

## Personal Branding in Digital Political Marketing: Ferry Irwandi as a Non-Party Political Influencer in Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

The development of digital media has transformed the landscape of political marketing in Indonesia, reshaping both the channels of communication and the actors who shape public opinion and political preferences. Beyond political parties and electoral candidates, non-party actors particularly political influencers have emerged as consistent producers and distributors of political content across digital platforms. This study examines the practice of digital political marketing through personal branding, focusing on Ferry Irwandi as a political influencer in Indonesia. Employing a qualitative approach with a single case study design, data were gathered through systematic observation and documentation of digital political content on YouTube and Instagram, supplemented by audience response analysis. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis. Findings reveal that Ferry Irwandi's personal branding is constructed through an intellectual-critical image, a sustained non-partisan position, and a consistently rational communicative narrative. This form of digital political marketing contributes to shaping audience political preferences through symbolic meaning-making rather than direct electoral mobilization. The study advances political marketing scholarship by foregrounding the role of non-party actors in Indonesia's evolving digital democracy.

**Keywords:** Digital Political Marketing, Personal Branding, Political Influencer, Voter Preferences, Social Media

### INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital technology has fundamentally restructured the media landscape and transformed public access to political information (Castells, 2009; Flew, 2014). As digital platforms have

proliferated, political actors have adapted their communication strategies shifting from physical, place-based campaigns toward digitally mediated forms of political engagement that are broader in reach and more dynamic in form. Simultaneously, the emergence of social media has fragmented public discourse, enabling a multiplicity of voices to contest and co-construct political meanings in real time.

The transformation of political communication in digital environments cannot be separated from the growing power of digital platforms and algorithmic systems in shaping public visibility and political discourse. Social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram do not merely function as neutral communication channels, but actively structure the circulation, amplification, and prioritization of political content through algorithmic recommendation systems and engagement-based visibility mechanisms (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). Within the contemporary attention economy, political influence is increasingly determined by visibility, interaction, and emotional resonance rather than by institutional authority alone. As a result, digital platforms have become central actors in the production of political narratives and public opinion, enabling individual content creators and influencers to compete with traditional political institutions in shaping political meaning and audience perception.

In political marketing scholarship, politics is conceived as an arena of symbolic exchange in which image, narrative, and identity are central to the persuasion process (Lees-Marshment, 2006). Digital media accelerates and amplifies this process by enabling rapid, wide-scale dissemination of political content (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Crucially, the democratization of digital expression has created conditions in which political influence is no longer confined to formal political actors; individuals with substantial digital followings can shape how political reality is framed and interpreted by the public (Norris, 2001). This shift reflects a broader reconfiguration of the political communication ecosystem.

This transformation has also shifted the orientation of political marketing from party-centered mobilization toward individualized and personality-driven political communication. In digital political environments, political branding increasingly relies on authenticity, relatability, and sustained audience engagement rather than solely on ideological affiliation or organizational identity. Political influencers are therefore emerging as new intermediaries within democratic communication systems, capable of translating complex political issues into accessible narratives that resonate with digitally connected audiences. This development reflects a broader transition from institutional political authority toward networked forms of symbolic authority in which credibility is constructed through continuous interaction, personal visibility, and perceived independence in digital spaces.

Within this context, the practice of personal branding has emerged as a significant mechanism through which individuals construct and communicate political identities in the digital sphere. Personal branding positions individuals as a “political brand” that has a certain identity, values and image that is consistently communicated to the public (Montoya et al., 2003) This development reflects a broader shift in political ideology from collective, party-based identification toward individualized, influencer-centered forms of political authority often mediated through Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs).

Nevertheless, the growing prominence of personal branding in political communication also raises critical questions regarding the commercialization and performative dimensions of digital political identity. The construction of authenticity in social media environments is often strategically curated through selective self-presentation, emotional engagement, and symbolic positioning designed to strengthen audience trust and loyalty. In this context, claims of neutrality, independence, and rationality may function not only as expressions of personal values, but also as communicative strategies that generate symbolic capital and political legitimacy within highly competitive

digital environments. Consequently, political influencers may simultaneously operate as independent commentators and as influential actors who shape political interpretation, public sentiment, and democratic discourse in subtle but significant ways.

In Indonesia, the increasing influence of political content creators must also be understood within the broader context of declining public trust in political institutions and growing dissatisfaction with formal democratic representation. Various studies have shown that younger generations increasingly perceive political parties and state institutions as elitist, transactional, and disconnected from everyday public concerns (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2014). Simultaneously, the expansion of social media has encouraged the emergence of alternative spaces for political discussion, criticism, and opinion formation outside conventional institutional channels. In such conditions, digital political influencers gain relevance because they are often perceived as more authentic, accessible, and responsive to public anxieties than formal political actors. This phenomenon reflects an important transformation in contemporary democracy, where political legitimacy and public trust are increasingly negotiated within digitally mediated communication environments.

Among contemporary digital political influencers in Indonesia, Ferry Irwandi has attracted significant attention across social media platforms. Unlike content creators who optimize primarily for algorithmic reach and entertainment value, Ferry Irwandi consistently addresses substantive social and political issues, fostering audience awareness of policy-relevant realities. Although he does not explicitly position himself as an electoral candidate, the political content he produces may meaningfully influence the views and voting orientations of his audience (Loader & Mercea, 2011).

This phenomenon is theoretically situated within the framework of social constructionism. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue, political preferences cannot be understood as the product of purely rational individual

deliberation; they are socially constructed through ongoing processes of meaning-making and interpretation. Political content circulated on social media including the opinion framings of digital influencers thus functions as a constitutive force in the production of political subjectivity and collective political orientation (McNair, 2011). The dense interaction between content producers, platforms, and audiences has become a significant site for the negotiation of political meaning.

Despite a growing body of literature on digital political communication (Chadwick, 2013; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Larsson, 2015), limited scholarly attention has been directed toward the political marketing practices of non-party, non-candidate digital actors particularly in the Global South. Most prior research has focused on the strategic communication of political parties and electoral candidates, leaving underexplored the role of political influencers who operate outside formal institutional structures. This study addresses that gap by analyzing the personal branding and digital political marketing practices of Ferry Irwandi as a political influencer in Indonesia, with particular focus on the construction of narrative, symbol, and political image, and their implications for audience political preference formation. This study seeks to contribute to the literature by analyzing digital political marketing as a discursive and symbolic process carried out by non-party political influencers operating within Indonesia's evolving digital democracy landscape.

This study is guided by the following research question: How does Ferry Irwandi construct and deploy personal branding as a form of digital political marketing, and in what ways does this practice contribute to the formation of audience political preferences? By addressing this question through a qualitative case study approach, this research aims to contribute theoretically to political marketing and political mediatization studies in the Indonesian context, while also offering practical insights into the changing dynamics of digital political communication.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative approach to examine the digital political marketing practices grounded in personal branding as enacted by Ferry Irwandi. The qualitative approach was selected because the research is oriented toward in-depth understanding of processes of meaning production, political narrative construction, and audience interpretation of digital political content, rather than toward quantitative measurement of influence (Creswell, 2013). The interpretive paradigm treats political communication as a socially embedded, meaning-laden practice that must be understood within its specific cultural and media context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

A single case study design was employed because Ferry Irwandi represents a theoretically significant and empirically rich instance of non-party digital political marketing in Indonesia. Case study methodology allows for holistic, contextually grounded examination of a phenomenon by attending to its social, media, and discursive dimensions (Yin, 2018). The selection of a single case is justified by the research objective: rather than generating comparative generalizations, the study seeks to produce a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of how political communication and personal branding operate in a paradigmatic case. Ferry Irwandi was selected on the basis of his sustained engagement with political content, the coherence of his digital personal branding, and his status as a non-party actor who actively frames public policy issues for a large and engaged audience.

Research data were selected using purposive sampling, whereby content was chosen based on its substantive political relevance to the research focus (Miles et al., 2014). Only uploads containing substantive political content excluding personal or non-political material were included in the analysis. The data collection timeframe was determined by the intensity of content production and the thematic relevance of issues addressed during that period.

This sampling strategy ensures that the data corpus is both informative and representative of Ferry Irwandi's digital political marketing practices.

Data analysis was conducted through a two-stage process combining thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns of personal branding, issue framing, and communicative strategy across the content corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Critical discourse analysis was subsequently applied to examine how language, rhetoric, and symbolic choices construct political authority and orient audience interpretation (Fairclough, 2003). To strengthen methodological rigor and ensure credibility, this study applied triangulation across data sources content from YouTube and Instagram were cross-referenced with audience comment responses. Member checking of analytical interpretations was conducted through systematic review of audience interactions, and peer debriefing was undertaken to mitigate interpretive bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As an interpretive qualitative study, this research acknowledges that the analysis is shaped by the researchers' interpretive perspectives and contextual understanding of digital political communication. To minimize interpretive bias, the study employed iterative reading, peer discussion, and triangulation across multiple data sources throughout the analytical process. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, the research focuses on a single political influencer and therefore does not aim to produce broad generalizations regarding all forms of digital political marketing in Indonesia. Second, audience responses analyzed in this study are limited to publicly visible interactions on social media platforms and may not fully represent the entire audience reception process. Third, this study does not directly measure the long-term electoral impact of political influencer content on voter behavior, but instead focuses on processes of symbolic influence, narrative construction, and political preference formation within digital communication environments.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Personal Branding Patterns in Ferry Irwandi's Political Content

The analysis of Ferry Irwandi's digital content reveals a coherent and strategically consistent pattern of personal branding anchored in three interrelated dimensions: intellectual identity, non-partisan positioning, and communicative authenticity. Consistent with Montoya et al.'s (2003) conceptualization of personal branding as the deliberate construction and consistent projection of a distinctive individual identity, Ferry Irwandi systematically deploys intellectual imagery, rational argumentative structures, and an explicitly independent political stance to differentiate himself within the crowded digital political landscape. This approach aligns with Simons' (2016) argument that credibility, consistency, and distinctiveness are the constitutive pillars of effective personal branding in politics.

An important finding emerging from this analysis is the paradoxical relationship between rational political communication and the logic of the contemporary attention economy. While digital platforms are often characterized by emotional polarization, sensationalism, and short-form engagement-oriented content, Ferry Irwandi's political branding consistently emphasizes analytical explanation, argumentative clarity, and issue contextualization. This positioning differentiates his content from dominant patterns of algorithmically amplified political communication that frequently prioritize outrage and emotional mobilization over substantive discussion. Nevertheless, the sustainability of such rational-oriented political branding within highly competitive platform environments also indicates that credibility, perceived intellectualism, and communicative consistency can function as valuable symbolic resources capable of generating audience loyalty and long-term engagement. In this sense, rationality itself becomes part of a distinctive branding strategy within contemporary digital political culture.

The results of the analysis show that Ferry Irwandi's personal branding is consistently built through an image as a critical, rational and independent figure. This image is apparent from the way political issues are conveyed, which tends to be analytical, accompanied by coherent explanations and efforts to link actual problems with the context of broader policies and political practices. This kind of communication pattern distinguishes Ferry Irwandi from popular political communication practices that generally emphasize short slogans or direct persuasive messages.

In a number of his content videos, the research subject positions himself as a presenter of arguments and interpreter of issues not as an actor directing the audience toward particular political choices. This self-positioning reflects what Mancini (2011) describes as the "expert commentator" model of political communication, in which credibility is derived from analytical independence rather than partisan affiliation. The analytical dimensions of this branding practice are summarized in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Coding Framework: Dimensions of Personal Branding and Digital Political Marketing in Ferry Irwandi's Content

| Analysis Dimension  | Code Category       | Indikator                                  | Data Example   |
|---------------------|---------------------|--|--|
| Personal Branding   | Self Identity       | Mention of non-party, independent position | Recorded in digital and population archives as not affiliated with any political party   |
|                     | Intellectual Image  | Use of data, references, rational analysis | Research and data based explanation  |
|                     | Authenticity        | Personal, non-formal speaking style        | Uses authentic visual and language styles  |
| Political Marketing | Political Narrative | Criticism of policies, elites, systems     | Criticism of the TNI Bill on   |
|                     | Issue Framing       | Emphasis on rationality vs. emotional      | Issues are packaged logically  |
|                     | Call to Thought     | An invitation to think, not to choose      | In every narration he uses <i>Socrates Method</i> , which is digging up the correct answer through a series of questions given to the audience |

|                    |                    |                                       |  |
|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Mediatization      | Media Style        | Simple visuals, long duration         | YouTube analytical video   |
|                    | Engagement         | Comment response, audience discussion | Reply or pinned comment  |
| Voter Preference   | Audience Response  | Approval, rejection, discussion       | Audience comments for and against content regarding the opinion that the Philosophy Department should be abolished |
|                    | Internalization    | Audience repeats narrative            | Reflective comments  |
| Political Position | Independence       | Distance from parties/candidates      | Not affiliated with any political party  |
|                    | Symbolic Authority | Positioned as a reference             | "Bang Ferry once discussed the TNI Bill issue"   |

Source: Primary Research Data, processed (2025)

Table 1 presents a structured mapping of the analytical dimensions identified across the content corpus. Personal branding is operationalized across three categories self-identity, intellectual image, and authenticity each evidenced by specific communicative indicators observable in Ferry Irwandi's content. The political marketing dimension reveals a consistent issue framing strategy that foregrounds rationality over emotional appeals, employing what can be described as a Socratic communicative method that positions the audience as active thinkers rather than passive recipients. Mediatization indicators reflect the platform-specific affordances of YouTube, while voter preference data are drawn from audience comment analysis. Together, these dimensions constitute a coherent digital political marketing strategy centered on symbolic authority grounded in intellectual credibility rather than formal political affiliation (Montoya et al., 2003; Simons, 2016).

This strategy reinforces the personal branding claim as a source of symbolic authority based on intellectual competence rather than formal position or political affiliation. These findings are consistent with Henneberg's (2008) argument that political marketing extends beyond electoral campaigns to encompass long-term identity construction and relational credibility building. The findings also resonate with research on political influencers in

other national contexts, where the credibility of non-partisan digital actors has been found to rest on perceived independence and analytical depth rather than party alignment (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Larsson, 2015). In the Indonesian context, where public trust in political parties and institutions has been subject to sustained erosion (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2014), this form of credibility carries particular symbolic weight.

Beyond verbal argumentation, Ferry Irwandi's personal branding is also reinforced through multimodal communication strategies that combine visual simplicity, conversational narration, and platform-adaptive presentation styles. The consistent use of minimalist visual layouts, direct camera engagement, informal language, and explanatory storytelling contributes to the construction of accessibility and relatability among audiences. Such communication patterns reduce symbolic distance between content creator and viewers, enabling political discussions to appear more approachable and emotionally engaging without abandoning analytical depth. In digital political communication, these multimodal elements are significant because audience perceptions of credibility are often shaped not only by informational content, but also by visual aesthetics, delivery style, and interactional tone. Consequently, personal branding in platform-based political communication operates through an integrated process involving narrative construction, visual performance, and emotional connectivity simultaneously.

The effectiveness of Ferry Irwandi's personal branding is also closely connected to the formation of parasocial interaction between content creator and audience. Through consistent communication patterns, direct conversational delivery, and repetitive exposure to issue-oriented content, audiences gradually develop a sense of familiarity and perceived personal connection with the influencer. This dynamic strengthens emotional trust and increases audience receptiveness toward political narratives delivered through the platform. In contemporary digital political communication, such

parasocial relationships are particularly influential because political trust is increasingly constructed through perceived authenticity, communicative intimacy, and symbolic proximity rather than through formal institutional affiliation alone. As a result, political influencers are able to occupy an increasingly significant position within digital public discourse by functioning simultaneously as information providers, interpretive authorities, and symbolic representatives of rational public engagement.

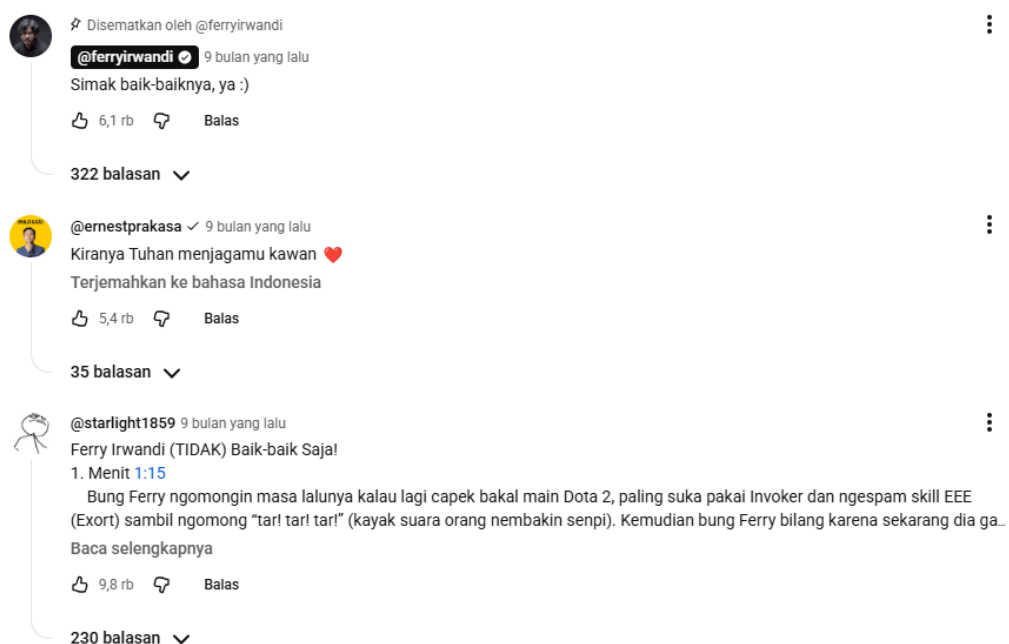
### **Non-Partisan Position as a Differentiation Strategy**

The analysis reveals that a non-partisan position constitutes a central and strategically deployed element of Ferry Irwandi's political communication. Across his content, the research subject consistently and at times explicitly maintains distance from political parties, governing elites, and electoral interests. This positioning is achieved through narratives that critically engage with political actors across the ideological spectrum, without exhibiting rigid ideological commitments. Such communicative neutrality functions as a form of symbolic capital that distinguishes Ferry Irwandi within the digital political landscape.

Nevertheless, the notion of non-partisanship within digital political communication requires critical examination. In platform-based political environments characterized by polarization and ideological contestation, claims of neutrality do not necessarily indicate the absence of political positioning. Instead, non-partisan identity may function as a strategic communicative stance that enables political influencers to maintain broader audience reach, enhance perceived credibility, and avoid direct association with formal political actors. In this context, neutrality becomes a form of symbolic positioning through which influencers construct authority by appearing independent, rational, and detached from partisan interests. Consequently, non-partisan branding should be understood not merely as a

personal ethical orientation, but also as a strategic mechanism of legitimacy production within contemporary digital political communication ecosystems.

This non-partisan stance operates as a differentiation strategy that amplifies personal branding effectiveness. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic capital, independence from partisan structures can be understood as a form of political field currency: it confers legitimacy upon actors who are perceived to operate outside the logic of self-interested electoral competition. Audience responses in the comment sections corroborate this interpretation; viewers frequently describe Ferry Irwandi's content as "**neutral**," "**objective**," or "**impartial**," indicating that perceived independence rather than ideological alignment is the primary basis of audience trust (Henneberg, 2008). This finding suggests that political preference formation among digital audiences may be more strongly mediated by communicator credibility than by direct ideological identification.



**Figure 1.** Example of Audience Comment Responses Affirming Non-Partisan Credibility  
(Source: YouTube Ferry Irwandi)

Ferry Irwandi consistently employs an issue framing pattern that privileges rational argumentation and analytical structure. A typical content

episode follows a three-part communicative sequence: contextual background establishment, identification and elaboration of the core problem, and critical reflective synthesis. For example, in a video discussing the TNI Civil Relations Bill, Ferry Irwandi opened with a historical account of civil-military relations in Indonesia, identified the contested provisions and their policy implications, and concluded with a series of reflective questions inviting audience deliberation rather than prescribing a specific political stance. This communicative structure positions the audience as epistemic agents invited to engage with political complexity, rather than as targets of direct persuasion.

Audience responses across the analyzed content provide evidence of active engagement and narrative internalization. In comment sections, audiences frequently reproduce the analytical frameworks introduced by Ferry Irwandi articulating their own political evaluations using vocabulary and reasoning structures consistent with those deployed in the content. For instance, following videos addressing the proposed abolition of philosophy departments, audience members engaged in extended debate about the value of humanities in higher education, often referencing the arguments presented in the video. This pattern of "reflective commenting" supports Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theoretical proposition that political preferences are socially constructed through iterative processes of meaning-making. Audience political preferences do not emerge instantaneously but are formed through cumulative, longitudinal exposure to consistent and intellectually engaging narratives a dynamic that aligns with agenda-setting and framing theories in political communication scholarship (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993).

These findings indicate broader implications for contemporary digital democracy in Indonesia. The emergence of non-partisan political influencers reflects an ongoing transformation in the structure of democratic mediation, where public trust and political authority are increasingly decentralized from traditional institutions toward digitally mediated individual actors. While this phenomenon may expand access to alternative political perspectives and

encourage critical public discussion, it also raises important concerns regarding accountability, interpretive dominance, and the concentration of symbolic influence within platform-based communication systems. Unlike formal political institutions, digital influencers often operate without clear democratic accountability mechanisms despite possessing substantial capacity to shape public opinion and political interpretation among large audiences.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that political marketing in Indonesia is no longer exclusively concentrated within political parties and electoral campaigns. Non-party actors, such as Ferry Irwandi, who possess coherent personal branding strategies and credible digital presences are capable of exercising meaningful influence over audience political preferences, particularly among younger, digitally active citizens. This development has substantive implications for political communication theory and practice: it suggests that political marketing must be conceptualized as a long-term, discursive, and relational process focused on the construction of credibility, symbolic authority, and public trust, rather than as a transactional campaign strategy oriented solely toward electoral mobilization.

More broadly, this study indicates that the structure of political communication in contemporary digital society is undergoing significant transformation. Political influence is no longer monopolized by political parties, state institutions, or conventional mass media, but is increasingly mediated through individual digital actors who possess symbolic credibility, communicative visibility, and sustained audience engagement within platform ecosystems. In this context, political influencers function not only as content creators, but also as alternative intermediaries capable of shaping political interpretation, public discourse, and democratic perception among digitally connected citizens. The emergence of such actors reflects the growing

decentralization of political authority within platform-based communication environments where symbolic legitimacy is increasingly constructed through interaction, authenticity, and algorithmically mediated visibility.

At the level of political institutions and democratic processes, the rise of digital political influencers poses both opportunities and challenges. Political parties and democratic institutions must respond creatively to a media environment in which political meaning is increasingly co-constructed by non-institutional actors, and in which audience trust is earned through perceived independence and intellectual engagement rather than formal authority. This study recommends that political actors and institutional communicators invest in more substantive, discourse-centered forms of political engagement that prioritize credibility and analytical depth over short-term persuasive appeals. Future research should extend this analysis through comparative case studies of political influencers across different national and cultural contexts, and through longitudinal studies tracking the effects of digital political marketing on electoral behavior and democratic participation in Indonesia.

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