Constructing Moral Populism Through Narrative and Evaluation: A Linguistic Analysis of Dedi Mulyadi's Digital Discourse in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study examines how moral populism is linguistically constructed in the social media discourse of Indonesian public figure Dedi Mulyadi. Unlike dominant global models of populism that construct political legitimacy through conflict with elites, Mulyadi's public persona emerges from empathetic encounters with ordinary citizens documented on YouTube. Rather than proposing policies, he performs ethical responsibility, framing poverty as moral virtue and leadership as personal caregiving. The analysis draws on twenty fully transcribed videos uploaded between January 2023 and January 2024 and applies an integrated linguistic framework combining discursive polarization, narrative, and appraisal theory. The findings show that (1) "the people" are constructed as morally deserving through narratives that romanticize hardship, (2) the leader is positioned as a cultural elder and ethical mediator rather than a political representative, and (3) indirect critiques of governance are articulated through linguistic contrasts between moral action and bureaucratic inaction. Public witnessing in the videos further legitimizes these moral acts, producing co-constructed authority. The study argues that Mulyadi's discourse represents a non-antagonistic form of moral populism rooted in everyday care, shared cultural responsibility, and linguistic intimacy. These findings expand current scholarship by demonstrating how populist legitimacy in localized Southeast Asian contexts can emerge not through ideological opposition but through ethical narration and interpersonal moral performance.

Keywords: moral populism; appraisal; narrative positioning; discursive polarization; dedi mulyadi.

Introduction

Populism has become a central topic in contemporary political studies, increasingly examined not as an ideology but as a communicative practice that constructs the relationship between leaders and "the people." (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2020). Instead of relying on extensive policy debates, populist figures often build legitimacy through emotionally charged storytelling, symbolic performances, and linguistic identification with ordinary citizens (Moffitt, 2016). Recent research shows that populism in the digital era increasingly revolves around *moral communication and* conversational proximity, where leaders establish credibility by performing empathy, care, and moral judgment in public interaction (Mahmoud & Sørensen, 2024). Rather than institutional authority, it is language—its tone, narrative form, and evaluative stance—that constructs political legitimacy.

In Southeast Asia, this communicative orientation has taken culturally specific forms, particularly in Indonesia, where local leaders often rely on regional languages, cultural norms, and interpersonal encounters to construct political authenticity (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). Scholars have noted the rise of "everyday populism," where legitimacy is built in informal encounters rather than national speeches or mass mobilization. These developments highlight the need to investigate how populism is constructed linguistically within localized digital settings, beyond national elections or ideological conflict. Yet, despite growing scholarly

attention, there remains limited analysis of how *language itself*—rather than social media strategy, policy stance, or identity politics—constructs populist authority in the Indonesian context.

Dedi Mulyadi, a former Regent of Purwakarta and current public figure in West Java, exemplifies a distinctive form of local populism in Indonesia. His political persona is built not through partisan rhetoric or institutional critique, but through continuous public interactions with informal workers, street vendors, small-scale farmers, and marginalized families—primarily documented through YouTube. Rather than delivering speeches, he engages individuals in spontaneous dialogue, helping them resolve disputes, mediating personal problems, or addressing everyday struggles such as housing debt, school fees, or access to basic utilities.

What makes Mulyadi's case analytically significant is that his populism is linguistically enacted: he constructs social solidarity and moral authority through improvised storytelling, regional humor, and morally evaluative language rooted in Sundanese cultural norms. Studies of Indonesian populism have emphasized religious identity (Hadiz, 2018), charismatic performance (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019), and mediatized authenticity. However, little is known about how leaders like Mulyadi construct a populist persona through *linguistic moralization*— framing suffering, humility, and collective responsibility through narrative and appraisal, rather than conflict or elite antagonism.

This makes his discourse a valuable site for understanding a form of populism that does not center on explicit opposition to elites, but rather emphasizes moral closeness, caregiving, and ethical responsibility toward "ordinary people." By focusing on empathetic linguistic acts— such as feeding street children, consoling grieving families, or defending informal workers— Mulyadi performs authority as a moral agent rather than a political actor. This pattern raises new theoretical questions: *Can populism function without antagonism? Can moral storytelling replace ideological conflict as a source of legitimacy?*

Although scholarship on Indonesian populism has expanded in recent years, most studies focus on national figures, large-scale mobilization, or religious political rhetoric (Aspinall et al., 2020; Hadiz, 2018). These works tend to emphasize structural and ideological dimensions—such as Islamic populism, oligarchic competition, or digital manipulation—while paying limited attention to how populist identity is *linguistically constructed* at the micro level through interpersonal interaction.

Existing research in political communication has begun to acknowledge the role of mediated authenticity and emotional performance (Enli, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2018)Yet empirical linguistic analyses remain sparse in the Indonesian context. Particularly lacking are studies that investigate how local leaders build moral authority through *everyday storytelling rather* than through explicit anti-elite opposition. Moreover, the use of regional languages, moral evaluation, and narrative positioning has not been systematically examined in relation to populist identity formation.

Populism as a Moral and Performative Practice

While populism is classically defined as a Manichean confrontation between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), contemporary scholarship reframes it as a performative mode of political practice centered on moral evaluation. Rather than relying solely on ideological manifestos, populist leaders construct legitimacy by performing moral care and authenticity, particularly in localized contexts where political authority is intertwined with cultural norms (Moffitt, 2016). In Southeast Asia, this often manifests through narratives of benevolence, social justice, and cultural obligation, positioning leaders as moral guardians as much as political representatives (Kenny, 2019). From this perspective, populism is enacted not only by critiquing elites but also by affirming everyday morality, using compassion and shared values as the bedrock of political legitimacy. This

framework is essential for analyzing digital discourse, where such moral narratives are embedded in spontaneous, informal interactions.

Discourse and Polarization: Constructing the Moral "Us" and "Them"

Even when couched in compassionate terms, moral populism operates through discursive polarization—the subtle categorization of social actors into virtuous ingroups and problematic outgroups (van Dijk, 1998, 2008, 2011). Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach posits that this is achieved by narrating the moral virtue of ordinary citizens and contrasting them with impersonal systems, irresponsible actors, or absent authorities, thereby constructing implicit blame through evaluative language. Contemporary research shows that this polarization often targets structural failures and systemic neglect rather than personalized elite figures (Hameleers & de Vreese, 2020). This allows a populist figure to frame "the problematic outgroup" as the institutional failure itself, a strategy that aligns with cultural contexts like Indonesia, where direct confrontation is often discouraged in favor of indirect critique and pragmatic storytelling (Aspinall et al., 2020; Bowen, 1986). Consequently, this study examines how these moral contrasts emerge linguistically in everyday dialogue, absent explicit political attacks.

Narrative Positioning and the Performance of Moral Authority

Narrative research demonstrates that identity is constructed through the strategic assignment of roles and moral standings within stories (Bamberg, 2012a, 2012b; Riessman, 2008). This positioning operates on three interconnected levels: the positioning of characters within the story (e.g., victim, negligent authority); the positioning of the speaker in relation to the audience (e.g., as mentor or protector); and the positioning of the speaker within broader social values (e.g., as a guardian of local morality). In populist discourse, leaders often position themselves as mediators, rescuers, or moral elders, a performance that builds cultural legitimacy through perceived empathy and personal involvement (Breeze, 2019; Moffitt, 2016). Applied to this study, narrative positioning analysis will reveal how Dedi Mulyadi frames citizens as victims of circumstance, portrays himself as culturally obligated to assist, and strategically embodies humility through informal speech and appeals to shared experience.

Appraisal and the Linguistics of Moral Evaluation

Appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) provides a systematic framework for analyzing how speakers evaluate people, actions, and states of affairs through language. This lens is particularly effective for examining how political discourse creates collective emotional alignment and solidarity through shared moral stances (Martin, 2021). The framework analyzes three key domains: Affect (the expression of emotion), Judgment (the moral evaluation of character and behavior), and Appreciation (the valuation of objects and traditions). Studies show that populist leaders frequently employ Judgement to valorize ordinary people as hardworking, honest, and deserving (Mudde, 2004), while simultaneously framing institutional neglect as a moral failure, even in the absence of a named agent. In this research, Appraisal analysis will precisely identify how moral worth is assigned to struggling individuals and how ethical responsibility is enacted in the leader's responses, thereby illuminating the linguistic mechanics of a localized moral populism.

This study addresses these gaps by analysing how Dedi Mulyadi constructs a populist persona through moral discourse grounded in local linguistic practices. Rather than examining ideological statements or campaign speeches, the analysis focuses on transcriptions of spontaneous interactions with ordinary citizens, which function as sites for narrating suffering, enacting empathy, and framing social relationships through moral judgment.

The study aims to investigate how moral populism is discursively constructed through narrative and linguistic evaluation in Dedi Mulyadi's social media discourse. It explores how representations of "the people" are produced through storytelling, and how moral authority is formed through positioning and appraisal. Therefore, the following are the research questions central to this study:

1. How are "ordinary people" discursively constructed in Dedi Mulyadi's interactions with citizens?
2. How does Dedi Mulyadi linguistically position himself in relation to those he assists?
3. What types of moral evaluations (appraisal) does he use to frame suffering, responsibility, and social values?
4. To what extent do these linguistic strategies reflect a distinctive form of moral populism without explicit antagonism?

By examining these questions, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to understand populism not merely as a political style or ideological configuration, but as a communicative practice grounded in culturally situated language use. Through a linguistic analysis of everyday moral storytelling in Mulyadi's YouTube interactions, the research advances the concept of *moral populism* as a form of authority based on empathy, ethical judgment, and communal solidarity rather than antagonistic mobilization. This perspective widens current understandings of populism in Indonesia by highlighting how political legitimacy can be performed through relational care, narrative morality, and affective proximity to marginalized citizens. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that populist identity can emerge through the micro-level enactment of moral responsibility—suggesting that in some contexts, populism survives not through resisting elites, but through embodying ethical intimacy with "the people."

Method

This study employed a qualitative linguistic–discursive analysis to examine how moral populism is constructed through the spoken language of Dedi Mulyadi in social media interactions. The focus of the analysis was not on policy statements or ideological propositions, but on how linguistic choices construct moral authority, proximity to "the people," and social evaluation. The research design integrates three complementary analytical lenses:

1. discursive polarization
2. narrative positioning
3. moral evaluation through Appraisal theory

This framework enables a close examination of how speakers linguistically position themselves and others within moral categories in everyday political encounters. Data were drawn from publicly accessible videos on the *Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel* on YouTube. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to select social interaction videos where Mulyadi engages directly with ordinary citizens, particularly those facing hardship or conflict. The inclusion criteria were:

- the video features spontaneous dialogue between Mulyadi and citizens;
- the speech contains moral or empathetic evaluations;
- storytelling, advice, or conflict resolution occurs;
- language includes informal Indonesian/Sundanese interaction.

Twenty videos uploaded between January 2023 and January 2024 met these criteria and were fully transcribed. The transcripts represent only verbal language; visual cues, gestures, and images were excluded to maintain analytic consistency with linguistic data.

Although 20 videos were selected, excerpts from 12 videos were selected for presentation in the Findings section. The criterion was analytical saturation, not representativeness by frequency. Videos that did not add new discursive strategies were used

to confirm themes rather than being quoted. This approach follows best practices in qualitative linguistics where illustrative excerpts are used to exemplify strategies identified through full-dataset analysis. A complete list of the 12 videos, upload dates, and URLs is provided in Appendix A.

Coding and Analytical Framework

A theory-driven coding scheme was developed, combining:

Table 1. Analytical framework and coding focus for examining moral populism in Dedi Mulyadi's discourse.

Framework	Coding Focus	Illustrative Coding Questions
van Dijk (2008–2011)	Discursive polarization	How are "we" and "they" morally contrasted? Who is blamed or protected?
Bamberg (2012); Riessman (2008)	Narrative positioning	How does Mulyadi position himself (helper/elder/mediator)? How are citizens positioned as victims, learners, or morally worthy?
Martin & White	Appraisal (Attitude, Judgment, Appreciation)	What moral evaluations are expressed? What emotions or ethical norms are invoked?

Result and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the linguistic analysis of Dedi Mulyadi's YouTube interactions, demonstrating how moral populism is constructed through narrative positioning, appraisal, and discursive performance. Rather than mobilizing antagonism toward elites, the data reveal a communication style centered on moral caregiving, ethical elevation of the poor, cultural authority, and soft critique through action. Each thematic subsection draws on selected excerpts from the corpus and interprets them using the analytical frameworks of van Dijk's discursive polarization, Bamberg's narrative positioning, and Martin & White's appraisal model. Together, the results illustrate how Mulyadi's populism is enacted not by naming political enemies, but by moralizing everyday hardship, performing personal responsibility, and co-constructing legitimacy with the witnessing community.

Populist Care as Moral Protection

Across the analyzed videos, Dedi Mulyadi constructs leadership as a form of moral protection rather than formal political authority. This position emerges through direct, nurturing speech acts that frame the poor as citizens deserving personal care. Rather than mobilizing anger against institutional failure, Mulyadi narrates himself as someone who must respond to suffering immediately, ethically, and without bureaucratic mediation.

This pattern appears consistently across the data. For example, in "BAPAK D1PENJ4R4 | DUA BOCAH KERJA KERAS…" (21 Nov 2023), he comforts two children selling tissues to support their mother:

"Ayo makan dulu. Urang mah kudu kuat."
(Let's eat first. We must be strong.)

The imperative "ayo makan dulu" performs protective action as leadership, while the collective pronoun urang (we) constructs moral solidarity. According to Bamberg's (2012) model of narrative positioning, this creates a shared identity in which the leader is not outside the suffering but co-experiences it.

In "NGGAK PUNYA BERAS EMAK TURUN KE SAWAH…" (15 Nov 2023), he meets a grandmother cutting grass in the rice field because she has no rice at home. Mulyadi tells her:

"Istirahat dulu, emak. Urusan makan, saya yang tanggung."
(Rest first, Mother. I will take responsibility for the food.)

Here, leadership is linguistically constructed through a deontic moral obligation ("saya yang tanggung"), signaling duty rather than charity. Using appraisal, this statement expresses Judgment: Propriety—suggesting that caring for the poor is morally required. Leadership is presented as ethical accountability, not policy delivery.

A similar pattern appears in "TEH HANI MASAK SAHUR HANYA NASI DAN GARAM" (23 Mar 2023), when he visits a family eating only rice and salt for sahur. He replies:

"Mulai sekarang, belanja sahur dan berbuka jadi urusan saya."
(From now on, sahur and iftar meals are my responsibility.)

Again, the discourse frames aid as a transfer of responsibility, shifting moral burden from the poor to the leader. This aligns with research describing moral populism as a replacement of institutional authority through personal action (Engesser et al., 2017). In this discourse, the leader emerges precisely because the state does not.

Importantly, this protective stance does not involve explicit accusations toward institutions. As opposed to antagonistic populism in Western contexts (Wodak, 2015)Institutional failure is implied, not stated. The poor exist without help; therefore, the leader must appear. Leadership is validated through immediate intervention, not administrative argument.

Thus, "care" here is not merely an emotional expression but a politically charged discourse. Through repeated linguistic constructions of obligation ("saya yang tanggung," "urusan saya"), Mulyadi replaces bureaucratic authority with personal moral authority. His populism functions as a non-antagonistic moral substitution, constructing political legitimacy through intimate acts of nurturing, performed and narrated through language.

Construction of Victimhood and Moral Worthiness

A central feature of Mulyadi's discourse is the construction of ordinary citizens as morally deserving victims—people who suffer not because of individual failure but because their effort and sincerity are undervalued. Rather than mobilizing anger against institutions, the narratives build moral elevation (Haidt, 2003) by portraying the poor as dignified laborers whose struggles grant them ethical superiority. Through this discursive framing, "the people" are not passive recipients of charity but protagonists of moral virtue, worthy of admiration rather than pity.

In "KISAH SI BUNGSU: SATE 2 RIBU…" (6 Aug 2023), Mulyadi praises a young vendor who sells cheap satay yet donates to orphans. He comments:

"Dulu kamu susah, tapi tetap bantu orang. Itu yang disebut rezeki yang berkah."
(You were struggling, yet you still helped others. That is what we call blessed livelihood.)

Here, suffering and generosity are paired as preconditions for moral worthiness, using judgment of virtue (Martin & White, 2005). The poor are framed as ethically superior to those who profit selfishly. Unlike classical populism that blames corrupt elites directly, Mulyadi uses positive moral elevation rather than antagonism as his populist trigger.

Similarly, in "AYAHNYA MEN1NGG4L | 3 BOCAH SD JUALAN TISU" (24 June 2023), three children selling tissues to survive are framed as responsible, self-reliant providers:

"Kamu bantu mama ya? Hebat, kamu anak pemberani."
(You're helping your mother, right? Amazing, you're a brave child.)

By labeling the child as "pemberani" (brave), Mulyadi reconstructs hardship as moral courage, positioning the poor as agents of resilience rather than objects of pity. Through this narrative positioning (Bamberg, 2012a) The children become ethical subjects who embody both innocence and responsibility. The poor are not pathetic; they are heroes.

In "KI AMID HIDUPI DIRI DENGAN JUALAN DAUN PISANG…" (22 Apr 2023), he meets an elderly blind masseur selling vegetables. Instead of foregrounding disability as helplessness, Mulyadi reframes him as morally strong:

"Bapak tidak pernah meminta. Justru bapak memberi tenaga untuk orang lain."
(You never ask for help. Instead, you give your strength to others.)

Here, the evaluative contrast between asking and giving constructs moral hierarchy: those who work despite suffering gain dignity, while those who exploit receive implicit criticism. This aligns with research showing how moral populism legitimizes leadership by romanticizing virtuous hardship (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2004). Moreover, across data, victimhood is never neutral. Hardship becomes proof of goodness. Poverty is re-signified as evidence of honesty, humility, and noble struggle. In appraisal terms, this discourse consistently uses positive judgment to assign ethical value to marginalized people, transforming deprivation into moral capital.

Through these repeated linguistic moves, Mulyadi constructs "the people" as a morally superior community whose worth does not depend on economic productivity, citizenship status, or social class. The populist appeal thus arises not from antagonism toward elites but from celebrating virtue among the marginalized, which implicitly implies that society fails to reward such virtue.

The Leader as Elder, Mediator, and Cultural Moralist

Another salient discourse pattern is the construction of Mulyadi as a moral elder whose authority stems not from political power, but from cultural wisdom, emotional caregiving, and ethical mediation. Rather than presenting himself as a bureaucratic leader, he narratively positions himself as sesepuh (cultural elder), one who teaches, advises, and protects the vulnerable. This role is linguistically produced through directive speech acts, cultural proverbs, and evaluative moral framing, rather than institutional claims.

In "AYAHNYA MEN1NGG4L | 3 BOCAH SD JUALAN TISU" (24 June 2023), after feeding the children, he admonishes their mother indirectly through the child:

"Bilang sama ibu ya… hidup sudah susah, jangan tambah anak lagi."
(Tell your mother this… life is already difficult, don't add more children.)

This utterance exemplifies moral directive discourse, which conveys advice alongside implicit judgment (Martin & White, 2005). The leader's authority here does not invoke state policy (e.g., family planning programs) but invokes cultural wisdom about responsibility, positioning him as a guardian of social norms. It is not a political proposal, but a moral intervention.

In "TANGANI SAMPAH MENUMPUK… WANITA MENANGIS DAN PELUK KDM" (5 Feb 2023), Mulyadi scolds local officials and residents for failing to manage public waste. Yet, rather than invoking technical regulations, he frames the issue as communal morality:

"Kalau pemerintah tidak peka, rakyat yang jadi korban. Itu bukan adil namanya."
(If the government is not sensitive, the people suffer. That is not justice.)

Justice here is ethical, not bureaucratic. He positions himself as the one who can re-align moral values, not as someone who enforces a policy. This aligns with moral populism, where

leaders act as guardians of shared ethics rather than institutional systems (Moffitt, 2016; Taggart, 2000)

Similarly, in "MERASA JALAN DIAMBIL... WARGA BERSITEGANG" (8 Feb 2023), during a conflict between vendors and developers, he resolves the dispute by defining fairness through cultural balance:

"Yang kuat jangan menekan yang lemah. Urusan ini bukan soal uang, tapi soal hati."
(The strong must not pressure the weak. This is not about money, it's about conscience.)

This act of mediation positions him as arbiter of moral intuition, which is central to narrative populism (Bamberg, 2012a). He constructs inequality not solely as an economic issue but as a moral one. Here, the leader's legitimacy comes from emotional judgment and ethical alignment rather than institutional mandate. The conflict is solved through values, not through legal mechanisms.

Even when criticizing the state, he avoids explicit antagonism. In "WARGA GELISAH JEMBATAN DARURAT..." (24 Aug 2023), he asserts:

"Kekuasaan itu bukan untuk berkuasa. Buat apa jadi pejabat kalau rakyat tidak sejahtera?"
(Power is not for ruling. Why hold office if the people are not prosperous?)

Rather than blaming a specific elite, he criticizes the abstract moral misuse of power. This constitutes anti-elitism without enemies, where he reinforces a moral dichotomy but avoids direct confrontation (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2004).The populist "Other" becomes immoral governance, not particular individuals.

Across these interactions, three discursive strategies consistently define Mulyadi's leadership persona:

Table 2. Discursive construction of leadership roles in Dedi Mulyadi's populist communication.

Leader Identity	Linguistic Features	Function
Elder / Sesepuh	Cultural proverbs; moral directives	Enforces values without institutional power
Mediator	Appeals to conscience; inclusive solutions	Resolves inequality as an ethical conflict
Protector	Empathy, praise, direct aid	Gains trust through care, not authority

Through these positions, leadership is constructed as cultural responsibility, not political ambition. He embodies a community elder whose authority derives from shared morality, thereby transforming governance into a cultural act.

Moralizing Everyday Hardship as Shared Social Knowledge

A central thread in Mulyadi's discourse is the moral framing of everyday hardship, where poverty is not treated merely as an economic condition but as shared social knowledge that reveals character, values, and communal ethics. Through storytelling and evaluative language, he interprets individuals' struggles as evidence of moral virtue, positioning the poor not as victims but as exemplars of integrity, endurance, and cultural wisdom.

In "TEH HANI MASAK SAHUR HANYA NASI DAN GARAM – SUAMI JUAL ASEUPAN 10 RIBU DIUTANG" (23 March 2023), after seeing a woman cooking only rice and salt for her family, Mulyadi reframes scarcity as moral devotion:

"Walaupun hanya nasi dan garam, yang penting halal. Rezeki itu bukan besar atau kecil, tapi berkah."
(Even if it's only rice and salt, what matters is that it's halal. Blessing is not about size, but sincerity.)

This excerpt demonstrates how material lack is reinterpreted as ethical surplus, enticing admiration rather than pity. Hardship becomes a moral resource, aligning with Appraisal Theory's viewpoint that evaluations encode social values (Martin & White, 2005). Here, the poor are symbolically elevated as moral educators who model proper conduct.

In the video "FITRA BERCERITA PAHITNYA JADI GOJEK…" (18 Jan 2023), a distressed motorcycle taxi driver describes being insulted as "drunk" while working. Instead of offering a political critique of labor exploitation, Mulyadi responds by moralizing dignity:

"Orang yang bekerja keras itu tidak pantas dihina. Yang hina itu yang malas, bukan yang bekerja." (Those who work hard do not deserve insult. The shame belongs to the lazy, not the working.)

Here, labor becomes a moral boundary marker, dividing the ethical ("the hardworking people") from the immoral ("the lazy"). This reverses conventional economic hierarchies by turning low-income workers into the moral elite. Such rhetorical inversion aligns closely with recent scholarship on moral populism, which constructs "the people" through ethical, not political, superiority (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2004).

This logic is reiterated in "KISAH SI BUNGSU | KUKUH JUAL SATE HARGA 2 RIBU…" (Aug 6, 2023), where a vendor who sells extremely cheap satay refuses to raise prices. Mulyadi praises him:

"Karena dulu pernah susah, sekarang dia tidak mau menyusahkan orang lain." (Because he once suffered, he refuses to burden others now.)

In this narrative, poverty becomes evidence of moral biography, producing virtue through lived experience. The vendor's generosity is not framed as charity, but as accumulated ethical capital. This resembles narrative positioning (Bamberg, 2012a), where identity is constructed through personal histories that index social values.

Across videos, we observe a recurring pattern:

Table 3. Moral reinterpretation of hardship and its populist effects in Dedi Mulyadi's discourse.

Observed Condition	Linguistic Moral Reinterpretation	Populist Effect
Scarcity/poverty	"berkah," "halal," "tidak menyusahkan orang"	Elevates the poor as moral exemplars
Exhausting labor	"kerja keras," "tidak pantas dihina"	Reframes workers as ethical leaders
Low prices/sacrifice	"tidak mau membebani," "pernah susah"	Constructs moral responsibility as heroism

These strategies reveal how hardship is rhetorically transformed into collective moral knowledge, creating a shared identity rooted in ethical everyday living. Instead of offering structural solutions, Mulyadi derives civic ethics from lived poverty, allowing "the people" to represent themselves through virtue rather than political articulation. Thus, suffering does not ask for policy—but teaches society how to live. In this discursive world, the poor are not helped to enter politics; politics enters the moral world of the poor.

Soft Critique of the State Through Ethical Responsibility

Unlike many populist figures who mobilize anger through explicit attacks on "the elite" or government institutions, Mulyadi performs a soft moral critique: he exposes state failure not through accusation, but by publicly doing what the state should have done, then framing it as common-sense morality. This approach critiques governance implicitly—by contrasting bureaucratic inaction with his own ethical responsiveness.

In "WARGA GELISAH JEMBATAN DARURAT MAU DIBONGKAR…" (Aug 24, 2023), a temporary bridge built for an infrastructure project is about to be removed, leaving schoolchildren stranded. Instead of condemning officials directly, Mulyadi frames the issue as a matter of basic moral duty:

"Yang penting bukan ribut dengan perusahaan, tapi pemerintah membuat jembatan untuk rakyat."
(The point is not arguing with the company, but that the government should build a bridge for the people.)

This utterance performs discursive polarization without naming enemies (van Dijk, 2011). The unnamed target—local government—is portrayed as distracted by conflict instead of fulfilling duties. The critique is implicit, packaged as a commonsense moral lesson, which shields the speaker from political backlash while still delegitimizing state inaction.

In "DI SAAT SIBUK SERANG PRABOWO–GIBRAN…" (Nov 5, 2023), Mulyadi encounters a traffic accident and stops to help. He frames his intervention using a moral contrast:

"Banyak yang sibuk berdebat politik, tapi kalau ada kecelakaan, siapa yang peduli kalau bukan kita?"
(Many are busy debating politics, but when an accident happens, who cares if not us?)

Here, he does not mention parties, names, or officials. The antagonist is politics itself, represented as noisy and useless. The implication is sharp: politics talks; the moral citizen acts. This reinforces a key feature of moral populism where legitimacy is derived from perceived action and connection to "the people," rather than from formal authority (Moffitt, 2016): legitimacy comes from action, not authority.

Similarly, in "AYAHNYA MENINGGAL – 3 BOCAH SD JUALAN TISU…" (Jun 24, 2023), three children forced to sell tissues for survival are asked why their stepfather makes them work. Rather than attacking the family or social services, Mulyadi broadens blame to adult irresponsibility in general:

"Sudah hidupnya susah, jangan tambah susah dengan punya anak banyak."
(Life is already difficult; don't make it worse by having many children.)

The object of critique is not an institution, but social irresponsibility as moral negligence, implicitly suggesting the state's failure to educate and protect its citizens. This aligns with appraisal-based critique, where moral evaluation substitutes political accusation (Martin & White, 2005).

Across these cases, government critique appears through ethical comparison, not ideological opposition:

Table 4. Implicit state critique through ethical action in Dedi Mulyadi's discourse.

Mulyadi's Action	State Responsibility Implied	Effect
Mediates disputes	Should facilitate public problem-solving	Shows state as an absent problem-solver
Pays food, bridge, or utilities	Should ensure welfare access	Portrays the state as financially careless
Helps the injured	Should ensure public safety	Constructs governance as inactive talk

Thus, Mulyadi's moralized performances serve as subtle indictments of bureaucratic inefficiency, allowing him to claim ethical authority without political confrontation. Rather than "the corrupt elite," the antagonist becomes any system that talks instead of acts. This broadens populism beyond anti-elitism, replacing political conflict with a narrative of moral action versus inaction. This style may represent a unique Indonesian variant of populism rooted in:

• cultural ethics of communal responsibility,

- avoidance of direct confrontation (to maintain social harmony),
- moral authority through performative care.

His critique is not shouted; it is performed in silence and narrated as virtue.

Community as Moral Witness: Populism Through Public Recognition

A striking pattern in Mulyadi's discourse is that the community functions as witness, validating moral action and transforming it into collective meaning. Unlike populist leaders who mobilize crowds to attack an "elite enemy," he mobilizes them as moral auditors, whose presence confirms the value of assistance. Populist legitimacy is therefore socially co-authored, not individually declared. In several videos, ordinary bystanders react verbally to his assistance, and these reactions are kept in the recordings rather than edited out. Their evaluative utterances perform an appraisal function: they ratify Mulyadi's behavior as morally appropriate, even exemplary. This is what Martin & White (2005)describe as "invoked judgment"—the leader does not praise himself, but others' reactions construct his credibility.

In "AYAHNYA MENINGGAL — 3 BOCAH SD JUALAN TISU…" (Jun 24, 2023), while he instructs the children to save money and stop giving earnings to adults, a woman behind the camera exclaims:

"Bagus Pak Dedi, itu harus dibimbing."
(Good, Mr. Dedi, they must be guided.)

The comment turns a private act of care into a publicly endorsed moral intervention. He does not need to state that his actions are righteous—the audience narrates it for him. The authority is co-produced, with the public granting moral approval.

Similarly, in "WARGA GELISAH JEMBATAN DARURAT MAU DIBONGKAR…" (Aug 24, 2023), as he argues that local governments should cooperate to build infrastructure for children to reach school safely, multiple people respond:

"Betul Pak, susah kalau lewat situ."
"Iya, itu harus ada jembatan!"

His critique of bureaucratic inaction is validated communally. Instead of positioning the state as a villain through antagonistic speech, the crowd co-constructs the moral complaint. The people act as ethical witnesses, not political supporters.

This pattern is repeated in "ANTAR CENDOL DARI SUKABUMI…" (Jan 1, 2024). After he refuses free goods and insists vendors should reserve assistance for the hungry, several bystanders affirm:

"Benar, itu buat yang butuh."
"Iya, untuk yang susah."

The crowd's agreement reinforces his authority, transforming personal ethics into collective moral knowledge. The leader becomes legitimate because the people recognize him, not because he claims legitimacy.

Witnessing as a Mode of Populism
This process works as a form of moral populism, where:
- The people are not a voting bloc, but a witnessing community.
- Their speech is not a demand for rights, but a public articulation of moral truth.
- Leadership is validated through ethical action observed collectively.

In discursive terms, witnessing serves two interrelated functions in the construction of moral populism. First, collective reactions such as praise, agreement, or expressions of awe

operate as a form of moral evaluation, positioning the leader as ethically upright without requiring him to self-assert moral authority. Second, repeated public alignment with these judgments transforms ordinary bystanders into a moral community, whose shared responses collectively define "the people" as guardians and validators of ethical behavior. Together, these witnessing practices co-produce legitimacy by granting moral recognition to the leader and by forming a communal identity grounded in shared ethical judgments rather than political mobilization.

Bamberg's (2012a) The concept of narrative positioning explains that social actors position one another through discourse. In these interactions, the community positions itself as beneficiaries and evaluators, while Mulyadi is positioned as a caretaker and ethical guide. This mutual positioning constructs a socially grounded populism that relies not on institutional legitimacy, but on relational presence.

An Alternative to Antagonistic Populism

Unlike global populist discourse, where audiences validate hostility toward an enemy (e.g., "Mexicans," "corrupt elites"), here the community validates empathy, fairness, and moral decentralization. The enemy is not personalized as a group or institution; rather, the villain is neglect, irresponsibility, or moral laziness. Therefore:

- The conflict is ethical, not political.
- The opposition is behavioral, not identity-based.
- The "people" are united through shared moral witnessing, not collective resentment.

Thus, populism here is quieter but potent—it is constructed through moral narration, communal appraisal, and shared ethical witnessing. Through these discursive mechanisms, Mulyadi embodies leadership not by confrontation, but by being seen doing good.

Conclusion

This study examined how Dedi Mulyadi constructs a moral populist persona through linguistic strategies in his social media videos. Focusing on the transcripts of 20 recordings, the analysis demonstrated that his populist appeal is not built through antagonistic attacks on elites—as found in typical global populism—but through ethical storytelling, empathic dialogue, and public witnessing of moral action. His discourse consistently foregrounds ordinary people as moral agents, not as symbols of victimhood or political mobilization.

The findings show three key discursive mechanisms. First, discursive polarization is reframed as a moral rather than political divide. Neglect, irresponsibility, or dishonesty—not specific institutions or elite actors—are constructed as sources of harm. Instead of blaming individuals, he critiques behaviors and bureaucratic attitudes through indirect moral commentary. This positions him as a corrective force without explicit conflict, expanding populism beyond antagonism.

Second, narrative positioning constructs Mulyadi as a caretaker and ethical elder, whose authority stems from presence, dialogue, and problem-solving rather than partisanship. Through personal stories, questions, and informal Sundanese-Indonesian speech, he situates himself alongside those he helps, adopting a role grounded in shared community norms. This relational stance creates political intimacy without invoking electoral identity.

Third, moral evaluation is distributed across the community, as public witnesses verbally affirm his actions, transforming private assistance into shared moral knowledge. This invoked judgment consolidates his ethos indirectly, making legitimacy a co-authored achievement between the leader and the people. Rather than mobilizing mass anger, the crowd participates by narrating morality. Across these mechanisms, populism emerges as an ethical performance through language. It is enacted in small, observable acts that foreground compassion, reciprocity, and cultural rootedness. The "people" are neither a mass needing mobilization nor a collective enemy of elites; they are co-participants in moral meaning-making. This form of moral populism suggests

a broader theoretical re-interpretation: populism can be sustained on ethics-based identification, without the antagonistic binaries that dominate Western models.

This research highlights the importance of linguistic analysis for understanding non-confrontational political styles in the Global South. It demonstrates that populism is not bound to crisis rhetoric or hostility, but may instead be embedded in cultural relationality and everyday care. Future research could expand this approach to include comparative analyses across Indonesian regions, the role of visual semiotics in constructing local populist leadership, or how audiences interpret and circulate these moral discourses online. Ultimately, the case of Dedi Mulyadi invites scholars to reconsider populist communication beyond conflict, showing how political authority can be built not through division, but through shared ethics, narrative participation, and linguistic intimacy.

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APPENDIX A

No.	Full video title (as on YouTube)	Upload date (YouTube)	Channel	URL
1	FITRA BERCERITA PAHITNYA JADI GOJEK – SERING DISEBUT BAWA MOTOR SAMBIL MABOK – MENANGIS DIPELUKAN KDM	18 Jan 2023	Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pT8ISnN3U5Y
2	TANGANI SAMPAH MENUMPUK DI JALAN CAGAK SUBANG – TIBA-TIBA SEORANG WANITA MENANGIS DAN PELUK KDM	5 Feb 2023	Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UQ5UVZhZHI
3	MERASA JALAN DIAMBIL KIOS PASAR CIASEM – WARGA BERSITEGANG DENGAN PERWAKILAN PENGEMBANG	8 Feb 2023	Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjuF2zErRBQ
4	TEH HANI MASAK SAHUR HANYA NASI DAN GARAM – SUAMI JUAL ASEUPAN 10 RIBU DIUTANG	23 Mar 2023	Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q624JtGQuis
5	KI AMID HIDUPI DIRI DENGAN JUALAN DAUN PISANG DAN KANGKUNG – TIAP MALAM RAJIN BACA QUR'AN	22 Apr 2023	Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKW3use-baxk
6	AYAHNYA MEN1NGG4L – 3 B0CAH SD JUALAN TISU – BISA BELI BERAS DAN PUNYA TABUNGAN	24 Jun 2023	Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZGC2IG6nt0
7	KISAH SI BUNGSU – KUKUH JUAL SATE HARGA 2 RIBU – BISA URUS 100 YATIM DAN NABUNG 80 JUTA PER BULAN	6 Aug 2023	Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsUp7MCsF5Q
8	WARGA GELISAH JEMBATAN DARURAT MAU DIBONGKAR – KE SEKOLAH KEMBALI NYEBRANG CITARUM	24 Aug 2023	Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GG8lZyiAf8

9	DI SAAT SIBUK SERANG PRABOWO– GIBRAN – KDM HENTIKAN PERJAL-ANAN BANTU KORB4N KEC3LAKA4N	5 Nov 2023	Kang Dedi Mul-yadi Channel	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56ICF4s1SfY
10	NGGAK PUNYA BERAS – EMAK TURUN KE SAWAH BABAT RUMPUT – PILIH PRABOWO BERKAH NONTON WAYANG	15 Nov 2023	Kang Dedi Mul-yadi Channel	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kprWLsbnuNw
11	BAPAK D1PENJ4R4 - DUA BOCAH KERJA KERAS BANTU IBUNYA UN-TUK BELI BERAS	21 Nov 2023	Kang Dedi Mul-yadi Channel	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bpFhaFYTmGI
12	ANTAR CENDOL DARI SUKABUMI – MESKI KAKI TIDAK SEMPURNA TIAP HARI MANJAT DUREN	1 Jan 2024	Kang Dedi Mul-yadi Channel	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbxzWQpR86Y