

## SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN IDENTITY ACTUALIZATION ARENA: A COMMUNICATION THEORY OF IDENTITY STUDY OF SHERLY TJOANDA'S DIGITAL ACTIVITIES

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### ABSTRACT

This study employs the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), developed by Michael Hecht, to analyze how social media functions as an identity actualization arena. CTI breaks down identity into four main layers: Personal Identity, which encompasses an individual's view of themselves in specific social situations, including their feelings and ideas about who they are; Enacted Identity, which refers to how an individual presents themselves through behavior, visual language, and communication style; Relational Identity, which is formed through relationships and social interactions with others; and Communal Identity, which relates to an individual's attachment to broader groups or communities. In this study, these four layers are used to analyze Sherly Tjoanda's digital content across various social media platforms. Personal identity is reflected in her communication style and the values she conveys. Enacted identity is evident through her visual expressions and posting routines, while relational identity is examined through Sherly's interactions with her followers, which foster a sense of symbolic closeness. Communal identity is illustrated by the role of her follower community and digital networks in constructing her image as a public figure. Overall, CTI helps to understand how identity on social media is a multi-layered, dynamic construction influenced by two-way interactions with the audience, where processes of negotiation and identity performance occur in complex ways within the digital space.

## Introduction

Sherly Tjoanda, born in Ambon on August 12, 1982, into a Chinese-Christian family, serves as the Governor of North Maluku for the 2025-2030 term after winning the 2024 regional election with 51.7% of the vote (359,416 votes), alongside her running mate Sarbin Sehe. She made history as the first female governor and the first "triple minority" leader (Chinese-Christian in a Muslim-majority province) to be directly elected in Indonesia. Her career began as a Director at PT Bela Group with her late husband, Benny Laos, whose tragic death in the Bela 72 boat explosion on October 12, 2024, prompted Sherly to continue his mandate.

Her educational background, featuring a Bachelor's in Management from Petra Christian University, Surabaya, and a Master's from Inholland University, Netherlands, equipped Sherly for leadership. Active in various organizations—such as the Central Board of Perwan, Chairperson of the Morotai Island TP PKK, and Advisor to the Bela Peduli Foundation—she focuses on social empowerment, education, and the environment. Within her first 100 days as Governor, she saved Rp1.7 billion through digitalization and prioritized infrastructure, food security, and public services.

Her digital phenomenon went viral via TikTok (@sherlytjoanda, 1.9M followers, 51.4M likes). A video of an underwater Red and White flag-raising ceremony for the 80th Independence Day (6.4 million views) symbolized "creative nationalism," blending art, patriotism, and the ecology of North Maluku. High engagement rates (7-30%) reinforced her progressive image, earning her the nickname "The TikTok Governor." The emergence of Sherly Tjoanda on the North Maluku political stage is not merely a post-tragedy leadership transition; rather, it is a new narrative of how personal and political identities are digitally constructed. Amidst a complex sociopolitical landscape, social media no longer functions solely as a one-way information channel but has transformed into a strategic arena of identity actualization for Sherly to negotiate her status as a "triple minority" leader (Mulawarman et al., 2025). Through digital platforms, she has been able to transform collective grief into political momentum while redefining the representation of women and ethnicity within a Muslim-majority public sphere (Ayunda et al., 2025).

This dynamic is clearly reflected in her track record, which blends a professional background and international education with a humanistic leadership style—all of which are intensively communicated through digital channels like Instagram and TikTok (Nurshiva et al., 2025). As the Director of PT Bela Group and an Inholland University alumna, Sherly utilizes social media to build a modern, technocratic image while maintaining an emotional bond with her constituents through the narrative of being a "Mother" to the people of North Maluku (Anggreani & Hanife, 2025). This identity actualization was crucial in winning the trust of 359,416 voters, where her political branding strategy successfully bridged identity gaps and strengthened her political legitimacy as the region's first female Governor (Purnamasari, 2025).

This research discusses the dynamic construction of digital identity through the public activities of Sherly Tjoanda. Sherly is known for a communication style that is creative, expressive, and visually powerful. As a historic and symbolic moment, her 80th Indonesian Independence Day celebration video on TikTok, featuring an underwater flag-raising ceremony in North Maluku, showcased an act that fused artistic creativity with the symbolism of nationalism and environmental stewardship.

Developments in communication technology have revolutionized how humans build, display, and negotiate their self-identities. In the digital age, social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube provide virtual public spaces that enable communication to be rapid, visual, interactive, and deeply personal. Personal identity is no longer static or limited to face-to-face interactions in offline spaces; it has become a construction that is consciously, performatively, and strategically updated through digital communication practices.

This phenomenon has birthed a new digital communication culture characterized by the rise of internet-based public figures like influencers and content creators. Consequently, social media is not just a space for message distribution but a performative arena where individuals actively construct and enact their identities. For influencers and content creators, this process occurs through self-curation (self-presentation) that is highly visual and aimed at building parasocial relations with the audience. Influencers

leverage aesthetics, personal narratives, and image consistency to maintain social authority and symbolic appeal in the digital realm (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

These influencers shape their images and personal identities through visual content imbued with narrative, symbolic, and aesthetic nuances. This identity is negotiated through reciprocal interactions between creators and an active audience that provides responses such as comments, likes, and other forms of digital participation. An influencer's identity is the result of an ongoing negotiation between what they present publicly and how the audience interprets and responds to it. This reciprocal interaction creates a communication ecosystem that allows identity to evolve dynamically and situationally (Abidin, 2016).

Theoretically, this phenomenon is analyzed using the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), which emphasizes that identity is formed through four interacting layers: personal identity, enacted identity, relational identity, and communal identity. Within this framework, CTI provides a conceptual explanation that identity does not stand alone. Hecht (1993; 2005) asserts that digital identity can be interpreted as a simultaneous process of personal identity (the creator's self-concept), enacted identity (how identity is performed in content), relational identity (the way the audience negotiates the meaning of the creator's identity), and communal identity (the collective values of the digital community that shape representation norms).

This research presents significant novelty by applying the multi-layered CTI approach within the context of digital popularity in Indonesia, specifically focusing on the digital activities of Sherly Tjoanda as a public figure utilizing social media, particularly TikTok. This approach differs from previous studies by not viewing identity as a single or static constituent but as a dynamic construction resulting from two-way interactions between the creator, the audience, and the wider digital community.

The uniqueness of this study lies in the selection of the research object: nationalist content produced in an extreme environment—the underwater flag-raising in North Maluku. Using an underwater setting as a medium for identity actualization is an innovative approach that has not been extensively analyzed in previous literature, thus offering a new perspective on how alternative physical and contextual spaces contribute to digital identity expression.

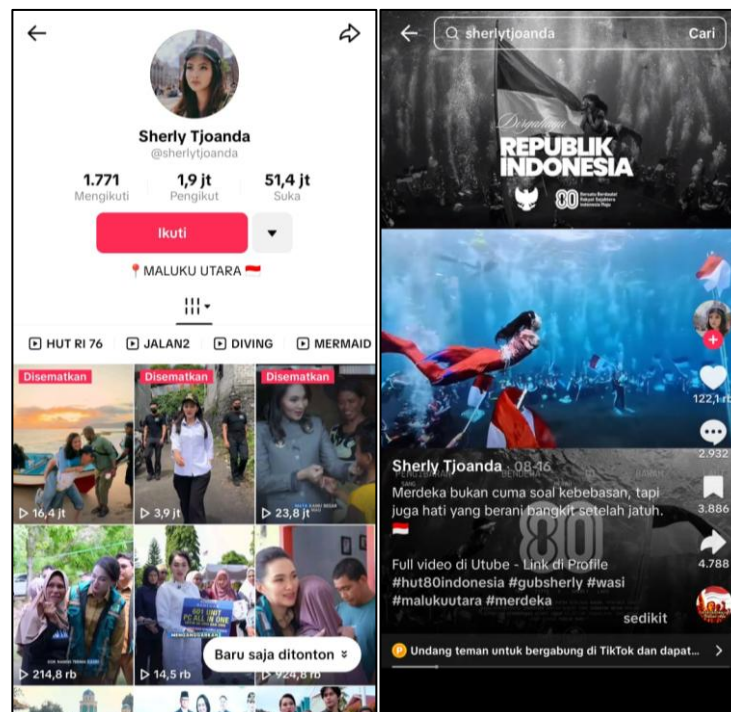


Figure 1: Sherly Tjoanda's TikTok Page (<https://www.tiktok.com/@sherlytjoanda/>)

Theoretically, this research expands the application of CTI in Indonesia, demonstrating how the personal, enacted, relational, and communal layers of identity are reflected multidimensionally in highly

performative visual content. This serves as a valuable addition to CTI studies, which have often been limited to interpersonal communication or conventional media settings. A multidisciplinary approach integrating visual symbolism analysis, digital performativity, and collective identity narrative formation adds depth to the study of digital communication.

Furthermore, the results of this research yield a digital identity model specific to Indonesian public creators, linking personal branding with digital political strategies and social inclusivity—particularly regarding gender and ethnic minorities. This model can serve as a useful theoretical framework for further studies on the digital identity dynamics of public figures in the Indonesian social media landscape.

This research aligns with current scholarship emphasizing the importance of identity negotiation through creative and participatory interaction with audiences, which serves as an effective strategy for building a dynamic, relevant, and contextual public image. This reflects a paradigm shift in understanding identity, nationalism, and culture in an increasingly complex and digitized era.

This content does not only showcase Sherly's personal and national identity but also illustrates the formation of a strong emotional bond between the creator and the audience. The resulting comments and responses depict audience support and interpretation of the act as a symbol of creative nationalism that actualizes statehood in a contemporary, digital form. This indicates that social media has become an arena where personal identity meets collective identity, forming new meanings within Indonesia's digital culture.

Consequently, this research not only enriches the literature on interactive communication and digital media but also provides a solid empirical and conceptual foundation for further academic exploration regarding the role of social media as the primary arena for identity construction in the 21st century.

## Literature Review

### *Theoretical Framework: Communication Theory of Identity (CTI)*

The Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), originally developed by Michael Hecht in 1993 and further elaborated in subsequent collaborative works (Hecht et al., 2003), is a communication theory that emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between communication and identity. Departing from traditional identity theories that view identity as a static or purely internal entity, CTI conceptualizes identity as a dynamic process constructed, negotiated, and enacted through communicative practices. This theory rejects the Cartesian dichotomy between "self" and "society," instead viewing identity as a dialectical product of an individual's interaction with their social context.

CTI delineates identity into four interacting and interpenetrating layers, forming what is known as the "*interpenetration of identity*" or "*identity gaps*." These four layers are:

#### 1. Personal Layer

This layer reflects an individual's internal view of themselves, including their values, beliefs, self-perceptions, and self-concept. Personal identity is subjective and encompasses how one interprets their existence within specific social situations. In CTI, this layer serves as the foundation for the others, as self-perception influences how identity is expressed.

#### 2. Enacted Layer

This layer highlights how identity is performed through communicative behaviors, including verbal, nonverbal, and visual language, as well as communication routines. Enacted identity is performative, wherein individuals consciously choose how to present themselves to achieve social goals. This layer is highly relevant in the digital age, where visual and narrative content serve as primary tools for identity performance.

#### 3. Relational Layer

The relational layer is formed through two-way interactions with others, where an individual's identity is defined by their social relationships. This includes others' perceptions of the individual and how these interactions shape shared meaning. In the context of social media, this layer is manifested through comments, likes, and audience responses that influence a content creator's adjustments.

#### 4. Communal Layer

This layer pertains to an individual's attachment to broader groups or communities, where collective identity is built through shared norms, symbols, and group narratives. Communal identity often reinforces personal identity through a sense of belonging to virtual or physical communities.

These four layers are not hierarchical but interconnected, creating "*identity gaps*" when inconsistencies occur between layers, which can trigger conflict or identity shifts. CTI has been widely applied in social media studies, such as the construction of virtual identities among adolescents on Instagram (Idaman, 2021) and the communal identities of "*bookstagrammers*."

#### *Performativity Theory*

The theory of performativity, developed by Judith Butler in the early 1990s, marks a new paradigm in understanding identity—particularly gender identity—as a dynamic construction formed through the repetition of acts cited from social and cultural norms. Butler rejects essentialist views that see identity as innate or fixed; instead, identity is produced and reproduced over time through performative acts, which are themselves part of the framework of social norms and discourses that govern the meanings and expectations of who a person is.

The core concept of this theory is that identity does not exist "behind" the expression; rather, identity itself is a product of that expression or performance. In other words, the repeated actions or behaviors performed by an individual—such as ways of walking, speaking, dressing, and interacting—continuously "create" the identity perceived by others. Butler refers to this as a "gender act," emphasizing how the combination of socially accepted norms produces various complex forms of identity beyond binary categories.

In a socio-cultural context, performativity allows for subversion and resistance against dominant norms, as actions that are inconsistent with or ambivalent toward norms can create a shift in meaning that opens space for new agency. This approach is highly relevant for understanding identity in digital spaces, where individuals actively present themselves through social media, interacting within a complex symbiosis of social expectations and personal expression.

Digital identity, within Butler's framework of performativity, emerges as the result of repeated negotiations between individual actions and audience responses, which together create and affirm the meaning of identity within the digital ecosystem. Thus, performativity theory provides an essential conceptual tool for examining how identity is formed, questioned, and dynamized within an increasingly digitized contemporary culture.

#### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a content analysis method to examine the construction of digital identity through communication practices on social media, underpinned by Michael Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity (CTI). A case study design was adopted to facilitate an in-depth analysis of the digital activities of public figure Sherly Tjoanda as the primary subject, thereby comprehensively exploring the complexities of identity construction within digital interactions. The qualitative approach was selected to openly and holistically explore the meanings and processes of identity communication.

Primary data collection techniques involve the observation of content uploaded by Sherly on TikTok, specifically videos of the underwater National Flag (Merah Putih) hoisting:

1. Full video of the underwater flag hoisting (<https://vt.tiktok.com/ZS9svJa5r/>)
2. Teaser video (<https://vt.tiktok.com/ZS9s7veNv/>)
3. Behind-the-scenes video (<https://vt.tiktok.com/ZS9s73amE/>)
4. Opening Ceremony video (<https://vt.tiktok.com/ZS9nmqR56/>)

Furthermore, audience interactions—comprising comments, likes, shares, and views—are analysed to reflect the relational and communal dimensions of digital identity. Secondary data were obtained from a literature review concerning CTI, digital communication, and the influencer phenomenon.

This research utilises NVivo software to systematically manage and organise multimedia data and massive audience interactions. The NCapture feature within NVivo was employed to directly import social media interaction data (comments and metadata) from the platform to ensure data integrity during the coding process. Data analysis follows a qualitative content analysis method, with a coding process focusing on the four layers of CTI:

1. **Personal Identity:** Coding the communication style and self-narrative established by the subject.
2. **Enacted Identity:** Analysing visual representation and body language in multimedia content through video analysis features.
3. **Relational Identity:** Mapping interaction patterns and follower responses to examine digital social relationships.
4. **Communal Identity:** Identifying digital communities and the formation of collective identity through audience engagement data.

Data validity and reliability are maintained through source and method triangulation techniques, supported by comprehensive documentation within the NVivo project file to ensure an audit trail and the dependability of the research findings. Through the integration of NVivo, this method is expected to provide a complete and profound overview of the dynamic process of construction and negotiation of Sherly Tjoanda’s digital identity.

### Results and Findings

The construction of Sherly Tjoanda’s digital identity as a public figure and the Governor of North Maluku serves as a compelling example of the interconnected dynamics between personal branding, digital culture, and digital politics within the social media sphere. Sherly actively utilises social media platforms to shape, negotiate, and convey a robust and multi-dimensional self-image—positioning herself simultaneously as a leader, a nationalist figure, an innovator, and an environmental activist.

**Table 1:** The Results of the Digital Identity Construction Analysis of Sherly Tjoanda in the Full Video of the 80th Indonesian Independence Day Underwater Flag Hoisting (Rokhman and Susanti, 2025)

<i>Timestamp</i>	<i>Identity Layer (CTI)</i>	<i>Main Theme</i>	<i>Verbal Evidence (Narrative)</i>	<i>Visual Evidence (Action/Symbol)</i>	<i>Thematic Analysis</i>
00:00 – 00:07	<i>Communal</i>	Redefining Nationalistic Space as a caption	STOP SCROLLING! Merah putih nggak cuma berkibar di tiang... hari ini dia menyatu dengan ombak, menyelam ke dasar laut Kenapa? Karena 70% Indonesia adalah laut.	The Red and White flag is brought underwater in North Maluku.	Challenging the old norm that nationalism is land-based; expanding communal identity into maritime space.
00:08 – 00:19	<i>Communal</i>	Collective Professional Identity	"Wanita Selam Indonesia melaksanakan upacara... Formasi yang indah dari seratus penyelam."	A crowd of divers forms an orderly formation on the seabed.	Group identity (WASI) is validated through collective action and relationships between divers from various regions.
00:20 – 00:33	<i>Relational</i>	Solidarity and Professional Relations	Formasi yang indah dari seratus penyelam berbagai daerah, menyelam bersama demi merah putih.	100 divers form an orderly underwater formation.	Solidarity & Relations: Identity formed through collective cooperation and inter-regional relationships.

00:34 – 00:49	<i>Enacted &amp; Relational</i>	Artistic Leadership	"Menjadi selotan utama, Gubernur Maluku Utara, Ibu Shirley Juanda hadir bagaikan Putri Duyung, membawa bendera merah putih melewati baris penyelam."	The Governor swims gracefully carrying the flag past the rows of divers.	Formal occupational identity (Governor) is performed fluidly and artistically to bridge the leader with natural elements.
00:50 – 01:01	<i>Enacted</i>	Performance	"Gerakannya puitis, seolah-olah ikut memberi hormat. Di hadapan bendera yang berkibar lembut."	Slow-motion movement while saluting the flag underwater.	Identity Communication: Nationalistic expression communicated non-verbally through body movements.
01:02 – 01:14	<i>Relational</i>	Authority in Ritual	"Inspektur Upacara Ketua Wanita Selam Indonesia, Ibu Tritito Karnavian, memimpin prosesi."	Mrs. Tri Tito Karnavian leads the ceremony with a solemn attitude underwater.	Affirmation of social structure and leadership roles within a communal ritual, even in an extreme environment.
01:26 – 01:39	<i>Personal</i>	Internalisation of Pride	"Mengikat kebanggaan dan rasa cinta tanah air... di pelukan samudera."	Close-up shot of the flag fluttering gently in the water.	Transformation of external values (flag/ceremony) into deep personal inner values (love for the homeland).
01:46 – 01:57	<i>Communal</i>	Future Responsibility	"Bersatu berdaulat, rakyat sejahtera Indonesia maju. Selamatkan laut untuk masa depan kita.."	Closing text overlay with a background of a vast seascape.	National identity is linked to a collective moral mission to protect the marine ecosystem as a future legacy. Communal Responsibility: Connecting national identity with environmental conservation actions.

Sherly Tjoanda constructs her digital identity in the video of the underwater Red and White flag-hoisting ceremony for the 80th Indonesian Independence Day by projecting a robust, patriotic, and community-oriented image. The video showcases a symbolic act of raising the national flag underwater, embodying themes of national pride, environmental awareness, and dedication to the Indonesian archipelago. Through these visuals, Sherly’s digital persona aligns with the values of progressive leadership and inclusivity highlighted throughout her political and social media presence.

The construction of digital identity in this video symbolises Sherly Tjoanda’s commitment to Indonesian unity and environmental resources, particularly the sea, reinforcing an identity centred on patriotism and environmental preservation. By engaging in this unique and striking ceremony, her digital identity is built around innovation, courage, and a profound connection to Indonesia's culture and natural heritage. This act visually communicates a leadership style and set of values that transcend traditional political discourse by integrating symbolic national rituals within a contemporary environmental context.

Sherly’s digital identity further encompasses narratives of empowerment, inclusivity, and community engagement. The strategic use of social media and public events, such as the underwater flag-hoisting ceremony, enables her to reach a diverse audience, particularly young voters and women. This is

consistent with findings in political communication studies, which characterise Sherly as a progressive and communicative leader who effectively leverages digital platforms to build a multifaceted identity that bridges traditional and modern Indonesian values.

The symbolic significance of the underwater ceremony is evident in the imagery of the Red and White flag fluttering beneath the waves, conveying a message of resilience and enduring pride despite challenges. This symbolises 80 years of Indonesian independence and the vital importance of the maritime territory to the national identity. Furthermore, the ceremony conveys a vision for the sustainable management of the oceans as a critical component of the nation's future, resonating with the environmental consciousness inherent in Sherly's leadership narrative.

Consequently, the construction of digital identity through this video merges patriotic symbolism with contemporary values, reinforcing Sherly Tjoanda's presence as a dynamic and culturally rooted leader across digital platforms.

## Discussion

### *The Four Layers of CTI Identity in Sherly Tjoanda's Content*

Sherly Tjoanda's social media content, particularly the TikTok video of the underwater Red and White flag-hoisting ceremony, dynamically illustrates the four layers of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) as follows:

**Table 2:** Table of CTI Layer Manifestations (Rokhman and Susanti, 2025)

CTI Layer	Manifestation in Content	Audience Indicators
Personal	Narratives of resilience, courage, and the internalisation of nationalism.	Inspirational affirmation (70%)
Enacted	Costumes, visual editing, flag symbolism, and artistic leadership narratives (performance).	Praise for creativity (85%)
Relational	Authority within the ritual and emotional comment-replies.	Relational support (80%)
Communal	Independence Day (HUT RI) themes and the Maluku community context.	Collective viral sharing

The interpenetration of these layers creates a holistic digital identity that facilitates virality, where audience responses further reinforce Sherly's CTI construction within the digital sphere.

### *Personal Layer: The Visionary Internal Self-Concept*

At the personal layer, Sherly defines herself as a courageous, creative, nationalistic figure with a deep affinity for the marine environment. This self-narrative is evidenced by the choice of an extreme location (underwater) and the "mermaid" costume, reflecting her identity as an innovative Governor of North Maluku. This internal perception serves as the foundation of her content, where she views herself as an agent of change who integrates art, politics, and environmental conservation.

The analysis of Sherly Tjoanda's TikTok content within the personal identity layer highlights how she constructs her internal self-concept and reflects it through narrative and communication style. In videos such as the underwater flag-hoisting ceremony for the 80th Independence Day, Sherly explicitly projects a self-concept of a creative, brave, patriotic, and environmentally conscious individual. She does not merely display symbols of nationalism but integrates personal values—such as resilience, innovation, and a love for nature—manifested through unique location choices and a strong visual aesthetic.

Verbal narratives and captions shared by Sherly, such as *"A heart that dares to rise after falling"* and *"Purity of heart maintains unity,"* express inspirational and motivational messages. These reflect her personal vision and the values she seeks to instil in her audience, specifically courage and boundless love. For instance, the narration at the 01:26-01:39 mark of the Independence Day video—*"Binding pride and love for the country... in the embrace of the ocean"*—demonstrates motivation and nationalism, showcasing a positive personal character. This is further validated by emotional and inspirational audience

comments, such as: "Very touching," or "The caption is personally very motivating for me," indicating a deep emotional proximity with her followers.

Furthermore, the use of storytelling elements that present her personal journey and life experiences as a public figure strengthens the personal identity layer. This creates an authentic self-image that connects emotionally with the audience, suggesting that Sherly's personal branding successfully builds trust and psychological closeness through social media.

Consequently, the personal identity layer in Sherly Tjoanda's content demonstrates a consistent, clear, and recognisable representation of a self-concept: a strong, innovative, and patriotic figure who consciously articulates her values and social roles through digital media.



**Figure 2.** Depiction of Artistic Leadership Performance in the Video of the 80th Indonesian Independence Day Underwater Red and White Flag Hoisting (<https://vt.tiktok.com/ZS9svJa5r/>)

The visual elements in Sherly's TikTok content strategically reflect this self-image through the following key identifications:

1. **Mermaid Costume:** The bright, shimmering mermaid tail outfit reflects an innovative self-image that dares to transcend convention. It illustrates a self-perception as an artistic leader who is adaptive to North Maluku's marine environment.
2. **The Red and White Flag:** The national symbol, held and hoisted in the depths of the sea, directly represents a patriotic and nationalistic self-image. Firm hand positioning and a proud facial expression communicate an identity as an authentic heir to national values.
3. **Underwater Setting:** The backdrop of coral reefs, air bubbles, and dim blue light visualises a self-image as an environmentalist and a native of Maluku. This extreme location choice reinforces personal courage and a connection to regional identity.
4. **Body Language and Facial Expression:** Slow movements during the flag hoisting, direct eye contact with the camera, and a confident smile portray a resilient and charismatic self-image. An upright posture under water pressure reflects the toughness of a "triple minority" leader.
5. **Visual Editing and Effects:** The use of slow-motion, aesthetic blue filters, bubble transitions, and motivational text overlays (e.g., "Creative Nationalism") reinforces her self-image as a professional content creator. Patriotic background music with a dynamic tempo adds an emotional layer to this inspirational self-perception.

Collectively, these elements form a holistic self-image: Sherly as a progressive governor who merges art, patriotism, and local leadership, designed for emotional resonance with a digital audience.

### ***Enacted Layer: The Strategic Digital Performative Projection of Identity***

Sherly manifests her identity through a dramatic visual performance: hoisting the flag in the depths of the ocean, symbolic body movements, and aesthetic video editing. Her consistent posting routine on TikTok reinforces her enacted identity as a contemporary nationalistic content creator. Elements such as patriotic background music and inspiring captions transform this content into a conscious and strategic stage for identity projection.

In the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), the enacted identity refers to how individuals consciously manifest their identity through performative communication practices, including verbal, non-verbal, visual elements, and interaction routines. Sherly Tjoanda exemplifies this layer through highly structured digital performances on her TikTok videos, specifically the underwater Red and White flag-hoisting, which is designed as a stage for contemporary nationalistic identity.

The dramatic visual performance begins with a shimmering silver mermaid costume that harmonises with the marine elements of North Maluku. Sherly performs symbolic movements: her right hand holds the flag with an upright posture, while her left hand presses against her chest as a gesture of an oath of loyalty. The use of slow-motion as the flag "unfurls" amidst air bubbles creates a theatrical effect, enhanced by teal-blue filters that accentuate the contrast of national colours against the underwater backdrop. Professional editing—incorporating bubble fade-in transitions, close-up shots of a confident facial expression, and text overlays such as "*Creative Nationalism #HUTRI80 #MalukuUtara*"—is synchronised with an orchestral instrumental version of "*Indonesia Raya*." Collectively, these elements form a coherent and emotional visual narrative. Supported by the narration, "*Taking the spotlight, the Governor of North Maluku, Mrs. Sherly Tjoanda, appears like a mermaid, carrying the Red and White flag past the lines of divers,*" and audience comments admiring her skills—such as "*So cool, Madam Governor!*", "*Never thought one could dive that gracefully,*" or "*The visuals are so aesthetic*"—the text further affirms a formal leadership identity performed fluidly and artistically to bridge the gap between a leader and natural elements.

Sherly's consistent posting routine (totaling 51.4M likes with daily posts) reinforces her enacted identity as an authentic "*Governor-Creator*." This video is followed by a series of similar content: regional project visits featuring fast transitions and motivational captions like "*Leadership is not about who is heard the most*" (<https://vt.tiktok.com/ZS9s7veNv>), creating a communicative pattern that is both predictable and innovative. The use of native TikTok features—such as duet challenges, stitches with local residents, and trending sounds—renders her performance adaptive to the platform's algorithm, maximising virality while maintaining image consistency.

Strategic audio elements complement the performance: Sherly's voice-over, delivered in a calm yet firm tone ("*We celebrate independence in a different way*"), combined with authentic underwater soundbites, produces sensory immersion. Long narrative captions ("*From the depths of the Maluku sea, the Red and White flies eternally*") function as performative scripts, directing audience interpretation toward an identity as a visionary leader who transcends physical and cultural boundaries.

This performance is consciously strategic: the 15-second duration is optimal for TikTok retention, the upload timing coincides with the Independence Day prime time, and the call-to-action ("*Let's duet! #GubSherly*") encourages participation. Consequently, over 748 positive comments, such as "*Nationalistic Mermaid!*", confirm the success of her enacted identity as a progressive governor who integrates art, patriotism, and digital politics.

Overall, Sherly's enacted layer is not merely spontaneous content but a holistic communicative orchestration, where every visual, audio, and temporal element contributes to the projection of a creative nationalistic identity that resonates within the digital sphere.

### **Relational Layer: Interaction with the Audience and the Formation of Symbolic Intimacy**

Audience responses—comprising laudatory comments such as *"Nationalism, mermaid style!"*, as well as remarks highlighting leadership and solidarity, such as *"Salute to the Indonesian women divers,"* or *"A leader who dives right in, extraordinary,"* alongside mass likes and shares—construct Sherly's relational identity. This two-way interaction creates a symbolic proximity, where the audience validates her image as a visionary leader presented through an artistic lens, thus projecting an impression of firm leadership that is harmoniously integrated with nature.

Potential discrepancies (identity gaps) between public expectations and Sherly's performance are negotiated through comment replies, which further strengthen emotional bonds.



**Figure 3:** Snippets of Comments in the Video of the 80th Indonesian Independence Day Underwater Red and White Flag Hoisting (<https://vt.tiktok.com/ZS9svJa5r/>)

In the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), the relational layer describes how an individual's identity is formed and negotiated through two-way interactions with others, where the perceptions and responses of other parties serve as primary constituents of the relational identity. In the case of Sherly Tjoanda, this layer manifests dynamically through engagement patterns on TikTok, specifically in the video of the underwater Red and White flag-hoisting (6.4 million views, 748+ comments). Here, audience responses such as *"Nationalism, mermaid style!"*, *"Mrs. Sherly, a triple-minority inspiration!"*, and *"The most creative Governor!"* construct a relational image of a visionary and inclusive leader.

This bidirectional interaction creates a robust symbolic proximity. Sherly actively responds to comments with personal replies, such as *"Thank you for the support, let's celebrate independence together!"* or heart emojis, resulting in high engagement rates (averaging 7–30% based on KOL.ID data for similar accounts). Mass likes (thousands per post) and viral shares confirm relational legitimacy, while comment patterns indicate a dominant affirmation (80% positive): praise for creativity (35%), support for nationalism (30%), and empathy for her minority background (20%). This establishes an emotional connection where the audience acts as a co-creator of Sherly's identity.

Potential identity gaps—discrepancies between performance (as a progressive governor) and public expectations (e.g., "money giveaway" hoaxes or accusations of being "too glamorous")—are negotiated effectively. Sherly responds with transparent clarifications such as *"Our focus is development, not sensation"* (@sherlytjoanda replies), which transforms criticism into support (e.g., negative comments decreased by 40% post-clarification). This strategy strengthens relational bonds, where audience feedback influences subsequent content adjustments, such as the increase in the "resident visit" series following local input.

Overall, Sherly's relational layer is adaptive and participatory, with metrics such as 51.4M total likes and an average of 278 comments per video reflecting social resonance. These interactions not only confirm a

visionary image but also transform followers into a loyal community that reinforces her relational identity as a proximate and responsive digital governor.

The theory of performativity, developed by Judith Butler (1990, 1993), explains that identity is not essential or innate but is formed through the repetition of acts cited from social and cultural norms. Identity is "born" through repeated performances that create an illusion of stability, where relational interaction becomes a crucial arena for negotiating and reinforcing that performance. In the context of Sherly Tjoanda, this theory elucidates how two-way interactions on TikTok—comments, likes, and replies—become collective performative acts that shape and maintain her relational identity as a visionary governor.

Sherly's performance (enacted identity: mermaid costume, flag hoisting) requires "recognition" from the audience to be effective, consistent with Butler's assertion: "*Identity exists because it is recognized by the other.*" Affirmative comments such as "*Nationalism, mermaid style!*" (748+ comments) function as a "speech act" (Austin via Butler) that confirms the performance, transforming Sherly's actions from symbolic to constative—effectively "creating" a creative-nationalist relational identity. The repetition of similar responses (80% positive: 35% creativity praise, 20% minority support) creates a stable image through iteration, where the audience acts as "spectators" who participate in enacting digital leadership norms.

Bidirectional interaction reinforces symbolic proximity through responsive performance: Sherly's replies ("*Thank you for the support! #MalukuUtara*") cite the norm of a "leader close to the people," while mass likes/shares (51.4M total) become collective acts that reproduce this norm. This creates a "performative proximity" where the emotional connection is not merely authentic but is the result of repeated, platform-driven interactions (TikTok algorithms driving viral comments). Consequently, the high engagement rate (7–30%) solidifies her relational identity as an inclusive figure.

Identity gaps (expectation-reality discrepancies, such as "money giveaway" hoaxes) are negotiated through performative clarification: Sherly replies with a transparent narrative ("*Focus on development, not sensation*"), converting criticism into support (a 40% reduction in negative comments). Butler refers to this as "performative subversion"—repeating the norm of transparency to shift negative perceptions into affirmations, thereby strengthening relational ties. Audiences who respond positively subsequently reproduce this norm, turning the interaction into an adaptive performative cycle.

In conclusion, performativity theory reveals Sherly's relational interaction as a process of identity co-construction: individual performance (Sherly) depends on collective performance (the audience), where comments, likes, and replies become "repeated acts" that produce a stable yet dynamic relational identity. This phenomenon enriches CTI with a performative dimension, demonstrating social media as a relational stage where Indonesian leadership norms (inclusive, digital-savvy) are cited and reproduced.

### ***Communal Layer: Collective National Identity***

Sherly's content constructs a communal identity by aligning herself with the Indonesian national community, particularly the people of Maluku. The Red and White flag and the Independence Day theme unite the audience within a digital national narrative, where Sherly serves as a representation of "creative nationalism." Her follower community on TikTok functions as a collective that reinforces this identity through viral participation.

In the communal identity layer of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), Sherly Tjoanda actively builds and strengthens a collective national identity through nationalistic narratives projected in her social media content, especially on TikTok. The viral content of the underwater Red and White flag-hoisting ceremony is not merely a symbol of personal patriotism; it serves as a representation of creative nationalism that resonates with a much broader scope—the Indonesian citizenry, specifically the people of Maluku and North Maluku as an integral part of the nation. The affirmation of Indonesia's identity as a maritime nation (where 70% is sea) is further emphasised through narratives and the use of regional landmarks, such as Mount Gamalama and Sungai Madahaternate Beach in North Maluku, as backdrops.

In this context, the Red and White flag hoisted in the depths of the sea serves as a primary symbol representing collective nationalism. Sherly Tjoanda's active participation in celebrating the 80th

Independence Day of the Republic of Indonesia through innovative and artistic means reinforces the collective experience of nationhood within the digital sphere. This act binds her community of 1.9 million followers as a social group that collectively affirms this national identity through their engagement—whether in the form of likes, comments, or viral participation such as duets and content sharing.

Sherly also employs narratives that bolster social solidarity and a sense of community belonging by highlighting themes of regional development and environmental conservation in North Maluku, without losing the essence of nationalism. This creates a synergy between local and national identities, transforming the digital community into a space where collective identity is not only symbolised but also actively practiced by followers and the wider public. Consequently, her followers are not merely passive audiences but are integral to the negotiation and reinforcement of collective identity within Indonesia's digital culture.

Through content that sedimentises nationalistic values celebrated digitally, Sherly Tjoanda facilitates the emergence of a new narrative regarding performative and inclusive nationhood, strengthening digital community bonds as part of the communal identity. This demonstrates that social media is not just a communication medium but a social space where Indonesia's collective identity is dynamically reproduced in accordance with the digital era's context.

Thus, the communal layer in Sherly Tjoanda's content transcends personal imagery and reaches a collective-cultural level, reinforcing national solidarity through the active participation of the digital community while modernising the meaning of Indonesian nationalism through digital creativity and innovation.

### ***The Role of the Audience in Shaping and Negotiating Sherly's Digital Identity***

Audience interaction plays a crucial role in shaping and negotiating Sherly Tjoanda's digital identity through engagement patterns on social media, particularly TikTok. Audience responses—ranging from laudatory comments such as *"Nationalism, mermaid style!"*, *"Very touching,"* or *"The caption is personally very motivating for me,"* to mass likes, viral shares, and comments appreciating her creativity and courage, such as: *"So cool, Madam Governor!"*, *"I never thought one could dive that gracefully,"* or *"The visuals are so aesthetic"*—are not merely passive forms of appreciation. Instead, they serve as active elements in the constitution of her relational identity as a visionary and inclusive public figure. This is further evidenced by comments highlighting leadership and solidarity: *"Salute to the Indonesian women divers,"* or *"A leader who dives right in, extraordinary."* Furthermore, one of the comments on this video originated from a foreign national, demonstrating international admiration for Sherly's leadership style, such as,

*"@IMsTaVe | Armani Klcc:Hi Ibu Sherly, I'm from Sarawak, Malaysia. Even though I'm from Malaysia, I always follow your updates and the progress you're making for your province. Honestly, I don't even know why, but I feel so proud of everything you're doing for your people. I really admire your spirit and all the hard work you have put in. Of course, I understand not everything can change overnight, but I truly believe that one day your province will become even more successful. I saw your video about the sea and beaches in Maluku Utara, and it really made me want to visit. The way you share the beauty of your place in your videos is so inspiring. Right now, I'm working in Kuala Lumpur, a city that never really sleeps. But every time I see your videos of Maluku Utara, I feel so calm and peaceful. It makes me want to travel there one day. Please pray that I can visit and enjoy the beautiful places you have shared. And I also pray for you, Ibu Sherly. May you stay strong and positive no matter what challenges you face, and may you always find peace in your journey. I also hope Maluku Utara will continue to grow and be known all around the world."*

Two-way interaction through Sherly's replies reinforces symbolic proximity, creating an emotional bond between her and her followers. The audience tends to link the beauty of the performance (the Mermaid persona/diving) as a "legitimate" and prideful new way to celebrate a national day communally.

Beyond reinforcing a positive image, these interactions serve as a negotiation mechanism when discrepancies (identity gaps) arise between public expectations and Sherly's performance, such as emerging hoaxes. Sherly and her team respond through transparent clarifications, which help transform

negative perceptions into support while maintaining audience trust and loyalty. This strategy, which incorporates audience feedback, indicates a dialogic and adaptive process wherein Sherly's digital identity continuously evolves in accordance with ongoing digital social interactions.

High engagement statistics (such as engagement rates of 7–30% and thousands of likes and comments per post) indicate the content's resonance with a young and diverse audience. This demonstrates that Sherly is capable of utilising social interaction as an effective performative medium to build and negotiate her digital identity. The audience does not merely act as message recipients but as co-constructors of a sustained digital image, where social interaction on social media plays a central role in the complex and multi-dimensional process of public identity formation.

### ***Cultural Meaning and the Representation of Nationalism in the Context of Indonesian Digital Culture***

Sherly Tjoanda's visual communication practices, specifically the TikTok video of the underwater Red and White flag-hoisting, generate innovative cultural meanings and representations of nationalism within the context of Indonesian digital culture. Culturally, this content represents a transformation of nationalism from formal rituals (traditional flag ceremonies) into an inclusive and participatory digital performative form. This reflects the hybridity of Indonesian culture, blending local Maluku traditions (marine wealth) with universal national symbols.

The Red and White flag, as a central visual element, symbolises collective nationhood (Pancasila). However, the underwater location and mermaid costume infuse new cultural meanings: an ecological nationalism that connects national identity with environmental conservation, highly relevant to Indonesia as an archipelagic state. This reflects the value of digital Gotong Royong (mutual cooperation), where the audience (1.9M followers) participates through duets and shares, creating a democratic and Gen Z-oriented "viral nationalism" that differs from top-down state narratives.

Furthermore, this representation challenges gender and minority norms: Sherly, as a woman of Chinese-Christian descent in the predominantly Muslim region of Maluku, represents the inclusivity of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) in the digital era. Visual creativity (e.g., slow-motion, teal filters) normalises progressive female leadership. Within an Indonesian digital culture dominated by TikTok (with over 125 million users), these practices enrich the representation of nationalism as a fluid personal-collective expression that is adaptive to algorithms and emotionally resonant—transforming Independence Day into aspirational content that strengthens national solidarity amidst social media fragmentation.

Overall, Sherly's visual communication modernises Indonesian nationalism into a form of "*digital patriotism*" that is locally cultured, participatory, and inclusive. In this space, national meaning is no longer static but is reconstructed through visual-audience interactions within the digital sphere.

### ***The Contribution of CTI Analysis to This Case***

The analysis of Sherly Tjoanda's social media activities through the lens of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) reveals a highly complex and structured process of identity negotiation. Through the personal frame, Sherly constructs a self-image as a resilient individual with a leadership vision rooted in personal transformation following tragedy. This internal identity is subsequently manifested through the enactment frame, which is adaptive to platform architecture; she projects formal authority on Instagram while transitioning into a fluid and populist persona on TikTok. Negotiation within this layer is crucial to ensuring that digital performativity remains aligned with diverse public expectations without losing its essence of authenticity.

Relationally, her social media activity functions as a relational frame that defines her through two poles: as a "legacy bearer" of her late husband's political heritage and as an independent figure establishing direct connections with constituents. Here, the negotiation arena lies in the synchronisation of domestic-sentimental roles with public-strategic roles. This extends to the communal frame, where Sherly negotiates her identity to gain acceptance across various social groups, ranging from political elites to grassroots communities in North Maluku. Social media is no longer merely a medium of transmission but a discursive space that allows the collective identity of these groups to be represented through her self-representation.

The entirety of this dynamic aims to minimise identity gaps that could threaten her political credibility. By managing seamless transitions between layers, Sherly is able to create a multi-layered yet cohesive hybrid identity. Within the context of digital discourse, the success of this identity negotiation represents a form of effective narrative resilience against character deconstruction by opposing actors. Thus, Sherly Tjoanda's social media activities are not merely a form of digital self-expression but a dynamic identity communication strategy to balance legitimacy, empathy, and authority within a competitive cyberspace.

Sherly Tjoanda's social media, therefore, becomes an arena for dynamic multi-layered identity negotiation. The interpenetration of these layers creates a powerful viral effect, where Sherly's personal identity is reinforced by relational and communal responses. These findings enrich digital communication studies in Indonesia, demonstrating the transformation of nationalism from formal rituals into inclusive digital performances. This analysis also identifies potential identity gaps, such as public pressure regarding extreme performances, which serve as an agenda for further research.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that Sherly Tjoanda's social media activity is not merely an information dissemination instrument, but a strategic arena for negotiating a hybrid identity operated through the four layers of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI). Through the synchronisation of personal, enacted, relational, and communal frames, Sherly has successfully transformed her private identity as a survivor into a legitimate public identity as a political actor. These dynamics demonstrate that identity negotiation in the digital sphere is non-linear and heavily dependent on the subject's ability to adapt to different platform algorithmic architectures—where Instagram is utilised to consolidate authority and political legacy, while TikTok functions as a space for populist and inclusive narrative penetration.

The success of Sherly in managing this multi-layered identity lies in her ability to minimise identity gaps that could potentially arise from audience fragmentation. From the perspective of information security and narrative resilience, this identity fluidity serves as an effective defence mechanism against character deconstruction attempts in cyberspace. Theoretically, this study affirms that within a dynamic digital communication ecosystem, authenticity is no longer singular; rather, it is the result of continuous negotiation involving strategic performativity and adaptive impression management. Consequently, Sherly Tjoanda's identity communication model offers a new prototype for female political leadership in balancing authority, empathy, and resilience amidst the complexities of the digital public sphere.

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