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Building Resilience to 'Political Brain Rot': A Critical–Creative Conceptual Model in Digital Politics

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to explain how Indonesian digital citizens build resilience against *political brain rot*, which is understood as the decline of reflective thinking and political empathy caused by repeated exposure to polarised and emotionally intense political content. Using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), this study examines 48 short YouTube videos and audience comments related to the August 2025 Demonstration and President Prabowo's Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program. The analysis focuses on how digital texts, visuals, titles, and comments shape citizens' political assessments, emotional responses, and participation. The findings reveal three mechanisms that reinforce *political brain rot*: the simplification of political narratives into moral-affective battles, increased visibility of angry and euphoric content, and the emergence of cognitive fatigue that weakens public reflection and deliberation. However, the study also finds micro-resilience through humour, empathy, irony, and reflective scepticism, showing that citizens remain active interpreters within the platform ecology. The article concludes by proposing a critical–creative resilience model, which emphasises cognitive, affective, and creative capacities as foundations for adaptive engagement and a more reflective digital democracy.

Keywords: Affective polarisation, critical–creative resilience, digital politics, Indonesia, political brain rot

INTRODUCTION

The digital public sphere can no longer be understood solely as an arena for rational deliberation. In many cases, politics is increasingly consumed as fast-paced, repetitive, and easily polarised emotional spectacles. Constant exposure to provocative, partisan, and sensational

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political content can weaken citizens' capacity for reflective thought, rational consideration of arguments, and development of political empathy. This article uses the term "political brain rot" to describe the cognitive and affective degradation that occurs when politics is consumed more often as an emotional stimulus than as a process of democratic reflection.

In the Indonesian context, this phenomenon is evident in the circulation of short political videos about the August 2025 demonstrations and the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG). The August 2025 demonstrations portray politics as a moral conflict between citizens, the state, security forces, and those in power. Meanwhile, the MBG, one of President Prabowo Subianto's flagship policies, aims to improve child nutrition, reduce malnutrition and stunting, and strengthen human resources. However, due to its large-scale implementation and the need for logistical preparedness, nutritional monitoring, food security, and budget accountability, the MBG has sparked public debate. While the program is promoted as a manifestation of the state's presence and concern for citizen well-being, it has also been criticised for its effectiveness, accountability, and potential use as a political spectacle.

Previous studies on digital politics have extensively discussed polarisation, disinformation, fake news, echo chambers, filter bubbles, and algorithmic bias (Bruns, 2019; Pariser, 2011; Tucker et al., 2018). These studies are important for diagnosing problems with digital democracy, but they tend to focus more on pathological aspects than on citizens' capacity to respond, reinterpret, and build resilience in digital spaces. Therefore, a critical-creative approach is relevant to this study. The critical dimension helps interpret power relations, ideological bias, and algorithmic domination (Barrow, 2024; Ott & Mack, 2024), while the creative dimension views citizens as actors capable of creating new political meanings through humour, irony, parody, reflective commentary, and everyday digital expression (Berk et al., 2013; Coleman & Freelon, 2015; Sobari, 2025).

This study uses Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) on 48 short YouTube videos and audience comments regarding the August 2025 Demonstration and the MBG. YouTube was chosen because it provides an appropriate digital ecology for examining the relationship between short political videos, visual framing, titles, channel narratives, recommendation logic, and public commentary. Unlike online media, which are more journalistic in nature, YouTube Shorts combines images, sound, text, music, captions, and audience responses within a single platform. Compared to Instagram, YouTube offers a relatively more open public comment space to explore citizen interpretations. Videos were selected through purposive sampling based on issue relevance, short video format, political framing, availability of audience commentary, and a variety of channels and narrative positions.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The primary issue examined in this article is not only the spread of misinformation, bias, or polarisation of political information, but also the decline in citizens' reflective engagement

in an increasingly platformized digital political ecology. Digital platforms do not simply convey political messages but also shape how citizens perceive, feel, and evaluate politics through fast, repetitive, and easily consumed emotional narratives. Previous studies have addressed polarisation, misinformation, and algorithmic bias but have been limited in addressing citizens' cognitive-affective fatigue and their capacity to build micro-resilience through humour, satire, empathy, irony, and reflective scepticism. This gap is crucial because the future of digital democracy depends not only on controlling misinformation but also on citizens' ability to think critically, feel empathetically, and participate creatively.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This article answers the following three research questions:

- How does political brain rot form in short YouTube videos and audience comments related to the August 2025 Demonstration and the MBG?
- How do citizens express micro-resilience through humour, empathy, irony, and reflective scepticism in response to emotional political content?
- How can the critical-creative resilience model explain citizens' capacity to maintain reflective, empathetic, and creative engagement in digital democracy?

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research findings indicate that political brain rot in Indonesian digital politics does not arise solely from low political literacy. It is also shaped by changes in the way politics is communicated in digital spaces. In short, politics often presents itself as a series of emotions rather than an exchange of arguments in short YouTube videos. Demonstration videos, for example, highlight conflict scenes such as lines of officers, tear gas, crowd shouts, and sensational headlines. This pattern encourages audiences to read politics through the lens of anger and a sense of injustice. Comments such as "If people cannot live, what's the point of democracy?" demonstrate that anger does not always equate to irrationality but can also serve as a moral judgment on democracy, public rights, and state power.

In the case of MBG, the affective pattern is different, although it operates through a similar simplistic logic. MBG content often uses images of smiling children, optimistic music, success narratives, and claims that the state is there for the people. This pattern generates positive feelings, such as gratitude, pride, and trust in government policies. However, audience comments also show some ambivalence. Some users embrace the narrative of success, while others use humour and irony to question policy implementation. Comments such as "99% success, but only 1% nutrition" or "Free food, but their minds remain hungry" demonstrate that citizens are not entirely passive. Humour allows citizens to maintain a critical distance from the dominant narrative without presenting a direct critique.

This pattern suggests that political brain rot simplifies politics into an affective struggle. Demonstration videos tend to reduce politics to a conflict between citizens and power, while MBG videos tend to reduce policy debates to the tension between pride in state programs and criticism of their implementation. Political complexity translates into easily consumable emotions such as anger, pride, suspicion, cynicism, or amusement. In this context, deliberative depth is weakened because the most visible content is not always the one with the strongest arguments but rather the one most capable of eliciting an emotional response.

YouTube serves as both a content distribution channel and an environment that shapes political visibility. Content that incites anger, euphoria, or political humour tends to garner more attention than content that explains issues in a complex way. In the case of demonstrations, videos depicting street tensions prompted angry, suspicious, and despairing comments. In the case of MBG, videos featuring children's faces, optimistic music, and narratives of success encouraged comments with tones of gratitude, pride, and defence against criticism. This suggests that bias in digital politics is both psychological and structural. Citizens' preferences are reinforced by platform designs that prioritise engagement, intensity, and rapid reactions. Consistent with Cho et al. (2020), content personalisation narrows the diversity of information and reinforces certain political affections.

However, this study also found evidence of digital reflection. Some comments not only responded to issues but also began to question how the platform operated. Comments such as "Why are the videos always the same, like they're being directed?" or "YouTube should be fair, not just looking for clicks" indicate a shift from thinking about issues to thinking about how issues are produced, filtered, and displayed. This awareness can be considered an early form of algorithmic literacy. Citizens are beginning to understand that digital political realities do not emerge neutrally but are curated and reinforced through platform logic.

Despite the dominance of affective content, citizens continue to demonstrate micro-resilience. This resilience does not always manifest in formal arguments or lengthy rational discussions. Instead, it presents itself through humour, irony, empathy, and reflective scepticism. Comments such as "The program is good, but don't just create content" or "Criticism isn't hate, it's caring" demonstrate that some citizens are capable of transforming emotions into moral reflection. In the MBG issue, satire like "Give free food to buzzers too, so they don't go hungry" provides a lighthearted yet critical way to question the relationship between power, propaganda, and digital support.

Based on these findings, this study offers a critical–creative resilience model comprising three interrelated layers. First, the cognitive layer, namely the ability to recognise bias, framing, and logic of platform recommendations. Second, the affective layer, namely the ability to manage anger, pride, suspicion, or disappointment so that they do not turn

into hatred or apathy, is important. Third, the creative layer, namely the ability to express criticism through humour, satire, storytelling, and reflective commentary. Cognition provides direction, affect provides moral energy, and creativity provides social expression. Thus, digital resilience does not mean eliminating emotion from politics but rather transforming it into reflection, empathy, and democratic learning.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that political brain rot in Indonesian digital politics is formed through the simplification of political narratives, the intensification of emotions, and the visibility of platforms that prioritise affective content. Based on the QCA of 48 short YouTube videos and audience comments regarding the August 2025 Demonstration and the MBG, this study finds that digital politics tends to shift from the exchange of arguments to the circulation of anger, pride, humour, and cynicism.

However, citizens are not entirely passive actors. They build micro-resilience through humour, empathy, and irony, and reflective scepticism. Therefore, this article offers a critical-creative resilience model that explains digital resilience through three layers, namely cognitive, affective, and creative layers. This implies that digital political literacy must go beyond fact-checking by strengthening algorithmic literacy, affective literacy, and creative civic expression.

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