



PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGY OF PT PLN (PERSERO) UP3 SIBOLGA IN BUILDING CORPORATE REPUTATION WITH STAKEHOLDERS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the public relations strategy of PT PLN (Persero) UP3 Sibolga in managing relationships with stakeholders and its implications for building the company's reputation. The study used a descriptive qualitative method through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The results show that the public relations strategy is implemented through integrated communication that combines community involvement, the use of digital media, and strategic partnerships with stakeholders. This strategy has been proven to contribute to building public trust, strengthening a positive image, and maintaining the company's reputation amidst the nature of public services that are sensitive to public complaints and perceptions. However, this study also found several obstacles, such as a high number of customer complaints, the spread of negative information on social media, limited human resources in public relations, and low public literacy regarding electricity services. The novelty of this study lies in the analysis of public relations strategies based on stakeholder management at the regional operational unit level, emphasizing the relationship between participatory communication, the local social context, and strengthening the company's reputation in the public service sector. Thus, this study confirms that adaptive, participatory, and consistent public relations plays a strategic role in building sustainable relationships with stakeholders.

Keywords: Public relations, stakeholders, corporate reputation, integrated communications, digital media.

1. INTRODUCTION

A company's reputation in the digital era is no longer shaped solely by an organization's internal performance, but also by its ability to manage the flow of information, respond to public perception, and build credible communication with stakeholders. In the context of public services, reputation becomes a strategic asset because it is directly related to the level of public trust in the organization's service quality, accountability, and social responsibility. The relevance of this issue is further strengthened as internet penetration in Indonesia continues to increase. The Central Statistics Agency (BPS) recorded that

72.78% of Indonesia's population had internet access in 2024, up from 69.21% in 2023. This means that public opinions, complaints, and assessments of organizations are increasingly formed and disseminated through the digital space. Therefore, public service organizations are required to exist not only as service providers but also as institutions capable of building communicative, open, and responsive relationships with their public (Husaini, 2025; Ghani et al., 2025).

In this context, PT PLN (Persero) occupies a highly strategic position because it directly relates to the community's basic needs and the sustainability of economic activity. Official PLN data shows that by the end of 2024, the number of PLN customers reached 92,877,292, a 4.17% increase compared to the previous year, with a national electrification ratio of 98.45%. This massive service scale demonstrates that PLN's reputation is determined not only by the technical aspects of electricity provision, but also by the quality of the company's communications in dealing with service disruptions, handling complaints, and managing stakeholder expectations. At the same time, PLN has also developed a digital service ecosystem, including a complaint channel through PLN Mobile and the PLN 123 Contact Center, indicating that stakeholder relationship management now occurs simultaneously in both offline and digital spaces. In such a situation, the public relations function becomes increasingly important, acting as a bridge between the company's service system and public perception of those services (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2021; Men & Bowen, 2017).

This urgency becomes even more evident at the regional operational level, particularly at PT PLN (Persero) UP3 Sibolga, which interacts directly with customers, local government, community leaders, local media, and surrounding communities in the Sibolga-Central Tapanuli region. At this level, public relations functions not only to convey institutional information but also to manage relationships, mitigate potential communication conflicts, and maintain the company's legitimacy amidst local social dynamics. The community's strong relational values, social closeness, and sensitivity to public service demand a public relations strategy that is not merely formal and administrative, but also communicative, participatory, and contextual. Therefore, in a service unit like UP3 Sibolga, the company's reputation is largely determined by stakeholders' direct experiences interacting with the organization, whether through technical services, social programs, public education, or communication during service crises. This aligns with the view that modern public relations works by establishing sustainable reciprocal relationships between an organization and its publics, rather than simply disseminating information in one direction (L'Etang & Pieczka, 2012; Al Givari, 2020).

Several previous studies have confirmed that a company's reputation is significantly influenced by the effectiveness of its communication and the quality of its relationships with stakeholders. Sari et al. (2020), for example, demonstrated that corporate social responsibility programs contributed to strengthening the reputation of PT PLN (Persero), particularly when the company faced negative sentiment post-crisis. On the other hand, Mahadewi and Darma (2024) emphasized that public communication through social media is crucial for building openness and closeness between institutions and the public in the digital era. Other studies also emphasize that two-way communication, responsive service, and stakeholder engagement play a significant role in shaping public trust and an institution's image (Manurung & Pohan, 2024; Johansen & Gregersen, 2024). However,

most of these studies still place reputation at the general institutional level or discuss social media and public service separately, thus failing to fully explain how public relations strategies are implemented in an integrated manner within operational units that directly deal with the complexity of local stakeholders.

Based on this review, there are clear research gaps. First, studies on PLN public relations still focus primarily on the corporate level, CSR activities, or general service quality, while stakeholder management at the regional operational unit level has not received much in-depth study. Second, previous research has not critically examined the relationship between participatory communication, digital media utilization, field constraints, and local socio-cultural contexts in shaping corporate reputation. Third, real-world challenges such as customer complaints, the spread of negative information, limited communication resources, and low public literacy are often cited as obstacles but have not been widely explained as part of the strategic public relations process that shapes organizational reputation. In this study, the perspective of Islamic communication ethics is positioned as a normative enrichment to emphasize the importance of honesty, responsibility, and good communication, while the primary theoretical foundation remains grounded in public relations and stakeholder management. Thus, this study does not confuse theoretical frameworks but instead positions Islamic ethics as a complementary perspective that enriches the reading of public relations communication practices.

Based on this, this study aims to analyze the public relations strategy of PT PLN (Persero) UP3 Sibolga in managing stakeholder relationships and its implications for shaping corporate reputation. This research is significant because it offers a more contextual reading of public relations practices in the public service sector, particularly at the regional operational unit level, which directly interacts with the public. Its novelty lies in its focus on stakeholder management-based public relations strategies at the UP3 level, highlighting the interrelationships between participatory communication, digital media, communication constraints, and the local social context in strengthening corporate reputation. Therefore, this study is expected to not only enrich public relations studies in public service organizations but also provide a practical contribution to the development of more adaptive, relational, and sustainable public relations communication strategies for state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Freeman, 1984; Wirtz & Lovelock, 2021).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a field research design to deeply understand the public relations strategy of PT PLN (Persero) UP3 Sibolga in managing stakeholder relationships and its implications for building the company's reputation. This approach was chosen because the research focus is not on quantitative measurements, but rather on exploring meaning, communication practices, relationship patterns, and organizational responses within a specific public service context. The research was conducted at PT PLN (Persero) Customer Service Implementation Unit (UP3) Sibolga from February to March 2026. This location was purposively selected because UP3 Sibolga is an operational unit that deals directly with the public, customers, local government, local media, and community leaders, making it relevant for examining

stakeholder management-based public relations strategies at the regional level. Epistemologically, qualitative research allows researchers to understand organizational phenomena from the perspective of participants and their social context more holistically (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

Research informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique with the following criteria: direct involvement in organizational communication activities, understanding of the company's interaction patterns with stakeholders, and being able to explain the dynamics of the company's reputation at the local level. Based on these criteria, the research informants comprised three main categories: public relations officials or persons in charge, staff involved in external communications, and external stakeholders representing the perspectives of service users or the public. The limited number of informants was not intended for statistical generalization, but rather to obtain the depth of data characteristic of qualitative research. Data sufficiency was determined based on the principle of saturation, which occurs when the information obtained shows recurring patterns and no longer presents truly new substantive themes (Sugiyono, 2022). Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, direct observation of communication practices and service interactions, and documentation in the form of archives, company publications, and digital media content related to public relations activities.

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al., 2014). In the condensation stage, data from interviews, observations, and documentation were selected, coded, and grouped into key themes, such as participatory communication, digital media utilization, complaint management, stakeholder relations, and corporate reputation challenges. In the data presentation stage, findings were organized into thematic narrative descriptions to clearly and analytically interpret the relationships between categories. Conclusions were then drawn gradually through repeated readings of the data and verified using source and technical triangulation to ensure consistency of information. To strengthen the credibility of the findings, researchers also reconfirmed important data obtained from informants to ensure that the interpretations remained consistent with field experience and reality (Arianto, 2024).

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The research results indicate that PT PLN (Persero) UP3 Sibolga's public relations strategy is implemented through an integrated communication pattern, combining face-to-face approaches, social activities, information services, and the use of digital media to build relationships with stakeholders. In the field, public relations not only serves as a conveyor of institutional information but also as a liaison between the company and the community, customers, local government, local media, and community leaders. Informants explained that relationships with stakeholders are built through a closer, more communicative, and contextual approach tailored to the needs of the local community. One informant stated, "Social activities such as free electricity assistance, education, and religious activities are our way of getting closer to the community and building trust directly" (Interview, 2026). This finding demonstrates that public relations at the

operational unit level operates not solely on a public relations function but also on a relational function that emphasizes social closeness with the public.

Field findings also indicate that community engagement is one of the most prominent strategies in PLN UP3 Sibolga's public relations practices. Activities such as electricity connection assistance programs for underprivileged communities, awareness campaigns on the dangers of electricity, distribution of takjil (breaking the fast), blood donations, and involvement in socio-religious activities serve as a means of building a more humanitarian corporate image. In this context, the Light Up the Dream program is viewed not only as a form of social assistance but also as a symbol of the company's concern for the community's basic needs. One informant emphasized, "This program is not just about electricity assistance, but also part of our efforts to build the image of a company that cares about the community" (Interview, 2026). Furthermore, direct interaction through social activities is considered effective in reducing the psychological distance between the company and the community. This is reflected in another informant's statement, "Direct interaction like this makes the public see PLN more closely, not just as an electricity provider" (Interview, 2026).

Beyond social engagement, the study found that the use of digital communication media is a crucial part of public relations strategies to maintain the flow of information and respond quickly to stakeholder needs. PT PLN (Persero) UP3 Sibolga utilizes social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, as well as app-based service channels like PLN Mobile, to disseminate information about outages, maintenance schedules, service education, and clarification on information circulating within the community. Informants stated that digital media significantly assists the company in reaching the public quickly, especially in situations that require immediate clarification. As one informant stated, "Social media is very helpful in conveying information quickly, especially during power outages" (Interview, 2026). These findings demonstrate that digital communication has become a crucial operational public relations tool, particularly in the context of time-sensitive public services, information clarity, and rapid organizational response.

Furthermore, this study also found that PLN UP3 Sibolga's public relations department faces several significant challenges in managing stakeholder relationships. The most frequently encountered challenges are the high number of public complaints related to power outages, delays in service restoration, and the proliferation of negative information on social media that can impact public perception of the company. In certain circumstances, public relations must work quickly to explain issues, defuse tensions, and maintain public trust. One informant stated, "The most frequent complaints are related to power outages, and these must be addressed quickly because they directly impact public trust" (Interview, 2026). Furthermore, limited human resources in the communications function and a low level of public understanding of the electricity service system are also obstacles. Thus, field findings indicate that public relations strategies do not take place in ideal situations, but rather amidst service pressures, high public expectations, and the rapid dynamics of digital communication.

Overall, the research findings demonstrate that a company's reputation at the local level is built not only through formal messages, but also through consistency between communications, actions, and the quality of the company's responses to stakeholder

needs. Informants emphasized that public trust is largely determined by the extent to which the information provided by the company aligns with the reality of the service provided to the public. In this regard, one informant stated, "The most important thing is the alignment between what is conveyed and conditions on the ground" (Interview, 2026). These findings indicate that the company's reputation at the Sibolga UP3 level is born from stakeholders' concrete experiences in interacting with the company, whether through technical services, digital communications, social activities, or complaint handling. In other words, the research findings indicate that public relations plays a crucial role in maintaining the connection between the company's institutional image and the actual experiences of the public as service recipients.

Community Engagement Strategy

The community engagement strategy implemented by PT PLN (Persero) UP3 Sibolga demonstrates that public relations can no longer be understood solely as an information provider, but rather as a relationship manager that builds the company's social legitimacy. Field findings show that electricity assistance programs, electrical hazard education, socio-religious activities, and direct interaction with residents are important instruments in bringing companies closer to the public. From a stakeholder theory perspective, organizations will gain stronger support when they are able to manage the interests and expectations of stakeholders in a balanced manner, rather than solely focusing on internal company interests (Freeman, 1984). Therefore, community engagement in the context of PLN UP3 Sibolga can be read as a relational strategy to create a sense of belonging, strengthen trust, and reduce the symbolic distance between the public service company and the community using its services. Thus, community engagement functions as a social mechanism that strengthens reputation through direct experience, not solely through institutional narratives.

These findings are also relevant to the view of public relations as relationship management, which emphasizes that public relations success is measured by its ability to build mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics (Cutlip et al., 2021; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2012). In this case, PLN UP3 Sibolga's public relations activities do not stop at creating public exposure but move towards establishing more participatory relationships. Programs like Light Up the Dream are not merely meaningful corporate social activities, but also symbolize the organization's presence in addressing the real needs of the community. From this perspective, community engagement is a form of humanistic communication because the community is not positioned as an object receiving messages, but as a social partner whose needs must be understood. This analysis shows that the effectiveness of community engagement lies in its ability to shift the public's perception of PLN from a technical electricity provider to an institution with a social, emotional, and communicative presence within the community.

Field findings indicate that the social and educational activities carried out by public relations have a strong reputational dimension. A company's reputation in the public service sector is shaped not only by the quality of its core services but also by public perceptions of the organization's concern, responsibility, and social sensitivity. Within the framework of corporate reputation and service communication, community engagement activities serve to strengthen trust because the public judges a company based on the consistency of its service, communication, and social contributions (Wirtz & Lovelock,

2021; Payne, 2006). This explains why activities like blood drives, distribution of takjil (breaking fast), or electrical safety education have an impact that goes beyond mere ceremonial functions. These activities create interactive experiences that allow the public to see the company in a more intimate and human way. Previous research also confirms that public engagement and social activities based on community needs contribute significantly to trust, satisfaction, and organizational reputation (Floyd et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2025).

In the local context of Sibolga–Central Tapanuli, community engagement strategies become more meaningful because they take place in a society that values social closeness, relational respect, and trust-based communication. Therefore, the community engagement carried out by PLN UP3 Sibolga's public relations department cannot be understood simply as the adoption of modern public relations programs, but also as a form of adaptation to the local social context. Herein lies the important contribution of this research finding: corporate reputation at the regional operational unit level is built through a combination of institutional communication strategies and sensitivity to the social environment in which the company operates. This finding expands public relations studies, which have previously focused on media, publications, or formal image, by demonstrating that reputation in the public service sector is crucially determined by the quality of concrete, contextual, and sustainable social engagement. Therefore, community engagement is not merely a complement to public relations strategy but is central to the process of building corporate reputation at the local level (Men & Bowen, 2017; Billings et al., 2020).

Public Relations Obstacles and Efforts in Managing Stakeholders

Field findings indicate that the main obstacle for public relations at PT PLN (Persero) UP3 Sibolga in managing stakeholders stems from the high number of public complaints, particularly those related to power outages and expectations regarding the speed of service restoration. From a stakeholder theory perspective, complaints cannot be viewed simply as technical reactions to services, but as expressions of the public's interests, expectations, and demands for legitimacy towards the organization (Freeman, 1984). In public service organizations, every service disruption has the potential to directly impact perceptions of the institution's credibility, making the public relations function crucial as a mediator between technical issues and social acceptance. Therefore, public relations efforts to respond quickly to complaints, explain the situation openly, and maintain calm communication are forms of relationship management oriented toward restoring trust. This analysis aligns with the view that the quality of service communication significantly determines satisfaction, perceptions of fairness, and the reputation of a service organization, especially when the organization is facing public dissatisfaction (Men & Bowen, 2017; Wirtz & Lovelock, 2021).

Another obstacle is the spread of negative information or hoaxes on social media, which can accelerate the formation of a negative image of the company. In the digital ecosystem, an organization's reputation becomes highly vulnerable because the public not only receives official information from the institution but is also exposed to alternative narratives that are often emotional, partial, and even misleading. This situation can be interpreted from the perspective of crisis communication and digital issue management,

namely that reputational threats in the digital era often arise from an imbalance between the speed of public information dissemination and the speed of organizational response (Payne, 2006; Rabb et al., 2023). In this context, public relations measures such as monitoring social media, providing clarification, and utilizing official digital channels are crucial strategies for managing public perception. However, the effectiveness of this strategy is determined not only by the presence of official media but also by the level of public trust in the institution's messages. This means that digital clarification will be effective if supported by a relatively consistent service track record and communication that is not defensive, but rather dialogic and responsive (Johansen & Gregersen, 2024).

In addition to external challenges, research findings also indicate internal constraints such as limited human resources in public relations and low public literacy regarding electricity services. From an organizational communications perspective, limited human resources not only mean a lack of personnel but also relate to the organization's adaptive capacity in analyzing situations, managing messages, and building sustainable relationships across stakeholders. When communication pressures increase while public relations capacity is limited, organizations risk becoming trapped in reactive and short-term communication patterns. Therefore, efforts to improve communication competencies, strengthen internal coordination, and utilize digital media more systematically are important strategic steps (Tahar et al., 2022; Men & Bowen, 2017). On the other hand, the public's low understanding of service procedures, technical glitches, and the use of service applications indicate that public relations communication functions not only as information but also as education. In this regard, public education is a form of long-term reputational investment, as the higher the public's literacy, the less likely misunderstandings that can develop into relational tensions (Ananda & Pohan, 2025).

The challenges and efforts of public relations in managing stakeholders at PT PLN (Persero) UP3 Sibolga demonstrate that the company's reputation is built through a continuous negotiation process between institutional messages, service experiences, and public social perceptions. This finding confirms that public relations success lies not in the ability to cover up problems, but in the ability to manage them communicatively, consistently, and credibly. The informant's statement that the most important thing is the alignment between what is conveyed and conditions on the ground demonstrates the relevance of the concept of corporate reputation, namely that reputation is born from the accumulation of public assessments of the consistency between an organization's identity, communication, and actions (Haerul et al., 2024; Wirtz & Lovelock, 2021). Thus, the main contribution of this finding to public relations studies is demonstrating that at the regional operational unit level, stakeholder management is highly determined by the public relations capacity to simultaneously bridge technical issues, digital pressures, organizational limitations, and the local social context. This means that public relations in the public service sector must be understood as a strategic function operating in a relational, not merely administrative, realm.

4. CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study shows that the public relations strategy of PT PLN (Persero) UP3 Sibolga in managing stakeholders is built through integrated communication that combines community involvement, digital media utilization, and

strategic partnerships, thus contributing significantly to building public trust, strengthening a positive image, and maintaining the company's reputation at the regional operational unit level. Theoretically, this study confirms that a company's reputation in the public service sector is not only determined by the quality of technical services, but also by the public relations ability to manage relationships, respond to complaints, and adapt communication strategies to the local social context. Practically, these findings demonstrate the importance of strengthening public relations capacity, optimizing digital communication channels, and expanding public education so that relations with stakeholders become more adaptive, participatory, and sustainable. However, this study has limitations because it was conducted in one operational unit with a limited number of informants, so the findings are contextual and cannot be generalized widely. Therefore, further research is recommended to involve more stakeholder categories, expand the study location to other PLN units or other state-owned enterprises in the public service sector, and compare the dynamics of public relations strategies in different social and regional contexts to obtain a more comprehensive understanding.

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