

## DEMOCRATIC PROGRESSIVE PARTY'S DIGITAL POPULISM TOWARDS REUNIFICATION NARRATIVES IN X 2020-2024

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### ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze how the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) utilizes digital populism on platform X (formerly Twitter) to reinforce Taiwan's distinct identity and shape public opinion regarding Taiwan-China reunification. A mixed-methods approach was employed, analyzing 920 posts from 2020 to 2024. Data were examined using Naïve Bayes classification for quantitative sentiment analysis and qualitative thematic evaluation grounded in Social Identity Theory. The research results reveal three primary findings. First, the DPP successfully establishes an "in-group" identity based on progressive and democratic ideals, contrasted with an "out-group" depiction of Chinese authoritarianism. Second, although the DPP effectively controls digital discourse on sovereignty and social initiatives, sentiment analysis indicates persistent polarization in public responses. Third, while "inclusive populism" has effectively fostered group preference and political allegiance, this approach encounters constraints associated with fundamental geopolitical issues. These discoveries highlight that digital populism serves as an effective tool for identity consolidation, though it may intensify societal divisions rather than establishing a broad consensus in cross-strait interactions. This research explores the role of social media within East Asian security dynamics and examines the influence of digital communication on regional political stability.

**Keywords:** digital populism; democratic progressive party; social identity theory; Taiwan-China relations; sentiment analysis

## POPULISME DIGITAL PARTAI DEMOKRAT PROGRESIF TERHADAP NARASI REUNIFIKASI DI X 2020-2024

### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana Partai Progresif Demokrat (DPP) memanfaatkan populisme digital di platform X (sebelumnya Twitter) untuk memperkuat identitas khas Taiwan dan membentuk opini publik terkait wacana reunifikasi Taiwan-Tiongkok. Pendekatan metode campuran digunakan dengan menganalisis 920 unggahan dari tahun 2020 hingga 2024. Data diperiksa menggunakan klasifikasi Naïve Bayes untuk analisis sentimen kuantitatif dan evaluasi tematik kualitatif yang berlandaskan pada Teori Identitas Sosial. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tiga temuan utama. Pertama, DPP membangun identitas "in-group" berdasarkan idealisme progresif dan demokratis, yang dikontraskan dengan penggambaran "out-group" otoritarianisme Tiongkok. Kedua, meskipun DPP secara efektif mengendalikan wacana digital mengenai kedaulatan dan inisiatif sosial, analisis sentimen menunjukkan adanya polarisasi yang persisten dalam respons publik. Ketiga, sementara "populisme inklusif" telah secara efektif mendorong preferensi kelompok dan loyalitas politik, pendekatan ini menghadapi kendala dari isu-isu geopolitik mendasar. Temuan-temuan ini menyoroti bahwa populisme digital berfungsi sebagai instrumen yang efektif untuk konsolidasi identitas, namun dapat memperdalam perpecahan dalam masyarakat alih-alih membangun konsensus luas dalam interaksi lintas selat. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi peran media sosial dalam dinamika keamanan Asia Timur dan mengkaji pengaruh komunikasi digital terhadap stabilitas politik regional.

**Kata kunci:** populisme digital; partai progresif demokratik; teori identitas sosial; hubungan Taiwan-Tiongkok; analisis sentimen

### INTRODUCTION

Taiwan's political status has emerged as one of the most sensitive geopolitical issues in contemporary East Asia. The Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) assertion of Taiwan's sovereignty coincides with increased military pressure from China in the Taiwan Strait, including frequent airspace patrols (Sari Marina, 2024). Despite functioning as a

democratic government with de facto autonomy, Taiwan's formal diplomatic recognition remains limited to around 23 countries worldwide (Tanasaldy et al., 2017). This geopolitical stalemate has transformed political discourse on Taiwan-China reunification from a purely domestic issue to a central question that intertwines national identity, international alignment, and regional stability.

Established in 1986 as an alternative to the Kuomintang, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) serves as the primary advocate for Taiwanese democratic consolidation and national identity. Through electoral victories in 2000, 2004, 2016, and 2024, the DPP institutionalized an agenda emphasizing pro-people governance, U.S. alignment, and resistance to China's reunification (Tanasaldy et al., 2017). This trajectory illustrates a populist strategy of mobilizing 'the people' against 'elites' to secure authority (Wu & Chu, 2020). Consequently, while the DPP fosters a patriotic domestic image, Beijing designates it a separatist organization, reflecting the party's contentious role in cross-strait relations (Zhao, 2023).

In recent years, X has emerged as an important platform for political communication, enabling the DPP to disseminate messages to its approximately 120,000 followers and mobilize its supporters around populist narratives concerning sovereignty, democracy, and reunification. The platform's features, such as hashtags, retweets, likes, and replies, facilitate rapid message amplification and allow users to actively engage with political content, transforming social media into a contested space where elite discourse meets grassroots reactions (Samalis et al., 2023). The DPP's strategic use of these features exemplifies how contemporary political actors leverage digital platforms to construct and disseminate populist messages.

Previous research has examined populism as an ideological construction of antagonism between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite," as well as its manifestation in the digital context through emotional, direct, and performative communication styles. Studies on Taiwan have emphasized the importance of identity politics and public opinion in shaping cross-strait relations. However, a critical analytical gap remains: the existing literature has not systematically examined whether the DPP's populist communication on social media platforms actually influences public sentiment on the question of reunification.

Research on populism in the Taiwanese context shows that this phenomenon has distinctive characteristics compared to cases in other regions. Frédéric Krumbein (2023) examined populist discourse in Taiwan by combining ideational, political-strategic, and socio-cultural approaches, finding that populism is primarily manifested through moral opposition between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite," the use of straightforward communication styles, and the portrayal of politicians as "ordinary people" who are close to the citizens. However, the research focused on the representa-

tion of populism in the mainstream media and did not empirically test how these narratives were received or responded to by the public on specific issues such as reunification. Chen (2025) shows that the DPP administration in the 2016–2024 period developed the narrative of "China as a threat" into a populist stance that emphasized a sense of national victimhood, which he calls "privileged populism" because it is carried out by a society that is relatively more advanced economically and democratically. These findings confirm that the DPP utilizes the framing of China as a threat to consolidate political support, but the research still focuses on the narrative construction of the elite, rather than on patterns of public sentiment in the digital space. Meanwhile, Adam Cheng-Dedman (2025) offers a two-dimensional framework that places economic anxiety and cultural backlash as the main drivers of the emergence of populism in Taiwan, emphasizing that economic anxiety related to dependence on the Chinese market and resistance to threats to Taiwan's developing identity contribute to the acceptance of populist discourse.

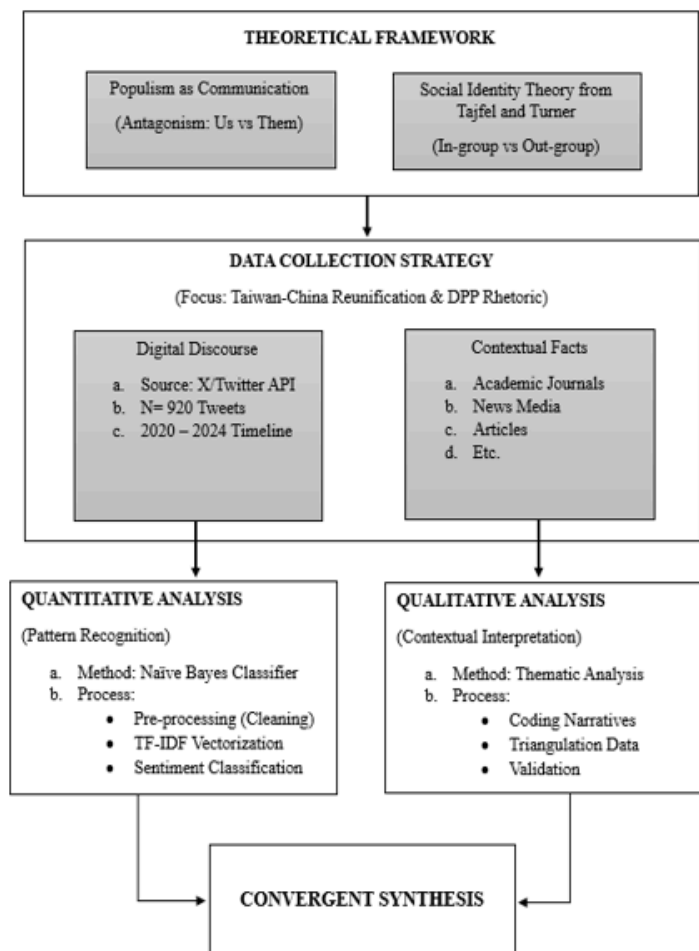
Some researchers have focused on analyzing populist discourse; others on identity politics; still others on the economic drivers of populism. However, research analyzing how the DPP's populist tweets on X specifically influence public sentiment regarding Taiwan-China reunification is still lacking. This gap is significant because it raises a theoretical question with practical implications regarding the intersection of digital political communication and entrenched geopolitical attitudes. To address this literature gap, this research is guided by a primary research question: To what extent do structural factors limit the impact of social media populism on public sentiment regarding reunification? By answering this, the research aims to evaluate whether populist rhetoric on platform X effectively reshapes fundamental public attitudes or if deeper structural variables resist such partisan interventions.

## METHOD

This research applies a mixed-methods design to evaluate the impact of the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) populist rhetoric on public sentiment on the X platform (formerly Twitter), as shown in Figure 1. The analytical framework is built on a synthesis of two main theoretical perspectives: Populism as Political Communication and Social Identity Theory. Populism is a discursive strategy that frames politics as a moral antagonism between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," as well as ex-

cluding out-groups (de Vreese et al., 2018). This perspective is integrated with Tajfel & Turner's Social Identity Theory, which postulates that individuals reinforce their self-esteem through social comparison between in-groups and out-groups (Khadka, 2024).

In this research, DPP populist tweets are positioned as communication stimuli that activate social identity boundaries, constructing Taiwan as an in-group threatened by China as an existential out-group in order to mobilize political support.



**Figure 1. Research Methodology Framework**

Source: Authors, 2025

The primary data acquisition process was conducted through the Academic Research API X with a five-year temporal range (January 1, 2020 – December 31, 2024). Population data was collected using a combination search strategy targeting three discourse clusters: Taiwanese national identity (#Taiwan\_Identity, #Taiwan\_Independence), reunification issues (#Cross-Strait\_Relations, #One\_China), and official party communications (@DPP.tw). To ensure data validity, strict exclusion criteria were applied to filter out bots, duplicates, and content with incomplete metadata. The final valid sample consisted of 920 tweets, stratified into 305 tweets from official DPP accounts (representing elite strategic messages) and 615 tweets from public users (representing grassroots responses).

The quantitative sentiment analysis was executed utilizing the Multinomial Naïve Bayes classifier within a Python-based Google Colab environment. Prior to model training, the raw textual corpus underwent a rigorous preprocessing pipeline, which encompassed lowercase normalization, tokenization, stopword filtration via the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) lexicon, stemming, and subsequent vectorization utilizing Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF) weighting to extract salient lexical features.

To mitigate the risk of algorithmic overfitting and to guarantee robust predictive validity, the aggregated dataset of 920 discrete posts was partitioned adhering to a conventional 80:20 training-to-testing ratio. This specific stratification, yielding an

empirical training set of 734 tweets and a testing set of 184 tweets, was deliberately selected to provide ample data volume for the algorithm to discern latent linguistic configurations, while preserving an adequate, unseen subset for objective performance appraisal. Inherently functioning as a probabilistic model, the Multinomial Naïve Bayes algorithm computes prior and conditional probabilities directly from the training matrix, thereby achieving optimal mathematical convergence within a singular computational iteration.

To establish high-fidelity ground truth labels prior to algorithmic training, a manual annotation protocol was strictly conducted by two independent coders, thereby fortifying the dataset's structural integrity. Subsequent evaluation on the 20% testing subset demonstrated commendable predictive efficacy, yielding an exact Accuracy of 71.20%, a weighted Precision of 50.69%, a weighted Recall of 71.20%, and a weighted F1-Score of 59.22%. These precise quantitative metrics substantiate the classifier's reliability in categorizing tripartite sentiments (positive, neutral, negative), effectively accommodating the inherent distributional imbalances typical of Taiwanese public political discourse on platform X.

To further strengthen the analysis of the DPP's micro-targeting strategy, qualitative observation of the dataset reveals how specific narratives are carefully tailored for distinct demographics. For instance, a tweet from the dataset stating, "*DPP will be hosting the Road to Diversity camp for international students in #Taiwan. This free two-day excursion will provide an overview of Taiwan's #multicultural history...*" (@DPPonline, 2021), demonstrates a clear targeting of younger, progressive voters and students. By emphasizing liberal-democratic values such as diversity and multiculturalism, the party effectively capitalizes on the specific socio-political concerns of this youth demographic.

Furthermore, the manual annotation by independent coders played a crucial role in addressing complex linguistic nuances, particularly sarcasm and irony, which automated sentiment analysis often misinterprets. As an example, a tweet from the dataset stating, "*There's no peaceful reunification it's a bloody forced annexation [Taiwan] has never been and will never be a part of china*" (@CindyWan19, 2023), utilizes the formally positive political terminology "peaceful reunification". An automated lexicon might misclassify this due to the presence of the word 'peaceful'. However, during the manual validation process, the coders accurately identified the underlying sarcastic context mocking the official narrative, and correctly classi-

fied the tweet as 'negative'. This manual contextualization significantly enhanced the overall validity and reliability of the dataset prior to the machine learning training phase.

Simultaneously, qualitative analysis was conducted using Thematic Analysis to dissect the narrative structure behind the statistical data. To strengthen the depth of interpretation, this analysis was extensively supported by secondary data sourced from reputable academic journals (to map the evolution of the DPP's concept of populism), credible mass media news articles (such as the Taipei Times and Focus Taiwan to verify the chronology of events), and official party release documents. The use of these secondary sources serves as a contextual reference to validate the narrative findings in the tweets and ensure that interpretations of "nationalism" or "sarcasm" are consistent with the actual socio-political dynamics that occurred during that period. The validity of the findings is reinforced through source triangulation, in which social media narratives are cross-confirmed with facts from literature and news to minimize subjective researcher bias.

The results of both quantitative and qualitative methods are integrated through a convergent (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)ign (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to this approach, the quantitative sentiment data and the qualitative textual data were collected and analyzed concurrently but independently. Subsequently, the findings from both streams were merged during the interpretation phase. This integration allows the qualitative thematic analysis to contextualize and explain the statistical distribution generated by the Naïve Bayes classifier, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding and robust cross-validation of the public sentiment regarding the reunification narratives.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Genesis of Digital Populism Strategy: The Transformation of Social Movements into Political Forces*

The evolution of digital populism in Taiwan found its critical juncture in 2014 through the emergence of the Sunflower Student Movement. The 2014 Sunflower Student Movement was a crucial turning point for the evolution of digital populism in Taiwan, especially in articulating resistance to *the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA)* (Grano, 2023). This mobilization, which involves student coalitions and marginalized

groups such as the *Tongzhi* community, leverages digital platforms to integrate the narrative of national sovereignty with the struggle for civil rights (Chen-Dedman, 2022).

Based on Tajfel's and Turner's Social Identity Theory, this phenomenon represents the consolidation of collective identity as a defense mechanism against China's external influence. The process of social categorization creates a stark dichotomy between the *progressive-democratic* in-group and the *out-group* associated with the pro-China policies of the Kuomintang Party (KMT). As a result, the use of digital space strengthens ideological solidarity and emphasizes the positive distinction of Taiwan's democratic identity. This integrated dissemination strategy has succeeded in transforming fragmented social elements into solid political forces in safeguarding Taiwan's political autonomy from systemic threats.

The institutional legacy of this movement was the birth of new political alliances, most notably the New Power Party, initiated by veteran leaders of the movement (Alsford, 2020). This party focused its platform on systemic reform, democratization, and human rights protection, subsequently gaining significant electoral support. Its legislative presence ensured that the Sunflower Movement's ideology remained integrated into national policy-making. This phenomenon also marked a fundamental transformation in the campaign strategies of major parties, particularly the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which began to synergistically adopt social media as a primary instrument of political communication.

During the 2014 local elections and the 2016 presidential cycle, the DPP intensively advocated for national identity and sovereignty (Lu, 2023). Analytical consensus suggests that the DPP's electoral dominance during this period manifested from public dissatisfaction with the KMT administration's perceived accommodation of Chinese interests. Throughout the 2015 presidential campaign, Tsai Ing-wen consistently voiced support for same-sex marriage legalization through both formal platforms and policy statements (Chen-Dedman, 2022). This aspirational rhetoric resonated profoundly with the *Tongzhi* community, transforming moral support into concrete political backing for Tsai and the DPP. This normative-prescriptive rhetoric was pivotal in consolidating the minority voter base, as Tsai emphasized the fundamental right to love and the pursuit of personal fulfillment (Lee, 2021).

Tsai's administration subsequently took proactive steps in institutionalizing LGBTQ+ rights

through comprehensive regulations designed to prevent discrimination across social and professional sectors (Jhang, 2020). Beyond strengthening anti-discrimination laws, Tsai invited minority activists to engage substantially in policy deliberation. She framed this achievement of equality as a progressive leap for the Taiwanese nation toward an inclusive social order (Lee, 2021). This narrative was widely disseminated through digital ecosystems, constructing a digital populist image aimed at building a solid democratic identity while mitigating Chinese ideological influence. This commitment was further manifested through government participation in symbolic events like Taipei Pride, the largest LGBTQ+ parade in Asia (Teufel Dreyer & deLisle, 2021).

The efficacy of this strategy was validated in the 2020 general election, where Tsai Ing-wen secured a landslide victory with 57.1% of the vote (BBC, 2020). Alongside executive success, the DPP achieved legislative dominance by securing 61 of 113 parliamentary seats. These data confirm that the DPP's ability to formulate resonant national identity narratives created a positive public perception of the party's agenda. The DPP systematically placed Taiwanese nationalism as the fundamental basis of its campaign, creating a sharp differentiation from the KMT's historically open orientation toward China. By framing sovereignty and national security as a response to China's existential threat, the DPP successfully attracted voters seeking robust political independence (Chen, 2025).

Within the framework of Populism Theory, this dynamic demonstrates how political actors utilize sovereignty rhetoric to mobilize heterogeneous social groups. The Sunflower Movement serves as a prototype of how digital technology can amplify political messages through social media-based mass organization. However, this approach is not immune to criticism. Populist strategies are often scrutinized for their tendency to simplify complex political realities into binary "people vs. enemy" dichotomies (Krumbein, 2023). In the Taiwanese context, these risks creating structured social polarization and potentially weakening democratic institutions by positioning political opponents as existential threats. Furthermore, reliance on digital ecosystems opens avenues for disinformation and the reinforcement of intergroup intolerance (Hsieh & Cox, 2022).

The DPP's communication evolution from traditional methods to social media utilization has reshaped participatory politics in Taiwan. Prior to social media proliferation, DPP campaigns emphasized ideological conflicts between democracy and

authoritarianism through conventional channels (Chen, 2025). Now, digital integration allows the DPP to identify real-time public sentiment and respond adaptively through "micro-targeting" techniques, using data analytics to tailor messages to specific demographics (Wong, 2019). By emphasizing security threats for nationalists and progressive issues for professionals, the DPP reinforced existing loyalty while engaging previously apathetic voters. This digital populism represents a sophisticated evolution in political communication tactics to maintain legitimacy and social cohesion.

### ***Populist Rhetoric on Social Media X: A Comparative Analysis of DPP and Kuomintang Strategies***

The DPP's populist strategy is articulated through the mainstreaming of liberal-democratic values. Issues such as social inclusion and LGBTQ+ rights serve as rhetorical instruments to distinguish Taiwan's progressive identity from China's authoritarian model. Analysis of Lai Ching-te's posts on platform X provides a clear illustration of the implementation of the DPP's digital populism and the resulting polarized reactions. In the presidential election of January 13, 2024, the DPP achieved a significant victory through the candidacy of Lai Ching-te and Hsiao Bi-k. Lai viewed this mandate as an opportunity to lead Taiwan toward a more resilient future despite geopolitical pressure from China (Fatunnisa, 2024). Lai's leadership philosophy, which is inherently pro-people and anti-interventionist, is reflected in his political stances and actions (Shattuck, 2025).

Theoretically, the DPP's success in dominating the Taiwanese political structure is supported by the use of populist mechanisms driven by sustained public support for various social movements. A tangible example is Lai Ching-te's post on October 25, 2024, which celebrated the diversity of the LGBTQ+ community as a national strength.

One of the posts on social media X uploaded by Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te on October 25, 2024, Lai Ching-te expressed full support for the movement carried out by the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) minority group with the aim of building strength and enthusiasm to create an inclusive future:

*"Pride celebrates the beauty of diversity & confidence to be ourselves. The #TaiwanPride parade this Sat. will showcase the strength & spirit of our LGBTQ+ community. As Asia's 1st nation to legalize same-sex marriage, we remain committed to building a more inclusive future."* (Ching-te, 2024).

Lai reaffirmed Taiwan's commitment as a pioneer in same-sex marriage legalization in Asia. From an academic perspective, this rhetoric is a strategic effort to embrace minority groups as part of the progressive "people" (Chen-Dedman, 2022). This trend has become a dominant discourse on social media, triggering diverse interactions on X.

Public response indicates a sharp sentimental divide, while supporters like appreciate the progress (@charlie\_rsmith, 2024). A fundamental criticism arises from another users, who argue that such policies contradict traditional family values and represent a "poisonous Western ideology" that destroys social fabric (@evan123liu, 2024). This negative sentiment demonstrates a deep disagreement with the cultural identity shift promoted by the DPP.

In contrast, the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) employs a counter-populist narrative. A post from their X accounts on April 16, 2025, reaffirmed their rejection of all forms of totalitarianism while accusing the DPP of manipulating public opinion and distorting history (Kuomintang, 2025). Unlike the DPP's focus on minority progressivism, the KMT's strategy emphasizes protecting democratic integrity from elite-driven disinformation. By labeling the DPP as a "manipulator," the KMT seeks to activate an in-group of voters concerned with historical authenticity and traditional values. This indicates that populism is not a monolithic phenomenon; both parties utilize similar mechanisms but with different constructions of "in-groups" and "out-groups." The DPP positions itself as a harbinger of liberal modernization, while the KMT positions itself as a guardian of established values and historical truth.

It is crucial to distinguish between populism and nationalism in this context. Populism focuses on the internal conflict between "the people" and "the elite," whereas nationalism prioritizes internal unity against external threats (Brubaker, 2020). While healthy nationalism can strengthen democracy, populist strategies relying on "us vs. them" narratives often deepen polarization and weaken social stability (Gidron & Hall, 2020). The rhetorical competition between the DPP and KMT on X has created layered polarization in Taiwanese society, touching fundamental levels of how the "true" Taiwanese identity is defined.

Applying Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, Lai Ching-te's rhetoric reinforces minority in-group favoritism by activating LGBTQ+ collective identity and positioning the opposition as reactionary (Khadka, 2024). This social categorization creates biases that benefit inclusive groups but simultane-

ously trigger defensive responses from conservatives. The KMT performs a similar categorization by positioning its supporters as preservers of "true democracy" against the "manipulative" DPP. This results in an identity-polarized society where each group feels they are defending universal values against an existential threat (Brubaker, 2020). This zero-sum dynamic reduces the possibility for constructive dialogue and deepens the divide regarding Taiwan (Gidron & Hall, 2020) position (Gidron & Hall, 2020).

### ***Public Sentiment and Manifestations of Taffel's Social Identity on Social Media X***

To analyse public reactions to the DPP's populist rhetoric, this research uses sentiment and emotion analysis methods on posts on social media X. Data was collected through two main hashtags: #DPP and #Reunification\_With\_China, which represent public discourse about the party and geopolitical issues relevant to the DPP's communication strategy. Sentiment analysis classified posts into three categories: positive, negative, and neutral, while emotion analysis identified specific emotions expressed by users, such as trust, fear, happiness, and sadness. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how public audiences respond to the DPP's populist rhetoric and how their social identities are activated through digital discourse.

**Table 1. Number of Taiwanese Public Sentiments on Tweets about the Democratic Progressive Party on X**

Sentiment	Number of Posts	Presented
Positive	234	76.72%
Neutral	56	18.36%
Negative	15	4.92%
Total	305	100%

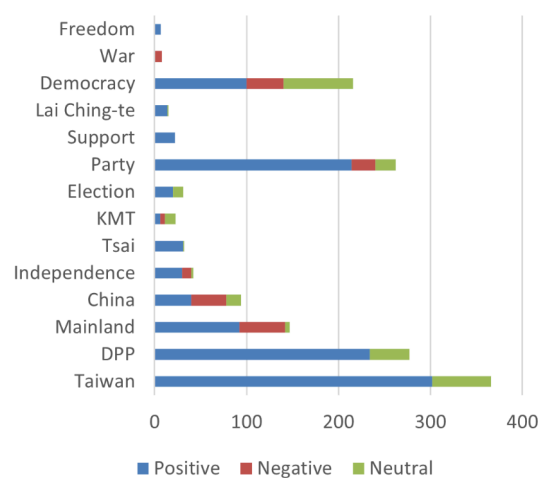
Source: Compiled by the Authors, 202

Sentiment analysis of 305 posts with the hashtag #DPP revealed a very positive and dominant sentiment distribution (see Figure 2 and Table 1 on the next page). A total of 234 posts (76.72%) showed positive sentiment, 56 posts (18.36%) showed neutral sentiment, and 15 posts (4.92%) showed negative sentiment. These findings, as shown in Figure 7 and Table 2, indicate that the majority of public discourse regarding the DPP on the

X platform is highly positive, with only a small portion expressing disapproval or direct criticism.

The dominance of positive sentiment (76.72%) regarding the #DPP hashtag, as detailed in Table 1, reflects a robust mechanism of in-group favoritism. According to Social Identity Theory, individuals are intrinsically motivated to evaluate their in-group more positively to enhance collective self-esteem. In this digital context, DPP supporters demonstrate a strong positive bias, suggesting that the party's digital populist rhetoric effectively activates social identity and strengthens in-group cohesion.

**Top Words Frequencies in #DPP**



**Figure 2. Top Words Frequencies in #Democratic\_Progressive\_Party Posts on Social Media X**

Source: Compiled by the Authors, 2025

The word frequency distribution across sentiments provides a granular view of how this identity is constructed (see Figure 3). In the positive spectrum, value-laden terms such as "freedom," "democracy," and "support" serve as the primary lexical pillars. These words do not merely represent political goals but function as "in-group virtues" that distinguish the DPP from its perceived rivals. The prominence of names like "Tsai" (Tsai Ing-wen) and "Lai Ching-te" further symbolizes this leadership as the guardian of these democratic aspirations. The high frequency of these terms aligns with the dominant emotion of "Trust" found in the emotional analysis (see Figure 4), suggesting that the DPP has successfully consolidated a digital community built on shared progressive values and institutional loyalty.

Conversely, the negative sentiment spectrum highlights a different facet of identity construction:

out-group threat perception. Words such as "China," "mainland," and particularly "war" and "independence" (see Figure 3) indicate deep-seated concerns regarding cross-strait tensions. From a theoretical standpoint, Tajfel suggests that perceived external threats strengthen in-group cohesion. By framing "China" as an exogenous out-group associated with "war," the populist narrative transforms geopolitical anxiety into a tool for domestic mobilization. This is further corroborated by the specific presence of negative discourse centring on manipulation or disgrace, which reflects a classic populist "us versus them" dichotomy, where the "enemies" are those considered to betray the people's interests.

Neutral discourse, characterized by terms such as "election," "kmt," and "party," reflects the procedural and geopolitical complexity of the 2024 election. The frequent mention of the "mainland" relationship across all sentiments underscores that Taiwan's sovereignty remains the central axis of public debate. Ultimately, the synergy between positive virtues (freedom, democracy) and negative threats (war, China) illustrates how digital populism successfully constructs a strong social identity that justifies political mobilization and resistance against external pressure. These findings show that the DPP's populist rhetoric has successfully constructed a strong "us versus them" narrative, in which China and the domestic opposition function as out-groups that justify in-group mobilization and cohesion.

A specific emotional analysis of #DPP posts, as shown in Figure 11, reveals an emotional distribution that is highly concentrated on the emotion of trust. From the 305 posts analysed, the data shows a very distinctive emotional pattern in the public response to the DPP's rhetoric.

**Table 2. Emotional Distribution in #DPP Hashtag Posts on Social Media X**

Emotion	Frequency	Percentage
Trust	249	81.64%
Fear	41	13.44%
Happy (Happiness)	11	3.61%
Sad (Sadness)	4	1.31%
<b>Total</b>	<b>305</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Compiled by the Authors, 2025

The emotion of "trust" emerged as the most dominant emotion with a frequency of 249 times

(81.64%), indicating that the majority of individuals had a positive perception and trusted the DPP party, as shown in Table 6. The emotion "fear" was recorded 41 times (13.44%), indicating concern among some individuals. The emotion of "happiness" was recorded 11 times (3.61%), indicating that although there were positive responses, the level of happiness related to DPP posts was relatively limited. The emotion "sadness" was recorded 4 times (1.31%), indicating that expressions of sadness regarding the DPP issue were minimal. Other emotions such as "surprise," "disgust," "anger," and "anticipation" were not identified or found in the results of this analysis, indicating that public discourse about the DPP is dominated exclusively by four main emotions: trust, fear, happiness, and sadness.

**Table 3. Amount of Taiwanese Public Sentiment Data regarding Reunification with China on X**

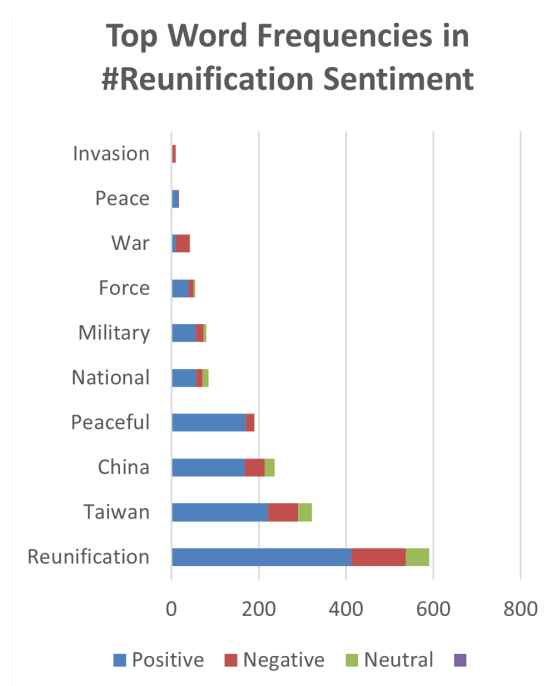
Sentiment	Number of Posts	Presented
Positive	33	57.24%
Neutral	167	27.48%
Negative	111	15.28%
<b>Total</b>	<b>615</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Compiled by the Authors, 2025

Sentiment analysis of 615 posts with the hashtag #Reunification\_With\_China shows a more heterogeneous and polarized distribution of sentiment compared to the hashtag #DPP (see Figure 4 and Table 3). A total of 337 posts (57.24%) showed positive sentiment, 167 posts (27.48%) showed neutral sentiment, and 111 posts (15.28%) showed negative sentiment. Compared to the very positive sentiment distribution of the #DPP hashtag (76.72%), the positive sentiment on the #Reunification\_With\_China hashtag is lower by 19.48 percentage points, while neutral and negative sentiments are much higher.

The significant disparities in sentiment patterns can be academically elucidated through the conceptual framework of social identity salience within Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (see Figure 5). As the digital discourse transitions from a clearly defined partisan identity (#DPP) to the more multifaceted and contested issue of #Reunification\_With\_China, the salience of social identity becomes increasingly nuanced and polarized. This

shift is empirically evidenced by a 19.48% decrease in positive sentiment compared to the #DPP discourse, while negative and neutral sentiments surged to 15.28% and 27.48%, respectively (see Figure 4). This representational ambiguity suggests that the reunification issue precipitates a more profound state of identity contestation than partisan politics alone.



**Figure 3. Top Words Frequencies in #Democratic\_Progressive\_Party Posts on Social Media X**

Source: Compiled by the Authors, 2025

The lexical distribution presented in the stacked bar chart (Figure 5) exemplifies this intense identity competition. Within the positive spectrum, the dominance of terms such as "reunification," "peaceful," and "motherland" indicates the strategic use of cultural and economic integration frames. The pro-reunification in-group leverages these signifiers to position integration as a harmonious progression rooted in historical ties. Conversely, the negative sentiment is heavily populated by security-centric signifiers and existential threats, most notably "war," "force," "Invasion", and "military", (see Figure 5). The high frequency of these terms in the negative spectrum reinforces an "out-group threat perception," where opponents of reunification frame the prospect of integration as a direct military threat to Taiwan's democratic sovereignty and institutional values.

Furthermore, the neutral discourse, which includes strategic terms such as "military" and

"peace," indicates that the public evaluation extends beyond emotional rhetoric to include pragmatic considerations of regional security and electoral implications. This divergence in narrative framing represents a concrete manifestation of Tajfel's social comparison process, in which competing in-groups differentiate themselves by emphasizing the superiority of their respective values, economic prosperity and cultural unity versus democratic autonomy and national sovereignty. Ultimately, the strategic utilization of divergent universal values, specifically economic prosperity versus democratic autonomy. Through this mechanism, competing in-groups rationalize their identity positioning by asserting the superiority of their respective values. This process effectively transforms latent geopolitical anxieties into a potent instrument for in-group cohesion and collective resistance against external pressures.

**Table 4. Emotion Distribution in Posts with the Hashtag #Reunification\_With\_China on Social Media X/Twitter**

Emotion	Frequency	Percentage
Trust	495	80.49%
Fear	109	17.72%
Happy (Happiness)	9	1.46%
Sad	9	1.46%
Surprise	2	0.33%
<b>Total</b>	<b>615</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Compiled by the Authors, 2025

Emotional analysis of 615 posts with the hashtag #Reunification\_With\_China, reveals a different emotional distribution pattern from the hashtag #DPP (see Figure 6 and Table 4). The emotion of "trust" emerged as the most dominant emotion with a frequency of 495 times (80.49%), reflecting a high level of trust in the reunification narrative. This can be interpreted as an indication that many social media users feel optimistic or positive about the prospects of reunification, perhaps due to their belief in the expected political or economic stability. Conversely, the emotion "fear" emerged as the second most significant emotion, with a frequency of 109 times (17.72%), indicating deep concern among users about the implications of reunification, which may include political uncertainty or potential conflict. Other emotions such as "happy"

and "sad" were recorded with very low frequencies (9 times or 1.46% each), while the emotion "surprise" was only detected in 2 cases (0.33%). Negative emotions such as "disgust," "anger," and "anticipation" were not detected in this analysis.

**Table 5. Comparison of Sentiment and Emotion between the #DPP and #Reunification\_With\_China Hashtags from the Perspective of Tajfel's Social Identity Theory**

Metrics	#DPP	#Reunifi- cation_With_ China	Difference
Positive Sentiment	76.72%	57.24%	-19.48%
Negative Sentiment	4.92%	15.28%	+10.36%
Neutral Sentiment	18.36%	27.48%	+9.12%
Dominant Trust Emotion	81.64%	80.49%	-1.15%
Fear Emotion	13.44%	17.72%	+4.28%

Source: Compiled by the Authors, 2025

When social in-groups are clear and well-defined (such as in #DPP, which distinguishes the party from the opposition), in-group favouritism is very strong, resulting in a dominant positive sentiment of 76.72%, (see Table 5). This mechanism is consistent with Tajfel's theory: when social categories are clear and salient, individuals exhibit very strong in-group bias. Conversely, when the topic concerns issues that are ambiguous in terms of identity categorization (#Reunification\_With\_China, which triggers competition between various identity in-groups), sentiment becomes more polarized and less clear, with positive sentiment dropping significantly to 57.24%, negative sentiment increasing to 15.28%, and neutral sentiment increasing dramatically to 27.48%.

The emotional distribution regarding the 2024 reunification discourse, as illustrated in the comparison data, reveals a significant concentration of "Fear" among the digital public (increasing to 17.72% for #Reunification). This emotional outcome is not an isolated phenomenon but is deeply rooted in the "China as a threat" narrative. The seamless arc between the theoretical framework and the empirical data is evidenced by the lexical

patterns, where negative sentiments are expressed by military-centric signifiers such as "war," "force," and "invasion." From a theoretical perspective, the prevalence of "Fear" serves as the psychological manifestation of the perceived exogenous threat from mainland China. By linking the heightened frequency of threat-based vocabulary to the dominant emotion of fear, this study demonstrates how digital populism successfully operationalizes the "China as a threat" narrative to reinforce in-group solidarity.

Furthermore, a comparison of the dominant emotions in both hashtags also shows a strong manifestation of Tajfel's theory. The dominance of the emotion of "trust" in the #DPP discourse at 81.64% indicates very strong in-group cohesion and deep in-group favouritism. This mechanism indicates that DPP in-group members not only show a positive bias towards the party, but are also emotionally attached with high and stable trust. Conversely, in the #Reunification\_With\_China discourse, although the emotion of trust remained dominant at 80.49%, the difference with the emotion of fear was much smaller (only 62.77 points). Compared to #DPP, where the difference between trust (81.64%) and fear (13.44%) reached 68.20 points, the 4.28% increase in fear emotions in the context of reunification indicates more intense competition between identity in-groups. Users who identify themselves as pro-independence will feel "fear" or "anger" towards reunification (out-group threat), while pro-reunification users feel "trust" or "hope" towards integration. This more diverse emotional pattern reflects higher social identity complexity in the topic of reunification compared to the topic of the DPP party, where group identities are clearer and more focused.

The DPP's rhetorical strategy of activating in-group identity (progressive and democratic Taiwanese supporters) while constructing an out-group threat (authoritarian China and reunification threatening autonomy) has succeeded in generating very strong in-group favouritism in public discourse, as shown by 76.72% positive sentiment and 81.64% trust emotions. The DPP's digital populism, which utilizes minority inclusion rhetoric (such as LGBT) to differentiate Taiwan from China, has been effective in activating social identity salience and strengthening in-group loyalty on social media platforms.

In contrast, the issue of reunification, which challenges the fundamental ambiguity of Taiwan's national identity and activates competition between opposing in-groups (pro-independence versus pro-reunification), generates a more polarized and less

clear public response. Data shows that the reunification discourse creates more complex social identity salience, where different groups use different universal values (democracy versus economy, independence versus welfare) to justify their identity positioning. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of the DPP's populist rhetoric in activating in-group favoritism is highly dependent on the clarity of social categorization; when issues concern fundamental identity ambiguities such as reunification, even strong populist rhetoric only results in complex polarization without clear consensus.

## CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) digital populist strategy on platform X operates as a dual-faceted mechanism: it effectively reinforces Taiwan's national "in-group" identity while simultaneously exacerbating social polarization regarding the reunification issue. Through the theoretical lens of Social Identity Theory (SIT), the findings underscore the DPP's efficacy in constructing distinct boundaries between a democratic-progressive Taiwan and an authoritarian China, thereby cultivating significant partisan loyalty and profound emotional trust among its constituents. This approach confirms that contemporary populism extends beyond traditional anti-elite rhetoric, increasingly leveraging cultural identities and liberal values, such as human rights and inclusivity to strengthen in-group favoritism and delegitimize external reunification narratives.

Despite the efficacy of these digital strategies, the research demonstrates that the hegemony of partisan narratives does not automatically translate into a collective consensus regarding multifaceted geopolitical dilemmas. The persistent divergence in sentiment and the emotional complexity surrounding the reunification discourse highlight a critical limitation of digital populism; while it is capable of mobilizing a political base, it remains insufficient to bridge the structural anxieties and identity ambiguities inherent in cross-strait relations. To mitigate the zero-sum polarization identified in this study, platform moderators should refine algorithmic curation to prioritize content that facilitates "constructive dialogue" rather than antagonistic binaries. Furthermore, regional policymakers are encouraged to develop communication frameworks that foster deliberative engagement and de-escalate digital tensions, recognizing that regional stability is increasingly contingent upon

how digital identities are constructed and contested within polarized social media ecosystems.

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