

Jurnal JTIK (Jurnal Teknologi Informasi dan Komunikasi)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35870/jtik.v10i1.5267>

Kang Dedi Mulyadi Populist Communication and Its Impact on Local Leadership Perception

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article info

Article history:

Received 23 September 2025

Received in revised form

10 October 2025

Accepted 1 November 2025

Available online January 2026.

Keywords:

Populist Communication;

Local Leadership; Cultural

Symbolism; Political Branding.

Kata Kunci:

Komunikasi Populis;

Kepemimpinan Lokal;

Simbolisme Budaya; Branding

Politik.

abstract

This study investigates how Kang Dedi Mulyadi (KDM) populist communication style influences public perceptions of local leadership in West Java. Through qualitative literature review, the research synthesizes insights from scholarly works, media analyses, and contextual sources to explore symbolic, cultural, and emotional dimensions of KDM leadership communication. Findings reveal that his use of Sundanese cultural codes, informal language, and direct grassroots engagement constructs an image of authenticity, empathy, and accessibility—enhancing short-term legitimacy while fostering strong emotional connections with constituents. Digital platforms amplify his persona by transforming political communication into viral, emotionally resonant storytelling that bridges the gap between elite governance and everyday citizens. Nevertheless, the research identifies critical concerns regarding sustainability of leadership models built primarily on symbolic action and performative gestures. While KDM communication resonates strongly with grassroots communities and redefines leadership legitimacy, it risks overshadowing institutional reform, policy depth, and governance sustainability. Such duality reveals the ambivalent nature of populist-local leadership in Indonesia: effective in mobilizing trust and visibility, yet vulnerable when not embedded within structural accountability and participatory governance frameworks.

abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana gaya komunikasi populis Kang Dedi Mulyadi (KDM) memengaruhi persepsi publik terhadap kepemimpinan lokal di Jawa Barat. Melalui kajian literatur kualitatif, riset ini mensintesis temuan dari karya ilmiah, analisis media, dan sumber kontekstual untuk mengeksplorasi dimensi simbolik, kultural, dan emosional dari komunikasi kepemimpinan KDM. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan kode budaya Sunda, bahasa informal, dan keterlibatan langsung dengan akar rumput membangun citra autentisitas, empati, dan aksesibilitas—meningkatkan legitimasi jangka pendek sekaligus memupuk koneksi emosional yang kuat dengan konstituen. Platform digital memperkuat persona tersebut dengan mengubah komunikasi politik menjadi narasi viral yang beresonansi secara emosional, menjembatani kesenjangan antara tata kelola elite dan warga biasa. Meski demikian, riset ini mengidentifikasi kekhawatiran kritis terkait keberlanjutan model kepemimpinan yang dibangun terutama atas tindakan simbolik dan gestur performatif. Meskipun komunikasi KDM beresonansi kuat dengan komunitas akar rumput dan mendefinisikan ulang legitimasi kepemimpinan, hal tersebut berisiko menutupi reformasi institusional, kedalaman kebijakan, dan keberlanjutan tata kelola. Dualitas semacam ini mengungkap sifat ambivalen kepemimpinan populis-lokal di Indonesia: efektif dalam memobilisasi kepercayaan dan visibilitas, namun rentan jika tidak tertanam dalam kerangka akuntabilitas struktural dan tata kelola partisipatif.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, communication in political leadership has moved beyond rhetoric to become a core driver of legitimacy, trust, and public perception. Kang Dedi Mulyadi (KDM) offers a striking case study: his communication style has drawn attention from constituents and scholars alike. Through cultural symbolism, populist narrative, and grassroots visibility, KDM has built a strong personal brand while reshaping how local leadership is understood in West Java. His strategies resonate with the public, yet they raise questions about sustainability and what such leadership means for modern governance. KDM approach rests on several intersecting factors: cultural proximity, emotional appeal, policy simplification, and an image of being 'one with the people.' He invokes Sundanese cultural motifs, speaks in everyday language, eats at warungs (local food stalls), practices 'blusukan' (walking among communities), and avoids the formal trappings of elite bureaucracy (Yohanes *et al.*, 2024). These symbolic gestures do more than create good optics—they build bridges of trust and shrink the psychological distance between leader and citizen. But the strategy opens up gaps: does cultural closeness make up for shallow policy? Can performance measured by social media engagement and emotional storytelling produce durable institutions?

KDM populist communication prioritizes directness and emotional immediacy over procedural formalism. His messages often set up a binary: "us" (ordinary people) versus "them" (bureaucrats, elites, illegal actors). This narrative fits within Indonesia's broader populist moment, where political figures gain ground by showing they are present and accountable—cutting red tape, appearing in person, responding to daily struggles. But the approach carries risks: structural issues get oversimplified, institutional checks may be sidelined, and governance norms can be undermined. West Java's socio-economic challenges require both empathy and technical skill, making these risks particularly relevant. Digital media amplifies KDM communication. Video clips of field visits, interactions with marginalized groups, or symbolic actions—intervening in illegal mining, confronting

polluters, solving street-level problems—spread quickly across social platforms. They are often packaged with strong storytelling, emotive music, and compelling visuals (Priowidodo, 2025). The interactivity—comments, shares, reactions—creates a feeling of dialogue, even though formal channels for feedback and policy input remain rigid. A disconnect emerges between perceived responsiveness and actual policy inclusion, between popularity and effectiveness.

Public perception of KDM leadership hinges on affect, symbol, and action working together: people see someone accessible, culturally grounded, visibly active, and willing to sidestep bureaucratic inertia. These traits shape expectations around speed, personal connection, and visible results. Yet some wonder about consistency, governance integrity, and whether a leader-driven model can hold up when media cycles shift or crises demand technical rather than symbolic responses. What happens when symbolic action runs into institutional limits?

The implications of KDM communication style for local leadership perception are layered (Awaluddin & Widiarto, 2025). On one side, it boosts legitimacy, trust, and grassroots political engagement; on the other, it blurs lines between charismatic leadership and populism, between symbolic gestures and structural reform. Evaluating his communication means looking beyond how people feel about him—it means examining real policy outcomes, local governance capacity, and institutional change. The sections that follow will unpack these dynamics: first, by mapping his communication style; second, by assessing public perceptions in West Java; third, by comparing these against governance benchmarks; and finally, by reflecting on both the promise and limitations of populist-local leadership in Indonesia's democratic landscape.

2. Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative research design with a literature study approach, well-suited for examining the communicative practices and leadership styles of political figures as represented in academic works, journal articles, and digital media analyses. Unlike

quantitative approaches that rely on numerical data and statistical measurements, qualitative literature research focuses on critical interpretation, meaning-making, and thematic synthesis of existing scholarly and contextual materials. The choice of method stems from the nature of the research problem: KDM communication style involves not just measurable outcomes but also symbolic interactions, cultural narratives, and discursive practices that require interpretive understanding. This methodological stance allows the researcher to map out theoretical perspectives, conceptual frameworks, and empirical findings published across multiple scholarly sources, constructing a fuller picture of how populist communication shapes local leadership perception (Hollingsworth *et al.*, 2021). The approach also identifies gaps in the literature, justifying why the present study is needed and how it adds to the broader discourse on political communication in Indonesia (Fathony, 2025).

The corpus of materials reviewed primarily consists of peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and relevant media sources that directly analyze KDM communication strategies and their implications. These scholarly works are complemented by contextual news articles, opinion pieces, and public communication records that illustrate KDM leadership practices in real-world settings. The selection of sources follows purposive sampling, where materials are chosen based on relevance, credibility, and direct engagement with themes such as populist communication, personal branding, and leadership perception. Through systematic reading, coding, and categorization, the researcher extracts thematic patterns—cultural symbolism, authenticity versus image-making, digital storytelling, and the risks of polarization—that serve as the analytical foundation. This multi-source integration ensures the research does not rely on a single perspective but instead synthesizes diverse viewpoints for a richer and more nuanced interpretation.

The analysis procedure follows a thematic content analysis model adapted to suit a literature review framework. Each article and supporting source is examined across three dimensions: (1) theoretical and conceptual framing, which highlights how

communication and leadership are defined and operationalized; (2) methodological orientation, which reveals how previous scholars have studied KDM communication practices; and (3) empirical findings, which offer insights into how KDM strategies are perceived by audiences and situated within Indonesian politics. The researcher then conducts a process of comparison and contrast, identifying convergences, divergences, and complementarities among the sources. This interpretive synthesis moves the study beyond a descriptive summary of past research, instead offering critical insights into the mechanisms through which populist communication shapes perceptions of local leadership. At the same time, attention is given to limitations in the existing body of literature—for example, the lack of longitudinal studies or empirical surveys directly linking digital communication with governance outcomes. Such reflection strengthens the academic rigor of the study by situating it within both the continuity of previous works and the broader agenda of future research directions.

3. Results and Discussion

Results

Elements of Kang Dedi Mulyadi Populist Communication

The findings reveal that Kang Dedi Mulyadi (KDM) communication style is characterized by a deliberate blending of cultural symbolism, emotional storytelling, and populist narratives that construct his image as a leader who is not only close to the people but also deeply embedded in their everyday lives. By employing Sundanese cultural codes—such as traditional language use, local proverbs, and symbolic practices like eating at warungs or visiting rural communities—KDM projects authenticity and humility, thereby reducing the perceived distance between elite politics and grassroots society. His viral digital content, such as the "nanti dijemput ke barak" (to be picked up to the barrack) moment, functions as more than a humorous anecdote; it operates as a discursive device that signifies belonging and solidarity. Through this strategy, KDM frames himself as a protector of cultural values while simultaneously positioning himself as a modern, relatable leader. Emotional appeal and immediacy are

central features of his communication, with visual storytelling on platforms like YouTube and TikTok amplifying his messages and inviting interactive responses from the public (Fathony, 2025). This strategy reconfigures political communication from a top-down process into a seemingly dialogical engagement where citizens feel recognized, represented, and involved. However, while these communicative practices generate high levels of visibility and resonance, they also carry inherent risks, including the possibility of oversimplifying complex governance issues into symbolic gestures and spectacle-driven interactions.

Another essential element of KDM populist communication is his consistent effort to embody "cultural proximity" as a foundation for political legitimacy. He regularly inserts himself into ordinary spaces—markets, village gatherings, farming fields—where the boundary between leader and citizen becomes blurred. In these interactions, he often uses Sundanese vernacular instead of formal Bahasa Indonesia, signaling not only linguistic familiarity but also an intentional break from bureaucratic rigidity often associated with political elites. By situating himself in familiar social environments and adopting the persona of a leader who understands the hardships of everyday life, KDM effectively creates a shared identity with his constituents. This identity construction is further reinforced by symbolic performances such as personally resolving community conflicts, confronting polluters, or directly responding to complaints during his visits (Kadri, 2022). These actions create strong narratives of accessibility and responsiveness, making citizens perceive him as a "problem solver" who is always present. Yet, the danger lies in the sustainability of this approach: while people appreciate such symbolic closeness, there is a risk that structural policy solutions are overshadowed by performative interventions that are media-friendly but less institutionalized.

Digital mediation constitutes another critical dimension of KDM populist communication. His political persona is amplified through social media platforms where short videos of his fieldwork circulate widely, often accompanied by dramatic music, captions that emphasize moral values, and

carefully framed visuals that highlight his empathy. This form of storytelling allows his leadership to transcend physical spaces, reaching not only constituents in West Java but also national and even international audiences. The interactivity of these platforms—through comments, likes, and shares—creates an illusion of dialogue where citizens feel as though they are in direct conversation with their leader. This, in turn, enhances emotional resonance and strengthens perceptions of legitimacy (Udin, 2023). However, the reliance on digital mediation raises questions about performativity and authenticity: to what extent are these digital narratives spontaneous reflections of leadership, and to what extent are they curated spectacles designed to reinforce a populist brand? Moreover, the visibility afforded by digital platforms can contribute to polarization, as his supporters and critics alike interpret his actions through different ideological lenses. Thus, while digital communication enhances reach and immediacy, it also complicates the interpretive terrain of leadership perception (Alfikri, 2024).

Finally, KDM populist communication is structured around a binary framework of "us versus them," a rhetorical device common in populist discourses worldwide. By aligning himself with the ordinary people—the "us"—he implicitly positions bureaucrats, corrupt elites, or unresponsive institutions as the "them." This dichotomy appeals to citizens who are disillusioned with formal governance mechanisms, as it validates their frustrations and situates KDM as their champion. For example, his interventions in cases of illegal mining or environmental degradation are framed not only as acts of governance but also as battles between the morally righteous people and exploitative forces (Herlina *et al.*, 2023). While such framing bolsters his legitimacy as a populist leader, it also risks oversimplifying complex governance challenges into moral binaries that may hinder collaborative policymaking. The risk is that governance becomes reduced to a series of spectacles where antagonism substitutes for institutional problem-solving (Awaluddin & Widiarto, 2025). Nevertheless, this rhetorical framing remains highly effective in mobilizing public support and sustaining perceptions of leadership strength, particularly in regions where people yearn for leaders who are visible, courageous, and emotionally connected.

Public Perceptions and Implications for Local Leadership

Table 1. Public Perceptions of KDM Populist Communication and Implications for Local Leadership

Dimension	Positive Perceptions	Critical Concerns	Implications for Leadership
Cultural Resonance	Seen as authentic, rooted in Sundanese identity, approachable through local symbols.	Risk of reducing leadership to cultural performance without policy depth.	Legitimacy tied strongly to cultural identity; sustainability depends on institutional backing.
Emotional Appeal	Evokes empathy, trust, and pride through direct gestures and emotional storytelling.	May oversimplify complex governance issues into symbolic acts.	Enhances short-term legitimacy but may weaken policy credibility.
Accessibility	Blusukan, market visits, and digital visibility reduce distance between leader and people.	Risk of performativity; visibility valued more than institutional effectiveness.	Encourages participatory perception but risks dependency on charisma.
Digital Mediation	Viral content amplifies reach, mobilizes citizen engagement, fosters grassroots dialogue.	Over-reliance on digital spectacle may polarize or create pseudo-solidarity.	Broadens legitimacy but fragile to shifts in digital trends.
Governance Impact	Enhances sense of responsiveness and inclusion in local politics.	Structural reforms and accountability mechanisms often remain underdeveloped.	Local leadership shaped by emotional trust requires integration with institutional reform.

Analysis of the reviewed literature and supporting sources indicates that KDM populist communication substantially shapes how local leadership is perceived in West Java. Studies such as Rosyidah (2025) demonstrate that his digital persona evokes trust, empathy, and cultural pride, which in turn enhances his legitimacy in the eyes of grassroots communities. Citizens frequently interpret his informal tone, use of Sundanese language, and empathetic acts as evidence of sincerity and genuine concern, thus reinforcing the belief that he embodies the values and struggles of ordinary people. Similarly, Hidayat *et al.* (2025) emphasize that KDM personal branding through viral cultural content effectively sustains his humanist image, distinguishing him from technocratic or elitist models of leadership. Yet, the findings also highlight tensions: while many respondents appreciate his symbolic closeness and problem-solving actions, others question whether such performative acts can translate into long-term governance capacity and institutional reform. This echoes Priowidodo's (2024) broader argument that populist communication, although successful in mobilizing support and fostering emotional unity, can also

create polarization, pseudo-solidarity, or dependency on charismatic figures rather than robust institutions. Therefore, the impact of KDM communication style on local leadership perception is twofold: on the positive side, it enhances accessibility, responsiveness, and cultural resonance; on the critical side, it raises concerns about sustainability, governance depth, and the potential substitution of substantive policy with symbolic politics.

From a grassroots perspective, the reception of KDM populist communication is strongly mediated by cultural proximity and emotional identification. Rural communities, in particular, perceive his use of Sundanese symbols and direct field interactions as a validation of their cultural heritage, creating an impression that leadership can remain authentic and rooted in local traditions even in the face of modernization (Wibowo, 2020). This contrasts with the alienation often felt towards national politicians who appear distant, bureaucratic, and technocratic. In this sense, KDM provides an alternative leadership model that resonates deeply with people's everyday lifeworlds. However, some community stakeholders

raise critical concerns that while KDM symbolic presence is welcomed, it does not always translate into systematic solutions for structural issues such as poverty reduction, infrastructural inequality, or bureaucratic reform (Hernando & Malinao, 2025). This highlights a recurring dilemma: leaders may gain immediate popularity through communicative symbolism, but sustaining legitimacy requires tangible and measurable governance outcomes that move beyond affective appeal.

The implications of these perceptions are highly significant for understanding the transformation of local leadership in Indonesia. On the one hand, KDM popularity demonstrates the growing demand for leaders who embody cultural familiarity, empathy, and everyday accessibility. Such qualities redefine the meaning of leadership legitimacy away from mere institutional authority toward affective trust, shared cultural identity, and symbolic visibility (Laturrakhmi *et al.*, 2023). On the other hand, this shift carries long-term consequences: when leadership legitimacy is primarily tied to individual charisma and populist communication, the stability of governance may become precarious, depending on the leader's media visibility rather than institutional continuity. This creates a leadership environment vulnerable to fluctuations in public sentiment, digital trends, and media framing, which could either amplify or erode legitimacy rapidly. Thus, while KDM case reflects the strengths of populist communication in enhancing short-term perceptions of leadership, it also underscores the fragility of governance models that rely heavily on symbolic legitimacy (Herabudin *et al.*, 2022).

Furthermore, the reviewed sources suggest that the reception of KDM communication style is not uniform across all groups. Urban middle-class citizens, for instance, may interpret his populist gestures with greater skepticism, questioning whether viral acts and symbolic interventions represent genuine governance solutions or political theatrics. Meanwhile, rural citizens and lower-income groups often embrace these gestures as rare moments of recognition and inclusion in political processes that historically marginalized them (Hernando & Malinao, 2025). This divergence points to the differentiated implications of populist

communication: while it may bridge gaps between elites and grassroots communities, it may also inadvertently deepen divides between urban technocratic expectations and rural cultural identifications. Consequently, populist communication strategies require careful balancing, ensuring that cultural proximity and symbolic acts are complemented by robust policy frameworks that address the diverse expectations of different social constituencies (Sijaya & Umuri, 2023).

Taken together, the findings reveal that KDM populist communication has profound implications for the trajectory of local leadership in West Java. It demonstrates the potential for leaders to construct legitimacy through cultural resonance, emotional storytelling, and visible accessibility, thereby strengthening grassroots engagement and trust. At the same time, it reveals critical vulnerabilities in governance structures that may arise when leadership is overly dependent on charismatic communication rather than institutionalized accountability. The lesson for future local leadership is clear: while populist communication can serve as an effective tool for building immediate legitimacy and resonance, it must be coupled with participatory mechanisms, transparent policymaking, and sustainable governance practices to ensure long-term trust. Otherwise, the risk remains that populist-local leadership will remain trapped in cycles of symbolic popularity without achieving durable structural reform (Saud *et al.*, 2023).

Comparative Analysis with Other Populist Leaders

Kang Dedi Mulyadi stands out as a populist figure who foregrounds local cultural symbolism in his communication strategy. His use of the Iket Sunda, a traditional Sundanese headband, serves as a distinctive political brand deeply rooted in West Java's traditions and reinforces the regional identity and pride of the Sundanese people (Nurhayati *et al.*, 2019). This approach is rarely found among other Indonesian populist leaders, who generally do not emphasize regional cultural symbols to such an extent. In addition, his leadership in transforming Purwakarta from a passive city into a vibrant, engaged community demonstrates a strong commitment to grassroots mobilization that is specifically tailored to the socio-cultural context of West Java (Nurhayati *et al.*, 2019).

Within broader populist patterns, Mulyadi displays an anti-elitist stance, positioning himself as a defender of ordinary citizens against the political elite—an attribute also evident in Indonesian leaders such as Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and Prabowo Subianto (Wicaksana & Wardhana, 2021). His pro-people communication style mirrors global populist trends and resonates with Jokowi's own emphasis on close connections with everyday citizens (Törnquist, 2022). Meanwhile, Jokowi's leadership illustrates "technocratic populism," blending pragmatic governance and effective administration with populist outreach. This contrasts with Mulyadi more culture-driven strategy but reflects the broader tendency of populist leaders to integrate technocratic elements to appeal to diverse audiences. A comparison with other Indonesian populist leaders underscores Mulyadi uniqueness. Jokowi combines technocratic pragmatism with strategic power-sharing among elites, while Prabowo Subianto relies on authoritarian-populist rhetoric and strong organizational and financial backing (Hatherell & Welsh, 2020). Mulyadi communication strategy—anchored in local symbols and intensive community engagement—highlights the importance of cultural context in Indonesian populism and illustrates the diverse approaches to populist leadership found across the national political landscape.

Evolving Perceptions of Kang Dedi Mulyadi Populist Communication

During his early leadership as Regent of Purwakarta (2008–2013), Kang Dedi Mulyadi (KDM) built a strong local following by embedding Sundanese cultural symbols—particularly the Iket Sunda headband—into his political communication. This strategy cultivated a sense of shared identity and pride among residents. Such localized symbolism echoes the observation that Indonesian populist leaders often "claim authenticity by rooting their rhetoric in indigenous traditions and community engagement," a method that strengthens grassroots trust and credibility. Community-based programs and participatory governance during this phase reinforced the perception of KDM as a leader committed to local interests. Between 2013 and 2018, KDM popularity reached its apex as he transformed Purwakarta into a dynamic civic space and leveraged digital platforms to extend his reach. Indonesia's

rapidly growing social media ecosystem "has become a powerful tool for populists to project intimacy and emotional connection with voters." KDM viral YouTube visits to villages and his informal, story-driven posts exemplified this style, enabling him to appear both culturally grounded and modern. Yet scholars caution that "the charisma underpinning populist success is inherently cyclical," explaining why some initiatives faced scrutiny over their sustainability as political cycles progressed (Tapsell, 2017).

Since leaving office in 2018, perceptions of KDM have fluctuated amid a more competitive political landscape and the rise of national figures such as Joko Widodo and Ganjar Pranowo. Research suggests that "effective political communication in today's Indonesia requires constant adaptation to new platforms and shifting digital habits," highlighting the challenge for leaders who no longer hold formal office (Lim, 2025). Although KDM remains active on social media, the long-term effectiveness of his current strategies depends on his ability to innovate and stay visible in an environment shaped by evolving algorithms and audience preferences. KDM trajectory illustrates the broader pattern of contemporary populism: strong local resonance in the early stage, national visibility at its peak, and post-tenure volatility driven by digital transformation and political competition. Scholars note that "the durability of populist appeal hinges on a leader's capacity to continually reinvent communication while preserving cultural authenticity." KDM future relevance will therefore rest on his ability to sustain that balance in Indonesia's fast-changing media and political context.

Media and Platform Dynamics

Kang Dedi Mulyadi (KDM) effectively leverages TikTok to project his populist identity and cultural authenticity. TikTok's algorithmic engagement, which prioritizes virality through sounds, hashtags, and trending content, enables KDM short, visually appealing videos to spread rapidly among younger audiences (Peña-Fernández *et al.*, 2022). His emotionally charged and personalized posts—often featuring Sundanese cultural elements—align with the platform's viral mechanics, amplifying his image as a relatable, grassroots leader (Blassnig, 2022). This direct connection with viewers reinforces his narrative as a protector of local traditions while harnessing the

algorithmic advantages unique to TikTok. On YouTube, KDM constructs longer-form narratives that blend personal anecdotes with political messaging, creating an intimate connection with viewers while highlighting his governance achievements (Ahmad *et al.*, 2017). The platform's recommendation system and user-generated content environment allow his videos to reach diverse audiences, while the emotional and narrative-driven format strengthens loyalty and engagement. Through YouTube, KDM not only documents his community visits and cultural performances but also builds a sustainable archive of his leadership style, positioning himself as both a cultural guardian and a modern political figure. KDM Instagram presence reinforces his charismatic public image through carefully curated visual storytelling. By sharing photos and short reels that merge personal and political moments, he presents a leader who is both approachable and deeply rooted in Sundanese heritage (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Instagram's visual-centric algorithm enhances this personalization, enabling KDM to cultivate a strong personal brand and maintain continuous interaction with followers (Schmidt, 2020). Complementing these digital strategies, the traditional press provides critical visibility and legitimacy, acting as both amplifier and evaluator of his populist messages (Wettstein *et al.*, 2018). Together, these platforms—driven by algorithmic influence and cross-platform amplification—shape KDM leadership image, ensuring that his culturally resonant messages achieve widespread impact across West Java and beyond.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that KDM populist communication strategy effectively bridges cultural authenticity with modern digital engagement, yet raises critical questions about governance sustainability. His use of Sundanese cultural symbols—particularly the Iket Sunda—functions as a distinctive political brand that differentiates him from other Indonesian populist leaders like Jokowi, who employs technocratic populism, or Prabowo, who relies on authoritarian-populist rhetoric (Nurhayati *et al.*, 2019; Hatherell & Welsh, 2020). This cultural embeddedness resonates strongly with grassroots communities, validating their identity and

fostering affective trust (Herabudin *et al.*, 2022). However, Priyowidodo (2025) warns that populist leadership in Indonesia's digital age risks fragmenting social cohesion when symbolic gestures overshadow institutional accountability. The digital amplification of KDM persona through TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram illustrates how algorithmic platforms reshape political legitimacy. Peña-Fernández *et al.* (2022) note that TikTok's virality mechanisms favor emotionally charged, culturally resonant content—precisely the format KDM employs. Yet, as Rosyidah (2025) critically argues, this raises tensions between authenticity and image-making: are these digital narratives genuine reflections of leadership or curated spectacles designed for mass appeal? Schmidt (2020) adds that while social media enhances populist reach, traditional press remains essential as both amplifier and critical evaluator, ensuring that populist messages do not escape scrutiny.

From a governance perspective, the findings reveal a paradox: KDM communication strengthens short-term legitimacy and citizen engagement but may undermine long-term institutional stability. Laturakhmi *et al.* (2023) emphasize that effective communicative leadership during crises requires balancing emotional connection with transparent policymaking. Similarly, Hernando and Malinao (2025) argue that leadership effectiveness depends not only on charisma but also on administrative efficiency and strategic governance. The risk, as highlighted by Awaluddin and Widiarto (2025), is that political communication in the TikTok era prioritizes virality over substantive policy discourse, potentially reducing governance to performative spectacle. Public perceptions of KDM vary across social strata. Rural communities view his cultural proximity as validation of their marginalized voices, while urban middle-class citizens remain skeptical of symbolic politics (Sijaya & Umuri, 2023; Yohanes *et al.*, 2024). This divergence underscores the need for populist leaders to complement emotional appeal with robust institutional mechanisms. As Saud *et al.* (2023) suggest, sustainable leadership requires integrating charismatic communication with accountability structures that ensure governance credibility beyond individual popularity. KDM trajectory thus offers both a model and a cautionary tale: cultural resonance can build legitimacy, but without institutional depth,

populist leadership risks remaining trapped in cycles of symbolic popularity rather than achieving durable structural reform.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study show that Kang Dedi Mulyadi populist communication style has become a central factor in shaping public perceptions of local leadership in West Java. His deliberate use of Sundanese cultural codes, emotional storytelling, symbolic gestures, and digital mediation projects an image of authenticity and closeness, reducing the psychological and social distance between political elites and grassroots communities. The strategy has proven highly effective in mobilizing trust, cultural pride, and affective loyalty, generating short-term legitimacy and strengthening his symbolic position as a leader who is "of the people." However, the same populist orientation reveals vulnerabilities. The sustainability of leadership legitimacy appears heavily tied to the continuity of his digital presence, charismatic gestures, and emotional resonance rather than institutional depth or long-term policy reform. While KDM style effectively bridges the cultural and emotional gap between leader and citizen, it risks oversimplifying governance challenges into symbolic acts that prioritize spectacle over substance. The duality underscores the ambivalent nature of populist-local communication: it provides citizens with recognition, accessibility, and cultural validation, yet may weaken the institutional fabric of governance when not coupled with structural reforms, accountability mechanisms, and participatory policy frameworks.

Several recommendations emerge from these findings for strengthening the impact of populist communication on local governance in Indonesia. Leaders like KDM should integrate their symbolic and culturally resonant gestures with institutionalized mechanisms of policy implementation, ensuring that emotional proximity translates into tangible solutions to socio-economic problems. Communication strategies need diversification so they do not rely excessively on digital spectacle and charismatic authority but instead encourage genuine dialogue, citizen participation, and collaborative decision-making processes. Policymakers and civil society

actors should engage critically with populist communication, recognizing its capacity to foster grassroots legitimacy while remaining cautious of its potential to create dependency, polarization, or pseudo-solidarity. Future local leadership in Indonesia can draw lessons from KDM case by acknowledging the power of cultural symbolism and empathy while ensuring these qualities are embedded within long-term governance reforms that prioritize inclusivity, transparency, and institutional resilience. Only through such integration can populist-local communication evolve from being a temporary strategy of symbolic closeness into a sustainable foundation for democratic leadership that is both culturally authentic and structurally effective.

5. Acknowledgements

Thank you to all respondents and parties who have assisted in data collection. Without the help and support of all parties, this research could not have been completed successfully.

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