

CONSTRUCTING POLITICAL IDENTITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA: ACHMAD AFZAN ARSLAN DJUNAID'S INSTAGRAM PERSONAL BRANDING STRATEGY

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the personal branding strategy of Achmad Afzan Arslan Djunaid through Instagram during his tenure as Mayor of Pekalongan. In the digital era, social media has become a crucial instrument for public officials to build image, credibility, and public trust. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach using content analysis of posts on the official Instagram account of the Mayor of Pekalongan. The findings reveal that the communication strategy implemented through visual elements, narratives, and public interaction successfully constructs a leadership image that is humanistic, religious, and participatory. A two-way communication approach, supported by collaborative narratives, proves effective in fostering emotional closeness with the community. Furthermore, the use of local cultural symbols, such as batik and religious activities, strengthens the regional identity of Pekalongan. This study concludes that social media functions not only as a tool for image-building but also as a medium for transparency and public participation. Consistent and authentic personal branding contributes to enhancing public trust and serves as a model for ethical digital political communication practices at the local government level.

Keywords: Personal Branding, Instagram, Branding Strategy, Mayor of Pekalongan.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization and rapid digitalization, social media has become a primary medium for public communication and self-image construction for individuals, institutions, and political leaders. Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter (X), and Facebook have evolved into strategic spaces for building personal narratives, managing reputation, and strengthening engagement with the public (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). Local leaders, including mayors, are no longer solely expected to perform administrative and bureaucratic functions but are also required to cultivate a positive, inspirational, and socially relevant personal image, particularly among younger generations who dominate social media usage (Effendy, 2021).

This context is highly relevant to Achmad Afzan Arslan Djunaid, widely known as “Mas Aaf,” who serves as the Mayor of Pekalongan. As a young leader with a background in economics and organizational experience, he actively utilizes Instagram as a primary channel to establish a more open, participatory, and modern form of political communication. Through his official Instagram account, he not only disseminates governmental activities but also presents a humanistic and relatable personal side, demonstrating his commitment to developing Pekalongan as a creative, religious, and globally competitive city. Personal branding for local government leaders has evolved beyond mere self-promotion into an integral component of transparent and accountable governance (Hearn, 2020). Social media enables public leaders to construct a digital identity that shapes public perceptions of their leadership style, integrity, and competence. Within the framework of political communication, social media facilitates two-way symmetrical

communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), allowing direct interaction between leaders and citizens without reliance on conventional media intermediaries.

Instagram, as a visually oriented platform, offers a unique narrative power through images, videos, and stories. These elements contribute significantly to shaping public perception of a leader's values, character, and vision. By combining visual aesthetics with storytelling, Instagram becomes an effective medium for constructing a public figure's digital identity. Leaders who effectively leverage visual communication are more likely to gain public acceptance, as their messages are delivered in an emotional, authentic, and relatable manner (Freberg, 2021). In the case of Achmad Afzan Arslan Djunaid, his personal branding strategy on Instagram is reflected in the consistency of communication style, the selection of images portraying closeness to the community, and narratives that position him as an energetic and innovative young leader. His use of Instagram extends beyond documenting governmental activities; it also serves to reinforce key leadership values such as professionalism, humanism, and collaboration. Furthermore, the socio-cultural context of Pekalongan known for its batik industry and strong religious values—plays a significant role in shaping this strategy. By incorporating local cultural symbols and community-oriented content, his digital presence aligns closely with the identity and expectations of the local society.

From an academic perspective, this study addresses a significant gap in the literature concerning digital leadership branding among local government leaders in medium-sized cities in Indonesia. Previous studies have predominantly focused on national-level figures such as presidents, ministers, or political parties, while local leadership remains underexplored. In fact, social media has considerable potential at the local level, where emotional proximity and direct interaction with citizens can be more effectively established (Rahardjo, 2020). Therefore, this study aims to analyze the personal branding strategy of Achmad Afzan Arslan Djunaid through Instagram during his tenure as Mayor of Pekalongan. Specifically, it seeks to examine: (1) the forms of visual and narrative communication used in constructing leadership image; (2) the leadership values emphasized through social media; and (3) the extent to which these digital strategies influence public engagement and perception.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on local political leadership branding through Instagram in the context of a medium-sized Indonesian city, integrating visual communication analysis with political communication theory. Unlike prior studies that emphasize macro-level political actors, this research provides a micro-level perspective on how digital platforms are strategically utilized in local governance. The findings of this study are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of digital political communication and personal branding studies, particularly in the Indonesian context. Practically, the results offer insights and strategic guidance for local governments in optimizing social media as an effective tool for public communication, transparency, and citizen engagement. Furthermore, this study highlights that consistent and authentic personal branding can enhance public trust and serve as a model for ethical digital political communication practices at the local government level.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS FORMULATION

Studies on personal branding in the context of public leadership consistently highlight that a leader's self-image is not merely a personal attribute, but a strategic asset in building public trust and legitimacy. In contemporary governance, where public scrutiny is intensified by digital media, the way leaders present themselves significantly influences how they are perceived and evaluated by society. The concept of personal branding introduced by Tom Peters (1997) underscores that individuals should be viewed as "brands" that must be strategically managed through clear value propositions, differentiation, and consistency. This perspective shifts the focus from traditional competency-based evaluation toward a more holistic understanding of identity, communication, and perception management.

Building upon this foundation, Peter Montoya and Timothy Vandehey (2002) emphasize that personal branding is a deliberate and ongoing process of shaping public perception. Their approach suggests that individuals, particularly public figures, must actively construct and maintain a distinct identity that resonates with their target audience. Complementing this view, Arruda (2009) highlights the importance of authenticity, consistency, and clarity as core elements of successful personal branding. These elements are essential in establishing long-term credibility, especially in political contexts where trust is a critical factor. In the realm of political communication, personal branding has evolved into a central component of political marketing strategies. Rather than relying solely on party identity or ideological positioning, modern political actors increasingly depend on personal image to connect with voters. Margaret Scammell (2015) argues that political branding extends beyond visual symbols and campaign slogans, encompassing the projection of a coherent identity that aligns with public values and societal expectations. This shift reflects a broader transformation in political communication, where emotional resonance and relatability often outweigh purely rational policy considerations.

The role of social media further amplifies the importance of personal branding in politics. Platforms such as Instagram enable leaders to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and communicate directly with citizens. This direct communication fosters a sense of intimacy and immediacy, allowing leaders to construct more personalized and relatable narratives. According to Khamis et al. (2017), social media functions as a strategic space for identity construction and audience engagement, while Edosomwan et al. (2020) note that active digital presence is positively associated with higher levels of public trust due to perceived transparency and openness. However, the authenticity displayed on social media is often not entirely spontaneous. Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011) introduce the concept of calculated authenticity, which explains that public figures carefully curate their online personas to appear genuine while still pursuing strategic communication goals. This highlights the dual nature of digital self-presentation: it is both authentic and constructed.

From a theoretical standpoint, the dynamics of personal branding can be better understood through the self-presentation theory proposed by Erving Goffman (1959). Goffman conceptualizes social interaction as a theatrical performance, where individuals manage impressions to influence how they are perceived by others. In digital environments, social media serves as the “front stage,” where leaders consciously design their appearance, behavior, and communication style. This perspective is further reinforced by the concept of impression management developed by Mark Leary and Robin Kowalski (1990), which emphasizes the strategic control of information to shape audience perceptions and responses. In the context of public leadership, effective personal branding extends beyond increasing popularity; it plays a crucial role in establishing credibility, legitimacy, and long-term trust. Labrecque et al. (2011) argue that a strong personal brand enhances a leader’s perceived trustworthiness and relevance, particularly in highly competitive and information-rich environments. Leaders who consistently present themselves as authentic, relatable, and aligned with public values are more likely to gain acceptance and support from the community.

Moreover, the integration of personal branding with digital communication strategies reflects the evolving nature of governance in the digital era. Modern leaders are expected not only to govern effectively but also to communicate effectively in digital spaces. This requires the ability to combine strategic messaging, visual storytelling, and interactive engagement in a coherent manner. As a result, personal branding and digital communication are no longer separate domains but interconnected components of successful leadership. In conclusion, the literature suggests that personal branding has become an indispensable element of contemporary public leadership. It serves as a bridge between leaders and citizens, enabling the construction of trust, emotional connection, and shared identity. The strategic use of social media further enhances this process by providing tools for direct communication, transparency, and engagement. Therefore, the

effectiveness of modern leadership is increasingly determined by the ability to integrate personal branding with digital communication strategies in a consistent, authentic, and contextually relevant manner.

Based on the findings and discussion of this study, which emphasize visual communication, narrative strategy, digital interaction, and public perception, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Visual-based personal branding on Instagram positively influences the formation of a humanistic and approachable leadership image.

H2: Narrative communication (captions and storytelling) on Instagram positively affects the perception of empathetic and participatory leadership.

H3: Two-way communication and digital interaction on Instagram positively influence public engagement.

H4: Transparency and Public Trust on Instagram positively influence public engagement.

H5: The use of local cultural symbols in digital content positively influences regional identity and public emotional attachment.

RESEARCH METHODS

This section explains how the research was conducted, covering the research design, research object, data collection techniques, and data analysis procedures. This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design aimed at understanding the personal branding strategy of Achmad Afzan Arslan Djunaid through Instagram during his tenure as Mayor of Pekalongan. The qualitative approach is selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of communication patterns, visual narratives, and symbolic meanings within digital content (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher acts as the primary research instrument, interpreting data based on contextual understanding, as emphasized by Denzin and Lincoln (2018).

The research object focuses on the mayor's official Instagram account, which serves as a medium of public communication and personal branding. The unit of analysis includes social media posts (photos, videos, reels, and stories), captions, audience engagement (likes, comments, and replies), and visual elements such as color composition, facial expressions, clothing, and local cultural symbols. The research is contextually situated in Pekalongan, and the observation period covers content published during the 2025 administration. In qualitative research, the concept of population is not applied in a statistical sense; instead, the study focuses on purposively selected data based on relevance to personal branding and public communication themes.

Data collection techniques include non-participant observation, digital documentation, literature review, and data triangulation (Sugiyono, 2019). The researcher systematically observes the Instagram account without direct interaction, collects documentation such as screenshots, caption archives, and engagement metrics, and reviews relevant academic literature to support theoretical interpretation. Triangulation is conducted by comparing Instagram data with secondary sources such as online news and official government publications to ensure consistency between digital representation and real-world activities.

The data analysis technique uses qualitative content analysis with a thematic approach (Krippendorff, 2018). The analysis process involves data reduction, categorization, narrative and visual analysis, interpretation, and verification. Content is coded into themes such as humanistic leadership, transparency, citizen participation, personal life, and religiosity. The findings are interpreted using theories of personal branding and self-presentation to explain how digital communication strategies contribute to leadership image formation. To ensure the validity of the research, several strategies are applied, including source triangulation, audit trail documentation, and researcher reflexivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The presence of the researcher as the main instrument is acknowledged, along with the subjective nature of qualitative interpretation. Ethical

considerations are also maintained by using only publicly accessible data, avoiding the disclosure of personal information, and ensuring that the analysis remains objective and non-partisan.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The Instagram account @aaf_arslan serves as the official personal account of Achmad Afzan Arslan Djunaid during his tenure as Mayor of Pekalongan for the 2025–2030 period. This account performs a dual function, operating both as a platform for personal expression and as a strategic medium for public communication in governance. Through this platform, the mayor is able to bridge the boundaries between his institutional role and personal identity, thereby strengthening his connection with the public. Since the beginning of his administration, Afzan Arslan has actively utilized Instagram to communicate policy initiatives and governmental activities, while simultaneously presenting his personal presence within the social life of the community. This approach allows him not only to disseminate information but also to foster emotional closeness with the citizens of Pekalongan. Moreover, the platform is strategically used to reinforce his image as a young, religious, and progressive leader who is both approachable and responsive.

The account features a diverse range of content, including field activity photographs, official visit videos, program campaign reels, public policy infographics, and personal posts with family members. In several instances, the content is also linked with official government communication channels such as @prokompimkotapekalongan, @pemkotpekalongan, and @official.batikty, indicating an integration between personal branding and institutional communication. In terms of presentation, the overall style is characterized by simplicity, naturalness, and consistency, reflecting the socio-cultural traits of Pekalongan society, which is known for its egalitarian and religious values. This alignment between communication style and local culture enhances the authenticity of the leader's image and strengthens audience relatability.

Visual Strategy and Leadership Representation

The findings indicate that visual elements are not only complementary but central to the construction of the mayor's personal brand. The consistent use of casual yet culturally embedded attire such as batik combined with natural photographic styles, creates an image of a leader who is both professional and approachable. The absence of overly polished or artificial visuals reinforces the perception of authenticity, which is crucial in building public trust.

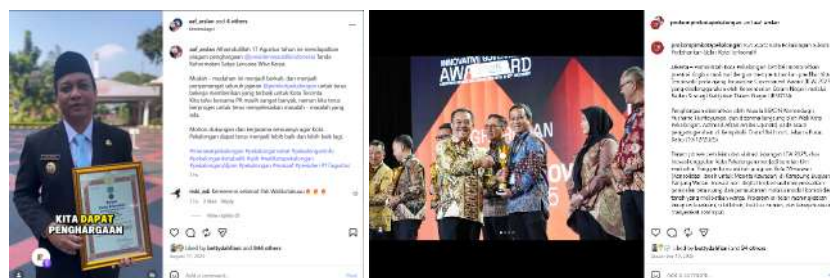


Figure 1. Visual Strategy and Leadership Representation

From an interpretative perspective, these visual patterns are not incidental but strategically constructed. They reflect an intentional effort to position the leader as “close to the people,” aligning with the socio-cultural characteristics of the local community. This supports the self-presentation framework of Erving Goffman (1959), where individuals actively manage impressions in public settings. In this case, Instagram operates as a digital “front stage,” allowing the leader to continuously perform and reinforce a desired identity. The findings suggest that visual authenticity

expressed through simplicity and consistency serves as a powerful mechanism for strengthening credibility and emotional connection.

Narrative Strategy and Humanistic Communication

Beyond visual elements, the study finds that narrative communication plays a significant role in shaping public perception. The captions accompanying posts are characterized by simple, inclusive, and empathetic language. The frequent use of collective pronouns such as “we” and “together” reflects a participatory and collaborative leadership style, positioning the leader as part of the community rather than above it. This linguistic choice reduces perceived social distance and reinforces a sense of shared responsibility, which is particularly important in local governance contexts where proximity to citizens is highly valued. The interpretation of these findings suggests that narrative simplicity is not incidental but a deliberate communication strategy aimed at enhancing accessibility and relatability across diverse audience groups. By avoiding overly technical or bureaucratic language, the leader ensures that messages can be easily understood by the general public, thereby increasing message effectiveness and engagement. This aligns with the concept of calculated authenticity introduced by Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011), where authenticity is carefully constructed to appear natural while still serving strategic purposes.



Figure 2. Narrative Strategy and Humanistic Communication

Furthermore, the findings indicate that narrative communication often integrates emotional cues, such as expressions of gratitude, empathy, and moral encouragement. These elements function to humanize the leader and create a more intimate connection with the audience. Emotionally resonant narratives not only attract attention but also foster a sense of belonging and identification among followers. In this sense, communication is not limited to information delivery but extends to relationship-building and community bonding. In addition, the consistency of tone and message across posts contributes to the stability of the leader’s personal brand. The repeated emphasis on togetherness, service, and optimism creates a coherent narrative framework that audiences can easily recognize and internalize over time. This narrative consistency strengthens credibility and reinforces the perception of authenticity, as audiences tend to trust messages that are stable and predictable. Ultimately, these findings suggest that effective political communication in the digital era requires a careful balance between rational information and emotional engagement. Narrative strategies that combine clarity, empathy, and consistency are more likely to generate meaningful interaction and long-term trust. Therefore, narrative communication emerges as a central pillar of personal branding, complementing visual strategies and digital engagement in shaping a holistic and persuasive leadership image.

Digital Engagement and Two-Way Communication

Another dimension identified in the findings is the active engagement between the leader and his audience. The Instagram account does not function merely as a broadcasting tool but as an interactive platform where dialogue occurs. Responses to comments, acknowledgment of public input, and visible interaction patterns indicate a two-way communication approach. This

interactivity reflects a shift from hierarchical communication toward a more participatory model, where citizens are positioned not only as information recipients but also as contributors to public discourse.

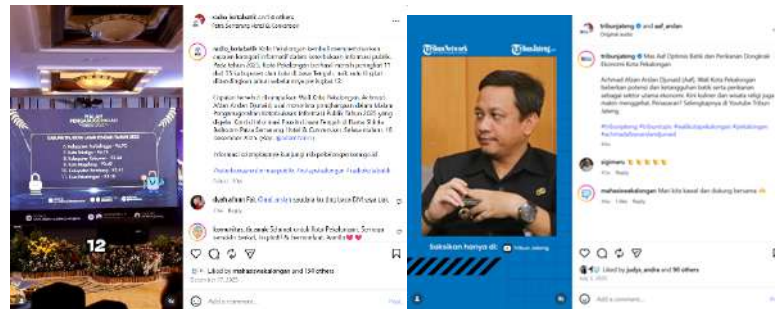


Figure 3. Digital Engagement and Two-Way Communication

This finding illustrates how engagement is not only a measure of popularity but also a reflection of communication quality. Posts that highlight social interaction and community involvement consistently generate higher engagement levels, suggesting that audiences are more responsive to content that emphasizes relational proximity. In this context, engagement becomes a qualitative indicator of how effectively a leader connects with the public, rather than merely a quantitative metric of likes or comments. Moreover, the presence of dialogue in the comment sections indicates the emergence of micro-level public spheres within digital platforms. These spaces allow citizens to express opinions, provide feedback, and even critique policies in a relatively open environment. When the leader responds or acknowledges these interactions, it reinforces the perception of accessibility and responsiveness, which are essential components of modern public leadership.

This dynamic aligns with the principles of two-way symmetrical communication, where dialogue and mutual exchange enhance trust and legitimacy. By engaging directly with citizens, the leader reduces communicative distance and fosters a sense of inclusion in governance processes. Such practices contribute to building what can be described as “digital intimacy,” where the relationship between leader and citizens becomes more personal and immediate despite being mediated by technology. Furthermore, consistent engagement also functions as a feedback mechanism, enabling the leader to gauge public sentiment and adapt communication strategies accordingly. This responsiveness enhances not only communication effectiveness but also policy relevance, as public input can inform decision-making processes, even if indirectly. The findings therefore imply that digital engagement serves both as a strategic communication tool and as a mechanism for strengthening democratic participation at the local level. It transforms social media into a space where governance is not only communicated but also experienced interactively. Consequently, engagement becomes a critical pillar of personal branding, reinforcing the leader’s image as approachable, responsive, and attuned to the needs of the community.

Transparency and Public Trust

The study also reveals that Instagram is utilized as a platform for promoting transparency in governance. Content related to policy implementation, infrastructure development, and public services is frequently shared with explanatory narratives, allowing the public to access information about government activities in real time. These posts often include contextual details, progress updates, and visual evidence, which together create a more comprehensive and accessible account of governmental performance. Interpreting these findings, transparency emerges not only as an ethical obligation but also as a strategic component of personal branding. By openly communicating both progress and challenges, the leader reduces informational asymmetry and builds credibility.

This aligns with the argument of Mergel (2019) that digital platforms enhance accountability and openness in public administration. In this context, transparency is not limited to the disclosure of information but extends to how information is framed, narrated, and made understandable to the public.

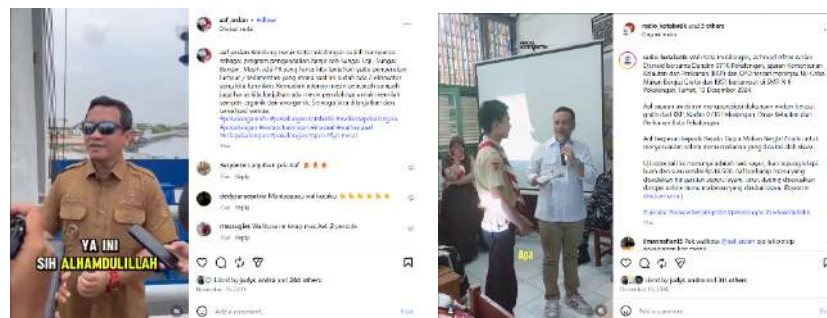


Figure 4. Transparency and Public Trust

Furthermore, the findings indicate that transparency-oriented communication helps construct a perception of honesty and integrity, which are critical attributes in public leadership. When policies and programs are consistently communicated with clarity and continuity, audiences are more likely to perceive the leader as reliable and accountable. This suggests that transparency contributes not only to institutional trust but also to the strengthening of individual leadership legitimacy. Another important aspect revealed in the analysis is the role of visual documentation in reinforcing transparency. Images and videos of on-site activities, community interactions, and development projects serve as tangible proof of action, making abstract policies more concrete and observable. This visual verification enhances the persuasive power of communication, as audiences tend to trust what they can see and interpret directly.

In addition, transparency through social media fosters a sense of inclusion among citizens. By providing timely updates and accessible information, the leader enables the public to feel informed and involved in governance processes. This contributes to a more participatory form of governance, where communication is not only about informing but also about empowering citizens with knowledge. The findings further indicate that transparency-oriented communication significantly contributes to public trust, suggesting that visibility of action is as important as the action itself in shaping public perception. In the digital era, governance is increasingly evaluated not only based on outcomes but also on how those outcomes are communicated. Therefore, transparency, when effectively integrated into digital communication strategies, becomes a key pillar in both governance effectiveness and personal branding.

Integration of Local Identity and Cultural Symbols

An important finding of this study is the integration of local cultural identity into personal branding. The use of batik, traditional settings, and community-based activities reflects a deliberate effort to connect leadership identity with regional values. This strategy not only reinforces authenticity but also strengthens emotional attachment between the leader and the community, as audiences tend to relate more strongly to symbols that represent their shared heritage and everyday experiences. From an interpretative perspective, this integration of local identity is not merely symbolic but strategic. By embedding cultural elements into digital communication, the leader positions himself as an integral part of the community rather than an external authority figure. This approach reduces social distance and enhances relatability, particularly in a local governance context where cultural familiarity plays a crucial role in shaping public perception. It also signals respect for local traditions, which can further strengthen legitimacy and acceptance among citizens. Moreover, the consistent presence of cultural symbols across posts contributes to

narrative coherence in personal branding. The repetition of culturally meaningful elements such as batik attire or participation in local events creates a recognizable pattern that audiences can easily associate with the leader's identity. Over time, this consistency reinforces a stable and distinctive image, which is essential for long-term brand recall and credibility.

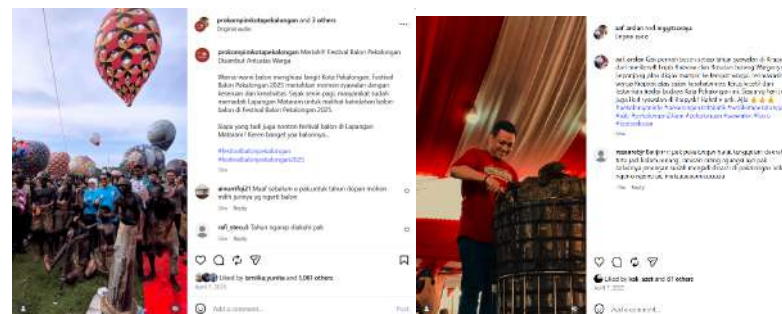


Figure 4. Integration of Local Identity and Cultural Symbols

From a theoretical standpoint, this supports the concept of place-based branding, where identity is constructed through cultural and spatial context. The findings suggest that incorporating local symbols enhances differentiation and relevance, making the leader's image more meaningful within the local socio-cultural framework. In addition, this approach aligns with the broader notion that effective political communication must resonate with the lived realities of the audience, rather than relying on abstract or generic messaging. Furthermore, the integration of cultural identity also functions as a bridge between tradition and modernity. While the platform used Instagram represents a modern digital medium, the content itself reflects deeply rooted local values. This combination creates a hybrid communication model in which modern tools are used to preserve and promote cultural identity, thereby enhancing both innovation and authenticity in leadership communication. This also indicates that effective personal branding in political contexts must be culturally grounded rather than universally generic. Leaders who successfully align their personal image with local values are more likely to build stronger emotional connections, sustain public trust, and maintain long-term relevance within their communities.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the personal branding strategy of Achmad Afzan Arslan Djunaid, as reflected through Instagram, is effectively constructed through the integration of visual consistency, narrative clarity, active engagement, transparency, and cultural relevance. These elements collectively shape a leadership image that is perceived as authentic, approachable, and credible. The findings demonstrate that personal branding in the context of public leadership is not merely about self-presentation, but also about building relationships, fostering trust, and communicating governance in a more accessible and human-centered manner. The study further confirms that digital platforms enable continuous interaction and real-time image construction, making personal branding a dynamic and evolving process.

From a practical perspective, this study implies that public leaders should strategically utilize social media not only as an information dissemination tool but also as a platform for engagement, transparency, and emotional connection with citizens. Effective personal branding requires alignment between visual representation, communication style, and socio-cultural context. Leaders who are able to integrate these elements consistently are more likely to strengthen public trust and enhance governance legitimacy. Therefore, digital communication competence has become an essential component of modern public leadership.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the research focuses on a single case study, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or regions. Second, the analysis is based solely on Instagram content, without incorporating audience perception data such as interviews or surveys, which could provide deeper insight into how the public interprets the leader's branding. Third, the study is limited to a specific time frame, which may not fully capture the long-term evolution of personal branding strategies. Based on these limitations, future research is recommended to expand the scope by comparing multiple public leaders across different regions or platforms to identify broader patterns of digital political branding. Further studies may also incorporate mixed methods, combining content analysis with audience perception analysis to better understand the effectiveness of personal branding strategies. Additionally, longitudinal research is needed to examine how personal branding evolves over time and responds to political, social, and technological changes. Such approaches would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of personal branding in the context of digital governance and public leadership.

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