



From TikTok to the Ballot Box: Parasocial Relationships and the Construction of Presidential Choice in the 2024 Election

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ABSTRACT

The 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election shows various communication phenomena. With Generation Z and Millennials comprising the majority of voters, political communication has increasingly shifted toward personal, emotional appeals through social-media figures, making it urgent to understand whether such bonds translate into political choice. In the era of media convergence, audiences are both consumers and producers of content, and one rapidly growing phenomenon is politainment on TikTok. Figures such as Major Teddy (now Lieutenant Colonel), an aide to one of the presidential candidates, attract the public, especially young women, through content displaying his professionalism and visual appeal. This study uses a qualitative phenomenological approach involving six informants to reveal how idolizing Major Teddy forms a parasocial relationship shaping his fans' political preferences. The results show that the parasocial relationship established with Major Teddy plays an important role in increasing political engagement and shaping the political views of his followers. This effect is most significant among first-time voters who tend to be more responsive to political communication based on public figures on social media. Thus, this study highlights the important role of parasocial phenomena in the dynamics of digital political communication in Indonesia. Theoretically, it contributes to Political Parasocial Relationship, whereas such relations are assumed to arise from celebrity appeal, this study shows they can instead grow from qualities resembling institutional trust, the orderliness, privacy guarding conduct, and professionalism of a military aide which informants ranked above their admiration for popular idols.

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1. Introduction

The 2024 Indonesian presidential election was largely determined by young voters. Of the 204.8 million people recorded on the permanent voter list, Generation Z and Millennials accounted for 56.45 percent, or more than 113 million voters ([Komisi Pemilihan Umum, 2024](#)). This means that more than half of the electorate belonged to generations that grew up alongside the internet and obtain most of their political information through the screens of their phones rather than through party offices or televised debates ([Jalli et al., 2025](#)). This demographic reality matters because political communication directed at young people is shifting toward a more personal and emotional mode.



When candidates display their private side on social media, voters tend to treat personal character as a shortcut for evaluating and deciding their choice, and the closeness formed from this can carry as much weight as the programs being promised (McGregor, 2018). Consequently, understanding how this emotional bond is formed, and whether it genuinely translates into a political choice, becomes an important question for the study of digital political communication.

Much of this shift has taken place on TikTok. In early 2024, the platform reached 126.8 million users aged eighteen and above in Indonesia, and although its user penetration rate lies below that of WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook, Indonesians spend more time on TikTok than on any other platform, averaging roughly 38 hours each month (DataReportal & Social, 2024). During the 2024 campaign period, TikTok became a central political arena, and its recommendation system tended to privilege emotionally evocative and easily shareable content over content with substantive or fact-based value (Jalli et al., 2025). The result is a form of politainment that condenses complex political issues into short, personal clips. It is precisely in such an environment that the boundary between a public figure and his idealized image begins to blur a condition that Baudrillard termed hyperreality, in which audiences connect more with the representation than with the actual person.

This kind of one-directional bond has its own term in communication studies Horton & Wohl, 2006, 1956) introduced the concept of the parasocial relationship to describe the illusion of an interpersonal relationship that audiences construct with media figures they have in fact never met. In today's short-video ecosystem, however, that closeness is no longer entirely one-directional, because features such as comment sections, duets, and live broadcasts enable repeated micro-interactions that intensify the parasocial bond and accelerate the transition from merely recognizing a figure to feeling close to him (Ali et al., 2022; Qurroh'Aini et al., 2026; Salisa & Sujiwa, 2026).

As politics becomes increasingly personal, this bond extends into the electoral arena and now functions as a tangible predictor of political behavior. Several studies show that a parasocial relationship with Donald Trump increased trust in him and the intention to vote for him Gabriel et al. (2018), that the intensity of a political parasocial relationship predicts political support Cohen, (2009), and that such a relationship was among the strongest predictors of voting preference in the 2019 Israeli election, at times even outweighing ideology (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Moreover, this influence does not always come from the candidate directly. Hoewe et al. (2026) demonstrate that elements merely associated with a candidate, such as a pet displayed on social media, can heighten the personalization of the candidate, form a parasocial connection, and in turn raise voting intention. Research on celebrity endorsement likewise finds that admired public figures can encourage young people to engage in politics because they are perceived as authentic and relatable (Austin et al., 2008).

Building on this empirical evidence, two gaps serve as the foundation of this study. First, most studies of political parasocial relationships are quantitative and survey-based, measuring the strength of the bond or its average effect on voting intention rather than exploring how voters actually experience that bond in their own words. Yet emotional attachment does not automatically translate into attitudinal change. A field experiment among young people found that political content on TikTok did indeed heighten negative emotional affect but did not necessarily alter their political attitudes Alsharawy et al. (2026) a gap that in fact calls for a closer understanding of voters' experience. The systematic review by Permana & Alfian (2023) affirms a strong link between parasocial relationships and the voting inclination of first-time voters, but as a review it aggregates findings and does not reach the lived experience behind them. Second, almost all prior research places political candidates or entertainment celebrities at the center of the parasocial bond, while

far less is known about cases in which the admired figure is neither a candidate nor a professional celebrity, but rather a supporting figure whose appeal can in fact transfer to a candidate. These two gaps are significant because they suggest that parasocial influence may not operate uniformly across every voter. Voters with differing initial political commitments are likely to respond to the same figure differently, so that the question is not merely whether the bond exerts influence, but how it is experienced and for whom it is most decisive.

Major Teddy offers an apt phenomenon for addressing this problem. During the 2024 campaign period, Major Teddy, an aide-de-camp to one of the presidential candidates, drew considerable public attention, particularly from young women. From the perspective of his admirers, he was regarded not only as a competent figure but also as an attractive individual, which fostered emotional involvement. This gave rise to an unofficial fan group that called itself Cegil MayTed, an abbreviation of Cewe Gilanya Mayor Teddy ("Major Teddy's crazy girls"). Although, following an Army decision in February 2025, his rank has now officially become Lieutenant Colonel, this study continues to use the appellation Major Teddy, because that is the identity attached to him in the public mind during the period under analysis.

As a research case, Major Teddy is analytically valuable precisely because he is neither a candidate nor an entertainer, so that his parasocial mechanism is detached from any electoral interest of his own and from celebrity-style self-promotion. He is also known to guard his privacy closely, keeping his personal Instagram account locked and avoiding TikTok, so that the fandom surrounding him grew without any deliberate effort at image-building. His persona rests on professionalism and military discipline rather than entertainment, enabling this study to examine parasocial attachment in a context rarely addressed in the existing literature. This pattern of transferred trust has begun to be recognized in the literature as that of political relational influencers, that is, non-political figures whose parasocial credibility is harnessed to be redirected toward a political figure or cause (Goodwin et al., 2023). Interestingly, Major Teddy was never deliberately mobilized as a campaigner, so that his case extends this notion to a situation in which the transfer of trust occurs without any planned mobilization. Selecting Major Teddy therefore allows the researcher to observe how a parasocial bond with a non-candidate figure can be redirected toward the candidate he accompanies, something that would remain obscured had a more conventional case been chosen.

On this basis, this study examines how the admirers of Major Teddy form a parasocial relationship with him, as well as whether and for whom that relationship influences their inclination to vote in the presidential election. Rather than assuming that Major Teddy's popularity in itself determines political choice, this study treats the matter as an open question and listens carefully to how admirers with differing degrees of attachment recount their own experiences. Its novelty lies in shifting the focus of political parasocial research from the candidate to a supporting figure whose emotional appeal transfers to the candidate, and in offering a phenomenological reading of voters' lived experience rather than a survey. In doing so, this study contributes theoretically by extending the scope of political parasocial relationships beyond candidates and entertainment celebrities; methodologically, by bringing a phenomenological and interpretive lens to a phenomenon usually measured quantitatively; and empirically, by documenting the dynamics of digital political communication among young Indonesian voters in the 2024 election. Two questions guide this article. First, how do admirers experience and form a parasocial relationship with Major Teddy? Second, does that parasocial relationship influence their inclination to vote, and for what kind of voter is that influence most decisive?

2. Theoretical Framework

Parasocial Relationship

The parasocial concept was introduced by Horton and Wohl in 1956 as an innovative perspective in media and communication, highlighting the importance of the relationship between media actors and audience (Nabi & Oliver, 2009). They noted that individuals in the media direct their social behavior and communication to the audience in a way similar to real interpersonal communication. Parasocial interactions occur when the audience responds to media personas (character in the media) through various ways such as talking back in front of the screen, laughing, or feeling emotion towards the characters in the media (Cohen, 2009). Parasocial interactions are characterized by feelings of closeness between audience and media persona. Horton and Wohl described this interaction as a distant approach where it is one-way. Media persona plays a central role, and the interaction that takes place emphasizes the relational aspect of communication, with communicators seen as partners in establishing relationships with audiences (Nabi & Oliver, 2009).

From an audience perspective, the intensity of parasocial relationships resemble the intensity of romantic and close social relationships, they evolve similar to the social relationships found in the real world. Tukachinsky & Stever (2019) then divides two types of meaning into parasocial relationship experiences, 1) Para-friendship relation or parasocial friendship is described as a feeling of interest in media figures, a sense of solidarity, a sense of trust that is formed, wanting two-way communication that leads to openness between the two. 2) Para-romantic love, in contrast to parasocial friendship, in parasocial love there is a strong intention of the attendance, a longing to be physically close, and an openness to be accepted and noticed.

In the contemporary short-video ecosystem, this one-way closeness described by Horton & Wohl (2006) is no longer purely one-directional, platforms such as TikTok enable rapid, repeated micro-interactions (comments, duets, live features) that intensify parasocial bonding at a scale and speed unavailable in traditional broadcast media, effectively compressing the time needed for audiences to move from mere awareness of a persona to a felt sense of friendship or attachment toward them. This intensified, platform-driven form of parasocial bonding becomes especially consequential when the persona in question is not an entertainer but a political actor – a shift discussed in the following section. Every individual on Tok-tok assumes the role of a performer, expressing their particular political perspectives through audiovisual performances. This phenomenon leads to a heightened level of interactivity in political communication (Ali et al., 2022). In the Indonesian context, a netnographic study of TikTok live streaming similarly finds that repeated on-platform interaction can build a trans-parasocial bond, in which viewers gradually come to feel personally acquainted with a persona they have never actually met (Laurensia & Ernungtyas, 2024).

Parasocial Experience in Political Scope

As politics becomes increasingly personalized, it opens space for charismatic figures who might previously have struggled to advance, being seen as too politically risky or lacking substantive qualifications (Moy et al., 2005). Parasocial relationships are often part of political communication strategy, and this politainment trend tends to obscure substantive political discourse, media coverage focuses more on politicians' private lives than on core political issues. Audiences, who are simultaneously voters, tend to feel comfortable with choices that feel personally close to them, sometimes developing personal attachment to parties, candidates, or other political entities. When trust in figures outweighs trust in institutions, parasocial relationships with politicians become increasingly important predictors of political support. Public favorability toward things not directly

related but associated with a candidate (e.g., pets) can even increase candidate personalization, creating parasocial connections and positive attitudes that translate into greater voting intention (Hoewe et al., 2026).

This shift aligns with the broader move in political communication from ideological competition toward political personalization, where candidates are evaluated on personality, authenticity, and everyday performance (Parmelee et al., 2023). On the same side, Schmuck et al. (2022) show that influencers and highly personalized political communication simplify political information in ways that shape young people's political interest, efficacy, and engagement. While Riedl et al. (2021) argue that the rise of political influencers reflects broader shifts in digital political communication, where influence increasingly depends on interpersonal credibility rather than institutional authority. This is reinforced by the rise of influencer politics where there is less of official campaign communication, political actors now operate within creator-centered ecosystems where visibility depends on engagement, authenticity, and relatability. Political influencers function as intermediaries between institutional politics and digital publics, translating political issues into accessible, emotionally engaging narratives, in that sense their influence rooted not merely in information dissemination but in the interpersonal trust built through repeated audience interaction (Riedl et al., 2021).

Several factors shape the formation of parasocial relationships within the political sphere: 1) positive media exposure ahead of elections, which strengthens politicians' public image; 2) media that helps politicians convey their vision and mission, where natural self-disclosure on social media boosts electability by appearing authentic and relatable to novice voters, further strengthening parasocial relationships; 3) celebrity endorsement (singers, athletes, influencers), effective in increasing voter participation, particularly among novice voters who view celebrities as authentic, relatable individuals; 4) narrative campaigns built on personal stories that build emotional attachment and trust toward political figures; and 5) authentic personal branding on social media, which increases electability while strengthening parasocial relationships with voters (Permana & Alfian, 2023). This mirrors the concept of political relational influencers where non-political social media figures are mobilized by parties or candidates to leverage the parasocial trust they've already built with their own followers and transfer it toward a political figure or cause (Goodwin et al., 2023). This transfer of favorable meaning from a trusted figure to the object he is linked with echoes the meaning transfer model, which describes how the qualities attached to an endorser can move onto whatever that endorser is seen to support (McCracken, 1989).

Taken together, the literature suggests that political parasocial relationships are shaped not only by the visibility or popularity of political figures but also by the perceived personal qualities and patterns of interaction that make them feel socially familiar and trustworthy. In digital environments such as TikTok, repeated exposure, interactive features, authenticity, and personalized communication can strengthen this perceived closeness and make political figures more relatable to audiences. At the same time, the development of such relationships does not necessarily mean that audiences will be directly persuaded politically, as admiration, emotional attachment, and political influence may operate as distinct processes. Therefore, political parasocial relationships can be understood as a relational mechanism through which audiences develop a sense of familiarity, trust, and emotional connection with political figures, while the extent to which these relationships shape political attitudes or voting decisions may vary across individuals and contexts. This perspective provides the theoretical basis for examining how perceived closeness with a political Fig. 1 is formed and how, if at all, it relates to political decision-making in the Indonesian digital media context.

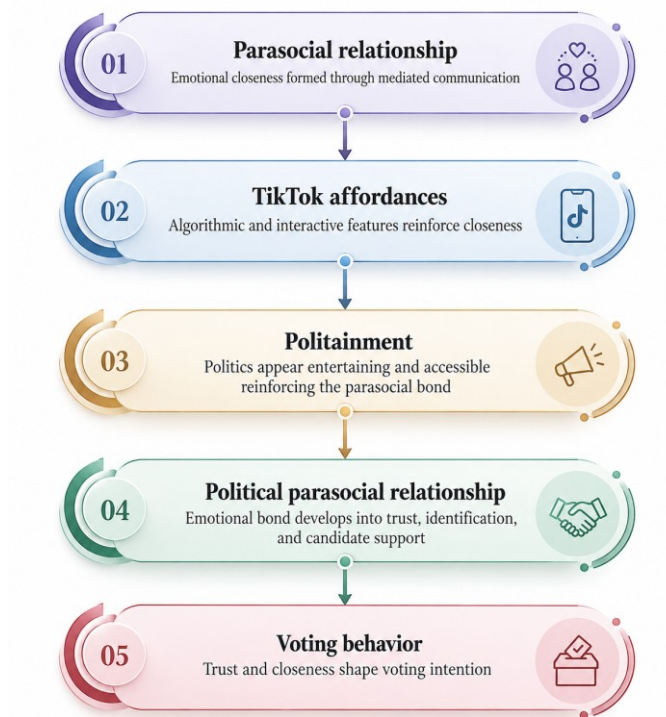


Fig. 1. Conceptual model

3. Method

A qualitative research approach using the phenomenological method was adapted for this study. The main point for researchers in a phenomenological study is to try to understand how individuals experience a particular phenomenon from their own perspective by entering the inner world of each participant (Gläser-Zikuda et al., 2020). The phenomenon in this study is the parasocial relationship of Major Teddy fans.

The specified criteria for informants determined were 1) Women who have and use their voting rights in the 2024 election, 2) TikTok users with high interactivity, 3) Prosumers of content about Major Teddy. The informants were selected based on purposive sampling techniques that have the basis for acquiring all possible cases according to certain criteria (Neuman, 2014). Informant recruitment began with an observation of TikTok using the search keyword "Major Teddy" to identify fanbase content owners as well as accounts actively commenting on such content. This observation was limited to publicly available activity and served solely to screen prospective informants against the study criteria, rather than as analyzed data; no private information was collected at this stage. Identified accounts were then contacted directly, with researchers sending an explanation of the study's purpose along with an informed consent form. Interviews were conducted only with those who voluntarily agreed to participate in Table 1.

Table 1. Informant Background

Code	Age	Domicile	Likes on TikTok
IN1	32	Jakarta	22.800
IN2	25	West Kalimantan	3.871
IN3	27	Central Java	11.300
IN4	22	North Sumatra	34.800
IN5	24	South Sulawesi	192.500
IN6	19	Banten	154.900

The relatively small number of informants (n=6) is consistent with IPA's idiographic commitment to detailed, case-by-case analysis rather than statistical generalization. The number of participants in IPA studies typically keeping the sample small and homogeneous is an appropriate strategy for retaining depth of analysis at the level of the individual case (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Foundational guidance on this method likewise recommends a small participant pool of roughly three to six people, so that the six informants in this study sit at the upper end of the range considered appropriate for a detailed idiographic analysis (Eatough & Smith, 2017). In-depth interviews were conducted online via Zoom lasting from 45-60 minutes each informant. All sessions were recorded with informants' consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure data accuracy. The interview guide was semi-structured, developed from relevant literature, and used probing questions to explore eight subthemes: becoming guidances, face-to-face desires, intimacy, emotional attraction, physical attraction, egalitarian communication, and becoming a support system. Data were analyzed following the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as outlined by Eatough & Smith (2017), which centers on a layered interpretative process through what they term the "double hermeneutic" the researcher making sense of participants making sense of their own experience. Transcripts were read repeatedly and annotated to identify units of meaning, which were then mapped onto the codes derived from the study's theoretical framework (the eight subthemes above).

In line with this, a priori coding framework was used, each informant's statements were mapped onto the existing codes, and no significant new codes or themes emerged beyond the interview with the sixth informant (IN6). This consistency by the sixth informant was taken as an indicator that saturation had been reached for the constructed thematic framework. It should be noted that all six informants were women who already idolized Major Teddy prior to the study, meaning this research captures the perspective of fans with pre-existing emotional attachment to the figure. This homogeneous sampling strategy aligns with IPA's aim of understanding a phenomenon in depth among those who experience it most directly, but it also limits representation of more varied perspectives for instance, TikTok users familiar with Major Teddy who are not (or not yet) fans. The findings should therefore be read as an in-depth account of parasocial relationships among engaged fans, rather than as representative of Major Teddy's broader audience.

4. Result and Discussion

Analysis of the interview data produced four themes: parasocial relationships, para-romantic love, para-friendship, and the construction of presidential choice. Rather than reporting the full coding scheme, this section presents each theme's sub-themes and illustrative codes in condensed tables and devotes the narrative to an analytical account of how the themes relate to one another from an initial sense of trust and closeness, through its emotional and romantic elaboration, to its varied, and in most cases explicitly denied, bearing on political choice. Direct quotations are used throughout to keep the interpretation grounded in informants' own words.

Parasocial Relationships: Closeness at a Distance

Experience feeling close to public figures is defined as parasocial relationships, where interactions in those relationships form them. The term 'interaction' is not limited to the interaction with the public figure, but also to any contacts that occur to the content and exposure to information from a parasocial relationship. Informants' parasocial relationships with Major Teddy were organized around four sub-themes: regarding him as a role model and source of guidance, a desire to meet him face to face, a desire for intimate closeness, and a sense of familiarity with him.

Table 2 summarizes these sub-themes; together they accounted for 73 of the 143 codes generated from the data, making this the most heavily populated of the four themes and, as discussed below, the foundation on which the other three themes build.

Table 2. Parasocial Relationship Theme

No.	Sub-themes	n	Illustrative Codes	Gloss
1	Guidance	25	role model; motivated by his education; reflecting his kindness; loves his country	Trust built from perceived character, education, and public conduct
2	Face-to-face desire	12	asking for a photo; would freeze if meeting him; send my regards to Mr. Prabowo	Wish for direct contact, tempered by nervousness/deference
3	Intimacy	24	curious about his perfume; how does he approach love? does he read fan comments?	Interest in personal/private details as a proxy for closeness
4	Familiarity	12	same birthday; similar height; identical personality	Self-other merging via perceived similarity

Note. The “n” column indicates the number of codes generated within each sub-theme; illustrative codes are a non-exhaustive selection.

Trust in Major Teddy (the guidance sub-theme) was anchored in three qualities: his educational background, his personal character, and his career achievements, all witnessed at a distance through social media. “In terms of the kindness he has shown to several people, which was then shared by a number of accounts on social media, we admire that and make him our role model. Because of his kindness, we feel encouraged to act better ourselves and we admire the education he received. All of this makes us want to upgrade ourselves and our education to be equal to him. Even if we can’t match his education, at least we can follow his goodness” (IN1). A second informant located this same trust in his professionalism, “I only came to know Major Teddy fairly recently, around Mr. Prabowo’s campaign. But even now, the feeling of awe is still there ... if anything it has grown stronger the more I see of his activities. He is truly a role model” (IN4).

This sense of guidance is what motivates the second sub-theme, the desire to meet Major Teddy face to face expressed by six of six informants, whether to ask for a photograph, to talk with him, or to be added on social media. Yet the desire for closeness did not always sit comfortably with informants, “I would definitely freeze up if I met him, so I would just want to take a photo because I’m too afraid to talk to him directly” (IN3), a reminder that closeness in a parasocial relationship is imagined rather than rehearsed, and can provoke anxiety once an actual encounter is contemplated. Finn (1997) found that extraverted individuals, despite stronger interpersonal skills, are not more inclined to pursue parasocial closeness – they tend to seek social satisfaction through real-life interaction instead, and are in fact less likely to experience media figures as personally close. This helps explain why the desire for closeness with Major Teddy was expressed so consistently regardless of how socially confident individual informants otherwise seemed, and why it could coexist with the performance anxiety IN3 describes.

Then in the interview process, the third sub-theme concerns intimate matters, which is a topic that makes the informants excited. This is shown by the uniformity of their tone and intonation when talking about Major Teddy. As a member of the Indonesian Army, Major Teddy is known as someone who really protects his privacy by avoiding TikTok and locking his personal Instagram account (around the electoral time). However, this makes fans even more curious about him. Starting from the items he used, his pets, his romantic life, and all these information is deemed necessary to know in order to create a sense of closeness or intimacy. Stein et al. (2024) illustrate

that curiosity and attraction increase the audience's tendency to form parasocial relationships and therefore is a cognitive, affective, and behavioral response to a media figure.

The status of Major Teddy, who is currently known to be single, also provokes fans to examine his personal life, "Everything about him I'm obsessed with. But now what's really uproar is the news that he already has a girlfriend. Cegil all over Indonesia has heart broken. How does he do the relationship? How often does he communicate with his girlfriend? What is the first text he sends to her? In the midst of your busy schedule, you still have time to fall in love, man?" (IN 5). Apart from that, the feeling of wanting to know his whereabouts was also evident from the statement of one of the informants, "Does he often read Cegil's comments on his social media? How did he react to seeing Cegil's comments and videos? You call us as a phenomenon, we call you as a gift" (IN 6).

The third sub-theme, intimacy, extends this desire for closeness into curiosity about Major Teddy's private life, the items he uses, his pets, his romantic status, treated by informants as necessary details for a felt sense of intimacy. This curiosity was sharpened, "I'm obsessed with everything about him. But what's really causing an uproar right now is the news that he already has a girlfriend, fans all over Indonesia ('Cegil') are heartbroken. How does he handle the relationship?" (IN5). The final sub-theme, familiarity, shows how this curiosity can turn into self-comparison, "A lot of people say my face looks like his, our birthdays are close, our height is nearly the same, and even our way of working is similar" (IN1). Repeated, replayable exposure on TikTok appears to intensify this process [Giles \(2003\)](#) so that admiration for Major Teddy comes to double as a form of self-affirmation and perceived similarity to him becomes, for these informants, a kind of evidence of their own worth. It is this combination of trust, desire for closeness, and self-referential identification that carries forward into the more explicitly emotional themes discussed next ([Stever et al., 2025](#)).

Fake Romance: Parasocial Love and Friendship

Where the parasocial relationship theme describes trust and closeness in general terms, the third and fourth themes show informants translating that closeness into the specific vocabularies of romantic love and friendship, the two relationship categories most familiar to them from everyday life. Love was expressed through emotional and physical attraction ("if only he were my partner"); friendship, through loyalty and support ("he must be a loyal friend"). [Table 3](#) summarizes the 28 love-related codes, and [Table 4](#) the 21 friendship-related codes.

Table 3. Parasocial Love Theme

No.	Sub-themes	n	Illustrative Codes	Gloss
1	Emotional	16	excessive act of service; his photos lift my mood; if only he were my husband; loyal; devoted to his country and partner	Idealized projection romantic/domestic
2	Physical	12	undeniable physique; he's handsome; baby face; his dimples; his handsomeness never fades	Attraction anchored in appearance

Major Teddy's protective, masculine persona underlies the emotional sub-theme, "His act of service is really out of the ordinary. I completely melt when I imagine being treated like that, like a queen. When I'm in a really bad mood because of work, scrolling TikTok and seeing his photos is enough to lift my mood again" (IN1). The physical sub-theme was equally salient as it says "He's handsome, almost the perfect human being... fair-skinned, sweet, charismatic" (IN5).

Tukachinsky & Stever (2019) explained that in the early stages of a parasocial relationship, individuals will show high interest, make social comparisons, and have an interest in knowing more about the media figure. However, at this stage, they do not yet have a high level of commitment, in-depth knowledge, understanding, or strong emotional ties to the media figure. These elements will emerge in later stages in the development of a parasocial relationship. Bond (2021) further demonstrates that parasocial closeness can increase over time, suggesting that emotional proximity is capable of developing through continued mediated engagement. So, at the beginning of a parasocial relationship, attraction and interest are the most dominant, while commitment and emotional ties develop over time.

Table 4. Parasocial Friendship Theme

No.	Sub-themes	n	Illustrative Codes	Gloss
1	Communication	9	want to be escorted; if I was part of his staff; set time to talk privately; if only he knew me	Imagined openness/trust as if in a real friendship
2	Support	12	give him compliments; defending him in the comments; supporting his career; hope he becomes a general soon	Loyalty expressed through public advocacy and well-wishing

Hays in Tukachinsky & Stever (2019) provides a review of the existing literature on real-life friendship and finds that friendship in adulthood is determined by communication and openness. Meanwhile communication styles can shape audiences' perceptions of a public figure as more amicable and friend-like, which is subsequently associated with greater trust (Tsai & Men, 2017). To discuss the theme of parasocial friendship, the subthemes of 'communication' and 'support' are key, a sense of friendship will always start from trust, a desire to share, and help each other. The six informants agreed that if there was a possibility for them to be in a social environment with Major Teddy, then of course they would be very open and trust Major Teddy.

This matches the informants' language borrowed the vocabulary of commitment ("husband," "partner," "fated") while describing what remained, on their own account, one-sided curiosity and attraction rather than a reciprocal bond. The friendship theme follows the same pattern along the dimensions Hays in Tukachinsky & Stever (2019) identifies as central to real-life friendship that is communication and openness, recast here as 'communication' and 'support'. "If I were part of the Kartanegara (Prabowo) staff, I would definitely be the first to try to get close and familiar with him... talking about the future together would be fun" (IN6). In practice, however, 'support' was mostly enacted unilaterally, for instance by defending Major Teddy in social-media comments, "Cheer him on and defend him in the TikTok comments if anyone posts something nasty... I'll wait for you to become a general" (IN5). Love and friendship therefore function here less as descriptions of an actual relationship than as the closest available emotional templates through which informants could articulate an otherwise undefined feeling of closeness, a feeling that, for some informants, extended into the political domain discussed next.

From Parasocial Relationships to the Ballot Box

The fourth theme examines whether this same sense of closeness carried over into informants' political attitudes. Construction, in the parasocial-relationship literature, refers to the process by which perception and attitude toward an object are shaped through the interpretation of information and social interaction; celebrity endorsement is one documented pathway through which such construction can shape voters' beliefs and behaviour (Cohen & Holbert, 2021). Table 5 summarizes the 21 codes obtained, grouped by degree of reported influence.

Table 5. President's Choice Construction

No.	Sub-themes	n	Illustrative Codes	Gloss
1	Not-Influenced	12	supported Mr. Prabowo since 2019; don't vote just for Major Teddy's looks; before knowing Major Teddy	Pre-existing political stance, independent of Major Teddy
2	Familiarized	6	wanted to vote 02 from the beginning; bonus now guarded by Major Teddy; my hopes for Prabowo keep growing	Existing preference reinforced/warmed by the parasocial bond
3.	Influenced	3	because both Teddy and Prabowo are sincere; because of FOMO; because there's Major Teddy	Vote shaped substantially by the parasocial attachment

The self-confidence built through the parasocial relationships of Mayor Teddy's fans will undoubtedly influence the decisions of the audience, who are also voters. Construction, in the context of parasocial relationships, refers to the process by which a person's perceptions, attitudes, and understanding of something are formed or constructed (Cohen & Holbert, 2021). This involves how individuals interpret information, experiences, and social interactions to form certain views or decisions. The case of parasocial relations with Major Teddy, construction refers to the way fan political views and choices are shaped through the influence of such relationships.

The data are heterogeneous, and the majority pattern runs counter to a straightforward influence story; twelve of the 21 codes and the largest and most emphatic set of quotations, fall under 'not-influenced.' Several informants explicitly rejected any suggestion that Major Teddy shaped their vote, "Actually, long before I knew Major Teddy, I had already supported Mr. Prabowo since 2019. I don't want people to say I chose him just because of his cute dancing (joget gemoy), that's just a bonus... what matters is that I sincerely chose him from the heart" (IN2). A smaller group described their existing support as reinforced, rather than caused, by Major Teddy's presence ('familiarized,' six codes): "At first, I already intended to vote for candidate 02 (Prabowo) before I started following Major Teddy. But after getting to know him, my wish to see him at every event grew even stronger... my hopes for Prabowo have grown" (IN3). Then one informant – a first-time voter – described Major Teddy as a direct factor in the decision itself, "Honestly, for this presidential election I was looking for information through TikTok. Then I saw how sincere Mr. Prabowo seemed, and how devoted Major Teddy is to him. In the end, I felt I needed to choose Mr. Prabowo. Yes, it's a form of FOMO, but that's genuinely how I felt" (IN6).

These results should be interpreted cautiously. Because the data are retrospective, self-reported accounts from a small, self-selected group rather than an experimental or longitudinal design, they cannot establish a causal relationship between admiration for Major Teddy and the decision to vote for a particular candidate. Thus, political parasocial relationships are linked to perceptions of intimacy, familiarity, authenticity, and friendship, which can shape how audiences evaluate and support political figures (Tsfati et al., 2022). What the data more defensibly show is an emotional association, informants who already felt close to Major Teddy tended to describe their political support in warmer, more personally invested terms, and one first-time voter explicitly linked that closeness to her choice although most informants drew a firm line between admiring him and being persuaded by him. Read alongside Tajfel & Turner (2004) social identity theory, which holds that individuals tend to identify with social groups they admire. It also resonates with Alsharawy et al. (2026) research that shows political content on TikTok could increase emotional affect, although it had seemingly no effect on political attitudes. The pattern is consistent with Major Teddy

functioning as a point of positive association with the candidate he escorts, rather than as an independent driver of the vote itself; whether that association translates into a measurable effect on turnout or candidate choice at scale is a question this interview-based design is not equipped to answer.

Across these four themes, the data reveal a singular, coherent developmental trajectory – rather than merely four unrelated topics – wherein the mutual trust and guidance established early on provided an emotional foundation that informants subsequently articulated using the language of romantic love and friendship; for a small subset of informants, this closeness even extended into the realm of political support. The data do not support the interpretation that admiration for Major Teddy drove the political behavior; instead, both the admiration and the political support appear to stem from the same underlying sense of closeness, even though most informants maintained a clear distinction between the two.

This dynamic also helps explain a point noted as unusual by the informants themselves – that their admiration was directed at a military aide rather than an entertainer, and was described as surpassing even their admiration for K-pop idols. Major Teddy's restraint, guarded privacy, and professional demeanor – qualities reflecting institutional trust rather than celebrity appeal – appear to have fostered a unique sense of closeness that conventional celebrities cannot offer; this may explain why so many informants in [Table 5](#), did not allow this sense of closeness to dictate their political choices.

These findings must be interpreted within the scope of the study. Data were obtained from a small group of informants who participated voluntarily via an online form, using a cross-sectional, self-report research design; while the study provides in-depth insight into the lived experience of parasocial closeness and identifies a link between such closeness and political attitudes, it cannot establish a causal relationship between the two.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study show that female admirers' closeness to Major Teddy does not form all at once but is layered through four interrelated themes: the parasocial relationship, parasocial love, parasocial friendship, and the construction of the presidential choice. Within the theme of the parasocial relationship, this closeness grows out of trust and idolization, the desire for a face-to-face meeting, a longing for intimacy, and a sense of familiarity with his figure. Notably, all of this closeness is built from a distance. The informants merely observed Major Teddy's character, educational background, and professional demeanor through social media, particularly TikTok. It is from here that admiration for a supporting figure can turn into a point of positive association with the candidate he escorts. This association operates subtly, not through overt political advertising.

Theoretically, this study enriches the concept of the Political Parasocial Relationship within the Indonesian context. Political parasocial relations have long been assumed to arise from celebrity appeal. The findings here indicate otherwise. That closeness can instead stem from qualities more closely resembling institutional trust, namely the orderliness, privacy-guarding conduct, and professionalism of a military aide. Indeed, the informants judged these qualities to surpass even their admiration for popular idols. Another important finding is that most informants drew a firm line between admiring and being politically influenced. Only a small proportion felt that their choice had been reinforced, and direct influence was most evident among first-time voters.

Practically, these findings offer lessons for political communicators and campaign teams. Parasocial relations do indeed prove to operate within the political sphere, since a trusted supporting figure can become an effective channel of emotional engagement for reaching young and first-time voters. Yet precisely because it proves to work, this approach must be used with caution. This study shows that parasocial closeness more readily warms an existing preference than changes a person's choice. Such a strategy should therefore be positioned as a reinforcer of affiliation rather than a substitute for programmatic substance, and its use must remain ethical so as not to exploit the emotional attachment of vulnerable audiences, especially first-time voters. The principle is simple: parasocial relations may be used to open a voter's attention, but a person's voting behavior should never rest on parasocial closeness alone. For scholars of digital communication, this study offers a conceptual foothold for examining political parasocial relations centered on a supporting figure, an object that has thus far received little attention.

Notwithstanding these contributions, this study has its limitations. Its analysis encompasses only a small group of self-selected informants. The study likewise does not directly measure voting behavior or electoral outcomes. Because its design is cross-sectional, capturing only a single point in time and based on self-reports, these findings can demonstrate only an association, not a causal relationship, between parasocial closeness and political attitudes. Future research may close this gap by employing a larger and more representative sample together with a longitudinal or comparative design. Such an approach would help test whether the association observed here genuinely develops into a real influence on political participation and choice on a broader scale. Additional evidence of this kind would benefit political communication stakeholders and policymakers in understanding the dynamics of digital political communication in the era of media convergence.

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