Strategic Management of Police Public Relations in Delivering Public Services: A Case Study of the Tanah Karo Regional Police

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Abstract

This research investigates the strategic communication management practices of the Tanah Karo District Police Public Relations (Polres Tanah Karo) unit in community service delivery. Employing a qualitative case study approach, it evaluates communication strategies, channels, and effectiveness in building positive community relations, guided by Harwood Childs› Public Relations Strategy theory encompassing publicity, persuasion, argumentation, and image-building alongside implicit elements of the Two-Way Symmetrical Model for mutual adaptation and Excellence Theory for stakeholder integration. Data collection involved in-depth interviews with police officers, community leaders, and residents, supplemented by document analysis and field observations. Findings reveal Polres Tanah Karo›s multi-channel strategy, integrating digital platforms like Instagram, traditional media, and direct community engagement, which aligns with Childs› indicators for publicity and persuasion while addressing local cultural contexts. Challenges persist in message consistency, feedback mechanisms, and cultural sensitivity, highlighting needs for enhanced two-way symmetrical dialogue to counter inconsistencies and boost trust. This study advances insights into Indonesian police PR, demonstrating how adaptive frameworks improve community trust and service delivery in regional settings like North Sumatra.

Keywords: *Strategic Communication, Police Public Relations, Community Service, Law Enforcement.*

Manajemen Komunikasi Strategis Humas Kepolisian Dalam Pelayanan Masyarakat: Studi Kasus Kepolisian Daerah Tanah Karo

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji praktik manajemen komunikasi strategis Unit Hubungan Masyarakat Kepolisian Kabupaten Tanah Karo (Polres Tanah Karo) dalam penyampaian layanan masyarakat. Menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, penelitian ini mengevaluasi strategi komunikasi, saluran, dan efektivitas dalam membangun hubungan positif dengan masyarakat, didasarkan pada Teori Strategi Hubungan Masyarakat Harwood Childs yang mencakup publisitas, persuasi, argumen, dan pembentukan citra, serta unsur-unsur implisit dari Model Simetris Dua Arah untuk adaptasi mutual dan Teori Keunggulan untuk integrasi pemangku kepentingan. Pengumpulan data melibatkan wawancara mendalam dengan anggota kepolisian, pemimpin masyarakat, dan

warga, dilengkapi dengan analisis dokumen dan pengamatan lapangan. Temuan menunjukkan strategi multi-saluran Polres Tanah Karo, yang mengintegrasikan platform digital seperti Instagram, media tradisional, dan keterlibatan langsung dengan masyarakat, yang sejalan dengan indikator Childs untuk publisitas dan persuasi sambil mempertimbangkan konteks budaya lokal. Tantangan tetap ada dalam konsistensi pesan, mekanisme umpan balik, dan sensitivitas budaya, menyoroti kebutuhan akan dialog simetris dua arah yang ditingkatkan untuk mengatasi ketidakkonsistenan dan meningkatkan kepercayaan. Studi ini memperluas wawasan tentang hubungan masyarakat kepolisian Indonesia, menunjukkan bagaimana kerangka kerja adaptif meningkatkan kepercayaan masyarakat dan penyampaian layanan di lingkungan regional seperti Sumatra Utara.

Kata Kunci: *Komunikasi Strategis, Hubungan Masyarakat Kepolisian, Pelayanan Masyarakat, Penegakan Hukum.*

INTRODUCTION

In today›s law enforcement environment, police agencies across the globe are progressively acknowledging the vital role of strategic communication in establishing and sustaining favorable relationships with the communities they serve. The idea of community policing has transformed from conventional law enforcement methods to include extensive communication strategies that promote trust, transparency, and cooperative partnerships between law enforcement and the public (Hallahan et al. 2007; Lee and McGovern 2014; Mawby 2010).

In Indonesia, the evolution of the police institution from a Military communication is characterized by direct, hierarchical, and jargon-laden styles that are influenced by extensive training, resulting in a "totalistic"organizational culture that often conflicts with civilian practices of indirectness and adaptability. This situation creates challenges in "code-switching,"as personnel find it difficult to modify national or institutional messages to fit local contexts, dialects, or customs, which can lead to feelings of alienation during transitions. In the realm of policing, this issue is evident in the struggle to move from

a command-driven communication style to one that is participatory and responsive to community needs. The existing gap is further highlighted by the absence of formal feedback mechanisms, such as standardized briefings that promote clarity within military environments but become fragmented in civilian organizations due to inter-departmental divides and varying protocols. In the absence of organized channels for conveying mission intent and addressing contingencies, transitions are plagued by ambiguity, redundant efforts, and ineffective resource allocation. A lack of trust is rooted in historical actions taken by the police and the cultural divide, with 94% of civilians lacking military experience, which intensifies misunderstandings and shifts in identity. This relational tension is further exacerbated by the frustration experienced by veterans or officers regarding perceived inefficiencies within civilian contexts, which obstructs the development of empathy and support networks that are crucial for successful reintegration. The Indonesian National Police (Polri) has undertaken numerous reforms aimed at bolstering its public image and fostering better community relations, with public relations units being

instrumental in these initiatives (Alyce 2015; Siregar et al. 2024).

The public relations (PR) efforts of the police are essential for fostering community trust and improving service delivery, especially in culturally diverse areas such as North Sumatra in Indonesia. This research investigates the strategic communication management practices employed by the PR unit of the Tanah Karo District Police (Polres Tanah Karo), utilizing and modifying frameworks established in previous studies on Indonesian police PR, including Harwood Childs› Public Relations Strategy theory. This model, which has been implemented in studies concerning the North Sumatra Regional Police, evaluates effectiveness through various means such as publicity, persuasion, argumentation, and image enhancement, which corresponds with the multi-channel strategies of Polres Tanah Karo, including the use of digital platforms like Instagram.

The Tanah Karo District Police (Polres Tanah Karo), which operates in the highland area of North Sumatra, encounters distinct challenges in engaging with the community owing to its varied population. This includes the indigenous Karo people, migrants from different ethnic groups, and tourists who come to the region. To ensure effective police public relations in this setting, it is essential to thoroughly analyze communication strategies that are Implementing cultural sensitivity in communication research within the Tanah Karo region necessitates an evaluation of how police communications correspond with Karo traditions, including indirect communication methods such as "Rebu ngerana"(a form of reluctance or politeness in familial interactions), while also

adapting to the inter-ethnic relationships with migrants. This process may involve qualitative analyses of language usage, for instance, the integration of the Karo dialect or local terminology, in conjunction with the observation of mediation practices during conflicts, drawing upon the principles of communication accommodation theory as observed in Indonesia›s multi-ethnic settings. Research conducted in Karo regions reveals distinct gendered communication patterns and the differentiation between public and private discourse, indicating that studies on police sensitivity should focus on the effectiveness of communication in specific domains, such as public announcements that honor masculine and feminine communication styles during multi-ethnic gatherings. In areas with a high concentration of migrants, such as Berastagi, the operationalization of this research may include conducting interviews and observations to determine whether police efforts effectively bridge communication gaps, thereby preventing conflicts from escalating, as evidenced in inter-ethnic situations in Gorontalo. This approach guarantees that the findings are relevant to the policing transitions occurring in regions adjacent to Aceh. (Bustami, Arifin, and Samosir 2025; Harahap et al. 2025).

Previous research conducted in Indonesia regarding police communication, particularly studies focused on digital policing in Tanah Karo, underscores the use of multi-channel strategies. However, these studies frequently neglect thorough assessments of message consistency, feedback mechanisms, and cultural sensitivity within the context of Batak Karo. For example, local investigations into the Instagram

strategies of Polres Tanah Karo highlight the importance of participatory communication but fall short in providing a comprehensive theoretical analysis in relation to Childs› indicators or two-way symmetrical models aimed at fostering mutual adaptation. This study seeks to fill that void by methodically employing these frameworks to analyze qualitative data derived from interviews, observations, and documents, thereby evaluating their applicability within a highland ethnic context.

Globally, research on police-civilian communication offers a comparative framework. Wang et al. assess eight communication competencies in interactions, emphasizing the importance of empathy and clarity for fostering trust, which reflects the difficulties faced in the feedback systems of Tanah Karo (Congyu Wang, Qiuyue Gao 2024). In a similar vein, Wozniak illustrate the effect of visual media, such as photographs, on public perception, which is pertinent to the role of Instagram in the strategies employed by Polres (Wozniak, Drakulich, and Calfano 2021). Furthermore, Turner and Shum connect police interactions to civic participation, highlighting the significance of public relations in shaping these relationships (Jacob R. Turner 2024).

Further global insights elucidate the cultural and oversight dynamics relevant to this context. Kwon and Wortley investigate perceptions of civilian oversight in Canada, emphasizing trust deficits that parallel the cultural sensitivity challenges observed in Indonesia (Jihyun Kwon 2022). Additionally, Burke examines stereotype threats in interracial interactions, providing guidance for adaptive strategies aimed at fostering ethnic diversity in Karo (Burke 2023). Adams conduct experimental tests on the impact of reforms on executives, proposing that the stakeholder-centric approach of Excellence Theory may improve the effectiveness of Polres PR (Adams et al. 2024). This study aims to replicate these perspectives within a domestic framework, thereby offering contextualized insights pertinent to Indonesian policing.

This research investigates the existing gap in knowledge regarding the management of strategic communication by police public relations units in Indonesian districts, with a focus on enhancing community service delivery. In the context of Indonesia, particularly in studies related to the North Sumatra police, the theory assesses communication strategies aimed at enhancing public image and engagement, which aligns with the objectives of Polres Tanah Karo during the shift towards civilian-oriented policing. It offers quantifiable variables for evaluating the quality of relationships, including aspects such as reciprocity and ethical interactions, which are essential for fostering trust in government-public relations (Ginting, Zulkarnain, and Kurniawati 2023). In contrast to the Two-Way Symmetrical Model that emphasizes balanced dialogue, Relationship Management Theory focuses on long-term relational outcomes such as legitimacy and cooperation. This approach is particularly suitable for qualitative assessments of police practices in culturally sensitive regions like Aceh or Karo. It provides a framework for your research on the relational gaps present during policing transitions, thereby offering a relational blueprint for the establishment

of sustainable trust, to identify both challenges and opportunities, and to offer recommendations aimed at improving the relationship between the police and the community through the implementation of effective communication strategies.

The importance of this research is found in its addition to the expanding literature regarding police communication in developing nations, especially within the Indonesian framework where community policing principles are being tailored to fit local cultural and social circumstances. The results will be beneficial for police leaders, policymakers, and scholars who seek to comprehend the intricacies of police-public relations in diverse community environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic Communication in Law Enforcement

Strategic communication within law enforcement pertains to the intentional and methodical management of information exchange between police entities and their stakeholders, which encompass the public, media, and various governmental bodies (Hallahan et al. 2007). This idea has become increasingly significant as law enforcement agencies acknowledge that proficient communication is crucial for establishing legitimacy, fostering public trust, and achieving operational success.

Hallahan et al. strategic communication is defined as "the intentional use of communication by an organization to achieve its mission." In the realm of policing, this entails the development of clear messages that

correspond with organizational objectives while also responding to the needs and concerns of the community. This strategic methodology necessitates meticulous planning, execution, and assessment of communication initiatives to guarantee their alignment with overarching organizational goals (Hallahan et al. 2007).

Research by Schneider it underscores the necessity for police communication strategies to adopt a proactive stance instead of a reactive one, prioritizing the establishment of relationships prior to the emergence of crises. This methodology entails consistent interaction with community members, transparent disclosure of police operations, and an attentive approach to addressing public inquiries and grievances (Schneider 2016).

Police Public Relations Theory and Practice

The field of police public relations has transitioned from merely sharing information to a more complex form of communication management, which includes aspects such as reputation management, crisis communication, and engagement with stakeholders (Mawby 2010). The discipline integrates concepts from public relations theory alongside criminological studies to create frameworks that elucidate the dynamics of communication between police and the community.

Grunig and Hunt's four models of public relations establish a fundamental framework for comprehending police communication strategies: press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetric, and two-way symmetric communication (Hunt 2018). Modern police public relations increasingly focuses on the two-way

symmetric model, which entails mutual understanding and adaptation between the perspectives of the police and the community.

The notion of police legitimacy plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of public relations. Procedural justice is based on four key principles: voice (the opportunity to be heard), neutrality (the provision of fair and transparent decisions), respect (the dignity afforded in treatment), and trust (the benevolence of motives). The quality of communication operationalizes these principles through timeliness (prompt responses), respect (the use of empathetic language), and consistency (the reliability of messaging). High-quality communication demonstrates that authorities are attentive, acknowledge concerns, and act ethically, which directly influences citizens› perceptions of fair treatment, regardless of the outcomes. In the context of Tanah Karo, the transition to civilian policing has been marked by cultural shifts, where inconsistent or delayed police communication has eroded perceived neutrality and trust. This mediates a decline in legitimacy, as the public interprets such communication as a disregard for local values. Engaging in respectful and timely dialogues, such as community forums, signals a shared identity and procedural fairness, thereby fostering cooperation and bridging relational gaps in ethnic highland environments. The research posits that mediation through relational models, such as the Group Value Model, allows communication quality to convey identity-affirming signals, establishing an empirical link to deference and compliance that extends beyond mere instrumental factors.

This aligns with qualitative assessments of Polres Tanah Karo, which evaluate how communication gaps account for variations in trust perceptions during institutional transitions (Sundaram et al. 2026). The role of effective communication is vital in influencing these perceptions, as it showcases transparency, respect, and responsiveness to the concerns of the community (Tyler 2004).

Community Policing and Communication

The philosophy of community policing highlights the importance of partnership, problem-solving, and prevention as fundamental principles (Trojanowicz 2019). Effective communication is essential to all of these principles, as it allows law enforcement to comprehend the needs of the community, work together on solutions, and establish the trust required for successful crime prevention.

Research by Skogan this illustrates that effective community policing initiatives necessitate ongoing communication strategies that extend beyond conventional police-citizen engagements (Pal 2023). Such strategies encompass frequent community gatherings, partnerships within neighborhoods, and joint problem-solving efforts that rely on efficient communication pathways.

The advent of the digital era has revolutionized the communication methods employed in community policing, as social media platforms offer novel avenues for interaction between the police and the community. Studies by Crump and Heverin & Zach demonstrate that social media has the potential to improve police transparency and foster community

engagement when employed strategically; however, it also introduces challenges concerning information management and crisis communication (Crump 2011).

Communication Challenges in Multicultural Settings

Policing within multicultural communities poses distinct communication challenges that necessitate cultural competence and sensitivity. Research by Cherney & Murphy emphasizes the significance of recognizing cultural variances in communication methods, hierarchical dynamics, and strategies for resolving conflicts (Kristina Murphy 2007).

Within the context of Indonesia, studies by Muradi and Kristiansen investigate the ways in which police communication must traverse various cultural backgrounds, languages, and social frameworks (Permana 2016). For instance, the Karo community in North Sumatra possesses unique cultural norms and communication styles that affect their engagements with law enforcement.

Language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and historical tensions between law enforcement and specific communities can greatly affect the effectiveness of communication. To achieve successful police public relations in diverse environments, it is essential to employ communication strategies that are culturally tailored and approaches that are specific to the community (Lum and Koper 2017).

Digital Communication and Social Media in Policing

The incorporation of digital communication technologies has transformed police public relations, providing novel avenues for information distribution, community involvement, and crisis communication. Research by Brainard & Edlins this indicates that social media platforms have the potential to improve police transparency and foster community trust when utilized effectively (Brainard and Edlins 2015).

Nonetheless, digital communication poses certain challenges such as information overload, maintaining message consistency across various platforms, and the necessity for prompt responses to online inquiries and criticisms. Studies by Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer it is recommended that law enforcement agencies create thorough digital communication plans that are in harmony with their broader public relations goals (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2015).

The context of Indonesia introduces particular factors that must be taken into account for digital police communication. These factors encompass diverse levels of internet accessibility, varying degrees of digital literacy, and cultural inclinations towards different communication mediums. Global police hierarchies enforce standardized protocols that emphasize obedience and uniformity, which limits Polres Tanah Karo›s ability to engage with the public in real-time and leads to delays in communication during crises. These issues manifest as common problems such as slow decision-making and a reluctance to incorporate grassroots feedback, particularly evident in the challenges faced by Indonesian policing in adapting to the digital age. In Tanah Karo, resource limitations, including a shortage of personnel and inadequate

rural infrastructure, further intensify communication gaps, resulting from both understaffed digital tools and infrequent patrols, which is a concern beyond mere hierarchical constraints. Additionally, the cultural diversity among Karo ethnic groups necessitates a localized respect for adat traditions, where any misalignment in messaging could lead to conflict, which is addressed through culturally sensitive approaches such as community dialogues, in contrast to uniform national strategies.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research utilizes a qualitative case study methodology to investigate the strategic communication management practices of the public relations unit at Polres Tanah Karo. The case study approach was chosen due to its capacity for thorough examination of intricate phenomena within their actual context, rendering it especially appropriate for analyzing communication strategies and their efficacy within a distinct organizational and cultural framework (Neuman 2014; Yin 2018).

The study adopts an interpretive framework, acknowledging that communication practices are constructed socially and embedded within specific contexts. This methodology facilitates an exploration of how various stakeholders understand and engage with police communication, yielding valuable insights into the efficacy and difficulties of existing practices (Leavy 2017; Matthew B. Milees, A. Michael Huberman 2017).

The research utilized purposive sampling to choose participants capable of offering in-depth insights into police communication practices and their efficacy.

The interpretive framework addresses organizational bias present in police personnel narratives by utilizing reflexivity and member-checking triangulation. This method cross-verifies officer accounts (for instance, the PR head highlighting compliance successes) against data from community stakeholders to differentiate self-justificatory rhetoric from verifiable relational practices. The inherent inclination of officers to emphasize policy adherence rather than acknowledging two-way symmetrical failures, such as limited dialogue, is identified through discourse analysis. This analysis uncovers linguistic markers of defensiveness (for example, an excessive focus on hierarchy-driven successes) that are deeply rooted in institutional socialization. Furthermore, the framework employs Tyler›s procedural justice perspective to investigate how biased narratives can distort perceptions of fairness, treating these narratives as reflections of internal culture rather than as objective truths. Data collected from police (n=4) is balanced with community feedback through iterative validation processes. Here, inconsistencies (such as officers asserting symmetrical engagement despite evidence of top-down messaging) expose bias, ensuring that the analysis prioritizes relational outcomes over the optimistic views of insiders. Researchers engage in reflexive bracketing during interviews to recognize power dynamics, adjusting their interpretations to focus on empirical gaps in trust-building. This methodology produces nuanced critiques, illustrating how bias conceals shortcomings in cultural adaptation within Tanah Karo, thereby informing recommendations for bias-aware

training in digital strategies (Creswell 2019; Ivankova 2020; Tseer et al. 2025).

The research prioritized the anonymity and safety of informants, including citizens and community leaders, by employing pseudonyms, utilizing encrypted data storage, obtaining informed consent with options for withdrawal, and selecting neutral venues for interviews. Additionally, it addressed sensitive historical tensions through comprehensive risk assessments and aggregated reporting. Prior to the interviews, risks associated with grievance topics were evaluated, ensuring that sessions took place in private locations that were not affiliated with law enforcement, along with providing referrals for support after discussions. In Phase 4, the review of themes aggregated the findings to ensure that individual identities could not be traced, thereby protecting informants from potential retaliation in contexts sensitive to police involvement (Zach 2013). 2. Initial coding: A systematic approach was employed to code relevant features of the data. 3. Theme development: Codes were organized into potential themes. 4. Theme review: Themes were refined to guarantee coherence and distinctiveness. 5. Theme definition: Final themes were clearly defined and named. 6. Report writing: The final analysis was produced, accompanied by illustrative examples (Denzin 2018; Earl Babbie 2013). NVivo 12 software was utilized to manage and analyze qualitative data, thereby facilitating systematic coding and theme development. The analysis process was iterative, involving regular team discussions to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings.

RESULTS

Current Communication Strategies

The analysis indicated that Polres Tanah Karo utilizes a comprehensive communication strategy that merges both traditional and digital methods to engage various segments of the community. The Public Relations unit has formulated what they refer to as an "integrated communication approach," which acknowledges the cultural and linguistic diversity present within the district.

1. Digital Communication Platforms

The law enforcement agency has created a presence across various digital platforms, with Facebook and Instagram acting as the main avenues for engaging with the community. The official Instagram account of Polres Tanah Karo can be found at https://www.instagram.com/polres_tanahkaro/ (25K followers, 9K+ posts), where the administrators engage in digital public relations by providing regular activity updates, announcing community events, and soliciting public cooperation, thereby underscoring the importance of transparency and accessibility. The Polres team shares reels and images depicting patrols, arrests, and community dialogues (such as "Patroli Dialogis" aimed at fostering community engagement), in addition to messages from leadership that advocate for safety and unity. This is essential for addressing relational gaps in policing within the highlands, particularly given resource constraints. Such a proactive strategy mitigates delays typically associated with hierarchical structures by facilitating real-time updates

and encouraging two-way communication through comment interactions, although the responses to these interactions are often limited. The posts predominantly feature formal and bureaucratic Indonesian language, structured as announcements like "Polres Tanah Karo mengajak seluruh masyarakat"(inviting the public), with minimal incorporation of local Karo references (such as place names) and a rare use of informal slang or dialect. Facebook reflects this approach through linked shares, emphasizing an official tone rather than casual vernacular. The formal style employed signals neutrality and reliability, in accordance with Tyler›s theory, thereby enhancing perceptions of procedural justice through consistent and respectful messaging that fosters legitimacy within diverse communities. However, this approach may inadvertently alienate ethnic groups that anticipate a more culturally resonant informality, potentially diminishing trust if the communication is perceived as distant, especially in light of historical tensions that necessitate hybrid strategies for fostering symmetrical relations. As articulated by one communication officer:

> "We use Facebook because most people in Tanah Karo are active there. We share information about traffic conditions, crime prevention, and our community programs. The response is generally positive, with people commenting and sharing our posts.»

WhatsApp groups have been established for various communities and neighborhoods, facilitating more focused communication and swift information sharing during emergencies. The police operate distinct groups for community leaders, business associations, and youth organizations.

2. Traditional Media Engagement
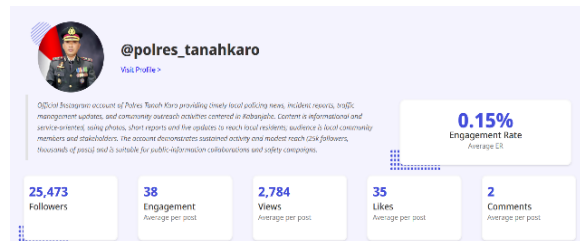
The Instagram account of Polres Tanah Karo (@polres_tanahkaro) shows an engagement rate of 0.15%, which is derived from the likes, comments, and shares in relation to its 25,000 followers and over 9,000 posts. This suggests a lack of interaction, even with regular updates. This engagement rate is below the average for Indonesian institutions, which typically range from 0.5% to 2% for police accounts. This indicates a deficiency in two-way symmetrical communication, as posts receive very few comments despite requests for public feedback on patrols and events. The formal tone adopted by the administrators further exacerbates this issue, as it emphasizes announcements rather than fostering responsive conversations, thereby hindering the development of relational trust in cultural settings such as the Karo highlands. The low level of engagement highlights the necessity for improved digital public relations strategies. This could involve transitioning to more informal or locally relevant Karo expressions, implementing Q&A stories, and encouraging user-generated content to enhance perceived accessibility and procedural justice. Such changes would be consistent with Relationship Management

Theory, which posits that interactive metrics are indicative of cooperation. The current formal approach risks perpetuating a hierarchical divide, which could undermine legitimacy, especially in the context of limited resources.

3. Direct Community Engagement

The police have established routine community meetings known as "Komsos"(Komunikasi Sosial) in every sub-district. These monthly assemblies unite police officers, community leaders, and residents to address security concerns and police initiatives. A village chief characterized these meetings as beneficial:

> *"The Komsos meetings help us understand what the police are doing and allow us to share our concerns. Sometimes there are misunderstandings, but we can clarify them through direct discussion.»*

Community policing officers, known as Bhabinkamtibmas, act as essential communication conduits between law enforcement and local communities. Their role involves maintaining consistent engagement with residents, comprehending community concerns, and transmitting information between the populace and police. The bottleneck at headquarters, which restricts information to weekly press conferences, undermines Polres Tanah Karo›s multi-channel strategy by causing delays that are at odds with the real-time demands of Instagram and Bhabinkamtibmas field interactions. This situation indicates a frail Two-Way Asymmetrical Model that depends heavily on one-way communication. Such rigidity, driven by hierarchical

structures, obstructs the objectives of Relationship Management Theory, as the public encounters inconsistent access to information outside of organized events. Informal and personalized dialogues conducted by Bhabinkamtibmas, such as village-level patrols, frequently highlight local collaboration and sensitivity to adat, which stands in stark contrast to the formal and bureaucratic social media posts from headquarters, like structured arrest reports. This discrepancy fosters public confusion regarding the intentions of the police. These contradictions exacerbate distrust within the diverse contexts of Karo, where delays in communication are perceived as unfair, ultimately diminishing both legitimacy and cooperation.
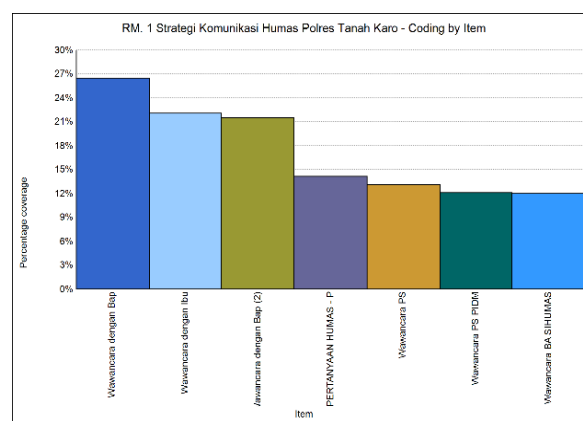
Communication Effectiveness and Challenges

1 Strengths in Current Communication

Several beneficial aspects of police communication have been recognized: Cultural sensitivity the police exhibit an understanding of cultural variances within the community. Communication materials are occasionally available in both Indonesian and Karo languages, and officers receive training to comprehend

local customs and traditions. Proactive information sharing the public relations unit consistently disseminates information regarding police operations, crime statistics, and safety recommendations, transitioning from reactive communication to proactive involvement. Multiple channel approach the implementation of diverse communication channels guarantees a wider reach across various demographic segments and communication preferences. Community Feedback Integration Police officers indicate that community feedback gathered from meetings and social media interactions significantly impacts their operational choices. The utilization of multiple channels theoretically results in message inconsistency due to coordination failures among decentralized sources, where differing channel affordances exacerbate discrepancies between centralized formal messaging and localized personalized inputs, according to multi-channel communication theories. Multi-channel strategies broaden outreach but also create silos: headquarters imposes a uniform tone through social media, while Bhabinkamtibmas provide adaptive, community-specific feedback from meetings, which lack real-time synchronization and generate cognitive dissonance for the public. This divergence from authentic representation occurs as audiences become aware of mismatches (for instance, formal arrests online contrasted with relational dialogues offline), leading to increased scrutiny and diminished credibility. The norms of each channel, such as Instagram›s visual brevity versus the informality of face-to-face interactions, contribute to

inconsistency in the absence of integrated oversight, thereby undermining the ideals of Two-Way Symmetrical communication by indicating inadequate neutrality and responsiveness within Tyler›s framework. In Polres Tanah Karo, this situation erodes trust despite the integration of feedback, as the public reconciles contradictions through attribution (for example, attributing blame to hierarchy), which ultimately lowers perceived legitimacy.

2 Persistent Challenges

Notwithstanding these advantages, a number of considerable challenges have been recognized: message consistency the information disseminated across various channels occasionally exhibits inconsistencies, leading to confusion among members of the community. A business proprietor remarked:

> *"Sometimes we get different information from the police officer in our area and what we see on their Facebook page. This makes us unsure about what is really happening.»*

Neglecting to systematically assess feedback from the community undermines the Two-Way Symmetrical Model, reducing public contributions to mere symbolic acts that fail to impact decision-making. This approach perpetuates a one-sided flow of information and diminishes the mutual adaptation that is crucial for achieving relational equity. According to Grunig›s model, effective communication necessitates reciprocal dialogue, where feedback informs program modifications. However, the ad-hoc management at Polres Tanah Karo, which lacks measurable metrics

or integration processes, treats community inputs as mere information rather than as catalysts for change. This approach indicates an asymmetrical distribution of power that favors hierarchical structures over collaborative efforts. Consequently, it overlooks valuable insights that could be gained from community meetings and social media interactions, leading to a sense of disillusionment among the public, who feel their voices are ignored despite attempts to gather their opinions. Tyler›s theory connects the concepts of justice with the importance of voice and impartiality; when feedback is not evaluated, it diminishes the perceived ‹quality of treatment› by suggesting a lack of consideration, thereby exacerbating the inconsistency between the personalized interactions of Bhabinkamtibmas and the rigid outputs from headquarters. This inconsistency ultimately undermines legitimacy and trust within the Karo context. In the absence of a systematic review process, such as thematic coding as proposed by Braun & Clarke, operational decisions fail to address relational deficiencies, thereby reinforcing historical grievances and obstructing collaborative efforts.

Despite attempts to support the Karo language, a significant portion of communications continues to be conducted in Indonesian, which may alienate certain community members who prefer their native tongue. While the police gather input from the community, there is a lack of systematic feedback mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of communication. Regular evaluations to determine whether messages are comprehended or fulfilling their intended purpose are absent. The Public Relations unit functions with a constrained staff and budget, which hampers their capacity to execute thorough communication strategies. The unit head clarified.

> "We have many good ideas for improving communication, but we need more personnel and resources to implement them effectively.»

In times of emergencies or contentious events, the responses in communication tend to be sluggish and reactive instead of being proactive and strategically planned. Members of the community have voiced their dissatisfaction regarding the slow or insufficient information provided during crucial circumstances.

Community Perceptions and Trust

Polres Tanah Karo illustrates an increase in public trust as evidenced by satisfaction surveys, achieving a score of 89.67 in the 2023 public service awards, an improvement from previous years. Additionally, national polls indicate a 79.8% approval rating for the Indonesian Police, while local studies reveal a 23.2% variance in satisfaction linked to service quality at Mardinding Polsek. A 2021 investigation at Polsek Mardinding established that service quality has a significant impact on community satisfaction ($R^2=0.232$). Furthermore, the 2023 awards positioned Polres Tanah Karo third in media management within North Sumatra, highlighting advancements in procedural practices. National surveys, which were disseminated via their Instagram reel, confirm a 79.8% satisfaction rate, suggesting that the police are perceived as responsive in their relational initiatives. The Instagram

account (@polres_tanahkaro) features reels that showcase positive community feedback regarding patrols and events, with comments expressing gratitude such as "terima kasih Polres"for their engagement, indicating a sense of fairness despite relatively low engagement metrics. During significant occasions like Independence Day, local officials, including Bupati Karo, have praised Polres for fostering unity. Moreover, Puslitbang Polri›s 2023 trust research in Tanah Karo highlights an increase in legitimacy through dialogues, addressing historical tensions.

1 Trust Levels and Factors

Trust in law enforcement varies considerably among various demographic groups and geographic regions. Residents of urban areas typically express greater levels of trust compared to those in rural settings, which can be partially explained by the more frequent and favorable interactions they have with police. Factors that contribute to this trust include: transparency in operations community members value when law enforcement agencies disclose information regarding their activities and decision-making processes. Responsiveness to concerns timely responses to community inquiries and grievances foster trust. Cultural respect demonstrating respect for local customs and traditions positively affects community perceptions. Consistency in messaging reliable and uniform communication enhances credibility over time.

2 Areas of Concern

Multiple factors adversely affect the trust within the community: perceived insufficiency of transparency certain members of the community believe that law enforcement does not provide sufficient information regarding investigations or policy modifications that influence them. Obstacles in communication language and cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings that harm the relationship between the police and the community. Restricted community participation although there are consultation processes in place, some residents feel that their opinions are not sufficiently considered in the planning and decision-making of the police.

Impact on Service Delivery

1 Positive Impacts

Effective communication has clearly enhanced various facets of police service delivery: Crime reporting community members are more inclined to report crimes and share information with the police when they feel informed and involved. A community leader noted:

> *"When people understand how the police work and feel they can trust them, they are more willing to report problems and cooperate with investigations.»*

Community involvement in policing initiatives, such as neighborhood watch programs (Siskamling) and traffic safety campaigns, is enhanced by effective communication and active engagement within the community. The paradox emerges from the fact that an increase in crime reporting signifies effective channel reach (for instance, through Instagram patrols and call centers that enhance awareness). However, disparities in access

(such as rural connectivity issues) and inadequate expectation management (like unfulfilled follow-up commitments) indicate failures in quality, as highlighted by Relationship Management Theory, which prioritizes relational reciprocity over sheer volume. The expansion across multiple channels boosts reporting by improving visibility; for example, dialogis patrols and social media reels encourage submissions. Nevertheless, hierarchical bottlenecks restrict equitable access in highland regions, where resource-deficient areas fall behind, leading to perceptions of uneven procedural justice.

2 Service Delivery Challenges

Communication gaps persist, leading to challenges in service delivery: Disparities in access some members of the community, especially those in remote locations or with restricted digital literacy, encounter obstacles in accessing police services due to communication barriers. Expectation management ambiguous communication regarding police capabilities and procedures can occasionally foster unrealistic expectations within the community. Conflict resolution challenges in communication can transform minor disagreements into significant conflicts, necessitating more extensive police involvement.

Recommendations from Stakeholders

1 Police Personnel Recommendations

Recurring resource limitations serve as the main physical obstacle to Polres Tanah Karo›s complete implementation of the Two-Way Symmetrical Model. These constraints restrict personnel availability for

ongoing dialogues, digital tools necessary for immediate responses, and training in relational skills, thereby necessitating a reliance on one-way communications in the face of hierarchical pressures. The insufficient staffing levels (for instance, fewer than 507 personnel during significant events) hinder Bhabinkamtibmas from engaging consistently with the community. Additionally, budgetary constraints impede the development of infrastructure, such as dependable internet access in highland areas, which is crucial for establishing reciprocal feedback mechanisms that are vital for Grunig›s concept of mutual adaptation. This situation fosters a top-down communication approach, as officers tend to prioritize patrol duties over evaluative processes, which ultimately undermines the principles of symmetrical equity. In the absence of resources for continuous training in cultural sensitivity or digital public relations, Polres resorts to formal messaging from headquarters rather than adaptive responses. This reliance perpetuates inconsistencies that negatively impact perceptions of procedural justice, as illustrated by Tyler›s findings regarding unmet commitments stemming from direct messaging feedback due to excessive workloads. Recommendations for resource redistribution underscore the importance of addressing these foundational issues, which would facilitate only partial progress toward a more relational approach to policing.

2 Community Recommendations

Community members and leaders suggested: Bilingual communications should consistently utilize both Indonesian and Karo languages in police interactions.

Community liaison programs should be expanded to effectively bridge communication gaps between law enforcement and particular community groups. Feedback mechanisms should be established as systematic approaches for community members to offer their input regarding police communication and services. Cultural competency should maintain a strong focus on comprehending and honoring local customs and traditions.

DISCUSSION

Strategic Communication Framework

The results indicate that Polres Tanah Karo has established a fairly extensive communication strategy that utilizes various channels and methods. Nevertheless, the existing approach seems to be more tactical rather than genuinely strategic, as it lacks the systematic planning and assessment elements that are crucial for effective management of strategic communication.

Compared to Hallahan et al.›s the definition of strategic communication is described as the "intentional use of communication by an organization to achieve its mission"(Hallahan et al. 2007; Zulham 2025). In this context, the police communication initiatives exhibit a clear purpose; however, they could improve by aligning more systematically with the organization›s mission and objectives. The use of a multi-channel strategy indicates an awareness of the diversity within the audience, yet there is a need for enhanced consistency in messaging and the implementation of robust evaluation mechanisms (Kappeller and Gaines 2009).

Cultural Adaptation and Local Context

The research emphasizes the significance of cultural adaptation within police communication strategies. The initiatives to integrate Karo language and traditions into communication methods are consistent with studies conducted by Cherney & Murphy regarding the challenges of multicultural policing, the implementation seems to lack consistency, indicating a necessity for a more structured approach to developing cultural competency (Kristina Murphy 2007).

The results corroborate Lum & Koper›s the assertion that effective police communication in multicultural environments necessitates approaches tailored to specific communities is evident (Kappeller and Gaines 2009; Lum and Koper 2017). The varying communication strategies employed in urban compared to rural settings, along with the acknowledgment of the distinct needs of diverse communities, illustrate a constructive adaptation to local circumstances.

Digital Communication Integration

The incorporation of digital platforms signifies a notable progression in the communication abilities of law enforcement agencies. Utilizing Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp groups is consistent with findings from research by Brainard & Edlins on the potential of social media to improve police transparency and foster community engagement (Brainard and Edlins 2015; Siregar et al. 2024).

Nevertheless, the results also indicate challenges that are consistent with Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer›s investigation

into the intricacies of digital communication (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2015). The challenges of maintaining message consistency across various platforms, along with the necessity for swift response capabilities, underscore the significance of well-rounded digital communication strategies (Bennett, Newman, and Sydes 2017).
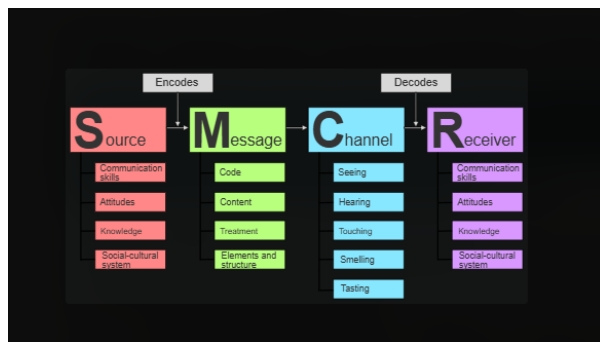
The illustration presented below illustrates a multi-channel flow from headquarters to the community, emphasizing the successes in consistency (represented by green arrows) and the failures (indicated by red barriers) within feedback loops, thereby anchoring the gaps identified in the Two-Way Symmetrical Model.

Two-Way Communication and Community Engagement

The execution of Komsos meetings alongside community policing officers signifies progress toward Grunig & Hunt›s a two-way symmetric communication model (Hunt 2018). These initiatives foster opportunities for reciprocal understanding and adaptation between the perspectives of the police and the community.

Nevertheless, the feedback mechanisms are still inadequately developed, which restricts the possibility for authentic two-way communication

(Braun and Clarke 2016). The community›s apprehensions regarding insufficient involvement in police planning indicate that although channels for dialogue are present, they might not be entirely effective in fostering a genuine partnership.

Trust and Legitimacy Implications

The connection between the effectiveness of communication and the trust within a community is supported Tyler›s the theory of procedural justice highlights the importance of transparency, responsiveness, and cultural respect as key factors in building trust among community members (Tyler 2004). This perspective is consistent with existing research on police legitimacy and the principles of procedural justice.

The differences in trust levels among various demographic groups and geographic regions indicate that communication strategies should be customized to meet the unique contexts and requirements of specific communities. This conclusion underscores the significance of community-focused methods in police communication.

Service Delivery Impact

The favorable relationship between efficient communication and enhanced service delivery, especially in the context of crime reporting and community engagement, corroborates findings from research conducted by Skogan regarding the effectiveness of community policing, the results indicate that communication serves not only as a supportive role but is fundamentally integral to the delivery of police services (Bennett et al. 2017; Greene 2015).

The difficulties encountered in service delivery due to communication gaps underscore the critical role of effective communication strategies in operations. Furthermore, the problems associated with unequal access and the management of expectations indicate that the effectiveness of communication has a direct influence on the success of police operations.

Resource and Capacity Considerations

The resource limitations highlighted in this research indicate wider issues in the management of police communication. The insufficient personnel and funding for Public Relations efforts imply that communication has not yet been entirely acknowledged as a strategic priority that necessitates appropriate resource distribution.

This discovery holds significant implications for the administration of police forces and the formulation of policies, indicating that successful communication necessitates a commitment from the organization that extends beyond merely establishing communication units. The necessity for training, technological advancements, and evaluation systems signifies substantial investment demands.

Implications for Indonesian Policing

The results of the study carry significant implications for the communication practices of the Indonesian police. The challenges and successes observed in Tanah Karo could be applicable to other districts that encounter similar cultural diversity and limitations in resources.

The focus on cultural adaptation and local context indicates that the communication strategies employed by the Indonesian police ought to be formulated with considerable local involvement instead of relying on uniform national methods. This is consistent with the overarching principles of community policing and reflects Indonesia›s rich cultural diversity.

CONCLUSION

This research has investigated the strategic management of communication within the Public Relations unit of Polres Tanah Karo, uncovering notable successes as well as ongoing difficulties in the communication between the police and the community. The findings of this study enhance our comprehension of how police organizations operating in culturally varied and resource-limited settings can formulate effective communication strategies to improve the delivery of community services.

Key Findings

The analysis indicates that Polres Tanah Karo has established a comprehensive communication strategy that integrates digital platforms, conventional media, and direct engagement with the community. The police exhibit cultural awareness and actively share information, which fosters generally favorable relationships with the community. Nevertheless, challenges remain regarding the consistency of messages, the implementation of systematic feedback mechanisms, and the allocation of resources for communication initiatives.

Trust in law enforcement within communities differs among various demographic groups and geographic regions, with transparency, responsiveness,

and cultural respect recognized as crucial elements affecting trust levels. The efficacy of communication has clearly enhanced crime reporting, community engagement, and emergency response, underscoring the operational significance of communication strategies.

Theoretical Contributions

This research enhances police communication theory by illustrating the significance of cultural adaptation within strategic communication management. The results affirm the importance of two-way symmetric communication models in the context of police-community relations, while also emphasizing the practical difficulties encountered when applying these methods in environments with limited resources.

Additionally, the study advances the comprehension of digital communication integration within police organizations, revealing both the opportunities and challenges linked to multi-platform communication strategies. The results underscore the necessity of systematic evaluation and feedback mechanisms in the realm of strategic communication management.

Practical Implications

Strategic communication addresses the broken feedback loop at Polres Tanah Karo by implementing a structured cycle of collecting, analyzing, adapting, and reporting. This process transforms ad-hoc direct messages (DMs) into actionable policy modifications, progressing from a Two-Way Asymmetrical Model to a Symmetrical Model through systematic

integration. Administrators categorize DMs thematically on a weekly basis, following Braun & Clarke›s phases, and prioritize significant issues such as rural access for headquarters review. They then adapt their approach through targeted responses, such as Stories polls, and program adjustments, like increasing patrols, while publicly reporting the outcomes to complete the feedback loop and demonstrate responsiveness. Digital tools, including shared dashboards, facilitate cross-channel alignment, effectively countering hierarchical silos.

Policy Recommendations

According to the findings, a number of policy recommendations arise: Strategic planning should involve the development of thorough communication strategies that are in alignment with the organizational mission and objectives. Resource allocation must ensure sufficient staffing and budgetary provisions for communication initiatives. Cultural competency necessitates the implementation of structured training programs focused on cultural competency, as well as the establishment of bilingual communication capabilities. Evaluation systems should be instituted to facilitate regular assessments of the effectiveness and impact of communication efforts. Community partnership requires the creation of systematic processes that allow for community input in both communication planning and evaluation

Future Research Directions

This research presents multiple pathways for subsequent investigations: Comparative studies analyze

communication methods across various police districts to pinpoint best practices and context-dependent elements. Longitudinal research monitors communication efficacy over time to grasp long-term effects and sustainability. Digital communication focus explores particular facets of digital communication within police organizations, such as social media management and crisis communication. Community perspective studies carry out research mainly from the viewpoints of the community to comprehend communication requirements and preferences. Quantitative assessment creates metrics for evaluating communication effectiveness and its influence on police performance

Limitations and Considerations

The limitations of the study must be taken into account when analyzing the findings. Concentrating on a single district restricts the generalizability of the results, and the three-month duration of data collection may not encompass all variations in communication practices. Additionally, cultural and linguistic factors could have impacted the interpretation of the data, while social desirability bias may have influenced the responses of participants.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the study yields significant insights into police communication practices within Indonesian contexts and provides practical recommendations for enhancing police-community relations through effective communication management.

Final Thoughts

Effective communication within police forces is crucial for fostering trust within the community, improving service delivery, and facilitating broader police reform initiatives. The case of Polres Tanah Karo illustrates that even police organizations with limited resources can create impactful communication strategies by emphasizing community involvement and cultural awareness.

The persistent advancement of communication technologies alongside shifting community expectations necessitates ongoing adaptation and enhancement of police communication methods. Achieving success relies not solely on technical skills but also on the organization›s dedication to maintaining transparent, responsive, and culturally aware communication with the communities they serve.

The results indicate that managing strategic communication is essential for police organizations, rather than being an optional enhancement, for effective law enforcement in democratic societies. As the Indonesian police continue to transition towards more community-focused strategies, the importance of strategic communication will grow significantly in establishing police legitimacy and operational efficiency.

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