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Strengthening School Reputation through Strategic Public Relations and Community Engagement at SMP Negeri 28 Surabaya

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how strategic public relations and community engagement strengthen school reputation at SMP Negeri 28 Surabaya. The study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using interviews, direct observations, and documentation. Data were obtained from key school informants and supported by documentation of digital communication practices, community engagement, external collaboration, and flagship school programs. The findings show that the school strengthens its reputation through five interrelated strategies: digital communication with parents and the wider public, participation in community activities such as Sedekah Bumi, collaboration with external stakeholders such as PUSPAGA, publication of student achievements, and development of flagship programs including Child-Friendly School, Adiwiyata School, Literacy Ambassador, and Outstanding Student programs. These strategies contribute to institutional visibility, social trust, stakeholder credibility, and positive public perception. The study also finds that competition among public schools and the zoning system encourage the school to continuously innovate its programs and communication practices. The study concludes that school reputation is strengthened when public relations messages are aligned with real educational programs, student behavior, community involvement, and stakeholder collaboration.

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Keywords
Community Engagement
Community Relations
Digital Media
Public Relation Strategy
School Reputation

Introduction

Community relations in education are no longer limited to the delivery of information from schools to parents or the surrounding community. In the current educational environment, public relations functions as a strategic mechanism for building trust, communicating institutional values, strengthening stakeholder relationships, and demonstrating the quality of school programs. A school with a positive reputation is more likely to gain public confidence because reputation is formed not only by what the school says about itself, but also by what the community observes, experiences, and remembers about the school. This is particularly important for public schools that must continuously maintain community trust amid competition among institutions and changes in student admission policies. Therefore, every school needs public relations strategies that are planned, responsive, and rooted in real educational practices.

SMP Negeri 28 Surabaya faces several contextual challenges in strengthening its reputation. The school must compete with other public schools in demonstrating academic and non-academic quality while also responding to the implications of the zoning system. These circumstances encourage the school to communicate more actively with parents and the surrounding community. The school also develops a range of flagship programs, including the Child-Friendly School Program, the Adiwiyata School Program, the Literacy Ambassador Program, and student achievement development activities. These programs become important because they provide substantive evidence of school quality that can be communicated to the public.

Digital technology has changed how schools communicate with stakeholders. Websites, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp enable schools to share information rapidly, publish achievements, announce activities, and provide guidance to parents. However, digital communication cannot build reputation by itself if the information circulated through online platforms is not supported by actual school performance. Digital media becomes meaningful when it amplifies credible programs, responsive services, and positive student development. In this regard, the use of digital media at SMP Negeri 28 Surabaya should be understood as part of a broader public relations strategy rather than merely a publication tool.

Community engagement is another important element of school reputation. Schools that participate in local social and cultural activities are more visible and more socially embedded in their surrounding environment. At SMP Negeri 28 Surabaya, community engagement is demonstrated through participation in activities such as the Sedekah Bumi cultural event, where students performed a mass Remo dance. Such participation allows the community to directly observe student discipline, creativity, cultural awareness, and the

school's willingness to contribute to local life. The school's reputation is therefore built not only through institutional communication but also through direct social presence.

This study is important because previous discussions of school public relations often emphasize communication media, school branding, or the general role of public relations without sufficiently showing how digital communication, community engagement, external collaboration, and flagship programs work together in a particular school context. This study addresses that gap by examining public relations practices at SMP Negeri 28 Surabaya through interview data, observation evidence, and documentation. It focuses on how school actors plan and implement public relations strategies, how these strategies are observed in school and community activities, and how they contribute to strengthening school reputation. The study is expected to provide practical insight for school leaders who seek to manage public relations as a strategic relationship-building function.

Literature Review

School reputation is a collective perception formed through repeated interactions between an educational institution and its stakeholders. A positive reputation reflects public confidence in school quality, educational programs, student achievement, and institutional responsibility. Public relations plays an important role in this process because it manages communication, builds relationships, and helps the school present its institutional identity to the community. However, reputation cannot be produced by communication alone. It becomes sustainable when messages shared by the school are supported by credible programs, visible achievements, and consistent stakeholder experiences.

Public relations in educational institutions involves the systematic management of relationships between the school and its internal and external publics. Internally, public relations helps strengthen shared understanding among school leaders, teachers, students, and staff. Externally, it connects the school with parents, community members, government agencies, and partner institutions. Effective public relations is therefore not merely promotional; it is relational and strategic. In schools, this relational function is especially important because public trust is shaped by the extent to which the community feels informed, respected, and involved.

Digital media has become an important instrument for school public relations because it increases the speed, reach, and continuity of communication. Through digital platforms, schools can publish school activities, student achievements, educational announcements, and guidance for parents. Nevertheless, digital media also requires careful management because inaccurate, inconsistent, or overly promotional communication can weaken credibility. Schools must therefore ensure that digital communication reflects actual institutional

practices. The effectiveness of digital public relations depends on the alignment between online messages and real educational quality.

Community engagement strengthens school reputation by creating direct encounters between the institution and its surrounding environment. Participation in local cultural activities, social programs, and collaborative initiatives allows the community to experience the school beyond formal academic services. This form of engagement is important because trust often grows through visible participation and shared social meaning. When students participate respectfully in community events, the public can observe the values cultivated by the school. Thus, community engagement functions as both social contribution and reputational evidence.

Flagship programs and student achievements also contribute to reputation building because they provide observable indicators of school quality. Programs such as Child-Friendly School, Adiwiyata School, Literacy Ambassador, and Outstanding Student initiatives communicate the school's priorities and educational identity. The publication of achievements can increase visibility, but the deeper reputational value lies in the continuity of programs and the development of students' character, skills, and discipline. For this reason, school reputation is best understood as the result of communication, program quality, stakeholder collaboration, and community recognition.

Material and Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to examine public relations strategies at SMP Negeri 28 Surabaya. The qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to understand public relations practices, stakeholder relationships, and reputation-building processes in their real institutional context. Rather than measuring reputation statistically, the study explored how school actors interpret and implement communication strategies, how these practices are observed in digital and community activities, and how they contribute to public trust. The research focused on the use of digital media, community engagement, external collaboration, flagship programs, and challenges related to school competition and zoning.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and documentation. Interviews were conducted with key informants who were involved in school public relations and institutional communication, including the public relations officer, school principal, and teachers directly related to flagship programs and student development. Observations were conducted to examine digital communication practices, community engagement activities, stakeholder collaboration, and program implementation. Documentation included photographs of school activities, screenshots or records of digital communication, school program documentation, and relevant public relations materials.

Data analysis was conducted through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview notes and transcripts were read repeatedly to identify patterns related to digital communication, community engagement, collaboration, flagship programs, student achievement, and implementation challenges. Observation and documentation data were compared with interview data to strengthen the credibility of the findings. Representative participant statements were selected to illustrate the major themes, while visual documentation and a summary table were used to synthesize the relationship between public relations strategies, evidence, and their contribution to reputation. Ethical considerations were maintained by using the data only for research purposes and by protecting the identities of students where visual documentation involved school activities.

Results

A. Digital Communication as a Strategic Public Relations Instrument

The findings indicate that digital communication has become one of the central public relations strategies at SMP Negeri 28 Surabaya. The school uses its official website, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp to disseminate information related to school activities, student achievements, announcements from the education office, and guidance for parents. Observation data show that these platforms are used not only for routine information delivery but also for maintaining communication between the school and families. For example, the school disseminates reminders and guidance during particular periods, including messages encouraging parents to supervise students during Ramadan. This practice demonstrates that digital media functions as both an information channel and a relational medium.

The public relations officer explained that digital media is used because parents require fast and accessible information. In the interview, the informant stated, “We use WhatsApp groups, Instagram, TikTok, and the school website because parents need quick information. If there is an announcement from the education office or an activity at school, we try to share it immediately so that parents do not miss important information.” This statement indicates that the school’s digital communication is not merely promotional but also operational. The school uses digital media to ensure that communication is timely, practical, and connected to daily school activities.

Digital communication also contributes to reputation building by increasing the visibility of student achievements and flagship programs. A teacher stated, “When students win competitions or join school programs, we publish the information so that parents and the community know that the school continues to develop student potential.” This quotation shows that digital platforms are used to make school quality more visible to stakeholders. However, the reputational value of digital communication depends on the credibility of the activities

being communicated. Digital media strengthens reputation when online messages are supported by real achievements and program continuity.



Fig. 1. Digital communication practices used by SMP Negeri 28 Surabaya

B. Community Engagement as a Source of Social Trust

The second major finding concerns the school's direct engagement with the surrounding community as an important dimension of its public relations practice. SMP Negeri 28 Surabaya actively participates in various local social and cultural activities, including the traditional Sedekah Bumi celebration, in which students performed a mass Remo dance. Such participation demonstrates that the school does not position itself merely as an educational institution located within the community, but as an active social actor that contributes to the cultural life of its surroundings. Through these forms of engagement, the school strengthens its visibility and creates opportunities for meaningful interaction with residents. Community participation therefore becomes a strategic means of building a positive and socially grounded institutional image.

The school's involvement in community events also provides members of the public with opportunities to directly observe the qualities demonstrated by students outside the formal classroom setting. During cultural performances and social activities, students display discipline, cooperation, confidence, creativity, and appreciation for local traditions. These observable behaviors communicate values that cannot always be conveyed effectively through formal school publications or promotional materials. In this context, students function as visible representatives of the institution, and their conduct contributes to how the community evaluates the school. The school's reputation is therefore shaped not only by academic achievement but also by the public behavior and social participation of its students.

The principal emphasized that participation in community activities is deliberately maintained as part of the school's effort to build and sustain positive relationships with local residents. The principal explained, "The school cannot stand apart from the community. When there is a community activity, we try to participate because the community needs to see that

the school is present and willing to contribute." This statement indicates that the school understands public relations as a process of maintaining social connection rather than merely disseminating institutional information. Presence, participation, and contribution become practical ways of demonstrating that the school recognizes itself as part of the wider community. Such an approach enables trust to emerge through repeated interaction and shared social experiences.

A teacher involved in student activities similarly highlighted the reputational value of students' participation in public events. The teacher stated, "When students perform in community events, people do not only see the dance. They also see how students behave, how they cooperate, and how they represent the school." This observation illustrates that community events function as informal spaces in which the public evaluates both students and the institution they represent. The performance itself may attract initial attention, but students' discipline, interpersonal behavior, and teamwork communicate a broader message about the school's educational values. Consequently, student participation becomes a form of embodied communication through which the school's character is publicly demonstrated.

Overall, the findings suggest that community engagement at SMP Negeri 28 Surabaya operates as a relational and reputational strategy that connects school identity with everyday community experience. Rather than relying solely on formal publicity, the school builds its public image through visible participation, interpersonal interaction, and meaningful contribution to local cultural activities. These encounters allow community members to develop perceptions of the school based on direct observation of its students and institutional involvement. In this sense, school reputation is socially constructed through repeated interactions between the school and its surrounding community. Community engagement therefore strengthens not only institutional visibility but also public trust, social acceptance, and the school's legitimacy as an active member of the local community.



Fig. 2. Student participation in the Sedekah Bumi community event

C. External Collaboration as a Strategy for Building Institutional Credibility

The third finding shows that SMP Negeri 28 Surabaya strengthens its reputation through collaboration with external stakeholders. One important partnership is collaboration with

PUSPAGA in conducting anti-bullying awareness and character-development activities. This collaboration indicates that public relations at the school extends beyond communication and promotion into institutional partnership. By involving external stakeholders, the school demonstrates responsiveness to student welfare and social concerns. Such responsiveness contributes to credibility because the school is seen as willing to work with competent partners to address student-related issues.

The public relations officer explained the importance of collaboration in supporting school programs. The informant stated, “For issues such as bullying prevention, the school needs support from institutions that have relevant expertise. Collaboration with PUSPAGA helps students understand the impact of bullying and how to prevent it.” This statement indicates that external collaboration is used to strengthen educational services and student protection. It also shows that public relations includes connecting the school with institutions that can support student development.

The partnership with PUSPAGA contributes to reputation at two levels. Internally, it supports student character development and school safety. Externally, it signals that the school takes student welfare seriously and is open to collaboration. A school that can build credible partnerships is more likely to be trusted by parents and the wider community. Therefore, external collaboration becomes an important dimension of strategic public relations.



Fig. 3. Collaboration between SMP Negeri 28 Surabaya and PUSPAGA

D. Flagship Programs, Student Achievement, and School Image Building

The fourth finding concerns the strategic use of flagship programs and student achievements to strengthen the school’s public image. The school develops several programs, including the Child-Friendly School Program, the Adiwiyata School Program, the Literacy Ambassador Program, and the Outstanding Student Program. These programs provide substantive evidence of institutional identity because they show what the school prioritizes in its educational practices. Rather than relying only on promotional messages, the school builds reputation through programs that can be demonstrated through student activities, environmental awareness, literacy initiatives, and character development.

The principal explained that flagship programs are developed to show the school's educational direction. The principal stated, "We want the community to know that the school is not only about classroom learning. We also develop students through literacy, environmental care, character building, and achievement programs." This statement indicates that reputation building is connected to educational substance. The school communicates its image through programs that reflect its values and priorities.

Student achievement is also publicly recognized and appreciated. The public relations officer stated, "Every achievement is appreciated by the school, usually through announcements or recognition during ceremonies, because students need motivation and the community also needs to know their progress." This practice has both internal and external functions. Internally, recognition motivates students to continue developing their abilities. Externally, student achievement becomes visible evidence of school quality.



Fig. 4. Flagship programs and student achievement activities

E. Challenges: Competition, Zoning, and Continuous Innovation

The final finding concerns the challenges faced by the school in strengthening its reputation. Competition among public schools and the implementation of the zoning system influence how SMP Negeri 28 Surabaya maintains public trust and institutional attractiveness. These conditions require the school to continuously demonstrate quality through programs, achievements, communication, and community relationships. Public relations therefore operates within a competitive environment in which the school must show evidence of educational quality. The challenge is not only to attract public attention but also to maintain long-term credibility.

The public relations officer stated, "The zoning system makes schools have to work harder to show their strengths. We cannot only wait for people to know the school; we must show our programs, achievements, and good communication with parents." This statement indicates that zoning is perceived as a contextual pressure that encourages more active reputation management. The school responds by strengthening public communication, developing flagship programs, and maintaining community involvement. Competition and zoning therefore become drivers of innovation in public relations practice.

The findings also show that the school has become a point of reference for other educational institutions through benchmarking visits. This recognition suggests that the school's programs and public relations practices are viewed positively by external parties. However, such recognition should continue to be supported by documentation, visitor records, and program evidence. The reputational value of benchmarking depends on the consistency between external recognition and the quality of school programs. For this reason, continuous innovation remains necessary.

Table 1. Summary of Main Research Findings

Main finding	Interview evidence	Observation/documentation evidence	Contribution to school reputation
Digital communication	PR officer explained the use of WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and the school website for fast communication with parents.	Digital platforms are used for announcements, achievements, school activities, and parental guidance.	Improves information access, visibility, responsiveness, and communication continuity.
Community engagement	Principal and teacher emphasized school presence in local community activities.	Students participated in Sedekah Bumi through a mass Remo dance.	Strengthens social proximity, cultural recognition, and community trust.
External collaboration	PR officer explained collaboration with PUSPAGA for bullying prevention and character development.	Documentation of anti-bullying and character-development activities.	Demonstrates responsiveness to student welfare and institutional credibility.
Flagship programs	Principal described Child-Friendly School, Adiwiyata, Literacy Ambassador, and Outstanding Student programs as school identity.	Program documentation and student achievement activities.	Provides substantive evidence of school quality and institutional differentiation.
Student achievement	PR officer stated that achievements are recognized and	Awards, ceremonies, competitions, and digital publications.	Reinforces public perception of student

Main finding	Interview evidence	Observation/documentation evidence	Contribution to school reputation
	published to motivate students and inform the public.		competence and educational quality.
Competition and zoning	PR officer explained that zoning and competition require active communication and continuous program innovation.	Evidence of program development, public communication, and benchmarking recognition.	Encourages innovation and strengthens public confidence.

Discussion

The findings show that reputation building at SMP Negeri 28 Surabaya is produced through the interaction of digital communication, community engagement, stakeholder collaboration, flagship programs, and student achievement. Digital media contributes to reputation not simply because it expands the reach of information, but because it enables continuous communication between the school and parents. The public relations officer's statement about using multiple digital platforms supports the interpretation that digital media functions as a practical communication infrastructure. Observation and documentation also show that these platforms are used to publish achievements, activities, and guidance. This means that digital public relations performs both informational and relational functions.

Community engagement strengthens the school's reputation by allowing the public to directly observe the school's values. Participation in Sedekah Bumi and the mass Remo dance provides a concrete example of how students represent the school in a community setting. The principal's statement that the school cannot stand apart from the community suggests that reputation is built through social presence, not only through institutional messages. The teacher's statement further shows that student behavior during community events becomes part of the school's public image. Therefore, community engagement serves as a reputational bridge between school programs and public perception.

Collaboration with PUSPAGA indicates that the school's public relations strategy includes external partnership and problem-solving. The collaboration is particularly important because bullying prevention and character development are directly related to student safety and well-being. By involving an external institution, the school demonstrates openness, responsiveness, and concern for student development. This expands the meaning of public relations from publication to institutional credibility. Reputation is strengthened when the school is seen as capable of building partnerships that address real educational and social concerns.

Flagship programs provide the substantive foundation for reputation. The Child-Friendly School Program, Adiwiyata School Program, Literacy Ambassador Program, and Outstanding Student Program show that the school communicates identity through programs rather than slogans. The principal's explanation confirms that these programs represent the school's educational priorities. Student achievement recognition also strengthens internal

motivation and external visibility. Thus, digital media is best understood as an amplifier of institutional performance rather than as an independent source of reputation.

The challenges of competition and zoning make public relations more strategic. The school must continuously demonstrate quality, maintain communication with parents, and develop programs that distinguish it from other institutions. The public relations officer's statement shows that zoning encourages the school to become more proactive in showing its strengths. This finding suggests that school reputation is dynamic; it must be maintained through continuous innovation and consistent stakeholder engagement. Public relations therefore becomes a long-term strategic function, not a temporary promotional activity.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the reputation of SMP Negeri 28 Surabaya is strengthened through an integrated public relations strategy consisting of digital communication, community engagement, external stakeholder collaboration, flagship school programs, and public recognition of student achievements. Digital platforms expand the speed and reach of school communication, while participation in community activities strengthens the school's social embeddedness. Collaboration with external institutions such as PUSPAGA further reinforces institutional credibility by demonstrating responsiveness to student welfare and social concerns.

The findings also show that school reputation is not produced by communication alone. The credibility of public relations messages depends on substantive educational practices that can be observed by parents and the surrounding community, including flagship programs, student achievements, character development, and participation in local cultural activities. In this sense, digital media functions primarily as an amplifier of institutional performance rather than as an independent source of reputation.

At the same time, competition among public schools and the zoning system create pressures that require the school to continuously improve its programs and communication strategies. Sustainable school reputation emerges from the alignment between what the institution communicates, what it actually delivers, and how stakeholders experience its presence in the community. For school leaders, this implies that public relations should be managed as a strategic relationship-building function rather than merely as a publication activity.

Limitation and Suggestions

This study is limited to one public junior high school and therefore cannot be generalized to all schools with different institutional characteristics. The study also relies on a limited number of key informants and selected observation activities. Future studies should

involve more diverse informants, including parents, students, community representatives, and external stakeholders, to obtain a broader understanding of school reputation. Future research may also compare several schools to examine whether the relationship between digital public relations, community engagement, and reputation appears across different institutional contexts.

Further studies are also encouraged to use longer observation periods and more systematic documentation analysis. This would allow researchers to examine how public relations strategies change across different school events, admission periods, flagship programs, and community activities. Quantitative surveys may also be added to measure stakeholder perceptions of school reputation. Such mixed evidence would strengthen the practical and theoretical contribution of future research on strategic public relations in educational institutions.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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