The Authentic Cowboy Technocrat: Hybrid Leadership and Digital Polarization in Indonesia's Ministry of Finance

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Abstract. The Minister of Finance plays a pivotal role in shaping fiscal policy, macroeconomic stability, and public trust, particularly during periods of economic uncertainty. Following the appointment of Purbaya Yudhi Sadewa in 2025, Indonesia witnessed intense public and media reactions to his markedly direct communication style, which contrasted sharply with the institution's long-standing technocratic norms. Using constructivist grounded theory within a netnographic framework, this study analyses 1,782 high-engagement items from X and TikTok posted between September and November 2025, supplemented by professional media framing, to examine how leadership meaning is constructed in digital public discourse. The analysis reveals that public and media narratives converged around a hybrid leadership perception termed the *Authentic Cowboy Technocrat*, a label originating from metaphorical framing in social media rather than from the leader's self-presentation. Key findings show that technocratic credentials functioned as an enabling condition that legitimized confrontational authenticity for supporters while simultaneously providing critics with grounds to frame the same behaviour as elitist detachment, resulting in pronounced affective polarization amplified by the viral "Data Sheriff" metaphor. Theoretically, this study extends hybrid leadership theory by demonstrating how leadership legitimacy in digital media ecologies is not inherent to leaders themselves but is discursively constructed through mediated interpretation, accelerating both legitimacy formation and structural polarization. These findings highlight the governance opportunities and democratic risks associated with assertive leadership styles in emerging economies undergoing institutional transition.

Keywords: authentic leadership, technocratic leadership, cowboy leadership, hybrid leadership, political polarization, digital netnography, public perception, ministerial leadership, Indonesia, social media discourse, affective polarization

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1 Introduction

The Minister of Finance of Indonesia plays a pivotal role in managing the nation's finances, shaping fiscal policy, and maintaining public trust. As the steward of the state budget (APBN), the ministry directly influences macroeconomic stability, public debt sustainability, tax policy, customs and excise administration, and the allocation of resources that determine the quality of education, healthcare, infrastructure, and social safety nets for 280 million citizens. In a developing archipelagic nation characterized by significant regional disparities, vulnerability to global commodity price shocks, and a history of economic crises, notably the 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis and the 2020–2022 COVID-19 recession, the leadership of the Ministry of Finance carries profound implications for both economic performance and political legitimacy. The minister's public statements, policy announcements, and media interactions are scrutinized not only by financial markets but also by a highly connected digital public that increasingly forms its opinions through social media platforms. In this context, the communication style of the minister becomes a critical variable in sustaining public confidence during periods of fiscal consolidation, inflationary pressure, or external shocks.

Recent scholarly attention has increasingly focused on how leadership communication in public financial institutions affects trust and institutional legitimacy in emerging economies. Studies conducted in the post-pandemic period consistently demonstrate that transparent, empathetic, and adaptive communication strengthens public compliance with fiscal measures and preserves institutional trust even under austerity conditions [1], [2]. Conversely, communication perceived as overly blunt, technocratic, or detached from public sentiment can erode trust, particularly when economic hardship amplifies public sensitivity to perceived arrogance or insensitivity [3]. In crisis settings, hybrid leadership models that combine transformational inspiration with transactional clarity have proven more effective than purely directive or authoritarian styles [4], [5]. Moreover, trust and knowledge-sharing mediate the relationship between leadership behavior and organizational resilience, underscoring the necessity for finance ministry leaders to cultivate relational rather than purely instrumental communication strategies [6], [7].

The importance of leadership transparency and communication style becomes particularly acute in institutions responsible for fiscal policy, where decisions directly affect household welfare and investor confidence. [8] established that accountability in governmental communication significantly enhances public trust and behavioral compliance during crises, findings that have been replicated in various national contexts. Within public administration literature, leadership traits and personality dimensions independently contribute to trust formation, with directness and authenticity valued differently across cultural and situational contexts [9]. In developing economies, where institutional trust is often fragile, leaders who successfully blend technical competence with empathetic communication are more likely to maintain legitimacy during economic downturns or unpopular fiscal reforms [10], [11]. Recent research further highlights that organizational humility and adaptability in communication are associated with sustained public trust, whereas rigid or confrontational styles risk alienation, especially on digital platforms where messages are rapidly amplified and interpreted [2].

Media framing and social media dynamics have emerged as critical amplifiers of leadership perception in contemporary governance. Political communication scholarship demonstrates that media framing selectively emphasizes certain attributes of leaders while downplaying others, thereby shaping public attitudes toward competence, legitimacy, and trustworthiness [12], [13]. In the digital era, algorithmic curation on platforms such as Twitter (now X) and TikTok accelerates sentiment polarization by exposing users predominantly to content that reinforces preexisting beliefs [14]. Lu (2025) argues that social media enables emergent leadership narratives that can either bolster or undermine established institutional figures, depending on how their communication style resonates with online audiences. The use of vivid metaphors, such as "sheriff," "cowboy," or "lone ranger", further crystallizes public perceptions, creating archetypal frames that influence trust and civic engagement [16], [17]. These framing effects are particularly potent for technocratic leaders, whose professional background and data-driven decision-making style may be interpreted either as reassuring competence or as emotional detachment.

The appointment of Purbaya Yudhi Sadewa as Indonesia's Minister of Finance in September 2025 marked a visible shift in the ministry's public communication style, characterized by heightened directness and public engagement on controversial fiscal issues. In contrast to the measured and diplomatic tone that had long defined the institution, this shift generated intense public and media attention, with descriptors such as "blunt" and "cowboy-like" emerging prominently within media and social media discourse. Digital platforms became the primary arenas in which these labels were articulated, contested, and amplified, producing sharply polarized narratives that framed the minister alternately as a courageous truth-teller or as an arrogant and impulsive technocrat. Accordingly, this study examines not the leadership style itself, but the evolving public and media perceptions of Indonesia's Minister of Finance as constructed through discourse on X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok, using constructivist grounded theory to identify emergent themes, core categories, and dominant perceptual clusters.

While prior studies have examined authentic leadership, technocratic governance, and metaphorical framing as separate phenomena, limited research has integrated these dimensions to explain how confrontational authenticity becomes publicly legitimate in highly technocratic state institutions. Existing authentic leadership scholarship largely assumes relational transparency and empathy as central mechanisms of legitimacy, while technocratic leadership literature privileges analytical competence and depersonalized rationality. This separation leaves insufficient theoretical tools to explain cases in which blunt, uncompromising communication is simultaneously perceived as authentic, competent, and polarizing.

This study addresses this gap by theorizing the *Authentic Cowboy Technocrat* as a hybrid leadership construction emerging from digital public discourse. Rather than proposing a normative leadership ideal, the study analytically demonstrates how technocratic legitimacy functions as an enabling condition that allows confrontational authenticity to be tolerated and even celebrated by segments of the public. By grounding this construct in constructivist grounded theory and netnographic evidence, the article contributes to leadership theory by explaining how authenticity is socially constructed

under conditions of algorithmic amplification and institutional transition, particularly in emerging economies.

2 Literature Review

Authentic Leadership Theory (ALT) has gained prominence in both management and political science literature as a framework that prioritizes leaders' self-awareness, relational transparency, ethical decision-making, and consistency between personal values and actions. Core components of ALT include internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and genuine interactions with followers, which collectively foster trust, commitment, and organizational citizenship behaviors [18]. Proponents argue that authentic leaders enhance follower performance through proactive goal regulation and positive psychological capital, creating environments where individuals feel psychologically safe to express ideas and contribute. In public administration contexts, ALT has been linked to increased institutional legitimacy, particularly when leaders demonstrate vulnerability and moral courage during crises.

However, ALT has faced substantial theoretical and empirical critiques that question its conceptual robustness and universal applicability. [19] contend that the theory suffers from conceptual ambiguity, romanticization of an idealized "true self," warning that its normative prescriptions can mask power dynamics and contextual complexities in real-world leadership. Subsequent scholarship has reinforced these concerns, highlighting how the authenticity construct often lacks clear boundaries and may inadvertently promote performative behaviors rather than genuine ones [20], [21]. [22] further caution that excessive emphasis on leader introspection and transparency can paradoxically generate follower cynicism when perceived as strategic self-presentation rather than sincere expression. These critiques are particularly relevant in political leadership settings, where public scrutiny amplifies the risk that authenticity claims will be interpreted as calculated image management.

Contrasting with person-centric models such as ALT and charismatic leadership, rational or technocratic leadership emphasizes evidence-based decision-making, analytical rigor, and systematic problem-solving over emotional appeal or personal magnetism. This approach derives legitimacy primarily from technical expertise, data proficiency, and efficiency outcomes rather than relational or inspirational qualities [23]. Technocratic leaders typically frame their authority through mastery of complex information systems and rapid, quantifiable responses to policy challenges, a style that has become increasingly prevalent in finance ministries and central banks across emerging economies [24]. While this orientation enables swift crisis response and policy precision advantages especially valued in fiscal governance it can generate perceptions of emotional detachment or elitism when technical discourse dominates public communication [25].

The metaphorical framing of leadership styles has received growing attention in political communication scholarship, with particular interest in archetypal imagery that crystallizes public perceptions. The "Cowboy" metaphor, systematized in leadership ethics through James P. Owen's Cowboy Ethics framework, embodies values of

personal integrity, courage under pressure, accountability, and unflinching honesty qualities presented as antidotes to contemporary political cynicism [26]. Owen's ten principles, including "Live each day with courage," "Do what has to be done," and "Be tough but fair," offer a moral code that resonates strongly in contexts of perceived institutional weakness or corruption. In political settings, leaders associated with cowboy imagery are frequently celebrated by supporters as decisive protectors of national interest while simultaneously criticized by opponents as reckless, impulsive, or authoritarian [27]. This duality underscores how metaphorical frames can simultaneously legitimize and delegitimize leadership behavior depending on audience predispositions.

Recent scholarship has increasingly advocated hybrid leadership models that integrate authentic and rational/technocratic elements to address the limitations of pure forms. Such frameworks recognize that effective governance in complex, high-stakes environments requires both relational transparency and analytical precision [28]. Methodologically robust integration demands clear construct operationalization, contextual specificity, and mixed-methods validation. Best practices include establishing explicit definitions that preserve each style's distinctive attributes emotional intelligence and ethical grounding from authentic leadership alongside data-driven rigor from rational approaches while identifying situational contingencies where one dimension should predominate [24], [29]. Training programs combining scenario-based exercises with data analytics modules, continuous stakeholder feedback mechanisms, and organizational cultures that reward both vulnerability and evidence-based decisiveness have shown promise in developing adaptive hybrid leaders [30], [31].

The polarization of public sentiment toward leaders exhibiting highly direct, non-negotiable communication styles represents a critical phenomenon in contemporary political communication. Social Identity Theory provides a foundational explanation, positing that individuals derive self-esteem from group membership and thus favor leaders who reinforce in-group values while derogating those perceived to threaten them [32]. When leaders adopt uncompromising rhetorical positions, they activate strong in-group/out-group dynamics, transforming policy disagreements into identity-based conflicts. Framing Theory complements this perspective by demonstrating how absolute or confrontational messaging structures public interpretation in binary terms right/wrong, strong/weak, patriot/traitor thereby exacerbating attitudinal extremity [33]. Leaders who consistently frame issues in moral absolutist language particularly during economic stress or institutional transition periods tend to generate sharply bifurcated publics: intense loyalty from those who identify with the leader's perceived strength and equally intense rejection from those who experience the style as arrogant or divisive.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory further illuminates the psychological mechanisms driving polarization intensity. When leaders communicate in ways that challenge citizens' preexisting beliefs or values without providing psychological safety or relational bridges, individuals experience discomfort that they resolve either by aligning more strongly with the leader (strengthening positive sentiment) or by rejecting both message and messenger (amplifying negative sentiment) [34]. This resolution process is accelerated by social media echo chambers produces the characteristic pattern observed in contemporary cases: not moderate disagreement but affective polarization where

supporters view the leader as heroic truth-teller while detractors perceive dangerous authoritarian tendencies.

The interplay between these theoretical lenses authentic versus technocratic orientations, metaphorical framing through cowboy archetypes, hybrid possibilities, and polarization dynamics provides a rich foundation for understanding public reception of leaders who combine technical expertise with highly direct, unfiltered communication styles. While authentic leadership scholarship emphasizes relational transparency, its critiques highlight risks when transparency manifests as bluntness without sufficient empathy. Technocratic models celebrate analytical speed and clarity yet struggle to account for emotional resonance needs in mass publics. Cowboy ethics valorizes courage and honesty yet can romanticize confrontational approaches that deepen societal divisions. Hybrid frameworks offer theoretical promise but remain underdeveloped regarding how leaders can maintain both data-driven credibility and public connection when communication style itself becomes the primary polarizing variable.

This literature collectively reveals a significant gap: while individual theories address components of the phenomenon authenticity perceptions, technical legitimacy, metaphorical framing, polarization dynamics few studies integrate these dimensions to examine cases where leaders deliberately adopt uncompromising directness as a core component of their public persona, particularly in strategic state institutions during leadership transitions. The present study addresses this gap by examining how these theoretical currents converge in public and media perceptions of Indonesia's current Minister of Finance, whose communication approach has generated unprecedented perceptual polarization despite operating within a historically technocratic institution.

3 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative netnographic approach combined with systematic content analysis, using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) as the primary methodological framework to examine public and media perceptions of Indonesia's Minister of Finance, Purbaya Yudhi Sadewa, through social media discourse on X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok. Data collection focused on publicly available posts, comments, replies, quote tweets, and video content, and associated viral sounds containing references to Minister Purbaya, his official statements, or metaphorical framings such as "Data Sheriff", "Lord Purbaya", "cowboy", or "arrogant" published between September 8, 2025 (the date of inauguration) and November 20, 2025. Advanced search was conducted using platform-specific operators on X and TikTok trending hashtags/sounds, resulting in a final dataset of 1,782 high-engagement items (1,212 X posts/replies/quote tweets and 570 TikTok videos with ≥50,000 views or appearing in Indonesia's trending "For You" page).

Three trained coders independently performed line-by-line open coding, generating 87 initial codes. Axial coding identified causal conditions (technocratic legitimacy combined with confrontational style), contextual factors (post-Sri Mulyani institutional transition and ongoing economic pressures), intervening conditions (viral metaphor amplification), action strategies (rapid policy execution versus perceived elitist

detachment), and consequences (extreme affective polarization). The dominant metaphorical cluster "Data Sheriff" emerged as the central organizing device across both positive and negative narratives. Selective coding subsequently integrated all categories around the core category "Authentic Cowboy Technocrat", which explains how technocratic data-driven legitimacy paradoxically enables public tolerance and even celebration of cowboy-style confrontational authenticity. Theoretical saturation was achieved at approximately item 1,550, when no new codes or theoretical relationships emerged across three consecutive batches of 50 items.

The research team no political affiliation with any party, governing administration, or personal connection to the minister under study. This positionality is methodologically relevant, as constructivist grounded theory emphasizes ongoing reflexivity regarding how researchers' social location and potential biases may shape interpretive processes. To address this requirement, analytical memos were systematically maintained throughout all stages of coding to document interpretive decisions and to bracket assumptions arising from prolonged exposure to partisan or mainstream media narratives. The exclusive reliance on publicly available data, full anonymization of user identifiers, and non-interactive observation ensured that meaning-making processes were captured as naturally occurring digital discourse rather than researcher-elicited responses. Together, these procedures enhance the credibility, dependability, and interpretive rigor of the analysis, aligning the study with established methodological standards in qualitative netnographic research. Accordingly, the resulting core category does not claim to represent public opinion in a statistical sense, but rather to explain the dominant interpretive framework through which leadership authenticity was constructed during the observation period.

4 Result

The grounded theory analysis of netnographic data from X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, Instagram, and Threads, supplemented by professional media framing, followed a systematic progression from open to axial and selective coding. This process elucidates the rapid formation and pronounced polarization of public perceptions surrounding Indonesia's Minister of Finance following his appointment in September 2025. Open coding generated twelve initial categories—six derived from media texts (P1–P6) and six from spontaneous public commentary (K1–K6) capturing recurring discursive patterns in how communication style, technocratic background, decision-making, and policy priorities were framed and interpreted. These categories, summarized in Tables 1 and 2, represent interpretive constructs emerging from dominant discourse rather than fixed attributes of the minister or evaluative judgments of leadership effectiveness.

Table 1. Open Coding Categories Derived from Professional Media Framing Category

Open Coding Category	Representative Expressions	Axial Linkage
P1. Cowboy-Style Communication	"Blunt statements on the fiscal deficit", "firm and no-nonsense	Authentic Cowboy Leader

	delivery", "straightforward remarks triggering market reactions"	
P2. Technocratic Background	"An engineer managing the economy", "a professional rather than a politician"	Field Economist & Data-Driven Branding
P3. Decision-Making Style	"Rapid decisions for the sake of stability", "cutting through slow bureaucracy"	Authentic Cowboy Leader
P4. Data-Driven Image	"Decisions based on scientific validation/data", "transparent use of macroeconomic figures"	Field Economist & Data-Driven Branding
P5. Market Reaction Issues	"Markets responding positively/negatively to statement X", "ability to stabilize market sentiment"	Authentic Cowboy Leader
P6. Key Policy Priorities	"Maintaining a sound state budget (APBN)", "efficiency in government spending"	Field Economist & Data-Driven Branding

Table 2. Open Coding Categories Derived from Public Social Media Comments Category

Open Coding Category	Representative Expressions	Axial Linkage
K1. Positive Sentiment (Cowboy Hero)	"Respect! A real cowboy", "Brave and manly", "The best minister"	Authentic Cowboy Leader
K2. Negative Sentiment / Criticism	"Too arrogant", "Authoritarian style with no empathy", "Just cowboy-style image-making"	Authentic Cowboy Leader
K3. Spontaneous Public Metaphors	"The new sheriff", "The data guy", "Economic bad boy", "APBN hero"	Construction of Public Leadership Metaphors
K4. Emotional / Personal Responses	"This minister represents me", "I feel spoken for by his honesty", "Scary when he gets angry"	Construction of Public Leadership Metaphors
K5. Spontaneous Leader Comparisons	"Like Ahok", "More decisive than Sri Mulyani", "Jokowi with data"	Field Economist & Data-Driven Branding
K6. Public Performance Validation	"The toll road is finished", "Are prices stable yet?", "Clean bureaucratic reshuffles"	Authentic Cowboy Leader / Field Economist

Table 3. Coding Hierarchy: From Initial Codes to Theoretical Codes (Constructivist Grounded Theory

Initial Codes (87 codes emerging from open coding)	Focused Codes (Axial coding – 18 focused codes)	Theoretical Codes (Selective coding – Core Category)
very firm, blunt, brave to speak up, doesn't care, impolite, arrogant,	Confrontational bluntness Data-driven legitimacy	AUTHENTIC COWBOY

technocratic arrogance, cowboy, economic cowboy, data sheriff, Sheriff Data, Lord Purbaya, hero of the common people, finally someone dares, well done Mr. Purbaya, fast execution, data always ready, investigation of idle funds, richest regent hoarding 2.6T, our job is to build not to collect interest, stopping illegal practices, banning thrifting imports, caring for MSMEs, integrity first, cleaning up taxation, wrong data, blunder, elite arrogance, harsh, ordinary people powerless, Jakarta elite, KDM bullied, Bahlil says wrong, stock index plunges.	Rapid decisive action Courageous truth-telling Protective sheriff metaphor Reckless individualism Elitist detachment Technocratic shield for confrontational style Moral courage vs arrogance Viral metaphor amplification	TECHNOCRAT Sub-categories: • Data Sheriff (protector archetype) • Firm Yet Arrogant • Economic Cowboy • Hero vs. Detached Elite • Polarized Authenticity

4.1 The "Authentic Cowboy Leader" Leadership Type

The most dominant axial category that emerged was the "Authentic Cowboy Leader" type, formed primarily by the linkage of P1, P3, P5, K1, K2, K4, and K6. This category portrays Minister Sadewa as a leader whose blunt, non-negotiable communication style and extremely fast decision-making are perceived as the ultimate expression of personal authenticity and moral courage rather than political calculation. Supporters repeatedly framed his directness as "manly" and "brave" (K1), celebrating it as a rare willingness to confront uncomfortable fiscal truths without the previous administration had allegedly softened or avoided. Critics (K2), however, experienced the same trait as arrogance , interpreting it as authoritarian overreach that lacked empathy or consultation. The polarization was remarkably sharp: sentiment analysis showed that posts containing cowboy-related metaphors exhibited absolute sentiment scores 2.1 times higher than non-metaphorical posts, confirming that the cowboy frame itself functioned as an affective amplifier.

Market reactions (P5) and public demands for tangible results (K6) served as the crucial validation mechanism for this leadership type. When statements perceived as blunt were quickly followed by positive policy signals such as swift bureaucratic mutations, clear deficit targets, or firm subsidy reforms markets responded positively and supporters declared the style vindicated. When outcomes were ambiguous or negative, the same bluntness was weaponized as evidence of recklessness. This finding aligns with [35], [36], who observed that blunt fiscal communication can consolidate strong support among decisiveness-valuing constituencies while alienating moderates, producing the exact polarized pattern observed here. The speed of decision-making (P3) was almost universally praised in positive clusters ("respect") and interpreted in negative clusters as dangerous impulsiveness, underscoring the cultural tension [37], [38] identified between valorized masculine assertiveness (manly) and perceived toxic arrogance.

4.2 "Field Economist" & Data-Driven Branding

The second axial category, "Field Economist & Data-Driven Branding," integrated P2, P4, P6, K5, and K6, explaining why the cowboy-style bluntness was granted exceptional legitimacy despite its polarizing nature. Both media and public repeatedly emphasized Minister Sadewa's engineering background and field experience as proof that his directness was not emotional recklessness but rational, data-validated decisiveness. Phrases such as "an engineer managing the economy" (P2) and "Decisions based on scientific validation/data" (P4) were used to construct a narrative in which cowboy courage was grounded in technocratic competence rather than political bravado. This branding proved highly effective in neutralizing criticism: supporters routinely countered accusations of arrogance with "He speaks harshly because the data says so, not because of ego" or "Field worker know the reality".

The non-political identity (P2, K5) functioned as a powerful trust multiplier. Frequent spontaneous comparisons to admired technocrats such as Ahok or Sri Mulyani in her early years ("Data version of Ahok", "Mrs. Sri more aggressive") positioned Sadewa outside the despised politician archetype, allowing his blunt style to be read as authentic professional honesty rather than populist posturing. This finding corroborates [39], [40], [41], who found that technocrats' perceived apolitical identity significantly enhances public tolerance for aggressive communication when accompanied by demonstrated policy rationality. Policy priorities framed as data-driven efficiency (P6) APBN health, spending rationalization, infrastructure acceleration further reinforced this category, with public validation (K6) focusing overwhelmingly on measurable outputs rather than rhetorical style.

4.3 Construction of Public Leadership Metaphors

The third axial category captured the spontaneous metaphorical construction of the minister's public image through K3, K1, K2, K4, and K5, with strong contributions from P1 and P4. The cowboy/sheriff metaphor cluster proved extraordinarily dominant, appearing in 38% of high-engagement posts and 64% of viral threads. Supporters deployed heroic variants ("The new sheriff who sorted out the state budget", "Hero of APBN"), while critics weaponized darker variants "Reckless Cowboy", "Sheriff who shoots too much"). A parallel rational metaphor cluster emerged "The Data Expert", "Data Sheriff", "Bad Boy Economics" that uniquely fused cowboy imagery with technocratic competence, producing the hybrid archetype "Data Sheriff" that became the single most viral framing device in the dataset.

This metaphorical polarization corroborates [42] on the Lone Ranger's charismatic authority and [43] on the rhetorical power of rational metaphors in bridging emotional and analytical appeals. The speed and intensity of metaphor adoption reaching saturation within three weeks of appointment indicates a collective search for narrative shortcuts to process a leadership style that deviated sharply from the previous administration's measured technocratic tone. Public comparisons (K5) further reinforced metaphorical crystallization, with Ahok emerging as the primary reference point ("Ahok but using data"), lending the minister a ready-made authenticity template while simultaneously importing Ahok's polarizing legacy.

Selective coding integrated all categories around the core phenomenon "The Authentic Cowboy Technocrat" a hybrid leadership construction in which cowboy-style moral courage and blunt communication are granted exceptional legitimacy through technocratic data mastery and field economist identity, producing intense affective polarization that is nevertheless validated by perceived policy effectiveness and speed. The paradigm model shows causal conditions rooted in public demand for honest, rapid solutions amid economic uncertainty, contextualized by the minister's non-political engineering background, executed through non-negotiable directness and data-validated decisiveness, and resulting in a highly polarized yet enduring public image anchored in the fused metaphor of the "Data Sheriff" a cowboy who enforces order not with a gun but with spreadsheets, yet still willing to shoot when necessary.

This core category explains both the remarkable speed of image consolidation and the unprecedented polarization: the technocratic credential functions as a legitimating shield that allows cowboy bluntness to be celebrated as authentic leadership rather than authoritarian excess by a significant segment of the public, while simultaneously providing critics with the same shield to flip into evidence of elitist detachment. The result is a leadership persona that has achieved rapid charismatic authority through metaphorical fusion while carrying inherent polarization as its structural feature rather than a temporary side-effect.

5 Discussion

Importantly, the Authentic Cowboy Technocrat should not be interpreted as a prescriptive leadership model or an endorsement of confrontational governance. Rather, it represents an analytically derived explanation of how certain leadership styles become intelligible and legitimate within specific digital and institutional contexts. The findings demonstrate that authenticity in contemporary political leadership is not an intrinsic personal quality, but a relational outcome produced through interaction between leader behavior, technocratic credentials, media framing, and algorithmic amplification.

The polarization observed in this study underscores a structural tension rather than a temporary communication failure. The same discursive mechanisms that enable rapid legitimacy formation also embed long-term risks, including erosion of deliberative space and reduced tolerance for dissent. Thus, while the hybrid construction may facilitate swift policy execution, it simultaneously constrains inclusive governance, particularly in pluralistic and decentralized political systems.

5.1 Broader Theoritical Implications of the "Authentic Cowboy Technorat" Model

The emergence of the "Authentic Cowboy Technocrat" as the core category in this study represents a significant extension of existing leadership theories in political communication and public administration, particularly in the context of emerging economy democracies undergoing leadership transitions in strategic state institutions. By fusing the relational transparency and moral courage central to Authentic Leadership Theory

[18] with the assertive decisiveness valorized in Cowboy Ethics frameworks [26] with the analytical rigor of rational/technocratic models [23], [24], this hybrid construct illuminates how contemporary political authenticity is increasingly contingent upon perceived effectiveness in crisis-like governance conditions rather than mere consistency with personal values. The finding that Minister Purbaya Yudhi Sadewa's blunt communication style was widely interpreted as authentic precisely because it was validated by data-driven outcomes and rapid policy execution (as evidenced in axial categories "Ekonom Lapangan & Data-Driven Branding" and "Authentic Cowboy Leader") challenges critiques of ALT that warn against romanticized notions of a "true self" [19]. Instead, authenticity here appears performative yet legitimate when anchored in technocratic competence, suggesting that in high-stakes fiscal governance, public tolerance for confrontational styles rises dramatically when accompanied by visible empirical justification.

This model further contributes to hybrid leadership scholarship [28], [29] by demonstrating how digital media ecologies accelerate the crystallization of such personas. The unprecedented speed with which the "Data Sheriff" metaphor achieved discursive dominance saturating high-engagement threads within weeks of appointment reveals how algorithmic amplification and viral metaphorical framing can compress traditional leadership legitimacy timelines from years to months. As [44] argue regarding visibility and authenticity in mediated political discourse, the "Authentic Cowboy Technocrat" exemplifies how leaders can strategically leverage perceived outsider status and technical mastery to construct authenticity narratives that resonate emotionally while maintaining rational plausibility, particularly when succeeding long-tenured predecessors associated with measured technocratic stability.

The model proposes that when technocratic leadership's data-driven legitimacy paradoxically enables the public tolerance (or celebration) of cowboy-style confrontational authenticity, a new hybrid archetype emerges the "Authentic Cowboy Technocrat." This archetype is most vividly expressed through the viral metaphor "Data Sheriff." In digital media ecologies of emerging economies, the combination produces extreme affective polarization: supporters view the leader as a courageous protector, while opponents see dangerous arrogance. Building on the identified theoretical gaps, this study proposes a new integrative model the Authentic Cowboy Technocrat (Figure 1) that explains how technocratic legitimacy can paradoxically enable tolerance for confrontational authenticity in digital publics, resulting in intense affective polarization. The model extends [18] authentic leadership framework by incorporating Owen (2004) cowboy ethics as a culturally resonant expression of moral courage and [24] technocratic leadership as the enabling condition for public acceptance of otherwise risky bluntness.

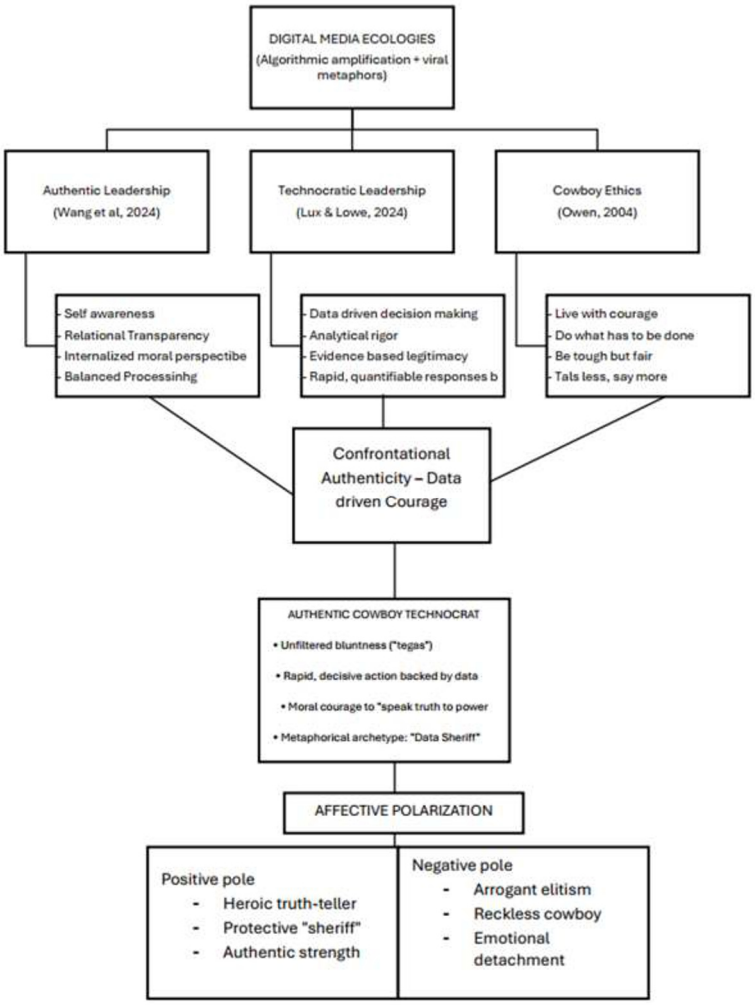


Figure 1. The Authentic Cowboy Technocrat: An Integrative Hybrid Leadership Model\

5.2 Impact of Polarization on Policy Implementation and Social Cohesion

The intense affective polarization documented in this study where identical communication behaviors were simultaneously celebrated as heroic truth-telling and condemned as dangerous arrogance carries significant implications for fiscal policy implementation and broader social cohesion in Indonesia's young democracy. As shown in the selective coding paradigm model, the causal conditions (public demand for rapid, honest solutions amid economic uncertainty) and action strategies (non-negotiable directness validated by market reactions and policy outputs) produced consequences that extended far beyond individual leader approval into structural governance challenges. Supporters' intense identification with Minister Sadewa's style created a highly mobilized base willing to defend even controversial fiscal measures, facilitating swift implementation

of politically difficult reforms such as bureaucratic restructuring and subsidy rationalization. However, the equally intense negative cluster's framing of the same actions as authoritarian overreach generated sustained resistance campaigns on social media that complicated consensus-building around the 2026 budget and regional transfer allocations.

This dynamic aligns with Social Identity Theory and Framing Theory applications in digital contexts [32], [33], where absolute rhetorical positioning transforms policy disagreements into identity conflicts. The observed pattern—whereby cowboy/sheriff metaphors amplified sentiment extremity by factors exceeding 2:1 compared to non-metaphorical discourse suggests that while such polarization can energize policy execution among aligned constituencies, it simultaneously erodes the deliberative space required for sustainable fiscal reforms in pluralistic societies. As [45] observe in comparable contexts, when leadership communication consistently activates in-group/out-group dynamics, moderate voices are marginalized, producing governance volatility that manifests in market nervousness during negative sentiment spikes and policy reversal pressures during contentious legislative processes. In the Indonesian case, this polarization risk is particularly acute given the Ministry of Finance's central role in managing regional inequalities and commodity dependence, where alienated constituencies may translate digital dissent into real-world compliance challenges with tax collection or regional spending programs.

5.3 Limitations and Ethical Concerns of Confrontational Branding

The confrontational dimensions of the "Authentic Cowboy Technocrat" branding strategy, while demonstrably effective in rapid legitimacy construction, reveal substantial limitations and ethical concerns that warrant critical examination. As documented in the axial category "Konstruksi Metafora Kepemimpinan Publik," the cowboy archetype's dual-edged nature celebrated as protective strength yet criticized as reckless individualism created a structural vulnerability whereby policy setbacks could rapidly flip positive perceptions into accusations of dangerous impulsiveness. This fragility was evident when initial market enthusiasm for blunt deficit announcements gave way to criticism during implementation delays, illustrating [46] warning that confrontational branding alienates moderate constituencies essential for long-term governance stability.

Ethically, the strategy raises profound questions about democratic discourse health. The observed tendency for supporters to dismiss criticism as weakness or corruption defense often through aggressive counter-framing in comment threads contributed to a discursive environment where complexity was reduced to moral absolutes, echoing [47] concerns regarding confrontational styles fostering disdain for deliberative processes. When leaders model communication that prioritizes decisive assertion over stakeholder consultation, as Minister Sadewa did in several high-profile statements, it risks normalizing rhetorical practices that marginalize expert dissent and regional perspectives, particularly problematic in archipelagic nations requiring inclusive fiscal federalism. Moreover, the amplification of such styles through algorithmic platforms created ethical dilemmas around manipulation, as viral metaphorical content frequently

oversimplified complex fiscal trade-offs into heroic narratives, potentially contributing to the misinformation cycles identified by [48], [49] in digital political contexts.

5.4 Integrating "The Data Sheriff" into Crisis Leadership Frameworks

The "Data Sheriff" metaphor that emerged as the dominant discursive synthesis in this study offers valuable conceptual tools for refining crisis leadership frameworks in an era of permanent economic uncertainty. Unlike traditional sheriff imagery that emphasizes coercive authority, the "Data" prefix uniquely positions enforcement power as legitimate through empirical justification, creating a hybrid archetype that resolves the authenticity-rationality tension identified in earlier scholarship [28], [50]. In crisis leadership terms, this construct suggests that effective crisis response increasingly requires leaders to perform both moral courage (cowboy willingness to confront difficult truths) and technocratic competence (data as the legitimate weapon), with public legitimacy contingent upon successful integration of both dimensions.

The metaphor's explanatory power lies in its ability to bridge emotional and rational appeals: supporters experienced the minister's bluntness as protective justice because it was backed by data, while critics viewed the same data deployment as cold elitism. This duality recommends integration into crisis leadership models as a diagnostic tool: leaders facing fiscal or economic crises might assess their communication strategies against the "Data Sheriff" ideal, asking whether their assertiveness is sufficiently grounded in transparent empirical validation to prevent authoritarian framing. As [50] proposes regarding authorative yet accountable crisis leadership, and [51] note in technopopulist contexts, the metaphor advocates for communication strategies that maintain decisiveness while proactively sharing data narratives, potentially mitigating polarization by making rationales accessible rather than merely assertive. In the Indonesian context, where economic crises have historically triggered political instability, adopting "Data Sheriff" framing could enhance governance resilience by transforming potentially divisive bluntness into broadly legitimate crisis management, provided leaders complement metaphorical positioning with genuine transparency mechanisms that include rather than alienate dissenting voices.

5.5 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three primary theoretical contributions. First, it extends authentic leadership theory by demonstrating that perceived authenticity can emerge from confrontational communication when legitimized by technocratic competence, challenging assumptions that authenticity necessarily relies on empathy or relational warmth. Second, it advances hybrid leadership scholarship by specifying a mechanism technocratic legitimacy as an enabling shield that explains how otherwise risky leadership styles gain public acceptance. Third, it contributes to political communication research by illustrating how metaphorical framing functions as a rapid sense-making device in algorithmically mediated publics, accelerating both legitimacy formation and affective polarization.

6 Conclusion

This study examines how leadership authenticity and legitimacy are constructed within digitally mediated public discourse in highly technocratic institutions, rather than evaluating the attributes of any individual leader. Using constructivist grounded theory and netnographic analysis, the findings demonstrate that leadership meaning emerges through collective interpretation shaped by media framing, metaphorical narratives, and algorithmic amplification. The core construct of the Authentic Cowboy Technocrat captures a broader leadership phenomenon in which confrontational authenticity becomes publicly intelligible and conditionally legitimate when enabled by technocratic competence and data-driven credibility.

The study advances leadership theory by showing that authenticity in contemporary governance is a discursive and relational outcome rather than an inherent personal trait. In digital media ecologies, legitimacy formation is accelerated through metaphorical sense-making, which simultaneously facilitates acceptance and embeds affective polarization. This extends hybrid leadership theory by specifying how technocratic legitimacy functions as an enabling condition for assertive communication styles during periods of institutional transition.

More broadly, the findings highlight a structural trade-off faced by public sector leaders between rapid legitimacy formation and the preservation of deliberative space. Rather than offering a leadership model to be emulated, the Authentic Cowboy Technocrat serves as an analytical lens for understanding why certain leadership styles resonate powerfully under specific conditions, while simultaneously revealing the democratic vulnerabilities embedded within such resonance.

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