

Transformational Digital Leadership And Public Legitimacy: Purwakarta Community Perceptions Of Dedi Mulyadi

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Abstrak

Studi ini mengkaji pola kepemimpinan digital transformasional Dedi Mulyadi serta konstruksi persepsi masyarakat Purwakarta terhadap fenomena kepemimpinan yang berpusat pada sosok individu (*person-centered leadership*) di media sosial. Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah deskriptif kualitatif dengan metode netnografi, yang didukung oleh wawancara mendalam terhadap tiga (3) informan. Secara metodologis, studi ini mengoperasionalkan empat tahapan inti dari kerangka kerja netnografi Kozinets yaitu introspeksi, pemetaan ekosistem digital, pengarsipan interaksi, dan interpretasi berbasis teori untuk menghubungkan data empiris dengan tujuan penelitian secara cermat. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa legitimasi Dedi Mulyadi terjaga melalui konten humanis yang konsisten dan interaksi langsung di berbagai platform digital dengan total pengikut lebih dari 34 juta, yang secara efektif memperluas pengaruh kepemimpinannya melampaui batasan jabatan formal. Dari sisi data kuantitatif, analisis sentimen lintas platform mengungkapkan dominasi sentimen positif sebesar sekitar 59%, yang sangat kontras dengan 22% sentimen kritis yang berfokus pada kekhawatiran akan paparan digital yang berlebihan dan konten yang cenderung dangkal. Selain itu, publik melihat adanya kontras antara aktivitas personal pemimpin yang cepat di media sosial dengan mekanisme birokrasi formal; hal ini berpotensi menciptakan ketergantungan pada sosok pemimpin dan melemahkan kepercayaan terhadap institusi. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan model kepemimpinan sektor publik yang adaptif di era digital. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keberhasilan kepemimpinan digital transformasional dalam membangun citra publik dan legitimasi perlu diimbangi dengan penguatan kapasitas birokrasi formal, agar kepercayaan publik tidak hanya bertumpu pada sosok pemimpin, tetapi juga pada keberlanjutan sistem pemerintahan.

Kata Kunci: Kepemimpinan Transformasional Digital; Legitimasi Publik; Kepemimpinan yang Berpusat pada Individu.

Abstract

This study examines Dedi Mulyadi transformational digital leadership patterns and the construction of Purwakarta society's perceptions of the phenomenon of person centered leadership based on social media. The approach use a qualitative descriptive with netnography methods supported by indepth interviews with three (3) informants. Methodologically, this study operationalizes four (4) core stages of Kozinets netnography framework introspection, digital ecosystem mapping, interaction archiving, and theory based interpretation to rigorously link empirical data with the research objectives. The result is Dedi Mulyadi legitimacy is maintained through consistent humanistic content and direct engagement across digital platforms with a total of more than 34 million followers, effectively extending leadership influence beyond formal office boundaries. In terms of quantitative data, at the cross platform sentiment analysis reveals a dominance of positive sentiment at approximately 59% standing in stark contrast to the 22% of critical sentiment centered on concerns regarding excessive digital exposure and rather superficial content. Then the public perceives a contrast between the leaders rapid personal movements on social media and formal bureaucratic mechanisms, which have the potential to create figure dependency and weaken institutional trust. This research contributes to the development of an adaptive public sector leadership model in the digital era. Research shows that the success of transformational digital leadership in building public image and legitimacy needs to be balance with strengthen the capacity of the formal bureaucracy so that public trust does not only rest on the figure of the leader, but also on the sustainability of the government system.

Keyword: Digital Transformational Leadership; Public Legitimacy; Person Centered Leadership.

1. Introduction

In this era (Industry 4.0) and also the transition to Society 5.0, leadership models in the public sector are required to transform from a bureaucratic mechanistic approach to responsive, transparent, and inclusive digital leadership. A leaders effectiveness is no longer solely measured by administrative capabilities, but also by their ability to manage public trust and build social cohesion in the digital space (Dolata & Schrape 2016). This context, social media has become an instrument of public accountability, opening up two (2) way communication between regional leaders and their citizens. However, this also presents a unique challenge, its how to balance the speed of social media responses with careful verification and systemic bureaucratic coordination (Nasrullah, 2015). Empirical evidence regarding digital engagement in West Java indicates that public interaction with local government officials by social media increase by more than 300% between 2020 and 2025, signaling a fundamental structural shift toward a digital first method/approach to citizen participation (Litbang Kompas, 2025). Purwakarta Regency, West Java, is an interesting phenomenon in Indonesia regional leadership landscape. Information from Golan Nusantara (2025), Dedi Mulyadi who served as Deputy Regent (2003–2008) and Regent of Purwakarta for two (2) terms (2008 – 2018), was elected Governor of West Java in February 2025, securing 62% of the vote, or approximately 14.13 million voters. This resounding electoral victory across various demographic groups provides tangible empirical evidence of his extensive digital reach and enduring public influence. He's considere successful in establishing a leadership identity that combines local wisdom with a humanistic digital approach, thus ensuring his public legitimacy remains firmly rooted even after his tenure in Purwakarta ended. This phenomenon is relevant to study using Bass's (1985) theory of Transformational Leadership. The Individualized Consideration dimension is reflect in his habit of directly responding to public complaint on social media, while Idealized Influence is evident in how he became a symbol of collective identity that transcends the boundaries of formal office. This type of figure centric leadership have the potential to generate extremely high public expectations, while simultaneously highlighting the gap between a leader personal response speed and often slow bureaucratic procedure. This research aims to explore in depth how the people of Purwakarta interpret these dynamics.

2. Literature Review

Bass's (1985) transformational leadership inspires followers through four main pillars. In the digital era of the public sector, this concept has evolved into digital leadership, Tulengen *et al.* (2022) explain that there is a combination of culture and competencies to digitalize the work environment. This study directly serves as a foundation for our research to uncover how organizational culture and digital skills interact in modernizing public administration leadership. Salam (2023) explain that the implementation in digital governance has been shown to significantly increase service effectiveness and public trust. Empirical findings from Salam provide context on how rapid digital responsiveness improve citizen participation in municipal governance. On the other hand, Lipset (1960) explain that public legitimacy is the collective recognition of a leader's authority beyond their formal position. The government's use of social media for transparency can encourage public participation in e-government (Prana & Sunarto, 2025). The analysis by Prana and Sunarto strengthens the conceptual link between the digital open door policy with increased citizen trust. Surahman (2018) explain that The activities of public figures on social media conceptualize them as virtual opinion leaders with high credibility and the ability to massively influence public opinion. However, the phenomenon of person centered leadership in the digital ecosystem has a duality. It's effective in building emotional closeness, but risks weakening institutional trust without system strengthening (Kurniawan & Yuliana, 2023). This theoretical perspective provides a core framework for analyzing whether digital personal branding strengthens or potentially weakens formal institutions. From the perspective of bureaucratic pathology by Firdausy (2019), public dependence on the direct intervention of leader figures indicates the dysfunction of an unresponsive formal bureaucracy. Collectively, the

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synthesis of these various strands of literature presents a multidimensional framework for evaluating digital transformation leadership and bureaucratic institutional integrity.

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach using the Netnography method, chosen because it aims to describe social phenomena in depth based on the meanings constructed by the research subjects (Sugiyono, 2020). Kozinets (2023) explain that the Netnography is an adaptation of ethnographic methodology to the context of online communities, developed by Kozinets in the late 1990s, defined as a naturalistic research technique that utilizes public information in online forums through ethnographic procedures, specifically participant observation (Kozinets, 2010). This study operationalizes four (4) of Kozinets (2015) twelve (12) stages of netnography, is introspection, investigation and mapping of the digital ecosystem, data collection of public interaction, and theory based interpretation. A mixed netnography model was use, combining digital ecosystem observation and in depth interviews (Kozinets, 2022). This was chosen because the object of study is digital, allows observation without researcher interference, and is relevant to studies of public communication and leader image management (Kozinets, 2023). To ensure methodological rigor, Kozinets four (4) stage framework was operationalized to address the following specific research questions:

- 1) Stage 1 (Introspection & Research Design)
Establishing research objectives and outlining Research Question 1 (RQ1: digital communication patterns & public perception) and Research Question 2 (RQ2: individual-centric leadership, bureaucratic contrasts, and institutional trust).
- 2) Stage 2 (Ecosystem Mapping)
Systematically mapping Dedi Mulyadis digital presence across five major platforms (YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, X/Twitter).
- 3) Stage 3 (Data Collection & Archiving)
Archiving over 4,200 video posts, public comments, and interaction statistics from February 2025 to February 2026, supplemented by semi-structured interviews with three purposively selected informants.
- 4) Stage 4 (Theory Based Interpretation)
Analyzing qualitative and digital data through Liquefaction and thematic categorization based on Bass (1985) dimensions of transformational leadership and the theory of bureaucratic pathology.

In depth interviews were conducted with three informants selected using purposive sampling based on varying levels of exposure to Dedi Mulyadi social media contents (Sugiyono, 2020). Data were sourced from KDM's official social media activities (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube), interview results, and external research reports, using digital interaction archiving techniques and response pattern observations [8]. Analysis was conducted through condensation, Bass dimension based categorization, and drawing conclusions referring to Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2014), with validity maintained through source triangulation.

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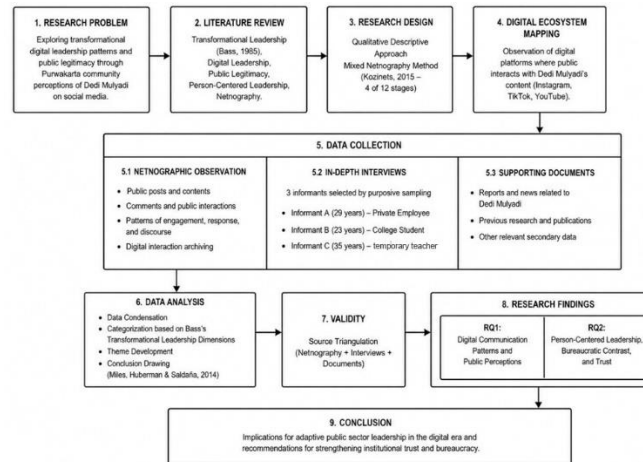


Figure 1. Research Process Model

Table 1. Research Informant

No	Informant & Age	Platform & Intensity
1	A-29 Th Private Employee	Instagram @dedimulyadi71 Daily active; routinely monitors the comment section when topics are trending/crowded
2	B-23 Th Collage Student	Instagram & TikTok (via FYP, does not follow) Nonroutine; content appears organically when there are viral issues on the timeline
3	C-35 Th Temporary Teacher	Instagram, TikTok & YouTube (follow all acc) Intensive; has been following since the era of the Regent of Purwakarta (highest)

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

Based on Kompas Research and Development data (2025), Dedi Mulyadi have a total followers across all platforms reached approximately 34.6 million accounts. Complete data per platform is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Dedi Mulyadi's Social Media Ecosystem (2025)

Platform	Account Name	Followers (2025)	All Content	Sentiment
YouTube	@KangDediMulyadi	8,1 million	4.269 video	-
TikTok	@dedimulyadiofficial	9,1 million	Daily	59%
Instagram	@dedimulyadi71	5,2 million		-
Facebook	Dedi Mulyadi (Official)	12 million		-
X/Twitter	@dedimulyadi71	185.114	Continues	-
Total	5 platform	34,6 million	-	59%

Consistency in content production is key, Golan Nusantara (2025) Inform that the YouTube channel Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel has uploaded more than 4,269 videos with an average of 1–2 uploads per day, supported by seven videographers in two rotating teams (Tempo.co 2025), and has been proven to reduce the West Java Provincial Government's advertising budget from IDR 50 billion to IDR 3 billion per year (Kompas id, 2025).

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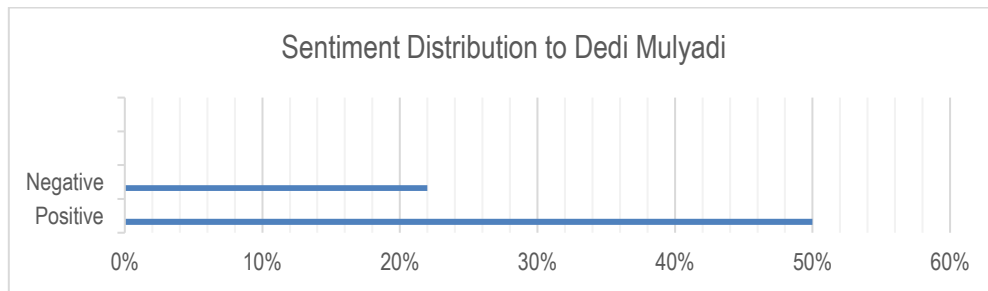


Figure 2. Distribution of Netizens Sentiment towards Dedi Mulyadi

Findings from netnographic analysis and in depth interviews identified three mutually supportive digital communication patterns in maintaining Kang dedi Mulyadi's public legitimacy after his tenure as Regent of Purwakarta.

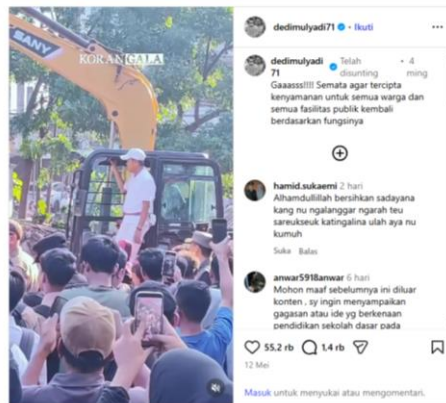


Figure 3. Documentation of Dedi Mulyadi's Field Activities

All informants identified the same phenomenon. The public tends to file complaints through KDM social media because this channel is perceived as faster and more effective than formal bureaucratic mechanisms. Informant B provided a sharp structural analysis its effectiveness is not solely due to the speed of personal response, but rather to the amplification effect of virality. When a problem gains the attention of public figures, relevant agencies are compelled to act more quickly due to social pressure.



Figure 4. Examples of Dedi Mulyadi's Social Media Content

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Table 3. Categorization of Interview & Netnography Findings

Main Theme	Bass Dimension (1985)	Key Findings, Interview & Netnography
Humanistic Branding	<i>Idealized Influence</i>	All three informants recognized the 'close to the people' image as having been established since the Regent era. Informant A: "the content now feels like a natural extension of that."
Selective Response Based on Impact	<i>Individualized Consideration</i>	Responses prioritized high impact issues (case of a student insulting a teacher at SMAN 1 Purwakarta, Apr 2026). Informant A: "Pak Dedi usually responds to what he considers a priority."
Content as Social Listening	<i>Inspirational Motivation</i>	Viral citizen content utilized as a field monitoring channel. KDM: "Through virality, I can understand what is happening in society" (Kompas, Nov 2025).
Person Centered vs. Bureaucracy	<i>(Systemic Gap)</i>	Viral amplification effect more significant than personal response. Informant B: "when an issue goes viral, it gets resolved faster." Inf. C: "trust in the figure > trust in the system."
Risk of Figure Dependency	<i>(Critical Implication)</i>	All informants identified the risk of a <i>boomerang effect</i> . Informant A: "it's easy to build a name, but easy to bring it down too one wrong step, and the impact is real."

4.2 Discussion

Deep Intelligence Research (DIR) in its "2026 Provincial Government Annual Report" report placed KDM as the governor who attracted the most public attention with a total of 4.573.206 cross platform public conversations during February 2025 until February 2026 (Suara Papua, 2026). This achievement reflects how digital leadership as a combination of digital competence and culture is able to effectively digitize the leadership ecosystem as explained by Tulengen *et al*, (2022), while also proving that public legitimacy does not always depend on formal positions, but can be built and maintained through a consistent digital presence (Lipset, 1960). All three informants consistently identified "closeness to the people" as the most ingrained branding since his leadership in Purwakarta. Informant A stated, "The initial branding from when he became leader of Purwakarta was already very ingrained, so see his current content feels like a complement." This pattern aligns with the Idealized Influence dimension of Bass's (1985) transformational leadership theory, where leaders who become symbols of collective identity are able to maintain their influence beyond formal office boundaries. Besides, this consistency makes KDM a virtual opinion leader a highly credible figure capable of massively influencing public opinion in the digital space (Surahman, 2018).

Interactivity and priority based responses. Netnographic observations show a selective response pattern based on social impact confirmed in the viral case on April 2026 of students (Tribun Jabar, 2026) insulting teachers at SMAN 1 Purwakarta, which was responded to directly by the KDM with suggestions for constructive sanctions. Informant A confirmed "Mr. Dedi usually responds to what might be his priority." This pattern reflects Bass's (1985) Individualized Consideration dimension, while also proving that leaders who actively utilize social media for transparency and public response have been shown to encourage public participation and strengthen trust in government administration (Prana & Sunarto, 2025). Content as a social listening mechanism. Dedi Mulyadi utilizes the virality of citizen content as a field monitoring channel "So with that virality, I can understand whats happening in the community" (Kompas, 2025). This paradigm reverses the direction of communication from top down to two (2) way social listening, in line with research in Tangerang City (Salam, 2023) that demonstrated that digital leadership within a digital governance framework significantly improves the effectiveness of public services. Informant C (35 years old, honorary teacher) assessed that KDM concern was a genuine characteristic, but identified the risk of overexposure. This was confirmed by the data: 59% positiv sentiment was accompanied by 22% negative

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sentiment, some of which stemmed from criticism of "too much content" (Litbang Kompas, 2025). Informant C offered a deeper, this condition reveals a systemic paradox where trust in figures is far higher than trust in the bureaucratic system. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of person centered leadership in the digital ecosystem, which is effective in building emotional closeness, but has the potential to weaken institutional trust if not accompanied by parallel system strengthening (Kurniawan & Yuliana, 2023). From a bureaucratic pathology perspective (Firdausy, 2019), the public's dependence on the intervention of leadership figures is a clear indicator of the dysfunction of a formal bureaucracy that is not fully responsive to public needs. Crucially, this empirical gap highlights deep seated institutional vulnerabilities, particularly the risk of over dependence on specific individuals. When citizens view personal social media interventions as the sole effective mechanism for resolving administrative grievances, a phenomenon of "Administrative skipping" occurs. Citizens miss standard public service protocols and local government agencies in favor of directly tagging executive figures. While this meets immediate public expectations and exemplifies "Individualized Consideration" (Bass, 1985), it can inadvertently and indirectly erode public trust in formal civil service structures. In the long run, should leadership change or political terms end, the administrative apparatus risks facing an institutional void—unprepared for responsive digital engagement and suffering a loss of citizen confidence (Firdausy, 2019; Kurniawan & Yuliana, 2023). Therefore, transformational digital leadership should not supplant formal institutional procedures; rather, it should serve as a temporary bridge to institutionalize agile digital responses within a permanent public governance framework. All of informants also agreed on the long term risks. Informant A warned of the potential boomerang effect, "Its easy to raise a name, but its also easy to lower it, one wrong move. the consequences are devastating." Informant C added the risk that society would focus more on the virality of content than the substance of problem solving an irony that could actually erode the essence of public accountability that was originally intended to be built through digital platforms (Nasrullah, 2015).

5. Conclusion

This research confirms that Dedi Mulyadis transformational digital leadership successfully maintained the public legitimacy of the Purwakarta community through mechanisms that transcend formal office. Three (3) supporting factors are consistent humanistic branding (Idealized Influence), a selective response pattern based on impact (Individualized Consideration), and viral content as a two (2) way social listening platform. These findings are supported by empirical data, 34.6 million cross platform followers, 59% positive sentiment, and a position as the most viral governor in Indonesia according to the 2026 DIR (Litbang Kompas, 2025). As well, this research identifies a critical structural tension, among person centered leadership has the potential to create figure dependency that undermines institutional trust. Strengthening the capacity of the formal bureaucracy must go hand in hand, not separately, with the leaders digital communication strategy. Legitimacy that relies purely on figures is fragile, that rooted in the system and support by strong figures is far more robust and sustainable. Practical Implications for Public Sector Leadership is like Institutionalizing Social Listening, Integrating digital complaint protocols (like SOP) into municipal e-government systems ensures citizen feedback drives systemic institutional responses rather than isolated executive actions. The directions for the future research is firstly, future research should employ quantitative sentiment modeling and multi site comparative analysis to compare leaders who utilize individual centric digital strategies with those relying on institution centric e-governance. Second, a longitudinal design is recommended to track the dynamics of citizen trust following a change in executive leadership, in order to evaluate whether trust in the institution recovers or remains attached to the outgoing leader.

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