

***NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL PARADOX: PUBLIC RELATIONS
STRATEGIES IN A SEMI-MILITARY VOCATIONAL INSTITUTION***

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ABSTRACT

In the digital era, higher education institutions are under pressure to adopt "Two-Way Symmetrical Communication" to build trust and reputation. However, this ideal often conflicts with the rigid, hierarchical structures of vocational institutions with semi-military cultures. This study explores how the Public Relations (PR) department of Politeknik Penerbangan (Poltekbang) Palembang negotiates these tensions. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with an exploratory case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with practitioners and students (n=4) and observational analysis. The study reveals a "managed interactivity" where digital platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp are used to create a semblance of open dialogue, while substantive policy decisions remain top-down. While the institution successfully builds a positive image through "performative transparency," true symmetrical communication is constrained by bureaucratic protocols and limited resources. These findings offer a critical nuance to the application of Excellence Theory in non-western, vocational contexts.

Keywords: Vocational Higher Education, Digital Public Relations, Two-Way Symmetrical Communication, Managed Interactivity, Institutional Reputation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global higher education landscape is currently undergoing radical transformation driven by technological disruption and increasingly fierce competition for reputation. In this context, vocational higher education institutions face a unique double challenge. On the one hand, they must fight against the social stigma that often places vocational education as a "second choice" compared to academic universities, while on the other

hand, they are required to aggressively prove the industrial relevance and employability of their graduates. Therefore, reputation management and communication strategies are no longer just supporting functions, but crucial strategic assets for the sustainability of the institution.

The role of Public Relations (PR) is central in bridging the institution with its public. It must build a good reputation, build public trust, and manage information in a two-way manner (Setyanto, 2017); (Musyarrofah, 2018). Theoretically, modern PR practices often refer to the Theory of Excellence introduced by Grunig and Hunt, specifically the Two-Way Symmetrical Communication model. This model is considered a normative ethical standard because it emphasizes dialogue, negotiation, and equality in the relationship between organizations and the public, where both parties are willing to adapt for the common good. In the digital age, social media is considered a “catalyst” that enables this symmetrical model to work perfectly due to its interactive and real-time nature.

However, the application of this ideal of symmetrical communication often clashes with the structural reality of organizations, especially government institutions or those with a strong hierarchical culture. The Palembang Aviation Polytechnic (Poltekbang) presents an interesting case study due to its hybrid characteristics: as a higher education institution serving Generation Z (which demands openness and digital egalitarianism), as well as a government institution under the Ministry of Transportation that adheres to a semi-military culture with a rigid chain of command. There is an inherent tension between the demands for “open dialogue” on social media and the “closed command” protocols of the organizational culture.

Recent literature has begun to criticize that in the digital age, many organizations only engage in “illusory dialogue” or asymmetrical two-way communication, where public feedback is collected not to change policy, but to polish persuasive messages to make them more effective. Research on how semi-military vocational institutions navigate this paradox—between maintaining hierarchical authority and serving the demands of digital interaction—is still very minimal in global discourse.

This study aims to fill this gap by: (1) Evaluating the digital strategy of the Public Relations Department of the Palembang Aviation Polytechnic in building the institution's image amid structural limitations, and (2) Critically analyzing the extent to which the principle of Two-Way Symmetrical Communication can be applied in a semi-military bureaucratic environment. This study argues that instead of pure symmetry, what occurs is “managed interactivity,” a pragmatic adaptation for survival in the digital age.

a. Vocational Education Branding and Reputation Challenges

Vocational education faces specific branding challenges, namely convincing the public of the quality of technical skills and work readiness of graduates. Unlike general universities that sell an “academic experience,” polytechnics must sell “industrial competence.” In this context, social media serves as a visual showcase to demonstrate real facilities and practical activities. However, research shows that building authentic brand engagement in the higher education sector is difficult if communication is only one-way (promotional) without involving storytelling that engages students emotionally.

b. Two-Way Symmetrical Communication in the Digital Age

Grunig's model divides PR practices into four categories: Press Agency, Public Information, Two-Way Asymmetrical, and Two-Way Symmetrical. The latter model is considered the most excellent because it prioritizes long-term relationships based on trust. However, contemporary critics such as Kent and Taylor (2021) highlight that social media often fails to create a true dialogic loop. Many organizations use comment and direct message (DM) features only as reactive customer service, not as a channel for strategic policy negotiation. This is relevant to Poltekbang's position as a public institution bound by strict bureaucratic rules, where flexibility to “change” according to public wishes (a requirement of symmetrical communication) is very limited.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with an exploratory case study design. Qualitative research data can be defined as data that is present or expressed in the form of words, sentences, narrative expressions, and images (Ummah, 2019). Descriptive research is research that attempts to describe an event or incident that occurs directly and realistically, in a realistic and actual manner. (Sugiyono, 2022). This design was chosen because the objective is to explore a specific phenomenon (PR practices in a semi-military environment) that has not been mapped in depth.

Informants in this study were selected using Purposive Sampling, which is the deliberate selection of informants based on certain criteria relevant to the focus of the study. (Sirait & Afrindo, 2021). Given the nature of this study as a preliminary investigation, data were collected from four key informants (N=4) representing two perspectives:

1. Message Production Perspective: Public Relations Officer and Head of the Finance/Cooperation Subdivision of Poltekbang.
2. Message Reception Perspective: Two active cadets/students. Although the sample size was limited, the validity of the data was strengthened through in-depth interviews (intensity sampling) and source triangulation.

Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and non-participatory observation of the institution's official social media accounts (Instagram and WhatsApp). Data analysis was conducted using Reflective Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke), which included the stages of data familiarization, coding, theme searching, and theme review to identify patterns of meaning underlying the institution's communication strategies.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. "Managed Interactivity" Strategy in Digital Channels

The findings show that Poltekbang's Public Relations actively utilizes social media, especially Instagram and WhatsApp, as the spearhead of

communication. However, the interactions that occur reflect a pattern of “Managed Interactivity.”

“We actively respond to comments on Instagram, even if they are negative, we must remain calm.” (Public Relations Officer)

This quote indicates that Public Relations is aware of the importance of responsiveness as a requirement for Two-Way Communication. WhatsApp is considered the most effective for fast and personal communication, creating an illusion of intimacy between the institution and students. However, a deeper analysis shows that this interaction is more functional (answering technical questions) than dialogical (discussing values or policies). Public Relations acts as a “gatekeeper” who filters public aspirations before passing them on to top management, in accordance with the prevailing military hierarchy. This is in line with the findings of Girsang & Kartikawangi that engagement on social media is often managed to dampen issues, not to empower the public.

2. Performative Transparency through Journalistic Standards

To build credibility, Poltekbang's Public Relations adheres strictly to basic journalistic principles.

“We always compile news based on the 5W+1H principle so that the information is relevant and reliable.” (Public Relations Officer)

The application of the 5W+1H standard is a hallmark of the Public Information model, where information accuracy is a top priority. Students responded positively to this strategy, considering the content produced to be “informative” and “trendy.” However, this transparency is performative; Public Relations showcases the best aspects of the institution (achievements, ceremonies) to build a positive image.

There are critical findings regarding operational constraints: “Lack of documentation when activities do not directly involve Public Relations.” This confirms that Public Relations at Poltekbang has not fully entered the dominant coalition of decision makers, a key prerequisite in Excellence

Theory. This marginal position of the Public Relations Office limits their ability to carry out truly symmetrical communication, as they often only act as technical implementers (communication technicians) rather than strategic planners.

3. Navigating Structural Obstacles: Bureaucracy vs. Digital Speed

The biggest challenge identified is the gap between the speed demanded by social media and the slowness of internal bureaucracy.

“Without equipment and information systems, two-way communication is difficult...” (Public Relations Officer)

Limited human resources and infrastructure pose real obstacles. In a semi-military culture, every outgoing message must go through a tiered approval process, which often hinders the real-time response demanded by the digital public. This phenomenon reinforces the argument that in government institutions, Two-Way Symmetrical Communication often remains an idealism that collides with the walls of administrative reality. Institutions respond by adopting a hybrid model: quick in responding to technical complaints (services), but slow and cautious in responding to policy issues.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Public Relations Management of Poltekbang Palembang does not fully implement the Two-Way Symmetrical Communication model as proposed by Grunig. Instead, they implement an Adaptive Hybrid model: combining one-way information dissemination (Public Information) to maintain the image of authority, with limited interaction elements (Managed Interactivity) on social media to serve the needs of Generation Z.

The success of Poltekbang's Public Relations in building a positive image does not lie in equality of power with the public, but in their ability to facilitate a “sense of being heard” through tactical responsiveness on WhatsApp and Instagram, even though strategic decisions remain in the hands of the command leadership.

Recommendations and Implications:

1. Strengthening the Dominant Coalition: Poltekbang leadership needs to involve Public Relations in strategic meetings so that communication is not only a downstream function (documentation) but also an upstream function (policy).

2. Digital Listening Tools: Adopt social listening technology to capture public sentiment more accurately and in real-time.

3. Digital Literacy Training: Improve the competence of Public Relations staff so that they are able to transform bureaucratic language into more fluid and engaging content without losing the authority of the institution.

4. Limitations: As an exploratory case study with a limited sample (N=4), these findings have limitations in terms of generalization. Further research is recommended to expand the sample by involving external stakeholders (parents, industry) and using quantitative methods to measure the effectiveness of the strategy statistically.

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