

**DIGITAL PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES TO INCREASE PUBLIC AWARENESS
THROUGH INSTAGRAM AT THE ACEH FOUNDATION FOR CHILDREN WITH
DISABILITIES****Diana Permatasari¹, Suwandi Sumartias², Iwan Koswara³**^{1,2,3,4} Ilmu Komunikasi / Magister Ilmu Komunikasi Universitas Padjadjaran**Article History**

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Abstract: The low level of public awareness of the role and activities of the Aceh Foundation for the Education of Children with Disabilities (YPAC) in educating children with disabilities requires an effective communication strategy through digital media. This study focuses on YPAC Aceh's digital public relations strategy in increasing public awareness through Instagram social media management, including planning, implementation, and evaluation of digital communication. The research method used is a qualitative approach with a descriptive research type, through data collection techniques in the form of interviews, observation, and documentation. The results of the study indicate that YPAC Aceh has implemented a digital public relations strategy in stages through the delivery of visual content based on school activities, interaction with the audience, and simple evaluation of follower responses. Although Instagram management still faces limitations in human resources and is not yet optimally structured, the use of Instagram is considered effective in disseminating information, building empathy, and increasing public awareness of children's disability issues and the role of YPAC Aceh.

Keywords: Strategy, Public Relations, Awareness.

INTRODUCTION

The Aceh Foundation for Children with Disabilities (Yayasan Pendidikan Anak Cacat/YPAC Aceh) is a non-profit institution dedicated to providing education and rehabilitation services for children with disabilities. YPAC Aceh has a vision of creating an inclusive and supportive environment for children with disabilities, enabling them to grow and develop optimally in accordance with their individual potential. By integrating quality education with holistic rehabilitation programs, YPAC Aceh strives to ensure equal opportunities and rights for children with disabilities to learn, develop, and contribute positively to society (Sutejo, 2023).

In general, educational institutions for children with disabilities in Indonesia are known as Special Schools (Sekolah Luar Biasa/SLB), which include several educational levels ranging from elementary school to junior high school and senior high school. At YPAC Aceh, education for children with disabilities is classified into two types: SLB-B, which is specifically designed for children with hearing and speech impairments, and SLB-CD, which serves children with intellectual disabilities and physical impairments. In principle, both types of schools operate under the same educational framework, with distinctions made based on the type of disability. This classification is intended to optimize the teaching and learning process as well as interactions between students and teachers in the classroom.

Based on a survey conducted by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII), the number of internet users in Indonesia in 2024 reached 221,563,479 people, representing approximately 79.5% of the total population. This figure reflects an increase of 1.4% compared to the previous year. The

survey also reported that around 60% of internet users in Indonesia actively engage in social media activities. These findings indicate a significant annual increase in internet usage in Indonesia. The behavior of Indonesian society in using the internet is largely oriented toward communication and information seeking through platforms such as Instagram. This phenomenon should be carefully considered by YPAC Aceh in optimizing the use of Instagram as an institutional communication tool for disseminating information to the public regarding its programs and activities. Instagram is a photography-based social networking service that was officially launched on October 6, 2010, by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, and attracted 25,000 users on its first day (Atmoko, 2012).

According to data from We Are Social as of January 2024, the number of active social media users in Indonesia reached 167 million out of a total population of 276.4 million, equivalent to 60.4% of the population. The use of Instagram as a digital public relations medium is particularly interesting to study, as Instagram ranks as the second most frequently used social media platform in Indonesia. On average, Indonesians spend approximately three hours and eighteen minutes per day accessing social media.

In this study, Instagram was selected as the primary social media platform because it is considered the most interactive platform and has the largest number of followers compared to other social media accounts owned by YPAC Aceh, such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. As of December 22, 2024, the Instagram account @ypacaceh had 331 followers and 30 posts. YPAC Aceh utilizes Instagram and its features as a medium for disseminating information, producing diverse content that has its own appeal. This practice aligns with the concept of digital public relations, which involves leveraging digital media as part of a strategic public relations approach. Digital public relations is a relatively new practice in the field of public relations that utilizes the internet as an intermediary and harnesses digital power to stimulate public interest (Asih, Muchtar, & Abidin, 2020). YPAC Aceh manages three official Instagram accounts that provide information on institutional activities, programs, and achievements, namely @ypacaceh, @slbbypacbna, and @slbcd_ypac_aceh.

The researcher focuses on the Instagram account @ypacaceh because it serves as the main institutional account and should ideally be managed professionally to increase public awareness of children with disabilities. However, the limited presentation of information has resulted in several challenges faced by YPAC Aceh, including limited financial capacity due to the lack of donors, low levels of active community participation, and the persistence of negative stigma toward children with disabilities. These issues are largely attributed to insufficient information dissemination, which should be effectively managed by the public relations unit of YPAC Aceh through its official Instagram account.

All public relations activities conducted via the internet are referred to as digital public relations, including the use of social media platforms such as Instagram. In this study, the researcher examines the digital public relations strategies implemented through the Instagram account @ypacaceh. The use of social media plays a crucial role for non-governmental or private institutions, as it serves to deliver information that can enhance public cognition and increase public awareness of YPAC Aceh.

Previous studies have demonstrated that digital public relations strategies are effective in increasing awareness and building relationships with the public. Several studies indicate that the use of social media and other digital platforms can help organizations, particularly non-profit institutions, achieve their objectives in mobilizing support, increasing participation, and shaping public perception. One relevant study by Waters and Jamaludin (2017) examined the use of social media in communicating health-related messages to the public and found that social media usage can increase awareness and foster more positive interactions between organizations and the community. Another study by Bortree (2017) on the use of social media in charitable campaigns reported similar findings, showing that organizations actively engaging through social media tend to be more successful in gaining support and raising public awareness of social issues. Based on these studies, it can be concluded that digital public relations strategies have significant potential to increase awareness, attract financial support, enhance public participation, and combat stigma within the context of YPAC Aceh. Therefore, YPAC Aceh can draw inspiration from these studies to design effective digital public relations strategies aligned with its specific needs and objectives.

This study offers several important contributions, including providing a deeper understanding of the importance of digital public relations strategies in increasing awareness of educational institutions serving

children with disabilities. Furthermore, this research is expected to offer valuable insights for YPAC Aceh in designing and implementing effective digital-based public relations communication strategies. Additional benefits include increasing public understanding of the role and contributions of YPAC Aceh in delivering educational and rehabilitation services for children with disabilities, as well as serving as a reference for future researchers or institutions interested in conducting similar studies in different contexts or within comparable organizations.

RESEARCHMETHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design, as it aims to describe and provide an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon or social reality. This method seeks to generate understanding through systematic data collection. Qualitative research, in essence, attempts to explain and formulate an interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation.

The research approach used is a case study. A case study is an empirical method that investigates a social phenomenon in depth and in a complex manner, while maintaining a holistic real-world perspective (Yin, 2018).

In this study, the case is limited to the management practices of the Instagram account @ypacaceh during the period January–December 2024. The rationale for selecting a single-case design is that YPAC Aceh represents a non-profit educational institution for persons with disabilities with distinctive digital public relations activities.

The research site is the Aceh Foundation for Children with Disabilities (YPAC Aceh), located in Santan Village, Ingin Jaya District, Aceh Besar Regency. The selection of this research location is based on thematic alignment, empirical relevance, data availability, and strategic value that can enrich the research findings, both theoretically and in terms of practical application within the field of communication studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

YPAC Aceh's Design and Evaluation of Digital Public Relations Strategies to Increase Public Awareness. The strategy examined in this study refers to the steps taken by the Aceh Foundation for Children with Disabilities (YPAC Aceh) to convey messages related to its institutional activities. Fundamentally, strategy involves planning and management processes aimed at achieving specific objectives (Effendy, 1993). Digital public relations strategy is defined as a series of communication planning and implementation efforts that utilize digital media and internet technology to build, maintain, and enhance relationships between an organization and its publics. This strategy encompasses the use of various digital platforms, such as social media, websites, and internet-based applications, to disseminate information, shape organizational image, and create sustainable two-way interactions with audiences (Smith, 2017). In this study, the digital public relations strategy is directed toward increasing public awareness of YPAC Aceh through the use of the Instagram social media platform.

Digital public relations strategies aimed at increasing public awareness represent planned organizational efforts that utilize digital media to introduce, disseminate, and embed public understanding of an organization's existence, values, and activities. Awareness in the context of public relations is understood as the level of public knowledge and consciousness regarding a particular issue, organization, or program (Aaker, 1997). Through Instagram, YPAC Aceh is able to reach wider audiences rapidly and continuously. The initial stages of public relations based on the boundary spanning theory include fact finding and planning (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2013).

The first stage in public relations practice is fact finding, which involves the collection of facts, information, and situational understanding related to the organization and its environment. Within the boundary spanning framework, public relations practitioners act as intermediaries between the organization and the public by observing internal organizational realities while simultaneously recognizing external public expectations (Cutlip et al., 2013). Fatmawati, the public relations officer of YPAC Aceh, stated that the foundation uses daily school activities as the primary basis for designing digital content, reflecting a fact-finding process grounded in direct observation of internal organizational activities.

Content design based on daily learning activities, religious programs, and routine school events demonstrates that YPAC Aceh conducts internal identification of organizational facts. In the context of boundary spanning theory, this activity constitutes internal scanning, which refers to the collection of data regarding what the organization does and which values it intends to communicate to the public (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). These facts are subsequently transformed into communication materials considered representative of YPAC Aceh's identity and activities.

In addition to routine activities, the findings indicate that YPAC Aceh incorporates special events such as National Disability Children's Day, National Teachers' Day, and flag ceremonies into its digital content. This practice indicates that the fact-finding process is not solely derived from internal activities but also considers social context and external momentum. According to Grunig (2009), public relations practitioners performing a boundary spanning function must be sensitive to relevant external issues and events so that organizational messages remain connected to public interests.

The fact-finding stage at YPAC Aceh remains largely descriptive and observational, focusing on documenting ongoing activities without structured audience research. Nevertheless, this approach still reflects the fundamental public relations function of identifying organizational realities as communication material. Cutlip et al. (2013) emphasize that fact finding does not always require formal research and may be conducted through systematic observation of activities and public responses.

Following fact finding, the next stage in boundary spanning-based public relations is planning. The planning stage involves determining what messages will be communicated, to whom they are directed, and how they will be delivered (Smith, 2017). YPAC Aceh's content planning, which prioritizes children's daily activities and thematic events, indicates that communication planning is aimed at building public awareness of the realities of education for children with disabilities.

From the perspective of boundary spanning theory, this planning stage reflects the organization's effort to bridge internal interests and public information needs. By showcasing children's daily activities, YPAC Aceh seeks to cultivate public understanding of inclusive education processes and their social value. Grunig and Repper (1992) argue that effective public relations planning must strategically connect organizational objectives with public expectations and perceptions.

However, the findings reveal that YPAC Aceh's digital content planning remains largely focused on activity documentation and is not yet fully based on audience needs analysis or long-term communication objectives. Within the theoretical framework, this condition indicates that the boundary spanning function remains more internally oriented rather than externally analytical. According to Kent and Taylor (2002), dialogic communication planning requires a deep understanding of audience characteristics and needs.

Overall, YPAC Aceh has implemented fact finding and planning stages in a practical and contextual manner. Content design rooted in daily activities and social momentum represents a tangible effort to bridge internal organizational activities with public interests. Although strengthening audience research and strategic planning remains necessary, these practices demonstrate the role of YPAC Aceh's public relations function as a connector between the organization and society in increasing awareness of issues related to children with disabilities.

CONCLUSION

YPAC Aceh has utilized Instagram as its primary platform for implementing a digital public relations strategy to enhance public awareness in a gradual and contextual manner. The strategy includes formulating communication objectives, presenting visually oriented content based on school activities, identifying target audiences, and conducting simple evaluations of public responses. Although the implementation remains basic and is constrained by limited human resources as well as the lack of optimal structure, Instagram has proven effective in expanding information reach, fostering public interaction and empathy, and increasing awareness of disability-related issues and YPAC Aceh's role in providing education for children with disabilities.

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