

Personal Branding and the Construction of a Positive Public Image through YouTube: A Content Analysis and Netnographic Study of Audience Comments on the Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has transformed how public figures construct personal branding and shape public image through direct interaction with audiences. YouTube, in particular, enables not only the dissemination of audiovisual content but also the formation of interactive digital communities through comment features. This study examines how personal branding contributes to the construction of a positive public image through YouTube by analyzing audience comments on the Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel. Employing a qualitative research design, the study integrates content analysis and netnography to explore sentiment orientation, dominant themes, and community dynamics within the comment section. A total of 350 audience comments were purposively selected from a highly engaged video and analyzed inductively. The findings reveal an overwhelming dominance of positive sentiment (98%), expressed through themes of support, loyalty, appreciation of concrete social actions, hope, and moral endorsement. Negative comments appear only marginally and are largely framed as constructive criticism, indicating a participatory form of evaluation rather than oppositional discourse. The results demonstrate that audience comments function as a mechanism of collective endorsement and legitimacy, reinforcing the public image projected through personal branding practices. This study concludes that personal branding on YouTube operates as a relational and community-driven process, in which audiences actively participate in the co-construction, validation, and sustainability of a positive public image in the digital era.

Keywords: Content Analysis, Digital Community, Netnography, Personal Branding, Youtube

INTRODUCTION

Personal branding in digital environments has shifted from a narrow understanding of “self-promotion” toward a strategic and relational process in which public figures continuously negotiate identity, credibility, and legitimacy through platform-mediated interaction (Sidharta et al., 2021; Osei, 2024; Liao & Chen, 2024; Raaper, 2024). Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that personal branding is no longer a static representation of the self, but an ongoing communicative practice shaped by visibility, audience feedback, and platform norms. In digital spaces,

identity is performed repeatedly across time, formats, and interactions, making personal branding a dynamic process of adjustment and interpretation rather than a one-off act of image construction.

In contemporary political communication, authenticity occupies a central position within this process. Authenticity is increasingly treated as a persuasive asset that can reduce public skepticism and strengthen affective identification, especially when political figures are perceived as consistent, relatable, and morally “real” in their mediated performances (Luebke, 2021; McTernan, 2024; Fischer et al., 2022). Audiences tend to reward figures who appear to speak plainly, acknowledge vulnerability, and align personal narratives with everyday experiences. However, authenticity is not a fixed attribute that political actors can simply declare or display. Instead, it emerges through interaction and interpretation, where audiences actively evaluate whether a performance aligns with their expectations of sincerity and character.

Crucially, authenticity is co-produced through audience interpretation and negotiated in comment spaces where endorsement, critique, humor, and suspicion compete to define the public image that ultimately “sticks” (Chae et al., 2024; Anderson et al., 2025; Ho, 2023). Comment sections become arenas where viewers articulate judgments about intent, morality, and credibility. Positive comments may frame a figure as honest or courageous, while critical or ironic comments may question motives or expose perceived inconsistencies. Through these discursive struggles, personal branding is stabilized, challenged, or reconfigured over time.

YouTube is particularly important for personal branding because it combines audiovisual storytelling with a persistent archive of interaction, including likes, subscriptions, and extensive comment threads, which can stabilize or destabilize public image across repeated encounters (Penttinen, 2022; Anderson et al., 2025; Su et al., 2022). Unlike ephemeral platforms, YouTube content remains accessible and searchable, allowing audiences to revisit past statements and performances. This archival quality increases both the durability and vulnerability of personal brands, as earlier content can be reinterpreted in light of new events or controversies.

Studies of political influencers and political content on YouTube show that creators increasingly adopt micro-celebrity strategies, such as community building, intimacy cues, and cross-platform circulation, to construct recognizable brand identities that audiences can follow, defend, or contest (Fischer et al., 2022; Penttinen, 2022; Harff, 2024). These strategies blur the boundaries between political leadership and influencer culture, positioning political figures as familiar, accessible, and continuously present in audiences’ daily media routines. Personal branding thus becomes embedded in practices of regular posting, direct address, and symbolic alignment with audience values.

At the same time, platform logics play a decisive role in shaping which voices gain prominence and which interpretations become visible. Ranking systems, recommendation algorithms, and engagement metrics amplify certain content and comments, meaning that public image is shaped by both communicative strategy and infrastructural governance (Cakmak, 2025; “Public participation in algorithmic governance on YouTube,” 2024; “YouTube comment ranking and public norms,” 2025). As a result, the visibility of supportive or critical discourse is not neutral, but mediated by algorithmic processes that privilege popularity, controversy, or engagement intensity.

This condition creates a methodological and theoretical need to examine not only what a public figure posts, but also how audience discourse and platform affordances jointly construct reputational meaning (Ho, 2023; Chae et al., 2024; “Public participation in algorithmic governance on YouTube,” 2024). Focusing exclusively on content production risks overlooking how meaning is reshaped through

interaction, amplification, and selective visibility. Personal branding must therefore be understood as an outcome of communicative ecosystems rather than individual intent alone.

Audience comments represent a crucial site for analyzing image construction because they are simultaneously evaluative, interpretive, and mobilizational (Chae et al., 2024; Venus, 2024; Park & Park, 2025). Comments express praise or blame, interpret motivations and character, and often call on others to support or reject a public figure. This combination makes comment sections a rich empirical resource for identifying dominant narrative frames, moral judgments, and legitimacy claims attached to a personal brand. Through repetition and endorsement, certain interpretations gain traction and become normalized within the community.

Comment cultures on YouTube can also be polarized and shaped by cross-cutting exposure, where disagreement is expressed through rhetorical conflict, sarcasm, and competing claims of credibility (Chae et al., 2024; Venus, 2024; “YouTube comment ranking and public norms,” 2025). These interactions directly affect how a “positive public image” is affirmed or contested. Supporters may actively defend a figure against criticism, while opponents attempt to undermine credibility by highlighting contradictions or questioning authenticity. Such dynamics illustrate that public image is continuously negotiated rather than passively received.

Beyond sentiment orientation, comment threads reveal parasocial closeness, or viewers’ perceived intimacy with the creator. Parasocial relationships have been repeatedly linked to stronger engagement, greater tolerance for ambiguity, and more resilient support during moments of controversy (Balaban et al., 2022; Su et al., 2022; Lotun et al., 2022). Viewers who feel personally connected to a creator are more likely to interpret controversial actions charitably and to defend the figure against criticism. Because parasocial processes depend heavily on perceived authenticity and self-disclosure, analyzing comment responses can clarify which communicative cues audiences interpret as evidence of character rather than mere performance.

Such cues may include humility, humor, religiosity, firmness, empathy, or a style of “straight talk” that resonates with audience expectations of honesty (Balaban et al., 2022; Luebke, 2021; McTernan, 2024). Comment analysis allows researchers to identify which of these cues are repeatedly highlighted by audiences as markers of trustworthiness. In this way, comments function as a collective interpretive lens through which authenticity claims are validated or rejected.

Methodologically, combining content analysis with netnography is particularly well suited for studying YouTube-based personal branding. Content analysis enables systematic coding of recurring brand themes, identity frames, and communicative strategies, while netnography provides thick interpretation of community meanings, norms, and identity work as they unfold in naturally occurring interaction (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024; Osei, 2024; Ho, 2023). This combination allows researchers to bridge structural patterns and lived experience within digital publics.

Contemporary netnography emphasizes ethical sensitivity, contextual immersion, and attention to how technoculture and platform governance shape meaning-making (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024; “Public participation in algorithmic governance on YouTube,” 2024; “YouTube comment ranking and public norms,” 2025). This emphasis is essential when studying comment communities that function as semi-public arenas of judgment, where visibility, anonymity, and algorithmic ranking influence participation. Netnography thus enables a nuanced understanding of how legitimacy and credibility are collectively produced under platform conditions. In applied communication research, qualitative case-based inquiry further highlights the importance of sensemaking and leadership communication in ambiguous public

contexts. Such approaches reinforce the view that image is produced through ongoing interpretation and interaction rather than one-way messaging (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024; Venus, 2024). Political figures must continuously respond to evolving interpretations, making adaptability and communicative responsiveness central to personal branding success.

Therefore, a study of the Kang Dedi Mulyadi YouTube channel that integrates content analysis with netnography can explain how a “positive public image” is continuously constructed, contested, and stabilized within platform-mediated public discourse (Penttinen, 2022; Fischer et al., 2022; Chae et al., 2024). Content analysis can map branding strategies and recurring identity frames, while netnography can interpret audience culture, moral evaluation, and community dynamics embedded in comment interactions.

Finally, recent advances in computational and hybrid approaches to YouTube comment analysis, ranging from sentiment classification to model comparison techniques, support rigorous triangulation between interpretive findings and measurable patterns of public response (Park & Park, 2025; Shivsharan et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). Such triangulation is increasingly important because algorithmic systems and engagement incentives can distort visibility, while communities develop norms that reward certain reactions and suppress others (Cakmak, 2025; “Public participation in algorithmic governance on YouTube,” 2024; “YouTube comment ranking and public norms,” 2025). By positioning YouTube comments as both cultural text and public evaluation record, this research contributes to international debates on authenticity, influencer-style political communication, and the co-construction of legitimacy in digital publics (Luebke, 2021; McTernan, 2024; Fischer et al., 2022).

RESEARCH METHODS

A. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how personal branding contributes to the construction of a positive public image through YouTube, with a specific focus on audience comments as sites of meaning-making and evaluation. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of interpretations, narratives, and social interactions that emerge organically within digital environments, rather than limiting analysis to numerical patterns of engagement (Osei, 2024). In the context of digital political communication, qualitative inquiry allows researchers to capture how public image is continuously negotiated through discourse, symbolism, and community interaction, which are central to personal branding processes on social media platforms (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024).

To achieve this objective, the study integrates qualitative content analysis and netnography as complementary methodological strategies. Content analysis is employed to systematically identify recurring themes, symbolic messages, and evaluative frames related to personal branding and public image, while netnography is used to interpret the cultural dynamics, norms, and collective identity formation within the YouTube comment community (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). This combined approach allows the research to balance analytical structure with contextual depth, ensuring that both message patterns and community meanings are adequately captured.

B. Data Source and Sampling Technique

The primary data source of this study consists of audience comments posted on the YouTube platform, specifically on the video “Kaki Lima Dibongkar Pedagang Bahagia Sampah Menumpuk di Pasteur Pun Sirna” published on the Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel. YouTube was selected because it functions not only

as a content distribution platform but also as an interactive public arena where audiences actively respond, evaluate, and negotiate the public image of content creators and political figures (Fischer et al., 2022). The comment section serves as a digital trace of public sentiment and collective interpretation, making it a suitable unit of analysis for studying image construction.

A total of 350 comments were selected as the research corpus. These comments were treated as qualitative textual data that reflect audience perceptions, emotional responses, moral judgments, and community engagement related to Dedi Mulyadi's personal branding efforts. The study employed purposive sampling, selecting comments that were substantively relevant to issues of personal branding, leadership image, social action, and public evaluation. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative digital research to ensure that the selected data meaningfully represent the phenomenon under investigation, rather than aiming for statistical generalization (Osei, 2024). Comments that were purely spam, irrelevant, duplicated, or unrelated to the content were excluded from the dataset.

The selected video was chosen based on its high engagement level, indicated by a substantial number of views, likes, and comments, which suggests active audience participation and a rich discursive environment. This strategy aligns with qualitative netnographic principles that emphasize the selection of information-rich cases where community interaction is most visible and analytically productive (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024).

C. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through passive digital observation, in which the researcher did not participate or intervene in the comment discussions. All comments were extracted using a crawling process supported by Google Colab to ensure accuracy, completeness, and traceability of the dataset. Passive observation is recommended in netnographic research to preserve the natural flow of interaction and to minimize researcher influence on community behavior (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). The collected comments were then cleaned and organized by removing duplicates, non-textual symbols that did not contribute meaning, and irrelevant entries. Each comment was documented with metadata such as posting time and username (anonymized during analysis) to maintain contextual integrity.

D. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted through inductive qualitative coding, beginning with open coding to identify initial patterns of sentiment and thematic emphasis. Comments were first classified according to sentiment orientation (positive or negative), followed by thematic categorization such as support and loyalty, appreciation of social action, hope and moral endorsement, and constructive criticism. This inductive process allowed categories to emerge from the data rather than being imposed a priori, ensuring analytical sensitivity to audience-generated meanings (Osei, 2024).

The thematic findings were then interpreted using Harold D. Lasswell's communication model to map the roles of communicator, message, channel, audience, and effect, while netnographic interpretation was applied to understand how collective identity, ritual expressions, and community solidarity were formed in the comment space. This dual analytical lens supports a holistic understanding of how personal branding operates simultaneously at the message level and the community level (Fischer et al., 2022).

RESULTS

This section presents and discusses the empirical findings derived from the qualitative analysis of 350 audience comments collected from the YouTube video "Kaki Lima Dibongkar – Pedagang Bahagia | Sampah Menumpuk di Pasteur Pun Sirna" published on the Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel. The analysis

focuses on three interconnected dimensions: (1) the distribution of audience sentiment, (2) dominant thematic patterns emerging from audience discourse, and (3) the role of digital community interaction in reinforcing personal branding and public image construction. These dimensions are analytically linked, as sentiment orientation provides an initial indication of audience evaluation, while thematic patterns and interaction dynamics explain how such evaluations are articulated, stabilized, and reproduced within the comment space.

The presentation of results follows a progressive analytical logic. It begins with a descriptive overview of sentiment distribution to establish the general evaluative tone of the audience, followed by a more interpretive discussion of recurring themes and discursive practices, and culminates in an integrative analysis that draws on communication theory and netnographic insights. Tables and figures are positioned immediately after the relevant analytical narrative to enhance clarity, transparency, and coherence between textual explanation and empirical evidence.

The first analytical step examined the overall sentiment orientation of audience comments to identify the dominant evaluative stance toward Dedi Mulyadi's personal branding as performed on YouTube. Sentiment classification revealed a highly asymmetrical distribution, as summarized in Table 1. Out of 350 analyzed comments, 343 were categorized as positive, representing 98% of the total dataset, while only 7 comments, or 2%, were classified as negative. No neutral category was identified, as most comments expressed clear evaluative positions rather than descriptive or ambiguous statements.

Table 1. Distribution of Audience Sentiment in YouTube Comments (n = 350)

Sentiment	Number of Comments	Percentage (%)
Positive	343	98
Negative	7	2
Total	350	100

Source: Processed YouTube comment data, 2025

As shown in Table 1, positive sentiment overwhelmingly dominates the comment section. This dominance suggests a strong alignment between audience perception and the public image projected through the channel. Positive comments frequently express approval, admiration, gratitude, and moral endorsement, indicating that viewers interpret the content not merely as informational but as reflective of desirable leadership qualities and personal integrity. The scarcity of negative sentiment further underscores the absence of a substantial counter-discourse that challenges or destabilizes the dominant positive framing of Dedi Mulyadi's persona.

Importantly, the limited presence of negative comments does not function as oppositional critique. Qualitative examination of these comments shows that they are largely framed as constructive feedback rather than hostile or delegitimizing attacks. Such comments may question specific actions, suggest alternative approaches, or raise minor concerns, but they do not reject the broader moral narrative or personal credibility associated with the figure. This indicates that negative sentiment, rather than undermining the personal brand, may coexist within a supportive discursive environment that tolerates limited critique without threatening overall legitimacy.

To visually emphasize this imbalance and support the analytical claim of sentiment dominance, the distribution of audience sentiment is illustrated in Figure 1. The figure clearly demonstrates the disproportionate concentration of positive comments compared to negative ones, reinforcing the

conclusion that the comment space is characterized by strong affective support. The visual representation also highlights that negative sentiment occupies a marginal position, both quantitatively and discursively, within the broader interactional landscape.

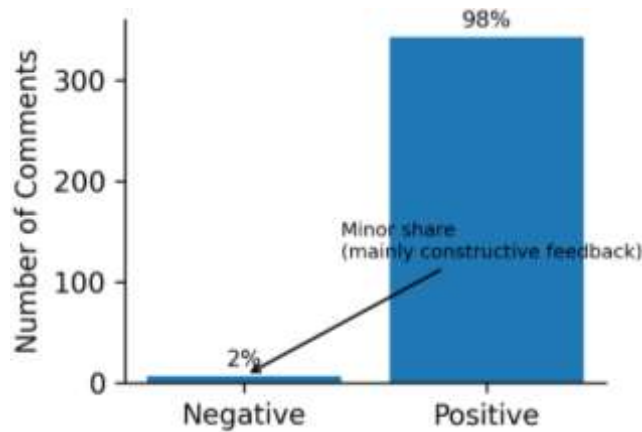


Figure 1. Distribution of Audience Sentiment in YouTube Comments (n = 350)

From an analytical standpoint, this sentiment distribution is significant because it reflects not only individual opinions but also collective dynamics within the digital community. High levels of positive sentiment suggest that the comment section functions as an affirming environment in which supportive interpretations are normalized and amplified.

The content depicting the removal of street vendors framed as beneficial and morally justified appears to align with viewers’ interpretations of leadership, social responsibility, and practical problem-solving. This alignment contributes to the stabilization of a “positive public image” that is not easily disrupted by isolated dissenting voices.

In sum, the sentiment analysis establishes a foundational understanding of audience evaluation that informs subsequent thematic and interactional analysis. The dominance of positive sentiment, combined with the marginal and constructive nature of negative feedback, suggests that the YouTube comment space operates as a supportive digital arena that reinforces Dedi Mulyadi’s personal branding. This empirical pattern provides a critical entry point for examining how thematic narratives and community interactions further consolidate legitimacy and public image in platform-mediated political communication.

Positive sentiment overwhelmingly dominates (98%), while negative comments remain marginal (2%) and are largely expressed as constructive feedback. Placement note: Figure 1 is positioned immediately after Table 1 to reinforce the quantitative imbalance described in the text and to visually foreground the dominance of positive sentiment discussed in subsequent sections. The figure strengthens the argument that audience comments function as a mechanism of public endorsement, rather than as a space of polarized conflict. Beyond sentiment polarity, inductive qualitative coding identified four dominant thematic categories that structure audience discourse and shape the construction of a positive public image. These themes are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Dominant Themes Identified in Audience Comments

Theme	Description
Support and Loyalty	Expressions of admiration, collective identification, and allegiance
Appreciation of Social Action	Recognition of concrete actions benefiting the public

Hope and Moral Endorsement	Prayers, wishes, and moral validation of leadership
Constructive Criticism	Polite feedback and issue-specific suggestions

Source: Inductive thematic analysis, 2025

The most salient theme is support and loyalty, reflected in repeated expressions of emotional attachment and collective identity. Many comments explicitly position the audience as part of a shared community of supporters, using inclusive language and symbolic calls for unity. This pattern indicates that personal branding on the Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel extends beyond individual popularity toward the formation of a community-based public identity.

Such expressions contribute to the normalization of loyalty within the digital space, reinforcing the leader–follower relationship through public affirmation. The second dominant theme centers on appreciation of visible social actions, particularly those addressing street vendors, public order, and environmental issues. Audiences consistently highlight the importance of “real action” and tangible outcomes, framing Dedi Mulyadi as a leader who prioritizes practice over rhetoric.

This thematic pattern strengthens public image construction by directly linking personal branding to observable and verifiable actions, enhancing credibility and trust. A significant portion of comments expresses hope and moral endorsement, often articulated through religious or ethical language. These comments position Dedi Mulyadi as not merely a political actor but as a moral figure whose leadership is associated with collective well-being and future aspirations.

Such moral narratives play a crucial role in stabilizing public image by embedding it within shared value systems that transcend immediate political performance. Although numerically limited, constructive criticism constitutes an important thematic category. These comments typically address specific policy concerns while maintaining a respectful tone and continued support.

Rather than undermining the public image, constructive criticism enhances credibility by portraying the channel as an open arena for participatory evaluation. This finding supports the argument that a positive public image does not require the absence of critique, but rather the ability to integrate critique into a supportive communicative environment.

Discussion

The combined findings demonstrate that personal branding on YouTube operates as a relational and discursive process, continuously shaped by interaction between content creator and audience. The dominance of positive sentiment, supported by Figure 1 and Table 1, confirms that the Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel effectively aligns content, symbolism, and interaction to construct a favorable public image.

The thematic analysis further reveals that audience comments function as a collective meaning-making mechanism, where support, appreciation, hope, and critique coexist within a broadly affirmative discourse. From a communication perspective, this aligns with Lasswell’s model, particularly the effect dimension, where communication outcomes are visible in audience endorsement and emotional investment.

From a netnographic perspective, the comment section emerges as a digital community space characterized by shared identity, ritualized expressions of support, and participatory feedback. Rather than being passive consumers, audiences actively co-produce the public image through repeated affirmations and moral framing. Overall, the strategic integration of visible action, symbolic communication, and open interaction enables personal branding to function as a sustainable mechanism for public image construction in digital environments. The structured placement of tables and figures within this section

reinforces analytical clarity and strengthens the coherence between empirical evidence and theoretical interpretation.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that personal branding conducted through YouTube plays a significant role in the construction of a positive public image by functioning as a relational and participatory communication process. Based on the qualitative analysis of 350 audience comments on the Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel, the findings reveal an overwhelming dominance of positive sentiment (98%), accompanied by recurring themes of support, loyalty, appreciation for social action, and moral endorsement. These patterns indicate that audience responses are not limited to passive consumption of content, but actively contribute to the validation and reinforcement of the public image projected through the channel. The visibility of concrete social actions, combined with consistent symbolic communication, enables personal branding to be perceived as authentic and credible in the eyes of the audience.

Furthermore, the integration of content analysis and netnography highlights the importance of the digital community in shaping and sustaining public image. Audience comments function as a space of collective meaning-making, where shared identity, emotional attachment, and ritualized expressions of support are continuously produced. Although negative sentiment appears only marginally, its presence in the form of constructive criticism underscores the participatory nature of the communication environment. Rather than undermining the public image, such feedback contributes to its legitimacy by portraying the channel as an open and dialogic arena. This finding confirms that a positive public image in digital contexts does not depend on the absence of critique, but on the ability to accommodate critique within a broadly supportive discourse.

In conclusion, personal branding on YouTube should be understood not merely as a strategy of self-presentation, but as an ongoing interactional process involving audiences as co-creators of meaning and reputation. The Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel illustrates how digital platforms can simultaneously serve as tools for documenting real-world actions, fostering community engagement, and facilitating participatory evaluation of leadership. By positioning audience interaction as a central component of image construction, this study contributes to the broader literature on digital communication and political personal branding, offering empirical evidence that public image in the era of social media is collectively constructed, negotiated, and sustained through everyday digital interaction.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to thank Dr. Veranus Sidharta who has provided a lot of help in completing the writing of this journal article and all informants who have provided information and data in this research.

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