

Digital Public Relations, Communication Quality, and Public Trust in an Elementary School: A Qualitative Case Study

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ABSTRACT

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Digital platforms have changed how schools communicate with parents and surrounding communities, but the availability of social media does not automatically produce dialogue, transparency, or trust. This study examines how Electronic Public Relations (E-PR) is implemented at Hidayatur Rohman Elementary School and how stakeholders perceive its contribution to communication quality and public trust. A qualitative single-case study was conducted using observation, interviews, and document review. Participants represented school leadership, teachers, public-relations personnel, parents, and community members who were involved in the school's digital communication. Data were analyzed through reduction, display, and conclusion drawing, with source and method triangulation used to strengthen credibility. The case indicates that WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and the school website were used for academic information, activity announcements, documentation of student achievements, and administrative communication. Across the available evidence, three mechanisms were recurrent: faster information access, opportunities for two-way feedback, and greater visibility of school activities. These practices were perceived to improve communication clarity and responsiveness and to support public trust through transparency and regular institutional presence. However, implementation remained constrained by limited personnel, uneven digital-communication competence, inconsistent evaluation, and technology-access barriers. The findings suggest that school E-PR should be treated as a relationship-management function rather than merely a publication function.

Keywords

Digital Public Relations
Family–School
Communication
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Introduction

Digital communication has become part of the institutional infrastructure through which schools provide information, coordinate services, and maintain relationships with families. School websites, messaging applications, and social-networking platforms can reduce the time and distance involved in home–school communication, but their relational value depends on how they are governed and used. Research on school websites shows that digital channels can support communication, administrative functions, engagement, and learning, while studies of technology-integrated family–school partnerships also identify persistent inequalities in access, skills, and effective use [1]–[4]. Thus, digitalization should not be equated with communication quality.

From a public-relations perspective, digital communication is particularly important because it expands opportunities for direct organization–public interaction. Dialogic communication theory emphasizes usefulness of information, generation of return visits, conservation of visitors, interface usability, and the dialogic loop as conditions that can support online relationships [5]–[8]. Subsequent social-media research has shown that organizations often adopt interactive platforms while continuing to use them primarily for one-way information dissemination [9]–[14]. This distinction is consequential for schools: posting frequently may improve visibility, yet trust is more likely to develop when communication is responsive, transparent, intelligible, and open to stakeholder feedback.

Relationship-management scholarship provides a second theoretical foundation. Organization–public relationships are commonly conceptualized through dimensions such as trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality [15]–[18]. Recent meta-analytic evidence indicates that interactivity, transparency, two-way communication, engagement, and mediated communication are strongly associated with relationship quality, while relationship quality is in turn connected with reputation, advocacy, and information seeking [19]. In school settings, trust is likewise relational: it develops through repeated exchanges involving respect, reliability, competence, and integrity [20], [21]. Family–school research further shows that communication and involvement are intertwined with parents’ ability to participate meaningfully in their children’s education [22], [23].

These perspectives suggest a useful analytical distinction between digital presence and relational performance. A school may have multiple channels yet still experience fragmented messaging, slow responses, limited participation, or unequal access. Conversely, relatively simple platforms can support strong relationships when information is timely, consistent, accessible, and responsive. Evidence from public-relations studies also cautions against assuming that social media are inherently beneficial; organizational capacity, strategic planning, platform norms, and staff resources shape whether interaction becomes genuinely dialogic [24]–[28].

The original manuscript on Hidayatur Rohman Elementary School identified social media, the school website, and digital communication applications as important E-PR channels, and reported perceived improvements in information efficiency, two-way communication, transparency, and public trust. It also identified limited human resources, insufficient training, and weak evaluation as implementation challenges. However, the initial presentation was largely descriptive and separated the literature review from the empirical argument, making the mechanism connecting E-PR, communication quality, and trust less explicit. The present revision therefore reorganizes the study around relationship management and dialogic communication and distinguishes empirical observations from interpretive claims.

Accordingly, this study addresses two questions: (RQ1) How is E-PR implemented in the case school across digital channels and stakeholder interactions? (RQ2) Through what perceived mechanisms does E-PR support communication quality and public trust, and what organizational constraints limit those mechanisms? The study contributes a school-level qualitative account of digital public relations in an elementary-education context and proposes an evidence-grounded framework for moving from channel adoption toward systematic digital relationship management.

Methods

A. Research design and setting

The study used a qualitative single-case-study design to examine E-PR practices in their institutional context. The case was Hidayatur Rohman Elementary School. A case-study approach was appropriate because the research questions concern how digital communication is organized, experienced, and interpreted by actors who participate in the school–community relationship. The analysis does not seek statistical generalization; instead, it develops an analytically structured account of practices, mechanisms, and constraints within the case.

B. Participants and sampling

Participants included the principal, teachers, public-relations staff, parents, and local community members involved in the school's communication activities. Purposive selection was used to prioritize participants with direct knowledge of digital communication practices.

C. Data collection

Three data sources were used: observation, interviews, and document review. Observation focused on how the school used social media and other online platforms. Interviews elicited accounts of the digital communication strategies used by the school and stakeholder experiences of those practices. Documentary material included screenshots of social-media activity, digital announcements, website content, and other records related to E-PR. The use of multiple sources allowed practices visible in digital artifacts to be compared with stakeholder accounts. The source manuscript does not specify the interview guide, interview duration, recording/transcription procedures, observation period, number of documents, or platform sampling window; these should be reported if available.

D. Data analysis and trustworthiness

Data analysis followed an iterative process of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. For the revised analytical structure, evidence was organized into categories reflecting (a) channel use and communication functions, (b) communication-quality mechanisms, (c) trust-related mechanisms, and (d) implementation constraints. Source triangulation compared perspectives across school personnel, parents, and community participants, while method triangulation compared interview, observational, and documentary evidence. Interpretations were kept at the level supported by the qualitative evidence; terms such as “improved” or “increased” refer to reported or observed qualitative change and not to experimentally demonstrated causal effects.

Table 1. Evidence architecture and analytic role of the qualitative data

Data source	Empirical focus	Contribution to analysis	Quality function
Observation	Use of social media and online communication in school practice	Identified channels, communication routines, and visible interaction practices	Compared reported practices with enacted practices
Interviews	Experiences of principal, teachers, PR staff, parents, and community members	Explored perceived speed, clarity, responsiveness, transparency, trust, and constraints	Enabled source triangulation across stakeholder positions
Document review	Social-media screenshots, digital announcements, website and supporting records	Verified types of content and institutional communication outputs	Provided an audit trail for claims about published information
Cross-source synthesis	Convergence and divergence across the three sources	Generated themes on information access, dialogue, transparency, trust, and implementation capacity	Reduced reliance on a single participant group or method

Results

A. E-PR as a multi-channel communication system

The school used WhatsApp groups, Instagram, Facebook, and its website as complementary E-PR channels. The platforms supported several recurring functions: dissemination of academic information, announcements of school activities, documentation of student achievements, and delivery of administrative information. Social media served as the most immediate public-facing channel, whereas messaging applications supported more direct communication with parents. The empirical pattern therefore reflects a multi-channel system rather than reliance on a single digital medium.

B. From information distribution to two-way communication

A central change associated with E-PR was the reduction of dependence on letters and face-to-face contact for routine information. Participants described digital channels as faster and easier to access. More importantly, online channels created opportunities for parents to ask questions, provide feedback, and communicate without visiting the school. This indicates a shift from purely distributive communication toward a limited dialogic model. The available evidence does not establish that all stakeholder groups participated equally, but it does show that feedback pathways were incorporated into the school's communication practice.

C. Communication quality: speed, clarity, accessibility, and responsiveness

Four features characterized perceived communication quality. First, digital distribution shortened the time required for information to reach stakeholders. Second, the school attempted to use simple and understandable language. Third, information became more accessible through channels already used by parents and community members. Fourth, two-way channels allowed questions and responses to occur more directly. Together, these features reduced dependence on sequential or paper-based communication and were perceived to reduce misunderstandings between the school and community.

D. Trust formation through visibility and transparency

Trust-related accounts were closely connected with transparency and institutional visibility. Regular publication of school activities allowed stakeholders to observe educational programs, student activities, and school achievements more continuously. Participants associated this visibility with confidence in the school's services and with a stronger sense of involvement.

E. Organizational capacity as the principal constraint

The benefits of E-PR were moderated by organizational capacity. Digital media management depended on teachers and administrative personnel with relevant technological skills, and the school lacked sufficient dedicated staff. Limited training constrained the consistency and professionalism of social-media management. Evaluation of communication

effectiveness was also not conducted routinely. In addition, uneven technology and internet access could hinder communication with some community members. These constraints show that channel availability alone is insufficient; E-PR requires staffing, competencies, governance, and evaluation.

Table 2. Cross-theme synthesis of E-PR mechanisms, evidence, and implications

Theme	Observed/reported practice	Immediate communication mechanism	Trust-related interpretation	Implementation implication
Information efficiency	Routine information distributed through WhatsApp, social media, and website	Faster reach and easier retrieval	Reliability may increase when information is timely and consistent	Define channel roles and publication schedules
Dialogic access	Parents can ask questions and provide feedback online	Lower interaction cost and greater responsiveness	Being heard can strengthen relational confidence	Set response standards and escalation procedures
Transparency and visibility	School activities and achievements are regularly documented online	Stakeholders can observe institutional activity	Visibility supports perceptions of openness and accountability	Use evidence-based content, not only promotional posts
Message clarity	School uses simple, understandable language	Reduces ambiguity and misunderstanding	Clear communication supports credibility	Apply plain-language and accessibility checks
Capacity constraints	Limited staff, training, evaluation, and internet access	Inconsistent content and uneven stakeholder reach	Inconsistency can weaken credibility and inclusion	Assign governance roles, train staff, monitor access gaps
Evaluation gap	No routine assessment of communication effectiveness reported	Limited organizational learning	Trust claims remain difficult to substantiate	Track response time, reach, engagement, feedback, and complaints

Discussion

The case supports a central proposition in digital public-relations research: technology creates the possibility of dialogue but does not itself constitute dialogue. The school's use of WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and a website broadened the communication infrastructure, while the relational value of those channels emerged from responsiveness, accessibility, and feedback. This is consistent with dialogic communication scholarship showing that organizations frequently provide useful information online but vary substantially in their use of genuine dialogic loops [5]–[14]. The distinction is important for educational institutions because a high volume of posts may indicate activity without demonstrating stakeholder participation or relationship quality.

The findings also align with organization–public relationship theory. In that literature, trust is not an isolated communication outcome; it develops alongside satisfaction, commitment, and mutual influence [15]–[19]. In the present case, trust was described in connection with regular information, openness about school activities, and responsive communication. These mechanisms are theoretically plausible because recent meta-analysis identifies transparency, interactivity, engagement, and two-way communication as important antecedents of relationship quality [19]. The present qualitative evidence should nevertheless be interpreted as mechanism-level support rather than a test of the causal model.

The school context adds a family–school relationship dimension. Home–school communication is not merely reputational communication: it is part of the infrastructure through which families access information, coordinate with teachers, and participate in education. Prior research has linked family involvement and communication with social and educational processes [22], [23], while studies of school websites and digital family–school partnerships show that digital tools can facilitate communication but may also reproduce access and skills inequalities [1]–[4], [29]. The reported internet and technology barriers in this case therefore have substantive implications. A digital strategy that reaches highly connected families while excluding others could improve aggregate communication efficiency yet weaken equity in participation.

The results further suggest that transparency should be understood as a communication practice rather than simple visibility. Posting school activities can increase observability, but organizational transparency also requires information that is accurate, understandable, timely, and open to stakeholder scrutiny. Research on social-media transparency has similarly emphasized both the opportunities and the tensions associated with online openness [30], [31]. For schools, this means that E-PR should avoid becoming exclusively promotional. Content about achievements can contribute to reputation, but trust is more likely to be sustained when schools also communicate procedures, changes, expectations, service information, and responses to stakeholder concerns.

The strongest implementation weakness in the case is organizational capacity. The original evidence indicates limited personnel, insufficient digital-communication training, and irregular evaluation. Comparable public-relations research has repeatedly identified staffing, time, content management, and strategic capability as barriers to sustained social-media relationship building [12], [24], [26], [32]. These are not peripheral operational issues; they determine whether digital communication is consistent enough to be trusted. Assigning responsibility to technologically capable teachers on an ad hoc basis may enable initial adoption, but a mature E-PR system requires explicit roles, editorial standards, response protocols, continuity planning, and oversight.

Evaluation is therefore a priority. The school currently appears to assess E-PR largely through perceived usefulness rather than systematic indicators. A feasible school-level evaluation framework could combine process measures (posting regularity, response time, unanswered inquiries), reach measures (audience coverage across channels), engagement measures (questions, comments, feedback), accessibility measures (stakeholder difficulty accessing or understanding information), and relational measures (periodic parent perceptions of transparency, responsiveness, and trust). Social-media engagement should not be treated as equivalent to trust, but it can provide behavioral signals when interpreted alongside stakeholder feedback [10], [13], [14], [19].

The study has several limitations. First, it is a single institutional case, so transferability depends on similarity of organizational and community contexts. Second, the source manuscript does not report the participant count, interview duration, fieldwork period, or documentary sampling frame; these omissions limit assessment of methodological adequacy and should be corrected from original research records. Third, the evidence is primarily qualitative and does not justify causal statements that E-PR “increased” trust in a measurable sense. Fourth, stakeholders with poor digital access may be underrepresented in digital evidence, creating a risk of overly positive interpretations. Finally, platform analytics and systematic content analysis were not reported. Future research could combine qualitative interviews with platform metrics, content coding, and validated relationship-quality measures to test whether responsiveness and transparency predict trust over time.

Despite these limitations, the case offers a practical conceptual contribution: school E-PR can be understood as a sequence linking communication infrastructure to relational outcomes. Digital channels enable information access and interaction; governance determines whether those affordances produce clarity, responsiveness, and transparency; repeated experiences of those qualities may then contribute to trust. Capacity and digital inclusion operate as boundary conditions throughout this sequence. This framing moves the analysis beyond the claim that “social media improves trust” toward a more defensible explanation of when and how digital public relations may support school–community relationships.

Conclusion

At Hidayatur Rohman Elementary School, E-PR operates through a combination of messaging applications, social media, and the school website. The qualitative evidence indicates that these channels support faster information distribution, more direct feedback, clearer access to school activities, and greater perceived transparency. Public trust is best interpreted as a relational outcome supported by these communication experiences rather than as an automatic consequence of technology use. The main threats to sustainability are limited staffing, uneven digital competence, weak evaluation, and access barriers. Accordingly,

the next stage of E-PR development should focus on governance: clarifying channel functions, assigning responsibility, establishing response and content standards, strengthening staff competence, protecting accessibility, and evaluating stakeholder experience. Future multi-site and mixed-method research is needed to quantify changes in communication quality and trust and to examine whether the mechanisms identified in this case persist across different school contexts.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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