

Recontextualization of Power Symbols in Public Space: The “Tot Tot Wuk Wuk” Phenomenon in Indonesia Through a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis Approach

Nio Awandha Nehru^{a,1,*}, Dwi Astuti Wahyu Nurhayati^{a,2}, Dewi Suspaningrum^{b,3}

^a *Tadris Bahasa Inggris, Departemen Pascasarjana, Universitas Islam Negeri Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung, Jl. Mayor Sujadi No. 24, Tulungagung 66229, Indonesia*

^b *Magister Ilmu Komunikasi, Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik, Universitas Diponegoro, Jl. Erlangga Barat 7 No.33, Kota Semarang 50241, Indonesia*

¹nioawandha25@gmail.com*; ²dwiastuti507@gmail.com; dewisuspa@gmail.com

* corresponding author

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to analyze how symbols of state authority are recontextualized and transformed within digital public spaces through the “Tot Tot Wuk Wuk” phenomenon in Indonesia, employing a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) approach and a constructive qualitative methodology with Genre and Multimodal (GeM) analysis design. The phenomenon illustrates the appropriation of state authority symbols, such as strobe lights, sirens, and imitation license plates by civilians without official authorization. These acts not only constitute legal violations but also serve as social expressions of status and prestige. Drawing on Theo van Leeuwen’s framework of social actor representation and recontextualization, as well as Kress and van Leeuwen’s concept of social modality, this research analyzes visual, verbal, and legal modes across various online media texts, digital images, and viral social media videos. Using a constructive qualitative methodology, the study goes beyond mere description to interpret the social and ideological meanings underlying these symbolic practices, integrating the researcher’s reflective interpretation as the primary analytical instrument. The findings reveal that the “Tot Tot Wuk Wuk” phenomenon operates as a multimodal discourse interlinking legality, morality, and the performativity of power. Symbols of authority are recontextualized into tools of social identity expression, signifying status disparities and the desire for symbolic legitimacy within public spaces. However, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary data, which constrains deeper validation of audience perceptions and real-world behavioral impacts related to the “Tot Tot Wuk Wuk” phenomenon.

I. Introduction

In August 2025, Indonesia was stirred by the phenomenon known as “Tot Tot Wuk Wuk.” The term quickly gained popularity, referring to the illegal use of strobe lights and sirens by private vehicle owners. This phenomenon spread widely through social media and national news coverage, representing not merely a legal violation but a symbolic manifestation of how individuals attempt to appropriate state authority signs within public spaces [1]. The use of sirens and license plates resembling official vehicles illustrates how civilians seek to simulate power, constructing an illusion of legitimacy and social status. In response, the digital movement “Stop Tot Tot Wuk Wuk” emerged as a form of civic resistance against the misuse of authority symbols. This activism reflects the growing public concern over blurred boundaries between legitimate and pseudo-authority, prompting renewed attention to the legal dimensions of the issue.

The “Stop Tot Tot Wuk Wuk” gained momentum as netizens criticized the illegal use of sirens and strobes [2]. Undang-Undang No. 22 Tahun 2009 *Tentang Lalu Lintas dan Angkutan Jalan* explicitly prohibits the use of such devices on private vehicles. However, weak law enforcement has allowed this practice to persist [3], [4]. This phenomenon indicates the existence of symbolic inequality and

social legitimacy, wherein the discourse of power is not only institutionalized by the state but also manipulated by citizens. Thus, it sparked controversy among various groups, generating diverse legal and moral opinions.

Several media outlets also highlighted the legal and moral implications of this phenomenon. The “*Stop Tot Tot Wuk Wuk*” movement is a civic protest against unauthorized use of strobe lights by non-official individuals and even off-duty state officials, reinforcing the view that public morality is tied to visible displays of legality [5]. Meanwhile, Dr. Ivanovic Agusta as sociologist from IPB University suggesting that the movement reflects potential civil disobedience driven by accumulated social resentment toward perceived inequality and selective law enforcement [6]. Moreover, [7] provided a detailed list of vehicles legally permitted to use sirens like ambulances, fire trucks, police, and military vehicles underscoring the clear legal boundary that has been blurred through this civilian imitation of power.

Previous studies on this issue can be grouped into three main strands. First, legal studies focus on the regulation and enforcement of strobe and siren usage on private vehicles, emphasizing compliance with traffic law and institutional authority [3], [4]. Second, media and communication studies examine the viral circulation of the “*Tot Tot Wuk Wuk*” phenomenon as digital humor and online civic protest [2]. Third, theoretical works on multimodality discuss symbolic manifestation and visual grammar in broader contexts of power representation [1]. However, these studies remain fragmented. Legal research does not address how authority symbols are semiotically reconstructed in digital discourse. Media studies emphasize public reaction but overlook the multimodal interaction of visual, auditory, and textual signs in constructing legitimacy. Meanwhile, multimodal theory has not yet been applied to this specific socio-legal phenomenon. Therefore, there is a clear gap in integrating legal discourse, media representation, and multimodal analysis to understand how state authority is recontextualized in contemporary Indonesian digital culture.

From the perspective of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), this phenomenon is compelling as it illustrates the interaction between language, image, sound, and symbol in constructing ideological meanings of power and citizenship. According to Leeuwen visual and verbal discourses can reveal how power is represented and negotiated within social spaces [8]. The combination of visual, auditory, and textual modes in digital media reflects what Kress calls the multimodal ensemble, where meaning is produced not by a single mode but through their interaction [9]. This recontextualization transforms formal symbols of state power into accessible cultural signs that can be reinterpreted, mocked, or contested by the public, revealing a cultural shift in which symbols once exclusive to legal institutions have become normalized through their repeated unofficial use by state officials. This normalization blurs the moral boundary between lawful and unlawful authority and reflects a deeper ideological transformation in Indonesian civic culture, where displays of power are valued not for their legality but for their performative visibility and prestige. Consequently, “*Tot Tot Wuk Wuk*” operates as a manifestation of symbolic recontextualization, wherein the semiotic boundaries of legality and legitimacy are redefined within the participatory dynamics of popular and digital culture.

This study is grounded in the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) approach developed by Theo van Leeuwen and Gunther Kress. This Approach extends Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to include visual, auditory, and material dimensions [1]. Two key concepts are employed: first, Social Actor Representation, which concerns how individuals or groups are depicted within discourse, including who is included or excluded [10]. Second, Recontextualization which refers to the process of transferring social practices from one context to another, resulting in ideologically charged shifts in meaning [8]. In addition, the concept of social modality is applied to examine how color, typography, and visual effects construct legitimacy and symbolic authority within digital public discourse [11].

This study seeks to answer the following research question, how are social actors represented in digital and media discourses surrounding the “*Tot Tot Wuk Wuk*” phenomenon in Indonesia? In what ways are symbols of state authority recontextualized from formal legality into popular and digital culture? How do multimodal resources construct symbolic legitimacy and power representation in digital public discourse? By addressing this question, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how power and legitimacy are negotiated through multimodal representations in contemporary digital culture. It also offers valuable insights for researchers and educators in linguistics, media

studies, and social communication to critically examine how online practices reshape public perceptions of authority in the post-digital era, making this research both timely and relevant.

II. Method

A. Research Method

This study employs a constructivist qualitative research approach with a content analysis design situated within the framework of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). This approach assumes that social reality is constructed through processes of interaction and interpretation rather than being objective or singular [12]. Within this research context, the researcher serves as the primary instrument in interpreting the social and symbolic meanings underlying the “*Tot Tot Wuk Wuk*” phenomenon. The data consist of online news articles, social media posts, digital images, and viral videos depicting the “*Tot Tot Wuk Wuk*” phenomenon. These texts are analyzed by identifying and interpreting semiotic resources such as color, typography, sound, and legal symbols that convey ideological meanings of power and legitimacy.

This study adopts Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) rather than classical CDA, visual semiotics, or discourse-historical analysis (DHA) because the “*Tot Tot Wuk Wuk*” phenomenon is constructed through the interaction of visual (vehicle color, strobes, license plates), auditory (siren sounds), and textual (news headlines, hashtags, legal discourse) modes. Classical CDA primarily focuses on linguistic structures, while visual semiotics centers on image interpretation without integrating broader socio-discursive practices. DHA emphasizes historical contextualization but does not systematically examine multimodal semiotic interaction. Therefore, MCDA is more suitable as it enables an integrated analysis of how multiple semiotic modes collectively construct symbolic authority and legitimacy in digital public space.

B. Data Analysis Technique

The analysis followed a three-stage coding procedure. First, open coding was conducted to identify recurring semiotic elements such as color, sound, typography, and legal references. Second, axial coding categorized these elements into thematic clusters related to authority, legitimacy, resistance, and legality. Third, interpretive coding linked these categories to MCDA theoretical constructs, including social actor representation, recontextualization, and social modality. Interpretive decisions were guided by theoretical alignment and cross-comparison between modes to ensure analytical consistency.

Following the coding process, the analytical procedure was structured into four stages based on the Genre and Multimodality (GeM) framework model proposed by Bateman and further developed by Hiippala [13] which consist of base layer identification of semiotic units (color, sound, text), layout layer analysis of modal interaction and composition, rhetorical layer analysis of discursive function and ideological positioning, and navigational layer analysis of circulation and digital interaction context. Each stage was systematically applied to all selected data, and the findings were mapped onto the three research questions concerning social actor representation, recontextualization, and symbolic legitimacy construction.

C. Data Sources

The dataset comprises 18 online news articles, 6 viral social media videos, 12 digital images (including vehicle photographs and protest stickers), and 2 legal documents collected between August and October 2025, during the peak circulation of the phenomenon. Using purposive sampling, materials were selected if they explicitly referenced the “*Tot Tot Wuk Wuk*” phenomenon, addressed the use of strobes or sirens by private vehicles, circulated on public digital platforms, and contained analyzable multimodal elements (visual, textual, or auditory), while repetitive reposts and purely opinion-based texts without multimodal content were excluded. The data, treated as secondary sources, include news reports, online videos, digital images, and social media content depicting strobes, sirens, license plates, and authority-associated vehicle types, alongside legal documents such as *Undang-Undang No. 22 Tahun 2009* and *Peraturan Kapolri No. 7 Tahun 2021*, which were examined to identify how institutional discourse defines and legitimizes these symbols. Visual and auditory elements, including vehicle color, strobe patterns, siren sounds, and official license plate designs, were analyzed as semiotic resources communicating power and privilege within the base

layer identification. Therefore, the types of data that analyzed in this research as follows in base layer identification:

Table 1. Base and Layout Layer Identification

No	Theory and Layout Layer	Name	Existence	Recognized Base Units (RBUs)	Source
1.	Social Semiotics [14]. Color and Symbol as Ideological Representation	Picture of Black Toyota Fortuner and Mitsubishi Pajero Sport		Color and Concrete Object	https://mitsubishi-batam.com/mitsubishi/pajero-sport/ https://www.toyota.asia.co.id/product/new-fortuner-vrz-srz-type
		Picture of Black Mitsubishi Pajero Sport with blue strobes and license plate number “B 1827 RFV”		Color and Symbol	https://oto.detik.com/berita/d-5817213/polisi-motor-pakai-sirene-kawal-ambulan-langgar-aturan
2.	Discourse Practice [1] Recontextualization of Institutional Symbols in Media Discourse	Youtube News Video entitled “Viral Gerakan Stop Tot Tot Wuk Wuk”		Video and Editorial Text	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXnkLWGDmrl&pp=ygUiVmlyYWwgR2V5YWthbiBTdG9wIFRvdCBUb3QgV3VrIFdlaw%3D%3D
		Article News Entitled “Istana Respons Gerakan Media Sosial ‘Stop Tot Tot Wuk Wuk’”	Readable Text	Editorial Text	https://korlantas.polri.go.id/istana-respons-gerakan-media-sosial-stop-tot-tot-wuk-wuk/
		Article News Entitled “‘Tot Tot Wuk Wuk’ tak Boleh Sembarangan, Ini Dasar Hukumnya”	Readable Text	Editorial Text	https://www.metrotvnews.com/read/ba4CzJg4-penggunaan-tot-tot-wuk-wuk-tak-bisa-sembarangan-ini-dasar-hukum-sirine-dan-pengawasan-jalan-raya
		Article News Entitled “Protes ‘Stop Tot Tot Wuk Wuk’, Pakar IPB: Potensi Pembangkangan Sipil”	Readable Text	Editorial Text	https://www.detik.com/edu/detikpedia/d-8131279/protes-stop-tot-tot-wuk-wuk-pakar-ipb-potensi-pembangkangan-sipil
		Kakorlantas Respons Positif Kritikan ‘Stop Tot Tot Wuk Wuk’ di Media Sosial	Readable Text	Editorial Text	https://targetberita.co.id/kakorlantas-respons-positif-kritikan-stop-tot-tot-wuk-wuk-di-media-sosial/
		Ramai Tot Tok Wuk Wuk, Korlantas Minta Warganet Viralkan Lawan Arus	Readable Text	Editorial Text	https://www.viva.co.id/otomotif/1852837-ramai-tot-tok-wuk-wuk-korlantas-minta-warganet-viralkan-lawan-arus

N o	Theory and Layout Layer	Name	Existence	Recognized Base Units (RBUs)	Source
3.	Social Actor Representation [15]. Public Resistance through Counter- Discourse	Picture of a car with a sticker “Pajak Kami ada dikendaraanmu, jadi stop mulai sekarang di jalan berisik TOT TOT TOT TOT WUK WUK WUK WUK”		Picture	https://www.viva.co.id/berita/nasional/1849735-viral-warga-ramai-ramai-pasang-stiker-stop-tot-tot-wuk-wuk-di-kendaraan?page=2
		Picture of a car and motorcycle with a sticker “Hidupmu dari pajak kami STOP strobo & sirine”		Picture	https://www.viva.co.id/berita/nasional/1849735-viral-warga-ramai-ramai-pasang-stiker-stop-tot-tot-wuk-wuk-di-kendaraan
4.	Legitimation Theory [16]. Institutional Legitimacy and Legal Discourse	Undang-Undang Nomor 22 Tahun 2009 Tentang Lalu Lintas Angkutan Jalan (LLAJ)	Readable Text	Regulation Text	https://peraturan.bpk.go.id/Download/27961/UU%20Nomor%2022%20Tahun%202009.pdf
		Peraturan Kepolisian Negara Republik Indonesia Nomor 7 Tahun 2021 Tentang Registrasi dan Identifikasi Kendaraan Bermotor	Readable Text	Regulation Text	https://peraturan.bpk.go.id/Download/219643/Perpol%20No.%207%20th%202021%20ttg%20regiden t.pdf
5.	Multimodal Semiotics [17]. Sound as Power Representation	Youtube Short Video entitled Suara sirine polisi by @Ekasumedang		Sound, Video, and Color	https://youtu.be/9tYIxo6TfU?si=LYXaq3x2fVvk0piHF

III. Results and Discussion

A. Overview of The Social Context

This section represents the rhetorical and navigational layer analysis within the GeM framework corresponding to the three research questions. The first question, “how are social actors represented in digital and media discourses surrounding the “*Tot Tot Wuk Wuk*” phenomenon in Indonesia?”, appears in “Media Framing and Public Morality.” The second question, “in what ways are symbols of state authority recontextualized from formal legality into popular and digital culture?”, appears in “Symbolic Meaning in the Visual Mode” and “The Legal Dimension as a Semiotic System.” The third question, “How do multimodal resources construct symbolic legitimacy and power representation in digital public discourse?”, appears in “Counter-Discourse and Symbolic Resistance” and “Researcher’s Reflection.”

Building upon this analytical framework, the viral phenomenon of “*Tot Tot Wuk Wuk*” illustrates how civilians attempt to construct alternative symbols of power in public spaces through the visual and auditory appropriation of state institutional signs. From a constructivist qualitative perspective, this reality is not regarded as a singular fact but as a social construction shaped by media, public discourse, and the collective experiences of society [18]. From the researcher’s perspective, this practice is not merely a legal violation but a symbol of shifting power relations, wherein society

renegotiates the meaning of authority through visual signs such as blue strobe lights, siren sounds, and special license plates. Social media serves as the primary arena for the construction of these new meanings. Posts, videos, and circulating memes function as digital discursive spaces where civilians and state institutions continuously negotiate symbols of legitimacy [19].

B. Media Framing and Public Morality



Figure 1. Video News Clip from CNN Indonesia

The news clip “*Viral Gerakan Stop Tot Tot Wuk Wuk*” from CNN Indonesia frames this phenomenon through a moral rather than legal lens. The choice of diction such as “movement,” “viral,” and “stop” reflects the construction of a collective moral discourse, positioning the media as an educational agent and enforcer of social ethics [20]. The selection of news headlines, such as “*Tot Tot Wuk Wuk Tak Boleh Sembarangan*,” reveals the media’s role as a moral authority. Lexical choices like “*arogan*” or “*tidak boleh*” perform evaluative work that constructs deviant identities and simultaneously legitimizes the state’s regulatory stance. This is a form of social actor representation, where language includes or excludes actors to reinforce ideological boundaries between lawful and unlawful citizens. Through such linguistic framing, the media does not simply report an event but actively participates in defining what counts as acceptable civic behavior within a moralized social order.

The repetition of negative evaluative amplifies moral policing through discourse [21]. From a constructivist qualitative perspective, this meaning is shaped through the interplay of journalists’ interpretations, public responses, and media algorithms [12]. The moral framing also interacts with digital audience practices, where comment sections, hashtags, and viral sharing extend the media’s moral authority into participatory forms of public judgment. Online news thus no longer merely conveys facts but becomes a site for the production of public morality, signifying the transformation of media from a messenger to a creator and regulator of social values [22].

C. Symbolic Meaning in the Visual Mode



Figure 2. Black SUV, Blue Strobe Lights, and Youtube Short Video entitled Suara sirine polisi by @Ekasumedang

The visualization of a black SUV equipped with blue strobe lights represents a multimodal performance of power. In social semiotics, the colors blue and red are associated with authority and law enforcement [1]. When these symbols are adopted by civilians, a recontextualization of meaning occurs transforming state authority into a social performance of status and prestige [3]. Through a constructive analysis, this phenomenon is interpreted as a form of “simulacrum of power”, in which society imitates signs of authority without possessing the actual substance of power [23]. The use of such symbols, therefore, is not merely a legal transgression but a social assertion of the desire for recognition and respect within a hierarchical social system.

D. *The Legal Dimension as a Semiotic System*

Article 134 of Undang-Undang No. 22 Tahun 2009 and Articles 45–48 of Peraturan Kapolri No. 7 Tahun 2021 are not merely legal provisions but also semiotic texts that delineate the symbolic boundary between legitimate authority and imitation. The color codes of vehicle license plates, black for civilians, red for government officials, yellow for commercial vehicles, and gold-black for police function as a visual sign system of state power [24], [25].

Within the MCDA framework, these legal texts function not merely as juridical instruments but as semiotic frameworks shaping how authority is visually and symbolically represented in public spaces. The integration of statutory language and visual modalities, such as plate colors, strobes, and institutional emblems illustrates interdiscursivity [26], where legal, bureaucratic, and cultural discourses converge to sustain legitimacy and social order. Articles 45–48 of Peraturan Kapolri No. 7 Tahun 2021 define color schemes reflecting institutional hierarchies: black for civilians, red for government, black-gold for police, and special patterns for military, ministerial, and diplomatic vehicles. These color codes act as semiotic resources that construct visual boundaries between citizens and the state, communicating hierarchy and privilege through material design. Recent research supports this, showing that plate-color coding plays a key role in transportation surveillance and regulation systems in Indonesia [27].

However, when these visual code as blue strobes or official plate designs are adopted by private users, a process of recontextualization occurs in which the official meaning of lawful authority shifts toward performative mimicry or pseudo-authority [10]. This semiotic displacement blurs distinctions between state legitimacy and individual assertions of power, creating ideological tension over who possesses the right to occupy privileged space on public roads. Research on law enforcement practices in Indonesia has found widespread misuse of sirens and rotator lights by private vehicles, highlighting the gap between regulation and practice [4]. Consequently, Peraturan Kapolri No. 7 Tahun 2021 serves not only as a regulatory document but also as a visual grammar of power that prescribes how authority must be materially represented and socially acknowledged.

E. *Counter-Discourse and Symbolic Resistance*



Figure 3. Civil Society Response to the “Tot Tot Wuk Wuk” Phenomenon

Public responses through stickers, visual campaigns, and hashtags such as “*STOP penggunaan sirine dan strobo*” or “*Pajak kami ada di jalan, jadi stop mulutmu di jalan bersirine*” represent a counter-discourse citizens’ form of resistance against pseudo-authority [8]. This visual material reflects a counter-discourse opposing the symbolic practices perceived as arrogant. In MCDA terms, these materials represent a *remodalization*, the transformation of authority discourse into citizen-led critique [8]. Semiotic elements such as the prohibition sign (the “*STOP*” icon) and the bright red color function as representations of public resistance against the misuse of authority symbols.

Within a multimodal context, the combination of satirical verbal text and contrasting visuals (the red and white national colors) constructs a new moral identity, that of ordinary citizens who uphold social order without formal power or institutional authority. Similar forms of resistance appear in [28] who found that multimodal counter-advertising uses irony and color symbolism to challenge dominant ideologies. From a constructivist perspective, this resistance creates an alternative symbolic space in which citizens’ moral legitimacy competes with the institutional symbolic power [29]. This phenomenon illustrates how Indonesian society employs humor, satire, and digital visuals to expose social status inequalities and the selective nature of law enforcement.

F. *Researcher's Reflection (Position and Meaning Construction)*

As researchers, the interpretive position constitutes an essential aspect of the constructivist qualitative approach. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) framework with the Genre and Multimodality (GeM) model to analyze the “*Tot Tot Wuk Wuk*” phenomenon as a new form of digital civic resistance. While previous studies such as Herna et al. which examined viral humor as public criticism of authority [2], Fuadi which explored social-media protest mobilization [30], and Krismiyati et al. which investigated digital activism and governance focused primarily on textual or sociopolitical dimensions [31]. This study advances the discussion by examining how visual, auditory, and legal semiotic modes interact to construct symbolic legitimacy and power representation. Moreover, it contributes methodological innovation by positioning researchers' interpretive stance as part of the analytical framework, emphasizing reflexivity in meaning-making. This dual emphasis on multimodal genre structure and interpretive reflexivity distinguishes the present research from earlier works on digital activism and authority discourse in Indonesia.

Furthermore, the reflexive process acknowledges that meaning is co-constructed through interaction between the researcher, the data, and the socio-discursive environment in which the phenomenon emerges. The researcher's engagement with multimodal texts, news reports, memes, and digital commentaries creates a dialogic relationship where understanding evolves through continuous reflection. This reflexivity reinforces the study's conclusion that the concept of power is not absolute but contextually negotiated through symbolic interaction and multimodal communication among society, media, and the state. By embracing this reflexive stance, the researcher situates the act of interpretation as both analytical and ethical, ensuring transparency and critical awareness throughout the inquiry. This critical awareness is essential for continuous reflection on the “what,” “who,” and “why” of social phenomena, highlighting the importance of such research in cultivating critical thinking and socio-cultural awareness among citizens. Moreover, it contributes to encouraging public officials to reexamine their attitudes, behaviors, and cultural practices related to the use of state symbols and authority representation in public spaces.

IV. Conclusion

The “*Tot Tot Wuk Wuk*” phenomenon reveals how digital and media discourses reconstruct the meaning of authority in Indonesian public spaces through multimodal interactions of text, image, and sound. First, the representation of social actors in online media shows a moral framing that divides society into lawful and unlawful citizens, positioning media and the public as moral enforcers who redefine civic behavior beyond legal dimensions. Second, symbols of state authority such as strobe lights, sirens, and license plates are recontextualized from institutional legality into cultural signs of prestige and pseudo-authority, demonstrating a shift from institutional to performative power within popular digital culture. Third, multimodal resources, colors, visuals, typography, and sound construct symbolic legitimacy that can both reinforce and challenge official authority. Citizen counter-discourses, including hashtags, stickers, and visual campaigns, act as multimodal resistance that transforms institutional symbols into tools of social critique. Through this interaction, the study concludes that power in the digital era is not static or centralized but continuously negotiated through multimodal representations. The “*Tot Tot Wuk Wuk*” phenomenon thus embodies both the democratization and contestation of authority symbols in Indonesia's contemporary civic and media culture.

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