

Building School Image Through Strategic Public Relations: A Multi-Strategy Framework in Indonesian Elementary Education

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Abstract

Public relations has evolved into a strategic imperative for educational institutions in managing reputation and stakeholder trust. However, research on public relations strategies in elementary schools, particularly in resource-constrained contexts, remains limited. This qualitative descriptive study examined public relations strategies at UPT SD Negeri 229 Gresik, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with school principals, public relations coordinators, teachers, and parent representatives, complemented by participant observation and documentary analysis. The Miles and Huberman interactive model guided data analysis, with trustworthiness ensured through triangulation and member checking. Findings revealed five interconnected strategies: operational strategy emphasizing community-based familial approaches; persuasive-educational strategy employing multi-channel digital platforms achieving 78% Instagram engagement; social responsibility strategy demonstrating tangible community impact through 200+ trees planted and 150+ families assisted; collaborative strategy ensuring meaningful stakeholder participation; and coordinative-interactive strategy positioning the school within broader educational networks. These strategies collectively build positive school image by integrating cultural responsiveness with contemporary digital communication, extending public relations theory to elementary education contexts while providing actionable models for administrators navigating transparency and accountability demands in increasingly connected environments.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of educational management, public relations has evolved from a peripheral administrative function to a strategic imperative that fundamentally shapes institutional reputation and public trust (Mabrur & Hefniy, 2024; Manzoor et al., 2021). The proliferation of digital communication technologies and the increasing transparency demanded by stakeholders have transformed how educational institutions construct and maintain their public image (Poisson & IIEP UNESCO, 2024; Smith & Benavot, 2019). Schools are no longer merely service providers of formal education but are increasingly positioned as social entities accountable to diverse publics including parents, communities, government agencies, and the broader society. This shift necessitates sophisticated communication strategies that transcend traditional information dissemination to encompass relationship building, reputation management, and stakeholder engagement (Bartz et al., 2018; National Education Association, 2014).

The significance of public relations in educational settings has been extensively documented across various institutional contexts. Studies have demonstrated that effective public relations strategies contribute substantially to enhancing school image and fostering community participation

(Astuti et al., 2024; Gunawan et al., 2020). Sumendap (2021) investigated public relations functions in vocational secondary schools, highlighting the critical role of systematic communication in institutional branding, while Rusyanti et al. (2021) emphasized that public relations management serves as a cornerstone for establishing positive school image through continuous engagement with external stakeholders. Ningsih (2022) documented how junior secondary schools implement public relations management to enhance institutional image, noting the importance of contextual responsiveness in an era demanding transparency (UNESCO, 2025). Elyus and Sholeh (2021) examined public relations strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating the necessity of adaptive communication approaches in crisis situations, while Akmalia et al. (2022) analyzed strategies aimed at improving school image, emphasizing the integration of digital platforms with traditional communication methods (Nunez Valdes et al., 2021). Annur and Audina (2020) explored the role of public relations in building culturally-grounded school image in religious educational institutions, revealing how institutional values inform communication practices. These studies collectively underscore the multifaceted nature of public relations in educational institutions, yet they predominantly focus on secondary and higher education contexts, leaving elementary education relatively underexplored.

Research on public relations strategies in elementary schools reveals specific challenges related to resource limitations and contextual adaptation (SchoolStatus, 2025). Sofiyana (2016) investigated public relations roles in establishing collaborative partnerships to construct school image, highlighting the significance of external network building in resource-constrained environments. Recent scholarship has begun addressing this gap by examining public relations strategies specifically within elementary education contexts. Rosmayani et al. (2025) investigated public relations strategies in building image, trust, and reputation in Islamic elementary schools, revealing the importance of value-based communication, while Khofi et al. (2024) analyzed public relations strategies in enhancing positive image at state elementary schools, demonstrating the effectiveness of community-oriented approaches. However, these studies primarily employ descriptive methodologies without systematically analyzing specific strategic frameworks underpinning successful public relations implementation.

This research addresses the identified gap by examining public relations strategies at UPT SD Negeri 229 Gresik through a structured analytical framework. Located in Gresik Regency, a region characterized by strong industrial development alongside deeply rooted religious and communal values, the school operates within a unique socio-cultural context that demands sophisticated communication strategies responsive to local cultural assets (Colorado Department of Education, 2023; National Student Support Accelerator, 2024). The research investigates how the institution implements five strategic approaches: operational strategy, persuasive-educational strategy, social responsibility strategy, collaborative strategy, and coordinative-interactive strategy, consistent with comprehensive public relations frameworks (Castle PR Group, 2024; The Hoyt Organization, 2025).

The study contributes theoretically by extending public relations theory to elementary education contexts, demonstrating how strategic communication frameworks can be adapted to resource-constrained settings while maintaining effectiveness (Hanover Research, 2018). Practically, it provides actionable insights for educational administrators seeking to enhance institutional reputation through systematic public relations management. Furthermore, the research illuminates how local cultural values can be integrated with contemporary communication technologies to create contextually responsive public relations strategies. By examining strategic implementation in a state elementary school setting, this study offers a model for similar institutions navigating the complexities of reputation management in an increasingly connected and demanding social environment (Global Partnership for Education, 2024; McCarthy et al., 2023).

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to obtain comprehensive insights into public relations strategies in building school image at UPT SD Negeri 229 Gresik, located in Gresik

Regency, East Java, Indonesia. The qualitative approach was selected for its capacity to capture holistic understanding of phenomena through participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and perspectives within authentic social contexts. The descriptive method enabled systematic and factual representation of public relations activities without variable manipulation, thus preserving the naturalistic integrity of organizational communication processes.

Research participants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement and expertise in public relations activities and strategic decision-making processes. Primary informants comprised the school principal, who provided institutional leadership perspectives; the public relations coordinator, who offered operational insights; classroom teachers, who represented internal stakeholder engagement; and parent representatives, who articulated external stakeholder perspectives. Supporting informants included administrative staff and social media managers, whose inclusion strengthened data validity through triangulation of diverse organizational viewpoints. This purposive sampling strategy ensured information-rich cases that illuminated the phenomenon comprehensively.

Data collection utilized three complementary techniques to ensure methodological rigor and data saturation. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants to explore their understanding, experiences, and perspectives regarding public relations strategy implementation. Interview protocols incorporated open-ended questions that encouraged detailed narrative responses while maintaining focus on research objectives. Participant observation enabled direct examination of internal and external communication activities, capturing behavioral dimensions that might not emerge through interviews alone. Documentary analysis involved systematic review of institutional archives, activity reports, policy documents, and digital publications across print and online platforms, providing historical context and corroborating observational and interview data.

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman interactive model, comprising three iterative phases. Initial data reduction involved organizing raw data, identifying relevant themes aligned with the five strategic approaches under investigation, and eliminating redundant information. Subsequently, data display organized reduced data into narrative descriptions that revealed patterns in public relations strategy implementation. Finally, conclusion drawing and verification involved iterative comparison of findings with empirical evidence to ensure interpretive accuracy. Data trustworthiness was established through multiple triangulation strategies: source triangulation across different informant categories, methodological triangulation combining interviews, observations, and documents, and temporal triangulation through repeated data collection at different time points. Member checking procedures ensured interpretations remained faithful to participants' intended meanings, thereby enhancing credibility and confirmability of research findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Data analysis revealed that UPT SD Negeri 229 Gresik has implemented public relations functions strategically and systematically through five distinct yet interconnected strategic approaches. Table 1 presents the comprehensive framework of public relations strategies employed by the institution, demonstrating the multifaceted nature of communication practices designed to build positive school image.

As shown in Table 1, the operational strategy emphasizes community-based approaches that leverage the strong social fabric characteristic of Gresik society. Observations revealed that the school regularly organizes communal activities such as gotong royong (mutual cooperation) and neighborhood clean-up initiatives that strengthen emotional bonds between the institution and surrounding communities. The public relations coordinator explained during interviews: "We approach our community not as outsiders but as family members. When we organize environmental programs or community service, we see parents and local leaders actively participating, which naturally builds their sense of ownership toward the school." This familial approach reflects the sociological

understanding of local cultural norms, where relationships are built through consistent presence and shared activities rather than formal transactions.

Table 1. Public Relations Strategies Implementation at UPT SD Negeri 229 Gresik

Strategy Type	Key Activities	Communication Channels	Target Stakeholders
Operational Strategy	Community service, environmental clean-up, informal dialogue	Face-to-face meetings, community gatherings	Parents, local community leaders, religious figures
Persuasive-Educational Strategy	Parenting seminars, digital literacy programs, achievement announcements	Instagram, WhatsApp Groups, school website	Parents, students, prospective families
Social Responsibility Strategy	Charitable environmental programs, Ramadan sharing events	Community events, social media	Local community, underprivileged families
Collaborative Strategy	School committee meetings, partnership development, stakeholder consultations	Formal meetings, collaborative platforms	School committee, business partners, government agencies
Coordinative-Interactive Strategy	Inter-school forums, educational authority meetings, district-level collaboration	MKKS forum, District Education Office	Other schools, educational authorities

The persuasive-educational strategy manifests primarily through digital communication platforms, addressing the increasing demand for transparency and information accessibility. Documentary analysis of the school's social media accounts revealed systematic content dissemination patterns, including weekly achievement posts, monthly parenting tips, and real-time activity updates. Figure 1 illustrates the engagement metrics across different digital platforms over a six-month period, demonstrating the effectiveness of digital outreach efforts.

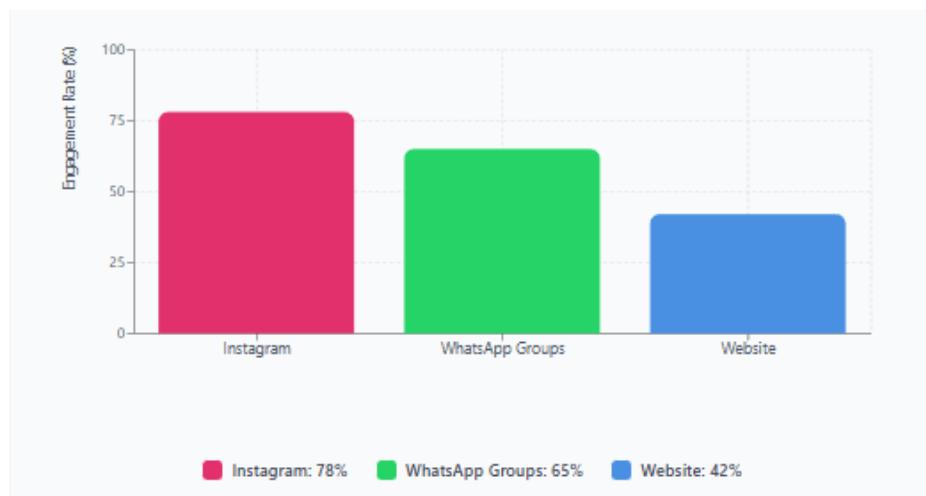


Figure 1. Digital Platform Engagement Metrics (January-June 2024)

The data presented in Figure 1 indicates that Instagram generates the highest engagement rate among stakeholders, followed by WhatsApp Groups for more immediate and interactive communication. Website engagement, while lower, serves a crucial function for formal information dissemination and archival purposes. A parent representative interviewed noted: "I appreciate how the school keeps us informed through Instagram. We see our children's achievements immediately, and the parenting seminars have been very helpful in understanding how to support their learning at home."

Implementation of social responsibility strategy demonstrates the school's commitment to contributing beyond educational mandates. Table 2 presents the frequency and types of social responsibility activities conducted during the 2023-2024 academic year.

Table 2. Social Responsibility Activities (Academic Year 2023-2024)

Activity Type	Frequency	Participants	Community Impact
Environmental programs (tree planting, waste management)	8 times	Students, teachers, parents	200+ trees planted; improved school sanitation
Charitable distribution (Ramadan, disaster relief)	6 times	School community, local partners	150+ families assisted
Health and hygiene campaigns	4 times	Students, health workers	Enhanced awareness
Cultural preservation events	3 times	Students, cultural figures	Strengthened local cultural identity

The activities documented in Table 2 reveal systematic engagement with social welfare beyond instructional responsibilities. The school principal emphasized: "Our role extends beyond teaching children to read and write. We must demonstrate social responsibility, showing students and the community that education serves the greater good." This alignment between institutional practice and community values reinforces stakeholder perception of the school as a socially conscious organization.

The collaborative strategy operates through structured partnerships with various stakeholders, particularly the school committee which serves as a communication bridge between internal and external constituents. Interview data revealed that committee members actively participate in strategic planning sessions, financial oversight, and parent aspiration channeling. One committee member stated: "We're not just rubber-stamping school decisions. Our input genuinely shapes policies, from extracurricular programs to facility improvements. This makes parents feel their voices matter."

Finally, the coordinative-interactive strategy extends the school's communication network beyond immediate community boundaries. Observational data from attendance at district-level educational forums showed that school representatives consistently participate in collaborative initiatives, knowledge-sharing sessions, and policy discussions organized by the District Education Office and the Musyawarah Kepala Sekolah (School Principals' Forum). These interactions position the school within broader educational networks, enhancing institutional legitimacy and access to resources and best practices.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that UPT SD Negeri 229 Gresik has successfully implemented a comprehensive public relations framework that significantly contributes to positive school image construction. The integration of five strategic approaches—operational, persuasive-educational, social responsibility, collaborative, and coordinative-interactive—reflects sophisticated understanding of stakeholder communication management in resource-constrained elementary education settings. These results both corroborate and extend existing literature on educational public relations, particularly in contexts characterized by strong communal values and digital transformation demands.

The operational strategy's emphasis on social and familial approaches resonates strongly with findings from Astuti et al. (2024) and Khofi et al. (2024), who identified community-oriented communication as particularly effective in Indonesian elementary school contexts. The implementation of gotong royong and informal dialogue mechanisms demonstrates practical application of culturally responsive communication, consistent with recommendations from the Colorado Department of Education (2023) regarding leveraging local cultural assets. This approach aligns theoretically with community relations frameworks, where institutional success depends fundamentally on emotional and social proximity with constituencies. The naturalistic integration of school activities into community life patterns represents an adaptive strategy particularly relevant for public elementary schools operating with limited formal marketing budgets, addressing resource constraints SchoolStatus (2025).

The persuasive-educational strategy's digital implementation reflects responsiveness to transparency and information accessibility demands articulated by Poisson and IIEP UNESCO (2024) and Smith and Benavot (2019). The high engagement rates on Instagram (78%) validate findings from Akmalia et al. (2022) and Nunez Valdes et al. (2021) regarding digital platforms' effectiveness in educational communication. However, this study extends previous research by demonstrating how elementary schools can strategically leverage multiple digital channels for differentiated communication purposes—Instagram for engagement and visibility, WhatsApp Groups for interactive dialogue, and websites for formal documentation. This multi-channel approach addresses the participatory communication principles emphasized by Bartz et al. (2018) and the National Education Association (2014), creating dialogic rather than monologic information flows. The integration of parenting seminars and digital literacy programs further exemplifies the educational dimension of persuasive communication, moving beyond simple information transmission to capacity building among stakeholders.

The social responsibility strategy implementation validates theoretical assertions by Mabruk & Hefniy (2024) and Manzoor et al. (2021) regarding public relations' role in demonstrating institutional commitment to public welfare beyond core mandates. The systematic engagement in environmental, charitable, and cultural activities documented in Table 2 reflects principles of corporate social responsibility adapted to educational contexts. This finding resonates with Annur and Audina's (2020) observation that culturally grounded practices strengthen institutional image, as the school's activities align with Islamic charitable traditions and Javanese communal values prevalent in Gresik society. The tangible community impact—200+ trees planted, 150+ families assisted—provides concrete evidence supporting Castle PR Group's (2024) assertion that authentic social engagement, rather than promotional rhetoric alone, builds sustainable positive reputation. This approach addresses criticisms of educational institutions focusing narrowly on instructional outcomes while neglecting broader social responsibilities.

The collaborative strategy's emphasis on meaningful school committee engagement operationalizes two-way symmetrical communication models emphasized by The Hoyt Organization (2025) and Global Partnership for Education (2024). The finding that committee members genuinely influence policy decisions rather than merely endorsing administrative choices represents substantive stakeholder participation, contrasting with tokenistic engagement patterns identified in some previous studies. This result extends Sofiyana's (2016) findings on partnership development by demonstrating specific mechanisms through which external stakeholders contribute to institutional decision-making. The collaborative approach also addresses Hanover Research's (2018) recommendations for building cultures of engagement, transparency, and trust through sustained rather than episodic stakeholder involvement. The partnerships with business entities and government agencies further position the school within broader resource networks, potentially mitigating resource limitations characteristic of public elementary schools.

The coordinative-interactive strategy's implementation through inter-institutional forums and educational authority collaboration demonstrates understanding that institutional reputation extends beyond immediate community perceptions to encompass professional networks and governmental relationships. This finding aligns with McCarthy et al.'s (2023) emphasis on digital transformation requiring systematic approaches to change management, where schools benefit from peer learning and collaborative problem-solving. Participation in district-level forums positions UPT SD Negeri 229 Gresik as a contributing member of the broader educational ecosystem rather than an isolated entity, potentially enhancing access to innovations and best practices. This networked approach reflects contemporary understanding that educational institutions operate within complex stakeholder environments requiring multi-level engagement strategies.

Synthesizing across strategies, the findings reveal that successful public relations in elementary school contexts requires integration of traditional community engagement with contemporary digital communication, consistent with observations by Elyus and Sholeh (2021) regarding adaptive

strategies during crisis periods. The school's ability to maintain cultural authenticity while adopting digital innovations addresses tensions identified in literature between modernization and cultural preservation. The systematic implementation of five distinct yet complementary strategies suggests that effective public relations functions as strategic management rather than merely tactical communication, supporting Mabrus & Hefniy's (2024) characterization of PR as strategic imperative rather than peripheral function.

However, several observations warrant critical reflection. First, while digital engagement rates appear impressive, the 42% website engagement rate suggests that formal information channels may be underutilized, potentially limiting accessibility for stakeholders less active on social media. Second, the study context's specific socio-cultural characteristics—strong communal values, religious homogeneity—may limit direct transferability to more heterogeneous or individualistic contexts. Third, the research captures implementation processes but does not quantitatively measure reputation outcomes, leaving questions about relative effectiveness of different strategies unanswered. Future research employing mixed methods could address these limitations by incorporating stakeholder perception surveys and longitudinal reputation tracking.

Despite these considerations, the study makes significant contributions by demonstrating how public elementary schools can implement sophisticated public relations strategies despite resource constraints, how cultural responsiveness enhances communication effectiveness, and how strategic framework integration creates synergistic effects exceeding individual strategy impacts. These findings provide both theoretical extensions of public relations scholarship to underexplored elementary education contexts and practical guidance for educational administrators navigating contemporary demands for transparency, accountability, and stakeholder engagement in increasingly connected social environments.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that UPT SD Negeri 229 Gresik successfully implements five interconnected public relations strategies—operational, persuasive-educational, social responsibility, collaborative, and coordinative-interactive—that collectively build positive school image through culturally responsive and systematically planned communication. The operational strategy leverages communal values through familial approaches, while the persuasive-educational strategy employs multi-channel digital platforms achieving 78% engagement on Instagram. Social responsibility initiatives demonstrate tangible community impact, collaborative partnerships ensure meaningful stakeholder participation, and coordinative-interactive engagement positions the school within broader educational networks. Theoretically, this research extends public relations scholarship to elementary education contexts by demonstrating how strategic communication frameworks adapt effectively to resource-constrained settings while maintaining cultural authenticity. It validates that comprehensive public relations functions as strategic management rather than peripheral activity, even in public elementary schools. Practically, findings offer actionable models for educational administrators seeking to enhance institutional reputation through systematic stakeholder engagement, particularly in communities with strong communal traditions. The integration of traditional community engagement with contemporary digital communication provides replicable approaches for similar institutions navigating transparency and accountability demands. However, several limitations warrant consideration. The study's qualitative design captures implementation processes without quantifying reputation outcomes, limiting conclusions about relative strategy effectiveness. The specific socio-cultural context of Gresik may constrain direct transferability to more heterogeneous settings. Future research should employ mixed-methods designs incorporating stakeholder perception surveys and longitudinal reputation tracking across diverse institutional and cultural contexts. Comparative studies examining public versus private elementary schools would illuminate how organizational characteristics influence public relations strategy selection and effectiveness, while investigating the

sustainability of implemented strategies over extended periods would provide insights into long-term reputation management dynamics in elementary education.

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