Political public relations in digital health communication: Engagement and trust building

Andi Subhan Amir[1], Moti Pangkam[2]

[1]Department of Communication Studies, Universitas Hasanuddin, Makassar, Indonesia

[2]Fakir Mohan University, Odisha, India

ABSTRACT

Background: The increasing complexity of health crises in the digital era has heightened the need for effective communication strategies that not only inform but also build trust. Political Public Relations (Political PR) has emerged as a central actor in framing public understanding and shaping behavior in response to government-led health campaigns. **Purpose**: This study explores how Political PR strategies are utilized in digital health communication to influence public trust and engagement. **Methods**: Employing a qualitative-comparative method, this research analyzes two case studies—Indonesia and Country X—focusing on the effectiveness, framing, and ethical dimensions of Political PR campaigns. **Results**: The findings reveal that Political PR strategies that emphasize credibility, transparency, and interactive communication, especially those involving health experts, tend to foster stronger public engagement. Platforms like Instagram and YouTube are more effective than text-heavy media such as Twitter, particularly when messages are framed empathetically and supported by trusted sources. However, ethical challenges such as misinformation, political bias, and the use of non-expert influencers pose risks to public trust. **Conclusion**: The study highlights the critical need for campaigns to integrate evidence-based messaging, collaborative communication, and ethical standards. **Implications**: This research contributes to both theoretical and practical understandings of Political PR in health communication by offering insights on strategy development, public trust dynamics, and platform effectiveness. The findings are expected to guide future political communication efforts during public health emergencies in digital contexts.

Keywords: Political public relations; digital health communication; public trust; media framing; crisis communication

Correspondence: Dr. Andi Subhan Amir, S.Sos., M.Si, (Senior Lecturer and Researcher). Department of Communication Studies, Hasanuddin University, Kampus Unhas Tamalanrea, Jl. Perintis Kemerdekaan Km.10, 90245. Email: asa@unhas.ac.id

INTRODUCTION

Political Public Relations (Political PR) has become increasingly crucial in shaping public perceptions and behaviors, especially in the context of digital health communication (Sweetser, 2019a). The rapid growth of digital media has transformed the landscape of health communication (Uddin & Sun, 2023). Digital platforms enable real-time interaction, allowing political actors and government institutions to directly engage with citizens, shaping public understanding of health issues, policies, and responses, particularly in crises such as pandemics. The COVID-19 pandemic exemplified the importance of effective political communication strategies (Hart et al., 2020). It suggested the critical role that public relations practices play in ensuring public compliance and trust toward health directives.

The historical evolution of Political PR reveals a transition from traditional, one-way communication models to interactive digital engagement that prioritizes audience feedback and real-time interaction (Alaimo, 2019; Sweetser, 2019b). Initially focused primarily on crisis management and image-building for politicians and corporations, Political PR strategies have adapted significantly with the proliferation of digital technologies (Bowen, 2019). Digital media now facilitate rapid and interactive exchanges between public officials and citizens, especially critical in crisis scenarios such as pandemics (Uddin & Sun, 2023). These transformations emphasize the strategic importance of transparent and credible messaging, as digital audiences increasingly demand authenticity and accountability from public institutions (Siegrist, 2021). Consequently, Political PR practitioners must navigate complex ethical terrains, balancing persuasive communication with responsible and truthful public health messaging (Hagelstein et al., 2021).

Political PR plays a crucial role in shaping effective health communication, especially in times of crisis. Its functions range from fostering transparency and managing public sentiment to addressing misinformation and cultivating trust (Bowen, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic provided strong evidence of this; countries that embrace well-planned digital communication strategies generally see greater levels of public compliance than those relying mainly on conventional channels (Lestari et al., 2023). Social media and other digital platforms offer more than just dissemination—they enable real-time interaction, encourage community engagement, and create space for the circulation of accurate health information. These features have proven to be influential in building public trust and encouraging meaningful participation

(Gollust et al., 2020).

Although the role of Political PR in health communication is widely acknowledged, complications follow. The same digital platforms that expand outreach also open the floodgates for misinformation and politically charged narratives, which can undermine public health efforts (Allcott et al., 2019). In highly polarized environments, even well-crafted government messages may be met with skepticism or outright resistance, making it even harder to build and sustain public trust (Garrett, 2020). These dynamics underscore the need to critically evaluate how Political PR operates in digital spaces, particularly whether its strategies are truly effective in shaping public perception and reinforcing trust in official health communication.

The integration of digital media within Political PR strategies introduces both unprecedented opportunities and significant ethical challenges. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter allow public officials and institutions to swiftly counter misinformation, gauge public sentiment, and dynamically adapt their communication strategies (Gollust et al., 2020). However, this digital agility is often accompanied by ethical complexities, including issues of privacy, manipulation, and the potential for misinformation to rapidly spread (Allcott et al., 2019; Bridgman et al., 2020).

Furthermore, digital platforms can amplify polarized political narratives, exacerbating public distrust towards official communications, particularly in contexts already characterized by low institutional credibility (Garrett, 2020). Therefore, understanding how Political PR can ethically leverage digital platforms to effectively manage public trust remains a critical area of inquiry.

There is a growing body of research on Political PR in health communication, yet much of it tends to emphasize general PR tactics rather than critically examining how these strategies perform across varied national settings (McCarthy et al., 2023; Scharnetzki et al., 2023). Only a limited number of studies delve into the comparative effectiveness of Political PR approaches in shaping public trust and engagement. Cultural, political, and technological differences between countries are often acknowledged, yet rarely analyzed in depth as variables that significantly affect strategy outcomes. As Siegrist points out, public trust is not a universal construct—it is shaped by context, history, and perceived credibility, which makes comparative analysis relevant and necessary (Siegrist , 2021). This research gap limits theoretical development and practical understanding of effective Political PR strategies within diverse digital environments.

Comparative analyses across national

contexts provide essential insights into how varying sociocultural, political, and technological environments influence the success of Political PR strategies (McCarthy et al., 2023; Scharnetzki et al., 2023). For instance, platforms like Instagram and YouTube may resonate differently across countries depending on local user preferences and technological access (Social & Meltwater, 2023). In countries with centralized digital governance, state-controlled platforms often achieve greater effectiveness, while decentralized contexts like Indonesia typically rely more heavily on interactive, community-based platforms. Despite these variations, comparative studies remain scarce, limiting our understanding of how Political PR effectiveness differs internationally (Siegrist, 2021). Addressing this gap can significantly enhance strategic communication practices tailored to diverse digital ecosystems.

Furthermore, most existing research predominantly addresses health communication strategies in isolation (Alif et al., 2023), without considering how political involvement shapes and influences communication effectiveness and public trust. Political contexts significantly impact public reactions and engagement, necessitating deep exploration into the mechanisms by which political actors influence health communication outcomes through

digital platforms. Furthermore, there is a lack of research focusing on the ethical issues and difficulties that arise when political figures share health information online (Hagelstein et al., 2021; Sebastião et al., 2017).

Moreover, gaining insight into the preferences and actions of digital audiences has become increasingly crucial. Digital citizens are not merely passive receivers of information; they actively choose, engage with, and even help create health messages. Consequently, Political PR must consider audience segmentation, the unique dynamics of each platform, and algorithmic visibility to effectively shape public perception. In situations where public trust is delicate, particularly due to past misinformation or the politicization of health issues (Yulianti & Boer, 2020). Political PR should utilize evidence-based messaging that is customized to meet the varied needs of different audiences.

Grasping the behaviors and preferences of digital audiences is essential for crafting and executing effective Political PR strategies. Digital citizens engage with content by selectively choosing platforms, participating in real-time interactions, and even co-creating health messages, which greatly impacts communication dynamics (Rubin, 2009; Yulianti & Boer, 2020). For instance, visual storytelling on platforms like Instagram typically sees higher engagement among

younger, urban populations, while YouTube's in-depth, expert-led content often draws viewers looking for thorough information (Social & Meltwater, 2023). Therefore, effective Political PR campaigns need to carefully tailor their messages and platform selections to match the specific traits and behaviors of their target audiences. Ignoring these subtleties can lead to ineffective communication and a loss of public trust.

In Indonesia, the way political communication is conducted in the realm of public health is significantly shaped by the country's decentralized governance, its cultural diversity, and the widespread use of mobile internet as the primary means of online access. According to We Are Social (Social & Meltwater, 2023), over 78% of the population are active social media users, with platforms like Instagram and YouTube, dominating digital content consumption. These platforms are often used not only for entertainment but also for primary sources of information. Conversely, Country X adopts a more centralized approach to managing public messaging, with strong state control and high penetration of broadband infrastructure. This leads to a different preference for platforms, particularly long-form content and official streaming channels. These differences underscore the need for context-sensitive Political PR strategies that

align with audience behavior, media habits, and technological access. Comparing both countries provides valuable insights into how political communication adapts to digital environments and informs public trust during health crises.

The comparative analysis between Indonesia and Country X is significant because these two contexts provide contrasting yet complementary insights. Indonesia's decentralized governance and culturally diverse landscape offer a unique setting to analyze Political PR strategies that leverage mobile-first internet use and visually engaging platforms like Instagram and YouTube (Social & Meltwater, 2023). In contrast, Country X's more centralized governance and advanced broadband infrastructure highlight a different model of political communication, relying heavily on institutional credibility and detailed expert-driven digital content. Analyzing these diverse approaches helps clarify how governance structures and technological infrastructures shape the effectiveness of digital health communication campaigns (Lestari et al., 2023). Therefore, the selection of these two distinct national contexts enriches the understanding of Political PR's strategic adaptability in different digital environments.

This study is grounded in two key theoretical frameworks: Framing Theory and Public Trust Theory. Framing Theory (Entman, 2018) explains how the presentation of information

can influence public perception by emphasizing certain aspects of an issue while omitting others. In the context of health communication, framing not only determines how risk is perceived, but also shapes emotional responses and behavioral compliance. Meanwhile, Public Trust Theory highlights the role of institutional credibility and message consistency in fostering societal cooperation during crises (Siegrist, 2021). Previous research has extensively explored digital health campaigns, but studies that specifically examine how political public relations influence framing and trust across platforms and cultures remain limited. Most literature either focuses on public health communication without the political lens or emphasizes Political PR without addressing digital health-specific challenges.

To address this research gap, the study undertakes a qualitative comparative analysis of Political PR strategies employed in digital health communication within Indonesia and Country X. These two countries offer contrasting yet insightful contexts—both politically and socially—as well as distinct patterns in digital media usage. This research is guided by three primary objectives: first, to assess the effectiveness of selected Political PR strategies in promoting digital health messages; second, to explore the factors that shape public trust and engagement in these campaigns; and third, to investigate the ethical challenges that political communicators face in navigating digital health narratives. Together, these objectives aim to deepen our understanding of how digital political communication can support more credible and inclusive health messaging.

This study draws its theoretical foundation from two key perspectives: Public Trust Theory and Framing Theory. Public Trust Theory underlines the importance of credibility, openness, and accountability in shaping how people interpret and respond to health communication (Siegrist, 2021). In public health contexts, trust becomes a deciding factor—citizens are more likely to follow recommendations when they perceive the source as reliable. For political actors involved in disseminating health messages, maintaining that trust is not just beneficial, but essential. On the other hand, Framing Theory offers insight into how the structure, tone, and delivery of a message can shape audience perception (Entman, 2018). The manner in which health information is presented—be it through words, images, or the focus of the narrative—can greatly affect the public's comprehension of the message and their subsequent actions.

Framing theory and public trust theory offer crucial perspectives for evaluating the impact of Political PR in digital health communication. Framing Theory demonstrates

that the way health information is conveyed—through specific choices in language, imagery, and narrative focus—can greatly influence public perceptions and actions (Entman, 2018). Public Trust Theory adds to this by highlighting that successful communication relies not only on the content itself but also on the perceived trustworthiness, openness, and reliability of the sources (Siegrist, 2021). By combining these theories, one can conduct a detailed analysis of why some digital campaigns effectively foster trust and compliance, while others face doubt or opposition. Therefore, using these frameworks aids in gaining a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between communication strategies, audience response, and trust dynamics.

To specifically address the identified gaps, this study embarks on a systematic qualitative comparative analysis of Political PR strategies in digital health communication between Indonesia and Country X. The research is designed to: (1) assess and compare the effectiveness of selected Political PR strategies in digital health campaigns; (2) critically explore the factors that shape public trust and engagement in these campaigns; and (3) investigate the ethical challenges political communicators face when deploying digital health narratives across different national contexts. These clearly defined objectives aim to bridge existing gaps by providing empirical insights into the influence of political involvement and strategic framing on public perceptions and behaviors in digital health settings (Entman, 2018; Siegrist, 2021). This method elucidates the strategic effects of Political PR and underscores the vital connection between ethical communication practices and successful public health messaging.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative approach employing a comparative case study framework to evaluate the success of Political PR tactics in digital health communication. A qualitative lens was considered appropriate for capturing the nuanced and context-specific nature of communication practices across two distinct political and cultural settings. As Yin noted, case study research enables a thorough exploration of contemporary events within their real-world environment (Yin, 2012). This approach allowed the study to examine not only the strategies used but also the way they were interpreted and received by different audiences.

This research focused on two significant digital health campaigns—one initiated by the Indonesian government and the other by Country X. The two countries were purposefully selected due to their contrasting digital infrastructures, political dynamics, and levels of public

engagement in health communication. Although both campaigns aimed to encourage public adherence to emergency health protocols, their communication approaches varied considerably. From the choice of platforms to the tone and framing of messages, each government tailored its strategy to fit its sociopolitical context and digital environment.

The research objects in this study consisted of digital communication outputs disseminated during two national health campaigns. These included official government press releases, social media posts (Instagram, Twitter/X, Facebook, and YouTube), video statements by political leaders and health officials, infographics, and mobile outreach such as SMS and WhatsApp messages. These materials were purposefully selected based on their visibility, public reach, and strategic use during the campaign period. Although the study did not involve direct interviews with informants, indirect insights were drawn from public opinion surveys and social media engagement analytics, which reflected audience response patterns. In this way, the "informants" of the study were represented through digital trace data—likes, shares, comments, view counts, and survey feedback.

A total of 48 communication materials from the Indonesian campaign and 41 from Country X were analyzed, selected purposively based

on their strategic relevance and visibility on public channels. The categorization into "high" and "medium" engagement levels was based on comparative metrics, such as like-to-view ratios, comment volumes, share counts, and the nature of audience responses. Materials with exceptionally high interactivity and consistent positive reception were classified as "high," while those with moderate engagement were categorized as "medium." This classification allowed the study to explore not only the content strategies but also the effectiveness of the digital attention and public trust mobilization.

Data for this study were gathered through digital content analysis of campaign materials published between January and March 2025. These materials were sourced from official government health ministry websites, verified social media accounts, archived press briefings, and leading online news portals. To assess how the public responded to these campaigns, the study also examined engagement metrics, such as likes, shares, comments, and view counts. These indicators provided a sense of how visible and interactive each strategy was in the digital space. Additionally, the analysis was enriched with secondary data—including public opinion surveys, policy documents, and previous research—which helped place the Political PR efforts in broader national contexts and allowed for a deeper comparison of how messages were

received and trusted across countries.

To guide the analysis, a thematic framework based on (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was used. The process involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Key themes explored included credibility of message source, consistency of messaging, emotional and informational appeals, ethical considerations, and levels of interactivity.

The comparative aspect of the study focused on identifying similarities and differences in Political PR strategies and outcomes between the two case contexts. Specific attention was given to the roles of key political figures, public perception of trustworthiness, use of digital media affordances, and the ethical handling of crisis information. For example, while Indonesia emphasized expert-led communication supported by influencers with medical backgrounds, Country X relied more on high-profile politicians and entertainment celebrities.

Participant observation and qualitative coding were triangulated to enhance the validity of the findings. Although the study did not include direct interviews, the availability of rich digital trace data and official communication reports enabled the researcher to infer communicative intent, strategy rationale, and public response

patterns with a high degree of confidence. These sources provided diverse perspectives and ensured contextual depth in interpreting the strategies applied. Data saturation was confirmed when no new thematic patterns emerged from subsequent materials, indicating analytical completeness.

Ethical integrity was a central consideration throughout the research process. All materials analyzed in this study were sourced from publicly available platforms and did not contain private or personally identifiable information. In handling digital content, the study ensured that the rights of both individuals and institutions were respected, and all sources were properly credited. Efforts were made to ensure transparency in the research process, particularly in safeguarding sensitive information. The study adhered to recognized ethical guidelines for digital research, emphasizing confidentiality, accountability, and the careful interpretation of data from public communications.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research demonstrated that Political PR strategies are crucial in enhancing the impact of digital health initiatives. In both Indonesia and Country X, a range of tactics was employed, such as active social media engagement, partnerships with influencers, direct communication through

Table 1 Political PR Strategies Used in Digital Health Campaigns

Political PR Strategy	Implementation Example	Effectiveness
Social Media Engagement	Daily updates, interactive Q&A sessions	High
Influencer Partnerships	Collaboration with medical professionals	Medium
Direct Messaging	SMS and WhatsApp government broadcasts	High
Online Press Conferences	Live briefings by health ministers	Medium
Community-Based Campaigns	Localized digital education via micro-influencers	High

Source: Research data, 2025

mobile platforms, online press conferences, and messaging focused on community needs. While these strategies aimed to achieve similar objectives, their implementation and outcomes differed, largely influenced by the distinct sociopolitical environments of each country. Elements like public trust in government, digital technology access, and cultural communication practices affected how messages were perceived and responded to. These insights highlight the importance of tailoring Political PR strategies to the local context to optimize public involvement and campaign effectiveness.

Table 1 shows that Political PR strategies that emphasize direct engagement and two-way communication—such as social media interaction and localized outreach—proved to be the most effective, especially in settings where public trust in institutional messaging was relatively moderate (Liu & Duarte, 2023). The study highlights that strategies emphasizing direct engagement and two-way communication—such as social media interaction and localized outreach—proved to be the most effective, especially in settings where public trust in institutional messaging was relatively moderate (Liu & Duarte, 2023). Through social media platforms, governments were able to deliver real-time updates, swiftly counter misinformation, and foster interactive spaces that encouraged dialogue with the public. Unlike traditional media, these digital channels enabled the creation of feedback loops that allowed communicators to gauge public sentiment and adapt messages accordingly. This dynamic exchange not only enhanced responsiveness but also helped strengthen the perceived authenticity and relevance of health communications. As a result, the public was more likely to engage with and trust the information being disseminated.

These findings align with Framing Theory (Entman, 2018), which posits that the way messages are constructed—especially through

interactive and participatory formats—can significantly influence how the public interprets risk, assigns responsibility, and responds to recommended actions. When audiences feel that they are part of the communication process, rather than passive recipients, they tend to internalize the messages more deeply and respond with greater behavioral commitment. Moreover, when communication strategies are anchored within community-specific contexts, the personalization of messages becomes more feasible. Research suggests that such tailored messaging increases the likelihood of compliance in public health initiatives. By resonating with local cultural values and everyday experiences, community-based framing helps strengthen message relevance and encourages more meaningful public engagement.

On the other hand, formal formats like online press conferences were less effective in attracting public attention. Their one-way nature limited interaction, making audiences feel like passive listeners rather than active participants. Though still important for agenda-setting and official positioning, these methods did not foster the same level of emotional connection or responsiveness. Interestingly, influencer partnerships were moderately effective, depending on the credibility of the influencer. Campaigns that engaged medical experts or professionals as influencers received more positive responses than those involving general celebrities. This supports the argument within Public Trust Theory (Siegrist, 2021) that message credibility is significantly influenced by the perceived expertise and integrity of the communicator.

As illustrated in Figure 1, this study identified notable differences in public engagement across digital platforms used in health communication campaigns. Data analysis revealed that YouTube and Instagram were the most effective in generating likes, shares, comments, and viewer retention, indicating a higher level of audience interaction. These platforms provided visual and dynamic content that appealed to broad demographics and encouraged sustained attention. In contrast, Twitter and Facebook had comparatively lower engagement levels, likely due to their text-heavy formats and algorithmic limitations in content visibility. Such disparities suggest that strategic platform selection in maximizing the impact of political PR campaigns is highly required.

These findings are consistent with the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Rubin, 2009), which emphasizes that audiences actively choose media platforms based on specific content preferences. Platforms with strong visual and interactive features tend to better meet audiences' informational and emotional
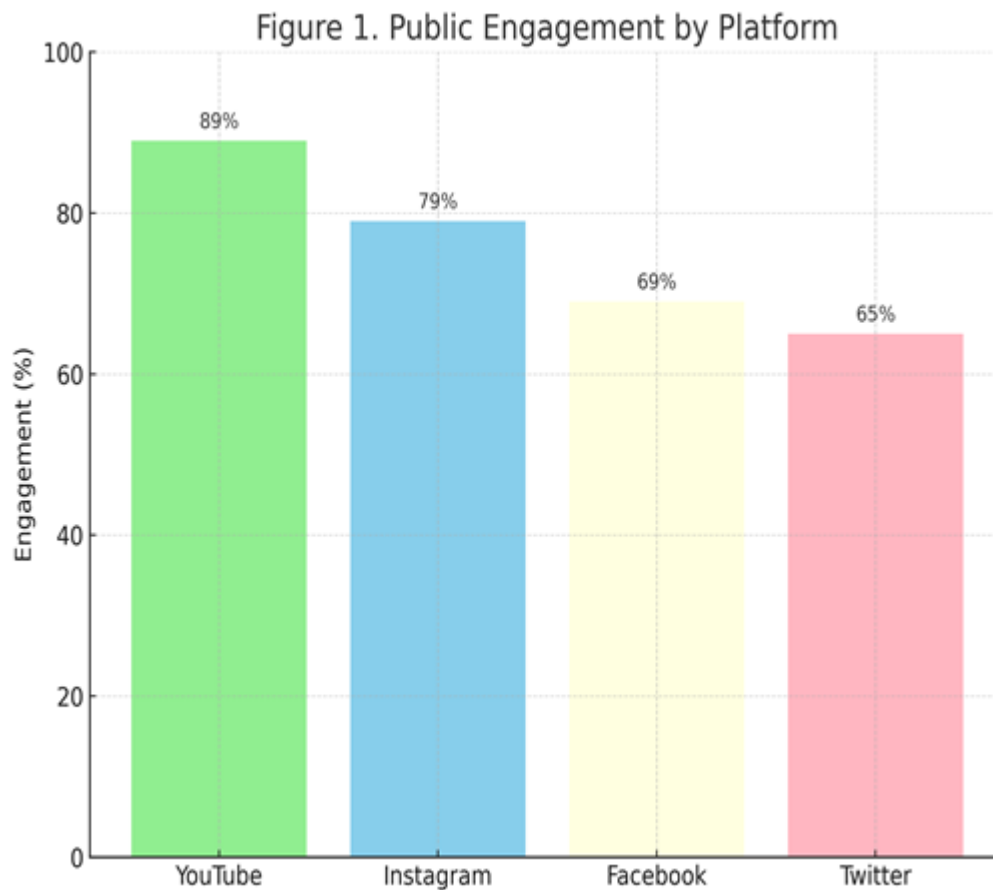
Source: Research data, 2025
Figure 1 Public Engagement By Platform

needs. Users are drawn to media that not only delivers information but also entertains, fosters connection, and allows for feedback. This explains the success of YouTube and Instagram in engaging users with public health content, as their features align with the diverse motivations of modern audiences. Consequently, these platforms serve as effective tools for political PR campaigns seeking to influence public behavior. For instance, YouTube enabled longer educational videos such as expert interviews and press briefings, which provided audiences with in-depth and credible information. These formats were effective in building trust and offering clarity on complex health issues. Instagram, on the other hand, utilized stories, reels, polls, and live sessions to deliver messages in an engaging and real-time format. The platform's visual appeal and immediacy helped capture attention quickly. Collectively, these features enhanced public perception of message authenticity and encouraged meaningful participation in the campaign.

In contrast, Twitter was limited by its character count and reliance on text, which constrained the delivery of comprehensive

health messages. While the platform was useful for quick updates, trending hashtags, and real-time alerts, it lacked the depth and interactivity required for nuanced communication. Its brevity often resulted in oversimplification of complex topics. Facebook showed moderate effectiveness, often relying on static posts and shared articles that were less engaging than video-based formats. Consequently, these limitations reduced the platforms' overall performance in sustaining public attention and influencing behavior.

Interestingly, message tone and presentation style also influenced engagement, with content that felt more personal or emotionally resonant gaining greater traction. Campaigns that used empathetic language and community-focused messaging consistently achieved high interaction levels across various platforms. These approaches made messages feel more relatable and reinforced a sense of collective responsibility. This supports insights from Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2012), which promotes the emotional impact of message framing during public health emergencies. Effective crisis communication relies not only on accuracy but also on empathy, trust-building, and audience sensitivity.

One notable dimension in Political PR during health crises is the use of emotional framing to enhance message impact. Campaigns that employed positive emotional appeals—such as hope, unity, and prosocial responsibility—tended to generate higher levels of engagement compared to those that relied on fear-based or punitive tones. For instance, Scharnetzki et al. (2023) demonstrated that messages promoting hope and collective action are more effective in reducing anxiety and encouraging vaccine uptake. This finding aligns with the ethical dimension of public relations, where practitioners are expected to balance persuasive goals with audience well-being (Bowen, 2019). Emotional framing, when used responsibly fosters a sense of shared purpose between political actors and the public. However, if misused—especially through exaggerated fear or blame—it can backfire and erode trust, as seen in various COVID-19 misinformation crises (Bridgman et al., 2020).

Cross-country analysis also revealed context-specific platform preferences that influenced campaign success. In Indonesia, Instagram proved more influential due to prevalent mobile usage patterns and a cultural affinity for visual storytelling, which aligns with the platform's interactive and image-driven features. These characteristics made Instagram a natural fit for engaging audiences in urban and semi-urban areas. In contrast, Country X leveraged YouTube more effectively. These findings underscore the importance of tailoring

digital health communication strategies to local media ecologies and user behaviors.

Cultural and religious nuances also played a critical role in shaping public responses to health communication, particularly in the Indonesian context. Campaigns that incorporated religious leaders or referenced local values demonstrated higher acceptance, especially in rural and conservative regions. For example, in several COVID-19 vaccination drives, messages delivered through religious authorities were more trusted and shared widely, echoing the findings of McCarthy on trust-building strategies in Ghana's health PR. In contrast, Country X adopted a more technocratic and secular approach, focusing on data-driven messaging by health ministries (McCarthy et al., 2023). While both strategies had merits, the Indonesian case highlighted the importance of cultural resonance in Political PR—a point reinforced by Alif et al. (2023), who documented how localized stunting campaigns gained traction through community-driven narratives. These results suggest that aligning health messages with local belief systems can powerfully reduce resistance and enhance message legitimacy.

Public trust played a key role in shaping the success of political public relations in digital health campaigns. According to survey results, health experts are regarded as the most reliable sources of information, with 45% of respondents trusting them. Government officials follow at 35%, while traditional media and social media influencers are trusted by 15% and 5% of people, respectively. These statistics highlight the importance people place on credibility in health communication. As outlined in public trust theory (Siegrist, 2021), trust is influenced by the public's perception of a source's honesty, expertise, and alignment with shared values. The strong trust in experts suggests that involving medical professionals in Political PR efforts can improve message acceptance and public engagement.

Figure 2 shows that the highest level of public trust is directed toward health experts (45%), followed by government officials (35%), traditional media (15%), and influencers (5%). This pattern clearly shows that individuals tend to trust sources that are authoritative and expert-driven, especially during health emergencies. The relatively low trust in influencers suggests that political PR campaigns must prioritize credible messengers over popularity alone. These findings highlight the importance of aligning Political PR strategies with public trust dynamics to ensure effective message delivery. In summary, Figure 2 reinforces the theoretical emphasis on credibility and expertise as key pillars in persuasive public health communication.
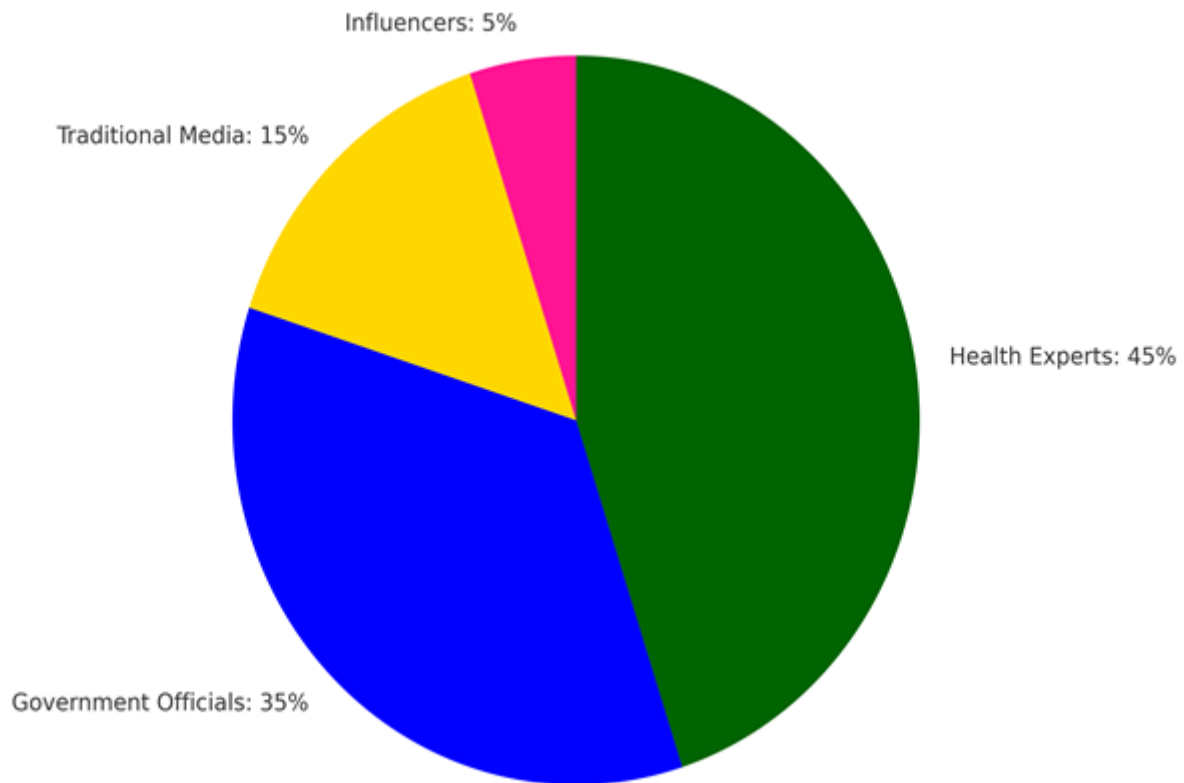
Source: Research data, 2025
Figure 2 Public Trust in Health Information Sources

Health experts, when framed as primary spokespersons, increase message legitimacy and audience compliance. The framing of messages also significantly influenced public interpretation and response. Campaigns that framed health directives through empathetic and community-oriented narratives gained more positive public engagement. In contrast, those who used fear-based or overly technical language often led to confusion or distrust. These patterns resonate with Framing Theory (Entman, 2018), which posits that how a message is structured affects how audiences define problems, assign responsibility, and evaluate solutions.

Moreover, when political actors collaborated with experts in framing messages, public reception improved. For example, Indonesia's campaign frequently positioned health experts as co-leads in digital communication. Conversely, Country X's reliance on political leaders and celebrity figures without expert endorsement resulted in weaker public confidence and lower adherence to health measures. Another critical issue identified was the spread of misinformation. In both countries, misinformation—particularly on social media—undermined public trust in official communication.

Political PR strategies that included

proactive misinformation debunking and real-time clarification significantly restored audience trust. This finding aligns with research on crisis communication, which recommends preemptive strategies to manage rumors and public fear (Coombs, 2020). The study also observed that transparency regarding health data, government actions, and policy changes was positively associated with public trust. Messages that clearly explained the rationale behind health restrictions or policy shifts received more favorable responses than those lacking detail or delivered in a top-down tone.

The success of Political PR in digital health communication is strongly contingent upon public trust and effective framing. Health experts must be at the forefront of campaigns, and message structure should favor clarity, empathy, and transparency. When these conditions are met, the public is more likely to perceive messages as legitimate, trustworthy, and worthy of compliance. These insights reaffirm the need for political actors to strategically collaborate with credible sources and construct messages that resonate with the public's values and concerns (Soo et al., 2023). The integration of trust-building and thoughtful framing enhances both the integrity and effectiveness of digital health campaigns.

The implementation of Political PR in digital health communication is not free from challenges. One of the main obstacles identified in this study is maintaining transparency while also addressing political agendas (Alaimo, 2019). Government actors often walk a tightrope between managing public perception and ensuring that information remains fact-based and scientifically sound. This tension may lead to selective framing of information or delayed disclosures, both of which risk diminishing public trust.

Ethical considerations become especially critical when political interests intersect with public health messaging. In both case studies, messages with strong political undertones tended to be met with skepticism by the public, particularly when inconsistent with expert recommendations. The use of social media influencers without medical credibility further complicated ethical communication (Bridgman et al., 2020)misinformation, and important attitudes and behaviours during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19. Campaigns that blurred the line between persuasion and manipulation were perceived as opportunistic, potentially harming long-term credibility.

Another challenge lies in addressing misinformation in politically polarized environments. Health misinformation spreads rapidly online, often fueled by partisan narratives or conspiracy theories. In responding to misinformation, Political PR must strike

a careful balance between being quick and being accurate. It's not enough to correct false claims promptly—those corrections also need to be trustworthy and delivered in a respectful tone. If communication feels rushed or lacks transparency, it can easily backfire. Instead of restoring clarity, it may end up creating more confusion and even eroding public trust in official sources.

The existence or lack of clear regulations plays a crucial role in maintaining ethical standards in Political PR. In countries where laws on digital communication and misinformation are not well-established, ensuring accountability becomes significantly more difficult. For example, Indonesia has implemented structured policies during public health emergencies, which has ensured consistent messaging. On the other hand, in Country X, unclear regulations have resulted in mixed messages and confusion. This contrast underscores the necessity of strong legal and institutional frameworks to support ethical and effective communication efforts.

Ethical challenges frequently arise when deciding whose perspectives should be prioritized in health campaigns. Prioritizing political leaders over health professionals can undermine the message and erode public trust in the campaign's authenticity. Meanwhile, audiences are becoming more focused on transparency, seeking clear information about the origins of messages, the sources of data, and the funding behind the campaign. Therefore, ethical public relations should focus on honesty, the public's welfare, and minimizing harm, rather than catering to political agendas or managing public image.

Professionals in public relations who operate within the political and health arenas frequently encounter challenging ethical issues, especially during public health crises. In situations where lives are at stake, it is crucial to prioritize values such as transparency, respect for personal autonomy, and inclusive communication. Campaigns that incorporate ethical principles from the beginning not only gain more credibility but are also better positioned to prevent public criticism. In the end, establishing and sustaining trust demands a long-term dedication to responsible communication that prioritizes the public's welfare over political objectives.

The findings of this research provide crucial insights for developing more effective Political PR strategies in the realm of digital health communication in the future. A key takeaway is the importance of transparency and the use of precise, evidence-based messaging to establish and maintain public trust. This involves engaging credible health professionals, delivering information in a clear and relatable

manner, and ensuring message consistency across all platforms and communicators. Campaigns that blend scientific accuracy with empathy are significantly more likely to connect with the public and foster meaningful engagement and compliance. (Siegrist, 2021).

Secondly, the focus should be on utilizing technology and data analytics to craft effective communication strategies. Future Political PR efforts can benefit from real-time monitoring of audience responses, sentiment analysis, and the use of targeted messaging. These tools can help tailor content to specific demographics and regions (Coombs, 2020). However, ethical considerations must guide the use of data to ensure user privacy and prevent manipulation through algorithmic bias.

Collaboration is another key implication drawn from the comparative analysis. Health communication is impactful when political actors, health experts, civil society organizations, and media platforms work in unison. Cross-sector collaboration ensures diverse perspectives and enhances the legitimacy of messaging. For instance, public-private partnerships could support wider dissemination of verified content and improve the reach of crisis communication efforts.

Furthermore, strategies should include capacity building for political spokespersons and communication staff. Training in crisis communication, digital media literacy, and ethical messaging can enhance campaign professionalism and prevent reputational risks. Governments and institutions should invest in communication infrastructure and personnel to ensure readiness for future health emergencies (Entman, 2018).

Beyond Indonesia and Country X, comparative insights from South Korea offer further perspective on the strategic use of Political PR in digital health communication. During the COVID-19 pandemic, South Korea's government employed a highly coordinated digital strategy that combined daily data dashboards, mobile alerts, and transparent updates from health officials. This approach was widely praised for its consistency and clarity, leading to high levels of public compliance and trust (Garrett, 2020). Unlike the influencer-driven campaigns in other countries, Korea's emphasis on institutional authority and real-time information delivery reflects a model of technocratic trust-building. However, this strategy worked partly due to existing cultural expectations around civic responsibility and high digital literacy. The contrast highlights that Political PR strategies are not universally transferable but must be tailored to the socio-political and technological realities of each country.

This study contributes to the theoretical

advancement of Political PR in the health sector by emphasizing the importance of trust, framing, and interactivity. Scholars and practitioners alike should continue exploring the dynamic relationship between digital media, public opinion, and political communication in health contexts. Future research may also examine long-term behavioral outcomes of digitally-mediated health campaigns.

The findings of this study offer valuable input for the development of training programs targeted at government public relations officers. Skills such as message framing, platform-specific engagement strategies, and audience segmentation should be integrated into official PR curricula, particularly during health emergencies. Moreover, the ability to collaborate with credible community actors—such as health professionals and religious leaders—can enhance message legitimacy and acceptance. These insights could be institutionalized through communication capacity-building programs at national and local levels. As governments increasingly rely on digital tools, equipping PR professionals with adaptive and ethical communication strategies becomes a crucial component of effective public governance.

This study also resonates with broad global health initiatives, particularly Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), which focuses on enhancing national capacities for risk communication and response to health emergencies. Political PR, when grounded in transparency, trust, and digital inclusion, effectively advances this agenda. In addition, the World Health Organization's (WHO) Digital Health Strategy highlights the urgency of improving digital health literacy, especially in helping the public discern credible information online. When aligned with these global frameworks, Political PR becomes more than just a communication tool. It serves as a strategic asset for building public resilience and long-term health preparedness.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Political PR could effectively foster public engagement and trust within digital health communication. By comparing health campaigns in Indonesia and Country X, the research highlights how strategies emphasizing transparency, credibility, and meaningful public interaction—particularly when health experts are involved—tend to resonate more with the public and encourage compliance. The analysis highlights that a one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective; the effectiveness of Political PR initiatives is influenced by the distinct political and cultural contexts of each nation, as well as the public's preference for certain digital

platforms. Moreover, the way health messages are presented can greatly impact how they are perceived and acted upon by various audiences. Upholding ethical standards, such as delivering accurate information, safeguarding against misinformation, and prioritizing public welfare over political agendas, is crucial for maintaining public trust. Based on these insights, future Political PR strategies should integrate evidence-based content and use digital technology ethically to enhance public health outcomes. Governments and communicators are urged to amplify the role of expert voices in response to changing digital behaviors and crisis situations.

The results of this comparative study highlight the vital need to align Political PR strategies with the specific behaviors and technological preferences of different audiences. Platforms that focus on visuals, like Instagram and YouTube, showed high levels of engagement and effectiveness, particularly among younger, mobile-first groups common in Indonesia. On the other hand, content that is expert-driven and detailed was more successful in areas with higher digital literacy and institutional trust, such as Country X. These variations indicate the necessity for strategic adaptability in digital communication campaigns, advocating for tailored approaches that acknowledge and effectively leverage local digital cultures and

infrastructures. Such targeted strategies play a significant role in maintaining long-term public trust and compliance.

The study emphasizes the importance of maintaining a strong ethical commitment in digital political communication, alongside strategic flexibility. Public relations approaches that emphasize transparency, consistency, and credibility—particularly during public health crises—are more likely to build trust and encourage compliance. When political figures work closely with healthcare experts and community leaders, the legitimacy of their messages is greatly enhanced. Additionally, incorporating ethical messaging into political public relations efforts helps reduce the risks of politicization and misinformation. Campaigns perceived as manipulative or self-serving can rapidly undermine public trust.

In the future, Political PR strategies should be crafted with a strong focus on data-driven assessments, cultural awareness, and effective institutional collaboration. This includes employing audience analytics to refine messaging. Cross-sector collaboration involving governments, health institutions, media platforms, and civil society will be essential to reinforce consistent messaging and counteract fragmentation. By institutionalizing these collaborative practices, Political PR can move beyond short-term crisis response

and contribute to resilient public health communication systems. This study reinforces that political communication must evolve in tandem with digital public behavior to remain effective, ethical, and inclusive.

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