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COMMUNITY-BASED PUBLIC RELATIONS MANAGEMENT IN STRENGTHENING SCHOOL IDENTITY

Muhammad Arifin[1](✉)
[1]Darul Falah College of Islamic Studies, Mataram, NTB, Indonesia

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(✉)**Correspondence to:**
Arifinmuhammad2022@gmail.com

Abstract: In the increasingly competitive educational landscape, educational institutions are required to build a strong school identity and gain public trust as a strategic asset for institutional sustainability. This study aims to analyze and describe the implementation of community-based public relations (PR) management strategies in strengthening school identity within the community. This research employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design at MI Nurul Huda, Probolinggo, Indonesia. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with six purposively selected informants comprising the principal, public relations coordinator, teachers, and parents, non-participant observation of school activities during February–April 2026, and documentation studies of PR work programs, meeting notes, and communication media. Data analysis used the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña including data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification, with source and technique triangulation to ensure trustworthiness. The results reveal that the school has implemented open communication through direct socialization, parent meetings, and transparent information delivery regarding student development and school programs. This practice is consistent with the principles of two-way symmetrical communication and public transparency theory, which contribute to building community trust and positive perceptions. However, community participation remains at the level of communication and consultation, tending to be passive, as the community has not been fully involved as an active partner in planning, decision-making, and evaluation of educational programs. This study contributes novelty by integrating two-way communication theory, community-based public relations theory, and school identity formation theory into a single analytical framework, positioning the community not merely as message recipients but as strategic partners in shaping school identity. The findings imply the need to develop a more participatory, collaborative, and sustainable PR management model through structured communication forums and empowerment mechanisms

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization has driven increasingly intense competition among educational institutions. In such a situation, schools are required not only to improve the quality of the learning process but also to build public trust through the provision of quality educational services (Has & Andriani, 2025). This demand is increasingly strengthened along with the growing public awareness in determining choices for educational institutions that are able to guarantee quality, implement a positive organizational culture, and display institutional identity clearly. Thus, competition between schools is no longer limited to academic achievement but also includes efforts to build image, maintain reputation, and establish harmonious relationships with the community as the main stakeholder. In the context of Islamic education management, this phenomenon becomes more complex because schools must balance academic excellence, Islamic values, and community expectations simultaneously.

In facing this competition, school identity has a strategic position in maintaining continuity while increasing the competitiveness of educational institutions. School identity represents the characteristics, values, culture, and advantages that differentiate a school from other educational institutions. A strong identity has the potential to shape positive public perceptions, foster parental trust, and increase loyalty of school members (Afandi et al., 2025). According to Albert and Whetten (1985) and later developed in educational context by Balmer (2021), organizational identity is formed through claims of centrality, distinctiveness, and endurance that are socially constructed through continuous interaction. In schools, identity is manifested through vision and mission, organizational culture, service quality, achievements, and consistent communication patterns. Therefore, strengthening school identity cannot be done solely through academic achievement but must also be supported by effective relationship management between schools and communities through the function of public relations (PR).

In its development, PR in the educational environment has experienced an expansion of roles, from initially being more oriented towards information delivery and school promotion to a managerial function that supports the formation of communication, cooperation, and public trust. Cutlip et al. (2006) and Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations position PR as a strategic management function, not just a technical communication function. Through effective management, PR can facilitate reciprocal relationships between schools and communities so that support is created for the implementation of various educational programs. This role is increasingly relevant to national education policies that encourage community involvement in education delivery (Rorong et al., 2025). Government Regulation Number 57 of 2021 concerning National Education Standards emphasizes the importance of community involvement in improving education quality. Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Number 5 of 2022 concerning Accreditation of Schools and Madrasahs also places school partnerships with the community as one of the quality indicators. Meanwhile, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum further encourages the formation of an educational ecosystem that prioritizes collaboration and participation of various parties.

This research is based on three interrelated theoretical foundations. First, two-way communication theory, particularly Grunig's two-way symmetrical model, which places reciprocal interaction between organizations and stakeholders as an important element in building trust-based relationships (Ramadhani et al., 2023). This model emphasizes dialogue, mutual understanding, and negotiation rather than one-way persuasion. In educational institutions, two-way communication allows schools to listen to community aspirations, provide space for feedback, and build mutual understanding. Second, community-based public relations theory, which emphasizes that the community should not only be placed as recipients of messages but as active partners in planning, implementing, and evaluating organizational programs.

This perspective aligns with the concept of community engagement and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 2020), where schools are seen as part of the community ecosystem that must empower the community. Third, school identity formation theory which explains that institutional identity develops through continuous social interaction, information openness, application of organizational values, and community participation. Drawing from Hatch and Schultz (2022), identity is formed through the interplay between internal culture and external image, mediated by stakeholder interactions. These three perspectives are used as an analytical basis for understanding PR management strategies in strengthening school identity through community involvement (Rachim, 2025).

Initial observations at MI Nurul Huda show that the school has developed a number of community-oriented PR strategies. These strategies are manifested through socialization activities with parents, openness of information regarding the learning process and student development, and delivery of various activities organized by the school (Pratama et al., 2025). To support information dissemination, schools also use simple communication media such as WhatsApp groups, bulletin boards, and school social media so that the public can obtain information about institutional developments more easily. Various efforts have supported the establishment of fairly good relations between schools and communities and foster trust in educational institutions. In this context, trust is understood as a multidimensional construct including competence, integrity, benevolence, and reliability (Mayer et al., 2021).

Although these practices have shown positive results, community involvement is still limited to receiving information and observing school activities. Community participation in planning, implementing, and evaluating school programs has not developed optimally (Otiso, 2025). This initial finding shows that PR management has been running quite well in the communication aspect, but the application of partnership principles which are characteristic of community-based public relations still requires strengthening (Nurohman, 2024). This gap is critical because research shows that symbolic participation without substantive involvement can lead to pseudo-participation that does not contribute to identity strengthening (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 2022).

A number of previous studies have examined PR management in relation to school image formation, promotional activities, information dissemination, and strengthening relationships between schools and communities. For example, Afandi et al. (2025) examined digital PR strategies for Islamic schools but focused

more on social media as a promotional tool. Hasanushifah and Nurcholis (2025) studied transparency in Islamic boarding schools but did not link it to identity theory. Kurniawati (2023) and Haryato et al. (2024) explored school-community communication but remained at the level of formal communication functions. In general, existing studies still emphasize formal communication functions, so the role of PR as a community-based strategy that places the community as an actively involved party in forming school identity has not received much attention (Nurkakim & Rahmawati, 2025). In addition, research that specifically connects two-way communication, community participation, and the process of forming school identity is also still relatively limited. This situation shows a research gap that needs to be further explored, especially to explain the contribution of community involvement to strengthening school identity (Nurjanah et al., 2025).

Referring to this gap, the novelty of this study lies in examining community-based PR management strategies through the integration of two-way communication theory, community-based public relations theory, and school identity formation theory in one analytical framework (Ngiode, 2024). Different from approaches that place the community as a party that only receives information, this study positions the community as a strategic partner who plays a role in forming and strengthening school identity through a participatory and collaborative communication process (Mujib & Saptiningsih, 2021). This integration offers a holistic model that not only explains communication practices but also analyzes how these practices contribute to identity construction and trust building.

Based on the background, this study aims to analyze community-based public relations management strategies in strengthening school identity in the community. Specifically, this study seeks to answer: (1) How is PR strategy implemented in building communication with the community? (2) How is information transparency practiced as an effort to strengthen school identity? (3) How is community participation in PR management, and what are the inhibiting and supporting factors? In addition, this research is expected to produce recommendations for developing a more participatory, collaborative, and sustainable PR management model (Sandi & Simamora, 2025). The practical contribution is expected to provide a model that can be adopted by Islamic elementary schools and madrasahs in Indonesia facing similar competitive pressures.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because the study aims to understand in depth the strategy of community-based public relations management in strengthening school identity through processes, meanings, and social interactions that occur between schools and communities. Case study design is appropriate because it allows in-depth exploration of a bounded system (Yin, 2022) – in this case, MI Nurul Huda as a single case that has implemented various PR programs involving the community.

The research was conducted at MI Nurul Huda, Probolinggo Regency, East Java, Indonesia, as the research location because the school has implemented various PR programs involving the community in supporting education delivery

and represents a typical Islamic elementary school facing competitive pressures. Data collection was carried out during February–July 2026 so that researchers had the opportunity to directly observe the implementation of PR activities at school (Has & Andriani, 2025). The extended period allowed for prolonged engagement, which is important for credibility in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 2021).

Research subjects were determined using purposive sampling technique, namely selecting informants based on consideration that they understand and are directly involved in implementing school PR programs. The informants totaled six people, consisting of 1 principal, 1 teacher who doubles as PR coordinator, 2 classroom teachers, and 2 parents who actively participate in various school activities. These informants were selected because they were considered capable of providing comprehensive information regarding community-based PR management strategies in building school identity in the community (Lina et al., 2025). Inclusion criteria included: (1) minimum one year involvement in school programs, (2) willingness to participate, and (3) ability to articulate experiences.

Research data consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted in-depth with all informants to obtain information about PR strategies, school-community communication patterns, and forms of community involvement in school programs. The interview guide was developed based on Grunig's two-way communication indicators (mutual understanding, dialogue, feedback) and community participation indicators (Arnstein's ladder of participation). Each interview lasted 45-90 minutes, was audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Observation was carried out by directly observing PR activities, interactions between schools and communities, and implementation of various activities involving parents and surrounding communities using an observation checklist. Documentation was used to complement research data through examination of PR work programs, meeting minutes, school activity documentation, school communication media, activity photos, and other supporting documents related to strengthening school identity.

Data analysis used the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), which includes four stages: data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data condensation was carried out through selection, simplification, and transformation of raw data from interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents. Data display was done in the form of narrative text, matrices, and thematic maps to facilitate understanding of patterns. Analysis was carried out continuously from the beginning of data collection until the research was completed so that researchers could find patterns, themes, and relationships between data related to community-based PR management strategies.

Data validity was tested through source triangulation and technique triangulation. Source triangulation was carried out by comparing information obtained from principals, teachers, and parents regarding the implementation of PR programs. Meanwhile, technique triangulation was done by matching interview results, field observations, and school documentation. If there were differences in information, researchers conducted re-interviews and tracing of

supporting documents until consistent data were obtained. Additionally, member checking was conducted by returning interview summaries to informants for verification, and peer debriefing was conducted with two colleagues who are experts in Islamic education management to ensure dependability. Through these procedures, the validity and credibility of research data can be accounted for so that research results are able to fully describe community-based PR management strategies in strengthening school identity in the community (Lidiawati & Fauzi, 2025).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

According to Stephen R. Covey, time management theory is closely related to the concepts of "urgency" and "importance." Effective time management requires the ability to recognize what is truly important. Covey also emphasizes that good time management implementation must be based on a clear vision, mission, and goals, as well as the ability to set priorities (Sarasija et al., 2021).

The results of this study are presented based on three main themes that emerged from data analysis: PR strategies in building communication with the community, information transparency as an effort to strengthen school identity, and community participation in PR management.

Public Relations Strategy in Building Communication with the Community

The results obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation show that PR management at MI Nurul Huda is carried out by intensifying communication between the school and the community, especially parents. This effort is manifested through socialization, parent meetings, direct communication between teachers and parents, and delivery of information related to school activities and student development. As stated by the principal: "We always try to be open. Every month there is a parent meeting, not only to report children's development but also to hear input from parents. We realize that without parental trust, the school cannot develop" (Interview, Principal, March 2026).

Based on observations, communication relations between schools and communities are fairly well established. Access to information for parents is not only obtained through official forums organized by the school but also through daily interactions with teachers and other school parties. A teacher coordinator stated: "We use a WhatsApp group for each class, so information about activities, homework, or student achievements can be conveyed quickly. Parents can also directly ask the teacher if there are things they don't understand." The intensity of these interactions builds closeness between both parties, so that the process of delivering information and handling various problems related to students can be done more easily (Herlita & Saleh, 2025).

In addition to optimizing direct communication, MI Nurul Huda uses simple communication media as supporting means in conveying information to the community. Although its utilization has not been carried out widely, the media provides convenience for schools to disseminate information more quickly, both regarding school activities, student development, and agendas that require parental involvement. Documentation shows that the school has Instagram and Facebook accounts that are updated 2-3 times a week with school activities. This shows that the existence of PR has a broader function than just conveying

information, namely as a liaison that bridges communication between schools and communities (Hasanushifah & Nurcholis, 2025).

Overall, the results indicate that the implementation of this communication pattern supports the growth of public trust in schools. Open and continuous delivery of information allows the community to obtain a clearer picture of various activities and developments of educational institutions. Trust formed through communication is one of the strategic capitals for schools in strengthening their institutional identity while maintaining competitiveness amid increasingly competitive competition between educational institutions (Haryato et al., 2024).

Table 1. Community-Based PR Communication Strategies at MI Nurul Huda

Strategy Type	Implementation Form	Frequency
Direct Communication	Parent meetings, home visits, teacher-parent consultation	Monthly / incidental
Mediated Communication	WhatsApp groups, Instagram, Facebook, bulletin board	Daily – Weekly
Socialization	New student admission socialization, program introduction	Semester
Community Events	Involvement in religious celebrations, mutual cooperation	Annual / incidental

Information Transparency as an Effort to Strengthen School Identity

One important finding of this study is the practice of information transparency carried out by schools to the community. Transparency is manifested through delivery of information about school activities, student development, and various programs being implemented. This openness allows the community to obtain a clear picture of the condition and development of the school. Based on observations, the community not only receives information verbally but also has the opportunity to directly see various activities taking place in the school environment. This condition creates a positive perception of the school because the community can make assessments based on direct experience and observation, not solely based on information conveyed by the school (Harditia & Sudadi, 2025).

Theoretically, information transparency is one of the important elements in building public trust. According to Rawlins (2008) and Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2022), transparency consists of three dimensions: information disclosure, participation, and accountability. At MI Nurul Huda, transparency is implemented through disclosure of financial reports for school operational assistance (BOS), academic achievement reports, and open access to school facilities. A parent informant stated: "We are happy because the school is open. We are informed about the use of funds, children's grades are reported transparently, and we are allowed to see the learning process. This makes us believe that the school is managed honestly."

Community trust is not formed instantly but through school consistency in conveying accurate, open, and accountable information. Therefore, information disclosure carried out by MI Nurul Huda is one of the factors that support the formation of school identity as a communicative and trustworthy institution

(Faseha et al., 2025). This aligns with signaling theory (Spence, 1973; Connelly et al., 2023), where transparency serves as a positive signal that distinguishes quality schools from others. Table 2 shows dimensions of transparency observed.

Table 2. Dimensions of Information Transparency at MI Nurul Huda

Transparency Dimension	Practice at School	Impact on Identity
Informational	Academic reports, financial reports, activity publication	Perceived as honest & competent
Participatory	Invitation to school events, suggestion box	Perceived as inclusive
Accountability	Explanation of program decisions, evaluation of learning	Perceived as responsible

Community Participation in Public Relations Management

Although communication and information transparency have been going well, research results show that community participation in PR management is still not optimal. Community involvement is generally still limited to receiving information, monitoring school activities, and attending activities organized by the school. The community has not been much involved in the process of planning, decision-making, and evaluating school programs. As revealed by one parent: "We are often invited to come to school, but usually we are only informed about programs that have already been decided. We have never been asked to participate in planning."

These findings indicate that the relationship between schools and communities is still at the level of communication and consultation, not yet developing into participatory partnerships. In Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, this position is at the level of informing and consultation, not yet reaching partnership or delegated power. In fact, from the perspective of community-based PR, the community not only acts as recipients of information but also as strategic partners who have contributions to school development (Erlianto et al., 2025).

This limited participation can be caused by several factors, including the unavailability of structured communication forums, limitations of community aspiration channeling mechanisms, and dominance of school roles in determining programs to be implemented. The principal acknowledged: "We still dominate in program preparation because we are worried that if we involve parents too much, the program will not be focused. But we realize this needs to be improved." As a result, community potential as a source of support, ideas, and innovation for school development has not been utilized maximally (Carnawi et al., 2024).

Discussion

This section analyzes research results based on literature and theories. It includes summary of research results, analysis of cause and effect, comparison with previous research, and research contribution and action plan.

Public Relations Strategy from the Perspective of Two-Way Communication Theory

Research findings show that PR management at MI Nurul Huda has implemented two-way communication principles. This is evident from the process of exchanging information between schools and communities that takes place symmetrically, where schools not only convey information but also listen to feedback from parents. This is consistent with Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical model, which emphasizes dialogue and mutual understanding as the ideal form of PR. However, the implementation is not yet fully symmetrical because feedback is still limited to operational matters, not yet strategic matters. According to Grunig (2022), symmetrical communication requires balanced power relations and willingness to change organizational behavior based on stakeholder input.

Compared to previous research, Afandi et al. (2025) found that many Islamic schools still apply one-way communication (public information model), so MI Nurul Huda's practice of providing WhatsApp consultation space is a step forward. Nevertheless, to achieve ideal symmetrical communication, schools need to develop formal feedback mechanisms such as regular surveys of parental satisfaction, community focus group discussions, and participatory planning forums. This aligns with research by Kurniawati (2023) and Haryato et al. (2024) which shows that schools that implement structured two-way communication have higher levels of trust.

Information Transparency and School Identity Formation

The practice of transparency at MI Nurul Huda contributes significantly to school identity formation. In Hatch and Schultz's (2022) organizational identity dynamics model, identity is formed through the process of expressing culture and mirroring image, where transparency acts as a bridge. When schools openly convey information, they express their cultural values (honesty, accountability), and when the community responds positively, it mirrors back to strengthen internal identity. This creates a cycle of identity reinforcement.

This finding strengthens research by Hasanushifah and Nurcholis (2025) which shows that transparency in pesantren contributes to institutional legitimacy. However, this study adds a new perspective by linking transparency to school identity theory, not just trust. In Islamic perspective, transparency is also related to the principles of shura (consultation) and amanah (trustworthiness) which are core values of Islamic education management (Baharun et al., 2024). Schools that are transparent demonstrate amanah in managing community trust.

The signaling effect of transparency is also evident. Parents perceive schools that are open about BOS funds and student grades as more competent and trustworthy. This positive perception becomes part of school identity that spreads through word-of-mouth in the community, creating a distinctive reputation as a "trustworthy madrasah". This is consistent with Balmer's (2021) corporate identity

theory applied to educational context, where identity is formed not only by what the organization says about itself but also by what stakeholders say about it.

Community Participation: From Passive to Active Partnership

The finding that community participation is still passive is a critical point that needs in-depth analysis. In the community-based PR framework, participation should be at the level of partnership and empowerment, not just informing. Arnstein's ladder and Hart's (2022) adaptation for education show that genuine participation requires redistribution of power. At MI Nurul Huda, parents are still placed as supporters, not decision-makers. This may be due to cultural factors where schools are seen as experts who should determine education, while parents are seen as recipients.

Previous research by Carnawi et al. (2024) and Otiso (2025) also found similar patterns in Indonesian elementary schools, where community participation is still symbolic. However, this study highlights that low participation is not due to community unwillingness but due to lack of structured mechanisms. Parents interviewed actually expressed willingness to be more involved: "If invited to plan, we want to help. We have ideas, for example about entrepreneurship programs for children, but don't know where to convey them."

The implication is that schools need to transform PR from a communication function to a community empowerment function. This can be done through establishing a school committee that functions actively, not just formally; creating community forums for program co-creation; involving parents as resource persons in learning; and developing community-based programs such as parenting classes, community service involving parents and students, and local wisdom-based curriculum development. Research by Rorong et al. (2025) shows that schools that involve parents as co-educators have stronger identity and higher parental loyalty.

Integration Model: Community-Based PR for School Identity Strengthening

Based on the findings, this study proposes an integrative model of community-based PR management for strengthening school identity. The model consists of four pillars: (1) Dialogic Communication – building structured two-way channels including digital and face-to-face; (2) Substantive Transparency – not only disclosing information but also explaining decision rationale and inviting accountability; (3) Empowered Participation – moving from informing to partnership by providing space for community in planning, implementation, and evaluation; (4) Value Internalization – ensuring that Islamic values and local culture become the soul of identity that is consistently communicated.

This model is novel because previous models (Nurkakim & Rahmawati, 2025; Nurjanah et al., 2025) separated communication and identity aspects. This study integrates them and adds Islamic perspective of ukhuwah (brotherhood) and gotong royong (mutual cooperation) as cultural capital for community-based PR. In Islamic education management, PR is not just about image but about building ummah that supports education.

The action plan from this research includes: short-term (0-6 months) – optimizing WhatsApp groups into two-way discussion forums and conducting parental satisfaction surveys; medium-term (6-12 months) – reactivating school committees with clear roles in program planning and creating a community

aspiration system; long-term (1-2 years) – developing community-based programs such as parent-as-mentor, community learning center, and collaborative branding of school identity as a community center of excellence. This model is expected to be adopted by other MI and Madrasah facing similar challenges in the era of educational competition and Merdeka Curriculum implementation.

The model shows that Dialogic Communication is the foundation, which enables Substantive Transparency, which in turn facilitates Empowered Participation, all of which are grounded in Value Internalization of Islamic and local values. This model contributes to the development of Islamic education management theory by integrating modern PR theory with Islamic principles.

CONCLUSION

The scientific contribution of this research lies in offering a novel integrative framework that positions the community as a strategic partner in shaping school identity, not just as message recipients, and enriching the literature on Islamic education management with empirical evidence from an Islamic elementary school context. The practical contribution is a four-pillar model (Dialogic Communication, Substantive Transparency, Empowered Participation, Value Internalization) that can be implemented by schools to develop more participatory, collaborative, and sustainable PR management, especially in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum which emphasizes ecosystem collaboration.

The strengths of this research are in-depth qualitative exploration with triangulation and member checking, and the integration of multiple theories relevant to the context of Indonesian Islamic education. Limitations include single-case study at one MI, so generalization is limited, and data collection was only from six informants, so broader stakeholder perspectives such as community leaders and alumni have not been accommodated. In addition, this study has not measured quantitatively the impact of PR management on school identity indicators.

Future research directions are recommended to: conduct multi-case studies at several MIs and madrasahs with different characteristics (urban-rural, large-small) to test the model; use mixed-methods with quantitative measurement of school identity and trust using validated instruments; explore the role of digital PR and social media in community-based strategies, especially for millennial parents; and examine the impact of community-based PR on student outcomes and school competitiveness in the long term. Such research will further strengthen evidence-based Islamic education management.

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