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## **Social media as a local political arena: the strategies of Padang legislators in building connections with netizens**

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**Abstract.** This study explores how legislators in the city of Padang have innovatively utilized social media to engage with their constituents. Twelve informants were involved, consisting of six Padang legislators and six netizens who follow them on social media. The study employed a phenomenological approach using qualitative methods such as observation, in-depth interviews, and literature review. The findings show that social media facilitates two-way communication, allowing constituents to interact directly with legislators and receive immediate responses to community issues. Two key aspects of the legislators' social media strategies were identified: how they define "friends" and "friendship" with netizens, and how they manage their online presence. Social media serves as a platform for legislators to showcase their performance, while also functioning as a tool for netizens to assess it. Furthermore, legislators tailor their use of social media platforms: WhatsApp is used for close contacts, Facebook and Instagram to reach the general public, and TikTok to engage with millennials. A clear distinction is also made between personal and official posts to ensure transparency and appropriateness in their online interactions.

**Keywords.** phenomenology, social media, utilization, netizens, strategy, legislators

### **Introduction**

The Padang legislators benefited greatly from social media, which facilitated constructive relationships and interactions with the community (netizens). Previously, they had relied on in-person meetings to communicate about work initiatives. However, Leocadia [1, p. 482-498] noted that despite the legislators' efforts to improve access and engagement opportunities, the community felt there were insufficient avenues for direct interaction. This highlighted the challenge for legislators to regularly connect with the public to address issues and provide solutions [2, p. 564-582]. While social media posed challenges such as misinformation and opinion polarization, it also enhanced political communication by making the landscape more dynamic, interactive, and transparent [3, p. 293]. Therefore, it was vital for all parties to engage in ethical and critical use of social media, avoiding misinformation while promoting democracy and constructive community involvement [4, p. 62-66]. During election campaigns, social media served as a crucial medium for candidates to communicate with voters, rally support, and shape public opinion [5, p. 50-74]. Its interactivity allowed political figures

to have more personal encounters with constituents, fostering connections and winning votes [6, p. 53–66].

Social media became essential for promoting public political participation by disseminating information about candidates' proposed work programs [7, p. 473-496] The study emphasized social media's significant impact on public engagement, noting its affordability and accessibility for the general populace. A unique aspect of this study was the Padang legislators' effective categorization of their social media use. The Padang legislators adeptly harnessed social media to inform and engage internet users, representing a significant political breakthrough. They utilized all platforms as tools for socialization and social control, countering detractors who might have undermined their credibility [8. P. 75-83].

Politicians' usage of social media is becoming increasingly significant in the current political climate. According to research, social media has altered political communication by facilitating more direct and instantaneous engagement between politicians and their constituents. According to Hargittai and Shaw [9, p. 50-61], social media platforms enable politicians get around the drawbacks of traditional media by enabling them to communicate with voters directly without the need of intermediaries, which helps to shape their public image and political narrative.

Social media is also necessary for political mobilization. According to a study by Gerodimos [10, p. 20-40], social media allows politicians to engage with younger people more effectively, as they are typically less engaged in traditional political discourse. These platforms allow politicians to personalize their statements, engage in dialogue, and participate in live policy and social debates. This shift in communication dynamics has become increasingly important as political engagement has shifted to online venues where voters, particularly those in younger generations, wish to engage.

The rise of social media has significantly changed how information is shared and how people participate in politics in democracies. According to Navarro, C., & Gómez-Bernal, G. [11, p. 93-103], social media encourages "networked individualism," whereby individuals interact more directly with political figures and organizations and take part in politics in a personalized manner. This engagement is crucial to the democratic process because it empowers voters and increases political involvement.

Additionally, social media has been essential in promoting transparency and accountability in government. According to Berduygina, O. N, politicians may win the public's trust by being more transparent about their policies, actions, and stances on important issues through social media platforms. However, transparency also entails a responsibility to ensure that the information provided is correct and does not spread misleading information, which could distort public opinion and erode trust in democratic institutions [12, p. 110]

Social media's broader potential as a tool for political communication and governance is demonstrated by the Padang legislators purposeful use of it to interact with the public, promote their work plans, and dispel misinformation. Their approach highlights the importance of social media in today's political strategies, particularly in promoting engagement, dialogue, and transparency between electors and elected officials. When such projects are successful, other political leaders can learn valuable lessons about how to use social media to improve democratic participation and governance.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on how local legislators in Padang have leveraged social media in a way that is both strategic and effective in fostering engagement and enhancing their political communication. Unlike many studies that concentrate on national-level politics, this research provides a detailed look at how regional politicians navigate the

challenges and opportunities of digital platforms to connect with their constituents. It examines how Padang legislators have gone beyond using social media for simple outreach, categorizing their engagement into distinct areas --informing the public, engaging voters, and managing their credibility in the face of detractors. This nuanced approach reveals a level of sophistication in social media use that is not commonly explored in existing literature.

The research also explores the vital role of social media during election campaigns, highlighting its power in shaping public opinion, rallying support, and enhancing voter-legislator interactions. By examining the Padang case, the study illustrates how social media not only facilitates engagement but also plays a crucial role in political strategies at the local level. This combination of ethical engagement, strategic use of platforms, and a focus on local politicians makes the study a unique and valuable contribution to the field of political communication.

### **Literature Review**

This study employed phenomenological theory for two primary reasons. First, it aimed to explain how Padang lawmakers communicated with their constituents on social media. In line with phenomenological assumptions regarding individual experiences, the study also highlighted how the public engaged with Padang legislators online. The increasing use of social media as a communication tool transformed interactions between people and lawmakers, creating new dialogue opportunities and enhancing public participation [13, p. 1-18]. By utilizing this approach, the study sought a deeper understanding of the communication dynamics that influenced the relationship between legislators and society [14, p. 122-132]. It focused not only on the technical aspects of interaction but also on the meanings associated with each encounter, contributing to a broader understanding of social media's role in supporting local democracy [15, p. 331-339].

Creswell [16, p. 76] defined phenomenology as a research endeavor aimed at elucidating the significance of individuals' life experiences concerning a specific concept or phenomenon, including their self-image and worldview. Engkus Kuswarno described phenomenology as an effort to depict a community's phenomena based on personal perspectives. Thus, phenomenology interprets experiences from the perspective of those experiencing them rather than from an external viewpoint [17, p1-8].

Moleong noted that phenomenological inquiry begins with silence, allowing researchers to capture the importance of the studied topic. This approach requires immersion in the subjects' conceptual worlds to understand how they interpret everyday events. In phenomenological research, reality is accepted as it is, without imposing preconceived categories. Saks [18, p. 242-271] claimed that participants in computer-mediated communication enjoyed greater equality in participation, a notion applicable to political communication in the age of social media. Politicians recognized that social media levels the playing field, allowing for meaningful interactions with the public. The primary goal of utilizing social media was to enhance politicians' reputations by fostering relationships and communication with constituents. Social media emerged as a platform for self-presentation and interaction when used effectively.

### **Research Methods**

This study employed a qualitative approach combined with a phenomenological strategy to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of Padang politicians and their followers with social media, focusing on its role in self-socialization and political participation.

As Creswell [19, p. 20] suggests, the phenomenological method aims to uncover the significance of individuals' experiences related to a particular phenomenon or concept. In this case, the focus was on how social media shaped the political landscape, decision-making processes, and public engagement for politicians in Padang. The phenomenological approach allowed the researchers to explore the lived experiences of participants, revealing how they perceived and responded to the influence of social media in their political lives.

The study aimed to provide insights into how different individuals interpret the role of social media in their daily lives, particularly in the context of political involvement [20, p. 17]. By capturing the perspectives of both political figures and their social media followers, the research sought to expand the understanding of how digital platforms influence political communication and decision-making in local governance [21, p. 1490-1527]. The findings are expected to offer fresh perspectives on the ways social media affects political discourse, policy-making, and public opinion, contributing to an enriched understanding of political engagement in the digital age.

A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants who could provide valuable insights based on their direct involvement in politics and social media activities [22, p. 652-661]. The study specifically targeted politicians who served as Padang legislators between 2014 and 2019 and who actively used social media to engage with their constituents. Twelve participants were selected, including six Padang politicians and six active internet users who followed these lawmakers. This sample provided a balanced perspective on how politicians use social media for communication, as well as how followers perceive and interact with political content.

Criteria for participant selection:

1. Participants were required to be current Padang legislature members (2019–2024 term).
2. They had to have engaged in social media activities for at least two years.
3. Participants needed to post about their political activities at least once a week, ensuring regular engagement with their followers.
4. A minimum of 1,000 friends or followers was a criterion to ensure that participants had a broad digital reach and influence.

The data collection methods included in-depth interviews, document analysis, and observation, ensuring a comprehensive approach to capturing participants' experiences. In-depth interviews were conducted with each participant to explore their personal experiences with social media use, political involvement, and public engagement. Document analysis involved reviewing social media posts, political statements, and relevant online content to understand how Padang politicians and their followers communicated and interacted. Finally, observation allowed the researchers to monitor the online behavior of both politicians and their followers, providing valuable insights into their digital interactions and engagement strategies.

The study's objectives were multi-faceted, with a primary focus on understanding how Padang politicians and their followers utilized social media for self-socialization and political involvement. It aimed to clarify the role of social media in shaping political discourse and influencing decision-making processes within the Padang legislature. By analyzing both the content shared by lawmakers and the responses from their followers, the study sought to reveal the impact of social media on public opinion and political discourse in Padang. This research is poised to shed light on the evolving relationship between politics and digital media, providing

a deeper understanding of how social media platforms influence democratic processes and political communication in local governance.

### **Friendship and the Meaning of Friendship in Social Media Interactions**

The dynamic between internet users and politicians on social media begins with the concept of friendship, which serves as the initial step in their interactions. This investigation specifically examines the friendship processes of Padang legislators, who are prominent public figures known for their engagement with online users. In the digital age, social media has become a platform where individuals, including politicians, can engage directly with their constituents, creating a space for networking, communication, and transparency.

The relationships between Padang legislators and internet users on social media are framed by the initial step of "friendship," which plays a crucial role in fostering communication, trust, and transparency. Through careful evaluation of friend requests and profiles, legislators ensure that they build meaningful and secure online networks. These online friendships serve multiple purposes, including facilitating political engagement, enhancing transparency, and improving accountability in governance. By interacting with the public through social media, Padang legislators can bridge the gap between citizens and policymakers, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and responsive political landscape.

Muzni Zen, a Padang legislator, outlines three criteria for accepting friend requests on social media. Firstly, he requires that friends reside in Padang City, verifying those in his electoral districts of Kuranji and Pauh. For users outside of Padang, he checks the profile and identity; if they appear genuine, he accepts the request. Additionally, he is open to accepting requests from women in hijabs. Usman Ismail also provides guidelines for friendship approvals, emphasizing selectivity. He advises reviewing the requester's profile, checking mutual friends, and assessing shared posts. He notes, "I am quite picky," indicating a desire for clear and distinct identities before confirming friendships.

Maidestal Hari Mahesa, while less prescriptive than Muzni Zen, is cautious. He examines whether a profile uses a real name or a pseudonym. If a profile has minimal images, he is unlikely to accept the request. His experiences with fake profiles lead him to prioritize security in his social media interactions. Zaharman, a seasoned member of the legislature, reflects a cautious attitude toward friend requests due to concerns about fraud. He looks for clarity in names and profile pictures, rejecting requests from those with dubious identities, such as profiles named after soccer stars.

Budiman, another legislator with extensive experience, initially accepted requests freely but became wary due to rising concerns about hackers and reputation damage. He now reviews profiles closely, confirming requests from those with clear identities and local ties. Helmi Moesim adopts a careful approach without specific guidelines. He has decided to reject requests from users lacking distinct identities, reinforcing the importance of clear profiles in establishing social media friendships.

The Padang legislators emphasize the importance of expanding their networks through social media friendships, which they view as beneficial for both themselves and netizens. This connectivity facilitates interactions and support between politicians and the community. Dasrul, a television journalist, notes that friendships with council members provide him with direct channels to report community issues, enhancing his effectiveness as a media actor. He sees this relationship as crucial for both his personal identity and his role in journalism.

Eliska identifies three key benefits of friendships with council members: access to information about government programs, the ability for the public to voice development goals,

and the transparency of lawmakers' performance. Social media enables direct communication, reducing bureaucratic hurdles and allowing for swift exchanges of information. Hendri Piter highlights the importance of these online relationships, stating that they provide a platform for the public to voice grievances and offer input to council members. He values the direct access that social media friendships afford, allowing him to communicate community issues without needing to visit legislative offices.

Donna Ikranova Febrina echoes this sentiment, stating that friendships with council members enable citizens to participate in government oversight and report issues directly. She emphasizes the role of social media in facilitating communication about poor service and accountability. Heranof supports this view, explaining that being friends with council members allows him to stay informed about their activities and developments within the council. This relationship also offers personal insights into lawmakers' lives, further humanizing their public personas.

Azizah Dasyiana regards these friendships as vital for expressing concerns and reminding council members of their responsibilities. She recognizes social media as a means for the community to engage with politicians, enhancing accountability and participation in governance.

Table 1  
Friendship and Meaning of Friendship

Aspect	Details
Concept of Friendship	Friendship serves as the foundation for interactions between internet users and Padang politicians.
Padang Legislators and Their Criteria	
Muzni Zen	- Accepts friends from Padang City, especially Kuranji and Pauh. - Checks for genuine profiles, open to women in hijabs.
Usman Ismail	- Selective about friend requests. - Reviews requester's profile, mutual friends, and shared posts. - "I am quite picky."
Maidestal Hari Mahesa	- Cautious; examines real names vs. pseudonyms. - Unlikely to accept profiles with few images.
Zaharman	- Cautious due to fraud concerns. - Rejects requests from profiles with dubious identities.
Budiman	- Initially accepted requests freely; now wary of hackers. - Reviews profiles for clear identities and local ties.
Helmi Moesim	- Rejects requests from users lacking distinct identities. - Emphasizes the importance of clear profiles.
Benefits of Friendships	
Dasrul	- Direct channels to report community issues. - Enhances effectiveness in media roles.
Eliska	- Access to government program information. - Public can voice development goals. - Transparency of lawmakers' performance.
Hendri Piter	- Provides a platform for public grievances.

	- Direct access for communicating community issues.
Donna Ikranova Febrina	- Facilitates government oversight and direct issue reporting. - Enhances communication about accountability.
Heranof	- Stays informed about council activities. - Gains personal insights into lawmakers' lives.
Azizah Dasyiana	- To remind council members of responsibilities. - Enhances accountability and participation in governance.

Source : Research Results

### **Communicating with the Community: Insights from The Padang Legislators**

The communication strategies of Padang legislators on social media reflect a conscious effort to engage with the community in meaningful ways. By posting updates on council activities, highlighting local issues, and interacting with the public through live sessions and feedback initiatives, legislators demonstrate their commitment to transparency and accountability. They recognize that social media is a powerful tool for building stronger relationships with constituents and promoting democratic participation. While balancing the benefits of online engagement with the potential pitfalls of public scrutiny, Padang legislators are forging a new path for political communication, one that is more accessible, interactive, and responsive to the needs of their community.

Legislators' transparency about their activities, as well as their willingness to share details about both successes and challenges, further solidifies the idea that social media is a tool for accountability. Citizens gain insight into the challenges that legislators face and are better equipped to understand the legislative process. Whether posting about local developments or discussing broader policy issues, these public-facing updates on social media play a key role in fostering civic engagement and informing the electorate.

Another noteworthy method of communication that has emerged among Padang legislators is the use of social media to promote citizen participation in local decision-making. Many legislators actively encourage the public to share their thoughts on community projects, legislative proposals, or upcoming elections. By inviting feedback and comments, they ensure that their constituents feel involved and heard, reinforcing the notion that governance is a collective effort between elected officials and the people they represent.

While social media engagement plays a central role in Padang legislators' communication strategies, they are also mindful of the potential risks associated with online interactions. The informal nature of social media can sometimes lead to misinterpretation or the spread of misinformation. Therefore, some legislators, including Helmi Moesim, exercise caution and are selective in their responses to online comments and critiques. They ensure that their replies remain respectful and constructive, avoiding conflicts or public disputes that might tarnish their reputations.

Helmi Moesim identifies two primary methods for the Padang legislators to engage with netizens on social media. First, they should focus on posting council-related events, such as development planning meetings, work trips, and recess gatherings. Posts showcasing these activities, especially local field trips and aspiration gatherings, have garnered positive responses from the public. Conversely, posts about business trips outside the province tend to receive less favorable feedback. Consequently, Helmi has chosen to limit such posts.

The second approach involves sharing personal activities. Netizens have responded positively to posts about family outings, community gatherings, and events like weddings,

demonstrating a preference for more relatable content. Helmi notes that posts solely intended to showcase status, such as airport photos from out-of-province trips, should be minimized. Feedback from netizens, such as Azizah Asyiana, suggests that the Padang legislators need to distinguish between online interactions and face-to-face encounters. They are encouraged to be more active on social media to foster public engagement in city development. Posts that highlight community-oriented activities—like religious studies and youth gatherings—are viewed favorably, while those that seem self-indulgent or disconnected from community needs should be avoided.

Eliska emphasizes the need for transparency in social media communications. The legislators should detail the outcomes of any trips, showing that such activities have tangible benefits for the community rather than merely being leisure excursions. This clarity can help protect the reputation of the Padang legislators and ensure public trust. Zaharman offers two specific strategies for effective communication: expressing gratitude to supportive netizens and engaging in private messaging to build rapport. He believes it's crucial to respond thoughtfully to all messages, promoting constructive dialogue even when faced with criticism.

Hendri Piter highlights the need for lawmakers to act as role models. Their online presence should foster calmness and respect, avoiding inflammatory language. Lawmakers are encouraged to acknowledge all feedback and respond without emotion, thereby maintaining a respectful discourse. Muzni Zen, a member of the Gerindra Party, shares his practice of limiting posts that do not reflect his duties as a council member. He actively engages with public comments, thanking individuals for their input and avoiding controversial content that could tarnish his reputation.

Netizen Heranof stresses that lawmakers' social media content should reflect their statesmanship, as online comments can shape public perception. He advocates for posts that promote peace and community engagement rather than inciting conflict. Maifestal Hari Mahesa believes in mirroring real-life communication online, advocating for polite language and careful proofreading to prevent misunderstandings. He engages in a variety of interactions, promoting positive content and responding selectively to messages.

Donna Ikranova Febrina suggests that lawmakers should use social media to enhance public understanding of their roles, sharing work-related posts that emphasize transparency. She warns against posting content that could evoke public disdain, such as images from luxurious settings. Budiman categorizes his social media usage: Facebook and Instagram for the general public, WhatsApp for specific communities, and LINE for family. He emphasizes proactive communication, using social media to address public issues swiftly and effectively, fostering a smarter, more engaged society.

Dasrul points out the importance of maintaining traditional Minang values in communication. He cautions against adopting negative behaviors observed elsewhere, emphasizing that polite and respectful interactions will bolster the lawmakers' reputations. Netizens agree on the contrasting communication styles between those who actively use social media and those who do not. Those familiar with social media tend to be more confident, knowledgeable, and approachable, facilitating better dialogue with constituents. They are seen as more in touch with community issues, which enhances their effectiveness during public engagements.

Table 2  
Communicating with the Community

Aspect	Details
Primary Methods of Engagement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Council-Related Posts: Focus on events like development planning meetings, work trips, and local field trips. Positive feedback received from these posts.</li> <li>2. Personal Activities: Share family outings and community events for relatability.</li> </ol>
Public Feedback	Netizens prefer community-oriented content over self-indulgent posts. Posts that show community involvement are encouraged.
Transparency	Lawmakers should clarify the outcomes of trips to demonstrate tangible benefits to the community, enhancing public trust.
Effective Communication	Zaharman's strategies include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expressing gratitude to supportive netizens.</li> <li>- Engaging in private messaging to build rapport.</li> </ul>
Role Modeling	Padang legislators should maintain a calm and respectful online presence, acknowledging feedback without emotional responses.
Content Reflection	Muzni Zen limits posts unrelated to his duties, engaging positively with public comments and avoiding controversial content.
Statesmanship	Heranof emphasizes that social media content should reflect statesmanship and promote community engagement while avoiding conflict.
Real-Life Communication	Maidestal Hari Mahesa advocates for polite language and proofreading to prevent misunderstandings. Engages positively with netizens.
Public Understanding	Donna Ikranova Febrina advises sharing work-related posts that enhance understanding of legislators' roles and warns against content that may evoke disdain.
Social Media Categorization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Facebook/Instagram: General public</li> <li>- WhatsApp: Specific communities</li> <li>- LINE: Family.</li> </ul>
Cultural Sensitivity	Dasrul highlights the importance of maintaining traditional Minang values in communication, advocating for polite and respectful interactions to bolster lawmakers' reputations.
Social Media Competence	There's a noted contrast in effectiveness between lawmakers who actively use social media and those who do not, with the former being seen as more knowledgeable and approachable, facilitating better dialogue with constituents.

Source : Research Results

## **Conclusion**

An interesting study examines how Padang politicians and their constituents communicate on social media. Social media plays a significant role in helping politicians connect with citizens, supporting the duties and responsibilities of elected representatives [23, p. 85-118]. In the contemporary digital era, social media interactions between voters and lawmakers have become increasingly important, fostering public participation and strengthening democracy [24, p 193-199].

The aim of this study is to explore how Padang legislators engage with their constituents on social media platforms. Understanding the dynamics of these interactions --how lawmakers share information, address community concerns, and build closer relationships with voters-- is crucial, especially given the growing use of social media as a communication tool (Use of Digital Communication in Spreading Knowledge About Legislative Members of South Sulawesi Province's Recess Activities, 2022).

This research seeks to clarify how social media can enhance political transparency and improve communication between Padang politicians and voters [25, p. 498-510]. The study will also highlight the challenges faced by parliamentarians when using social media, such as managing public criticism and combating misinformation. It will examine the strategies lawmakers use to address these issues and how they can leverage public feedback to improve their effectiveness and responsiveness. Therefore, it is expected that the study will provide lawmakers with valuable recommendations on how to use social media more effectively to foster constructive discourse and increase public trust.

Additionally, the study will explore how social media helps build networks between the public and legislators, and how these interactions can enhance transparency and public participation in the legislative process. To identify best practices that other politicians could adopt, the study will also examine case studies of successful social media campaigns that have promoted participation and transparency.

Based on the findings of the study regarding the use of social media by Padang legislators, here are three specific recommendations for enhancing their engagement with constituents:

1. Develop tailored strategies for each social media platform to maximize engagement. For instance, legislators could use WhatsApp to address community-specific issues and provide updates directly to constituents, while using Facebook and Instagram for broader public engagement through informative posts on their activities and initiatives. TikTok could be leveraged for creative, engaging content that resonates with younger audiences, utilizing trends and challenges to raise awareness about legislative efforts.
2. Establish regular feedback mechanisms to assess how well legislators are meeting constituents' needs and expectations. This could include polls, surveys, or interactive Q&A sessions on social media, allowing constituents to voice their concerns and suggestions directly. By actively seeking feedback, legislators can demonstrate responsiveness and accountability, enhancing their relationship with the public.
3. Provide social media management training for Padang legislators, focusing on best practices for creating engaging content, maintaining professionalism, and managing public interactions. This training could also cover the importance of balancing personal and official posts, helping legislators communicate their roles clearly while remaining approachable and relatable to constituents. By enhancing their skills, legislators can improve the quality of their online engagement and foster a more positive public image.

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