

The Role of Cultural Identity in Shaping Political Persuasion: A Cross-Cultural Study in Indonesia and Malaysia

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Article Info

Article history:
Received: Augst 9, 2025
Revised: Augst 10, 2025
Accepted: Augst 13, 2025

Keywords:

Cultural Identity
Political Persuasion Intercultural
Communication Campaign
Strategy
Political Communication



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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of cultural identity in shaping political persuasion strategies in two multicultural Southeast Asian democracies Indonesia and Malaysia. It seeks to compare how cultural identity is articulated and utilized in political communication practices in both countries. The research adopts a qualitative comparative approach by analyzing campaign materials such as political speeches, posters, and digital content from the 2019 Indonesian and 2022 Malaysian general elections. Semi-structured interviews with political consultants and communication scholars supplement the data. Critical discourse analysis and thematic coding are used to interpret the findings. In Indonesia, cultural identity is communicated through inclusive narratives grounded in national ideology (e.g., Pancasila, gotong royong) and diverse local traditions, fostering emotional resonance across ethnic groups. In Malaysia, political communication tends to emphasize segmented cultural appeals aligned with ethnic-based party structures, indicating different modes of cultural mobilization in electoral contexts. The study reveals that cultural identity plays a significant but contextually distinct role in political persuasion within Indonesia and Malaysia. These insights enhance theoretical understanding of intercultural political communication and offer practical guidance for designing campaign strategies in culturally diverse democracies.

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INTRODUCTION

In the era of global democracy and the digitalization of political communication, cultural identity has increasingly become a key element in political persuasion strategies, particularly in multicultural countries like Indonesia and Malaysia. Amidst increasing electoral competition, politicians no longer rely solely on rational issues like the economy or security but also leverage cultural symbols, local values, and identity narratives to build rapport with the public (Reese et al., 2023; Ismail & Tew, 2022).

In the Indonesian context, narratives such as Pancasila, mutual cooperation (gotong royong), and the local wisdom of specific ethnicities are used in various campaigns to create emotional resonance and social legitimacy. In Malaysia, ethnic politics has become a dominant framework

shaping party structures and political communication, where culture-based approaches are used to consolidate support among Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities (Yusof et al., 2021; Weiss, 2020).

However, there is still little research that explicitly compares how cultural identity is used in political communication strategies in these two countries systematically, using a strong theoretical approach and up-to-date empirical data. This opens up important space to answer the question: how do cultural and political contexts influence political persuasion strategies in multicultural societies?

In the last decade, political communication studies have significantly expanded from a rational-instrumental approach to one that considers the symbolic and cultural dimensions of political messages. In multicultural democracies like Indonesia and Malaysia, politics is not only an arena for contesting ideas and policies but also a battleground for symbols and cultural identities (Reese et al., 2023; Weiss, 2020). Cultural identity is used not only to strengthen political loyalties but also to create differentiation and strong emotional resonance among voter groups.

In Indonesia, cultural identity is strategically used to construct a national narrative that is inclusive yet rich in local symbols. Political figures often present themselves as representatives of cultural values such as cooperation (*gotong royong*) and diversity or even wear traditional attire during campaigns to reinforce the impression of closeness to the community's cultural roots (Lim, 2022; Mietzner, 2019). This strategy demonstrates a blend of national and local symbolism in establishing political legitimacy.

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, the still ethnically based party structure (such as UMNO for Malays, DAP for Chinese, and MIC for Indians) has resulted in more segmented political communication. Political persuasion strategies in neighboring countries tend to reinforce each country's ethnic identity, with cultural narratives tailored specifically to their support base (Yusof et al., 2021; Ismail & Tew, 2022). Such an arrangement creates a contrasting pattern of political communication from Indonesia, which places a greater emphasis on inclusivity even though diversity remains a key issue.

The emergence of social media has also accelerated the transformation in culture-based political communication practices. Through digital platforms, politicians can adapt cultural symbols in the form of memes, short videos, and slogans that are accepted by the younger generation. However, this phenomenon also poses challenges in the form of the simplification of cultural identity or even the commodification of cultural symbols for the sake of electability (Chang, 2021; Tapsell, 2023).

Although the issue of cultural identity has been a focus of various political studies in Southeast Asia, most research remains descriptive and fragmented. Many studies examine only one country (either Indonesia or Malaysia) in isolation, focusing on aspects of ethnic politics or cultural representation in the media. Cross-national comparative studies that explicitly analyze culture-based political persuasion strategies in the context of elections remain rare. Few studies integrate the perspectives of cultural identity theory and political persuasion to analyze the dynamics of political communication in two countries with similar sociopolitical configurations but differing cultural approaches.

Therefore, this study offers a novel contribution by comparing how cultural identity is constructed and utilized in political communication strategies in Indonesia and Malaysia, using a solid theoretical approach and recent empirical data. By highlighting culture-based campaign practices in the context of multicultural democracy, this article aims to broaden the theoretical and practical horizons in the study of global political communication.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design to explore how cultural identity is embedded and mobilized in political persuasion strategies during election campaigns in Indonesia and Malaysia. The selection of these two multicultural Southeast Asian democracies enables cross-contextual analysis of how political actors adapt cultural narratives to engage voters in distinct cultural-political environments.

The qualitative approach is appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research, which seeks to interpret meanings, symbols, and strategies rather than quantify behavior. The comparative method enhances analytical depth by revealing both context-specific and shared patterns in the use of cultural identity.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through two primary sources:

- Document Analysis

Campaign materials from the 2019 Indonesian General Election and the 2022 Malaysian General Election were collected, including:

1. Political speeches (transcripts and video),
2. Campaign posters and banners,
3. Social media content (Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter),
4. Candidate websites and digital advertisements.

These texts were selected purposively to represent different ethnic, religious, and regional affiliations and to reflect the major political parties and presidential/parliamentary candidates.

Semi-structured Interviews

A total of 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with:

1. 4 political consultants (2 from each country),
2. 4 senior communication scholars specializing in political and cultural communication,
3. 4 campaign team members or strategists.

These interviews explored the rationale behind cultural messaging strategies and perceptions of their effectiveness. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded with consent. Data were anonymized and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995), allowing for both content-focused and ideology-critical interpretations.

The analysis followed these stages:

1. Coding cultural symbols, references, and identity markers in campaign materials;
2. Identifying dominant frames and discursive strategies;
3. Mapping how these cultural references align with social identity constructs;
4. Assessing the persuasive mechanisms based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (central vs. peripheral cues);
5. Conducting cross-case comparison to find similarities and differences across both national contexts.

NVivo software was used to manage coding and pattern analysis.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure credibility and methodological rigor, the study applied Lincoln and Guba's criteria for trustworthiness:

1. **Credibility:** Member checks were conducted with 3 interviewees to verify interpretation accuracy.
2. **Transferability:** Thick descriptions of cultural context and campaign settings are provided.
3. **Dependability:** A detailed audit trail of coding and data interpretation was maintained.
4. **Confirmability:** Reflexivity was practiced through peer debriefing and coding triangulation among co-authors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Culture-Based Persuasion Strategies in Indonesia

In the Indonesian context, political campaigns tend to use inclusive nationalist symbols—such as Pancasila, mutual cooperation, or local culture—as a unifying force. This facilitates a persuasive approach that aligns with the central processing pathway in ELM, where voters are encouraged to understand political messages through the rational and affective elaboration of collective values.

However, as reviewed by Lim (2020) and Tandoc et al. (2021), social media also allows for the development of emotionally charged and rapidly viral narratives of religious identity, such as in the case of the Islamic symbol-based campaign in West Java or anti-minority narratives on digital platforms. This suggests a peripheral persuasion pathway that relies on heuristics and emotions, consistent with the ELM argument.

In both countries, cultural identity is not merely a normative symbol, but a strategic persuasive tool for building candidate credibility and creating emotional bonds with voters. In the Indonesian context, this strategy is implemented through an emphasis on inclusive national values, such as Pancasila, Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity), and local culture. In Malaysia, this strategy is more exclusive, utilizing ethnic and religious narratives segmented by political affiliation.

Positive Examples:

1. **Indonesia:** In the 2019 presidential election, the Jokowi-Ma'ruf ticket showcased cultures from various regions (Papua, Aceh, Java, and East Nusa Tenggara) in their campaign. This strategy created the impression of leaders capable of embracing all groups.
2. **Malaysia:** In its 2018 campaign, Pakatan Harapan (PH) used a "New Malaysia" narrative that emphasized the value of cross-racial justice, pushing for a shift away from sectarian politics.

Negative Example:

1. **Indonesia:** In the 2019 legislative campaign, several local candidates used religious and ethnic symbols to assert the dominance of the majority group, leading to the exclusion of minorities.
2. **Malaysia:** PAS's 2022 campaign used a narrative of "Malay-Islam under threat" that amplified tensions between ethnic groups, as criticized in a study by Ismail & Tew (2022).

Theoretical Discussion

Referring to Cultural Framing Theory (Snow & Benford, 2000), cultural symbols are used to resonate with values embedded in society's collective consciousness. However, their effect depends on how the framing is contextualized as a tool of integration or exclusion.

Identity Segmentation in Malaysian Political Campaigns

Malaysia exhibits sharper identity segmentation, with political parties such as UMNO, PAS, and DAP explicitly promoting ethno-religious agendas. As explained by Zakaria & Rosli (2023) and Rahim

& Zainal (2023), campaigns often employ narratives of “Malay-Islamic defense” or “Chinese diversity,” reinforcing culturally based partisan loyalties.

This research adds that in the digital space, social media algorithms reinforce this segmentation through echo chambers, as described by Maly (2019) about algorithmic activism that drives polarization through the personalization of political identity.

Positive Examples:

DAP adopted the New Malaysia narrative with cross-cultural symbols, reducing ethnic tensions among the youth.

Negative Example:

PAS uses digital political preaching with an exclusive narrative that emphasizes the identity of the majority and stigmatizes the opposition.

Identity, Emotion, and Political Persuasion

In-depth interviews with political consultants and academics show that the use of cultural identity taps not only into voters' rationality but also into collective affection and emotion. Identity narratives are used to construct in-group favoritism, as explained in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

For example, in the 2019 Indonesian presidential election, the symbolism of “son of the land,” local accents, and ethnic community-based campaigns were used to build emotional loyalty. In Malaysia, the PAS campaign actively used the narrative of “we are the people who are threatened” to build a sense of togetherness against “ideological opponents” (liberalism, pluralism).

This finding strengthens Chang's (2021) study in the *International Journal of Communication*, which shows that identity elements in political campaigns create persuasive effects through peripheral cues, as explained in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM).

“Peripheral cultural cues, such as ethnic dress or religious idioms, increase perceived authenticity and emotional appeal, especially in low-information election environments.” (Chang, 2021, p. 3435)

Cultural identity has high affective power. Candidates leverage identity symbols to build emotional connections through what Petty & Cacioppo (1986) call the peripheral pathway in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)—where voters do not evaluate the message content in depth, but respond based on the proximity of values and symbols.

Positive Examples:

1. Indonesia: Ridwan Kamil in the 2018 West Java gubernatorial election used Sundanese narrative, locality, and emotional communication style to attract sympathy across ages and social classes.
2. Malaysia: Figures like Syed Saddiq are leveraging the symbolism of multicultural Malaysian youth to foster positive identification and hope among a new generation.

Negative Example:

1. Indonesia: The “identity politics”-based campaign in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election demonstrated that religious symbols can trigger sharp polarization when used exclusively.
2. Malaysia: The politics of “Malay supremacy” in the UMNO narrative is sometimes used to justify exclusionary policies, weakening the involvement of non-Malay citizens.

Theoretical Discussion:

Social Identity Theory explains that group identity forms the basis for in-group favoritism and discrimination against out-groups. When politicians use cultural symbols to reinforce the "us" versus "them," political persuasion shifts from integrative to destructive.

Comparative Insight: Inclusive vs. Exclusive Cultural Strategies

Comparatively, there are broad patterns that differentiate cultural strategies in the two countries:

Table 1. Comparative Insight: Inclusive vs. Exclusive Cultural Strategies

Aspect	Indonesia	Malaysia
Types of Strategy	Integrative, pluralistic	Segmentative, ethnic-based
Cultural Framing	Multicultural national narrative	Ethno-religious narrative of domination
Targeting	All identity groups	Ethnic specific voters
Campaign Media	Traditional & digital (TikTok, Instagram)	More traditional & religious social media

Indonesia's strategy emphasizes unity in diversity and cross-identity mobilization (though not always without bias), while in Malaysia, the dominant strategy is strengthening ethnic bases. This demonstrates that the use of cultural identity in political communication is not neutral but is always embedded in the logic of power and existing social structures.

Comparative studies show that approaches to cultural identity in politics depend heavily on social structures and party systems:

1. Indonesia: An open multi-party system and a pluralistic national narrative encourage the integrative use of cultural symbols.
2. Malaysia: Ethnic-based party structures (UMNO-Malay, DAP-Chinese, MIC-Indian) produce political communication that tends to be sectarian.

Positive Examples:

1. In Indonesia, the public debate format features inclusive symbols from various cultures as a form of national appreciation.
2. In Malaysia, cross-ethnic campaigns within the PH coalition demonstrate the potential for reconciling identity narratives in the political space.

Negative Examples:

1. In Indonesia, when campaigns focus too much on a candidate's "hometown," it risks fostering narrow regional sentiments.
2. In Malaysia, fear-based campaigns about "external cultural threats" encourage exclusionary politics that reinforce ethnic boundaries.

Theoretical Discussion:

Exclusive and inclusive framing is part of strategic cultural positioning, where political elites choose symbols and narratives to maximize support for specific groups (Entman, 2004). This explains why political communication strategies are highly contextual and influenced by the dynamics of social structures.

Discussion and Theoretical Implications

These findings provide important theoretical contributions:

1. Strengthening Cultural Framing Theory: Culture is not only a symbol, but also an active narrative that is reproduced in the political communication space.
2. Expansion of Social Identity Theory: Identity is not only a source of affiliation, but also an instrument for forming perceptions of threat and solidarity in campaigns.
3. Confirmation of the Elaboration Likelihood Model: Cultural identity functions effectively as a peripheral persuasion pathway in the context of voters with low political literacy or a dense information environment.

This study also demonstrates how cultural identity can act as a "bridge" or a "wall" in democracy—depending on how it is used by political actors and responded to by the public. Therefore, its practical implications point to the importance of communication ethics and narrative framing that prioritizes inclusivity.

Synthesis of Findings and Theoretical Implications

Through an integrative approach of three theories—Cultural Framing Theory, Social Identity Theory, and ELM, this study found that:

1. Cultural identity is a key element in political persuasion, but its effects depend on the form and context in which it is used.
2. Inclusive strategies tend to strengthen social cohesion and participation, whereas exclusive strategies can deepen political segregation.
3. In a digital context, the speed and power of visuals strengthen symbols of identity but also increase the risk of misinformation and the mobilization of hate.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored how cultural identity is strategically mobilized in political persuasion practices in two multicultural democracies—Indonesia and Malaysia. Through a comparative qualitative analysis of campaign materials and expert interviews, the findings reveal that cultural identity operates not only as a symbolic expression of collective memory but also as a persuasive asset in shaping political narratives, voter alignment, and emotional engagement.

While Indonesia exhibits more integrative cultural communication rooted in inclusive nationalism and pluralist discourses, Malaysia reveals a segmented and ethno-politically structured messaging system. The study demonstrates that identity-based communication can foster civic cohesion when framed inclusively but may also intensify polarization when employed through exclusionary narratives.

The interplay between digital media, emotional resonance, and identity-based appeals underscores the importance of understanding how political messages are constructed, framed, and received in culturally diverse societies.

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