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Exploring Political Perceptions through Social Media: A Phenomenological Study of Personal Branding among Female Politicians in North Maluku

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Abstract: Although previous research has highlighted the role of social media in the formation of political image and image management, the majority of these studies have been conducted in Western democracies or within highly centralised political contexts. Consequently, attention to how female politicians construct authentic political identities in a culturally diverse and geographically fragmented archipelago such as North Maluku, Indonesia, remains limited. This study aims to explore how female politicians in North Maluku manage perceptions, develop personal branding, and negotiate authenticity through social media and everyday political interactions. The study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Data were collected through in-depth interviews with seven participants, comprising three key female politicians (Sherly Tjoanda, Irine Yusiana Roba Putri, and Nurlaela Syarif) and four supporting informants from political, academic and media backgrounds. Data collection took place between November 2025 and February 2026. These findings reveal three interrelated processes that shape personal branding in politics: symbolic transformation in response to challenges relating to gender and political identity; the safeguarding of perceived integrity through strategic engagement on social media; and the construction of image through the maintenance of identity consistency across online and offline interactions. This study further demonstrates that authenticity is not an inherent personal attribute, but rather the result of social negotiation brought about through sustained communication, selective self-disclosure, responses to public aspirations, and validation from the audience. Social media functions not only as a tool for visibility, but also as a mechanism for bridging the distances between islands, managing identity-based sensitivities, and strengthening political legitimacy. In practical terms, this research provides insights for female political leaders seeking to develop credible and sustainable public engagement strategies within a digitally mediated democratic environment.

Keywords: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Personal Branding, Impression Management Social Media, Female Politicians.

1. Introduction

The emergence of female politicians in North Maluku, such as Sherly Tjoanda (Neni *et al.,* 2026), Nurlaela Syarif (Neni *et al.,* 2026), and Irine Yusiana Roba Putri (Siagian, 2025), marks a significant shift in the local political landscape. Sherly, who replaced her husband as a gubernatorial candidate following his death, utilised social media to build her public image through empathetic and modern communication. Sherly's success in garnering public support, particularly from mothers and women's communities, demonstrates social media as a tool for shaping personal branding that not only introduces a political figure but also connects them with the audience through relatable narratives (Aulia *et al.,* 2026; Qadaruddin *et al.,* 2026). Similarly, Nurlaela and Irine, with their inclusive communication style focused on social advocacy, have successfully built a rapport with the public through digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. All three utilise social media to present themselves as responsive, empathetic leaders attuned to the needs of the community, whilst also highlighting social issues relevant to the daily lives of the people of North Maluku.

However, behind the popularity built through this creative messaging lies a challenge and criticism of image-building practices (Reynolds, 1965; Schill, 2012), which are often seen as tools for manipulating the public. In the

context of North Maluku society, which tends to value traditional and normative values, the personal branding of these female politicians has sparked heated debate, both from supporters and political critics (Finneman *et al.,* 2019; van Zoonen, 2006). These female politicians not only face challenges in managing their self-image but also contend with gender stereotypes that often limit women's political space. This study aims to explore how impression management through social media can serve as an effective strategy in shaping an authentic political identity for women that is accepted by the public, whilst simultaneously overcoming existing social barriers. The phenomenological approach in this study provides insights into how female politicians' subjective experiences in building personal branding through social media create new spaces in local politics, which are directly linked to the hopes and aspirations of the community.

North Maluku offers a unique setting for examining the self-image of female politicians, as political communication in this province takes place within an archipelagic society that is sensitive to issues of identity and steeped in history. Known as the 'Land of a Thousand Islands', North Maluku comprises 1,474 islands, of which only 89 are inhabited, whilst the remaining 1,385 remain uninhabited (Admin, 2020). The province is characterised by vast maritime territories, resulting in geographical fragmentation and uneven physical connectivity between communities. In this context, social media serves not only as a campaign tool but also as a vital mechanism for overcoming spatial barriers, maintaining ongoing communication, and preserving a symbolic closeness between political actors and citizens scattered across various islands. At the same time, political competition in North Maluku is influenced by ethnic and religious identities (Kambo, 2018), historical affiliations (Deni & Rukmawati, 2025; Purnamasari, 2025), and the still-strong symbolic influence of the Sultanates of Ternate and Tidore (Christomy & Nazarudin, 2021). These conditions make the construction of a political image more complex than in regions where electoral image-building is primarily mediated by party structures or conventional mass media. For female politicians, who must simultaneously navigate gender-based expectations, religious differences and the boundaries of local identity, personal branding is an ongoing process of negotiating legitimacy, visibility and public trust across various levels of social recognition.

Studies on personal branding and image management in the context of female politicians highlight the importance of social media as a strategic tool for building a political image, but also reveal gender-related challenges and image-related risks that can either limit or strengthen women's positions in politics. Research by Fountaine (2017) and Alhaimer (2023) reveals that female politicians, both in New Zealand and Kuwait, utilise digital platforms to strengthen their personal branding by highlighting attributes such as empathy, openness, and closeness to their audience. In this context, the use of social media serves not only as a means of communication but also as a space for identity negotiation, where female politicians can present themselves in a more authentic and relatable manner, although there are often consequences associated with an image-building strategy focused on creating a 'likable' impression (Fountaine, 2017). Furthermore, research by (Thompson-Whiteside *et al.,* 2018) and Dewi (2023) identifies that elements such as femininity and impression management behaviour are key components in the management of female politicians' personal branding; however, in a male-dominated political context, this can carry the risk of "gender bias".

Existing studies highlight the importance of understanding local cultural dynamics, as demonstrated by (Heriberta *et al.,* 2024), which states that personal branding for female academics can serve as a strategic tool for visibility and leadership, although this is often unintentional. Therefore, impression management requires careful planning, taking into account the gender and socio-cultural aspects that shape voter behaviour, as well as utilising social media as a tool to respond to the needs and expectations of the public. Most existing research focuses on the political context in specific countries (New Zealand, Kuwait), with little research into similar dynamics in Indonesia, particularly in regions with markedly different cultures such as North Maluku; further research is needed to explore how female politicians in the local political context of Indonesia, particularly in regions with strong traditions and social values such as North Maluku, build and manage their personal branding on social media.

This study offers a highly contextual approach, focusing on female politicians in North Maluku, which possesses a social and cultural structure distinct from other regions in Indonesia. North Maluku boasts a rich cultural heritage influenced by factors such as ethnicity, religion, and unique local values, which are rarely explored in research concerning the personal branding of female politicians. This study aims to explore the dynamics of impression management employed by female politicians, such as Sherly Tjoanda, Nurlaela Syarif, and Irine Yusiana

Roba Putri, in shaping an authentic public image that is responsive to the needs of the community, particularly through digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. Adopting a phenomenological approach, this study will identify how female politicians' subjective experiences in constructing their self-image are influenced not only by personal and social aspects, but also by the complex interplay between gender, local culture, and social media.

2. Literature Review

In contemporary political communication studies, political identity is understood as a social construct that explains how political actors define, negotiate and present themselves in the public sphere. Political identity is no longer viewed merely as party affiliation or a formal position within government, but rather as the result of the interplay between life experiences, personal values, gender, culture and societal expectations. Refki & Faerman (2024) demonstrate that women's political identity is formed through a process of ongoing negotiation between leadership capacity and social structures that remain male-dominated. These findings are reinforced by Mohsin & Syed (2021), who found that female politicians in developing countries must continually build the legitimacy of their identity through a combination of professional competence and symbolic representation that is acceptable to the public.

Meanwhile, Aoki and Sila (Aoki & Sila, 2026) demonstrate that women's political identity in Indonesia is shaped by the interplay of local cultural factors, religion and political experience, resulting in a form of leadership that differs from that of male politicians. Nevertheless, the majority of such research still focuses on the national context or formal institutions, and thus has not yet provided much insight into how women's political identity is constructed in an archipelagic region such as North Maluku, which possesses complex geographical, ethnic and religious characteristics. Consequently, this study regards political identity as the primary foundation underpinning the process of personal branding among female politicians in building social recognition and political legitimacy.

From the perspective of impression management, political interaction is understood as a strategic process in which political actors seek to control public perception through various forms of symbolic communication. Goffman explains that individuals act like performers who manage their appearance, behaviour and the information presented to an audience in order to create a particular impression. In the context of digital communication, this practice has become increasingly prominent through the use of social media as a political stage. Lalancette & Raynauld (2019) found that Justin Trudeau's use of Instagram demonstrates how a leader's image is constructed through a combination of personal life, political activities and visual symbols that convey an impression of warmth, approachability and leadership competence

Bast (2024) study of right-wing populist politicians in Europe shows that visual strategies on Instagram are dominated by two main patterns: the cultivation of a professional image and the creation of a sense of closeness with the public. These findings suggest that successful impression management depends not only on the ability to demonstrate political competence, but also on the ability to build emotional connections with the public. However, previous research has largely focused on the context of developed nations and national political figures. Few studies have examined how image management is practised in a geographically fragmented archipelagic society with high identity sensitivities, such as North Maluku. In this context, image management functions not only as a political communication strategy but also as a mechanism for bridging geographical distances, overcoming gender stereotypes and maintaining social legitimacy within the local political environment.

The concept of personal branding has evolved as an extension of impression management theory, which emphasises the importance of creating a consistent, unique and easily recognisable public identity. Personal branding enables politicians to present themselves as figures with distinctive characteristics that set them apart from other political actors. Pérez-Curiel & Limón-Naharro (2019) demonstrate that Donald Trump successfully transformed his personal Twitter account into a primary source of political communication that not only influences public opinion but also shapes the mainstream media agenda.

The study confirms that personal branding has become a key instrument in an increasingly personalised political landscape. Furthermore, (Pich *et al.,* 2020) explain that political personal branding is an ongoing process involving identity formation, self-differentiation, the strengthening of one's public position, and the management of

relationships with the audience. In contrast to the context of Western countries, which tend to be oriented towards political individualisation, personal branding in Indonesia is often associated with the values of collectivity, social closeness, and the ability to resolve community issues. In this study, personal branding is understood as the result of a process of managing political identity, realised through consistent public communication. Sherly Tjoanda builds her brand through the image of a firm yet responsive leader; Nurlaela Syarif through openness and accessibility to the public; whilst Irine Yusiana Roba Putri demonstrates consistency as the political representative of North Maluku at the national level.

Recent literature suggests that the success of personal branding is determined not only by visibility, but also by the level of recognition of authenticity. Authenticity refers to the public's perception that a politician's presented identity aligns with their actual actions, values and experiences. (Lorenz & Tackett (2025)) found that female politicians face a double standard: they must appear competent whilst also being perceived by the public as approachable and human. In many cases, authenticity is a key factor determining the level of public trust in a politician. Study (Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018), in their phenomenological study of female entrepreneurs, found that the most effective personal branding strategies are not those that are purely self-promotional, but rather those that demonstrate vulnerability, real-life experiences and consistency of action, thereby being perceived as authentic by the audience. These findings are reinforced by Molyneux (2019), who demonstrated that women tend to construct a more authentic personal image through self-narratives and personal experiences than men do. However, research on authenticity remains dominated by the contexts of media, journalism and organisational leadership. Research into how authenticity is constructed and recognised in the political practices of women across the Indonesian archipelago remains very limited.

This study therefore fills this gap by demonstrating that the personal branding of female politicians in North Maluku is shaped not only by digital communication strategies, but also by distinctive local mechanisms that have not been extensively explored in studies focusing on more centralised or culturally homogeneous political contexts. The novelty of this research lies in its explanation that, in the North Maluku context, social media functions as a means of bridging geographical disconnections between islands, managing political sensitivities based on ethnic, religious and gender identities, and transforming the position of women or minorities into symbols of accessibility, moral accountability and inclusive leadership. Thus, this research moves beyond general claims about the usefulness of social media in building visibility, transparency and empathy, towards a more contextual understanding of how the management of digital impressions is embedded in the archipelagic geography, identity politics and symbolic political culture of North Maluku.

3. Methods

3.1 Type and Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative method using an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA). This approach was chosen because the research focuses on exploring the subjective experiences of female politicians in managing their personal branding on social media, as well as understanding how they construct their self-image within the specific local cultural context of North Maluku. Interpretative phenomenology enables the researcher to explore and understand the meaning (Conroy, 2003; Palmer *et al.*, 2010; Willis & Harvey, 2025) that individuals ascribe to their experiences, which in this case relates to how female politicians navigate the management of their public image through social media. This approach also allows researchers to understand the dynamics between personal identity, social construction, and digital media that shape female politicians' personal branding.

In this study, interpretative phenomenology is employed to explore female politicians' experiences in depth, identify key themes emerging from their interactions with social media, and examine how these experiences shape public perceptions and their political identities. This approach emphasises individual and collective understandings of how female politicians present themselves and are received in the public sphere. Through semi-structured interviews and observation, the researcher is able to capture experiences that are not merely verbal, but also involve deep subjective interpretations and reflections from each informant.

3.2 Participants and Data Sources

Table 1 summarizes the participant groups, their selection criteria, and the basis used to assess the adequacy and depth of the interview data.

Table 1. Number of Participants, Participants' Roles, Selection Criteria and Reasons for Data Saturation

Number of Participants	The Role of Participants/Informants	Criteria for Selecting Informants	Reasons Why the Data Has Reached Sufficient Saturation and Depth
3	The main informants were female politicians in North Maluku: Sherly Tjoanda, Irine Yusiana Roba Putri and Nurlaela Syarif.	They were selected on a purposive basis because they hold prominent political positions, actively use social media for political communication, and represent different experiences in executive, national legislative and local legislative politics.	Data from key informants has provided first-hand insight into how female politicians build their personal brands, manage their public image, maintain their authenticity, and draw a line between their private and public spheres in the context of digital politics.
1	Supporters from among the members of the Regional People's Representative Council.	She was selected because of her experience in local politics and her ability to provide insights into the acceptance, competition and institutional perceptions of female politicians in North Maluku.	The data corroborates the information provided by key informants regarding local political dynamics, public acceptance and the position of female politicians in a political arena that remains male-dominated.
1	Informants from the academic community and experts in Communication and Media Studies.	Selected for their academic expertise in analysing political communication practices, social media, impression management and the construction of public image.	The data provides interpretative depth regarding the concepts of personal branding, authenticity and impression management, thereby helping to validate the findings from an academic perspective.
2	Supporting informants from the media team or creative team of the main informant.	They were selected because they were directly involved in the production, selection, editing and publication of social media content by the female politicians who served as the main informants.	The data reveals the behind-the-scenes aspects of image management, including how content is designed, curated and adapted in response to public feedback. This information complements the key informants' accounts and deepens the dramaturgical analysis.
7	Total number of research participants: 3 key informants and 4 supporting informants.	All participants were selected using purposive sampling on the basis of the relevance of their experience, their proximity to the research phenomenon, and their ability to provide information regarding personal branding and the management of the public image of female politicians in North Maluku.	The data was deemed to have reached sufficient saturation and depth, as the interviews had yielded recurring patterns of meaning, particularly regarding three key issues: the use of social media to build political rapport, the management of authenticity and privacy, and the role of support teams in maintaining the consistency of public image. Additional interviews did not yield any new substantive themes, but served to reinforce and confirm the main findings.

Source: Researcher's Data Analysis, 2026

This study involved seven participants, comprising three key informants and four supporting informants. The key informants were female politicians in North Maluku who were selected on the basis of their public visibility, political roles, and active use of social media in shaping their public image. The supporting informants consisted of one member of the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), one academic expert in the field of communication and media studies, and two members of the media team directly involved in supporting the key informants' communication practices. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted between November 2025 and February 2026. The data was deemed sufficient for a phenomenological study as the interviews revealed recurring patterns of experience among the participants, particularly regarding the use of social media to build political rapport, the negotiation of authenticity and privacy, and the role of behind-the-scenes actors in maintaining the consistency of public image.

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected between November 2025 and February 2026 using in-depth semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection technique. The interviews were designed to explore the lived experiences of female politicians in North Maluku regarding personal branding, impression management, authenticity, and political communication through social media and face-to-face interactions. The semi-structured format enabled participants to narrate their experiences freely while allowing the researchers to probe emerging issues relevant to the research objectives.

The study involved seven participants consisting of three key informants and four supporting informants. The key informants were Sherly Tjoanda, Irine Yusiana Roba Putri, and Nurlaela Syarif, who were selected because of their prominent political roles and active engagement in social media communication. Supporting informants included one member of the Regional House of Representatives (DPRD), one communication and media scholar, and two media team members who were directly involved in managing political communication and digital content production. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the phenomenon under investigation and their ability to provide rich experiential accounts.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or through online communication platforms depending on participants' availability. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the objectives of the study and provided consent for participation and audio recording. During the interviews, researchers explored experiences related to self-presentation, audience engagement, media use, privacy management, public expectations, and strategies for maintaining political credibility. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented by field notes documenting contextual observations and researchers' reflections.

To enhance data credibility, information obtained from the key informants was cross-checked with supporting informants through source triangulation. Data collection continued until thematic redundancy was reached, indicated by the recurrence of similar meanings and experiences across participants. No substantially new themes emerged during the final interviews, suggesting that sufficient depth and saturation had been achieved for phenomenological interpretation.

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected from semi-structured interviews and observations were analysed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Eatough & Smith, 2017). IPA is a method that focuses on a deep understanding of individuals' subjective experiences and the ways in which they make sense of those experiences (Joseph, 2014; Nizza *et al.,* 2021). Interview transcripts and field notes will be analysed to identify common patterns emerging from the informants' experiences (Griffin & May, 2012; Larkin *et al.,* 2019). Subsequently, initial codes were developed based on themes identified in the transcripts, enabling the emergence of core themes relevant to the management of impressions and personal branding among female politicians. This process yielded key themes, which will be presented alongside verbatim quotes from informants to provide rich

insights into how female politicians manage their personal branding and how this is received by the public. Table 2 presents the stages of interpretative phenomenological analysis used to organize and interpret the interview material.

Table 2. Stages of Data Analysis Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Stage	Description
Reading and Re-reading (Smith *et al.,* 2021)	Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to immerse the researchers in participants' lived experiences and maintain closeness to the original narratives.
Exploratory Noting (Larkin *et al.,* 2011)	Detailed descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes were developed to capture significant meanings, expressions, and interpretations emerging from each participant's account.
Developing Experiential Statements and Initial Codes (Relja & Ward, 2026)	Exploratory notes were condensed into experiential statements and initial codes representing participants' subjective meanings regarding personal branding and political identity.
Developing Emergent Themes (Smith & Osborn, 2015)	Related experiential statements were clustered into emergent themes reflecting how participants interpreted and managed their public image and political identity.
Within-Case Analysis (Larkin *et al.,* 2011)	Each participant's account was analyzed independently to preserve the idiographic commitment of IPA and capture the uniqueness of each political actor's experience.
Cross-Case Analysis (Nizza *et al.,* 2022)	Themes across Sherly Tjoanda, Irine Yusiana Roba Putri, and Nurlaela Syarif were compared to identify convergences, divergences, and shared patterns of meaning.
Interpretative Synthesis (Smith & Osborn, 2015)	Researchers developed higher-order interpretations by integrating participants' narratives, contextual factors, and theoretical insights from impression management, dramaturgy, and phenomenology.

Source: Analysis from (Nizza *et al.,* 2022; Relja & Ward, 2026; Smith *et al.,* 2021).

Table 2 illustrates a more appropriate analytical framework for interpretative phenomenological analysis, placing the participants' subjective experiences at the centre of the analysis. The first stage, 'reading and re-reading', serves to build the researcher's familiarity with the data through repeated readings of the interview transcripts. This stage is crucial because IPA requires the researcher to fully understand the participants' narratives before proceeding with coding. The second stage, exploratory noting, deepens the reading by noting the descriptive, linguistic and conceptual aspects of the participants' experiences. In this way, the researcher not only captures the content of the statements, but also the ways in which participants attribute meaning to their experiences of politics, personal branding, authenticity and impression management.

The next stage, developing experiential statements and initial codes, involves transforming exploratory notes into experiential statements and initial codes that remain faithful to the participants' narratives. From here, the researcher proceeds to developing emergent themes, which involves grouping codes and experiential statements into themes that reflect the subjective meanings of each informant. The within-case analysis stage is a key distinguishing feature of IPA, as each politician is first analysed as a separate case; for example, the experiences of Sherly, Irine and Nurlaela are examined within their respective biographical and political contexts. Subsequently, a cross-case analysis is carried out to identify similarities and differences between cases, such as variations in communication strategies, privacy management and forms of political authenticity.

The final stage, interpretative synthesis, represents the culmination of IPA analysis. At this stage, the researcher does not merely identify themes, but develops an in-depth interpretation of how female politicians make sense of their experiences in constructing their political identities through social media and public interactions. This stage also illustrates the principle of double hermeneutics, whereby participants make sense of their life experiences, whilst the researcher interprets the ways in which participants assign meaning to those experiences. With this

approach, the table is better suited to international journal standards as it demonstrates an idiographic, interpretative analytical process grounded in the participants' direct experiences.

4. Results

4.1 Symbolic Transformation in Personal Branding: Overcoming the Challenges of Gender Identity and Politics

Table 3 summarizes the interview evidence, experiential statements, and themes relating to symbolic transformation in personal branding.

Table 3. IPA Analysis of Symbolic Transformation in Personal Branding: Addressing Gender and Political Identity Challenges

Participant Group	Verbatim Evidence	Experiential Statement	Emergent Theme	Superordinate Theme
Sherly Tjoanda (Key Informant)	"The cheapest and quickest way is social media. These days, who wants to watch TV? People are just scrolling through social media."	Social media is seen as the main platform for presenting one's political identity and reaching a wide audience.	Digital adaptation as political visibility	Symbolic Transformation in Personal Branding
Sherly Tjoanda (Key Informant)	"When I work, I have to show that I'm working, and the public needs to know."	Political performance must be demonstrated openly in order to gain public legitimacy.	Performance-based legitimacy	Symbolic Transformation in Personal Branding
Irine Yusiana Roba Putri (Key Informant)	"There are still many people who look down on women in the public sphere, believing that women belong in the domestic sphere."	Experiences of gender stereotypes form part of women's political journey.	Negotiating gender stereotypes	Symbolic Transformation in Personal Branding
Irine Yusiana Roba Putri (Key Informant)	"Women will, and have, been shown to bring a different perspective to the world of politics."	Women's political identity is shaped through the representation of women's interests in the public sphere.	Gender-based political advocacy	Symbolic Transformation in Personal Branding
Nurlaela Syarif (Key Informant)	"We must also play on public sentiment."	The success of political communication depends on the ability to understand the public's emotions and expectations.	Emotional engagement strategy	Symbolic Transformation in Personal Branding
Nurlaela Syarif (Key Informant)	"We're constantly receiving feedback via our inbox, Instagram, TikTok and Messenger."	Social media serves as a symbolic space that strengthens the bond between elected representatives and the public.	Interactive representation	Symbolic Transformation in Personal Branding
Rakhmat Ibnu Harun (Academic Informant)	Female politicians build legitimacy through communication that is more participatory and responsive to the needs of the community.	Political identity is shaped through social closeness and two-way communication.	Participatory legitimacy	Symbolic Transformation in Personal Branding
Muksin Amrin (Political Informant)	"The rise of social media has enhanced female politicians' access to a wider audience."	Personal branding is built through transparency and ongoing public engagement.	Accessibility and visibility	Symbolic Transformation in Personal Branding
Ichsan (Sherly's Media Team)	"Mum always acts on what she thinks."	The team simply reinforces the message that stems from the politician's true identity.	Authenticity preservation	Symbolic Transformatio

				n in Personal Branding
Nisa (Nurlaela's Media Team)	"We film things as they are, in line with the agenda and the atmosphere on the ground."	The content is based on real activities, not staged imagery.	Authentic political performance	Symbolic Transformation in Personal Branding

Source: IPA Analysis of Interview Data, 2026.

The results of the IPA analysis show that the symbolic transformation in the personal branding of female politicians in North Maluku stems from their experiences in facing two main challenges: gender stereotypes and the need to build political legitimacy in the public sphere. For the three key informants, social media serves not only as a means of communication, but also as a symbolic space for redefining women's political identities. Sherly Tjoanda, for example, views social media as a tool that enables her to showcase her leadership capabilities directly to the public. She explains:

> *"The cheapest and quickest way is social media. These days, who wants to watch TV? Now people are scrolling through social media." (Sherly Tjoanda, 2025)*

This statement illustrates how political identity is constructed through adaptation to changes in digital communication culture. From a Communication Studies perspective, Sherly's experience reflects not only the use of communication technology but also the process of interpreting social media as a means of gaining political recognition and building legitimacy amidst her status as a newcomer to politics in North Maluku. Unlike Sherly, who emphasises the aspect of political visibility, Irine Yusiana Roba Putri tends to view personal branding more as a process of negotiating the gender stigma that remains strong in the political arena. Her long experience as a member of the Indonesian House of Representatives has made her realise that women are often perceived as lacking the same capacity as men in public leadership. She states:

> *"There are still many people who look down on women in the public sphere, believing that women belong in the domestic sphere." (Irine Yusiana Roba Putri, 2025)*

However, Irine does not view this situation as an obstacle, but rather as a driving force to strengthen women's representation in politics. This experience demonstrates that the symbolic transformation she has undergone has taken place through a shift in identity—from a woman positioned within the domestic sphere to a political actor possessing public legitimacy and representative capacity. Meanwhile, Nurlaela Syarif defines personal branding as the ability to build emotional connections with the public through responsive and participatory communication. She explains that the success of political communication is determined not only by the conveyance of information, but also by the ability to understand the public's feelings and needs.

> *"The key is that we must also play on public sentiment." (Nurlaela Syarif, 2025)*

This experience demonstrates that symbolic transformation is not only about creating a self-image, but also about the ability to build emotional closeness that fosters public trust. This finding is reinforced by Nurlaela's creative team, who stated that the majority of the content is produced based on the politicians' actual activities and on-the-ground agenda. Thus, the political identity presented is not artificial, but stems from everyday political experiences which are then translated into digital representations.

Findings from supporters further reinforce the interpretation that the personal branding of these three female politicians is constructed through a process of symbolic transformation that links personal identity, gendered experiences and everyday political practices. In the context of North Maluku, the success of personal branding is not primarily determined by visual imagery, but by the ability to transform experiences as women, public servants and representatives of the community into political symbols that are understood and accepted by the public. Thus, symbolic transformation in personal branding functions as a mechanism to overcome gender challenges whilst strengthening women's political legitimacy in the contemporary public sphere.

4.2 Protecting the Integrity of Perception in the Political World: Building an Authentic Identity through Social Media

The IPA analysis revealed that female politicians in North Maluku do not view the protection of perceived integrity as merely an effort to maintain their image, but rather as a process of sustaining an authentic relationship between political identity, public expectations and everyday communication practices. The three key informants demonstrated different strategies, yet shared the same objective: to maintain public trust through consistent, transparent communication that aligns with the personal identities they hold dear. Table 4 presents the interview evidence and themes concerning how female politicians seek to protect the integrity of their public identities through social media.

Table 4. IPA Analysis of Protecting the Integrity of Perception in the Political World: Building an Authentic Identity through social media

Participant Group	Verbatim Evidence	Experiential Statement	Emergent Theme	Superordinate Theme
Nurlaela Syarif (Key Informant)	"There must be continuity; once you've started using this channel, it must be sustained. I always serve everyone without discrimination."	Continuity of communication is understood as a means of maintaining closeness and political accessibility after being elected.	Continuous accessibility	Protecting the Integrity of Perception
Nurlaela Syarif (Key Informant)	"Social media has become a channel of communication that brings us closer to the community."	Social media is seen as a space for maintaining symbolic relationships with constituents.	Relational authenticity	Protecting the Integrity of Perception
Nurlaela Syarif (Key Informant)	"If you've been brave enough to open this space, you have to face it."	Public transparency carries moral consequences that must be accepted as part of one's political identity.	Accountability commitment	Protecting the Integrity of Perception
Sherly Tjoanda (Key Informant)	"The people must know whether their votes are in vain or not."	Transparency is regarded as a moral obligation towards the voters who have granted a political mandate.	Transparency as legitimacy	Protecting the Integrity of Perception
Sherly Tjoanda (Key Informant)	"There are some media outlets that tend to twist my words when I speak."	Social media is used to control the narrative and prevent the distortion of political messages.	Narrative control	Protecting the Integrity of Perception
Sherly Tjoanda (Key Informant)	"I often get ideas and identify issues in the field via direct messages and messaging apps."	Two-way communication serves as a mechanism for maintaining relevance and public credibility.	Dialogic responsiveness	Protecting the Integrity of Perception
Irine Yusiana Roba Putri (Key Informant)	"There are still many people who look down on women in the public sphere."	Women's political identity is constructed through negotiations regarding gender stigma.	Gender-based identity protection	Protecting the Integrity of Perception

Irine Yusiana Roba Putri (Key Informant)	"Women will, and have, proven to bring a different perspective to the world of politics."	Threats to women's legitimacy are met by emphasising their substantive contributions.	Legitimacy through representation	Protecting the Integrity of Perception
Nisa (Nurlaela's Media Team)	"We discuss negative comments constructively, but the content continues as planned in line with the original objective."	Public criticism does not alter the identity that has been established, but serves as a basis for internal evaluation.	Managing negative perceptions	Protecting the Integrity of Perception
Ichsan (Sherly's Media Team)	"Mum always acts on what she thinks."	Authenticity is maintained through the direct involvement of politicians in content production.	Authentic self-presentation	Protecting the Integrity of Perception
Jul (Irine's Supporting Team)	"He doesn't really emphasise his personal routine; he focuses more on public information."	A clear distinction between private and public spheres is used to protect political identity.	Boundary management	Protecting the Integrity of Perception
Academic and Political Informants	"It is considered that consistent communication, transparency and a focus on tangible results strengthen public trust in female politicians."	The integrity of one's image is built through consistency in actions and communication.	Consistency-based credibility	Protecting the Integrity of Perception

Source: IPA Analysis of Interview Data, 2026.

For Nurlaela Syarif, safeguarding perceived integrity stems from the realisation that the public often perceives elected politicians as being difficult to approach. Consequently, social media is used as a space to maintain a connection with the public whilst reaffirming her identity as a responsive representative of the people. She explains:

> *"There must be continuity; once you've started using this channel, it must be sustained. I always serve everyone without discrimination; whether I know them or not, everyone is served." (Nurlaela Syarif, 2025)*

This statement indicates that accessibility is understood as an important part of her political identity. In Nurlaela's experience, maintaining public perception is not achieved through symbolic image-building, but rather through consistency in responding to the aspirations of the community. This experience becomes even clearer when she explains:

> *"Social media has become a channel of communication that brings us closer to the public, as they are able to voice their aspirations." (Nurlaela Syarif, 2025)*

From a political science perspective, social media is understood as a relational space that enables the formation of symbolic closeness between elected representatives and the public. However, this closeness also entails personal consequences that must be accepted as part of political responsibility.

Meanwhile, Sherly Tjoanda interprets the protection of perceptual integrity as an effort to maintain accountability and avoid the distortion of information. As the first female governor of North Maluku, having emerged

from a relatively brief political process, Sherly recognises that political legitimacy must be continually maintained through open communication. She stated:

> *"The people must know whether their votes are in vain or not, and exactly who they are voting for." (Sherly Tjoanda, 2025)*

This statement indicates that transparency is understood not merely as a communication strategy, but as a moral obligation towards the public who grant the political mandate. Sherly also explained that social media serves as a means of reducing the risk of message distortion, which frequently occurs in media reporting.

> *"There are some media outlets that tend to twist what I say, so one way I ensure the public is informed is by communicating directly with them." (Sherly Tjoanda, 2025)*

This finding demonstrates that the protection of perceived integrity is achieved through direct control over the political narratives circulating in the public sphere. Social media is not only a means of conveying information, but also functions as a mechanism for clarification and the reinforcement of authentic political identity.

Unlike Nurlaela and Sherly, who emphasise open communication, Irine Yusiana Roba Putri places the protection of perceptual integrity more within the context of negotiating gender stigma. As a member of the Indonesian House of Representatives who has served for three terms, Irine recognises that women in politics still face stereotypes that limit their legitimacy in the public sphere.

> *"There are still many people who look down on women in the public sphere, believing that a woman's place is in the home." (Irine Yusiana Roba Putri, 2025)*

This experience demonstrates that threats to the integrity of one's identity do not always stem from political criticism, but also from social constructs that cast doubt on women's capacity for leadership. Nevertheless, Irine chose to respond to this stigma by highlighting women's substantive contributions to politics.

> *"Women will, and have, proven to bring a different perspective to the political world by voicing women's interests on various public issues." (Irine Yusiana Roba Putri, 2025)*

These findings suggest that the protection of perceived integrity is achieved through the affirmation of the values and contributions that women bring to the political arena, rather than through conforming to dominant gender expectations. Data from supportive informants reinforces this interpretation. Nisa, a member of Nurlaela's team, explained that negative comments are not viewed as a threat to political identity, but as material for reflection to strengthen public communication.

> *"We discuss negative comments constructively, but the content remains aligned with our original objectives." (Nisa, Nurlaela's Team, 2025)*

Similarly, Ichsan emphasised that Sherly's identity on social media remains true to herself.

> *"She always presents herself in line with her own thoughts." (Ichsan, Sherly's Team, 2025)*

Meanwhile, Irine's team emphasised that the protection of perceived integrity is also achieved through managing the boundaries between the public and private spheres.

> *"She does not overly emphasise her personal routines, focusing instead on information of a public nature." (Jul, Irine's Team, 2026)*

IPA findings indicate that the protection of perceptual integrity is built through three main mechanisms. Firstly, continuity of communication and public accessibility, as demonstrated by Nurlaela. Secondly, transparency and control over political narratives, as demonstrated by Sherly. Thirdly, the negotiation of gender stigma and restrictions on private space, as demonstrated by Irine. These three mechanisms show that an authentic political identity is not built through engineered public image-making, but through consistency between personal values, communication practices, and political actions that are directly perceived by the public.

4.3 Image Construction and the Success of Personal Branding: Maintaining Identity Consistency in Political Social Interaction

4.3.1 Image Construction through Accountability and Public Visibility

These findings suggest that the success of personal branding amongst female politicians stems from their ability to build an image based on accountability, rather than mere symbolic popularity. Sherly Tjoanda emphasises that every public statement made via social media must be actionable and measurable:

> *"All the programmes I have outlined have been carefully thought through and I am certain I can implement them. If I have said it publicly, it means I know I can carry out that programme. I never make promises unless I am certain." (Sherly Tjoanda, 2025)*

For Sherly, social media serves as a mechanism for public accountability, not merely a promotional platform. Her narrative demonstrates a strong commitment to ensuring that public communication remains closely linked to the actual implementation of policies. This finding suggests that image-building is not primarily based on persuasion, but rather on demonstrating the ability to fulfil political promises. A similar view was expressed by Nurlaela Syarif, who regards social media as a strategic space for demonstrating public accountability: Table 5 brings together the interview findings on political image construction, authenticity, and the consistency of personal branding.

Table 5. IPA Findings on Image Construction and the Success of Personal Branding among Female Politicians in North Maluku

Participant Group	Verbatim Evidence	Experiential Statement	Emergent Theme	Superordinate Theme
Sherly Tjoanda (Key Informant)	"If I've spoken about it publicly, it means I know I can follow through on it. I never make promises unless I'm certain I can deliver."	Personal branding is built through consistency between political promises and the accountable implementation of programmes.	Performance-based credibility	Image Construction and Personal Branding Success
Sherly Tjoanda (Key Informant)	"The people must know what I do, because they are the ones who pay my salary."	Transparency is understood as a form of accountability that strengthens the legitimacy of political identity.	Public accountability	Image Construction and Personal Branding Success
Nurlaela Syarif (Key Informant)	"This media outlet serves as a partner in raising public awareness and educating the public."	Social media is seen as a means of political education to demonstrate the substantive contributions of elected representatives.	Educational political communication	Image Construction and Personal Branding Success
Nurlaela Syarif (Key Informant)	"There is a duty of public accountability that must be fulfilled through social media."	A digital presence is used to demonstrate political accountability to constituents.	Digital accountability	Image Construction and Personal Branding Success
Irine Yusiana Roba Putri (Key Informant)	"As it is, and this is a dynamic process in line with my development as a female politician"	Personal branding is understood as a reflective process that	Authentic political identity	Image Construction and Personal Branding Success

		evolves in line with political experience.		
Irine Yusiana Roba Putri (Key Informant)	"The main thing is that I carry out my duties to the best of my ability as a member of the Indonesian House of Representatives."	Consistency of identity is built through the fulfilment of a representative mandate, not through symbolic image-building.	Role-based legitimacy	Image Construction and Personal Branding Success
Ichsan (Sherly's Media Team)	"Mum has the ability to adapt to the situation."	A consistent image is built through the ability to adapt without losing one's personal character.	Contextual adaptability	Image Construction and Personal Branding Success
Ichsan (Sherly's Media Team)	"She's always there whenever people reach out via direct messages and the comments section."	Being responsive to the public reinforces the perception of a leader who is close to the public.	Responsive leadership	Image Construction and Personal Branding Success
Jul (Irine's Supporting Team)	"He responds quickly and accurately to the community's concerns."	A reputation for leadership is built through concrete actions and the swift resolution of problems.	Solution-oriented leadership	Image Construction and Personal Branding Success
Jul (Irine's Supporting Team)	"We have been given the responsibility to respond swiftly"	Consistency of identity is reinforced through a working system that supports a rapid response to public needs.	Organizational responsiveness	Image Construction and Personal Branding Success
Nisa (Nurlaela's Media Team)	"Bunda is known for her firmness, courage and empathy towards the community."	Personal branding stems from a combination of assertiveness and social awareness that is consistently demonstrated.	Empathetic firmness	Image Construction and Personal Branding Success
Nisa (Nurlaela's Media Team)	"Whenever there's a community issue, Mum gets straight involved."	The authenticity of one's political identity is demonstrated through direct involvement in public affairs.	Action-based authenticity	Image Construction and Personal Branding Success

Source: IPA Analysis of Interview Data (2026)

"Social media is the most effective space for demonstrating that elected representatives not only provide direct assistance, but also have ideas and initiatives that help the community." (Nurlaela Syarif, 2025)

The convergence of these experiences suggests that successful personal branding amongst female politicians is built on a foundation of visible accountability, where public communication serves to reinforce perceptions of competence, responsibility and transparency.

4.3.2 Authentic Identity Representation and Political Credibility

Another significant theme concerns the construction of authenticity as a central element of political identity. Unlike conventional political branding, which often relies on a highly curated self-presentation, Irine Yusiana Roba Putri described her political identity as evolving naturally through experience:

> *"Just as I am, and this is dynamic, evolving in line with my development as a female politician, influenced by political dynamics and my own experiences." (Irine Yusiana Roba Putri, 2025)*

This statement reflects a phenomenological understanding of identity as continuously negotiated through lived experience rather than strategically manufactured. Irine's branding stems from the consistency between her role as a legislator and her personal understanding of political responsibility. The authenticity of her political identity was further confirmed by Sherly's media team. Ichsan explained:

> *"She is a firm person and treats us very much like family. She is always there when the people reach out via direct messages or the comments section, and what she does is resolve the people's problems." (Ichsan, Sherly's Media Team, 2025)*

In contrast to self-reported narratives, these supporters' testimonies reveal how authenticity is perceived by individuals who interact with the politician behind the scenes. Consistency between internal interactions and public behaviour reinforces the credibility of the politician's personal brand.

4.3.3 Responsive Leadership as a Symbolic Resource for Brand Building

The data also reveals that responsiveness functions as a powerful symbolic resource in building political identity. According to Jul, a member of Irine's support team:

> *"It's more about how responsive, swift and accurate she is in addressing a situation or issue. The community's basic needs are addressed immediately." (Jul, Irine's Team, 2026)*

Similarly, Nisa describes Nurlaela as a politician whose public image is closely linked to direct action:

> *"If there is a report from residents, Bunda immediately steps in to follow it up. Even when she is with her family, if there is an urgent community need, that is still prioritised." (Nisa, Nurlaela's Team, 2025)*

These testimonies demonstrate that responsiveness is not merely an operational behaviour, but an important symbolic element in political image-building. Through repeated interactions, responsiveness becomes associated with leadership competence, empathy and commitment to the public. Consequently, public trust is built not only through communication, but also through concrete actions.

4.3.4 Maintaining Consistency between Public and Private Identities

These latest findings highlight the importance of maintaining consistency between political appearances in the public eye and personal values behind the scenes. In all three cases, successful branding was not achieved through image manipulation, but rather through a sustained alignment between personal beliefs and behaviour in public. Sherly consistently projected an image as a results-oriented leader; Nurlaela maintained a reputation as an approachable figure who actively engaged with the public; whilst Irine emphasised institutional responsibility and authenticity. These patterns were repeatedly confirmed by supporting informants who observed their day-to-day political practices.

From a political science perspective, the real-life experiences of these politicians reveal that the success of personal branding is not primarily determined by communication techniques or media visibility. Rather, this success stems from sustained efforts to align political presentation, personal values and public expectations across various social interactions. This alignment enables a political identity to be perceived as credible, authentic and consistent over time, thereby strengthening both public trust and political legitimacy.

5. Discussion

Although all three female politicians regard authenticity as a key component of their personal branding, the findings of this study suggest that authenticity cannot be understood as a personal attribute that is naturally inherent in an individual. Rather, authenticity is the result of a social construction formed through ongoing communication practices. The informants consistently described themselves as open, approachable and responsive to the needs of the public. However, the research data show that these perceptions do not arise spontaneously, but are produced through a process of self-presentation, strategic disclosure of information, and ongoing interaction with audiences in both digital and face-to-face spaces. Thus, authenticity is not determined solely by who the politician is, but by how their actions, narratives and public performances are interpreted and validated by the public. These findings expand on Goffman's perspective on impression management by demonstrating that, in contemporary political communication, authenticity is not the antithesis of strategic self-presentation, but is often the result of the successful management of that very impression.

The research findings also show that social media functions as an arena for negotiating political authenticity, rather than merely a channel for expressing it. Sherly Tjoanda utilises short videos and direct communication to cultivate an image as a leader who is accessible and responsive to the needs of communities spread across the North Maluku archipelago. Meanwhile, Nurlaela Syarif relies on intensive interaction via various messaging platforms, public feedback and ongoing digital communication to reinforce perceptions of accountability and closeness to her constituents. In contrast to the other two, Irine Yusiana Roba Putri builds authenticity through a more controlled communication style, emphasising policy advocacy, institutional representation and the protection of her privacy. These differences demonstrate that authenticity is not produced through a single, uniform communication pattern, but rather through strategies tailored to each political actor's political position, audience expectations and symbolic resources.

A comparison of the cases also reveals significant differences in communication style, privacy management, audience targeting and the involvement of support teams. Sherly employs a highly mediated communication model, in which the creative team plays a key role in translating political messages into visual content that is engaging and easily accessible to the public. Nurlaela has developed a participatory model characterised by ongoing dialogue and direct responses to various community issues. In contrast, Irine maintains a clearer boundary between her public and private lives and does not rely heavily on personal exposure to build her political credibility. Despite these strategic differences, all three cases demonstrate a commonality in their ability to transform gender identity, geographical constraints and local political sensitivities into sources of political legitimacy. These findings suggest that the personal branding of female politicians in archipelagic regions such as North Maluku is not only linked to efforts to increase political visibility, but is also a process of negotiating social recognition, public trust and political authority rooted in distinctive cultural, geographical and local identity contexts.

The findings of this study expand on Goffman's theory of impression management (Bach *et al.,* 2025; O'Boyle, 2022) by demonstrating that authenticity in digital political communication is not the opposite of strategic self-presentation, but rather one of its possible outcomes. Sherly Tjoanda, Nurlaela Syarif, and Irine Yusiana Roba Putri use social media as a front stage to present themselves as political actors who are accessible, responsive, and accountable. However, the data indicate that these qualities are not merely expressed; rather, they are produced through selective self-presentation, strategic disclosure of information, and repeated interaction with the audience. In this regard, politicians control what is displayed, how it is narrated, and which aspects of their political and personal identities are made public. Goffman's assumption that individuals manage information to influence audience perceptions is thus supported, but these findings add that in contemporary digital politics, the success of impression management depends on whether strategic performances can be interpreted by the public as authentic, rather than manipulative.

These findings critically examine Goffman's dramaturgical distinction between the front stage and the back stage (Mullany, 2011; Scanlan, 2019). In all three cases, social media functions as the visible front stage, where political work, responses to the public, and symbolic closeness are displayed. However, this front stage is underpinned by practices on the back stage involving media teams, content selection, message framing, and privacy management. Sherly's communication is heavily mediated by visual content and a creative team; Nurlaela's presence is more participatory and rooted in ongoing public dialogue; whilst Irine builds credibility by maintaining a stricter boundary

between public duties and private life. These variations demonstrate that the front stage and back stage are not rigidly separated in digital politics. Rather, the two overlap and interact, producing a managed form of authenticity that appears natural because it is constantly aligned with the politician's role, audience expectations and day-to-day political actions.

Through Schutz's phenomenology (Eberle, 2022; Schutz, 1970, 2012), these findings can be understood as part of the politicians' lifeworld and their intersubjective relationships with the people of North Maluku. These three politicians do not merely use social media as a technical tool; they draw upon shared knowledge regarding local expectations, gender-based judgements, geographical distance, and public demands for closeness. Consequently, their personal images are shaped by the way they interpret what residents expect from a female political leader in an archipelagic region that is sensitive to issues of identity. Sherly's short videos, Nurlaela's intensive digital interactions, and Irine's carefully managed public image represent various ways of giving meaning to political identity within the local social reality. From this perspective, authenticity is not merely claimed individually, but is also socially negotiated through interactions between politicians, audiences, media teams, and the cultural-political context of North Maluku.

The findings of this study expand on previous research into the self-presentation of female politicians by demonstrating that social media-based self-presentation is not limited to efforts to build popularity, visibility or emotional closeness. Fountaine (2017) research on young female politicians in New Zealand shows that Twitter enables female candidates to present themselves through popularity, relational politics and their activities in local councils. Similarly, Alhaimer (2023) research in Kuwait shows that social media influences the personality of political brands and voter behaviour in electoral contexts with specific cultural characteristics. Recent research on political image and digital branding also shows that political figures are increasingly using visual and personalised platforms to showcase their competence, approachability and leadership credibility, as demonstrated in studies on Trudeau (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019) image management on Instagram and the strategies of European populist politicians on Instagram. However, the cases in North Maluku introduce mechanisms that are more specific to the context: social media not only expands reach, but also bridges the distances between islands, manages audiences sensitive to issues of identity, and transforms geographical fragmentation into symbolic closeness. Sherly's short videos, Nurlaela's sustained digital accessibility, and Irine's controlled institutional communication demonstrate that personal branding in this context is shaped through various forms of audience engagement, rather than through a single model of digital popularity.

This study also builds on previous findings regarding gender, authenticity and political representation. Dewi (2023) research on female politicians in South Sulawesi shows that femininity in political image-building can pose gender-related risks within patriarchal political structures, seanwhile, (Thompson-Whiteside *et al.,* 2018) found that women's authentic self-image is often constructed through impression management behaviour that combines self-promotion, vulnerability and consistency of action. Recent research on women's leadership and personal branding suggests that women's visibility is often influenced by institutional barriers, gender-based networks, and the need to create spaces where they can be seen and heard (Heriberta *et al.,* 2024).

The findings of this research provide important insights for political communication practice, particularly regarding the management of female politicians' public image through social media. Practically, the results indicate that female politicians, by relying on openness and authentic communication, can more easily build strong connections with their audiences, even within more conservative and traditional political contexts such as those in North Maluku. This enriches the literature on Image Management and Dramaturgy, adding a new dimension regarding how politicians utilise social media as a tool to build and protect their political identities in challenging situations. Theoretically, these findings also enrich the discourse on phenomenology and symbolic interaction, by demonstrating how female politicians navigate their public and private lives through digital media an approach that has not been extensively studied within the context of local Indonesian politics. Although this research makes a significant contribution, there are several limitations that should be noted. Firstly, this study focuses on three female politicians in North Maluku, who may not be fully representative of all female politicians in Indonesia. Furthermore, data collected through in-depth interviews may contain subjective biases from the respective informants. Further research could expand the scope of the study to various regions or incorporate quantitative methods to verify these findings on a broader scale.

6. Conclusion

This study examines how three female politicians in North Maluku namely Sherly Tjoanda, Irine Yusiana Roba Putri and Nurlaela Syarif construct and manage their public images through social media and day-to-day political interactions. Based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the findings indicate that image management in these three cases is shaped through three interrelated practices: symbolic transformation in response to challenges of gender and political identity; safeguarding the integrity of the image through direct and controlled communication; and maintaining consistency of identity across all political interactions, both digital and face-to-face. Rather than presenting a general model of successful political branding for women, this study demonstrates how these politicians interpret authenticity as something that must be continually negotiated through transparency, responsiveness, privacy management, and alignment between public narratives and political actions. The contribution of this research lies in its case-based explanation of how personal branding is experienced and practised by female politicians within a specific local political culture. Sherly's case illustrates the use of social media to build direct accountability and reduce message distortion; Nurlaela's case demonstrates how sustained digital accessibility serves as a means of maintaining closeness with constituents; whilst Irine's case highlights the importance of role consistency and privacy boundaries in maintaining political credibility. These findings are not intended to represent all female politicians in Indonesia, but provide contextual insights into how female political actors in North Maluku balance public visibility, gender-based expectations and political legitimacy. This study has several limitations. Its empirical basis is limited to three key politicians and four supporting informants; consequently, these findings cannot be generalised to all female politicians or other political contexts. Furthermore, this analysis focuses primarily on the experiences recounted by the participants and the interpretations of the supporting informants, rather than directly measuring audience responses. Future research should examine female politicians in other regions, compare different cultural and party contexts, and incorporate the perspectives of voters or audiences to better understand how political authenticity and personal branding are received, debated and interpreted in terms of public trust.

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Author contribution Statement

Wahyuni Bailussy: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing - Original Draft. Tuti Bahfiarti: Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing. Muliadi Mau: Validation, Formal analysis, Writing - Review & Editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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