	“algorithmic populism”, “digital populism”, “platform populism”, “populism + Indonesia”, “TikTok + politics”, “affective politics”, “populisme algoritmik”, “populisme digital”, “komunikasi politik digital”
Inclusion criteria	Peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, academic monographs; substantive discussions on algorithmic populism / Indonesian populism; in the period 2014–2026
Exclusion criteria	No digital/algorithmic dimension; non-academic (other than industry reports used as contextual data); irrelevant to political communication; duplicative
Selection flow	Identification (312), Title/abstract screening (148), Full text eligibility (67), and Final inclusion (38)
Sampling strategy	Purposive sampling for data-rich literature relevant to conceptual arguments (Benoot et al., 2016)
Validity criteria	Strength of argument, internal coherence, conceptual clarity (Jaakkola, 2020)

Source: Processed by the Author (2026)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Literature Review

The Evolution of Populism Theory: From Ideology to Style to Algorithm

Populism has been theorized in various ways across various scholarly traditions. In contemporary political science, the most influential formulation is Mudde's (2004) thin-centered ideology approach. Mudde defines populism as a framework that views society as divided into two homogeneous, opposing groups: the "pure people" versus the "corrupt elite," with politics ideally reflecting the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004). This definition is productive for comparative analysis, but many scholars consider it too focused on the content of the message and too little attention to the means by which it is delivered or the infrastructure that supports it (Moffitt, 2016).

Benjamin Moffitt (2016) responded to these limitations by reconceptualizing populism as a political style. In his view, populism is a set of performative repertoires used by political actors to position themselves as representatives of the people in opposition to the elite. Moffitt (2016, p. 44) sees populism as emerging through performances, namely appeals to the people, bad manners as political outsiders, and persistent exposure of crises. This framework is more sensitive to the theatrical dimension of populist communication, but it does not adequately explain the role of digital media infrastructure in shaping and distributing such messages (Van Dijck et al., 2018).

Maly's (2018; 2020; 2022) concept of algorithmic populism represents the most serious attempt to transcend the two aforementioned approaches. Maly situates populism within the specific logic and affordances of digital platform infrastructure. Digital-era populism, he argues, must be understood as a mediatized communicative relation, one in which the construction of "the people" is inseparable from the algorithmic conditions that determine how political messages are distributed, amplified, or drowned out (Maly, 2018). In

developing this concept, Maly (2022) formulated several prerequisites for algorithmic populism, including communicators claiming to speak for the people, knowledge of people's needs through datafication, labeling by other actors, a digital media infrastructure that shapes and distributes messages, and uptake from audiences whose engagement functions as audience labor. Crucial to this framework is that engagement metrics such as likes, views, and shares are not merely indicators of popularity but are treated as evidence of democratic legitimacy itself (Maly, 2020).

Empirical Studies on Algorithmic Populism: The Dominance of Western Contexts

Furthermore, when examining the empirical literature, studies of algorithmic populism remain geographically concentrated. Studies that develop and test this concept almost exclusively originate from Western Europe and Latin America. Maly (2020) examines the Flemish Interest Party (Vlaams Belang) and the Schild & Vrienden movement in Belgium, demonstrating that their digital populist campaigns operate through datafication and gamification mechanisms that transform "the people" into quantifiable and mobilizable entities through platform metrics. Van Raalte, Maesele, and Phelan (2021) analyze the Forum voor Democratie in the Netherlands and identify four constitutive elements of algorithmic populism: othering, heartland, leadership, and conspiracy theorizing. Cesarino (2019; 2020) demonstrates that populist patterns in Bolsonaro's digital campaign in Brazil follow the mechanisms of Laclau's populism, reinforced by platform affordances. More recently, Rodas-Coloma et al. (2026) found what they called a populism premium on TikTok in Ecuador, namely the tendency for antagonistic content with a high populism index to consistently receive greater engagement than programmatic content.

In all these cases, algorithmic populism operates through similar affective mechanisms of anger, fear, and the mobilization of in-group versus out-group identities. Radulescu (2025) even explicitly frames algorithmic populism as a threat to democracy, arguing that anger-inducing content actually travels further and faster within algorithmic systems. This finding aligns with a broader body of research showing that negative emotions, particularly moral outrage, do indeed generate higher engagement on social media than positive emotions (Brady, Wills, Jost, Tucker, & Van Bavel, 2017). However, as will be argued in this article, what we are reading here are empirical observations of what happens to be algorithmically advantageous in certain contexts, not a feature of all algorithmic systems in all cultural contexts.

Ceccobelli and Mosca (2024) themselves note that existing studies remain fragmented and rarely comparative, with most focusing on only one actor or party within a single national context. Specifically for Asia, and especially Southeast Asia, research explicitly using the algorithmic populism framework is virtually non-existent.

Populism in Indonesia: Variants and Characteristics

The literature on populism in Indonesia itself is quite substantial, challenging the notion that populism has only one register. Mietzner (2020) identifies at least three competing currents of populism in contemporary Indonesian politics. First, a chauvinist current built on aggressive nationalism and anti-minority sentiment, as evident in Prabowo's 2014 and 2019 campaigns. Second, an Islamist current that mobilizes religious identities to challenge secular elites. Third, a technocratic-developmental current associated with Joko Widodo, which builds popular claims through inclusive calls for development and shared prosperity (see also Mietzner, 2015). Importantly, Mietzner (2020) shows that anger-based populism is not always the most electorally successful strategy in Indonesia. This suggests that populism's emotional register is a strategic variable, not a constant.

Yilmaz, Bachtiar, Smith, and Shakil (2024) expand on this analysis through the concept of fluctuating populism, which they developed from their reading of Prabowo's

political evolution. In 2014 and 2019, Prabowo campaigned as a militaristic nationalist populist with a distinctive rhetoric of confrontation and national humiliation. But in 2024, the same politician successfully rebranded himself as "Gemoy" (a popular Indonesian term roughly meaning adorable or funny). In his campaign TikTok content, he appears as a figure dancing, laughing with children, and appearing as an AI-generated cartoon (Yilmaz et al., 2024). Djumadin (2025) shows that this Gemoy strategy successfully dispelled the negative stigma attached to Prabowo as a militaristic figure and replaced it with an image that resonates with young voters. This transformation is more than just a stylistic shift; it is a theoretically important data point. He shows that in Indonesia's digital-political ecosystem, the most effective algorithmic-populist personas are built on affective warmth, not anger.

The Affective Logic of TikTok and Political Communication

Among digital platforms, TikTok holds a distinct position in the political communication landscape due to its fundamentally different architecture from previous generations of social media platforms. Guinaudeau, Munger, and Votta (2022) describe TikTok as the first post-network platform. On TikTok, the For You Page (FYP) system distributes content based on predicted user interests (interest graph), rather than based on a network of followers (social graph) like on Facebook or Instagram. This means that even accounts with no followers can potentially reach millions of viewers if their content sparks sufficient engagement in the initial distribution phase (Guinaudeau et al., 2022). Research from Penn State University (2022) even found that TikTok users spend more than two-thirds of their time on the FYP, rather than on the pages of accounts they follow.

This architectural difference has important political implications. Cervi and Divon (2023) argue that TikTok encourages a playful approach to political communication. The platform lowers barriers to participation while simultaneously creating structural incentives for emotional, concise, and shareable content. Platform affordances such as short vertical videos, audio-visual overlays, duet and remix features, and trend cycles structurally favor performative, affective, and entertaining content over programmatic or deliberative content (Cervi, Tejedor, & Blesa, 2023). Medina Serrano, Papakyriakopoulos, and Hegelich (2020) also found that political communication on TikTok is significantly more interactive and based on creative participation than on other platforms.

From a cultural perspective, Lim's (2017; 2020; 2025) work is the most sustained reference to the specificity of the affective logic of digital politics in Southeast Asia. Using the concept of algorithmic enclaves, Lim (2017; 2020) shows how social media algorithms in Indonesia create affective enclaves where users are trapped in echo chambers that reinforce particular identity sentiments. Lim's (2025) more recent work adds an important nuance, noting that the content of these affective enclaves differs from the rage-driven content dominant in the West. The practice of *curhat* (confession), a form of personal sharing and emotional outpouring deeply embedded in Indonesian communication culture, is the dominant mode of digital political participation in Indonesia. Here, what drives engagement is affective closeness and personal identification, not anger toward an outgroup (Lim, 2025). Lim's findings provide a crucial foundation for this article's argument that algorithmic populism in Indonesia operates through distinct mechanisms.

From the mapping above, it appears there is an unaddressed conceptual gap. Existing algorithmic populism frameworks have not been tested and developed for contexts where digital populism is not dominated by narratives of anger. This article addresses this gap.

Discussion

Three Limitations of the Existing Algorithmic Populism Framework

The first limitation identified by this article is geographic bias. Based on the conceptual analysis, the first limitation that can be identified is the geographic bias in the

existing algorithmic populism framework. As shown in the literature review, almost all empirical studies that shape this concept originate from Western Europe and Latin America. Research on algorithmic populism in Southeast Asia, a region with very high social media penetration and complex political systems, remains very limited, and those that exist generally do not explicitly use this conceptual framework (Ceccobelli & Mosca, 2024). The issue is not simply the number of studies, but also their theoretical implications: this framework has never been tested in different socio-cultural settings, making it unknown whether the mechanisms it describes are universal or context-specific. This geographic bias becomes even more significant when we consider that Indonesia, with 157.6 million TikTok users (DataReportal et al., 2025), is one of the world's largest laboratories for studying the dynamics of platform populism.

A second limitation is the implicit assumption that anger is algorithmic fuel. A more theoretically serious limitation is the tacit equation between algorithmic populism and rage-driven communication. In all foundational studies, the content that is said to be algorithmically favored is content that promotes negative affect, such as anger, fear, and contempt for out-groups (Maly, 2020; Van Raalte et al., 2021; Rădulescu, 2025). This assumption is problematic because it conflates algorithmic mechanisms, which generally reward engagement, with the specific emotional registers that happen to dominate engagement in the contexts studied. However, research on TikTok's algorithm indicates that the platform may amplify different types of engagement than Facebook or Twitter, including creative participation driven by positive affect (Cervi & Divon, 2023; Guinaudeau et al., 2022).

The third limitation is the underdevelopment of cultural context variables. The final limitation relates to the lack of theorization of how local cultural contexts interact with global platform architectures to produce locally specific forms of algorithmic populism. Klinger and Svensson (2018) have shown that platform logic does not operate in a cultural vacuum. Lim (2025) more specifically demonstrates that the affective logic of digital political participation in Southeast Asia, driven by practices of sharing, personal closeness, and emotional bonds, differs fundamentally from the logic of participation in Western Europe. Such insights have not been systematically integrated into existing frameworks of algorithmic populism. Consequently, there is a conceptual gap in understanding how local communication norms, emotional idioms, and cultural values direct algorithms to favor different types of content in different locations.

Affective Algorithmic Populism: Conceptual Development

Based on the three limitations above, this article proposes a conceptual extension called Affective Algorithmic Populism. This extension is not intended to replace the initial framework formulated by Maly (2018, 2020, 2022), so its prerequisites remain valid. In this regard, this article is a distinctive variant relevant to non-Western contexts, namely contexts where the dominant affective registers in political communication are warmth, humor, and personal closeness, rather than anger and confrontation. This extension works through the following three dimensions.

The first dimension is the affective register shifting from anger to warmth. In rage-driven algorithmic populism, the primary affective mechanism is negative emotions, namely the mobilization of anger and contempt for out-groups (Maly, 2020; Rădulescu, 2025). In Affective Algorithmic Populism, the mechanism shifts toward identifying positive emotions, such as building emotional closeness between political leaders and "the people" through humor, openness, and shared joy (Papacharissi, 2015). This is not simply a difference in degree, but rather a difference in mechanism. Rage-driven populism builds popular support through opposition to a common enemy, while affective populism builds popular support through shared positive affect, namely a sense of being with a leader who is just like us (Lim,

2025). The implications are also felt in the prerequisites for uptake. In the affective model, uptake does not take the form of anger-driven reactive sharing, but rather creative participation, where audiences replicate and remix content because it is enjoyable and evokes positive social identification (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). The Gemoy phenomenon serves as a paradigmatic example. Prabowo supporters created their own videos, memes, and remixes of the Gemoy theme, generating audience labor mobilized not through anger, but through joyful affective participation (Jalli et al., 2025).

The second dimension is an open performative mode. Within Moffit's (2016) framework, populism's performative repertoire includes bad manners, namely violations of elite communicative norms as a performance of authentic popular identity. In Affective Algorithmic Populism, the performative mode shifts to openness, where political leaders are systematically presented as accessible, human, and non-threatening (Djumadin, 2025). On TikTok, this performative mode is highly effective because the platform's architectural affordances, such as short vertical videos, participatory features, and trending audio, indirectly benefit content that feels authentic and personally engaging (Guinaudeau et al., 2022). Cervi and Divon (2023) even assert that TikTok structurally encourages a playful approach to politics that benefits figures who appear natural, spontaneous, and relatable. Prabowo dancing without calculation and laughing with small children is an almost perfect expression of this performative mode (Djumadin, 2025; Jalli et al., 2025).

Yet this openness carries a critical ambivalence that must be made explicit. The very qualities that make the open performative mode effective, apparent spontaneity, warmth, and relatability, can simultaneously operate as a mechanism of strategic concealment. What audiences read as authentic and uncalculated is frequently the product of highly professionalized production; authenticity here is not the absence of performance but, in Enli's (2015) terms, a manufactured authenticity illusion negotiated between political actors and their audiences. In the Indonesian case, several observers argue that Prabowo's Gemoy persona functioned as a form of image-laundering that softened and obscured a contested record, including allegations of human rights abuses dating to the late-Suharto period (Habibillah & Hariyanto, 2026; Yilmaz et al., 2024). Tapsell (2025) characterizes this as a politics of toxic positivity, in which relentless warmth and playful content act as a smokescreen that whitewashes past controversies, crowds out substantive debate, and insulates the candidate from journalistic and public scrutiny, during the 2024 campaign, for instance, Prabowo largely avoided critical interviews and detailed policy exchanges. Read critically, then, affective algorithmic populism is not normatively innocent: its inclusive warmth can *depoliticize* electoral competition by displacing accountability with affect, converting the evaluation of a candidate's record into an experience of shared enjoyment. Acknowledging this dual character, at once participatory and potentially obfuscatory, is essential to analyzing the concept objectively rather than merely celebrating it.

The third dimension is the cultural grammar of the people as an affective community. In rage-driven algorithmic populism, "the people" are constructed through exclusion. The people are those who share anger toward the elite and reject out-groups (Mudde, 2004; Cesarino, 2020). In Affective Algorithmic Populism, the "people" are constructed through inclusion, namely the people as an affective community bound by warmth, humor, and positive identification with the leader (Papacharissi, 2015). This kind of construction is highly culturally specific. In the Indonesian context, the cultural grammar for constructing the people is shaped by the logic of venting, identified by Lim (2025), that the people are those who feel seen and understood by political figures who are able to speak in the idiom of everyday emotional life. Prabowo's persona as an adorable AI cartoon character, therefore, is not a political program at all. It is an affective statement about a warm and inclusive political community, where anyone can feel a part.

Table 2. Comparison of Algorithmic Populism and Affective Algorithmic Populism

Dimensions	Algorithmic Populism	Affective Algorithmic Populism
Affective register	Negative (anger, fear, contempt)	Positive (warmth, humor, closeness)
Construction of 'the people'	Exclusion (unity through a common enemy)	Inclusion (unity through shared positive affect)
Performative mode	Confrontation, bad manners, violation of norms.	Openness, relatable, performative authenticity
Audience labor type	Reactive sharing driven by moral outrage.	Creative participation, remixing, playful replication.
Cultural grammar	Anger-based othering.	Affective community based on sharing.
Main geographic context	Western Europe, Latin America.	Southeast Asia, Indonesia.
Main platform	Twitter/X, Facebook	TikTok
Key empirical cases	Vlaams Belang, Bolsonaro, FvD	Prabowo's 'Gemoy' Persona in 2024

Source: Processed by the Author from Maly (2020; 2022), Yilmaz et al. (2024), Lim (2025), and Djumadin (2025)

Conceptual Relevance to the Dynamics of the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election

The Affective Algorithmic Populism framework provides a more comprehensive explanation for the empirical phenomena of the 2024 Presidential Election, which are difficult to explain using existing frameworks. Drone Emprit data (2024) shows an interesting pattern: although the AMIN ticket posted the most TikTok content (793 posts, 48% share of voice), it was Prabowo-Gibran who dominated the interaction metrics with 376 million interactions, or 47% of the total, compared to AMIN's 241 million (30%) and Ganjar-Mahfud's 190 million (24%). This gap cannot be explained solely by differences in resources. The AMIN campaign team itself acknowledged that it had limited resources to produce custom-designed TikTok content (Tempo, 2024). But a resource-based explanation alone does not answer the core question, which why did a smaller volume of content generate significantly greater engagement?

This is where Affective Algorithmic Populism provides the answer. Prabowo-Gibran's content is more suited to TikTok's affective logic because it operates across the three dimensions discussed above: a positive affective register constructed through Gemoy's humor and warmth, a performative mode of openness that appears authentic and uncalculated, and an inclusive cultural grammar that invites audiences to participate creatively. Jalli et al. (2025) show that Prabowo's campaign team consciously utilized these three elements, including by encouraging individual supporters to become their own content producers, thus expanding the campaign's reach through affective participation, rather than emotional reactivity.

The contrast between AMIN's strategy, which relied heavily on TikTok Live for direct dialogue (Rakatiwi & Sazali, 2024), and Ganjar-Mahfud's more conventional strategy without a strong digital persona (Kulau, 2024), further strengthens this argument. The differences in the three candidate pairs' adaptation patterns to TikTok's algorithmic logic empirically demonstrate one thing: not all digital political communication strategies successfully utilize the platform's affective mechanisms equally. The most successful strategies are those most compatible with the dimensions of Affective Algorithmic Populism formulated in this article.

Furthermore, the pattern of the 2024 presidential election also provides empirical confirmation for a broader theoretical claim. The algorithmic populism framework, based on Western European and Latin American cases, would predict that the candidate with the most confrontational rhetoric and the most out-group mobilization would win the algorithmic contest. In the 2024 Indonesian presidential election, this prediction proved unfounded. In fact, the candidate previously known for being the most confrontational (Prabowo in 2014 and 2019) managed to win the algorithmic contest when he abandoned the anger register and shifted to a warmth register. This anomaly is not simply an isolated case, but a strong signal

that algorithmic mechanisms operate through different affective pathways in different cultural contexts.

A Research Agenda for Algorithmic Populism in the Global South

The conceptual expansion offered by this article opens up four research priorities worthy of being pursued by digital political communication researchers, especially in non-Western regions.

The first priority is a systematic empirical examination of Affective Algorithmic Populism in the Southeast Asian electoral context. The 2024 Indonesian presidential election offers a rich empirical laboratory, with three candidate pairs competing on the same platform, during the same period, with differing strategies, and generating significantly different engagement (Drone Emprit, 2024). A comparative content analysis of the three candidates' TikTok content, read through Maly's (2022) prerequisites and expanded with the three affective dimensions proposed by this article, could serve as the first empirical test of this framework.

A second priority is cross-platform comparison in non-Western contexts. If TikTok's algorithmic architecture specifically favors affective warmth over anger, then different patterns of algorithmic populism should emerge on platforms with different architectures, such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, within the same national context. Such studies would help separate the effects of cultural context from those of platform architecture, and in turn, improve theoretical precision (Klinger & Svensson, 2018).

The third priority is longitudinal research on how algorithmic populism strategies evolve from one election cycle to the next. Prabowo's transformation from a rage-driven populist to a Gemoy populist between 2019 and 2024 suggests that political actors are continuously strategically learning which affective registers are algorithmically advantageous (Yilmaz et al., 2024). Longitudinal research allows scholars to track this learning process and understand how algorithms and political communication strategies co-evolve over time.

The fourth priority is comparative extension to the broader Global South. Patterns identified in Indonesia may be repeated in other non-Western democratic contexts with high social media penetration and communication norms oriented toward affective expression. Comparative studies involving Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa will test the extent to which the Affective Algorithmic Populism framework applies beyond Indonesia (Lim, 2024; 2025).

Table 3. Research Agenda for Algorithmic Populism in the Global South

Priority	Research Focus	Suggested Method
1	An Empirical Test of Affective Algorithmic Populism in the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election	Comparative content analysis + netnography (TikTok)
2	Cross-platform comparison of the dynamics of algorithmic populism	Multi-platform comparative content analysis
3	Longitudinal evolution of algorithmic populism strategies	Longitudinal case study across election cycles
4	Comparative Affective Algorithmic Populism in the Global South	Cross-country comparative studies (SEA, South Asia, Africa)

Source: Processed by the Author (2026)

CONCLUSION

This article seeks to demonstrate that the existing framework of algorithmic populism, while theoretically rich and deeply rooted in its own context, harbors significant geographical and cultural biases. Because its empirical cases are constructed almost entirely from Western Europe and Latin America, it tacitly presents certain emotional registers such as anger, confrontation, and othering as universal mechanisms of algorithmic populism. Through a

conceptual analysis based on a critical literature review, this article identifies three structural limitations: geographical bias, the implicit assumption that anger fuels the algorithm, and the underdevelopment of cultural context variables.

Southeast Asia, and Indonesia in particular, offers a counter-case that directly challenges the equation of algorithmic populism with the negative emotion of anger. The 2024 Indonesian presidential election demonstrated that the most successful algorithmic-populist campaigns were built not on anger and confrontation, but on humor, affective warmth, and performances of personal openness (Yilmaz et al., 2024; Jalli et al., 2025; Djumadin, 2025). In other words, the Gemoy phenomenon is not an anomaly, let alone an exception. Rather, it is evidence that algorithmic populism can operate through affective mechanisms different from those theorized in Western literature, and that the dominant mechanisms are strongly influenced by the interaction between platform architecture and local communication culture.

In response to this situation, this article proposes Affective Algorithmic Populism as a conceptual development that captures these differences through three dimensions: a positive affective register built on warmth and humor, a performative mode based on openness and authenticity, and a cultural grammar that constructs "the people" as an inclusive, rather than exclusionary, affective community. This extension does not replace Maly's (2018; 2022) framework. It enriches it by showing that the prerequisites for algorithmic populism can be instantiated through different emotional pathways, and that which pathway is dominant depends on the cultural context and platform architecture within which it operates.

The broader implications of this argument point to a conclusion that goes beyond Indonesian studies: an adequate study of algorithmic populism in the 21st century must be sensitive to the diverse affective and cultural grammars in which platform-mediated politics operates, particularly in the Global South. As digital platforms penetrate political systems whose communication cultures differ fundamentally from those of Western Europe, the challenge for scholars is to develop a framework that can "move places" without losing its roots in the specific contexts that give digital politics its distinctive character in each place.

Beyond its conceptual contribution, this article carries several practical implications for the study of elections across the Global South. First, election researchers in these settings should treat platform architecture and local affective culture as joint objects of analysis rather than importing Western, rage-centered templates wholesale, comparative and mixed-method designs that read platform metrics alongside culturally situated communication norms are likely to yield more accurate accounts of how candidates actually win algorithmic contests. Second, because affective algorithmic populism can obscure as much as it reveals, scholars and electoral-integrity practitioners would do well to develop analytical and civic-education tools that help publics distinguish manufactured warmth from substantive accountability, extending media-literacy efforts beyond the detection of fake news toward a critical reading of affect, aesthetics, and professionalized authenticity. Finally, sustained collaboration among researchers in Southeast Asia, South Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa can build a genuinely comparative, Southern-grounded body of knowledge on platform-mediated elections, one that neither treats the Global South as a deviation from Western norms nor romanticizes affective politics, but takes seriously both its participatory appeal and its democratic risks. In doing so, the study of algorithmic populism can become more globally representative, methodologically pluralistic, and normatively alert to the health of democratic competition in the world's fastest-growing digital electorates.

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