

# Moral Politics in the Digital Space: Dedi Mulyadi's Populist Strategy in Building Leadership Image on Instagram

Jordy<sup>1</sup>, Rino Dwi Putra<sup>2</sup>, Nur Rani<sup>3</sup>, Arista Damayanti<sup>4</sup>

<sup>123</sup>*Master of Public Administration, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia*  
[aristadamayanti@mail.ugm.ac.id](mailto:aristadamayanti@mail.ugm.ac.id), [rinodwiputra@mail.ugm.ac.id](mailto:rinodwiputra@mail.ugm.ac.id),  
[nurrrani@mail.ugm.ac.id](mailto:nurrrani@mail.ugm.ac.id), [jordy1998@mail.ugm.ac.id](mailto:jordy1998@mail.ugm.ac.id)

## Abstract

This study analyzes Kang Dedi Mulyadi's (KDM) political branding strategy on Instagram as a manifestation of local moral populism. It argues that his leadership image is built on personal morality and Sundanese cultural values rather than policy rationality. Qualitative content analysis reveals a consistent prioritization of Political Value and Activity Report posts, positioning KDM as a simple, moral, and hard-working leader. This image is reinforced by focusing on Relationship and Personal Value in his personality content, which builds emotional closeness with the public. Visual elements, particularly white Sundanese traditional clothing, serve as symbolic markers of simplicity and local wisdom. KDM's success creates a paradox: it effectively builds trust through affective bonds but risks shifting the political arena from rational deliberation to a personal moral stage, potentially weakening democratic accountability (the "Halo Effect").

**Keywords:** political communication, digital populism, moral leadership.

## BACKGROUND

The construction of political identity is a fundamental aspect in understanding contemporary social and political dynamics. Political identity not only reflects how an actor positions themselves in the public sphere, but also how they utilize communication media to shape perceptions, loyalties, and legitimacy (Karmila et al., 2024; Aldi & Anggraini, 2021). In the digital age, this process is no longer entirely determined by formal political institutions, but rather by interactions that take place on social media platforms. Social media acts as a new arena where the boundaries between politics and entertainment are blurred, and where personal narratives often replace rational debate as a source of public trust. Gilani et al. (2019) highlight that the relationship between leaders and followers in the digital space is negotiable; they jointly construct the meaning of power through continuous interaction. In this context, authentic leadership on social media requires a balance between personal character, public expectations, and professional image (Dickson, 2021).

When viewed from the context of Indonesian politics, Dedi Mulyadi or Kang Dedi Mulyadi (KDM) emerges as a prominent representation of digital political transformation based on local cultural values. This political credibility is further strengthened by data from the Indonesian Political Indicator survey (2024), which recorded KDM's popularity rating at 93.8%, public approval rating at 92.2%, and electability at 77.81%. These figures not only illustrate the success of his political communication, but also signify the emergence of a populist leadership pattern rooted in emotional proximity between leaders and the people. Interestingly, the main reason people support KDM is because of his "attention to the people," a moral category that confirms that his success stems from a narrative of morality and simplicity, rather than a rational policy platform.

This phenomenon stems from KDM's success in utilizing social media, especially Instagram (@dedimulyadi71), as the main instrument in building his leadership image. The nickname "Governor of Content" attached to him does not only indicate digital productivity, but also represents a new form of aesthetic and emotional image politics. Through Instagram, he presents himself as a leader who blends in with the community: wearing traditional Sundanese clothing, sitting cross-legged with ordinary people, inspecting polluted rivers, and even visiting disaster sites. This strategy transforms political actions into captivating visual narratives, where social activities are packaged as moral performances and authenticity signaling. The construction of political identity is a fundamental aspect of contemporary public administration, reflecting not only how an actor positions themselves, but also how they shape perceptions and legitimacy. Normatively, ideal public leadership is often associated with the "rational man" model. This model assumes that a leader has comprehensive knowledge, a stable system of preferences, and the capability to analyze various policy alternatives in order to achieve the most optimal results for the public. Within this framework, a leader's legitimacy stems from the superiority of data-based arguments and deliberative policy debates, where rationality becomes the main foundation of public trust.

In line with the findings of Fathony (2025) and Faathony (2025), storytelling is at the core of KDM's political communication. He slips humanistic and spiritual values into his everyday narratives, portraying himself as a leader who "understands the suffering of the people." Behind this success, however, there is a critical dimension that cannot be ignored. This communication strategy based on morality and personal closeness signals the strengthening of digital populism, where political legitimacy is built through emotional and symbolic appeal, rather than through data-based policy arguments and long-term vision. This type of populism operates with a dichotomous moral logic that separates the "pure and dignified" people from the "corrupt and distant" elite. In the context of Dedi Mulyadi, values such as simplicity, hard work, and anti-money politics become the main narrative that strengthens his moral image, but also has the potential to dismiss the complexity of modern politics, which should demand rational and deliberative analysis. As a result, politics is reduced to a stage for personal morality, where truth is measured by the piety of a figure, not by the effectiveness of policies. This phenomenon illustrates the paradox of populism: on the one hand, it brings politics closer to the people by presenting a face of humanity and morality; on the other hand, it weakens public rationality and reinforces the personalization of power. However, Herbert A. Simon, in his model of bounded rationality, criticizes this idealism. Simon argues that in practice, human cognitive capacity and access to information are too limited to achieve global rationality. As a result, decision-makers, including political leaders, do not seek to "optimize" (find the best solution), but rather to "satisfy" (satisfice) by finding policy alternatives that are "good enough" or meet minimum aspirations.

One significant policy initiated by Dedi Mulyadi was the prohibition of study tours in schools. This policy was triggered by concerns about finances and the efficient use of the education budget, and was part of a broader education policy to reduce students' learning burdens, such as the elimination of homework (Sepudin & Rozak, 2025). Media analysis shows that this policy sparked a response from the public, which was discussed in several articles, including a framing analysis by Faris and Fabrianus, which shows that the media largely provided a positive framework for this policy (Faris & Fabrianus, 2025). However, on the other hand, criticism has emerged from various circles, including the Child Protection Commission, which has explored the negative impacts of these policies (Faris & Fabrianus, 2025).

Dedi Mulyadi is also known as a leader who is able to utilize digital technology to improve his public image and emotional connection with the community. Through the strategic use of social media, Dedi has succeeded in building a strong and relatable persona by promoting Sundanese cultural values in his campaigns and programs (Hidayat et al., 2025; Yunita, 2025). Research by Hidayat et al. shows that the use of digital content that emphasizes storytelling and cultural symbols is very effective in creating emotional closeness (Hidayat et al., 2025). Dedi Mulyadi adopted a populist narrative that connected the community with local values, which was further elaborated in Arwansyah's study on the mediatization of politics in the content he shared (Arwansyah, 2025).

In addition to education, Dedi also highlighted the issue of juvenile delinquency and launched a military barracks program in response to this issue. This program aims to discipline troubled teenagers and has garnered various reactions, both positive and negative, from the public and experts. A media analysis shows that despite criticism, many media reports emphasize the program's success in having a positive impact on participants (Faris & Fabrianus, 2025). The study notes that the public has a positive view of the effectiveness of Dedi Mulyadi's leadership in handling this complex social issue (Arwansyah, 2025).

Leaders simplify complex problems so that they can be managed, often by examining alternatives sequentially and choosing the first one that is considered satisfactory. Through the Instagram account @dedimulyadi71, KDM strategically builds the image of a leader who is down-to-earth, simple, and rich in Sundanese cultural values, where political actions are transformed into captivating visual narratives and moral performances. Legitimacy is no longer built through data-based policy arguments, but through emotional and symbolic appeal. The public no longer needs to analyze policies rationally, instead using cognitive shortcuts (heuristics) that "KDM is a good and moral figure, so his policies must be good too."

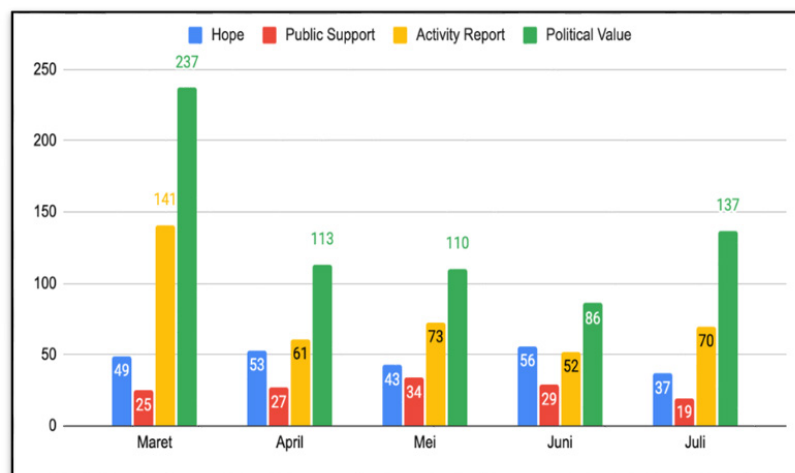
As a result, a paradox arises: on the one hand, this approach succeeds in bringing politics closer to the people and increasing public participation through emotional closeness. However, on the other hand, it has the potential to weaken public rationality and shift the policy discourse from the deliberative space to the affective personal arena. This phenomenon raises the question: How can visual political communication strategies on social media that emphasize personal morality shape the image of populist leadership and what is their impact on the principles of democratic accountability and evidence-based policy-making in the digital age? This research is important for understanding this paradigm shift in public leadership.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses qualitative content analysis with a directed content analysis approach developed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), based on the theory of Mitsikopoulou (2008) and the results of induction of the empirical data found. This approach allows researchers to systematically analyze political messages in the form of text, images, and videos, while still referring to previous theories and research as a guide in developing initial categories. In accordance with the views of Hsieh and Shannon (2005:6), the analysis is directed through a process of identifying key concepts or variables that are used as initial coding categories. The coding process is carried out by referring to operational definitions formulated based on theory as stated by Potter and Donnerstein (1999 in Hsieh & Shannon, 2005:6),

in which each unit of analysis is classified into predetermined categories. If there is text or visuals that cannot be included in existing categories, the researcher develops new codes to capture the meaning that emerges inductively. Based on the implementation of this directed content analysis approach, the researcher identified two broad categories that form the structure of Kang Dedi Mulyadi's political communication, namely Personality and Political Key Message. The Personality category covers the aspects of relationships, technology responsiveness, and personal values, while Political Key Message covers four main subcategories, namely hope, public support, activity reports, and political values or ideologies. Through this coding process, it was found that Dedi Mulyadi's political messages on Instagram not only display electoral communication strategies but also form a narrative pattern that combines morality, social closeness, and local cultural symbols as a form of digital populist leadership at the regional level.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION



**Figure 1.** Number of Political Branding Indicator Categorizations  
Source: Analyzed by researcher, 2025

Figure 1 shows the fluctuation in the number of posts representing the four main indicators of Kang Dedi Mulyadi's political branding, namely Hope, Public Support, Activity Report, and Political Value. In general, Political Value was the most dominant indicator in each month, indicating that Kang Dedi Mulyadi's content mostly highlighted political values rooted in morality, culture, and local wisdom. The highest peak occurred in March (237 posts), coinciding with the political momentum at the beginning of the year, which is usually accompanied by intensified public communication.

The Activity Report indicator also occupies an important position, especially in March (141 posts) and July (70 posts). This shows Kang Dedi Mulyadi's efforts to portray himself as a leader who is active in the field and close to the community. Meanwhile, the Hope and Public Support categories were relatively stable and lower than the other two indicators, showing that although narratives of hope and public support remained present, the main focus of Kang Dedi's communication tended to be on the actualization of values and real activities.

The dominance of the Political Value indicator throughout the observation period (highest in March with 237 posts) shows a strong orientation towards the formation of moral authority as a basis for political legitimacy. This is in line with the concept of value-based political branding (Scammell, 2015), which emphasizes the importance of political values and personality in influencing public perception. Thus, Kang Dedi not only presents himself as a political actor, but also as a cultural figure who acts as the guardian of the morals and local identity of the Sundanese people.

Meanwhile, the high Activity Report indicator in March and July shows an effort at performative populism, which is a strategy of displaying physical closeness and real activities in the community (Moffitt, 2016). This becomes a visual instrument to strengthen the image of a “down-to-earth” leader who is actively involved, not just talking at the level of discourse. The stable but relatively low Hope and Public Support indicators show that Kang Dedi’s political communication is more of a one-way symbolic construction than interactive mobilization. This means that the main focus is still on creating an image and symbol of exemplary behavior rather than building dialogue or public participation digitally.

Theoretically, this pattern shows a combination of populist communication style and cultural moral branding. In the Indonesian context, this strategy is effective because it combines values of locality, spirituality, and simplicity that resonate with the traditional voter base. However, critically speaking, this approach also has limitations: branding that relies too heavily on cultural values and symbols can lead to a high risk of political personalization and obscure the rational aspects of public policy. Thus, Kang Dedi Mulyadi’s political branding reflects a form of cultural populism that is effective in building emotional closeness, but it still needs to be supported by a more substantive policy narrative in order to have long-term political sustainability.

## **KDM’S POLITICAL BRANDING**

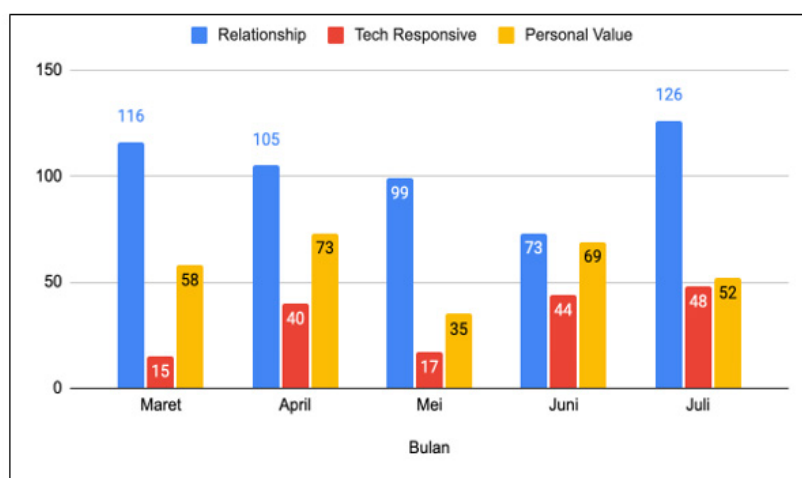
### **Personality Category**

The first indicator in Kang Dedi Mulyadi’s (KDM) *political branding* is his personality. Based on the results of data induction from the coding process, this personality can be broken down into three main sub-categories, namely *relationship*, *technology responsive*, and *personal value*. Analysis of these three sub-categories shows a structured strategy to build the image of a humanist leader who is accessible and deeply rooted in values that are close to the community.

It is clear that posts focusing on “Relationship” consistently dominate KDM’s personality content every month, with the highest peaks in March (116 posts) and July (126 posts). The “Personal Value” sub-category ranks second as the most frequently displayed element, while “Tech Responsive” is a supporting element with a lower but consistent frequency. This pattern indicates that the core of KDM’s personality strategy is to build and maintain emotional relationships with the audience.

The *relationship* sub-category is the main pillar in the construction of KDM’s personality. This is a strategy to attract, retain, and build bonds between KDM and the community. Posts in this category consistently feature KDM’s direct interactions with citizens, often outside the formal political context, reflecting his personality of enjoying socializing. By showcasing moments such as eating

with villagers or sitting cross-legged on the floor, KDM visually reinforces his image as an accessible leader who is “equal to the community” (Banurea & Maulina, 2018). This strategy effectively builds “community brand equity,” a brand equity attached to individual politicians through their interactions at the community level, separate from their “corporate brand” or political party image. By focusing on personal relationships, KDM has succeeded in shifting voters’ focus from the party brand to his personal brand, a tactic that has proven effective, especially when a politician is able to transcend the image of his party (Phipps et al., 2010). From a social psychology perspective, this approach aims to project “warmth,” one of two universal dimensions in social perception. Warmth, which includes friendliness, good intentions, and trustworthiness (Bennett et al., 2019), is a crucial factor that explains why the main reason voters support KDM is their perception of his “concern for the people.”



**Figure 2.** Categorization of Dedi Mulyadi’s Political Branding Strategy  
 Source: Analyzed by the researcher, 2025

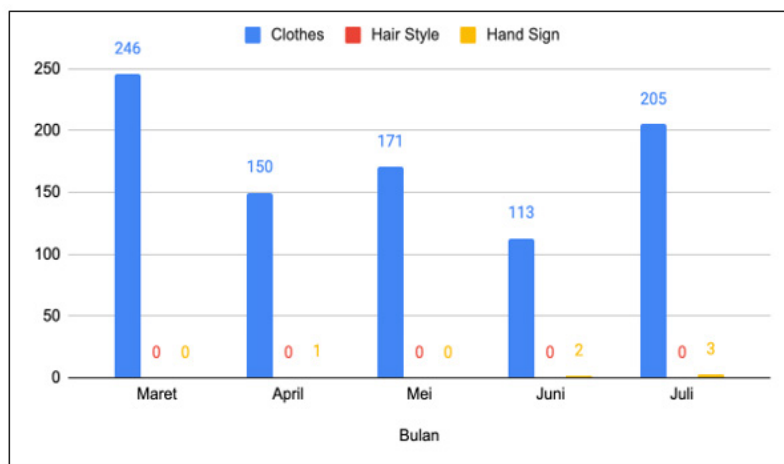
The *personal value* sub-category is the second most dominant element and serves to communicate the core values embraced by KDM. Posts in this category portray KDM as a humble figure who upholds Sundanese culture and possesses a solution-oriented leadership spirit. The use of cultural symbols, such as white Sundanese traditional clothing, which signifies a commitment to nature, serves as a strong marker of cultural identity. Actions such as blusukan (impromptu visits) to solve citizens’ problems directly not only display personal values such as empathy, but also build the image of an “anti-politician celebrity superhero.” This type of celebrity politician is described as a figure who is able to solve the people’s problems directly because traditional politicians are considered incapable of doing so (Schneiker, 2019). These displayed values serve as “heuristics” (cognitive shortcuts) for voters to assess the character and competence of a leader (Banerjee & Ray Chaudhuri, 2016). In a complex political landscape, the image of a simple, cultured, and responsive leader becomes an easy way for voters to form positive perceptions without having to delve into the details of technocratic policies. Thus, KDM successfully combines the image of an “everyday political celebrity” (a politician who is “just like us”) through his simplicity, with the image of a “superhero” through his ability to provide instant solutions (Schneiker, 2019).

Despite having the lowest frequency, the *technology responsive* sub-category plays an important role as a medium that allows the other two strategies to run effectively. This category represents the

use of Instagram social media itself as a platform for communicating and conveying political messages. The active use of two-way social media such as Instagram is a hallmark of modern celebrity politicians (Banurea & Maulina, 2018; Schneiker, 2019). By being active on Instagram, KDM shows that he is a modern leader who is able to adapt to technology to reach a wider audience, especially the younger generation. This platform facilitates the dissemination of humanistic narratives and sympathetic visuals, which are at the core of his communication strategy. Direct engagement with users through dialogue and quick responses also serves as a tool for shaping public opinion, reinforcing the perception of him as an authentic and responsive leader. Thus, this aspect of technological responsiveness, although not the main content, is an instrumental foundation that strengthens the overall construction of KDM's personality in the digital realm.

### Appearance Category

The second indicator in Kang Dedi Mulyadi's (KDM) *political branding* is his appearance. According to Bessie Mitsopoulou (2008), appearance is one of *the semiotic modes* used in texts or media to construct self-image, identity, and social meaning (Mitsopoulou, 2008). Analysis of these three sub-categories shows a structured strategy to build the image of a leader who is humanistic, accessible, and deeply rooted in values that are close to the community.



**Figure 3.** Categorization of Appearance  
 Source: Analyzed by the author, 2025.

Based on Figure 3.3, the categorization of *appearance* is divided into three categories, namely *clothes*, *hairstyle*, and *hand sign*. Of the three categories mentioned, the clothing category was the most dominant in the visual representation of March, reaching 246 posts, and the lowest in June with only 113 posts. This shows that the aspect of clothing is a construction of self-image built by KDM in public communication.

The clothing worn by KDM serves as a marker of social, professional, and cultural identity. A public official's choice of clothing represents certain values that symbolize the verbal messages or ideologies they convey. According to [radarcirebon.com](http://radarcirebon.com), the white clothing typical of the Sundanese culture worn by KDM signifies a commitment to nature. The second category, hairstyle, represents personal and social impressions. In discourse analysis, hairstyle is described as a symbolic tool to show

modern, conservative, or rebellious identity. However, KDM does not show any particular hairstyle here, only appearing neat and simple because it is always covered with a typical Sundanese headband, a cap when exercising, and a black cap. This highlights cultural identity, where KDM preserves local wisdom, modesty, and attachment to regional culture. According to Mitropoulou's (2008) theoretical perspective, KDM's hairstyle and headband are a *self-representation strategy* that shows modernity and locality.



**Figure 4.** KDM's Clothing

Source: @dedimulyadi71 account

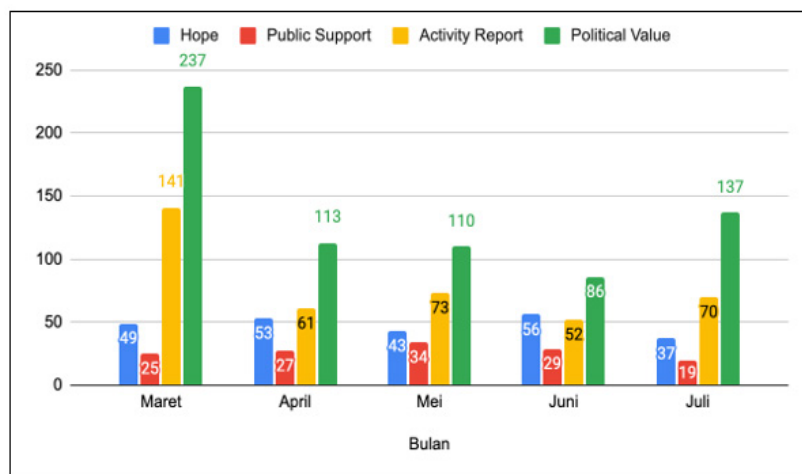
Signatures or hand gestures represent the assertiveness of the message, displaying self-confidence or inviting emotional closeness. In this category, there were very few posts: 1 in April, 2 in June, and 3 in July. This is very few compared to the clothing category. There is a gradual tendency to use nonverbal expressions to reinforce visual messages. This is also related to authority, solidarity, or friendship. KDM here more often embraces the interlocutor in many videos, which shows or emphasizes the friendship that he wants to build and display in every conversation with citizens. In the framework of Mitsikopoulou (2008), gestures such as *hand signs* serve as *semiotic resources* that add dimension to the interaction and closeness with the audience.

From the perspective of critical discourse analysis proposed by Fairclough in 1995, all communication, whether verbal or visual, is always connected to the underlying social and ideological context. Visual elements such as clothing, hairstyle, and hand movements are not merely aesthetic aspects, but also semiotic resources that shape specific social meanings. Therefore, the appearance of a public figure not only reflects personal preferences but is also part of a discursive practice that is deliberately constructed to highlight social position, ideology, and power relations. In this case, KDM's appearance on social media is a form of multimodal communication that contains political and cultural messages. For example, the white clothes he always wears can be interpreted as a symbolic step to show an image of clean, simple leadership that is in line with the moral and spiritual values of the Sundanese people. The color white is also often associated with purity, neutrality, and integrity, which are crucial assets in building public trust amid a political situation full of negative images of public officials.

From the results of this evaluation, it can be concluded that appearance plays an important role in shaping public image and reinforcing messages conveyed nonverbally on social media platforms. Clothing is a major factor in describing social identity and outlook on life, while hairstyle and hand gestures serve as complements that add depth to the meaning of visual interactions. This trend shows that how one presents oneself in public is not only determined by what is said, but also by visual symbols that have their own narrative power. Thus, this analysis supports Mitsikopoulou's (2008) finding that appearance is one of the semiotic means that contributes significantly to the development of identity discourse and social meaning in the media, where every visual aspect is used to convey values, character, and self-image to a wider audience.

### Responsibility Category

The third indicator in Kang Dedi Mulyadi's (KDM) *political branding* is his responsibility. The Responsibility indicator in Kang Dedi Mulyadi's (KDM) political branding reflects an important dimension of leadership image that is based on social, moral, and political responsibility. In this context, the narrative distribution pattern depicted in categories such as Hope, Public Support, Activity Report, and Political Value shows how KDM balances moral messages and electoral interests.



**Figure 5** Categorization of Responsibility in Dedi Mulyadi's Political Branding Strategy  
 Source: Analyzed by researcher, 2025

Based on Figure 5, analysis of Dedi Mulyadi's social media posts from March to July 2024 shows a consistent pattern of political communication based on four main subcategories, namely Hope, Public Support, Activity Report, and Political Value. Quantitative data shows that during the research period, the Political Value category dominated with the highest frequency, especially in March (237 posts), followed by Activity Report with 141 posts, Hope with 49 posts, and Public Support with 25 posts. This trend shows that Dedi Mulyadi consciously emphasizes political values and ideology as the core of his communication messages. Although there were fluctuations in the following months, the pattern of dominance of moral messages and field activities remained consistent until July, when Political Value posts increased again to 137. This pattern shows that Dedi not only uses social media as a campaign tool, but also as an ideological space to reinforce his image as a moral leader and bearer of Sundanese cultural values.

In the Hope category, the high frequency of posts in June (56 posts) shows Dedi Mulyadi's intensive efforts to build public optimism ahead of the final stage of the political contest. These posts contained many narratives about a dignified future for West Java and moral appeals to the public to actively participate in the election. These messages were conveyed through simple but meaningful symbols and language, such as the number one pierced by a nail as a representation of hope for victory and a symbol of the people's struggle. The hope communicated was not merely an electoral promise, but also a reflection of the moral idea that politics should be a means to improve the social and spiritual life of the community. Wasesa (2013) explains that when politicians are able to present programs and messages that touch on the emotional needs of the community, public trust grows, strengthening political support. Thus, the dimension of Hope in Dedi Mulyadi's communication serves as a medium for the formation of moral imagination, hope for a dignified future under religious and simple leadership.

The Activity Report category shows a relatively stable trend, with the highest frequency in March (141 posts) and increasing again in July (70 posts). This data indicates that Dedi Mulyadi makes social activities in the field an important element in his political communication. In various posts, he shows himself cleaning rivers with residents, dialoguing with the community, and reviewing development projects. These activities are represented as tangible evidence of his work and closeness to the people. However, in the context of digital politics, this form of communication is not only documentation, but also a symbolic performance that reinforces the image of populist leadership. Through the visualization of his body present in public spaces such as rivers, markets, and villages, Dedi creates a narrative of a "hands-on leader." This kind of politics of presence reflects what is called performative populism, a strategy in which leaders display social actions as symbols of empathy and morality. In other words, social media functions as a stage where political work is transformed into a moral narrative about authentic leadership that is close to the people.

Meanwhile, Public Support occupies the lowest position quantitatively, with the highest number of posts only 34 in May and the lowest 19 in July. However, qualitatively, this category has high significance because it shows the strength of a support base that emerged voluntarily. Public support was widely seen through community involvement, such as Marga Simbolon, which has more than 10,000 members and openly declares its support for Dedi. Posts featuring testimonials, interfaith prayers, and positive comments from the community show the formation of collective affection between leaders and the people. This is in line with McLean's (in Wasesa, 2013) view that the affective aspect of political communication is a determining factor in changing people's attitudes and loyalty. Dedi has succeeded in building a strong emotional connection with his audience through messages of morality, spirituality, and social solidarity. However, critically, this affective relationship also displays the characteristics of emotional populism, where public loyalty is formed not through policy rationality, but because of symbolic closeness to the leader figure. This strategy is effective in expanding the support base, but also has the potential to create political dependence centered on the figure.

The last category, Political Value, shows the most significant dominance throughout the research period. In March alone, there were 237 posts displaying moral and ideological messages, while in July this number remained high at 137 posts. This consistency shows that Dedi Mulyadi places moral and cultural values at the core of his communication strategy. He often presents himself as a simple figure who works selflessly, rejects money politics, and emphasizes the importance of ethics and social responsibility. His post when he dove into a pile of residents' trash in Bekasi (Detik.com, 2024)

became a powerful symbol of moral values and exemplary leadership. This action was not only a social act, but also a visual representation of moral politics that rejects the pragmatism of power. From a critical perspective, this strategy reflects a form of moral populism, in which leaders use morality and simplicity as tools for political legitimacy. In this context, Dedi acts as a figure who brings the “purity of the people” in opposition to the political elite, who are considered far from ethical values. This kind of value-based politics is effective in building loyalty and emotional resonance, but it also risks simplifying political complexity into individual moral issues. In other words, it shifts the public’s focus from rational debates about policy to moral narratives that center the meaning of politics on the figure of the leader.

Overall, quantitative and qualitative data show that Dedi Mulyadi has developed a pattern of political communication that focuses on morality, social closeness, and physical presence in public spaces. The combination of high frequency of Political Value and Activity Report posts indicates that he emphasizes moral image and social engagement as the main sources of his political legitimacy. Meanwhile, the Hope and Public Support categories show how affective messages and emotional support are mobilized to reinforce the image of an authentic and “people’s” leader. Critically, this pattern reveals the emergence of a cultural populist leadership style, a form of populism rooted in local cultural values and morality, but expressed through digital aesthetics and modern communication strategies. Through this approach, Dedi Mulyadi has succeeded in creating a warm, simple, and close-to-the-people leadership figure, but at the same time reveals the paradox of populism: strengthening emotional closeness with the people, but potentially placing politics as a stage for personal morality, rather than as an arena for rational policy.

### **Public Administration Perspective on Findings**

From a public administration perspective, the findings regarding Kang Dedi Mulyadi’s (KDM) *political branding* strategy present a highly relevant case study on the paradigm shift in public leadership in the digital age. The effectiveness of a public leader is traditionally measured by their ability to formulate and implement rational policies and build institutional trust. However, the KDM phenomenon shows that the personalization of leadership has become a dominant variable, where the personal image of a leader not only supports but often surpasses the substance of the policy itself.

The finding that KDM’s image is strongly supported by personality categories, particularly in the sub-categories of relationship and *personal value*, is in line with the theory of *authentic leadership*. Modern public administration requires *public* trust as the foundation of legitimacy. KDM builds this trust by projecting an authentic persona of a leader who is “true to himself” and presenting *life stories* that make him feel close to the people. This strategy effectively builds “positive psychological capital” such as hope and optimism among the public (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Furthermore, the image of a leader who is “attentive to the people” and “has personal values” is a manifestation of *ethical* leadership. According to the *moral person* and *moral manager* framework, an ethical leader must not only have personal integrity but also actively communicate and uphold normative standards (Brown et al., 2005). KDM does this by making himself a *role model* through simple but meaningful symbolic actions, such as wearing traditional clothing and interacting directly with citizens. In public administration, this kind of ethical image serves to reduce public cynicism towards the bureaucracy and create the perception that the government is working in their interests.

A crucial finding in this study is the potential that KDM's popularity is supported more by his personal image than by his policy communication. From a public administration perspective, this signals a shift from technocratic policy promotion to a more transactional and personal approach. Policies are no longer presented as complex bureaucratic products, but rather as a form of "*contingent reward*" from a caring leader (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Direct assistance, instant solutions during visits, and quick responses to citizens' complaints are forms of transactional leadership that build a foundation of trust before more transformational messages can be accepted (*augmentation effect*). This strategy is reinforced by the use of *subtle signals* (Berger & Ward, 2010). His trademark white clothes and Sundanese *iket* headdress serve as powerful signals to his target audience. For "insiders" or people who understand the cultural context, these symbols communicate values of simplicity, local wisdom, and rejection of the formalities of power. In public administration, these non-verbal signals are a very efficient tool for breaking down the psychological distance between leaders and citizens, making leaders and their policies feel more accessible and acceptable.

The key finding that "the public views all policies made by KDM as good... because of the figure who made the policies" can be explained through the concept of cognitive and affective image (Lee et al., 2010). From a public administration perspective, this is a manifestation of the "*Halo Effect*," where a leader's overall positive image overshadows or influences evaluations of their specific actions or policies. KDM's strategy of focusing on building an affective (emotional) image through humanistic narratives, personal touches, and empathy has proven to be very powerful. The emotional bond formed between the audience and KDM makes the cognitive (rational) evaluation of his policies biased. The public tends to support policies not because they have analyzed the pros and cons in depth, but because they believe in the good intentions of their leaders. This is in line with the finding that "selfish altruism," or the feeling of personal gain when supporting something that is good for the public, is a strong motivator. Citizens feel "good" when supporting leaders they consider "good," regardless of the technical quality of their policies.

The Dedi Mulyadi phenomenon has important implications for public administration. On the one hand, his ability to build trust through strong *personal branding* enables rapid and effective mobilization of public support, which can facilitate policy implementation. On the other hand, however, this poses challenges for democratic accountability and *evidence-based policy making*. When public evaluation is based more on the leader's persona than on the substance of the policy, the space for constructive criticism can narrow.

KDM's success underscores the importance of identity verification in the digital age (Ma & Agarwal, 2007). His ability to consistently display and obtain confirmation of his populist image on platforms such as Instagram shows that digital communication competence is now one of the core capabilities for modern public administrators. Reliance on a leader's personal brand creates a highly effective yet fragile governance model, as the sustainability of public support is heavily dependent on maintaining the individual's reputation.

## DISCUSSION

This study found that Kang Dedi Mulyadi's (KDM) political branding on Instagram emphasizes morality and culture in building his leadership image. This finding is in line with Moffitt's (2016) view

that populism is often manifested through media strategies that emphasize personal style, simplicity, and claims of morality, but differs from the concept of digital charisma (Abidin, 2021), which focuses solely on individual appeal. KDM's strategy shows a new variant of culture-based populism or local moral populism, where cultural identity is used as a source of moral and political legitimacy. In Mitsikopoulou's (2008) framework, KDM's appearance on Instagram is constructed through three main dimensions, namely clothing, hairstyle, and hand gestures (hand signs) that reinforce the message of simplicity and symbols of morality. In addition, four categories of political messages—Hope, Public Support, Activity Report, and Political Value—reveal a dual narrative strategy between representation as a moral leader and agent of local wisdom. This approach represents a form of moral populism (Hawkins, 2009), in which power is constructed as a moral mandate rather than an instrument of political rationality, thus creating a paradox between social closeness and the personalization of power in the digital space.

The image constructed in his leadership gives the impression of simplicity, closeness to the community, and Sundanese cultural values. Theoretically, this study provides new insights into digital populism in Indonesia with the addition of moral and cultural dimensions as distinct factors. However, in practical terms, these results show that social media, especially Instagram, has become one of the platforms used to build a locally-based leadership image. However, the use of morality in political communication strategies has shifted the public sphere from rational discourse to the symbolic and emotional arena. This study reveals a new form of digital populism in Indonesia by examining KDM's communication strategy based on morality and local culture. The leadership image is then constructed with visual symbols and simple narratives that evoke emotional closeness with the community and also give rise to the paradox of moral politics and deliberative politics. This study has limitations in its analysis of visual content on the Instagram account @dedimulyadi71 in the five months since he was inaugurated as Governor of West Java (March-July 2025), so it does not cover the overall dynamics of interaction. Future research recommendations could use a sentiment analysis approach to gain an understanding of how audiences interpret populist messages and their impact on public political preferences.

## CONCLUSION

This study argues that Kang Dedi Mulyadi's (KDM) *political branding* strategy on Instagram is a manifestation of local moral populism, where leadership image is built on the foundation of personal morality and Sundanese cultural values, rather than policy rationality. Content analysis shows that KDM consistently prioritizes posts in the *Political Value* and *Activity Report* categories, strategically presenting himself as a moral, humble, and hard-working leader. This image construction is reinforced through the personality category, where the relationship aspect is the main pillar for building emotional closeness with the public, as well as *personal values* that highlight his identity as a solution-oriented figure who upholds local culture. Visual appearance, particularly the use of white Sundanese traditional clothing, serves as a strong symbolic marker of his commitment to the values of simplicity and local wisdom. Thus, KDM has successfully shaped his image as an authentic "people's leader," whose legitimacy does not stem from technocratic programs, but rather from *moral performance* and emotional closeness built in the digital space.

The success of this strategy raises a fundamental paradox for the discourse of public administration and deliberative politics. On the one hand, KDM's personal and humanistic approach has proven effective in building *public trust* and mobilizing support by creating strong affective bonds. However, on the other hand, this strategy risks shifting the political arena from a rational deliberative space to a personal moral stage. This phenomenon can be explained through the concept of *the "Halo Effect,"* whereby KDM's positive personal image makes the public tend to evaluate his policies positively, without undergoing in-depth cognitive analysis. As a result, support is no longer based on the substance of *evidence-based policy*, but rather on trust in the leader's good intentions. Thus, this study concludes that although morality-based digital populism is effective in gaining popularity, it poses serious challenges to democratic accountability by weakening public rationality and strengthening the personalization of power.

## REFERENCES:

- Afandi, M. I. (2022). *Komunikasi Politik Dedi Mulyadi dalam Meningkatkan Personal Branding melalui YouTube Channel Pribadi @Kang Dedi Mulyadi Muhammad Ibnu Afandi-2001026051 (KPI-B4)*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360261668>
- Aldi, M. F., & Anggraini, C. (2021). Analisis Penggunaan PR Tools Pada Instansi Pemerintahan Dalam Membantu Kegiatan Kehumasan. *E-Proceeding of Management*, 8(4), 4188–4194.
- Avolio, B. J., & Gardner, W. L. (2005). Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 315–338. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.001>
- Banerjee, S., & Ray Chaudhuri, B. (2016). Factors responsible behind political brand preference: An empirical study on Indian voters. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 34(4), 559–582. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-05-2015-0095>
- Banurea, I. S., & Maulina, P. (2018). *Political Branding Edy Rahmayadi pada Kampanye Pilgub Sumatera Utara Tahun 2018 melalui Instagram*. 5(2).
- Bennett, A. M., Malone, C., Cheatham, K., & Saligram, N. (2019). The impact of perceptions of politician brand warmth and competence on voting intentions. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 28(2), 256–273. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-09-2017-1562>
- Berger, J., & Ward, M. (2010). Subtle Signals of Inconspicuous Consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 37(4), 555–569. <https://doi.org/10.1086/655445>
- Bódi, J. and Mester, T. (2022). Pécs chatter: a digital anthropological study on the impact of a facebook group on local politics. *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae Communicatio*, 9(1), 62-75. <https://doi.org/10.2478/auscom-2022-0005>
- Brown, M. E., Treviño, L. K., & Harrison, D. A. (2005). Ethical leadership: A social learning perspective for construct development and testing. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 97(2), 117–134. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2005.03.002>
- Brown, M. E., Treviño, L. K., & Harrison, D. A. (2005). Ethical leadership: A social learning perspective for construct development and testing. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 97(2), 117–134. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2005.03.002>

- Daud, R. (2021). The role of political communication in shaping public opinion: a comparative analysis of traditional and digital media. *Journal of Public Representative and Society Provision*, 1(2), 63-69. <https://doi.org/10.55885/jprsp.v1i2.241>
- Dickson, M. (2021). Building a Leaders Identity on Social Media. <https://doi.org/10.15760/HONORS.1098>.
- Dommett, K. and Verovšek, P. (2021). Promoting democracy in the digital public sphere: applying theoretical ideals to online political communication. *Javnost - The Public*, 28(4), 358-374. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2021.1955206>
- Dwiputra, R., Aziz, T., & Nur, M. (2022). Strengthening digital citizens political communication ethics (digital citizenship) in social media. *International Journal Pedagogy of Social Studies*, 7(2), 51-56. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijposs.v7i2.52400>
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London: Longman.
- Fathony, I. I. (2025). *Gaya Komunikasi Politik Persuasif Gubernur Dedi Mulyadi sebagai Pengambil Kebijakan Publik*. <https://doi.org/10.30656/nryfdf17>
- Fedorchenko, S., Алексеев, P., Ezhov, D., & Kurenkova, E. (2020). Democratic political regime in development context of online network communities. *E3s Web of Conferences*, 210, 16016. <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202021016016>.
- Fikri, M. 2024. BRANDING POLITIK CALON GUBERNUR JAWA BARAT PADA AKUN INSTAGRAM @dedimulyadi71. *Indonesian Journal of Digital Public Relations (IJDPR)*. 3, 1 (Oct. 2024), 1–11. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.25124/ijdpr.v3i1.7944>.
- Gilani, P., Bolat, E., Nordberg, D., & Wilkin, C. (2019). Mirror, mirror on the wall: Shifting leader–follower power dynamics in a social media context. *Leadership*, 16, 343 - 363. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715019889817>.
- Hatfield, L. M. (2024). Content analysis. In *Encyclopedia of Sport Management, Second Edition* (pp. 205–207). Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.; Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035317189.ch118>
- Instagram: [https://www.instagram.com/reel/DJ2hskkp-2s/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&igsh=MWc1djJrNDV00Wh4NA==](https://www.instagram.com/reel/DJ2hskkp-2s/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MWc1djJrNDV00Wh4NA==) diakses 5 Oktober 2025 pukul 10.30 WIB.
- Judge, T. A., & Piccolo, R. F. (2004). Transformational and Transactional Leadership: A Meta-Analytic Test of Their Relative Validity. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 89(5), 755–768. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.89.5.755>
- Kane, G., Alavi, M., Labianca, G., & Borgatti, S. (2014). What’s different about social media networks? a framework and research agenda. *Mis Quarterly*, 38(1), 274-304. <https://doi.org/10.25300/misq/2014/38.1.13>
- Karmila, L., Rachmiate, A., K., S., Fardiah, D., Ahmadi, D., & Muhtadi, A. (2024). The role of social media in the political construction of identity: Implications for political dynamics and democracy in Indonesia. *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development*. <https://doi.org/10.24294/jipd9171>.
- Laporan Survei Indikator Politik Indonesia (IPI) 2025
- Lee, J.-S., Hsu, L.-T. (Jane), Han, H., & Kim, Y. (2010). Understanding how consumers view green hotels: How a hotel’s green image can influence behavioural intentions. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 18(7), 901–914. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669581003777747>

- Ma, M., & Agarwal, R. (2007). Through a Glass Darkly: Information Technology Design, Identity Verification, and Knowledge Contribution in Online Communities. *Information Systems Research*, 18(1), 42–67. <https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.1070.0113>
- Meier, F. (2020). *Social network analysis as a tool for data analysis and visualization in information behaviour and interactive information retrieval research*. 477–480. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3343413.3378018>
- Mitsikopoulou, B. (2008). *The textual construction of globalization: Media discourses of international communication*. In B. Jessop, N. Fairclough, & R. Wodak (Eds.), *Education and the Knowledge-Based Economy in Europe* (pp. 127–144). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Papakyriakopoulos, O., Hegelich, S., Shahrezaye, M., & Serrano, J. (2018). Social media and microtargeting: political data processing and the consequences for Germany. *Big Data & Society*, 5(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951718811844>
- Phipps, M., Brace Govan, J., & Jevons, C. (2010). The duality of political brand equity. *European Journal of Marketing*, 44(3/4), 496–514. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03090561011020552>
- Radarcirebon.com. 2025. Pakaian Dedi Mulyadi Selalu Berwarna Putih, Ini yang Jadi Penyebab. <https://radarcirebon.disway.id/read/196728/pakaian-dedi-mulyadi-selalu-berwarna-putih-ini-yang-jadi-penyebab>. Diakses 5 Oktober 2025 pukul 11.00 WIB.
- Rahmadhani, Z. and Kusumasari, B. (2023). Aktivisme digital kebijakan pencegahan dan penanganan kekerasan seksual. *Jurnal Studi Komunikasi (Indonesian Journal of Communications Studies)*, 7(2), 662-681. <https://doi.org/10.25139/jsk.v7i2.5323>
- Schneiker, A. (2019). Telling the Story of the Superhero and the Anti-Politician as President: Donald Trump's Branding on Twitter. *Political Studies Review*, 17(3), 210–223. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929918807712>
- Şenol, Y., ŞENOL, F., & Yaşar, M. (2023). Digital game addiction of preschool children in the covid-19 pandemic: social emotional development and parental guidance. *Current Psychology*, 43(1), 839-847. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04323-8>
- Serrano, J., Papakyriakopoulos, O., Shahrezaye, M., & Hegelich, S. (2020). The political dashboard: a tool for online political transparency. *Proceedings of the International Aai Conference on Web and Social Media*, 14, 983-985. <https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v14i1.7371>
- Wang, Y., Lu, L., Zhou, Z., & Zhu, J. (2022). Empathic narrative of online political communication. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.869496>