

Public Relations Strategy: Analysis of Social Media Utilization in Leadership Transition

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Abstract

This study aims to examine Public Relations (PR) strategies in utilizing social media during the leadership transition period at State Islamic University Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten for the 2025–2029 term. The analysis is grounded in Grunig and Hunt's Four Models of Public Relations to examine patterns of internal communication. Drawing further on the Excellence Theory of Public Relations and Institutional Theory, this study explores how strategic communication practices are shaped by the normative ideal of two-way symmetrical communication while simultaneously being constrained by the bureaucratic structures of State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN). This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including the elected rector, the head of the public relations bureau, senate members, lecturers, students, and local media representatives. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and meanings within the collected data. The findings indicate that the use of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter/X is effective in supporting the university's external image and contributes to crisis mitigation efforts. However, internal communication practices remain predominantly one-way, reflecting a gap between normative models of excellent public relations and institutional realities. Moreover, the absence of a structured crisis management protocol exacerbates perception gaps between the institution and the academic community. This study concludes that the effectiveness of strategic communication during leadership transitions is determined not only by careful planning but also by institutional capacity, particularly the competence of human resources and organizational readiness to anticipate and manage potential crises.

Keywords: Public Relations; Utilization of Social Media; Leadership Transition.

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Strategi Public Relations: Analisis Pemanfaatan Media Sosial dalam Transisi Kepemimpinan

Abstrak

Tujuan penelitian mengkaji strategi Public Relations (PR) dalam memanfaatkan media sosial pada masa transisi kepemimpinan di Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten periode 2025–2029. Penelitian ini menyoroti pentingnya pengelolaan reputasi institusi pada Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri (PTKIN) yang beroperasi di bawah regulasi ketat

pemerintah. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan para pemangku kepentingan utama, termasuk rektor terpilih, kepala biro PR, anggota senat, dosen, mahasiswa, serta media lokal. Analisis tematik digunakan untuk mengidentifikasi pola dan wawasan dari data yang diperoleh. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pemanfaatan platform media sosial seperti Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, dan Twitter/X berhasil mendukung citra eksternal universitas sekaligus mengurangi risiko krisis publik. Namun demikian, ditemukan kelemahan dalam komunikasi internal yang cenderung bersifat satu arah serta tidak adanya protokol manajemen krisis yang terstruktur. Kelemahan ini menimbulkan kesenjangan persepsi antara institusi dan komunitas akademiknya. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa komunikasi strategis yang efektif tidak hanya bergantung pada perencanaan yang matang, tetapi juga pada kapasitas kelembagaan, khususnya kompetensi sumber daya manusia dan kesiapan dalam menghadapi potensi krisis.

Kata kunci: Public Relations; Pemanfaatan Media Sosial; Transisi Kepemimpinan.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership transition, specifically the election of a rector in higher education, is not merely an administrative process, but a pivotal momentum that determines the future direction of the institution (Badillo-Vega & Buendía-Espinosa, 2022; Ruben et al., 2023). This leadership transition is closely tied to reputational risks and opportunities, as all its stages are closely monitored by the academic community (sivitas akademika), the government, the media, and the public. Poorly managed communication can lead to conflict and erode public trust, whereas transparent communication strategies can strengthen the legitimacy of the elected rector as well as the university's image (Bhutlo, 2024).

In Indonesia, the challenge of leadership transition is magnified as universities are demanded to achieve world-class university standards. This requires good governance based on transparency, accountability, and participation (Marlia et al., 2025). In this context, the role of Public Relations (PR) is not merely as a conveyor of information, but as a reputation manager and facilitator of dialogue with various stakeholders.

In the context of State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN), including Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin State Islamic University Banten, the rector election process is strictly regulated by the Minister of Religious Affairs Regulation (PMA) No. 68 of 2015. While this regulation provides legal and procedural certainty, in practice, it also creates an elite-centered communication bias, where institutional communication flows are prioritized toward formal authorities such as the University Senate and the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Consequently, the Public Relations (PR) function tends to be directed toward ensuring bureaucratic compliance and vertical legitimacy, while downward and lateral communication with lecturers and students remains suboptimal. This pattern indirectly creates communication silos—a condition where the PR unit focuses on managing messages for the organizational elite while neglecting the need for broader participation, transparency, and internal dialogue, which are vital for the institutional health of the academic community. In line with the findings of Stoldt et al. (2020), the dominance of elite communication

in higher education organizations risks undermining perceptions of inclusivity and the trust of the academic community during leadership transitions. Based on these conditions, this study seeks to analyze and formulate a PR communication model capable of balancing procedural compliance with state regulations and the democratic participation of the academic community. Thus, the PR function serves not only as a guardian of formal legitimacy but also as a facilitator of participatory strategic communication.

Technically, the challenges faced by PR staff include managing social media, handling false information (hoaxes), maintaining information accuracy and neutrality in every news release, and coordination mechanisms with the election committee (Fadli et al., 2021). On the other hand, from the perspective of the academic community, it is important to observe perceptions regarding the adequacy of information, the effectiveness of message delivery media, and the neutrality of the PR role. These conditions indicate that the role of PR in the rector election is not merely administrative but strategic in supporting the democratization process of the campus. Therefore, public communication during the election period requires a systematic approach, adaptive to technological developments, and upholding the principles of institutional transparency and accountability.

In this context, findings indicating a gap in internal communication—which tends to be one-way—and a lack of crisis management protocols are not merely descriptive phenomena; they reflect institutional structural limitations and the

strategic positioning of the PR function within the organization. As identified in the literature (Setyanto et al., 2025), integrating the PR position strategically within university management and recognizing its role in building two-way relationships between the institution and its audience is crucial for communication effectiveness and overall institutional reputation. Thus, the technical obstacles encountered are not purely operational but also relate to the gap between ideal communication practices and existing institutional structures, an issue relevant to other university PR studies.

This condition suggests that the role of Public Relations (PR) in rector elections is not merely administrative but strategic in supporting campus democratization. However, the high dependence on social media as the primary channel for public communication has the potential to create what can be termed a 'digital facade' of transparency—a situation where an institution displays intensive information openness in the online public sphere, while internal communication practices remain dominated by one-way patterns lacking substantive dialogue. In this regard, the university's social media strategy functions more as an instrument for branding and external reputation management than as a participatory medium that allows for meaningful involvement of the academic community. Therefore, public communication during leadership elections requires not only a systematic and adaptive approach to technological developments but also a restructuring of internal communication mechanisms that uphold the principles of

transparency, accountability, and sincere institutional dialogue as prerequisites for democratization and good university governance.

A study by Smith (2005) asserts that strategic communication in the realm of public relations must be designed through a systematic planning process, encompassing formative research, audience identification, formulation of communication objectives, strategy selection, and evaluation of communication impact. Similarly, Coombs in Youngblood (2010) emphasizes the urgency of issue management and crisis communication as part of an institution's response to potential polarization of public opinion.

Digital transformation has further expanded the challenges and opportunities in the field of PR, particularly in managing social media as a primary communication channel prone to disinformation. Research by Lovejoy & Saxton (2012) demonstrates that social media can be utilized strategically by non-profit organizations to deliver information, build community engagement, and increase public participation.

Scientifically, this research contributes to the enrichment of strategic communication literature in Islamic higher education environments by demonstrating how Public Relations (PR) units can transform from mere tactical information-sharing tools into strategic organizational functions. Through an analysis of communication practices during leadership elections, this study identifies that such a shift can be achieved by simultaneously integrating institutional reputation management and stakeholder engagement, rather than viewing them as conflicting objectives.

Within the specific context of PTKIN regulations, the strategic function of PR is characterized by its ability to facilitate measured two-way communication, expand academic participation, and maintain institutional neutrality without neglecting procedural compliance. Thus, public communication serves not only as a means of delivering formal information but also as an institutional mechanism to build trust, strengthen democratic values, and support good university governance.

METHOD

The research utilizes a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain a profound understanding of Public Relations (PR) strategies in the Rector election of UIN SMH Banten. The case study was selected because it allows for the exploration of phenomena within a real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident. The research subjects consist of PR leaders, technical PR staff, and the academic community of UIN SMH Banten. The research stages include the contextual dynamics of the rector election, social media analysis within the PR strategy during the leadership transition, and the effectiveness of public relations strategies in utilizing social media during the UIN SMH Banten rector election for the 2025–2029 period.

The research was conducted at Campus 2 of UIN SMH Banten. The instruments used were interview guides, observation sheets, and documentation. Data collection techniques included direct observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Data were analyzed using

the Miles and Huberman model through three stages: data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. Subsequently, the data underwent thematic analysis to identify patterns, themes, and categories, which were then interpreted using relevant Public Relations theoretical frameworks within the context of strategic communication during leadership transitions.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This study found that the PR strategy of UIN SMH Banten in the 2025–2029 rector election was formed through a close relationship between the contextual dynamics of the rector election, social media analysis in PR strategy during the transition, and the effectiveness of PR strategies in utilizing social media.

Contextual Dynamics of UIN SMH Banten Rector Election

UIN SMH Banten, established in 1961 with six faculties and 38 study programs, sets a vision to become a superior, characterized, and globally competitive Islamic higher education institution by 2030. Its reputation as a leading Islamic campus in Banten is a vital asset in strategic processes, including the rector election. In this regard, internal communication functions to maintain the unity of the academic community—lecturers, staff, and students—and ensure information regarding election stages and candidates is conveyed correctly. External communication is directed at strengthening the university's positive image in the eyes of the public, government, and media. Social media utilization demonstrates UIN SMH Banten's adaptation to digital communication, enabling rapid interaction,

broad reach, and real-time connection with the public (Hendershot & Loewen, 2024).

The PTKIN rector election process is strictly regulated by PMA No. 68 of 2015, which serves as a legal reference while limiting the PR strategy's room for maneuver (Kaplin & Lee, 2019). The stages include candidate recruitment, screening by the PTKIN Senate, and the appointment of the rector by the Minister of Religious Affairs. The Senate's position is decisive, making effective communication, both formal and personal, crucial. The final appointment by the Minister indicates the influence of external factors, including national policies. Therefore, PR strategies must encompass relations with the government.

Transparency is the basis of public communication during the election to create trust and legitimacy. Because the election structure is tiered, PR must devise segmented strategies. The Senate requires substantive proposals, the academic community needs to understand the candidates' vision, while the external public requires assurance of institutional credibility. Thus, communication strategies cannot simply be generic information campaigns but must be tailored to the needs of each stakeholder. Theoretically, institutional communication in rector elections should be participatory, responsive, and evaluative (Smith, 2005). However, PR practices at UIN SMH Banten are still limited due to the absence of data-driven monitoring and evaluation instruments. In the context of Islamic universities, neutrality and communication ethics are also important as the rector election reflects the values of transparent and inclusive campus democracy (Nurudin, 2007).

In the context of Islamic higher education, the rector election is understood not only as an administrative process but also as a manifestation of campus democratic values that are transparent, inclusive, and dignified. Nurudin (2007) emphasizes that Islamic communication ethics demand honesty, moral responsibility, and a balanced power relation between the communicator and the public. These principles are conceptually aligned with the two-way symmetrical communication model in Public Relations, which emphasizes dialogue, mutual understanding, and the equality of interests.

Thus, the Islamic context does not present an ethical framework that contradicts secular PR models; rather, it strengthens their normative dimensions. However, research findings indicate a gap between the ideal of Islamic communication ethics and PR practices that still tend to be one-way, particularly in the absence of evaluation mechanisms that allow for continuous public dialogue and feedback.

The PR planning at UIN SMH Banten is based on the long-term Vision 2030 and regulatory compliance. Communication with the Senate and the Ministry of Religious Affairs is designed to be formal and substantive in accordance with PMA No. 68 of 2015, while communication with the academic community and the public is directed toward maintaining the institution's image and legitimacy.

The main principles implemented are transparency, neutrality, and equal access to information for all stakeholders. In practice, internal communication aims to maintain the cohesion of the academic community through Senate meetings, faculty and

student forums, and internal campus media. The goal is to ensure an understanding of the election process, build support, and prevent disinformation (Smith, 2019). Conversely, external communication focuses on a positive image through press conferences, mass media, websites, and social media (Wilcox et al., 2015). The utilization of digital media is considered key due to its ability to reach a broad public, especially students as the digital generation (Hendershot & Loewen, 2024; Snoussi, 2020).

Based on Stakeholder Theory (Shin & Heath, 2020), UIN SMH Banten must tailor its communication to different groups. The Senate requires detailed candidate visions and missions, the Ministry of Religious Affairs emphasizes regulatory compliance, while the external public requires reputational assurance. PR also plays a role in addressing the risk of negative issues, such as allegations of lack of transparency or conflict between candidates, through mitigation strategies and rapid clarification (Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006).

Interview results support the findings synthesized in Table 1. The elected Rector considers that consolidating the vision requires strong internal communication. PR emphasizes the role of digital communication despite the challenges of public expectations. The Senate underscores the importance of candidate vision-mission presentations, while lecturers assess that information access exists but lacks feedback forums. Students appreciate social media but feel that interaction is still limited. From an external perspective, local media assess that information is sufficiently available, although not yet proactive in addressing sensitive issues.

Table 1. Synthesis of Key Informant Perceptions on PR Strategy

Informant ID	Role/Position	Key Perspective	Representative Quote (Illustrative)
IK-01	Elected Rector	Emphasizes the importance of strong internal communication for post-election vision consolidation. Regards transparency as key to process legitimacy.	«Post-election, inward communication is far more important to unify the vision.»
IK-02	Head of AAKK Bureau/PR	Outlines digital communication tactics as the main effort to reach young audiences. Acknowledges challenges in managing high public expectations.	«We already have a communication map, but countering wild narratives on social media is the biggest challenge.»
IK-03	Senate Member	Highlights the role of candidate vision-mission presentations before the Senate as a crucial moment. Perceives two-way communication efforts, though limited to formal forums.	«Presentation of vision-mission before the Senate is the decisive moment. Communication there is very profound.»
IK-04	Lecturer Representative	Feels information about candidates is sufficiently available, but direct interaction with candidates is lacking. Desires easier feedback channels.	«The information we get might be only 30-40%. We know the stages, but there is no room to ask or discuss.»
IK-05	Student Representative	Appreciates the use of social media, but feels information lacks depth and interaction is not optimal. Desires more open Q&A sessions.	«Info on Instagram exists, but it's limited to announcements. We want direct Q&A sessions, not one-way communication.»
IK-06	Local Media Representative	Observes the university's efforts in providing information, but sometimes less proactive in responding to sensitive issues. Assesses the university's image remains maintained.	«generally, UIN Banten's image is good. But if there is a sensitive issue, sometimes they need time to respond.»

Source: Interview with respondent

Based on Table 1, the research shows dynamic diversity of viewpoints among key

informants regarding UIN SMH Banten's PR strategy during the leadership transition.

Internally, the elected rector emphasized the urgency of internal communication to consolidate the vision after the election. This perspective asserts that the legitimacy of new leadership is determined not only by election results but also by the ability to build a unified vision through intensive and transparent communication. The PR side underscored the importance of digital communication in reaching a wider audience, especially students. However, there is an awareness that the digital space also presents challenges in the form of "wild narratives" that are difficult to control, so the communication strategy is not only informative but also defensive in facing reputational risks.

In practice, Public Relations (PR) manages diverse interests in digital communication by implementing centralized narrative control and issue-based messaging. PR positions itself as the primary gatekeeper of official information by standardizing content across all institutional social media channels and emphasizing messages related to procedural legitimacy, neutrality, and institutional sustainability.

To counter the emergence of uncontrolled digital narratives, PR employs defensive communication strategies through limited clarifications, agenda-setting, and selective engagement, rather than open dialogue. This strategy is aimed at minimizing reputational risks while maintaining institutional neutrality throughout the rector election process.

The Senate's view indicates that formal forums such as candidate vision-mission presentations are perceived as important moments for in-depth communication,

although limited in nature. This shows that communication at the institutional elite level emphasizes formality rather than sustainable participatory interaction. Meanwhile, lecturers assessed information availability as relatively sufficient, but interaction and feedback forums were still inadequate. This finding indicates a gap between one-way information provision and the need for more open discussion spaces. A similar gap is seen with students, who appreciate the role of social media but assess communication as still top-down, consisting of announcements without meaningful interaction mechanisms. Student aspirations for direct Q&A forums emphasize the importance of participatory engagement in communication strategy.

From an external perspective, local media assessed university information as adequate and the institutional image as relatively positive. However, they highlighted the lack of rapid response to sensitive issues, which potentially weakens credibility if not managed proactively. Thus, this study reveals a tension between information sufficiency and participation needs, as well as between proactivity and reactivity in issue management.

Social Media Analysis in Public Relations Strategy during Leadership Transition

The communication strategy implemented by PR UIN SMH Banten in the 2025–2029 rector election was structured by emphasizing principles of transparency, accuracy, and neutrality. Interviews with PR leadership revealed that this strategy included mapping communication channels, audience segmentation, and publication schedules via official media such as Instagram, the campus

website, and offline media like banners and faculty announcements. However, although systematically arranged as suggested by Smith (2005) (Smith, 2005), practice has not fully reflected the symmetrical two-way communication model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

The UIN SMH Banten case study demonstrates that, in field practice, the public relations communication models proposed by Grunig are not applied in a singular or pure manner. Instead, the institution simultaneously and pragmatically adopts a hybrid approach. They implement the Public Information model for disseminating information to the general public and the academic community, the Two-Way Asymmetrical model in persuasive communication efforts highly focused on the Senate, and at the same time, strive—albeit sub-optimally—to apply Two-Way Symmetrical principles through social media channels. This indicates that rigid theoretical frameworks may be less capable of capturing the fluidity and complexity of strategic communication practices in real organizations. A more contextual theoretical approach is required, one that recognizes the existence of hybrid practices tailored to specific target audiences and objectives.

The findings of this research confirm that Grunig's Public Relations models do not operate as rigid, separate frameworks in organizational practice. On the contrary, the UIN SMH Banten case shows that these theories function as heuristic devices that help understand the complexity of communication practices, rather than as normative recipes applied in their pure form.

By utilizing Grunig's framework, this study does not position the communication

dynamics during the rector election as a 'technical problem' that can be solved directly, but rather as an institutional phenomenon that is complex, contextual, and laden with interests. The hybrid practices found—ranging from information dissemination and limited persuasion to efforts at dialogue—demonstrate that communication challenges are not merely a failure to implement a symmetrical model, but a reflection of the inherent power structures, organizational culture, and institutional constraints. Consequently, the selection of theory in this research is intended to open an analytical space for the fluidity of strategic communication practices, rather than reducing them to normative issues or treating them as 'resolved' theoretical matters.

During the 2025–2029 rector election process, PR UIN SMH Banten used various official institutional communication channels to convey information. These channels included the official campus website, social media (Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter/X), faculty/institution WhatsApp groups, digital posters, campus banners, press releases to local media, and verbal delivery via MCs or moderators in official institutional activities.

Institutionally, the multi-channel strategy was designed to reach various segments of the academic community. However, based on interviews with lecturers and students, a significant perception gap emerged between PR as communication managers and the campus audience as message receivers. Although these channels were considered to represent institutional information distribution, most of the academic community stated that the

information they received was "insufficient", "minimal", or "late to update" on official channels. The majority of students relied on campus social media, especially Instagram, as their main source of information, while lecturers tended to get information from internal WhatsApp groups, informal forums, or offline conversations among colleagues. Some lecturers even stated they did not know the schedule or important stages in the election process due to the lack of direct socialization at the faculty level. This indicates a lack of communication strategy differentiation between audience segments and a weak cross-channel notification system.

Informal surveys showed contradictory perceptions: a small portion of the community mentioned that information was "quite open", but the majority felt there was no even and in-depth information transparency. Thus, it is an indicator that although communication channels have been widely used, their effectiveness in reaching and satisfying audience information needs is still low. In the context of public communication theory, this situation signals that information dissemination is not yet oriented toward the preferences and media consumption patterns of the campus audience.

Based on Lovejoy & Saxton (2012), social media should not only be an information dissemination tool but also a means of interaction and participation. Unfortunately, campus content during the election did not utilize participatory features such as polling, online Q&A, or discussion forums. Consequently, PR communication tended to be one-way and lacked active audience involvement. Additionally, external media

played a significant role in shaping campus public opinion. Local media such as Kabar Banten, Banten Raya, Fesbuk Banten News, and Kabar Banten TV actively reported on the election, candidate profiles, and their programs. Some viral news even reached a wider audience than official campus channels, showing that information flow was controlled more by outside media than campus PR.

The high dependence of the community on informal WhatsApp groups and external media accounts shows that official PR channels are not fully trusted as the main source. This condition risks the emergence of inaccurate or biased information. Thus, although PR used many official channels, the main challenge was not the number of channels, but the ability to manage messages to be consistent, coordinated, and aligned with the digital communication patterns of today's academic community.

Managing the rapid speed and volume of information in the digital space, as well as maintaining neutrality amidst internal campus political dynamics, were managerial challenges for the Leadership and Staff of PR UIN SMH Banten. Based on interviews, the main obstacles faced can be categorized into two dimensions: internal institutional challenges and external complexity due to public opinion dynamics. Pressure on PR professionalism increased, especially when information developed outside institutional control, whether through unofficial accounts, wild narratives, or rumors spreading quickly via WhatsApp groups and social media. PR implementation staff stated they worked with limited human resources, directly

impacting their ability to produce fast, accurate, and high-quality content across all communication channels.

The minimal availability of systematic crisis communication guidelines resulted in communication approaches being reactive rather than proactive, specifically in facing hoaxes, disinformation, and public pressure for clarification speed. In the crisis management theory framework, this condition illustrates that crisis communication principles as explained by Coombs (Youngblood, 2010) namely the importance of having a crisis protocol to respond to opinion turbulence and mitigate potential polarization—have not been fully adopted by the institution.

Content creation focused more on responding to dynamics developing on social media rather than directing communication flow through a mature issue management strategy, making PR efforts during the rector election more ad hoc and reactive¹¹⁰. Yet, in the perspective of strategic communication and issue management theory (Smith, 2005), systematic media monitoring, clarification narrative drafting, and structured republication scheduling are needed for the institution to effectively manage public expectations.

This analysis of PR media in managerial and technical terms is directly reflected in the perception of the academic community. Students and lecturers conveyed that information delivered during the election period still felt vague, incomplete, and uneven. The impression of PR neutrality became ambiguous due to the lack of open data and balanced information distribution. Students even stated they found it “difficult to judge whether PR is neutral or not”,

while lecturers noted that only about 30–40% of information was successfully accessed officially.

The consistency of PR regarding the lack of crisis communication protocols, HR limitations, and high information distribution indicates that the problem faced lies not solely in communication strategy design, but in institutional capacity issues. As revealed by Kriyantono (Kriyantono, 2015), weaknesses in institutional position and resource support for PR can limit their capacity to manage information comprehensively. Sub-optimal communication infrastructure, the absence of crisis supports systems, and inequality in content production and distribution are the root causes of low perceptions of transparency and neutrality among the academic community. These findings align with research by Widianingsih and Cahyani (Widianingsih & Cahyani, 2020) which shows that HR limitations and weak content design are major challenges in digital PR communication in universities. Meanwhile, (Anwar & Abbas, 2023) also highlight the importance of cyber media as a strategic PR tool but note the absence of issue management systems and suboptimal digital literacy as factors inhibiting communication effectiveness. This confirms that the challenges faced by PR UIN SMH Banten are not isolated cases but part of a broader phenomenon in PTKIN PR institutionalism.

Based on research findings, the social media analysis of UIN Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten’s PR strategy during the leadership transition can be categorized at a sub-optimal level. Although the strategy design included principles of transparency,

accuracy, and neutrality, its implementation was not fully able to ensure even information distribution and dialogical participation among stakeholders. Unintegrated communication channel management, human resource limitations, and the absence of crisis protocols resulted in a gap between strategic messages and public perception. This condition creates a risk of alternative narratives forming in the digital space that are difficult to control, potentially affecting the institution's reputation in the short and long term.

Effectiveness of Public Relations Strategy in Utilizing Social Media

Strategy effectiveness focuses on the application of the Two-Way Symmetrical model in Excellence Theory (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), which ideally builds mutually beneficial reciprocal relationships. However, competitive dynamics and potential crises often drive a shift towards Public Information or Two-Way Asymmetrical models which are more persuasive or defensive. Transparency and stakeholder engagement are key indicators of symmetrical communication application (Aldoory, 2009), so the discussion assesses the extent to which these principles are reflected in UIN SMH Banten's communication practices, including limitations arising in the context of tight competition.

In the framework of Freeman's

Stakeholder Theory (Shin & Heath, 2021), evaluation includes the identification and prioritization of communication with strategic groups such as the Senate, lecturers, students, media, and government. Analysis is directed at mapping served and potentially neglected groups, as well as the strategy's level of responsiveness to each party's specific needs. The Agenda Setting Theory perspective (McCombs & Shaw) (Wihardi et al., 2014) is used to examine efforts to shape public narratives through traditional and social media, including issue management strategies, emphasis on certain themes, and digital discourse control. The role of social media as an instrument for shaping public perception is a special focus, given its relevance to young audience segmentation and real-time interaction dynamics (Shin & Heath, 2020).

Tension exists between the ideal of dialogue-based symmetrical communication and the reality of strategic communication in high-risk situations, where competitive pressure can trigger a shift towards more controlled tactics (Coombs, 2015). Findings in Table 2 show that UIN SMH Banten's PR strategy functions not only to build a positive image and maintain public trust but also reflects the tactical compromises required to maintain institutional reputation stability. This analysis contributes to academic discourse regarding the application of PR theory in the complex context of higher education leadership transition.

Table 2. Matrix of PR Strategy and Its Relation to Theory

Aspect of UIN SMH BANTEN PR Strategy	Key Tactics/ Implementation (Empirical Examples)	Relation to PR Theory	Analysis/Implication
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Internal Communication	Senate Meetings, Lecturer/Student Forums, Campus Bulletins, Lecturer/Staff Chat Groups	Stakeholder Theory; Excellence Theory (potential Two-Way Symmetrical) Islamic Communication Ethics (shura/consultation, justice, and amanah/trustworthiness)	Internal communication plays a vital role in building internal cohesion and legitimacy. In the context of Islamic higher education, two-way symmetrical communication aligns with the principles of shura (consultation) and communicative justice. However, field practices remain constrained by formal power structures, resulting in the ideals of Islamic communication ethics not yet being fully institutionalized.
External Communication	Press Releases, Press Conferences, Mass Media Publications, University Website	Public Information Theory; Agenda Setting Theory; Reputation Management	It aims to inform and build a positive institutional image. This strategy is effective in maintaining the consistency of external messaging, yet it tends to be one-way and limited in opening spaces for public dialogue.
Social Media Usage	Digital Campaigns, Online Q&A Sessions, Event Live Streaming	Agenda Setting Theory; Excellence Theory (potential Two-Way Symmetrical); Reputation Management	Social media is utilized to expand outreach and interaction with the academic community. Although it opens opportunities for two-way communication, its practice is still overshadowed by the risk of disinformation and a tendency toward defensive responses in issue management.

Relations with Senate	Candidate Vision-Mission Presentation, Closed Discussions	Stakeholder Theory; Excellence Theory (Two-Way Asymmetrical/Symmetrical)	Communication with the Senate is highly directed and substantive, reflecting an elite-centered communication bias. This pattern underscores the priority of vertical legitimacy over the broad participation of the academic community in the communication process.
Issue/Crisis Management	Rapid Official Statements, Clarification of Negative Issues	Reputation Management; Excellence Theory (potential Two-Way Asymmetrical)	The communication approach tends to be responsive-defensive. This condition indicates systemic limitations resulting from the absence of crisis protocols and monitoring instruments, rather than merely a failure of individual PR performance.
Process Transparency	Election Stage Announcements, Selection Criteria	Excellence Theory (Two-Way Symmetrical); Stakeholder Theory; Islamic Communication Ethics (honesty, openness, and amanah/trustworthiness)	Process transparency serves as a mechanism for formal legitimacy as well as a manifestation of Islamic communication ethics that emphasizes honesty and amanah (trustworthiness). However, transparency remains procedural and has not yet fully opened the space for participatory deliberation as required in symmetrical communication.

Table 2 demonstrates that the PR strategy of UIN SMH Banten does not operate within a single framework. Instead,

it exists in a state of tension between the demands of structural compliance with state regulations (PMA No. 68 of 2015)

and the normative ideal of participatory communication aligned with democratic values and communication ethics in Islamic higher education. This pattern reaffirms that PR practices cannot be separated from institutional power structures that shape the boundaries of strategic communication during leadership transition periods.

In the context of State Islamic Higher Education Institutions, the principle of communication neutrality is understood not only technically as a balance of information but also as an ethical commitment rooted in Islamic values. Nurudin (2007) asserts that Islamic communication ethics place honesty, justice, and consultation (*shura*) as the foundation of communicative relations. This principle has conceptual alignment with the two-way symmetrical communication model in Excellence Theory, which emphasizes dialogue, equality, and feedback. However, research findings indicate that this ethical ideal still contends with power structures and formal regulations that limit the space for participatory deliberation during rector elections.

Research findings reflect that PR practices in religious higher education environments are not only normative but also adaptive to the context of competition, public pressure, and institutional regulations. Internal communication serves as an important foundation in maintaining academic community cohesion. Through formal forums like senate meetings or informal channels like chat groups, PR attempts to manage internal legitimacy (Mueller, 2024). Consistent with stakeholder theory and excellence theory, this strategy shows potential for two-way communication practices, although

effectiveness relies heavily on active involvement and quality feedback from the academic community. Meanwhile, external communication through press releases and media publications is closer to public information and agenda-setting theories because it focuses on positive image formation and message consistency, despite facing challenges in balancing public opinion and external media framing.

Social media usage opens wider participation spaces through digital interaction¹⁴¹. According to excellence theory and reputation management, this platform has the potential to be an ideal two-way communication tool, although risks of disinformation, polarization, and negative sentiment remain challenges (Boulianne, 2020). This demands PR to combine participatory approaches with narrative control strategies. Furthermore, relationships with the university senate are marked by substantive communication reflecting stakeholder theory, with dynamics between symmetrical and asymmetrical models. Communication quality at this level proves crucial in influencing strategic institutional decisions.

In issue and crisis management, the PR strategy of UIN SMH Banten tends to adopt a responsive-defensive approach by prioritizing rapid clarifications to maintain institutional credibility. The assessment of this strategy in this study is not intended as an objective measurement of effectiveness based on quantitative indicators, but rather as a qualitative evaluation based on the actors' perceptions, the consistency of communication practices, and the alignment of the strategy with the risk context encountered. Within the

framework of reputation management theory, this pattern indicates an effort toward situational adaptation, while simultaneously underscoring the limitations of implementing two-way symmetrical communication in crisis situations fraught with time and political pressures.

Transparency efforts through the announcement of election stages and selection criteria reflect a strategy to build public trust, as explained in Excellence Theory and stakeholder theory. However, such openness remains selective and procedural, influenced by formal regulations and institutional strategic considerations. This places the PR strategy of UIN SMH Banten on a spectrum between the normative ideal of symmetrical communication and the tactical necessity of defensive communication.

This research distinguishes between strategies that are adaptive and those that are merely reactive based on the level of reflective awareness and intentionality of PR actions. Adaptive strategies are characterized by the recognition of reputational risks, adjustment of messages across channels, and efforts to maintain narrative consistency, even if not yet supported by data-based monitoring and evaluation instruments. Conversely, reactive strategies are reflected in ad hoc responses that are not integrated into a systematic communication planning cycle. The absence of effectiveness measurement tools and formal evaluation mechanisms suggests that PR adaptivity is still pragmatic and has not yet been institutionalized within the organizational work system.

Theoretically, these findings strengthen the argument that institutional

communication in the context of rector elections cannot be assessed solely by message output but must be understood as a continuous process of negotiation between institutional capacity, internal political pressures, and the demands of communication ethics. In the context of Islamic higher education, the principles of neutrality and communication ethics serve as important normative variables, although their implementation faces challenges in digital information management, media literacy, and PR human resource limitations.

CONCLUSION

Meanwhile, in the context of Islamic universities, principles of neutrality and communication ethics must be prioritized, considering the rector election is also a representation of inclusive and transparent campus democratic values. Although aligned with research-based strategic communication principles, implementation in the field encounters many major challenges covering digital information flow management, maintaining neutrality amidst internal political dynamics, and facing disinformation risks. These conditions make PR strategies continually form ideal planning with operational capacity; amidst conditions of digital literacy, content design, and HR limitations, PR can still be proactive and reactive.

The successful implementation of the two-way symmetrical communication model turns out not to depend solely on good intentions or PR practitioner competence. Two external factors proved decisive: the power structure formed by regulation and institutional capacity. Regulation PMA No. 68 of 2015, by

centralizing power in the Senate and Ministry, structurally encourages more asymmetrical communication practices. On the other hand, without adequate institutional capacity support such as sufficient HR, budget, and clear protocols, theoretical idealism to build dialogue will always collide with the pragmatism of resource limitations in the field. This confirms that excellence in public relations is the result of a supportive organizational ecosystem, not merely individual or departmental prowess.

This research simultaneously critiques the application of Excellence Theory, which tends to be normative, by demonstrating that the effectiveness of institutional communication in practice is significantly influenced by the regulatory context, power structures, and institutional capacity. In the case of UIN SMH Banten, communication dynamics during the rector election cannot be understood solely as a matter of PR department performance, but rather as a consequence of systemic limitations that constrain the organization's strategic maneuverability.

Under this framework, the management of institutional perception and reputation during the leadership transition can be understood as relatively maintained, yet it still reveals a gap between communication planning and the perceptions of both the academic community and the public. This gap reflects the limits of institutional capacity in translating the ideal of symmetrical communication into consistent and institutionalized practice.

Therefore, follow-up actions based on these research findings should be directed

toward strengthening the institutional communication system rather than merely enhancing individual competencies. Recommendations include increasing procedural transparency, optimizing digital media based on strategic planning, strengthening internal communication across units, developing more proactive issue management, and implementing continuous evaluation mechanisms. This approach is expected to narrow the gap between institutional capacity and the demands of strategic communication in the context of higher education leadership elections

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