

From Digital Content to Corporate Brand Legitimacy: Transmedia Storytelling and Corporate Identity Mix in Grindboys

Ega Rizky*, Yusuf Bagas Bilowo

Universitas Paramadina, Indonesia

Email: ega.rizky@students.paramadina.ac.id*, yusuf.bagas@students.paramadina.ac.id

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital media has reshaped corporate communication, enabling non-traditional actors to evolve into organizational entities with recognizable identities and legitimacy claims. This article examines the transformation of Grindboys from a digital content creator collective into a community-based corporate brand within Indonesia's contemporary creative industry, focusing on how transmedia storytelling and the corporate identity mix function as strategies for constructing collective identity and brand legitimacy. Grindboys develops narratives centered on friendship, everyday experiences, and shared cultural values across digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, which are extended into physical spaces (Warkopolim) and commercial expressions through merchandise. The findings indicate that Grindboys develops narratives centered on friendship, everyday experiences, and shared cultural values across digital platforms, which are extended into physical spaces and commercial expressions through merchandise. The integration of cross-media narratives with the symbolic, communicative, and behavioral dimensions of corporate identity produces a coherent and immersive brand experience, positioning audiences as active stakeholders in meaning-making and contributing to the sustainability of brand legitimacy. This study concludes that brand legitimacy can be formed discursively through repetitive, consistent, and distributed communication practices across media, rather than through formal institutional claims. The theoretical contribution lies in integrating transmedia storytelling and corporate identity mix frameworks in the context of community-based creative entities, while the practical contribution offers strategic guidance for creative industry practitioners in designing narrative-consistent, cross-media communication strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has changed corporate communication practices, especially in the formation of brand identity and legitimacy in the public sphere (Eisenegger & Schäfer, 2023; Fuchs, 2022; Reinikainen & Valentini, 2023; Sevigani, 2022). Communication that was previously linear and one-way has now shifted to a more dialogical and participatory form, in which the public plays an active role in the production and interpretation of brand narratives (Castells, 2010; Jenkins et al., 2013; Cornelissen, 2020).

In this context, corporate identity is no longer built solely through visual symbols or official organizational statements, but rather through cross-platform communication practices that are repetitive and connected to audiences' cultural experiences. Brand legitimacy is

understood as a discursive process formed through the consistency of narratives, symbolism, and behaviors represented in public spaces (Suchman, 1995; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008).

This phenomenon is increasingly prominent in the creative industries and digital culture, where the boundaries between organizations and communities tend to blur (Ngo & Ngo, 2026; Pravdová et al., 2023; Sampson & Markelj, 2023; Yuan, 2025). Digital content-based entities often develop into brand ecosystems that involve audience participation, emotional closeness, and the production of collective meaning (Holt, 2004; Jenkins, 2006).

Grindboys represents this dynamic. Starting as a group of digital content creators centered on everyday narratives and friendship, Grindboys has grown into a creative entity with a recognized brand identity, an active community, and expansion into physical spaces and commercial products. The narrative of Grindboys is constructed across digital platforms and extended into physical spaces, forming a coherent network of meanings in line with the concept of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006).

This study analyzes the phenomenon of Grindboys through the integration of transmedia storytelling and corporate identity mix perspectives to understand how brand identity and legitimacy are constructed through cross-media communication narratives and practices within the context of digital culture and community.

Research on transmedia storytelling has grown rapidly across communication, media, and marketing studies. Numerous studies confirm that transmedia storytelling enables brand narratives to be developed in a fragmented yet interconnected manner across media platforms. Each medium does not merely serve as a channel for distributing the same message, but instead contributes uniquely to enriching stories and audience experiences. This approach is considered effective in increasing engagement, extending interaction duration, and building emotional bonds between brands and audiences (Jenkins, 2006; Scolari, 2016; Kustritz, 2018).

A number of previous studies have examined transmedia storytelling in the context of the entertainment industry, media campaigns, and digital communication strategies, both globally and within Indonesia. These studies generally position transmedia storytelling as a narrative distribution strategy or a form of cross-media content expansion. However, studies that specifically position transmedia storytelling as a corporate communication practice integrated with the formation of brand identity and legitimacy, especially in community-based creative entities in Indonesia, remain relatively limited. This research addresses this gap by analyzing Grindboys as a communicative phenomenon that demonstrates the integration of cross-media narratives, corporate identity mix, and the process of brand legitimacy formation.

In the context of digital culture, transmedia storytelling is also understood as a strategy aligned with the characteristics of contemporary audiences, who are active, participatory, and accustomed to moving across platforms. Audiences not only consume narratives, but also play a role in disseminating, interpreting, and even modifying existing stories. This makes transmedia storytelling a relational and dynamic communication practice.

On the other hand, research on corporate identity emphasizes that corporate identity is a social construct formed through interactions between organizations and their publics. The concept of corporate identity mix explains that organizational identity consists of three main elements: symbolism (visual and identity representation), communication (formal and informal messages), and behavior (organizational actions and practices). Consistency among these three elements is regarded as the primary prerequisite for building public credibility and trust.

Previous research has shown that mismatches between communicated identities and organizational behavior can lead to crises of trust and undermine brand legitimacy. Nevertheless, most corporate identity research still focuses on conventional companies or organizations with established formal structures. Research examining community-based creative entities that emerge from digital cultural practices and informal relationships remains relatively limited.

In addition, research that explicitly integrates the perspectives of transmedia storytelling and corporate identity mix within a single corporate communication analysis framework remains rare. In the context of creative entities such as Grindboys, however, these two approaches are intertwined and inseparable.

Furthermore, research explicitly integrating transmedia storytelling and corporate identity mix within a single corporate communication analysis framework remains rare. In the context of creative entities such as Grindboys, these two approaches are intertwined and inseparable. Widjanarko and Chusjairi (2025) distinguish between transmedia storytelling as a narrative practice and transmedia organizing as a strategic process of managing and distributing cross-platform content to encourage audience participation. This perspective emphasizes that brand legitimacy in the digital era is built not only through narrative, but also through systematic and targeted media management.

This study analyzes Grindboys through the integration of transmedia storytelling and corporate identity mix perspectives to understand how brand identity and legitimacy are constructed through cross-media communication narratives and practices within the context of digital culture and community. By examining Grindboys as a case study, this research positions the entity within the broader framework of how informal creative collectives transform into legitimate brands in an era of media convergence.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how transmedia storytelling practices are constructed across Grindboys' digital and physical platforms, to examine the integration of symbolism, communication, and behavior as elements of the corporate identity mix in shaping brand identity, and to explain the process of brand legitimacy formation through the integration of transmedia storytelling and corporate identity mix. The benefits of this research are twofold. Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of corporate communication scholarship by integrating transmedia storytelling and corporate identity mix frameworks, particularly in the under-researched context of community-based creative entities within Indonesia's digital economy. Practically, the findings provide strategic guidance for creative industry practitioners and communication managers in designing communication strategies that emphasize narrative consistency, cross-media integration, and community relations to build sustainable brand legitimacy.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with a constructivist-interpretive orientation to analyze communication practices and the construction of meaning in the Grindboys phenomenon. The approach was chosen because the study did not aim to quantitatively measure communication effectiveness or audience behavior, but rather to understand how brand identity and legitimacy were constructed, negotiated, and reproduced through publicly observable

narratives, representations, and communication practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Creswell, 2013).

The study was analytical-descriptive in nature and focused on tracing narrative patterns, symbolism, and identity consistency represented across various Grindboys communication media. Accordingly, Grindboys was positioned as a communicative phenomenon analyzed through its representational traces in media artifacts and communication practices, rather than as an object of organizational performance evaluation (Schwandt, 2014).

In line with this approach, the study used communication artifacts such as digital content, visual representations, and cross-media narrative practices as its primary data sources. Validity was established through the depth of interpretation and the consistency of theoretical analysis applied to symbolic and representational data.

The object of this study was the communication practices of the Grindboys brand as a community-based creative entity. The unit of analysis focused on narratives, symbols, and communication practices represented across multiple media, including digital content on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok; the representation of brand identity in the physical space of Warkopolim; and merchandise products as forms of symbolic brand expansion.

The selection of these units of analysis was based on the understanding that brand identity and legitimacy in contemporary corporate communication are constructed across media platforms rather than through a single communication channel (Cornelissen, 2020; Jenkins, 2006).

The data were obtained from publicly available communication materials. Data collection was conducted through documentation and content searches involving audiovisual, visual, and textual materials produced and published by Grindboys across digital platforms, physical spaces, and commercial products.

Data selection was carried out purposively based on relevance to the construction of brand narratives and corporate identity. This study did not use interviews, surveys, or audience measurement instruments because the analysis focused on represented communication practices and discourses.

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively through interpretive reading of the collected communication materials. The analysis consisted of several stages. First, dominant narratives were identified by tracing themes, values, and storylines consistently represented across media. Second, transmedia storytelling analysis was conducted by mapping the contribution of each platform in expanding the brand narrative (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2013).

Third, corporate identity mix analysis examined the integration of symbolism, communication, and behavior represented in Grindboys content and communication practices (Balmer & Soenen, 1999; Balmer, 2001). Fourth, brand legitimacy was interpreted as a discursive process formed through repetitive and integrated communication practices in public spaces (Suchman, 1995).

The analysis was conducted iteratively by comparing representations across media to identify patterns of narrative coherence and brand identity.

The validity of the analysis was maintained through consistency in applying the theoretical framework and through data traceability, as all findings were derived from publicly accessible Grindboys communication artifacts. Interpretations were directly linked to

narratives, visual representations, and communication practices found in cross-platform content, allowing the analytical process to remain transparent and academically accountable.

The use of multiple communication media enabled source triangulation at the level of representation and narrative by comparing patterns of meaning across digital platforms, physical spaces, and symbolic products (Denzin, 2012).

The main limitation of this study was its focus on representation and communication practices; therefore, audience perceptions and empirical measurements of communication impact were not included. Consequently, the findings were not intended for statistical generalization, but rather for developing a contextual and in-depth understanding of identity formation and brand legitimacy in digital culture-based corporate communication (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the results of the analysis of Grindboys' communication artifacts and their discussion in the context of transmedia storytelling, corporate identity mix, and brand legitimacy. The analysis was carried out thematically to explore how narratives, representations, and communication practices are constructed and integrated across media in shaping community-based brand identity and legitimacy. This approach allows for a systematic reading of the patterns of meaning that emerge in the Grindboys' communication ecosystem.

To provide an initial overview of the analysis findings, **Table 1** presents a summary of the aspects of the study, object or medium of communication, as well as the main findings that are the basis for discussion in the next subsection. The description in sections 3.1 to 3.3 further elaborates on these findings in more depth by referring to the theoretical framework used.

Table 1. Summary of Grindboys' Communication Practice Analysis Results

Analysis Aspect	Object / Medium	Key Findings	Theoretical Framework
Transmedia Storytelling	YouTube, Instagram, TikTok	The narrative of friendship and everyday life is constructed in layers and complements each other across platforms; Each medium has a different narrative function	Transmedia Storytelling (Jenkins, 2006)
Narrative Expansion into Physical Space	Warkopolim	Physical space serves as an extension of the digital narrative and strengthens the brand experience phygitaly	Convergence Media; Phygital Experience
Identity Symbolism	Visual branding, dress style, content aesthetics	Brand identity is displayed casually, collectively, and non-formally, in line with the narrative of community closeness	Corporate Identity Mix – Symbolism (van Riel & Balmer, 1997)
Communication Practice	Content language, captions, social media interactions	Dialogical and informal communication styles build participatory relationships with the audience as a community	Corporate Identity Mix – Communication

Brand Behavior	Community interactions, offline activities	Consistency between narrative and action reinforces the perception of brand identity authenticity	Corporate Identity Mix – Behaviour
Brand Legitimacy	The entire communication ecosystem	Legitimacy is formed discursively through the repetition of narratives and identity consistency, rather than formal institutional claims	Organizational Legitimacy (Suchman, 1995)

Source: Author's analysis based on Grindboys' communication artifacts, 2025

The Practice of Transmedia Storytelling in the Grindboys Communication Ecosystem

The Grindboys brand narrative is constructed through the spread of stories across digital platforms and physical spaces that form a transmedia communication ecosystem. The main narrative developed is not centered on product promotion or a formal corporate image, but rather on representations of friendship, everyday life, and emotional closeness packaged in popular content formats. This pattern suggests that narrative is positioned as the main foundation of brand meaning, not just as a supporting element of communication.

The narrative of the Grindboys is displayed through the presence of a number of public personas who collectively represent friendship relationships and daily dynamics, namely Gofar Hilman, Rico Lubis, and Mahesa Yuwanda. Individual identities are not highlighted hierarchically, but are fused in the collective image of the group as a single story. These three personas function as narrative characters that maintain the continuity of the cross-platform storytelling world, so that the brand is interpreted as a living social relationship, not as a formal corporate entity.

On digital platforms such as YouTube, the Grindboys' narrative is developed through long-form video content that displays natural and repetitive interpersonal interactions. YouTube serves as the main medium for the development of the story world, where characters, relationships, and collective values are introduced and deepened. Meanwhile, Instagram and TikTok act as a medium for fragmentation and amplification of narratives by presenting pieces of stories in a short and repetitive format. Each platform does not replicate the same story, but rather contributes different points of view and intensity of meaning, thus enriching the overall brand narrative (Jenkins, 2006).

The narrative of the Grindboys does not stop at the digital space, but is extended to the physical space through Warkopolim as a meeting point for the community. The presence of this physical space represents the materialization of the narrative, where the value of friendship and togetherness that was previously digitally constructed is experienced directly. The physical space serves as a narrative medium that links digital experiences to everyday social practices, reinforcing the connection between brands and communities. In addition, Grindboys' merchandise products act as narrative artifacts that allow brand identity to be present in the audience's daily lives. Merchandise is not only understood as a commodity, but as a symbol of affiliation and participation in the community. Through the consistent use of symbols and visual styles, these artifacts become an extension of a narrative that is personal and performative.

Overall, Grindboys' communication practices exhibit the characteristics of transmedia storytelling, in which stories evolve through the specific contributions of each medium and form a coherent yet non-centralized brand experience (Jenkins, 2006). The cross-media

narrative became the initial foundation for the formation of meaning and symbolic recognition of the Grindboys' brand identity, which is further analyzed in the framework of the integration of communication practices in the next section.

The Construction of Corporate Identity Mix in Grindboys' Communication Practices

Grindboys' corporate identity is not built through formal corporate communication structures like conventional organizations, but through communication practices that grow from digital culture and community relations. Brand identity is constructed gradually through the integration of symbolism, communication, and behavior that appears consistently in various brand representations and interactions. This pattern shows the application of corporate identity mix as a cultural and discursive process, not an administrative one.

At the **level of symbolism**, the identity of the Grindboys is represented through the repeated use of names, visual styles, language, and attributes in digital content, merchandise, and physical spaces. These symbols are not directed to build a formal corporate professional image, but rather to affirm closeness, simplicity, and a sense of community. This symbolic consistency allows audiences to recognize Grindboys as an entity that has a distinctive character, while also differentiating it from mainstream commercial brands.

In the **communication dimension**, Grindboys displays an informal, dialogical, and participatory communication style. Interaction with the audience is not limited to the delivery of a one-way message, but rather takes place through comments, content responses, and audience engagement in the developed narrative. This communication practice reinforces the perception of authenticity and blurs the boundaries between communicators and audiences, so that brands are understood as part of a community, rather than an external entity.

Meanwhile, the behavioral dimension is reflected in daily practices that are displayed and reproduced consistently, both in digital content and activities in physical spaces. The presence of Warkopolim as an interaction space shows that the values that are communicated symbolically and narratively are also manifested in real actions. The consistency between what is said, displayed, and done reinforces the credibility of the Grindboys' identity as a behaviorally coherent entity.

The integration of these three elements of the corporate identity mix forms a brand identity that is not only recognized, but also felt and experienced by the community. The identity of the Grindboys is not produced centrally through formal communication policies, but rather through repetitive, adaptive communication practices rooted in social relations. Thus, corporate identity in the context of Grindboys can be understood as the result of a continuous communication process, where symbolism, communication, and behavior reinforce each other in building brand meaning.

Integration of Transmedia Storytelling and Corporate Identity Mix in Brand Legitimacy Formation

This section discusses how the integration between transmedia storytelling practices and corporate identity mix contributes to the formation of the legitimacy of the Grindboys brand. Legitimacy is understood not as the result of formal assessment or measurement of public acceptance, but as a process of symbolic meaning and recognition that develops through the consistency of communication practices in the public space.

The practice of transmedia storytelling allows the Grindboys' narrative to exist sustainably across digital platforms and physical spaces. Narratives of friendship and everyday life are developed through the specific contributions of each medium, thus forming a multi-layered yet coherent brand experience. This narrative continuity creates a stable framework of meaning, which is a prerequisite for the repeated recognition and meaning of brand identity.

The narrative framework is then locked and stabilized through the construction of a corporate identity mix. Elements of symbolism, such as visual style and everyday language, are displayed relatively consistently in a variety of communication materials. The fluid communication patterns and brand behaviors represented in interactions with the community and expansion into physical spaces demonstrate the fit between the narrative communicated and the practices displayed. This consistency allows brand identity to be recognized as a single unit of meaning, even though it comes in various forms of representation.

In addition to narrative consistency and visual identity, the legitimacy of the Grindboys brand is also displayed through symbolic practices in the verbal communication of its individuals. Gofar Hilman, Rico Lubis, and Mahesa Yuwanda have repeatedly referred to and referred to "Grindboys" in various other platforms and communication contexts outside of the brand's main channels. This repeated mention serves as a discursive act that affirms the existence of the Grindboys as a collective entity that is recognized and reproduced consistently, not only in curated content, but also in everyday communication practices. In this context, the name "Grindboys" operates as a symbolic marker that reinforces the continuity of identity and the brand's presence in the public space.

The integration between transmedia storytelling and corporate identity mix forms a mechanism of symbolic legitimacy, where the Grindboys brand is interpreted as an authentic creative entity rooted in community relations. Legitimacy is not explicitly stated through corporate claims, but arises through the regularity of meaning and stability of representation generated by repetitive and integrated communication practices.

In the context of contemporary corporate communication, these findings suggest that brand legitimacy can be formed through communication practices that grow out of digital culture and community interactions. The integration of cross-media narratives and identity consistency allows Grindboys to be understood not just as content producers, but as communicative entities with relatively cohesive identities in a convergent media ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the transformation of Grindboys from a group of digital content creators into a community-based creative entity within the context of contemporary corporate communication. The findings showed that Grindboys' brand legitimacy was constructed through consistent cross-media communication practices emphasizing narrative coherence and community relationships rather than formal corporate strategies or institutional claims. Transmedia storytelling functioned as the primary mechanism for building brand meaning, with narratives distributed across digital platforms, physical spaces, and symbolic artifacts that collectively strengthened brand identity and audience engagement. These practices were integrated with elements of the corporate identity mix, including public personas, communication styles, visual symbols, and interaction behaviors, resulting in a recognizable and emotionally connected brand identity. However, the study was limited to publicly

accessible representations and communication practices and did not examine audience perceptions, internal organizational dynamics, or measurable communication impacts. Theoretically, this research contributes to corporate communication studies by explaining how brand legitimacy is formed in community-based creative entities in the era of media convergence, while practically offering insights for communication practitioners in designing narrative-driven and cross-media communication strategies. Future research could expand this discussion through audience reception studies, digital ethnography, or comparative cross-case analyses to further explore the dynamics of transmedia-based brand legitimacy in evolving digital media environments.

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