



## Politics Communication Based on Local Cultural Branding: A Critical Ethnographic Study of Cultural Festivals in Lamongan Regency

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### A B S T R A C T

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In 2023, the Lamongan Regency government released a schedule of 39 cultural festivals held from March to December. The Regent of Lamongan's involvement in each event, from the promotional stage, where his image was prominently featured on posters and billboards, to the implementation stage, where he was given a dedicated time and platform to address the public directly, is crucial for examining the underlying message behind these cultural festival programs and the extent to which the local government has developed and successfully implemented a local cultural branding program to promote Lamongan's local cultural wisdom without any political bias. This research aims to uncover the hegemony of power from a political communication perspective through an examination of the cultural festivals held. A qualitative approach using critical ethnography methods positions and embeds culture within a broader symbolic, social, economic, political, and historical context, rather than simply seeking recognition from its members. The research results indicate that cultural festivals serve as a form of political legitimacy by integrating local identity, promoting public participation,

protecting heritage, and fostering economic empowerment. Political communication strategies encompass verbal, non-verbal, mass media, digital, and cultural forms, which are integrated to create an image of leadership that cares about regional culture. Future research could focus on countering hegemony through populist practices in festivals, both at the local and national levels. This could include delving deeper into how community groups, artists, cultural communities, academics, and activists construct counter-spaces against the dominant discourses and symbols of power reproduced through festivals.

## Introduction

The first term of Yuhronur Efendi and KH. Abdul Rouf's leadership as Regent and Deputy Regent of Lamongan, since officially taking office in 2021, has initiated a variety of events titled "local cultural branding" on a massive scale through local cultural festival activities. The festival is organized directly by the Lamongan Regency Government, specifically through the Lamongan Regency Culture and Tourism Office, without utilizing the services of private event organizers or corporate social responsibility (CSR) sponsors. As an illustration, on February 27, 2023, the Lamongan Regency government, in collaboration with Sendangagung Village, Paciran District, released a tourism event calendar featuring 39 cultural festival agendas to be held from March to December. (*Kalender Event Kabupaten Lamongan 2023*, n.d.)

The festival program is not concentrated in a single location, unlike the events typically held by the Lamongan Regency government, which usually take place in the town square, pavilion, or regency center. Since 2021, most cultural festivals have been held at multiple locations throughout Lamongan Regency. These include the "Sendangagung Batik Carnival" in Sendangagung Village, Paciran District; the "Pindang Megilan Festival" in Brondong District, both located in the northernmost coastal area of the Regency; the "Wingko Babat Festival" in Babat District, the westernmost region of Lamongan Regency; and the "Mendok

Sanggring Tlemang Festival” in Tlemang Village, Ngimbang District, at the southernmost tip of the Regency. These festivals highlight the local characteristics of each region where they are held.

Public enthusiasm has been high at each festival, given that the festival’s distinctive local cultural themes have a strong appeal for local participation, both as participants and spectators. This is because the themes are derived from the daily values of the local community. The Sendangagung Batik Festival, for example, attracts thousands of people. The event is attended by various groups and communities, including batik artisans and traders, YouTubers, schoolchildren, and even international tourists who come specifically to see the various distinctive Sendang Agung batik.

Furthermore, the presence of the Regent, Deputy Regent, and their staff at each festival is a unique attraction, as these cultural festivals can heighten the excitement among local residents and other stakeholders. The Regent and Deputy Regent receive the spotlight at each festival, evident in the promotional materials and their central roles in each event. The 2023 tourism event calendar features Yuhronur Efendi and KH. Abdul Rouf graced the front cover and featured in almost all sections of the activity schedule for several events included in the calendar, which has also been distributed through its promotional media.



Figure 1. Cover of the Lamongan Regency Tourism Event Calendar, 2023

The presence and involvement of Regent and Deputy Regent Yuhronur and Abdul Rouf in each series of cultural festivals is an exciting aspect to study in two ways: first, from an administrative perspective, which views local cultural branding as one of the government's commitments to realizing local community-based tourism. Namely, to what extent is the local government's program involved in developing and implementing the cultural branding program to promote local cultural wisdom in Lamongan, without being influenced by any political tendencies? Although we cannot simply disregard the positive impacts and essential functions that usually arise from cultural festival events, such as increased local community income, the growth of the creative economy sector, and the spirit of nationalism that develops through cultural awareness. (Anggini et al., 2022). The second approach, examining this phenomenon using a critical perspective in political communication studies, examines the underlying interests behind the festival program. This involves viewing the festival as a medium for commodifying local cultural branding, designed to strengthen the power of the Regent and Vice Regent in Lamongan Regency. The researcher chose to adopt a critical perspective as the second approach.

A critical perspective can be used to examine the Lamongan Regent's involvement in every event, from the promotional stage, where his image is prominently featured on posters and billboards, to the implementation stage, where his presence is given a dedicated time and platform to address the community directly. This is an early indication that the cultural festival program, which has been a part of the Lamongan community for the past two years, offers a large-scale and comprehensive platform for the Regent to engage with the community. The perspective used as a reference for a more in-depth discussion of this phenomenon is to position the Regent and Vice Regent Yuhronur-Rauf not as neutral subjects in the study of political communication. As stated by Nimmo (2011) Leadership is a political interaction aimed at establishing a bond between the communicator and their members or followers. Furthermore, the political communication process that occurs is an agenda for image construction and interpersonal meaning modification through various instruments of power, perpetuating the existing status quo.

The cultural festival, which originates from the government's agenda rather than directly reflecting the people's will, represents a form of covert hegemony

carried out by the Lamongan Regency government, intending to encourage the public to positively evaluate the government's performance, particularly that of the ruling Regent and Deputy Regent. This aligns with the early 19th-century Italian political intellectual Antonio Gramsci's assertion that hegemony is not merely a relationship of domination through the use of power, but rather involves consent through political leadership and ideology. Therefore, the local cultural festival, initiated by elite ruling actors, represents a form of consensual organization, where the submission of the Lamongan community is evident through their active participation in the festival, which involves sacrificing time, energy, and material resources for the sake of local culture.

A study in the field of political communication chose Regent and Deputy Regent Yuhronur Efendi-Abdul Rouf as the subject, conducted by Burhan Hakim & Sadiyin (2023). They examined the effectiveness of social media use in the Yuhronur-Rouf campaign during the 2020 Lamongan Pilkada. By employing a descriptive qualitative approach and utilizing library research methods, they found that social media was considered an effective tool for campaigns. Hakim and Sayidin's research has various shortcomings both in terms of method and analysis. Effectiveness research should measure the audience who accesses social media campaign content.

However, the study did not mention distributing questionnaires to the public, making the analysis inadequate. Other research discussing cultural commodification has been conducted by Danugroho (2022) This examines the preservation and strengthening of the Tumpeng Sewu tradition, which is deliberately commodified to support and generate commercial value for the local community. Therefore, the focus of this research is on the political communication strategy of the Yuhronur Regent regarding the cultural festival activities they carry out. This research also employs a critical approach, as it aims to dismantle political hegemony in the practice of power, where no study has specifically linked political communication strategies to a sustainable cultural festival at both the local and national levels.

## **Methode**

This research is a qualitative study using critical ethnography, a social science method developed within the realm of cultural and media studies. This method aims to understand the world from the researcher's perspective and the

social relations that surround them.

Critical ethnography is a response to classical ethnographic methods, which have drawn much criticism for their failure to involve research participants in interpretation, their lack of clarity in the researcher's positionality, and their focus on description, which can neglect the agenda of social change. Therefore, critical ethnography offers a different format in which culture is foregrounded, embedded within a broader symbolic, social, economic, political, and historical context, rather than simply seeking recognition from its members. This method aims to foster collaboration and a commitment to social justice, challenging the status quo and hegemony, thereby producing more emancipatory research. (Halik, 2018; Kuper & Kuper, 2008; Ryder, 2021). In the context of this research, critical ethnographic analysis reveals the hegemony and commodification of cultural festival practices in Lamongan Regency.

This research was conducted over a six-month period, from July to December 2023. The research locations were several areas in Lamongan Regency, including Brondong and Lamongan Districts. Data collection was conducted using non-participant and participant observation methods, in-depth interviews, and literature review.

There were four informants in this study: (1) Achmad Ilham Zubairi, Expert Staff to the Regent and Chair of the Lamongan Regency Youth Organization (Karang Taruna), a member of the political communication planning team for incumbents Yuhronur Effendi and Abdul Rouf, related to the cultural festival held in Lamongan Regency in 2023; (2) Diana Dewi Iswandari, Head of the Information Promotion and Marketing Section of the Lamongan Regency Tourism and Culture Office; a community member involved in local cultural festivals; (3) Hariyanto, Cultural Expert; (4) Yovi Widiyanto, Youth Member of Sendangagung Village, Lamongan District: Paciran, participants of the 2023 Sedangagung Batik Carnival Festival. The selection of informants in this study was based on the research questions related to the commodification and hegemony of festivals.

This study employed five stages of critical ethnographic analysis developed by Carspecken (1966) in Hardcastle et al. (2006). These included, first, constructing a primary ethical record and collecting initial data through non-participant observation to gain an objective understanding of what was happening. The researcher observed news, social media, and directly observed posters and banners depicting various



festivals in Lamongan. Direct observations were conducted in the center of Lamongan Regency, where the banners and billboards were displayed. Second, the researcher's initial interpretation involves interpreting the meaning and social patterns from indirect observation data collected at various festivals in Lamongan Regency. At this stage, the researcher found that the festival promotional media predominantly contained images of Yuhronur-Rouf, often even depicting the local community as unrepresented. At this stage, the researcher still used an outsider's perspective (etic). Third, dialogic data collection, emphasizing the interaction between the researcher and participants to understand meaning from an insider's perspective (emic). Researchers conducted participant observation by participating in two cultural festivals in Lamongan Regency, held in September and October 2023: the Pindang Megilan Festival and the Sendangagung Batik Carnival Festival. By directly participating in the festivals, researchers sought to gain insight into the process of festival commodification. To strengthen understanding of the festival's meaning, researchers also conducted in-depth interviews with five informants representing various parties, including experts, tourism officials, cultural observers, and youth festival participants. Fourth, contextual systemic analysis connected field findings to the broader social, economic, political, and cultural context. Researchers viewed festivals not only as cultural events created for cultural preservation and generating economic benefits for the community, but also as arenas of hegemony. Fifth, explaining the relational system, researchers linked the findings to macro theory to explain power relations and social structures that influence cultural practices. At this stage, the collected data were analyzed using theories of commodification and hegemony, recognizing that festivals are not merely neutral cultural activities but also tools for reproducing the hegemony of power produced by the authorities in Lamongan Regency. Lamongan to perpetuate his power.

## **Findings and Discussions**

### **Cultural Festivals as Political Legitimacy**

Political communication is a crucial instrument in building, maintaining, and directing public opinion regarding the dynamics of power and the policies implemented by political actors. Conceptually, McNair (2017) defines it as the process of conveying political messages, whether originating from formal

institutions, such as the government and political parties, or from non-formal actors, including community leaders, interest groups, or cultural communities. Lasswell (1948) formulated political communication as “who says what, in which channel, to whom, and with what effect” in a political context, demonstrating that it encompasses the dimensions of the message sender, message content, media, audience, and its impact. (Nimmo, 2011).

In practice, political communication takes a wide variety of forms, from verbal communication through political speeches, public debates, and media interviews; non-verbal communication through symbols, clothing, gestures, and spatial arrangement; mass media communication through news reports, political advertisements, and campaigns on television, radio, and print media; and rapidly expanding digital communication through social media, streaming platforms, and influencer strategies. Furthermore, in local contexts, political communication often takes cultural forms, such as traditional celebrations, art performances, religious rituals, and cultural festivals that embody symbols of specific community identities. This diversity of political communication demonstrates that politics extends beyond parliamentary debates and television screens to socio-cultural spaces where meaning is constructed and negotiated.

From a political communication perspective, work programs, as a form of political legitimacy through the introduction of local culture (local cultural branding), hold particular appeal because they connect narratives of power with the collective identity of the community. The context of this cultural celebration serves as a symbolic arena, combining elements of art, tradition, and political messages, which in turn can strengthen the image of leadership while maintaining social legitimacy. Understanding political communication requires more than just its content; it also involves the forms in which it manifests within society.

This research begins with the view that cultural festivals in Lamongan Regency are not only a means of preserving tradition but also a strategic means of political communication during the leadership of Regent Yuhronur. Political messages are packaged in cultural symbols to shape image, garner support, and strengthen regional identity. These populist programs, which directly involve the community, tend to have a political impact on the electability and public satisfaction of regional heads who successfully organize cultural festivals. This collateral effect will manifest in their popularity, representing a form of symbolic hegemony, with a



society demonstrating a strong level of moral and intellectual unity, evident in the organic relationship between the government and the governed—the community itself. (Anggini et al., 2022)

The expert staff of the Regent of Lamongan, as the primary informant in this study, explained that the program was indeed the main priority of Regent Yuhronur, serving as a form of branding for Lamongan Regency.

*“The idea originated from the regent’s political vision, which was concerned that Lamongan had only been known for Persela in the sports arena. If Persela didn’t exist, what else would there be to be proud of? From this concern, the idea of city branding was born, which later became widely known as “Lamongan Megilan,” a local term meaning excellent, designed to become the bureaucratic work ethic and regional identity (Ilham Zubairi, Expert Staff to Regent Yuhronur). Along the way, from the discovery of the city branding “Lamongan Megilan”, which has been widely known by the community even outside the region, the Lamongan Regency Government (Pemkab) then initiated the idea of holding a festival through various local cultural potentials.*

*“From its global city branding, it morphed into a cultural festival. By establishing Lamongan’s identity, everything from culinary delights to arts and traditions is celebrated. The festival becomes a “festival” that not only enlivens but also serves as a stage for showcasing the collective identity of the Lamongan community (Ilham Zubairi, Expert Staff to Regent Yuhronur).”*

When asked about the festival’s funding mechanism, Ilham explained that the local government serves as both the data collector and the event promoter. Some festivals are fully funded by the government (such as the Rajungan Festival, which has been held twice); others are independently financed by villages (for example, Mendak Sanggreng in Tlemang Village); and still others use collaborative schemes. Interestingly, the local government refrains from acquiring local culture, thereby allowing management to remain in the hands of the communities that hold the traditions.

Addressing accusations that this culture is being used as a political identity for the Regent, Ilham said, *“If that’s the case, it shouldn’t be a problem. The regent’s innovations in reviving and enhancing cultural heritage are a work ethic worthy of appreciation. Lamongan’s identity, from culinary to art, continues to be promoted through festivals, creating a narrative of srawung and togetherness that directly*

*engages the community.* (Ilham Zubairi, Expert Staff to Regent Yuhronur).”

The statement demonstrates that the Lamongan cultural festival is an effective form of cultural political communication. The “Lamongan Megilan” branding, transformed into a regional cultural festival program, serves as a symbol of local pride and a tool of political legitimacy, built through collaboration between the bureaucracy, the community, and artists. Power relations are evident in the local government’s position as the identity pioneer and controller of the official narrative, although festival management at the village level remains respected. This strategy combines regional promotion, heritage protection, and leadership image enhancement, creating a public space where cultural meanings are negotiated between the local government and the community, simultaneously with tourism and cultural branding narratives.

Cultural festivals in Lamongan Regency represent a transformation of routine events or activities held by local residents as celebrations of specific moments that have been routinely practiced for generations. Then, during the era of Regent Yuhronur, the Regency government accommodated this by developing an event calendar that contained the schedules of all festivals in the sub-districts and villages. This step has made previously fragmented and less widely publicized activities more structured and more visible, both internally and externally. This was also explained by Diana Dewi Iswandari, Head of the Promotion, Information, and Marketing Section of the Lamongan Regency Tourism and Culture Office, who emphasized that the Regency Government is not the primary creator of every cultural festival held in several areas of Lamongan Regency.

*“The festival isn’t a direct initiative of the district government, but rather a village or sub-district initiative with local wisdom. Our role is to facilitate, support, and guide the organizers to ensure the festival runs optimally and connects with the regional promotional narrative. The district government’s comprehensive event calendar, complete with dates and times, allows for effective coordination.* (Diana, Department of Culture and Tourism of Lamongan Regency)”

The Lamongan Regency Government is not entirely responsible for the continuity of these various cultural festival events. Consistent with Ilham’s statement in the previously presented data, Diana also explained that funding for these activities comes from several involved parties, each with its own budget allocation.

*“The festival’s funding is multi-sourced, including village budgets, sponsorships,*

*and limited contributions from the Tourism Office. To broaden public involvement, invitations to participate are issued in stages, starting with educational institutions, village officials, and sub-districts, and progressing to the regional level. (Diana, Department of Culture and Tourism of Lamongan Regency)”*

The involvement of the local community or village officials extends beyond funding to key roles on the organizing committee. This also fosters a sense of pride in the community, which stems from exposure to their local culture and direct involvement in major events. This was expressed by one of the young people involved in an event held in Sendang Agung Village, Lamongan Regency.

*“Initially, it wasn’t supported by the Department of Tourism and Culture, but was initiated by the youth organization. I was also involved in the first festival, and I was very proud because it was a new event in Sendang Agung village, attended by the Regent and many residents who were truly proud of their village. (Yovi Widiyanto, a young man from Sendang Agung Village)”*

The data above makes it clear that local cultural branding-based political communication in Lamongan is not simply the creation of new events, but also the recontextualization of old traditions within a more systematic regional promotional framework. The Regent of Lamongan, through the Regency Government, acts as a facilitator and liaison between the government, local communities, and the wider public. From a critical perspective, this coordination demonstrates a hegemony of meaning, where once-autonomous traditions are now integrated into the official government narrative, simultaneously serving as a means of building leadership legitimacy. However, this mechanism also opens up opportunities for participation and provides a broader platform for local cultural actors to engage.

This integration offers political benefits in the form of legitimacy and a positive image for the Regent, while also facilitating broader community participation. By combining the protection of local identity, strengthening the MSME economy, and promoting tourism, this program appears to integrate cultural values and political interests within a unified narrative. Regent Yuhronur seems to revive and package traditions within the festival, providing a positive narrative for the Regent’s leadership. The public views the Regent as a figure who cares about cultural heritage, supports the local economy, and builds regional identity. Widespread public participation also fosters emotional closeness between the government and its citizens, thereby enhancing political legitimacy.

## Symbolic Power in Political Hegemony

At every cultural festival held in Lamongan Regency, the presence of Regent Yuhronur is not only physical but also symbolic, conveyed through various media representations. Photo documentation, local media coverage, and even official regional government promotional materials often place the regent as the visual center and main narrative. This symbolic presence is not accidental, but rather a political communication strategy that operates through **mechanisms of cultural hegemony**. Several festival information and promotional posters display the regent's image dominating the promotional media space; this is not just one or two posters, but rather several of the festival's information posters.



Figure 2. Poster and News of the Lamongan Regency Cultural Festival  
Source: Research team documentation and <https://lamongantourism.com>

On the poster for the 2023 Padenganploso Mixed Tofu Festival, Regent Yuhronur and the Deputy Regent appear at the top of the poster, in the largest size and central position, wearing traditional Lamongan attire (golden yellow clothing, batik headbands), and posing in a prayer gesture. Below, other figures, such as the village head and performers, are depicted, but in a much smaller size, emphasizing the visual hierarchy. On the billboard for the 2023 Pindang Megilan Brondong Festival, a similar composition is used, with the Regent and regional officials occupying the center, wearing traditional yellow attire, surrounded by a



backdrop of festival activities (a procession, contest, and bazaar). The text of the event, sponsors, and technical details are located at the bottom, signifying the Regent's role as a key actor in preserving and organizing culture through the festival.

According to Mead (2015), symbols are a form of communication that enables shared meaning within a community. Traditional attire, for example, serves not only as clothing but also as a signifier that evokes associations with cultural values, local wisdom, and the leader's connection to tradition. The gesture of worship carries connotative meaning as a symbol of humility, respect, and closeness to the people, although visually it still emphasizes the hierarchical position of the figure depicted. From the poster, it can also be seen that interaction occurs not only directly between the Regent and residents, but also mediatively through visual media spread throughout the public space. Every time residents know a poster or billboard with a similar composition, the meaning-making process is strengthened, as it conveys the impression that leadership and the success of the festival are inextricably linked.

When viewed from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, both posters and news images of the cultural festival, which feature a photo of the regent as the dominant figure, can be understood as part of a political communication ritual that utilizes cultural symbols to shape collective perceptions. These symbols are not merely ornaments, but rather devices of meaning that construct a narrative of leadership that is down-to-earth, cultured, and worthy of support. The posters, which are not only displayed in one corner of the public space but also distributed through social media and reported in the mass media, show that the symbolic design is disseminated to demonstrate the dominance and validation of the festival's holding because this symbolic meaning is always born and maintained through continuous, repeated interactions in the contextual reality within society. (Blumer, 1986). In addition, official festival photos often show the Regent strategically positioned in the center of the line, leading the procession, or otherwise taking center stage. This visual composition implicitly conveys the Regent's central role, even though the festival is a collaborative effort between the government, village communities, and artists. This placement creates an image of active leadership, close to the community, and serves as a symbol of the program's success.

Gramsci (2020) explains that hegemony is a form of domination achieved through majority consent, where the values, norms, and views of the ruling group

are accepted as the general truth. Several characteristics of hegemony are: (1) it views consent as a concept based on the understanding of the majority of society. (2) Most knowledge of political and moral values in society is essentially the values of the ruling group. (3) This general ideology is considered a “general truth” that is considered valid by society. (4) The consent of the hegemonic knowledge is embraced peacefully by the majority. Still, coercion is sometimes carried out in the form of physical violence directed at dissenting minorities as long as the majority agrees (Larasati & Laksana, n.d.).

In the first characteristic, posters and billboards for cultural festivals depict Regent Yuhronur in a dominant visual position, wearing traditional clothing and posing in a prayer pose. This representation is widely disseminated to the public as information that is readily accepted. The majority of the public views the Regent’s presence not merely as a protocol official, but as a symbol of pride and protector of regional culture. This is a form of consent that arises without direct coercion, but rather through social customs and expectations. Second, the values implied in the poster, such as respect for tradition, a spirit of togetherness, and the success of cultural development, are values shaped and disseminated by the local government. Through visual media, these values are socialized as moral and political standards worthy of adherence, thus positioning the ruling group as the primary arbiter of cultural meaning.

Third, in the festival’s visual narrative, the link between successful cultural preservation and the Regent’s leadership role becomes an accepted ideology as a “common truth.” The public internalizes the idea that regional cultural progress is a direct result of the regional head’s policies and concerns, even though these traditions originate from community roots that predate the current leadership. Fourth, consent to this hegemony is generally achieved peacefully, with residents voluntarily accepting the narrative constructed by the local government. However, there is the potential for power structures to suppress or marginalize minority views that criticize or reject this symbolic dominance, for example, by excluding dissenting parties from festival stages or official promotional channels. The combination of hegemony theory and symbolic interactionism demonstrates that the visual symbols in festival posters and billboards are not neutral elements, but rather political instruments operating in the cultural realm. In practice, narratives developed, both directly and based on symbols associated with cultural



festivals, possess a strong symbolic power base. This symbolic power functions as a mechanism of political legitimacy. While cultural festivals aim to preserve traditions, they also become arenas for producing political images that benefit those in power. Programs that have legitimacy and strong ties to a regional leader convey a structured political message.

Through symbolic visualization, the public is conditioned to associate the success of cultural preservation with the role of the Regent. This is a form of internalization of power relations; society not only recognizes the Regent's formal position but also views him as a moral and cultural figure. Symbolic power here is not neutral. While it brings benefits in terms of cultural promotion and local economic empowerment, it also constructs a single narrative that centers on the role of the local government. In contrast, the contributions of other actors (communities, local artists, and traditional leaders) are rendered less visible in public representation. This proves that symbolic power can only function if it is recognized by those who are subject to it, because in the narrative space that develops through power, it requires legitimacy from the party being controlled. (Bourdieu, 1991).

### Forms of Political Communication in Cultural Festivals

Based on the data outlined in the previous paragraph, the cultural festival practices organized by the Lamongan Regency Government were identified as containing elements of political communication, both directly and indirectly. This can be seen in the following table:

Forms of Political Communication	Main Features	Practice at the Lamongan Cultural Festival	Relevance in Local Cultural Branding
Verbal	Conveying messages orally or in writing to shape public opinion	Regent's remarks at the opening of the festival, speech on cultural preservation, and invitation to support local MSMEs	Inserting the "Lamongan Megilan" vision and cultural preservation narrative into official events so that the public associates it with the Regent's leadership.
Non-Verbal	Communication through symbols, body language, colors, and visual attributes	Golden yellow traditional clothing, batik headband, greeting, sitting/standing position on the main stage	Showcasing cultural identity as symbolic capital to strengthen the image of the Regent as a protector and representative of Lamongan culture.

Forms of Political Communication	Main Features	Practice at the Lamongan Cultural Festival	Relevance in Local Cultural Branding
<b>Media Massa</b>	Distribution of messages through conventional media channels	Every festival is consistently featured in mass media news articles	Expanding the reach of the “Lamongan Megilan” narrative so that it becomes an identity that is recognized at the regional and national levels.
<b>Digital</b>	Utilization of online media and interactive platforms	Upload photos/videos of the festival on the official Regency Government account and the Regent’s personal social media, and live-stream the opening of the event	Building direct connectivity with digital communities and young audiences, and permanently documenting regional branding
<b>Cultural</b>	Delivering political messages through cultural activities that are full of symbolic meaning	Crab Festival, Mixed Tofu Festival, Earth Alms, “My Village Charm” program	Packaging local culture into a source of regional pride that implicitly links the success of cultural preservation to the leadership of the Regent.

**Table 1. Political Communication Elements of the Cultural Festival in Lamongan**

Source: Researcher’s Work

During the administration of Regent Yuhronur, political communication not only served as a channel for conveying information but also as a strategic medium for building the image and legitimacy of leadership. Through the festival, packaged under the city branding umbrella “Lamongan Megilan,” the local government successfully combined local identity, community participation, heritage protection, and economic empowerment into a cohesive narrative. Local identity was reinforced through the consistent use of cultural symbols, such as traditional golden-yellow clothing, batik headbands, and the prayer gesture, in both live events and promotional media. These symbols instilled the Regent’s image as a protector of tradition and a representative of Lamongan’s values. Furthermore, community participation was inclusive, involving various levels, creating an emotional connection and a sense of ownership in government programs.

The integration of verbal, non-verbal, mass media, digital, and cultural communication within the context of local cultural branding at the Lamongan cultural festival was evident in a structured manner. Verbal communication was manifested through speeches and official remarks at the festival’s opening, where the Regent incorporated the “Lamongan Megilan” vision and messages of cultural preservation while encouraging the community to support local

MSMEs. Non-verbal communication was evident in the Regent's presence at nearly every festival event, which also served as a crucial element of non-verbal political communication, representing the central figure of a program that gave the community a sense of pride. Furthermore, the use of traditional golden yellow clothing, batik headbands, prayer gestures, and strategic positions on the main stage or in promotions on banners or pamphlets created an image as a protector of tradition and a representative of Lamongan's identity.

The findings of this study differ from those of previous studies, which explained the dimensions of political communication in the context of regional head image formation as solely focused on optimizing social media content to create symbolic closeness with the public (Hamadi, 2024). Furthermore, other research in the same context emphasized the role of interpersonal communication and patronage in building electoral support as the basis for their political communication strategies (Gay et al., 2025). Meanwhile, Mazzoleni et al. (2003) and McNair (2017) emphasize in their books that political communication has mainly focused on the role of mass media, electoral campaigns, and identity politics in constructing political representation for audiences through the media.

However, these studies and research generally fail to address how local cultural branding is implemented as part of a symbolic hegemony-based political communication strategy within the context of regional power, as found in this research. Political communication operates through the improvisation of local cultural festivals as a key pillar in building political legitimacy with the public, packaged as a source of regional pride. Through this packaging, local culture is not only preserved but also projected as a public identity inherent in the leadership. The integration of these various forms of communication constructs a unified narrative that Lamongan's cultural progress is within the framework of the Regent's vision, strengthening political legitimacy while broadening public acceptance of his leadership achievements.

On the other hand, studies related to cultural festivals have been discussed within the context of tourism communication as part of branding and promotion, as in the research conducted by Kusumastuti & Priliantini (2017), Romadhan (2019), and Branding (2023). These studies examine festivals within the framework of the creative economy and tourism communication, where cultural marketing, destination promotion strategies, and tourist engagement are more frequently

discussed. In other studies, festivals are even understood as tourism events that play a role in increasing tourist visits, expanding destination exposure, and strengthening place branding (Getz, 2010). Conversely, studies that position festivals as arenas for political communication are relatively limited, despite the fact that cultural festivals are symbolic spaces that can reproduce powerful interests to achieve the legitimacy of a strong leadership image. This aligns with the critical ethnographic perspective, which asserts that cultural symbols or practices are never neutral and value-free, but always have the potential to become instruments of hegemony and contain power relations within them (Denzin, 1997).

This gap highlights the importance of studies that not only depict cultural festivals as tourism promotions but also dissect the logic of power within them through an analysis of symbols, representations, and regional branding practices.

## Conclusion

Cultural festivals during the Yuhronur Regent era served as political communication instruments, based on local cultural branding, that integrated local identity, public participation, heritage protection, and economic empowerment. The communication strategies employed included verbal, non-verbal, mass media, digital, and cultural forms, all of which integrally shaped the image of leadership as a protector of tradition and a driver of regional progress. Through symbolic power and cultural hegemony, political legitimacy was subtly yet effectively constructed. Festivals served not only as venues for cultural preservation but also as a medium for consolidating public support, fostering collective pride, and strengthening the Regent's position in the eyes of the Lamongan community.

This research offers novelty by combining Bourdieu's analysis of political hegemony, symbolic interactionism, and symbolic power in the context of local cultural branding at regional cultural festivals. These findings make a significant contribution to the study of political communication and cultural studies, particularly in understanding how symbolic strategies are used to build leadership legitimacy through local cultural media. The results can serve as a reference for future studies examining the role of cultural identity-based political communication in other regions, while also enriching the literature on culture, politics, and power at the local level.

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