

DELEGITIMIZATION THROUGH AD HOMINEM IN INDONESIAN PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES: A SOCIOCOGNITIVE CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Saiyidinal Firdaus¹, Samsi Setiadi², Muhammad Kamal Bin Abdul Hakim³

Universitas Negeri Jakarta

Email: Saiyidinalfirdaus1995@gmail.com¹, Syamsi.Setiadi@unj.ac.id²,
Muhhammad.kamal@unj.ac.id³

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how ad hominem operates as a mechanism of delegitimization in the Indonesian presidential and vice-presidential debates of 2024 through a socio-cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis framework. The research examines the discursive construction, cognitive implications, and ideological functions of ad hominem in formal political discourse. The data consist of official debate transcripts, analyzed using a three-level socio-cognitive approach encompassing textual, cognitive, and social dimensions. The findings reveal that ad hominem is predominantly realized in implicit and indirect forms, embedded within evaluative language, presuppositions, and contrastive framing rather than overt personal attacks. These strategies function to shape audience cognition and reinforce ideological polarization through positive self-representation and negative other-representation. The study contributes theoretically by integrating argumentation theory and socio-cognitive discourse analysis, reconceptualizing ad hominem as a multidimensional discursive phenomenon rather than merely a logical fallacy. Practically, it offers insights for Indonesian language and literature education by promoting critical discourse awareness and enhancing students' ability to analyze argumentative strategies in political texts.

Keywords: *Ad hominem; delegitimization; critical discourse analysis; political debates; sociocognitive*

INTRODUCTION

Public political debates serve as a crucial arena for negotiating meaning, legitimacy, and power within democratic societies. In electoral contexts, debates are not merely platforms for policy articulation but also discursive spaces where political actors strategically construct identities, shape public perception, and contest ideological positions. In Indonesia, the 2024 presidential and vice-presidential debates offer a particularly rich site for examining these dynamics, as candidates engage in both substantive argumentation and rhetorical contestation before a national audience. These debates reveal how discourse operates not only as a medium of communication but also as a mechanism for influencing cognition and social representation.

Within argumentation theory, one of the most prominent yet controversial rhetorical practices is *argumentum ad hominem*. Traditionally categorized as an informal fallacy, ad hominem refers to argumentative strategies that attack an opponent's character

or personal attributes rather than addressing the substance of their claims. Classical logic has long treated such arguments as invalid forms of reasoning. However, Setyaningsih et al., (2025) demonstrates that ad hominem persists as a dominant feature of real-world discourse, particularly in political communication. For instance, contemporary analyses of Indonesian political debates by Cholifah et al., (2024) reveals that ad hominem constitutes a recurring form of argumentative deviation that can obscure substantive policy discussion and reduce the quality of deliberative discourse.

More broadly, interdisciplinary research has highlighted the paradoxical nature of ad hominem: although it is logically fallacious, it remains rhetorically effective. Studies in computational linguistics and discourse analysis by Patel et al., (2023) show that ad hominem attacks are not only frequent but also influential in shaping audience perception and suppressing opposing viewpoints. Large-scale analyses of online debates indicate that a substantial proportion of argumentative interactions contain ad hominem elements that delegitimize interlocutors and redirect attention away from substantive issues. Similarly, research on digital discourse by Shea et al., (2025) demonstrates that ad hominem is among the most common discursive tactics used to challenge or reject opposing views, often driven by cognitive and affective motivations such as social distancing and reputational attack. These findings suggest that ad hominem should be understood not merely as a logical error but as a strategic discursive resource embedded in broader communicative practices.

To capture this complexity, we must move beyond purely formal approaches to argumentation and adopt an integrated framework that considers discourse, cognition, and social context. In this regard, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a powerful analytical lens. CDA conceptualizes discourse as a form of social practice that both reflects and reproduces power relations and ideological structures. It emphasizes the role of language in shaping social realities and highlights how discursive structures contribute to the maintenance of dominance and inequality (Fairclough, 1997; Wodak and Meyer, 2001). Among various approaches to CDA, Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive model is particularly relevant, as it explicitly integrates textual analysis with cognitive processes and social structures. This model posits that discourse mediates between individual cognition (e.g., mental models, beliefs, knowledge) and collective social representations, thereby enabling the reproduction of ideology through language.

From a socio-cognitive perspective, ad hominem can be reconceptualized as a discursive mechanism of delegitimization that operates across multiple levels. At the contextual level, it manifests through evaluative language, negative labeling, and rhetorical framing. At the cognitive level, it activates shared schemas and stereotypes that shape how audiences interpret the message. At the social level, it helps construct in-group and out-group boundaries, reinforcing ideological polarization and power asymmetries. Such a multidimensional understanding aligns with developments in discourse studies, which emphasize the need to analyze the interplay between linguistic structures, cognitive processes, and socio-political contexts in political communication (Breeze, 2013).

Despite growing attention to political discourse and fallacious argumentation, a significant gap remains in the literature. First, most studies on ad hominem have been conducted in Western contexts or in digital communication environments, leaving its role in formal political debates within non-Western democracies unexplored. Second, existing research often treats ad hominem primarily as a classificatory category within logic without examining its broader discursive and ideological functions. Third, few studies have systematically integrated argumentation theory with socio-cognitive CDA to



analyze how ad hominem operates as a mechanism of delegitimization in political discourse.

The Indonesian 2024 presidential debates provide a valuable empirical context to address these gaps. As a large and diverse democracy, Indonesia offers a unique sociopolitical landscape in which cultural, historical, and institutional factors shape discourse practices. The debate transcripts reveal interaction patterns in which candidates not only present policy arguments but also engage in implicit and explicit personal attacks, credibility questioning, and ideological positioning. These patterns suggest that ad hominem plays a significant role in constructing political meaning and legitimacy, warranting systematic analysis.

Furthermore, the prevalence of ad hominem raises important normative concerns regarding the quality of democratic deliberation. From a deliberative democracy perspective, public discourse should ideally be grounded in rational argumentation and mutual respect. However, the increasing reliance on personal attacks indicates a shift toward affective and identity-based persuasion, which may undermine the integrity of public reasoning and contribute to polarization. Understanding how ad hominem operates in political debates is therefore essential not only for theoretical advancement but also for improving the quality of democratic communication.

Based on these considerations, this study examines how ad hominem functions as a discursive mechanism of delegitimization in Indonesian presidential debates. Specifically, it seeks to analyze (1) how ad hominem is discursively constructed at the textual level, (2) how it operates within the socio-cognitive interface between discourse and ideology, (3) how textual, cognitive, and social dimensions are interconnected in the production of delegitimizing discourse.

This study contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it advances the theoretical integration between argumentation theory and socio-cognitive CDA by reconceptualizing ad hominem as a multidimensional discursive phenomenon. Second, it provides empirical evidence from a non-Western democratic context, thereby enriching the global understanding of political discourse. Third, it offers a critical perspective on the implications of fallacious argumentation for democratic deliberation, highlighting the need to promote more rational and substantive forms of public debate.

METHOD

1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically employing the socio-cognitive framework developed by van Dijk (1993, 2000, 2005, 2008a, 2008b), which conceptualizes discourse as a dynamic interaction between textual structures, cognitive processes, and broader social contexts. Within this triadic relationship—discourse, cognition, and society—language is not a neutral medium of communication but a socially situated practice that both reflects and constructs ideological meanings. As Khoiron (2025) emphasizes, this model enables a multi-layered interpretation of discourse, allowing researchers to connect micro-level linguistic choices with macro-level socio-political structures through cognition's mediating role. Gil-Bonilla (2025) further reinforces the relevance of the socio-cognitive approach in contemporary political discourse analysis, arguing that this framework is

particularly effective in electoral contexts where ideological meanings are strategically encoded in discourse and cognitively internalized by audiences. Moreover, empirical work by Firdaus et al. (2025) demonstrates that integrating CDA with argumentation theory provides a robust analytical lens for examining how ideological positioning and delegitimization strategies operate simultaneously within political communication. Building on this foundation, the present study incorporates argumentation theory—specifically the concept of *argumentum ad hominem* as an informal fallacy—to deepen the analysis of discursive strategies. Rather than viewing ad hominem merely as a logical error, this study aligns with Setyaningsih et al. (2025) and Firdaus (2026), who conceptualize it as a strategic discursive maneuver deployed to undermine opponents' credibility and shape public perception. This integrative design thus bridges discourse analysis, cognition, and argumentation within a unified and theoretically grounded framework.

2. Data and Corpus

The data for this study consist of official transcripts from the 2024 Indonesian Presidential and Vice-Presidential Debates, representing authentic instances of naturally occurring political discourse with high argumentative density and strategic interaction. These debates are a particularly fertile site for discourse analysis because they capture real-time processes of persuasion, contestation, and ideological positioning among political actors competing for legitimacy and public support. As noted by Wicke and Bolognesi (2025) as well as Welle and Shtok (2026), political debates are inherently structured as argumentative communicative events shaped by institutional norms, participant roles, and strategic intentions, making them especially suitable for examining how discourse functions as a tool of political influence. Within the Indonesian context, Setyaningsih et al., (2025) further confirm that such debates frequently contain argumentative fallacies, including ad hominem attacks, embedded in broader strategies of delegitimization. The corpus in this study includes multiple components of the debates—opening statements, interactive exchanges, rebuttals, and closing statements—thereby capturing a comprehensive range of communicative situations within the debate format. Data selection used purposive sampling, focusing on segments that contain explicit argumentative exchanges relevant to delegitimization practices. This targeted approach ensures analytical depth while maintaining relevance to the research objectives, allowing the study to concentrate on discourse segments where ideological contestation is most salient.

3. Analytical Framework: Socio-Cognitive CDA

The analytical procedure follows an operationalized socio-cognitive CDA model adapted from established applications in political discourse studies, structured across three interrelated levels: textual (micro), cognitive (meso), and social (macro). At the textual level, the analysis identifies the linguistic realization of ad hominem strategies through detailed examination of lexical choices, syntactic patterns, and rhetorical strategies. Specifically, evaluative and derogatory lexical items are analyzed as indicators of ideological positioning, while syntactic structures such as contrast, accusation, and implication are examined for their role in constructing oppositional meanings. Rhetorical devices—including presupposition, metaphor, and insinuation—are further analyzed as mechanisms for conveying implicit meanings and ideological assumptions. This level of analysis is grounded in CDA principles that conceptualize language as a site of ideological meaning-making, as articulated by Badrkhani (2019), where linguistic forms are inseparable from power relations and social practices.



At the cognitive (meso) level, the analysis explores how discourse activates and shapes social cognition, drawing on van Dijk's theoretical assertion that meaning is not inherent in text but mediated through shared mental representations. This includes examining mental models and context models that guide participants' interpretation of discourse, as well as ideological schemas that structure representations of the "positive self" versus the "negative other." Additionally, the analysis considers processes of framing and categorization, through which political actors construct simplified representations of complex realities to influence audience perception. Agnibaya (2025) underscores the importance of this level by emphasizing that discourse interpretation is fundamentally dependent on cognitive processes, while Wang et al., (2020) demonstrates how socio-cognitive biases contribute to political polarization and reinforce ideological divisions.

At the macro (social) level, discourse is interpreted within broader socio-political structures, focusing on how linguistic and cognitive processes reproduce ideology, power relations, and polarization. This includes identifying delegitimization strategies, reproducing ideological narratives, and constructing "us-versus-them" dichotomies central to political discourse. Hazaea et al., (2017) highlights that discourse plays a crucial role in sustaining dominance and inequality through ideological framing, while Gil-Bonilla (2025) further argues that polarization is a defining feature of contemporary political communication. By integrating these three levels of analysis, the study provides a comprehensive account of how ad hominem functions not only as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a cognitive and social practice embedded in broader ideological structures.

4. Coding Scheme for Ad Hominem

To ensure systematic analysis, this study employs a structured coding framework grounded in contemporary argumentation research and empirical findings. The classification of ad hominem strategies is divided into four primary categories: abusive ad hominem, which involves direct attacks on an opponent's character or competence; circumstantial ad hominem, which targets an individual's background, affiliations, or interests; *tu quoque*, which accuses opponents of hypocrisy or inconsistency; and identity-based (ethno) ad hominem, which attacks individuals based on group membership, identity, or ideological alignment. Patel et al. (2023) confirm that these categories are consistently observable across political and online discourse, providing a reliable taxonomy for analytical purposes. Each category is operationalized through identifiable linguistic indicators, including evaluative and derogatory lexical choices, pronoun usage that signals distancing or alignment, modality and hedging that indicate degrees of certainty or strategic ambiguity, and implicature and presupposition that convey implicit meanings. Insights from computational discourse analysis further support this approach, showing that ad hominem can be systematically identified through recurring linguistic patterns and markers (Patel et al., 2023). By combining theoretically grounded categories with observable linguistic features, this coding scheme ensures both analytical rigor and empirical traceability.

5. Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis follows an iterative and interpretative qualitative procedure designed to ensure depth, rigor, and coherence across analytical stages. The process

begins with data familiarization, involving intensive and repeated reading of the debate transcripts to develop a comprehensive understanding of the discourse context and emerging patterns. This is followed by segmentation, in which the data are divided into discrete units of analysis, such as utterances or speaking turns, allowing systematic examination of individual argumentative moves. The next stage involves coding, in which instances of *ad hominem* are identified and categorized according to the predefined coding scheme, ensuring consistency and comparability across the dataset. Subsequently, the analysis moves to interpretation, where textual features are mapped onto cognitive and social dimensions, linking linguistic patterns to underlying mental models and broader ideological structures. The final stage, synthesis, integrates these findings into a cohesive socio-cognitive explanation that accounts for the interplay between discourse, cognition, and society. This iterative process aligns with established practices in qualitative discourse analysis, emphasizing both systematic procedure and interpretative depth.

6. Validity and Reliability

To ensure methodological rigor, this study uses multiple validation strategies to enhance credibility and reliability. Triangulation is implemented at three levels: data triangulation, through the inclusion of multiple debate sessions; theoretical triangulation, by integrating CDA and argumentation theory; and analytical triangulation, by examining discourse across textual, cognitive, and social dimensions. This multi-layered approach is widely recognized as essential for strengthening validity in qualitative research. In addition, inter-rater reliability is established through a second coder who independently analyzes a subset of the data, with agreement measured using Cohen's Kappa—a standard metric in discourse annotation studies. This ensures consistency in coding and reduces subjectivity. The study also maintains an audit trail, documenting all stages of analysis, coding decisions, and interpretative processes to support transparency and replicability. Finally, the study emphasizes empirical grounding by ensuring that all interpretations are firmly rooted in observable linguistic data, thereby avoiding speculative claims and aligning with methodological critiques that call for greater evidential rigor in discourse studies.

7. Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to established ethical standards in discourse research by utilizing publicly accessible data in the form of official debate transcripts, thereby eliminating concerns related to privacy or informed consent. The analysis is conducted with strict academic neutrality, avoiding evaluative bias toward any political actors and focusing solely on the discursive structures and strategies under investigation. By maintaining a descriptive and analytical stance, the study ensures that its findings contribute to scholarly understanding rather than political judgment, aligning with ethical principles of objectivity and integrity in research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Results

The analysis of the five Indonesian presidential and vice-presidential debate transcripts (2024) demonstrates that *ad hominem* is systematically embedded within political discourse, not as an isolated or overtly aggressive rhetorical device, but as a



subtle, strategic, and discursively mediated mechanism of delegitimization. Across the dataset, candidates rarely use direct personal insults; instead, they rely on indirect evaluative constructions, contrastive framing, presuppositions, and metaphorical representations to challenge their opponents' credibility, competence, and integrity. This finding indicates a shift from classical forms of *abusive ad hominem* toward more contextualized and ideologically driven discursive practices, where personal attack is integrated into broader argumentative structures.

At the textual level, *ad hominem* is frequently realized through evaluative contrasts that implicitly position the opponent as inferior or inadequate. For example, the statement “*anda akan memilih yang serius untuk jadi presiden, bukan yang main-main*” constructs a binary opposition between “serious” and “not serious,” implicitly attributing incompetence to political rivals without explicitly naming them. This indirect labeling lets the speaker maintain a normative, persuasive tone while undermining the opponent’s credibility. Similarly, expressions such as “*yang ketika dikritik tidak baperan*” function as colloquial evaluative judgments, subtly portraying opponents as emotionally unstable or unable to handle criticism. These linguistic choices demonstrate that *ad hominem* operates through pragmatic implication rather than explicit accusation, making it less confrontational but equally effective.

A more dominant pattern in the data is circumstantial *ad hominem*, where attacks target the opponent’s perceived background, institutional role, or political positioning rather than their personal character *per se*. For instance, the statement “*jangan bersembunyi di balik keputusan hukum*” presupposes that political actors manipulate legal frameworks for personal or political advantage. This utterance does not explicitly accuse a specific individual, yet it constructs a discursive environment in which opponents are framed as lacking integrity and accountability. Likewise, the phrase “*pembuat aturan yang merangkap sekaligus pemain bisnis*” suggests a conflict of interest, associating political actors with unethical practices and thereby delegitimizing their authority. These examples illustrate how circumstantial *ad hominem* functions through institutional critique that implicitly targets individuals, blurring the boundary between policy criticism and personal attack.

Another recurring pattern is the use of *tu quoque* (appeal to hypocrisy), although it appears less frequently and often in softened forms. For example, the statement “*kami tidak bisa mendapatkan data... secara terbuka*” implies that the opposing side fails to uphold transparency standards. Rather than directly accusing the opponent of wrongdoing, this strategy highlights inconsistencies between proclaimed values and actual practices. Such constructions are particularly effective in political debates because they let speakers question an opponent’s credibility without overt confrontation. This suggests that *tu quoque* in this context operates as a strategic rhetorical maneuver embedded within policy-oriented discourse, rather than as an isolated logical fallacy.

The most dominant form identified in the dataset, however, is implicit or ideological *ad hominem*, which operates through broader discursive constructions of social and political reality. Candidates frequently employ metaphorical and evaluative language to criticize systems or institutions in ways that indirectly delegitimize their opponents. For instance, the metaphor “*hukum itu harusnya tegak... kenyataannya bengkok, tajam ke bawah tumpul ke atas*” constructs an image of systemic injustice,

implicitly attributing responsibility to current or previous leadership. Similarly, statements such as “*ini masalah yang tidak menjadi kepedulian segelintir elit*” position opponents as detached from ordinary citizens' concerns, reinforcing a dichotomy between “elite” and “people”. These discursive strategies show that ad hominem often operates not through direct personal reference but through ideological framing that associates opponents with negative social categories.

From a socio-cognitive perspective, these patterns reveal ideological polarization and schema activation, particularly the construction of “positive self-representation” and “negative other-representation.” Candidates consistently position themselves as aligned with values such as justice, integrity, and public interest, while implicitly framing their opponents as unethical, inconsistent, or disconnected from the people. For example, statements emphasizing moral conduct—such as “*tidak boleh menghasut, memecah belah*”—implicitly attribute divisive behavior to political rivals. This pattern indicates that ad hominem in these debates is not merely a rhetorical device but a cognitive strategy that shapes audience perception by activating shared ideological schemas.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate a significant fusion between policy argumentation and personal delegitimization, where ad hominem is embedded within substantive discussions of governance, law, and public policy. For instance, critiques of legal systems, economic policies, or environmental governance often carry implicit judgments about the competence or integrity of political actors, as seen in statements such as “*negara dan pemerintah abai terhadap nasib petani*”. This hybridization suggests that ad hominem is not external to rational argumentation but is instead integrated into argumentative structures, functioning simultaneously as policy critique and personal attack. This finding challenges the traditional dichotomy between rational argument and fallacy, suggesting that in real-world political discourse, the two are often intertwined.

Another notable pattern is institutional or systemic delegitimization, where criticism targets broader structures—such as legal systems, governance practices, or policy frameworks—while implicitly targeting the actors associated with them. This indirect form of ad hominem allows speakers to maintain discursive legitimacy, as they appear to critique systems rather than individuals, even though the underlying implication remains personal. This strategy is particularly effective in formal debate settings, where overt personal attacks may be socially or institutionally discouraged.

Overall, the findings indicate that ad hominem in the Indonesian presidential debates operates as a multilayered discursive phenomenon. At the textual level, it is realized through linguistic strategies such as evaluation, presupposition, and metaphor. At the cognitive level, it activates schemas of moral judgment, credibility, and group identity. At the social level, it contributes to ideological divisions and the reproduction of power relations. The predominance of indirect and implicit forms suggests that political actors strategically adapt ad hominem to fit the norms of formal debate, resulting in a form of “polished delegitimization” that is less visible but no less influential.

2. Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that *ad hominem* in Indonesian presidential debates operates not merely as a logical fallacy in the classical sense, but as a strategically embedded discursive practice that functions at the intersection of discourse, cognition, and ideology. This reconceptualization aligns closely with the socio-cognitive framework proposed by Teun A. van Dijk, which posits that discourse cannot be understood in isolation from the mental representations and social structures that mediate its production and interpretation. Within this framework, the prevalence of



implicit and indirect forms of ad hominem identified in the results can be interpreted as evidence of how political actors strategically shape mental models and shared social cognition to influence public perception. As van Dijk (2017) argues, discourse plays a central role in reproducing ideology by linking textual structures to socially shared beliefs and knowledge systems. The findings extend this argument by showing that ad hominem functions as a discursive trigger for ideological polarization, activating “us versus them” schemas that structure political understanding.

More specifically, the dominance of implicit and circumstantial ad hominem in the data supports van Dijk’s notion that ideological discourse often operates through subtle semantic and pragmatic strategies rather than explicit statements. Candidates rarely engage in direct personal attacks; instead, they employ evaluative contrasts, presuppositions, and metaphorical constructions that indirectly frame opponents as incompetent, unethical, or disconnected from the public. This pattern reflects what van Dijk (2008a) describes as positive self-representation and negative other-representation, a fundamental mechanism in ideological discourse that lets speakers construct their own legitimacy while delegitimizing others. The empirical examples in the results—such as framing opponents as “elitist,” “not serious,” or “manipulative”—illustrate how such representations are linguistically realized and cognitively processed.

At the cognitive level, these discursive strategies can be understood as activating context models and ideological schemas, which mediate between discourse and audience interpretation. van Dijk (2008a) Socio-cognitive discourse studies emphasize that meaning is not inherent in text but is constructed through interaction with shared knowledge and beliefs. This study’s findings show that ad hominem contributes to this process by shaping how audiences interpret political actors and their arguments. For instance, when candidates criticize “segilintir elit” or portray governance systems as unjust, they are not merely making descriptive claims but are structuring cognitive frames that position opponents within negative ideological categories. Welle and Shtok (2026) shows that argumentative strategies are deeply intertwined with identity construction and ideological positioning.

From an argumentation theory perspective, the findings also challenge the traditional view of ad hominem as a purely fallacious argument. According to Walton (1998, 2006), ad hominem arguments should not be categorically dismissed as invalid, as their relevance depends on the context and the relationship between personal attributes and argumentative claims. Walton’s dialogical model emphasizes that argumentation occurs within structured interactions where participants advance and challenge claims through strategic moves. The data in this study clearly show that ad hominem functions as such a strategic maneuver, embedded within policy arguments and used to question opponents’ credibility and authority. For example, critiques of legal systems or governance practices often carry implicit judgments about the integrity of political actors, illustrating what Walton identifies as contextually relevant personal critique rather than purely fallacious reasoning.

This interpretation is further supported by Hansson and Reijven (2025) in argumentation theory, particularly the pragma-dialectical approach, which conceptualizes fallacies as violations of argumentative norms that are nevertheless strategically employed to achieve persuasive goals. The Indonesian debate data provide empirical

evidence for this perspective, showing that ad hominem is not used randomly but is carefully integrated into argumentative structures to enhance persuasive effectiveness. This aligns with computational and discourse-analytic studies by Durmus et al., (2019) demonstrating that the impact of arguments depends not only on their logical structure but also on their pragmatic and contextual appropriateness. In this sense, ad hominem in political debates can be understood as a rhetorically effective but normatively problematic strategy, balancing between persuasion and fallacy.

A particularly significant contribution of this study lies in its identification of “polished delegitimization” as a dominant discursive pattern. Unlike overtly aggressive forms of ad hominem commonly observed in online discourse or informal debates, the Indonesian presidential debates exhibit a more refined and institutionalized form of personal attack. This finding diverges from previous studies that emphasize the prevalence of explicit and hostile ad hominem in political communication, particularly in digital environments. Instead, Firdaus et al., (2025) demonstrates that in formal political settings, ad hominem adapts to norms of civility and professionalism, resulting in indirect, implicit, and ideologically embedded forms of delegitimization.

Furthermore, the findings contribute to the growing body of research on hybrid argumentation, where rational policy discourse and fallacious reasoning coexist within the same argumentative structure. As the results show, ad hominem is frequently embedded in discussions of policy issues such as law, economy, and governance, fusing substantive argumentation with personal delegitimization. This challenges the conventional dichotomy between rational argument and fallacy, suggesting that in real-world political discourse, the two are not mutually exclusive but are often strategically intertwined. Such a perspective is consistent with Welle and Shtok (2026), which emphasize the inherently argumentative nature of political communication and its dependence on context, intention, and audience reception.

Another important implication of this study concerns the role of ad hominem in ideological polarization and democratic discourse. The consistent use of “us versus them” framing in the data suggests that ad hominem contributes to polarized cognitive representations, reinforcing group identities and social divisions. This finding resonates with Wang et al., (2020) showing that political discourse is shaped by biases and polarization dynamics that influence how individuals process information and form opinions. In this context, ad hominem can be seen as a mechanism that not only persuades but also structures public cognition in ways that may undermine deliberative democracy.

The primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in its integration of socio-cognitive CDA and argumentation theory to reconceptualize ad hominem as a multidimensional discursive phenomenon. While previous research has largely treated ad hominem either as a logical fallacy or as a rhetorical strategy, this study demonstrates that it operates simultaneously at three interconnected levels:

1. Textual level → realized through linguistic strategies (evaluation, metaphor, presupposition)
2. Cognitive level → shaping mental models and ideological schemas
3. Social level → reproducing power relations and ideological polarization

This triadic model extends van Dijk’s socio-cognitive framework by explicitly incorporating fallacious argumentation as a mechanism of ideological reproduction,



thereby bridging a gap between discourse studies and argumentation theory. At the same time, it advances Walton's theory by providing empirical evidence from a non-Western political context, demonstrating how *ad hominem* functions as a contextually embedded and strategically deployed argumentative move.

Moreover, the concept of "implicit *ad hominem* as ideological delegitimization" proposed in this study represents a novel analytical category that captures forms of personal attack that are not overtly expressed but are nonetheless cognitively and socially consequential. This contribution is particularly relevant for analyzing political discourse in formal settings, where institutional norms often constrain direct insults.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *ad hominem* in the Indonesian presidential and vice-presidential debates of 2024 is not predominantly realized as overtly aggressive or explicitly abusive argumentation, but rather as a subtle, indirect, and strategically embedded mechanism of delegitimization. Using a socio-cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis framework, the findings show that *ad hominem* operates across textual, cognitive, and social dimensions, where linguistic strategies such as evaluative framing, presupposition, metaphor, and contrastive structures construct negative representations of political opponents while maintaining discursive legitimacy. In line with the study's objective, *ad hominem* functions less as a standalone logical fallacy and more as a discursive practice that shapes audience cognition and reproduces ideological polarization, particularly through the construction of "positive self" and "negative other" representations.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to integrating socio-cognitive discourse analysis and argumentation theory by reconceptualizing *ad hominem* as a multidimensional phenomenon of ideological delegitimization, rather than merely a violation of logical norms. This finding extends the socio-cognitive framework by highlighting how fallacious argumentation participates in the reproduction of ideology, while also supporting the view in contemporary argumentation theory that the effectiveness of arguments depends on their contextual and pragmatic functions. The concept of implicit or "polished" *ad hominem*, identified as a dominant pattern in formal political debates, is a key contribution of this study, offering a novel analytical lens for examining how personal attacks adapt to institutional and cultural constraints.

The findings of this study carry important implications for both theoretical development and democratic practice. First, they suggest that analyses of political discourse should move beyond rigid distinctions between rational argumentation and fallacy, recognizing instead the hybrid nature of real-world argumentation, where persuasive strategies often combine logical reasoning with implicit delegitimization. Second, the study highlights the need for greater critical awareness among audiences and stakeholders regarding how political language shapes perception and cognition, particularly in electoral contexts where discourse plays a decisive role in influencing public opinion. Third, for scholars of discourse and argumentation, this study underscores the importance of integrating linguistic, cognitive, and ideological dimensions in analyzing political communication, especially in non-Western contexts that remain underrepresented in the literature.

Despite its contributions, this study also opens several avenues for future research. First, further studies could expand the dataset to include multimodal elements of political debates, such as gestures, intonation, and visual framing, which may reinforce or modify the effects of ad hominem. Second, comparative research across countries or political systems could provide deeper insights into how cultural and institutional contexts shape the use of delegitimization strategies. Third, future research could incorporate computational and corpus-based approaches to examine larger datasets and identify patterns of ad hominem at scale, thereby enhancing methodological robustness. Finally, experimental studies focusing on audience reception could investigate how different forms of implicit ad hominem influence public cognition, trust, and political decision-making.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors express sincere gratitude to Universitas Negeri Jakarta for providing academic support and an intellectual environment that facilitated the completion of this research. We also thank colleagues and reviewers whose valuable comments and suggestions helped improve this manuscript. Finally, the authors thank the organizers of the International Seminar on Humanity, Education, and Language (ISHEL) 2026 for providing a scholarly forum to disseminate and discuss this study's findings. The authors declare that this research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agnibaya, R. (2025). Dysphemistic language and social cognition: an analysis in online comments on 2024 presidential election coverage. *Lingue: Jurnal Bahasa, Budaya, Dan Sastra*, 7(1 SE-Articles), 25–39. <https://doi.org/10.33477/lingue.v7i1.9240>
- Badrkhani, P. (2019). Discourse, ideology and heritage language socialization: micro and macro perspectives. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 16(2), 237–239. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2018.1538892>
- Breeze, R. (2013). *Corporate Discourse*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. Retrieved from <https://digital.casalini.it/9781441177537>
- Cholifah, A. N., Alfaruqy, D., Pustika, R., & Sunarsih, S. (2024). Unmasking Logical Fallacies: An Analysis of The 2024 Indonesian Vice-Presidential Debates. *Journal of Pragmatics and Discourse Research*, 4(02), 159–167. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.51817/jpdr.v4i2.961>
- Durmus, E., Ladhak, F., & Cardie, C. (2019). The Role of Pragmatic and Discourse Context in Determining Argument Impact. In K. Inui, J. Jiang, V. Ng, & X. Wan (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 2019 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing and the 9th International Joint Conference on Natural Language Processing (EMNLP-IJCNLP)* (pp. 5668–5678). Hong Kong, China: Association for Computational Linguistics. <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/D19-1568>
- Fairclough, N. (1997). Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Analysis of Language. *Language*, 73, 189. <https://doi.org/10.2307/416612>
- Firdaus, S. (2026). Ad Hominem at the Boundary of Reasonableness: Strategic Maneuvering and Ideological Polarization in the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Debates. *Argumentation*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10503-026-09700-8>



- Firdaus, S., Kamal, M., & Anoegrajekti, N. (2025). Reconstruction of Political Ideology Through Ad Hominem Argument Strategy in the 2024 Presidential-Vice Presidential Debate. *Proceeding of International Seminar on Humanity, Education, and Language*, 1(1 SE-Humanity-Education-Language), 35–52. <https://doi.org/10.21009/ishel.v1i1.57255>
- Gil-Bonilla, J. F. (2025). Critical Discourse Analysis of Pre-Electoral Interviews between Nicolás Maduro and María Corina Machado in the 2024 Venezuelan Elections. *Lengua y Habla*, 29, 238–257.
- Hansson, S., & Reijven, M. H. (2025). Political discourse and argumentation. *Qualitative Approaches*. Routledge. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003502296-11>
- Hazaea, A., Noraini, I., & Fariza, N. (2017). Methodological Challenges in Critical Discourse Analysis: Empirical Research Design for Global Journalistic Texts. *E-Bangi Journal of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 12, 1823–1884.
- Khoiron, K. (2025). Critical Discourse Analysis of Political Speech on Human Rights By Prabowo Subiyanto in The First Debate of The 2024 Presidential Election. *Journal of Law, Politic and Humanities*, 5(6 SE-Articles), 4661–4667. <https://doi.org/10.38035/jlph.v5i6.2172>
- Patel, U., Mukherjee, A., & Mondal, M. (2023). “Dummy Grandpa, Do You Know Anything?”: Identifying and Characterizing Ad Hominem Fallacy Usage in the Wild. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, 17, 698–709. <https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v17i1.22180>
- Setyaningsih, Y., Rahardi, R. K., & Rahmat, W. (2025). Unpacking Argumentative Fallacies in Indonesia’s 2024 Presidential Debates: A Cognitive-Pragmatic Analysis. *Jurnal Gramatika*, 1(1), 30–47. <https://doi.org/10.22202/jg.v1i1.9371>
- Shea, A. L., Omapang, A. K. B., Cho, J. Y., Ginsparg, M. Y., Bazarova, N. N., Hui, W., ... Margolin, D. B. (2025). Beyond ad hominem attacks: A typology of the discursive tactics used when objecting to news commentary on social media. *PLOS ONE*, 20(8), e0328550. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0328550>
- van Dijk, T. A. (1993). *Elite Discourse and Racism*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483326184>
- van Dijk, T. A. (2000). *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446217856>
- van Dijk, T. A. (2005). *Racism and Discourse in Spain and Latin America*. John Benjamins. Retrieved from <https://www.jbe-platform.com/content/books/9789027294364>
- van Dijk, T. A. (2008a). *Discourse and Context: A Sociocognitive Approach*. Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=jKEUzVDAmYAC>
- van Dijk, T. A. (2008b). *Discourse and Power*. Macmillan Education UK. Retrieved from <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=NhILAQAAMAAJ>
- van Dijk, T. A. (2017). Socio-cognitive discourse studies. In *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies* (1st Editio, p. 18). Routledge.
- Walton, D. (1998). *Ad Hominem Arguments*. University of Alabama Press. Retrieved

- from https://books.google.co.id/books?id=-HTQY_b1_84C
- Walton, D. (2006). Poisoning the Well. *Argumentation*, 20, 273–307. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10503-006-9013-z>
- Wang, X., Sirianni, A. D., Tang, S., Zheng, Z., & Fu, F. (2020). Public Discourse and Social Network Echo Chambers Driven by Socio-Cognitive Biases. *Physical Review X*, 10(4), 41042. <https://doi.org/10.1103/PhysRevX.10.041042>
- Welle, M. T., & Shtok, N. (2026). Argumentation and Language in Identity Construction: A Discourse-Historical Analysis of Polarisation in the 2024 Trump-Harris Debate. *Argumentation*, 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10503-026-09709-z>
- Wicke, P., & Bolognesi, M. M. (2025). Red and blue language: Word choices in the Trump and Harris 2024 presidential debate. *PLOS ONE*, 20(6), e0324715. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0324715>
- Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2001). What CDA Is About – A Summary of Its History, Important Concepts and Its Developments¹ (1st ed.). London: SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857028020.n1>