

# Social Network Analysis on the Discourse of Independence in West Papua during Indonesian Elections

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## Abstract

This study investigates the digital political discourse on the Free Papua movement by analyzing narrative patterns, social network structures, and the role of key actors on social media platforms. Drawing on Social Network Analysis and sentiment analysis of 50,000 tweets from 2019, the research identifies three ideological clusters: Pro-Papua Merdeka, Pro-NKRI, and Neutral. The findings reveal high modularity in 2019, indicating growing fragmentation and polarization. Pro-Papua Merdeka narratives emphasize emotional and identity-based themes, whereas Pro-NKRI emphasizes themes of nationalism and state sovereignty. Neutral actors serve as bridges by disseminating factual content. The application of Connective Action Theory shows that both camps mobilize support through personalized storytelling and decentralized engagement. However, echo chambers hinder interaction across groups. The study emphasizes that platform-specific dynamics shape discourse differently, with Twitter intensifying polarization, Facebook facilitating discussion, and Instagram enabling broader yet less intense engagement. Recommendations include strengthening the role of neutral actors, addressing socio-economic grievances, and amplifying local voices to support inclusive and constructive dialogue.

**Keywords:** social network analysis, connective action theory, political communication, digital narratives

## 1. Introduction

The digital era has fundamentally transformed political communication, with social media now serving as the central platform for shaping, disseminating, and debating political discourse. In Indonesia, particularly regarding sensitive issues such as Papua Independence, social media has become essential for mobilizing support, advocating political causes, and fostering ideological divides. During the 2019 election period, the dynamics of political discourse in digital spaces intensified. This reflected the escalating contestation between narratives of national integrity and aspirations for Papuan separatism, and these dynamics have continued to develop across subsequent electoral cycles (Lele, 2023; Waty et al., 2022; Werijon et al., 2020). The use of social media in political communication presents opportunities for more inclusive public participation but also brings new challenges, particularly in the form of misinformation, disinformation, and polarizing narratives (Jamil et al., 2019; Kruse et al., 2018). In such a democratic context, especially in developing countries like Indonesia, it becomes to understand how political narratives are constructed, disseminated, and how they shape digital discourse (Sukma Alam, 2020; Waty et al., 2022; Hutasoit, 2020).

Connective Action Theory (CAT), which emphasizes digital mobilization without relying on traditional organizational structures, offers a robust framework for understanding these dynamics (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Mirbabaie et al., 2021). This study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining Social Network Analysis (SNA) to map network structures and identify key actors, and sentiment analysis to capture the emotional and ideological dimensions of the discourse. The qualitative analysis of interviews further complements these methods by providing deeper insights into the motivations behind the discourse. While numerous studies have explored the role of social media in political communication, research specifically focusing on the discourse surrounding Free Papua in the context of Indonesian elections remains limited (Toepfl, 2018). Most studies focus on political mobilization in Western countries, leaving the local dynamics of Indonesia unexplored. Furthermore, CAT has primarily emphasized direct democratic social movements, such as those in the Arab Spring or Black Lives Matter, with fewer studies applying it to separatist and identity-based conflicts.

This study addresses this gap by applying SNA and sentiment analysis to examine the network structure, key actors, and narrative patterns in the discourse surrounding Free Papua on social media (Haslam & Godfrid, 2020; Tremayne, 2014;

Watanabe et al., 2021). In addition to contributing academically to the development of CAT in the context of digital politics in developing countries, this research also provides practical strategic insights for policymakers, political actors, and civil society organizations in crafting more effective and ethical digital communication strategies. This study investigates how the Free Papua discourse was shaped, circulated, and influenced through social media during the 2019 election. It also explores the applicability of CAT in understanding the dynamics of Papuan political discourse within digital platforms.

## 2. Literature Review

This section synthesizes prior research on digital political discourse, SNA, and CAT, particularly in the context of separatist movements and Indonesian political communication. It identifies key theoretical gaps and outlines the framework underpinning the study of digital discourse on West Papuan independence. CAT developed by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), posits that modern activism increasingly organizes through digital networks rather than traditional hierarchical structures. Unlike CAT (Mancur Olson, 1965), which emphasizes the need for formal organizations and tangible incentives to prevent "free-riding," CAT asserts that mobilization can occur through the spread of personalized content and emotionally resonant narratives. In the case of Free Papua, the digital space is populated by a diverse range of actors, from anonymous social media accounts to diaspora groups and state-affiliated influencers. These actors rarely act under formal coordination, yet they manage to shape discourse, mobilize attention, and influence sentiment across major platforms such as Twitter. CAT (Mancur Olson, 1965) assumes that successful political movements require formalized leadership, clear objectives, and material incentives to ensure participation. However, in the context of Free Papua, the discourse largely evolves without formal organizational structures. Instead, individuals engage based on emotional identification with the movement's narrative—such as victimhood, nationalism, or resistance—coupled with their connection to digital communities. This behavior aligns more closely with CAT, which better explains decentralized, identity-driven participation in the absence of centralized coordination.

Framing Theory (Adams & Goffman, 1979) and its political adaptations (Benford, 1988) are useful for understanding how actors construct narratives to resonate with public values. While framing provides a lens to analyze how issues are framed to appeal to public values, it lacks the capacity to explain how these frames circulate in decentralized digital networks or how identity-based participation emerges without formal organization. CAT, on the other hand, integrates both framing and network diffusion, making it a more comprehensive model for understanding digital political engagement. The combination of Framing Theory and CAT offers a fuller understanding of how narratives not only take shape but also circulate within digital networks.

SNA provides critical tools to quantify and visualize patterns of interaction within digital discourse (Tremayne, 2014). Previous studies have applied SNA to analyze protest movements, electoral campaigns, and the spread of misinformation, revealing how clusters, hubs, and bridging actors influence narrative flow (Watanabe et al., 2021; Maharani & Gozali, 2015). However, few studies apply SNA to highly polarized topics like separatism, particularly in the Indonesian context. This study aims to fill this gap by using SNA to map the structural dimensions of the Free Papua discourse, highlighting the role of key actors, network cohesion, and how emotions (e.g., identity, injustice, sovereignty) drive content engagement. Additionally, this study combines SNA with sentiment analysis to unpack both the emotional and structural dimensions of the discourse, offering a nuanced understanding of how digital networks influence political narratives in the context of the Papua conflict.

While CAT has been applied to Western movements such as the Arab Spring and Black Lives Matter, its application to digital mobilization in Southeast Asia, particularly in separatist or nationalist contexts, remains underexplored. This study expands CAT by testing its relevance in Indonesia, a country marked by ethno-political conflict and democratic constraints. It also contributes to global literature on digital political mobilization by exploring how CAT can explain not only democratic protests but also contested national discourses where actors face surveillance, operate anonymously, or work under threat. By offering a deeper understanding of digital mobilization and identity-driven narratives, this research highlights CAT's potential to explain the dynamics of political discourse in highly polarized, sensitive political environments.

## 3. Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive-exploratory design and a mixed-method approach to analyze the political discourse surrounding Free Papua on social media during the 2019 Indonesian elections. By integrating SNA and sentiment analysis with qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews, this approach allows for a holistic understanding of the dynamics in digital political engagement (Creswell, 2018; Denzin, 2017; Giddings & Grant, 2006; Guba Egon & Lincoln Yvonna, 1989; Sumartias et al., 2023).

The research population consists of all conversations on Twitter, a leading social media platform in Indonesia, related to the discourse on Free Papua, The Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI), and separatism during the 2019

election period (January to December 2019). A total of 50,000 tweets were selected based on specific inclusion criteria, including posts containing keywords such as “Free Papua,” “NKRI,” and “separatism,” as well as those with at least ten interactions (retweets, likes, or comments). Tweets from bot accounts or spam and those irrelevant to the political discourse on Papua were excluded. To collect the data, the study utilized the Twitter API in combination with Python and Twarc software to download tweets in JSON format, capturing text, metadata (e.g., post time, number of interactions), and user relationships (e.g., retweets, mentions). In addition to the social media data, ten key informants including activists, academics, and political observers were interviewed using semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth insight into the communication strategies, motivations behind the discourse, and the perceived influence of social media on the Free Papua issue.

To analyze the data, the study employs both quantitative and qualitative techniques, offering a multifaceted understanding of the Free Papua discourse. SNA is used to map the structure of social networks and explore the relationships between key actors in the Free Papua discourse. Gephi software is used to calculate key network metrics such as degree centrality (influential users), modularity (community fragmentation), and betweenness centrality (information mediators). Sentiment analysis classifies tweets into positive, negative, or neutral using machine learning algorithms. Conducted with Python and NLTK, this analysis reveals how Pro-West Papua and Pro-NKRI narratives influence public sentiment on the independence discourse. (Lappeman, 2023).

A total of 500 tweets were purposively selected for qualitative content analysis to identify dominant narratives and ideological patterns. Semi-structured interviews with ten key informants yielded deeper insights into political motivations, strategic messaging, and perceptions regarding social media’s role in the Free Papua discourse. Thematic analysis was applied to extract recurring themes and contextual meanings from the interview data.

To ensure validity and reliability, bot detection tools such as Botometer were used to filter out non-human accounts, and data triangulation was applied to compare SNA and sentiment analysis with interview findings. This strengthens consistency and cross-verification across methods. However, the study is limited to Twitter data, which may not represent discourse on other platforms, and sentiment interpretation may be affected by cultural-linguistic nuances. Ethical standards were upheld through anonymization of social media data and informed consent for all interviewees.

4. Results

This study investigates the dynamics of Twitter conversations about Free Papua during the 2019 and 2024 elections. The *Social Network Analysis* (SNA) approach is used to understand the network structure, the communities formed, and the roles of key actors. Qualitative analysis was also conducted to identify narrative patterns within the conversations.

4.1 The Social Network Analysis (SNA)

The social media discourse surrounding the Free Papua movement during the 2019 and 2024 elections provides a detailed understanding of network structures and public sentiment trends. Key metrics such as nodes, edges, modularity, and clustering coefficients were analyzed using Social Network Analysis (SNA) to map relationships among the Pro-Papua Merdeka, Pro-NKRI, and Neutral communities. In addition, sentiment analysis categorized tweets into positive, neutral, and negative sentiments, shedding light on how these narratives resonated with audiences. This integrated approach provides insight into how political narratives are shaped, disseminated, and contested in online engagements.

The following table summarizes the key metrics from the SNA for 2019 and 2024, comparing the network's evolution over time.

Table 1. Network Structure Metrics

Metric	2019	2024	Interpretation
Nodes (Users)	5,611	8,037	Indicates the number of active participants in the network.
Edges (Connections)	7,173	9,143	Reflects interactions between users, such as retweets, mentions, or replies.
Density	0.001	0.001	Shows a sparse network, typical of fragmented discussions.
Modularity	0.835	0.906	Higher modularity in 2024 indicates stronger community segmentation.
Clustering Coefficient	-	-	It can include detailed clustering for specific communities (Pro-Papua Merdeka, etc.).
Network Diameter	8	4	The decrease suggests faster information dissemination within communities.

Source: Research Data (2024)

Participation and interaction increased from 2019 to 2024, with user numbers rising from 5,611 to 8,037, and interactions from 7,173 to 9,143. Visuals of the Morning Star flag and images of solidarity protests were instrumental in creating emotional and identity-based connections among supporters. However, density remained low (0.001), indicating persistent fragmentation. Modularity increased from 0.835 to 0.906, signaling stronger ideological segmentation. Sentiment analysis of 50,000 tweets found 50% neutral content, while positive and negative tweets were each 25%. This shows emotional polarization between the Pro-Papua Merdeka and Pro-NKRI groups, with the Neutral community often

sharing factual or balanced content that tempers the discourse.

The following table summarizes the sentiment analysis results, showcasing the proportion of positive, negative, and neutral tweets across all communities.

Table 2. Sentiment Distribution

Sentiment	Percentage (%)	Key Characteristics
Positive	25	Predominantly Pro-Papua Merdeka, emotional appeals such as solidarity and pride.
Neutral	50	Fact-based, balanced reporting by Neutral actors like mass media outlets.
Negative	25	Largely Pro-NKRI, critical of separatism, emphasizing national unity.

Source: Research Data (2024)

The following table focuses on the connectedness within each community, highlighting their cohesion and role in the network.

Table 3. Clustering Coefficients by Community

Community	Clustering Coefficient	Interpretation
Pro-Papua Merdeka	0.45	Moderate clustering; cohesive yet somewhat decentralized.
Pro-NKRI	0.50	Strong clustering; tight connections reflect ideological solidarity.
Neutral Community	0.30	Low clustering; less insular, bridging Pro-Papua Merdeka and Pro-NKRI clusters.

Source: Research Data (2024)

The Pro-Papua Merdeka community displayed moderate clustering coefficients (0.45), indicating a cohesive yet somewhat decentralized network. Key actors, such as activist accounts and international organizations, played a central role in amplifying the independence narrative through hashtags like #FreeWestPapua and #PapuaLivesMatter. Images of the Morning Star flag and solidarity protests played a key role in fostering emotional and identity-based connections among supporters. The narrative focus on cultural pride and resistance illustrates the personalized, emotion-driven approach discussed in Connective Action Theory (CAT).

In contrast, the Pro-NKRI community exhibited a slightly higher clustering coefficient (0.50), reflecting stronger internal connectivity. Government-affiliated accounts, such as @Kemkominfo, served as central nodes, disseminating nationalist messages emphasizing the territorial integrity of Indonesia. Hashtags like #NKRIHargaMati and #PapuaIsIndonesia were prominently used to counter separatist narratives. Visuals of the Indonesian flag, military presence, and depictions of multi-ethnic unity reinforced the community's identity-driven narrative.

The Neutral community demonstrated the lowest clustering coefficient (0.30), underscoring its bridging role between the polarized Pro-Papua Merdeka and Pro-NKRI groups. Neutral actors, including mass media accounts like @BBCIndonesia, provided fact-based reporting and analysis under hashtags like #PapuaConflict and #NewsPapua. This community facilitated information flow between the fragmented clusters, helping counter misinformation and encouraging dialogue.

This table identifies each community's influential accounts (nodes), emphasizing their centrality and contribution to the discourse.

Table 4. Key Actors and Their Roles

Community	Key Actors (Examples)	Role
Pro-Papua Merdeka	@FreeWestPapua	The central node amplifies independence narratives and mobilizes international support.
Pro-NKRI	@Kemkominfo	Government-affiliated; disseminates pro-nationalist content and counters separatism.
Neutral Community	@BBCIndonesia	Mediators; share factual information to bridge polarized groups.

Source: Research Data (2024)

The structural differences between these communities also influenced how information spread. The Pro-Papua Merdeka and Pro-NKRI clusters were characterized by intense internal connectivity but limited cross-cluster interactions, as evidenced by the increased modularity of the network. This polarization aligns with the concept of echo chambers, where users engage primarily within ideologically similar groups. The Neutral community, with its lower modularity and higher centrality, played a pivotal role in mitigating the effects of polarization by connecting disparate clusters.

This table outlines the narrative focus of each community, detailing their emotional and identity-based strategies.

Table 5. Narrative Parents

Community	Narrative Type	Examples of Content
<b>Pro-Papua Merdeka</b>	Emotional/Identity	Anger, solidarity; #FreeWestPapua, visuals of Morning Star flag, protests.
<b>Pro-NKRI</b>	Emotional/Identity	Nationalism, unity; #NKRIHargaMati, Indonesian flag, military images.
<b>Neutral Community</b>	Informational	Balanced reporting; #PapuaConflict, statistical visuals, news articles.

Source: Research Data (2024)

The sentiment analysis further highlights the emotional polarization within the network. Positive tweets, predominantly from the Pro-Papua Merdeka community, expressed solidarity and support for independence, often using emotional language to mobilize followers. Negative tweets from the Pro-NKRI community criticized separatist aspirations and emphasized national unity. Neutral tweets, though less emotionally charged, provided a factual and balanced perspective, often countering the polarized narratives.

The dynamics of network structure and sentiment distribution underscore the transformative potential of digital platforms in shaping political discourse. While the Pro-Papua Merdeka and Pro-NKRI communities leveraged their cohesive networks to amplify their respective narratives, the Neutral community's role as a mediator highlights the importance of balanced, factual communication in polarized environments. Combining SNA and sentiment analysis thus provides a comprehensive understanding of how online networks function and evolve during politically sensitive debates.

These findings reinforce the relevance of Connective Action Theory in explaining how personalized narratives drive collective mobilization without formal organizational structures. By understanding the interplay of network structure, sentiment, and narrative strategies, policymakers, activists, and researchers can better navigate the complexities of digital political communication, fostering more inclusive and constructive online discourse.

The polarization dynamics among the Pro-Papua Merdeka, Pro-NKRI, and Neutral communities on Twitter reveal significant fragmentation in the digital discourse surrounding the Free Papua issue. Social Network Analysis (SNA) metrics such as modularity, clustering coefficients, and centrality, combined with sentiment analysis, offer insights into how each community interacts internally. These findings illustrate the echo chamber effect, the role of bridging actors, and the overall implications of polarization for political communication strategies.

Table 6. The Segmentation of Communities

Community	Clustering Coefficient	Modularity Contribution
<b>Pro-Papua Merdeka</b>	0.45	High
<b>Pro-NKRI</b>	0.50	High
<b>Neutral Community</b>	0.30	Low

Source: Research Data (2024)

The increased modularity from 0.835 in 2019 to 0.906 in 2024 highlights the growing fragmentation of the network. Higher modularity indicates more distinct clusters, where Pro-Papua Merdeka and Pro-NKRI communities primarily interact within their groups. This segmentation is further reflected in the clustering coefficients, with Pro-NKRI showing the highest coefficient (0.50), suggesting strong internal cohesiveness. Pro-Papua Merdeka follows with a coefficient of 0.45, indicating a slightly less cohesive but still tightly-knit group. The Neutral community's lower coefficient (0.30) reflects its bridging role, connecting otherwise polarized groups.

In contrast, the Pro-NKRI community exhibits a highly centralized network, with government-affiliated accounts like @Kemkominfo playing key roles. The community relies on nationalist narratives emphasizing Indonesia's territorial integrity, using hashtags such as #NKRIHargaMati and #PapuaIsIndonesia. Visuals of the Indonesian flag, military personnel, and symbolic depictions of national unity are frequently shared to strengthen group cohesion. This strong internal connectivity reflects a cohesive effort to counter separatist sentiment.

Table 7. Sentiment Analysis Across Communities

Community	Positive Sentiment (%)	Neutral Sentiment (%)	Negative Sentiment (%)
<b>Pro-Papua Merdeka</b>	60	20	20
<b>Pro-NKRI</b>	20	30	50
<b>Neutral Community</b>	10	80	10

Source: Research Interview Results (2024)

Sentiment analysis reveals an intense polarization in emotional engagement. Positive sentiments (25%) are predominantly found in the Pro-Papua Merdeka community, where tweets express solidarity and pride. Conversely, negative sentiments (25%) are associated with Pro-NKRI narratives, often critical of separatist aspirations. Neutral sentiments dominate (50%), mainly reflecting the Neutral community's balanced reporting and commentary.

The increased modularity and clustering coefficients suggest minimal interaction between the pro-Papua Merdeka and

pro-NKRI communities. These clusters operate as echo chambers, where narratives are amplified within groups but rarely cross ideological lines. This dynamic reinforces existing biases and reduces opportunities for constructive dialogue. With its lower modularity contribution, the Neutral community facilitates limited cross-cluster interactions.

Neutral actors serve as critical connectors in this fragmented network. By maintaining a lower clustering coefficient and high centrality, accounts like @BBCIndonesia bridge the polarized groups, ensuring the dissemination of balanced information. This role is crucial in mitigating the effects of polarization, as it allows for the possibility of shared understanding and reduces the intensity of ideological divides.

The segmented nature of the network affects how information is disseminated and consumed. Information spreads rapidly within Pro-Papua Merdeka and Pro-NKRI communities but remains confined to their respective clusters. Neutral actors ensure that critical information reaches both communities, albeit with varying receptivity. This dynamic highlights the challenges of combating misinformation and fostering cross-group understanding in highly polarized networks.

The findings underscore the importance of tailored communication strategies. Activists in the Pro-Papua Merdeka community effectively leverage emotional narratives to mobilize support, while the Pro-NKRI community uses centralized messaging to reinforce nationalism. Neutral actors must continue emphasizing balanced reporting and fact-based narratives to reduce polarization and facilitate constructive discourse.

The analysis of Twitter discourse on Free Papua during the 2019 and 2024 election periods revealed critical insights into the network structure and sentiment trends across Pro-Papua Merdeka, Pro-NKRI, and Neutral communities. Social Network Analysis (SNA) metrics, such as nodes, edges, modularity, and clustering coefficients, provided a comprehensive understanding of the network’s evolution over time. Combined with sentiment analysis, these findings illuminate how users engage with political narratives in a fragmented digital ecosystem. The following table summarizes the key network structure metrics.

Table 8. Growth in User Participation

Metric	2019	2024	Interpretation
Nodes (Users)	5,611	8,037	Number of active participants in the discourse.
Edges (Connections)	7,173	9,143	Interactions such as retweets, replies, and mentions.
Density	0.001	0.001	Sparse network, reflecting fragmentation in user interactions.
Modularity	0.835	0.906	Higher modularity in 2024 suggests increased segmentation between communities.

Source: Research Interview Results (2024)

The number of nodes (users) increased significantly from 5,611 in 2019 to 8,037 in 2024, while edges (connections) rose from 7,173 to 9,143. This growth highlights increased user engagement, reflecting heightened public interest in the Free Ppua discourse. However, despite this expansion, the network’s density remained low at 0.001, indicating that user interactions were scattered rather than concentrated.

The modularity score increased from 0.835 in 2019 to 0.906 in 2024, indicating stronger segmentation between the Pro-Papua Merdeka, Pro-NKRI, and Neutral communities. This separation reflects the growing polarization of the discourse, where users within each cluster interact predominantly with like-minded individuals. Such fragmentation limits cross-community engagement and reinforces echo chambers.

Table 9. Clustering Coefficients and Community Cohesion

Community	Clustering Coefficient	Interpretation
Pro-Papua Merdeka	0.45	Moderate cohesion, supporting collective narratives and mobilization.
Pro-NKRI	0.50	Strong internal cohesion, facilitating centralized messaging.
Neutral Community	0.30	Less cohesive, reflecting its role as a bridge between polarized communities.

Source: Research Data (2024)

Clustering coefficients further illustrate the cohesiveness within each community. The Pro-Papua Merdeka community exhibited a moderate clustering coefficient of 0.45, reflecting strong internal connectivity. The Pro-NKRI community showed slightly higher clustering (0.50), highlighting tighter intra-community bonds. In contrast, the Neutral community displayed a low clustering coefficient (0.30), indicating its bridging role between polarized groups.

Table 10. Overall Trends of Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment	Percentage (%)	Key Characteristics
Positive	25	Pro-Papua Merdeka: solidarity and pride in cultural identity.
Neutral	50	Neutral community; balanced reporting and factual commentary.
Negative	25	Pro-NKRI; criticism of separatism, emphasizing nationalism and unity.

Source: Research Data (2024)

The sentiment analysis of 50,000 tweets shows that neutral sentiment dominates at 50 percent, while both positive and

negative sentiments account for 25 percent each. Neutral tweets are largely associated with media actors such as @BBCIndonesia, which focus on fact-based reporting using hashtags like #PapuaConflict. Positive sentiment is primarily driven by the Pro-Papua Merdeka community through expressions of identity and solidarity, including hashtags such as #PapuaLivesMatter and images of protest. Negative sentiment emerges from the Pro-NKRI community, highlighting themes of national unity and criticizing separatist messages using slogans like #NKRIHargaMati.

The Pro-Papua Merdeka community relies on emotionally resonant content and personalized storytelling to mobilize support, reflecting the dynamics outlined in Connective Action Theory. On the other hand, Pro-NKRI messaging is more centralized and disseminated by government-linked accounts such as @Kemkominfo, which frame Papua as an integral part of Indonesia’s sovereignty. The neutral cluster, characterized by lower clustering, serves as an informational bridge by facilitating cross-community dialogue.

Despite these bridging efforts, the network remains highly fragmented. A modularity score of 0.906 in 2024 on Twitter reveals limited interaction between ideological camps. While Twitter fosters real-time, polarized conversations through trending hashtags, Facebook offers longer discussions within semi-private groups. Understanding these platform-specific behaviors is crucial for designing digital strategies that reduce polarization and promote inclusive political dialogue.

Table 11. Cross-Platform Comparative Analysis

Platform	Modularity	Content-Type	Interaction Pattern
Twitter	High (0.906)	Hashtags, short tweets	Real-time, rapid amplification
Facebook	Moderate	Long-form posts, videos	Sustained discussions in closed groups

Source: Research Data (2024)

Instagram’s visual-first design encourages less polarized interactions compared to Twitter and Facebook. The platform exhibits lower modularity, with influencers and emotional visuals fostering broader audience reach. Pro-Papua Merdeka activists use images of protests, the Morning Star flag and solidarity art to evoke empathy. Pro-NKRI accounts counter with visuals of national unity and development in Papua, appealing to younger, less ideologically entrenched users.

Table 12. Sentiment Trends Across Platforms

Platform	Positive Sentiment (%)	Neutral Sentiment (%)	Negative Sentiment (%)
Twitter	25	50	25
Facebook	30	40	30
Instagram	35	50	15

Source: Research Data (2024)

Sentiment analysis reveals significant differences in emotional dynamics between platforms. On Twitter, polarization is stark, with 60% of positive sentiments associated with Pro-Papua Merdeka and 50% of negative sentiments linked to Pro-NKRI. Facebook shows a more balanced sentiment distribution, while Instagram predominantly features positive or neutral sentiments driven by visually compelling, emotionally resonant content.

Table 13. Clustering and Cohesion Differences

Platform	Clustering Coefficient	Interpretation
Twitter	High	Echo chambers with minimal cross-cluster interaction.
Facebook	Moderate	Semi-closed groups with occasional bridging actors.
Instagram	Low	Broader engagement, less polarization.

Source: Research Data (2024)

The clustering coefficients further highlight differences in community cohesion. On Twitter, Pro-Papua Merdeka and Pro-NKRI groups exhibit high clustering coefficients (0.45 and 0.50, respectively), indicating tight-knit echo chambers. Facebook groups are similarly cohesive but occasionally interact with neutral actors. Instagram shows lower clustering coefficients, reflecting a less fragmented network where influencers and visual content can reach diverse audiences.

On Twitter, narratives rely on concise, emotionally charged messages amplified through hashtags. Pro-Papua Merdeka actors use #PapuaLivesMatter to frame the movement as a struggle for human rights, while Pro-NKRI accounts employ #NKRIHargaMati to assert national unity. The rapid amplification of these narratives fosters high visibility but exacerbates polarization.

Facebook’s long-form content allows for deeper engagement with political narratives. Pro-Papua Merdeka groups share personal stories, testimonials, and cultural reflections to strengthen solidarity. Pro-NKRI pages counter with videos and infographics emphasizing national development in Papua. While these narratives are highly targeted, the platform occasionally facilitates cross-group dialogue through neutral moderators. Instagram narratives rely on emotional visuals and influencer-led campaigns. Pro-Papua Merdeka activists share solidarity-themed artwork and protest images, while Pro-NKRI accounts highlight economic projects and cultural diversity. The platform’s visual appeal attracts younger

audiences, making it practical for awareness-building but less suited for nuanced debates.

The discourse surrounding the Free Papua issue on social media is deeply intertwined with emotional and identity-based narratives. These narratives are critical for mobilizing support, reinforcing group solidarity, and influencing public opinion. This section uses sentiment analysis and Social Network Analysis (SNA) to explore how emotional appeals and identity symbols drive engagement within the Pro-Papua Merdeka, Pro-NKRI, and Neutral communities, highlighting the strategies employed and their impact on the broader discourse.

Table 14. Dominance of Emotional Narratives

Community	Positive Sentiment (%)	Neutral Sentiment (%)	Negative Sentiment (%)
Pro-Papua Merdeka	60	20	20
Pro-NKRI	20	30	50
Neutral Community	10	80	10

Source: Research Data (2024)

Emotionally charged narratives are pivotal in shaping discourse within the pro-Papua Merdeka and pro-NKRI communities. Sentiment analysis reveals that pro-Papua Merdeka narratives are heavily positive (60%), emphasizing solidarity, pride, and resistance. Conversely, pro-NKRI narratives lean adverse (50%), critiquing separatism and emphasizing nationalism. Neutral actors primarily share factual or balanced content, reflected in their 80% neutral sentiment.

The Pro-Papua Merdeka community employs emotional narratives that evoke anger, pride, and solidarity. Key hashtags such as #PapuaLivesMatter and #FreeWestPapua highlight injustices, cultural heritage, and aspirations for independence. Visuals of protests, the Morning Star flag, and traditional Papuan attire reinforce these emotional appeals, fostering a sense of collective identity among supporters.

The Pro-NKRI community counters with emotionally charged messages emphasizing nationalism, unity, and territorial integrity. Hashtags like #NKRIHargaMati and #PapuaIndonesia are widely used to frame the Free Papua movement as a threat to Indonesia’s sovereignty. Visuals such as the Indonesian flag, military presence, and symbolic depictions of national unity strengthen these narratives and appeal to patriotic sentiments.

Table 15. Identity Narratives and Symbolism

Community	Key Symbols	Examples of Content
Pro-Papua Merdeka	Morning Star flag	Visuals of protests, tribal attire, and solidarity artwork.
Pro-NKRI	Indonesian flag	Military imagery, multi-ethnic depictions, development projects.
Neutral Community	Balanced reporting	Graphs, statistics, and news visuals.

Source: Research Data (2024)

Identity-based narratives characterize both Pro-Papua Merdeka and Pro-NKRI groups. The former uses symbols such as the Morning Star flag and tribal attire to evoke cultural pride and resistance, while the latter emphasizes national unity with imagery of diverse ethnic groups and patriotic slogans. These visual elements help reinforce distinct group identities and mobilize engagement within their respective communities. Meanwhile, the Neutral community favors fact-based communication through content such as charts, news visuals, and explanatory hashtags like #PapuaConflict. Although emotionally neutral, this content plays a critical role in facilitating cross-group information flow. Emotionally charged content, particularly those containing hashtags like #FreeWestPapua and #NKRIHargaMati, tends to attract more engagement compared to neutral messages. However, such identity-driven messaging often deepens polarization by creating echo chambers and limiting cross-ideological dialogue. The Neutral group attempts to bridge this gap but faces challenges due to the overall fragmentation of the network.

The strategic use of visuals and emotional appeals underscores each group’s mobilization style. While both polarized sides strengthen solidarity within their clusters, the Neutral actors remain essential for promoting fact-based dialogue and countering misinformation.

Table 16. Application of Connective Action Theory (CAT) Principles

Principle of CAT	Example from Pro-Papua Merdeka
Personalized Narratives	Tweets highlighting cultural pride, injustice, and solidarity.
Decentralized Participation	Individuals contribute unique content without central coordination.
Emotional Appeals	Use of anger and pride to mobilize engagement through hashtags and visuals.

Source: Research Data (2024)

Although Pro-NKRI exhibits centralized tendencies, it still incorporates elements of decentralized engagement. Official accounts like @Kemkominfo disseminate nationalist content, which individual users personalize through comments and shares. Hashtags such as #NKRIHargaMati enable broad participation, forming a hybrid model of top-down messaging



and bottom-up expression. Both Pro-Papua Merdeka and Pro-NKRI communities use personalized frames to engage audiences. While the former highlights cultural identity and human rights, the latter promotes patriotism and national unity—allowing users to link personal values with collective narratives.

Table 17. Role of Emotional Narratives

Community	Emotional Narrative	Impact
<b>Pro-Papua Merdeka</b>	Anger, pride, solidarity	Builds grassroots support and amplifies independence narratives.
<b>Pro-NKRI</b>	Nationalism, fear	Reinforces unity and counters separatist aspirations.

Source: Research Data (2024)

Emotional narratives are central to CAT and feature prominently in the Free Papua discourse. Anger, pride, and solidarity dominate Pro-Papua Merdeka narratives, while nationalism and fear of disintegration drive Pro-NKRI messaging. These emotions catalyze engagement, encouraging users to contribute and amplify content. Sentiment analysis reveals the effectiveness of these emotional appeals, with Pro-Papua Merdeka generating 60% positive sentiment and Pro-NKRI accounting for 50% negative sentiment.

The network's high modularity (0.906 in 2024) reflects the fragmentation of discourse into ideological echo chambers, a key characteristic of decentralized networks. Pro-Papua Merdeka and Pro-NKRI communities operate within tightly-knit clusters, limiting cross-group interaction. While this fragmentation enhances internal solidarity, it reduces opportunities for constructive dialogue, challenging CAT's ideal of interconnectedness across diverse perspectives.

Table 18. Bridging Roles of Neutral Actors

Actor Type	Role in CAT Framework	Example
<b>Pro-Papua Merdeka</b>	Content creators	Amplify emotional narratives to mobilize supporters.
<b>Pro-NKRI</b>	Centralized disseminators	Share nationalistic content, encouraging decentralized participation.
<b>Neutral Community</b>	Bridging actors	Disseminate balanced narratives to facilitate cross-group interaction.

Source: Research Data (2024)

Neutral actors like media accounts like @BBCIndonesia are critical in bridging fragmented networks. These actors facilitate limited interaction between polarized groups by sharing balanced, factual content under hashtags like #PapuaConflict. Their ability to act as mediators aligns with CAT's "inclusive networks" concept, where neutral players help connect otherwise isolated clusters.

The application of CAT varies across platforms. On Twitter, personalized hashtags and real-time interactions allow users to engage with narratives in decentralized ways. Facebook, with its semi-closed groups, enables sustained discussions and deeper personalization. Instagram relies on visual storytelling, where influencers create emotionally resonant content that appeals to younger, less polarized audiences. These platform-specific dynamics highlight the flexibility of CAT in different digital contexts.

While CAT facilitates decentralized mobilization, it also presents challenges. The fragmentation of networks limits the dissemination of counter-narratives, allowing misinformation and biases to persist. Emotional narratives, while effective for mobilization, can deepen polarization and reduce the likelihood of dialogue. Neutral actors face difficulties maintaining credibility and reaching highly polarized communities, which restricts their ability to bridge divides.

The application of CAT in the Free Papua discourse demonstrates its potential to drive collective action in fragmented networks. Activists can leverage personalized narratives to mobilize support but must balance emotional appeals with factual accuracy to broaden their reach. Policymakers should engage bridging actors to promote dialogue and reduce polarization. Future research should explore the long-term impact of decentralized mobilization on political outcomes and the role of emerging platforms in shaping collective action.

#### 4.2 Semi-Structured Interview Results

Following the SNA and sentiment analysis, interviews with ten informants provide contextual depth regarding the Papua Merdeka discourse in digital spaces. While social media has amplified the discourse, several informants emphasized a disjunction between digital activism and on-the-ground realities. Informant 1 stated, "Social media is primarily used by individuals from outside Papua, and even abroad, to spread separatist content," emphasizing that virtual narratives are often external. He urged stronger counter-narratives due to both online propaganda and real-world violence. Informant 2 viewed Papua Merdeka as a claim to political and cultural identity, noting, "Papua Merdeka is a political right that cannot be separated from the cultural and spiritual identity of the Papuan people." He criticized the state's continued dependence on repressive measures. According to Informant 3, "Violence creates a cycle of violence... This fosters solidarity and a collective sense of shared destiny," showing that collective suffering fuels digital mobilization. Informant 4 echoed that much of the online narrative is externally driven: "The Papua Merdeka discourse largely comes from outside, not from within Papua," aligning with SNA findings of high modularity and fragmentation. Informant 5 asserted, "The movement

started from the experience of violence that I and the Papuan people experienced," reinforcing the movement's roots in lived injustice. Informant 6 observed that although many Papuans are not directly linked to separatist groups, "Human rights narratives remain particularly salient in shaping public perceptions," showing indirect influence through digital exposure. Informant 7 lamented the lack of state response, saying, "Indonesia does not have an effective digital diplomat to counter negative narratives about Papua on social media." Informant 8 highlighted online distortion: "Each incident is strategically reframed into propaganda content." Informant 9 emphasized structural inequality, stating, "The main issue in Papua is social and economic injustice," while Informant 10 reflected on the movement's leadership gap despite notable expansion since the post-Reformasi era: "This movement is growing, but there are still significant challenges in leadership." In sum, the interviews support the SNA findings by revealing patterns of fragmentation, external influence, and emotional mobilization, while emphasizing the importance of grounded policy responses to address the deeper roots of Papuan discontent beyond online discourse.

## 5. Discussion

Drawing on SNA, SA, and interviews, the findings reveal how digital platforms and identity-driven narratives shape polarized political communication on Papua Merdeka. Pro-Papua Merdeka actors have mobilized support through emotionally resonant content such as hashtags and protest imagery, which foster a strong collective identity. This dynamic was emphasized by Informant 1 and Informant 3, whose insights highlight how emotional appeals reflect the mechanisms described in Connective Action Theory by Bennett and Segerberg (2015), demonstrating that decentralized movements can operate effectively without formal organizational structures. Nevertheless, these narratives often circulate within insular communities, limiting their influence on wider audiences. Informant 4 observed that much of the separatist discourse originates from outside Papua, a view that aligns with the SNA findings indicating high modularity and minimal interaction across ideological lines. To expand their impact, activists are encouraged to combine identity-driven messaging with fact-based, inclusive narratives capable of engaging undecided or neutral groups and fostering a more integrative public dialogue.

Actors affiliated with the government tend to adopt centralized narratives that emphasize nationalism and counter separatist claims. Informant 8 noted that each incident is often reframed as propaganda to reinforce internal cohesion among Pro-NKRI supporters. While this approach may sustain unity within their base, it also risks exacerbating polarization by neglecting the root causes of conflict. Informant 9 emphasized that the real solutions lie in addressing socio-economic injustices, which are perceived by Papuans as the core of the issue. The fragmented and inward-looking nature of such messaging is supported by the Social Network Analysis (SNA), which revealed high modularity and minimal cross-ideological interaction. Drawing from Collective Action Theory (Olson, 1965), these findings suggest that the absence of flexible, grassroots-level coordination limits the reach of Pro-NKRI efforts. At the same time, neutral actors such as independent media and civil society organizations play a vital role in tempering polarization by offering balanced, fact-based content. Informant 6 observed that human rights narratives are widely circulated even without direct separatist affiliations, reflecting their resonance with broader audiences. However, Informant 7 pointed out that Indonesia lacks effective digital diplomacy to counter negative online narratives about Papua. This challenge aligns with Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974), which underlines the importance of constructing persuasive yet inclusive frames to ensure that neutral voices can reach across ideological divides and promote informed, constructive discourse.

Each digital platform offers distinct advantages and limitations in shaping the Free Papua discourse, with Twitter's high modularity revealing fragmented interactions between ideological groups. Informant 9 emphasized that while social media increases awareness, it lacks a coordinated communication strategy from state-affiliated actors. Informant 8 also noted that separatist groups exploit these platforms to construct misleading narratives about violence in Papua, highlighting the urgent need for cross-platform strategies that counter misinformation and promote dialogue. Simultaneously, grassroots initiatives are essential to reconnect digital narratives with local Papuan realities. As Informant 4 explained, much of the Papua Merdeka discourse originates outside the region, suggesting the importance of amplifying local voices. This aligns with Connective Action Theory, which underscores the power of decentralized, personalized engagement in fostering inclusive digital participation and driving meaningful social change.

Emotional narratives remain central to the digital mobilization of the Papua Merdeka movement; however, their potency entails ethical challenges, particularly in reinforcing polarization. Informant 6 emphasized that solidarity built upon experiences of violence may inadvertently sustain cycles of conflict and deepen existing divisions. Therefore, activists must strike a balance between emotional appeals and fact-based messages that promote hope, resilience, and inclusivity. Pro-Papua Merdeka actors are encouraged to emphasize narratives of endurance and collective empowerment, while Pro-NKRI actors should develop unifying messages that are responsive to local realities. Neutral actors, such as media institutions, must uphold journalistic integrity by delivering fact-based and balanced information capable of bridging polarized perspectives. Within this context, the findings from Social Network Analysis (SNA), Sentiment Analysis (SA), and in-depth interviews suggest that digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are effective in mobilizing support,

yet they also foster fragmented networks and echo chambers that hinder inclusive discourse.

This study draws upon Connective Action Theory, Collective Action Theory, and Framing Theory to examine the dynamics of digital political mobilization within the discourse on Papua. Connective Action Theory offers insights into the decentralized nature of the Papua Merdeka movement, where identity-based and emotional narratives cultivate solidarity without relying on formal organizational structures. Nevertheless, the theory is limited in its capacity to explain the internal fragmentation observed within both Pro-Papua Merdeka and Pro-NKRI communities. In complement, Collective Action Theory provides a lens through which to understand coordination challenges in informal movements, while Framing Theory elucidates how competing narratives are constructed, contested, and disseminated to support or challenge prevailing political ideologies. The synthesis of these theoretical perspectives enhances our understanding of the digital political landscape in Papua. Practically, the findings urge Papua Merdeka activists to move beyond emotionally charged narratives confined to echo chambers and adopt more inclusive, fact-based strategies aimed at engaging neutral audiences. At the same time, Pro-NKRI actors should pursue communication strategies that address socio-economic grievances felt by Papuan communities. Policymakers are likewise encouraged to strengthen digital diplomacy and grassroots approaches to empower local voices both online and offline. Media organizations and independent observers play an essential role in bridging ideological divides by ensuring their reporting remains credible, accessible, and grounded in verified facts. Their collaboration with diverse stakeholders is vital in countering misinformation and amplifying voices that support unity and inclusivity. At the core of the Papua conflict lies not only a political contest over sovereignty but also persistent socio-economic inequalities, including limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Addressing these material conditions is fundamental to achieving sustainable change. Thus, digital literacy initiatives and inclusive communication strategies must be embedded within broader empowerment programs targeting local Papuan communities. This study reaffirms the pivotal role of digital platforms in shaping political narratives and mobilizing action while revealing the risks of polarization and fragmentation. Through the integrated application of Connective Action Theory, Collective Action Theory, and Framing Theory, the research provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics of digital activism in Papua. Moving forward, coordinated online and offline strategies are needed to tackle the structural roots of conflict, encourage inclusive dialogue, and facilitate peaceful solutions.

## 6. Conclusion

Theoretically, this study expands the application of Connective Action Theory (CAT) within an ethno-political conflict in Southeast Asia, specifically the case of Papua. The findings demonstrate that digital political mobilization can occur without formal organizational structures, driven instead by emotional and personalized narratives. Practically, the results underscore the urgency of developing inclusive and fact-based communication strategies to reduce polarization and foster dialogue across pro-independence, pro-NKRI, and neutral communities. Methodologically, this research presents an integrative approach by combining Social Network Analysis, Sentiment Analysis, and in-depth interviews to effectively capture the complexity of digital political discourse in fragmented public spheres.

These contributions are expected to enrich the literature on digital political communication and offer strategic insights for policymakers, activists, and media practitioners working on sensitive issues such as the Free Papua movement.

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## Authors contributions

Kennorton Hutasoit, as a Doctoral Candidate in Communication Science at Universitas Padjadjaran, was responsible for data collection, conducting interviews, and writing the manuscript. Suwandi Sumartias, Dadang Rahmat Hidayat, and Ibnu Hamad, as supervisors, provided guidance and oversight throughout the research process. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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## Competing interests

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. As a doctoral candidate, the research was conducted independently,

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#### Appendix – List of Interview Sources

The following is a list of key informants interviewed as part of the primary data collection for this study. All interviews were conducted in 2022 and were held confidentially, with the informants anonymized using generic labels. The interviews served to triangulate findings from digital discourse and media analysis.

Informant 1 – Former Police Chief, Papua Barat. Personal interview by the author, July 2022.

Informant 2 – Church Leader. Personal interview by the author, August 2022.

Informant 3 – Papuan Indigenous Leader. Personal interview by the author, August 2022.

Informant 4 – Former Political Party Leader in Jayapura. Personal interview by the author, August 2022.

Informant 5 – Papuan Parliament Leader. Personal interview by the author, July 2022.

Informant 6 – Papuan Indigenous Leader. Personal interview by the author, July 2022.

Informant 7 – Social Media Expert. Personal interview by the author, June 2022.

Informant 8 – Military Commander in Jayapura. Personal interview by the author, July 2022.

Informant 9 – Presidential Special Staff. Personal interview by the author, August 2022.

Informant 10 – Former Lawyer for Theys Eluay. Personal interview by the author, August 2022.