“Mothering the Politics”: Care, Affect, and the Digital Construction of Maternal Leadershipof North Maluku Governor Sherly Tjoanda

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Abstract

This study examines how maternal identity operates as a communicative practice of governance within digitally mediated political environments. Focusing on the case of Sherly Tjoanda, Governor of North Maluku, Indonesia, the research analyzes how maternal leadership is constructed through the interaction between official social media performances and public reinterpretations circulating through YouTube Shorts. Using digital ethnography, the study examines three interconnected datasets: official Instagram posts documenting governing activities, publicly produced YouTube Shorts that remix and circulate these performances, and audience comments that express emotional and moral evaluations. The analysis identifies four communicative dynamics through which maternal leadership becomes recognizable and legitimate: performative identity, communicative constitution through circulation and recognition, affective engagement within digital publics, and care-based ethical framing. The findings show that motherhood functions not merely as symbolic political branding but as a relational infrastructure through which governance is narrated, interpreted, and legitimated. Short-form videos amplify gestures of care, emotional interactions, and narratives of protection, allowing networked publics to participate in the communicative constitution of maternal leadership

Keywords: motherhood, performative identity, communicative constitution of leadership, ethics of care, digital ethnography

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary political communication scholarship has increasingly recognized the role of gendered identity performances in shaping legitimacy of a political leadership (Bauer et tal., 2023; Combs et al., 2023; Muringa & Ndlovu, 2026; Schreiber, 2016). One prominent example in the context of Indonesia local government is Tri Rismaharini, the former Mayor of Surabaya, because of her leadership styles which departed from dominant masculine models of political authority, and became highly visible through extensive media coverage. Risma was widely recognized for her hands-on approach to governance, personally supervising policy implementation and directly confronting bureaucratic inefficiency, but at the same time, her public persona combined firmness with empathy of her deep concern for the welfare of citizens, particularly women and children (Tuti & Adawiyah, 2020). This example demonstrates that female political leadership in Indonesia has long been mediated through communicative narratives that intertwine gender, emotion, and governance.

Studies examining female political leadership often highlight how motherhood functions as a symbolic resource deployed to humanize candidates, appeal to voters, or soften perceptions of leadership within masculinized political arenas (Bauer, 2017; Deason et tal., 2015; Greenlee, 2014). However, existing literature largely treats maternal identity as an electoral strategy tied to campaign periods and mediated image construction (Stalsburg & Kleinberg, 2016; Stalsburg, 2010). Such approaches tend to reduce motherhood to a representational device rather than examining its potential role as an ongoing communicative practice through which governance itself is enacted.

At the same time, scholarship on digital political communication has emphasized personalization, emotional appeal, and authenticity as central features of social media–based leadership (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Klinger & Svensson, 201). While these studies illuminate how politicians cultivate intimacy with audiences through everyday visibility, they frequently foreground branding, strategic self-presentation, or populist performance (Ratu et tal., 2025), leaving underexplored how gendered forms of relational labor—particularly maternal identity—may constitute alternative modes of political authority. Parallel research on digital motherhood and performative maternal identities has shown how social media enables the public negotiation of care, authenticity, and moral legitimacy in domestic contexts (Luebke & Engelmann, 2026; Pullen & Vachhani, 2021). Yet this body of work rarely extends its analytical lens into formal political leadership, resulting in a conceptual divide between scholarship on everyday digital motherhood and studies of political governance.

This study addresses these intersecting gaps by theorizing “mothering the politics” as a governing communicative practice rather than a symbolic or campaign-based identity performance. The concept directs attention to how maternal discourse and practices of care become embedded in everyday leadership communication, shaping how political authority is enacted, justified, and evaluated within digital publics. Specifically,

this research asks how motherhood operates as a relational governance strategy capable of producing legitimacy, demonstrating accountability, and generating affective bonds between leaders and citizens through routine social media performance (Hsiao & Lu, 2025; Simpson et tal., 2022).

Addressing these gaps, this study examines how maternal identity operates as a communicative practice of governance in the case of Sherly Tjoanda, Governor of North Maluku, Indonesia. Her leadership is situated within layered intersectional conditions—including gendered political norms, minority religious status, ethnic difference, and widowhood—that conventionally position political actors as marginal or vulnerable (Widiyanti et tal. 2026). Yet her digital self-presentation reframes these positions through the narratives and practices of maternal care, inviting the question of how social media infrastructures enable intersectional marginality to be transformed into claims of moral leadership (Ceccobelli & Colombo, 2025; Fadhillah, 2025). By investigating these dynamics through digital ethnography, this study aims to reconceptualize political communication beyond image-building frameworks, demonstrating how governance can be communicatively constituted through everyday performances of care within networked publics.

Research Questions

1. How is motherhood enacted as a communicative practice of governance?
2. How do social media practices enable maternal performativity to function for political engagement?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study proposes “mothering the politics” as an integrated conceptual model in which leadership is constituted through performative identity in digital practices. Conceptually, the notion of “mothering the politics” offers a new analytical lens for understanding how gendered identity performances can function as communicative and ethical infrastructures of leadership within digitally mediated publics, particularly in contexts marked by intersectional marginality (Condie, 2026; Collins, 1990; Ruddick, 1989). In this study, the term mothering or motherhood is conceptualized communicatively as a performative identity through which political leadership is enacted, interpreted, and recognized within digitally mediated publics.

Motherhood provides a cultural repertoire of care, protection, relational responsibility, and moral accountability that can be mobilized in political communication. The concept therefore does not assume that all women leaders govern maternally or that maternal identity inherently generates political legitimacy. Instead, it depends on its continual enactment, circulation, and public recognition within specific sociocultural and digital contexts. This conceptualization further requires distinguishing performance from performativity. While performance generally refers to the strategic presentation of identity before an audience, performativity, following Butler (1990), understands identity as constituted through the repeated citation of socially recognizable norms rather than as

the expression of a pre-existing self. Consequently, mothering the politics is conceptualized not as the strategic use of maternal symbolism but as a communicative process through which motherhood becomes a governing logic that organizes political authority around care, relationality, and public accountability.

For that purpose, this study develops an integrated theoretical framework to explain how motherhood operates as a communicative practice of governance in digitally mediated political contexts. This framework brings together performative motherhood, the communicative constitution of leadership, affective publics, and the ethics of care to conceptualize political leadership not as a fixed personal attribute but as a relational process continually enacted through communication.

Hence, maternal identity is understood as a performative and ethical resource through which leadership legitimacy is constituted, circulated, and recognized within networked publics (Deason, 2021). Scholarship on performativity positions maternal identity as something enacted through everyday practices, narratives, and visual performances rather than merely possessed. In digital environments, such performances become intensified through visibility, repetition, and audience interaction, enabling motherhood to function simultaneously as personal identity, moral narrative, and public claim to authenticity (Triastuti & Siahaan, 2024).

Previous studies on digital motherhood demonstrate how maternal performances on social media mobilize affect, relatability, and moral credibility through displays of care, sacrifice, and ordinary domestic labor (Siahaan, 2023). However, these analyses have largely focused on domestic or entrepreneurial contexts. Extending this logic into political leadership allows motherhood to be understood not simply as symbolic representation but as a communicative practice through which political actors negotiate authority, proximity, and trust (Koschmann, 2013). The communicative constitution of leadership perspective reframes leadership as something that emerges through interaction rather than residing solely in individual traits or formal positions (Cooren & Martine, 2016). From this lens, leadership exists insofar as communicative processes produce recognition, alignment, and legitimacy among multiple actors; and therefore leadership is relational, dynamic, and continuously negotiated (Fairhurst, 2007). Digital platforms generate publics that are organized not only around shared information but also around shared feelings (Ahmed, 2004). The concept of affective publics helps explain how emotions circulate through networked communication, shaping collective attention, identification, and political engagement (Papacharissi, 2014). In this context, social media does more than transmit political messages; it enables emotional alignment between leaders and citizens.

Feminist ethics of care offers a normative dimension that complements performative and communicative approaches (Harcourt, 2026). Rather than prioritizing abstract principles or hierarchical authority, ethics of care emphasizes relational responsibility, attentiveness to others, and moral action grounded in interdependence (Held, 2006). When applied to political leadership, care can function as an alternative

governing logic that values responsiveness, proximity, and everyday problem-solving (Woodly et tal., 2021). Within this study, ethics of care provides a lens for understanding why maternal performances resonate as more than strategic communication. By framing governance as an extension of caregiving, leaders may position themselves as morally accountable to citizens in relational rather than purely institutional terms. Social media becomes a key arena where this ethic is publicly enacted and evaluated: documenting visits, listening sessions, or acts of assistance serves not only as visibility but as demonstrations of care-oriented governance.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs digital ethnography to examine how maternal leadership is performed, circulated, and interpreted within networked publics. Digital ethnography is particularly suited to investigating communicative practices that unfold across social media environments to understand how identities, meanings, and relational dynamics are enacted through digitally mediated interaction (Forberg & Schilt, 2023). More over in contemporary political communication, leadership performances are increasingly embedded within digital platforms where official political messaging intersects with user-generated content and audience responses (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). This approach therefore allows the study to trace how maternal leadership narratives from the ways these performances are re-edited, circulated, and emotionally interpreted by digital publics.

To capture the multi-layered communicative processes through which maternal governance is constructed, the study analyzes three interconnected datasets collected from social media platforms which provide contents that were randomly observed from February 2025 until February 2026 marking the first administration year of Shirley Tjoanda. There are 50 videos altogether to become samples which present motherhood discourse relating to governance. The first dataset consists of posts published on the official Instagram account of Sherly Tjoanda, the governor of North Maluku through which the governor documents her daily governance activities and communicates directly with citizens. The second dataset consists of user-generated YouTube Shorts that feature clips of the governor's activities. These videos are created and circulated by members of the public that help provide a valuable perspective on how leadership performances are interpreted, reframed, and amplified by digital audiences. The third dataset consists of audience comments associated with both Instagram posts and YouTube Shorts videos. These comments provide insight into how viewers interpret, evaluate, and emotionally respond to the governor's performances.

The collected data were analyzed through qualitative interpretive coding guided by the study's theoretical framework. The analysis focused on identifying recurring communicative patterns across textual, visual, and affective dimensions of the digital content. Four analytical categories were developed based on the study's conceptual framework: a) Maternal Identity Language, (b) Care-Oriented Gestures and Actions, (c) Emotional Expressions and Affective Circulation, (d) Legitimacy and Leadership Narratives. Coding was conducted iteratively, allowing themes to emerge across different

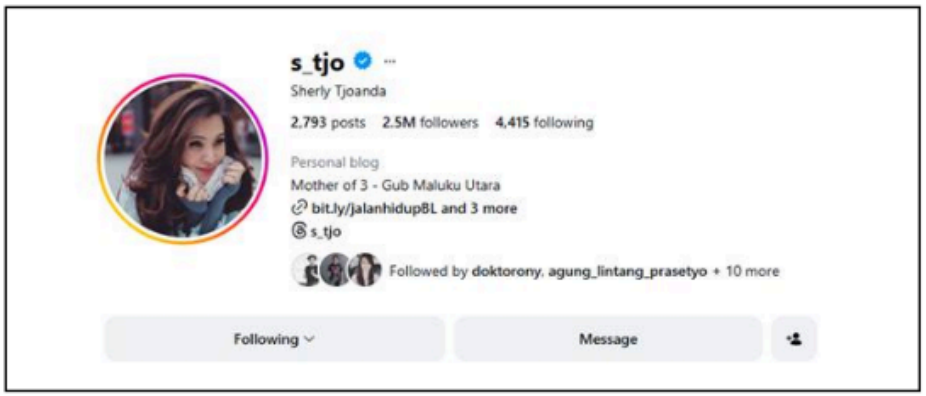
forms of digital content. Patterns were then compared across datasets in order to identify how maternal leadership narratives evolve from initial performance to public circulation and eventual recognition within digital publics.

All data analyzed in this study were drawn from publicly accessible social media platforms. No private or restricted digital content was collected. Usernames and personal identifiers from audience comments were anonymized in order to protect individual privacy. Because the research focuses on publicly visible communication by a political leader and publicly shared user-generated content, the analysis treats these materials as part of the broader public sphere of political discourse.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Maternal Identity as a Repertoire for Leadership

Sherly Tjoanda presents herself on her personal Instagram account first and foremost as a "mother of three," a self-description that appears alongside her formal designation as Governor of North Maluku. This maternal identity is consistently reinforced in interviews and public speeches, where she frequently introduces herself as a (former) housewife—a role she occupied prior to entering electoral politics. Rather than distancing herself from her domestic background after assuming political office, Sherly incorporates it into her public leadership persona. Through her social media performances, governing is repeatedly framed as an extension of maternal caregiving, where citizens are positioned as subjects of care, protection, and attentiveness. Most videos of her performativity distributed as social media content show activities such as listening to public concerns, visiting communities, responding to crises, and overseeing development programs. Below is the Bio of Sherly's official Instagram account.



As a member of the socio-economic elite, she possesses significant social and cultural capital. However, her public narrative is also shaped by personal tragedy following the death of her husband in a fatal accident during the election campaign. By foregrounding her experiences as a wife, mother, and widow, it can be interpreted that Sherly constructs a relatable and emotionally compelling identity that strengthens her connection with citizens. This is particularly significant given her intersectional position as

a woman, a Christian leader governing a Muslim-majority province, a politician of Chinese-Indonesian descent, and a widow operating within a patriarchal sociocultural context.

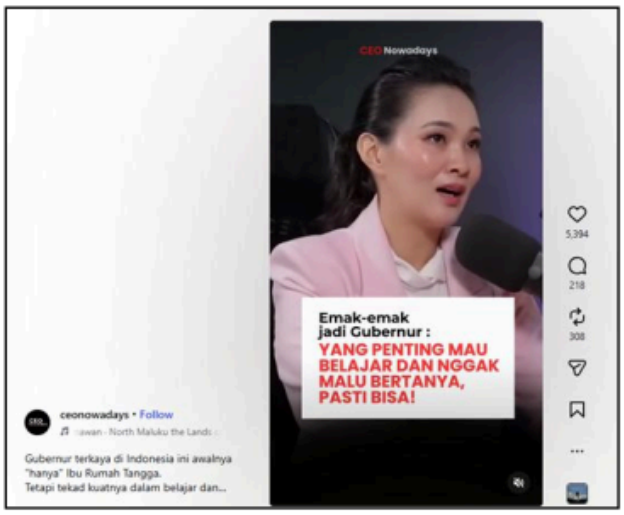
Analysis of Instagram videos and publicly circulated YouTube Shorts reveals that motherhood functions as a central identity repertoire through which Sherly Tjoanda enacts leadership as the Governor of North Maluku. Across the observed digital content, maternal identity is repeatedly performed through discursive narratives, embodied gestures, and relational interactions with citizens. In numerous videos shared through Sherly's official social media accounts, the North Maluku Provincial Government's platforms, and citizen-generated YouTube Shorts, Sherly openly expresses her emotional responses to the hardships experienced by local communities. She frequently articulates the purpose of her visits as an opportunity to listen directly to citizens' concerns, grievances, and requests, emphasizing the importance of understanding their lived experiences. These encounters are often followed by commitments to provide solutions, deliver assistance, and ensure that government policies are implemented in ways that respond to community needs.

The content consistently portrays Sherly engaging in close and intimate interactions with local communities, particularly women and children. Many videos depict her conversing informally with mothers, carrying infants and holding young children, embracing women, hugging elderly residents and other visible gestures of care whilst adopting attentive listening postures during the interactions. These embodied actions transform formal governance encounters into scenes of relational intimacy. Such gestures visually communicate attentiveness and empathy, reinforcing the idea that leadership is enacted through caregiving practices particularly in areas related to healthcare, children's education, housing, family livelihoods, and local economic development.

The YouTube Shorts comments, such as *"Bu Sherly bukan hanya seorang Gubernur tapi IBU bagi masyarakat Maluku Utara"* (Mrs Sherly is not only a governor but also the mother for North Maluku people) or *"Ini baru namanya seorang ibu buat masyarakat"* (This is what we call a mother for her people) illustrate how leadership authority is not merely expressed by the political actor but co-constructed through audience discourse. These comments explicitly redefine political leadership through maternal identity. The phrase *"bukan hanya gubernur tapi ibu"* (not just a governor, but mother) signals a discursive elevation—motherhood is positioned as more meaningful than formal office. In the case of Sherly Tjoanda, governor of North Maluku, public comments function as sites of recognition that stabilize maternal identity as a legitimate form of leadership. This claim is proven with this heartfelt comment by a citizen below (which is translated as follows: See all the evidence of how the people love her. They are not reluctant to hug and kiss her at the moment, and she also welcomes them without doubts. She is also very responsive to give solution without delay, and makes sure her command is executed right away. Thank you for being present in North Maluku. Greetings from your online children)



The governor frequently references her personal biography as a mother and homemaker. In multiple clips circulated on social media, she mentions her experience as a mother of three children and frames this identity as shaping her approach to public service. Public interpretations circulating in YouTube Shorts further stabilize this maternal identity. Many user-generated videos explicitly refer to her as "Emak-emak" (It sounds like Mommy) or "Ibu Gubernur," while captions and titles emphasize her patience, empathy, and listening ability. In several instances, creators contrast her leadership style with that of male politicians, framing her maternal approach as more compassionate and attentive to citizens' needs. Additionally, some videos highlight aspects of her biography—including widowhood, religious minority status, and ethnic Chinese heritage—in ways that present maternal identity as a moral resource capable of transcending social difference. One of the circulated video made by the public below emphasizes her status as the richest governor who "only" began her career as a housewife but then she transforms by learning a lot of things.



Leadership Through Public Circulation and Recognition

While maternal performances originate in the governor's own social media communication, their political significance becomes visible through processes of public circulation and reinterpretation. Analysis of YouTube Shorts created by independent users demonstrates how leadership authority is communicatively constituted through repetition, recognition, and audience alignment. Rather than merely reproducing official content, users selectively recirculate and reinterpret moments that reinforce Sherly Tjoanda's maternal leadership persona, thereby contributing to the construction of her public legitimacy. Across the analyzed videos, Sherly is frequently portrayed as a leader who combines authority with maternal care. For example, several clips depict her reprimanding subordinates in ways that resemble what audiences often describe as a caring mother's corrective guidance as typical Indonesian very talkactive motherhood ("ibu-ibu cerewet"). Rather than displaying anger, aggression, or overt domination, she communicates criticism through a firm yet emotionally controlled style. This communicative pattern allows authority to be exercised without relying on the masculine leadership norms traditionally associated with command and confrontation.

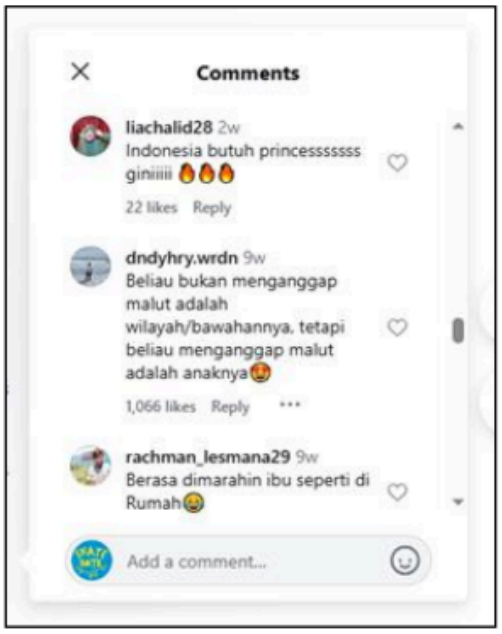
Similarly, public recirculations highlight instances in which Sherly criticizes government officials or addresses administrative problems in an indirect and measured manner. Her criticisms are typically framed as efforts to improve governance rather than as personal attacks. This communicative style is also evident in her responses to political opponents and public criticism. Rather than reacting confrontationally, she frequently adopts a restrained and composed posture, reinforcing an image of leadership grounded in patience, emotional regulation, and relational responsibility. The maternal dimension of these performances is further amplified through visual and discursive representations of femininity. Sherly is often portrayed as approachable, graceful, and modest in appearance, presenting a contemporary feminine persona that avoids both excessive glamour and overt displays of political power. Her communication style similarly departs from formal bureaucratic conventions. In many videos, she speaks in colloquial and spontaneous language, creating an impression of authenticity and social proximity. This conversational style reduces symbolic distance between political leader and citizen, making her leadership appear accessible and relatable.

Another recurring feature in the circulated content is the visibility of vulnerability. Sherly does not attempt to conceal emotional experiences, personal limitations, or uncertainty when interacting with either citizens or political elites. Instead, these moments are publicly displayed and frequently interpreted as signs of sincerity and authenticity. At the same time, expressions of vulnerability do not diminish her authority. Across the observed videos, she continues to exercise executive power confidently, issuing instructions, making decisions, and directing bureaucratic action when necessary. As a result, vulnerability and authority are not presented as contradictory qualities but as mutually reinforcing elements of maternal leadership. Her strong but graceful leadership is caught by the citizen and narrated through the content they make.



(https://www.youtube.com/shorts/8bhHoYeuRzc)

Above is one example amongst other user-generated videos that frequently re-edits fragments of the governor's speeches and public interactions into short inspirational clips. These edited videos typically highlight moments of emotional engagement with citizens, including scenes where she listens to complaints, comforts residents, or participates in community activities. In many cases, these clips are accompanied by emotional background music and captions emphasizing care-oriented leadership. Comment sections reveal patterns of audience recognition and endorsement. Users often respond with statements such as "She is a real mother for Maluku," "Finally we have a leader who cares," or calls for protecting the governor from political criticism. These comments indicate that viewers interpret maternal performances not simply as personal gestures but as evidence of legitimate leadership. Repeated circulation across multiple Shorts videos reinforces a shared narrative framing. Compilations of her interactions with citizens frequently describe her as a "leader with a mother's heart" ("pemimpin berhati ibu"). In some cases, such videos explicitly defend her leadership against criticisms related to economic or political controversies, including debates surrounding regional mining activities. In these contexts, maternal identity functions as a discursive resource through which supporters reaffirm her moral authority

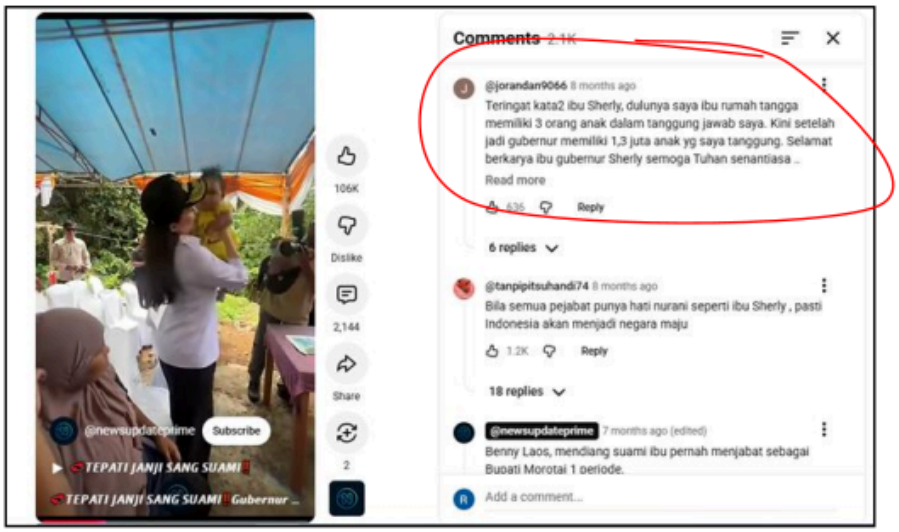


Audience comments in YouTube Shorts as displayed above, illustrate how maternal leadership is communicatively constituted through processes of public recognition and endorsement beyond local governance. She is described as *"princess mother"* who consider the province allegorically as her children. Even more one of the comments funnily compare her strong leadership to a fierce mother who disciplines her children at home. Viewers consistently reframe the governor not merely as a formal officeholder but as "ibu bagi masyarakat" (mother of the people), positioning maternal identity as a more meaningful source of authority than institutional role. These discursive practices are accompanied by moral evaluations emphasizing care, attentiveness, and virtue, as well as affective expressions such as prayers and blessings. Such responses indicate that leadership legitimacy is co-produced through communicative interaction, where publics actively attribute meaning, reinforce identity, and stabilize authority. These communicative dynamics illustrate how leadership is not solely self-claimed but collectively constituted through digital interaction. Public creators, viewers, and commenters participate in reinforcing maternal leadership narratives by repeatedly circulating and endorsing care-oriented performances. Through these processes, political authority becomes a co-produced phenomenon emerging from communicative practices rather than from institutional position alone.

Affective Publics in Digital Political Communication

The circulation of maternal leadership narratives within YouTube Shorts also reveals the formation of affective publics organized around shared emotional responses. These short-form videos rely heavily on aesthetic elements that amplify affect, including background music, slow-motion editing, expressive facial close-ups, and emotionally framed captions. Several videos depict emotionally charged interactions between the governor and local residents. Scenes of citizens embracing the governor, expressing gratitude, or speaking emotionally about local hardships frequently appear in these clips. These visual moments are often accompanied by captions emphasizing emotional

resonance, such as “terharu” (deeply moved), “bangga” (proud), or expressions referring to the governor as “our mother.”

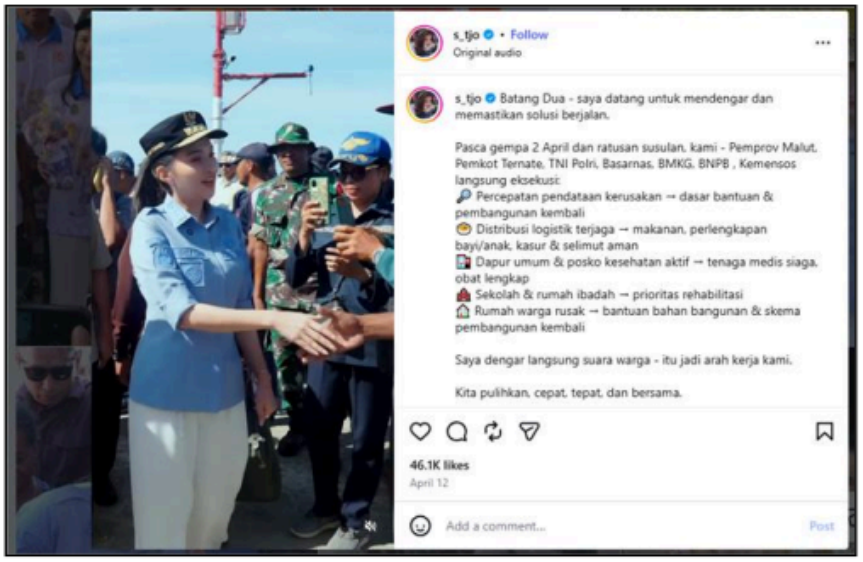


Audience reactions further amplify this emotional circulation as can be seen in the content above which recall her statement about her past life being a housewife with three children and now that she becomes a governor, she has to take care more than one million people under her administration. Other comment sections commonly include heart emojis, expressions of pride, and religious blessings offered to the governor. For instances are: “Panjang umur dan sehat selalu” (long live and always in good shape) or “Tuhan Yesus berkati selalu ibu” (Jesus will always bless you, Mom). These comments move beyond evaluation into affective investment. Rather than focusing on technical policy debates, these responses foreground emotional identification with the leader’s caregiving posture. It is proven that leadership is reinforced through emotional alignment, and authority becomes personally meaningful, not just politically accepted. Such patterns indicate that political legitimacy within these digital spaces is produced through affective alignment rather than through bureaucratic or technocratic evaluation. Support for the governor emerges not primarily from policy discussion but from shared emotional recognition of care-oriented leadership practices. These dynamics illustrate how social media platforms facilitate the emergence of affective publics in which emotional connection becomes a central dimension of political engagement.

Governance as Relational Responsibility

Finally, the analysis shows that maternal leadership performances are accompanied by a broader moral discourse framing governance as relational responsibility. In several speeches and public statements circulated in social media videos, the governor explicitly invokes maternal duty when explaining political decisions. Statements such as “as a mother I must protect”, “I cannot let my people suffer,” and “this is my responsibility as ibu” position leadership as a form of moral caregiving. Rather than emphasizing technocratic authority or legalistic reasoning, these explanations foreground ethical responsibility toward citizens as members of a shared social

community. This relational framing is particularly visible in discussions surrounding regional economic controversies. In videos addressing public concerns about resource extraction and development, the governor frequently frames her decisions in terms of protecting the well-being of communities, children, and the environment. These narratives prioritize moral obligation and collective welfare over purely procedural justifications. Her official Instagram account very often conveys her commitment as a leader who makes all the efforts to respond immediately to the people's needs and dares to prove herself accountable of what she has promised as showed in the content bellows:



Public reinterpretations circulating in Shorts videos reinforce this ethical framing. Supporters often describe her leadership as compassionate and morally grounded, suggesting that care-based governance resonates strongly with audience expectations of responsible leadership. Through repeated circulation, these narratives normalize the idea that care-oriented decision-making constitutes legitimate political authority. Leadership legitimacy is also grounded in moral evaluation as mentioned in the short videos comments: "Respect Ibu yang selalu memperhatikan rakyatnya" (We respect you M'am for always caring your people) or "Bu Sherly sungguh mulia hatimu" (M'am Sherly, how pure is your heart). These are ethics of care indicators, not bureaucratic metrics. In this case authority is legitimated through moral discourse, and publics evaluate leadership based on care performance.

DISCUSSION

Across the digital content of Governor Sherly's performativity, maternal identity functions as the dominant discourse through which the practice of leadership is enacted, circulated, and legitimized. The findings demonstrate a multi-layered digital construction of maternal leadership operating across four levels:

1. Performance – maternal identity enacted through language, gestures, and narrative framing.

2. Circulation – user-generated videos redistribute and reinterpret these performances.
3. Recognition – audiences affirm maternal leadership through comments and endorsements.
4. Legitimation – repeated affective engagement stabilizes care-based leadership as politically credible.

All these processes show how digital media environments enable the emergence of what this study conceptualizes as "mothering the politics" that refers to a performativity of maternal identity through which the political governance of a feminine leadership is publicly enacted and socially validated. The concept of "mothering the politics" captures how maternal identity becomes a governing logic that is enacted through digital communication process. Scholarship on gender and political communication has long examined how women leaders mobilize motherhood rhetorically (Carroll, 1985; Campus, 2013; Heldman et al., 2005). However, such work often focuses on campaign rhetoric or mediated representation rather than examining how maternal identity operates after women assume office. By examining the case of Governor Sherly Tjoanda's leadership, I argue that maternal appeals can be interpreted as strategic resources that allow women candidates to humanize their image and navigate tensions between femininity and political authority (Jamieson, 1995).

Rather than functioning solely as symbolic representation, motherhood operates as an ongoing communicative practice through which governance itself is narrated and enacted. Across the observed digital content, maternal identity is repeatedly articulated through discursive language, embodied gestures of care, and references to domestic responsibility. These communicative practices frame leadership as an extension of caregiving, transforming routine governance activities—such as village visits, disaster response, and listening forums—into performances of relational responsibility. In this sense, maternal identity provides both the narrative repertoire and ethical vocabulary through which political authority is expressed and interpreted. Feminist political theory has long argued that maternal thinking can inform political ethics by foregrounding responsibility, protection, and attentiveness as central to social life (Ruddick, 1989; Sevenhuijsen, 1998).

The study also contributes to the theory of communicative constitution of leadership by demonstrating how maternal authority emerges through iterative interaction between political actors and digital publics. The legitimacy of Governor Sherly Tjoanda in this case does not derive solely from institutional position but from repeated communicative recognition within networked media environments which create her relational leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006). User-generated YouTube Shorts play a particularly important role in this process. These videos re-edit interactions between the governor and local citizens, highlighting moments of empathy, listening, and physical care while framing them through emotionally resonant narratives. Through repeated circulation, these clips stabilize maternal performances as recognizable markers of legitimate leadership. Audience responses further reinforce this communicative process. Comment

sections frequently contain expressions of admiration, gratitude, and moral endorsement that frame maternal gestures as evidence of authentic commitment. Leadership authority thus emerges through a feedback loop of performance, circulation, recognition, and endorsement. In this sense, maternal governance becomes communicatively constituted through participatory media practices that transform personal interactions into collectively recognized leadership narratives (Cooren & Martine, 2016). The findings further resonate with perspectives that conceptualize leadership as a socially constructed communicative process emerging through interaction rather than individual traits or formal authority (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014).

The findings also highlight the central role of affect in shaping political legitimacy within digital media environments. The circulation of emotionally framed YouTube Shorts illustrates how maternal leadership narratives resonate within affective publics organized around shared emotional responses (Papacharissi, 2015). Visual scenes depicting gratitude, empathy, and physical care are amplified through editing techniques such as background music, slow motion, and emotionally charged captions. These aesthetic strategies transform routine governance activities into emotionally resonant narratives that invite identification and solidarity. Audience reactions indicate that political support in these digital spaces often emerges through emotional alignment rather than policy evaluation. Comment sections are dominated by expressions of pride, gratitude, and moral admiration, while technical discussions of policy outcomes remain comparatively limited. Such patterns suggest that legitimacy is grounded less in bureaucratic rationality than in affective identification with a caregiving posture. Digital platforms thus enable maternal leadership performances to circulate not only as information but as emotional experiences that bind citizens to leaders through shared affect (Ahmed, 2004 Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

Taken together, these findings contribute to the theoretical framework in ways that extend, rather than merely apply, the concepts employed in this study. First, while Butler's notion of performativity conceptualizes identity as constituted through the repeated citation of socially recognizable norms, this study demonstrates that in digitally mediated political communication, maternal identity is constituted not only through the leader's repeated enactments but also through its continual circulation, reinterpretation, and endorsement by networked publics. Second, the findings broaden the Communicative Constitution of Leadership (CCO) by showing that leadership is communicatively constituted through culturally meaningful identity repertoires, such as motherhood, which organize how authority is interpreted, recognized, and legitimized by audiences. Third, the study extends the concept of affective publics by demonstrating that digital circulation does more than amplify emotional engagement; it transforms emotions into moral evaluations that stabilize political legitimacy around care, empathy, and relational responsibility. Finally, the findings operationalize feminist ethics of care within political communication by illustrating how care is translated from an abstract normative principle into observable communicative practices—listening, responding, embracing, protecting, and being visibly present—that enable citizens to assess governmental accountability through relational rather than purely bureaucratic criteria.

By integrating these perspectives, this study proposes mothering the politics as a new conceptual framework for understanding digital political leadership, in which maternal identity functions not as an electoral symbol or strategic image, but as a communicatively constituted mode of governance through which political authority is enacted, circulated, recognized, and legitimized within networked publics.

To add some critical reflection about the limits of maternal performativity as political authority, the findings also reveal a potential tension regarding the long-term sustainability of governance. From the perspective of performativity theory, maternal leadership is not a stable attribute possessed by political actors but an identity effect continuously produced through repeated communicative performances (Butler, 1990). The authority associated with maternal leadership therefore depends upon the ongoing reproduction of recognizable signs of care, empathy, attentiveness, and moral responsibility. Such legitimacy remains contingent upon the successful repetition and public recognition of these performances rather than upon institutionalized structures of governance If political legitimacy becomes heavily dependent upon the performative enactment of a leader's maternal identity, governance risks becoming increasingly personalized. The affective bond between citizens and leaders may be attached less to governmental institutions and policy systems than to the individual figure who performs care most convincingly. What is recognized today as authentic maternal leadership may be reinterpreted tomorrow through different social, political, or media discourses.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how maternal identity is performed in a communicative practice of governance within digitally mediated political environments. By analyzing the social media communication of Sherly Tjoanda, governor of North Maluku, alongside public reinterpretations circulating through YouTube Shorts, the findings demonstrate that maternal identity functions not merely as symbolic political branding but as working ethics of care through which leadership legitimacy is constructed. Through repeated digital performances, affective circulation, and audience recognition, motherhood becomes an identity work that shapes how political authority is enacted and evaluated within networked publics.

Insights from this research shows that maternal identity can function as a governing logic rather than simply a rhetorical strategy. Leadership legitimacy in this context emerges not only from institutional authority but from the ongoing interaction between leaders and digital publics who interpret, circulate, and endorse maternal leadership. More broadly, the study suggests that contemporary networked publics play an active role in constituting gendered political authority, revealing how maternal discourse can reshape the communicative foundations of governance in the digital age.

From this perspective, the concept of mothering the politics contains an inherent paradox. On one hand, maternal performativity expands the repertoire of political

leadership by introducing care, empathy, and relational responsibility into public governance. On the other hand, because these forms of authority are communicatively constituted through personalized performances, they may inadvertently reinforce a model of governance centered on individual charisma rather than durable institutions. The challenge for democratic governance therefore lies in transforming the symbolic legitimacy generated through maternal leadership into institutional practices, organizational cultures, and public service norms that can survive beyond the political career of any particular leader. Future research should examine whether digitally mediated maternal leadership can become institutionalized within governmental systems or whether it remains primarily a personalized and temporally contingent source of political legitimacy.

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