

Proceeding Paper

# Social Media-Based Public Relations Activities for the Resilience of Indonesian Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs) †

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the world to adapt to Internet-based technology. With the many obstacles that occur in the economic field, the affected people in Indonesia refuse to give up on the situation. Indonesian MSMEs have survived, and even grown, during the COVID-19 period. They carry out various public relations (PR) activities with their target consumers on social media. This research conducted an in-depth review of the various strategies and tactics of social media public relations activities used for the resilience of Indonesian MSMEs. This research uses the qualitative method, with data collected by interviews with well-established MSME owners. In the business landscape, the consequences of the pandemic may be particularly negative to micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) because they often have insufficient financial and human resources to tackle the issues presented by COVID-19. MSMEs could embrace mass cooperation through social media for knowledge development and innovation to acquire resiliency. The unique and various social media strategies are described, which can be a guide for any MSME that wants to engage more with their stakeholders on social media.

**Keywords:** public relations; social media; micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises; MSMEs



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## 1. Introduction

The world is experiencing a social media paradigm shift. Media and communications are shaped by the dominance of social media technologies—the digital platforms, services, and apps that combine content sharing, public communication, and interpersonal connection [1]. Social media platforms play an important role in mediating issues of public concern, public debates, and shaping their topics and dynamics [2]. Modern public relations strategies have evolved with improvements in social media technologies [3]. Public relations professionals are using Internet applications (such as websites, various social media, blogs, social networking services, etc.) to communicate with stakeholders [4–6].

Social media is defined as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technical foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” [7]. This is in contrast to online media, which is conceptualized as a variety of Internet communication systems and channels (e.g., the World Wide Web, e-mail, and instant messaging) [8]. The use of social media, how people perceive it, and whether it should be utilized for mass or private communication are just a few of the research issues that social media investigators have studied [9].

In the field of public relations study, digital public relations is regarded as a research paradigm [10]. Since 2006, social media has been introduced into the study of public relations [11]. Social media has been identified by public relations scholars as a medium for relationship management and dialogic communication [11]. They have looked at the ways that different businesses interact with the public using social media to establish and sustain relationships.

In the business landscape, COVID-19 consequences may be particularly negative to micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) because they often have insufficient financial and human resources to tackle the issues presented by the pandemic. MSMEs could embrace mass cooperation through social media for knowledge development and innovation to acquire resiliency [12]. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the world to adapt to Internet-based technology. With the many obstacles that occur in the economic field, the affected business owners in Indonesia refuse to give up on the situation. Indonesian MSMEs have survived, and even grown, during the COVID-19 period. They carry out various public relations (PR) activities with their target consumers on social media.

MSMEs are the foundation of numerous economies around the world, generating revenue and jobs for a sizable population of people everywhere. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact on society, the economy, and MSMEs; in addition, these occurrences not only result in financial losses, but also pose a serious threat to business continuity [13]. The most recent statistics from the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics show that MSMEs made up around 65.46 million units, or 99.99%, of all company operators in Indonesia in 2019, the first year of COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. This figure demonstrates that the MSME employed nearly 97% of the workforce nationwide and contributed more than 60% of Indonesia's GDP [14].

The literature on small business public relations is frequently overlooked. However, scientists have agreed that public relations are important not only for large corporations, but also for small businesses [15]. According to one study, small businesses prioritize relationship building over publicity seeking. Communication in small businesses, in particular, focuses on direct, face-to-face, and more informal communication, and is less reliant on indirect channels, such as the mass media. The study also found that when an organization has fewer than 20 employees, the CEO is usually in charge of public relations. When the organization's size exceeds 20 employees, this responsibility is delegated to individuals other than the CEO [16].

In both theoretical and empirical studies, the PR literature has been biased toward large organizations to the exclusion of small organizations. Several studies, however, have demonstrated that public relations activities are equally relevant and important for small businesses. Public relations practices in small businesses differ significantly from those in large corporations [17]. Small businesses cannot simply replicate large corporations' public relations strategies [18], yet the own style and uniqueness of these strategies have not yet been explored, especially in the digital realm. For more than ten years, public relations academics have researched how public relations is conducted on social media. They have specifically looked at how businesses, charities, and governments use social media to connect with their constituents and deal with crises (such as natural disasters and fake news on social media); furthermore, a few studies examined corporate social responsibility activities on social media.

One of the first definitions of social media in terms of public relations states that they are "any interactive communication channel that allows for two-way contact and feedback" [19]. Social media is an online medium in which users may contribute, share, and create information with ease. The three most widely used types of social media are blogs, social networks, and wikis. Several social media platforms, including WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, Line, Telegram, Facebook, YouTube, and others, are currently seeing rapid growth. It is easier for MSMEs to advertise various products and events in the form of activities thanks to a range of static and dynamic elements in social media promotion [20].

According to the Hootsuite (We are Social): Indonesian Digital Report 2022, the top three most popular social media channels were WhatsApp (88.7%), Instagram (84.8%), and Facebook (81.3%), followed by TikTok, Telegram, and Twitter. Mobile devices have replaced desktop computers for e-commerce; however, laptops are still important. Most Indonesians will own four to six devices, depending on their online consumption habits and payment preferences [21]. Because it has such a big impact on how quickly individuals can get information online, social media should be of considerable relevance to MSMEs as they

grow their businesses. MSMEs owners can utilize social media quickly and easily to market their products using telematics that do not take into account time or location limits, thus proving to be very effective. As a result, social media is a tool that businesses, especially MSMEs, may use to grow and optimize their companies. Utilizing social media can save expenses while facilitating marketing, buying, selling, and even public relations [22].

Social media may be used to communicate in all areas of business, including the selling of goods and services. This includes aiding in product and service promotion, corresponding with clients and suppliers, enhancing brands, and cutting expenses associated with online sales. Social media has a lot of potential to advance a business’s sales of goods and services, which is one of its benefits. Social media platforms continue to grow in Indonesia due to the high degree of interest in these services among Indonesians. This is the basis for the objectives of this research, reviewing in depth the various strategies and techniques of social media public relations activities used for the resilience of Indonesian MSMEs.

**2. Methodology**

Social media, more so than new or digital media, must be at the center of public relations efforts because social media can enhance organization-public partnerships by increasing and improving community relations [23]. The campaigns we have examined show that what makes them unique and keeps their audiences interested is talking with (rather than marketing to) a target audience in the context of forging relationships within the community. The communication and community building was well received by each audience, and some of these audiences even actively took part in these activities. Unlike practices used in big company, public relations practices in MSMEs can be natural and unintentional. These strategies somehow exist below the consciousness of the actors, so this research use the qualitative paradigm and methodology to determine the answers.

The research questions are:

- RQ1: Do MSMEs use traditional and digital PR activities on a daily basis?
- RQ2: What types of social media public relations tasks do the MSMEs perform?
- RQ3: What are the social media strategies and tactics they employ?

Online interviews were conducted with three MSME owners. The sample of participants consisted of two females and one male. They are the owners of well established MSMEs in Jakarta, Indonesia, that have been running their enterprises for more than five years; the products marketed are foods and beverages (two participants), and fashion outfits and apparel (one participant). Each of these participants represent the category of micro, small, and medium enterprises (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** The micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises classification and criteria.

No.	Size of Business	Criteria	
		Asset (IDR)	Income (IDR)
1	Micro business	Max 50 million	Max 300 million
2	Small business	>50 million–500 million	>300 million–2.5 billion
3	Medium business	>500 million–10 billion	>2.5 billion–50 billion

Sources: Ibrahim, et. al., 2022 [24].

Data were collected between September–October 2022, using semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was divided into four sections: (1) personal background, (2) company description, (3) functions, duties, and roles of public relations, and (4) social media-based PR strategies and tactics.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. RQ1: Do MSMEs Engage in Traditional and Digital PR Activities on a Daily Basis?

##### 3.1.1. Internal Public Relations

All participants in this study have carried out various public relations activities in their daily management of the MSMEs, both internally and externally. In managing relations with the internal public, it turns out that MSMEs take it seriously “... if it’s for harmony with the team, it means that actually, we routinely do team outings every year, it’s really full of everything” (Participant 1, 25 September 2022).

Not only do MSMEs participate in annual activities, they also routinely coordinate and communicate with all managers and people in charge, with activities such as personal exchanges, “... but if for example I usually ride every day, so today is HR day, tomorrow is finance, the next day is marketing. and sales, but this is just talking to the manager. So we can still chat every day to catch up” (Participant 2, 2 October 2022).

MSME owners have even thought about how to accommodate aspirations, complaints, and criticisms from their employees through various platforms, “... all kinds of things go through there” (Participant 3, 8 October 2022). In this interview, even the MSME owners greeted and referred to their employees as “friends,” which is very good for fostering good relations with their employees.

Participants also have a special program to build relationships with suppliers and producers, “Usually, when there are big holidays, we will definitely send hampers, parcels. So the communication is smooth. Usually there will also be regular meetings to discuss the production process, so while working we also maintain relations. So that later the relationship will be good when we may need footage later, need video, need content, we can shoot there to the supplier” (Participant 2, 2 October 2022).

##### 3.1.2. External Public Relations

There are many external PR activities carried out for consumers; this is done on various online and offline platforms. Besides communication, MSMEs also provide many rewards for consumers, “So automatically we have to either send a bonus, whether later, for example, we meet up. We don’t even meet up often, but the important thing is there. Of course, good relations are also carried out through good communication from our CS” (Participant 1, 25 September 2022).

Offline activities are also carried out by MSMEs to foster good relationships with their consumers, such as by holding meet ups. “Meet ups are usually when we have an opening store, there is a run show, the customer is invited, if there is an event, the customer is invited, that’s usually how it is. If you are fasting, in the store there is *takjil* for breaking the fast, yes there are small gimmicks, small gestures that can make the relationship better with customers” (Participant 3, 8 October 2022).

Two of the three participants did not do anything special to manage mass media. There is one medium MSME that conducts relationship building with the media, “So far the media has used an agency, so we don’t really have a direct relationship with the media. Maybe there are a few but not many, because we use an agency, we automatically cooperate and maintain good relations, relations through the agency” (Participant 3, 8 October 2022).

##### 3.1.3. PR Functions, Duties, and Roles That Have Not Been Carried out

Of all the MSMEs that participated in this study, none of them specifically and routinely fostered relations with the government. There is only one MSME owner who stated that he occasionally builds a relationship with the government “Until now, there is no maintenance relation whatsoever, because it is usually one-off, so it’s just one time. Like for example yesterday we just certified TKDN, the value of the domestic component of a product. That’s because it’s just one off, so we don’t have any form to maintain the relationship” (Participant 3, 8 October 2022).

Public opinion has not become the main factor considered by the participants “Currently it is not the main factor, nor is it not the main factor either, it’s just that there may not

be a scheme to measure it. So apart from that, it is not the main factor because public opinion has not been measured so far, because what is measured is sales again. Because we feel like public opinion will connect with sales, so we only measure sales. So opinions are not measured, not recorded. Until now it has been like that" (Participant 1, 25 September 2022).

Of all the functions, duties, and roles of PR, none of the participants evaluated the PR activities that have been carried out. That is, whether or not the existence of the event or the activities mentioned above motivate the customers to buy again has not been measured up until now. "So it's really based on what's happening in the field, oh the feedback is good, but even then there is no measurement at this time" (Participant 2, 2 October 2022).

### 3.2. RQ2: What Types of Social Media Tasks for Public Relations Do the MSMEs Perform?

#### 3.2.1. Customer Engagement

MSMEs maximize social media for PR programs aimed at consumers, or for PR marketing. In addition to consumers, they also build relationships with vendors, but with different social media platforms from those used for consumers " . . . if the customer must go through social media, if the social media vendor is more personal like wa, you don't have to meet directly. There is Instagram, Twitter, for those who are messaging, there are wa and email" (Participant 1, 25 September 2022).

#### 3.2.2. Publications

A specific social media PR program created to build relationships with stakeholders involves publishing. "Perhaps publication is the most noticeable, because every time we make a project, the publication must be on social media, right" (Participant 2, 2 October 2022). Publications are carried out for various purposes, namely to deliver the latest information about the product, to clarify, to provide useful information, etc.

The social media platform most used by all MSMEs to carry out PR activities is Instagram; for chat applications, it is WhatsApp, " . . . there is Instagram, Twitter, for messaging there is WhatsApp and email" (Participant 3, 8 October 2022). The marketplaces they use are Shopee and Tokopedia. Some still use email to communicate with specific stakeholders, such as suppliers, vendors, and producers.

#### 3.2.3. Research

Social media is also used to conduct research online " . . . usually via Instagram, so we do research. So it's like spreading a survey on Instagram, but it's actually not formal, so it's really relaxed. But the activity has not been made regular" (Participant 1, September 25, 2022). The research activities carried out have not been planned; they are only used to increase engagement with followers on social media.

### 3.3. RQ3: What Are the Social Media Strategies and Tactics They Engage in?

#### 3.3.1. Person in Charge

MSMEs have different tactics in managing social media. Everyone agreed that there should be a specific person in charge of day-to-day implementation; for example, "Everything is managed halfway, so usually there is an agency that will handle it as well. There is a portion of each, if for example wa someone replies wa, there is a social media admin that uploads, but only uploads it; but CS will also be able to log in to Instagram to respond to inquiries from customers" (Participant 3, 8 October 2022).

The management of the marketplace is also carried out by a different PIC " . . . if for Tokped itself there is a separate person who for the content strategy, every day what to post, how, for TikTok itself until now we are still looking for someone to handle it, but indeed we vlog there must be 1 person. Because social media is different, so it can't be handled by the same person" (Participant 2, 2 October 2022).

### 3.3.2. Content Quality

MSMEs have realized that the quality of the content uploaded on social media is very important. They plan seriously and in detail and about the content created for consumers. Research is the basis for creating social media content: "... usually when our consumers make the analysis, it must be relatable, because sometimes we make content that is idealistic, we just want what is good for us. But we don't analyze what Instagram actually wants, as I said, we pay around 800,000–1,000,000 rupiah so we can know what kind of content we post. If we post, we can assume the customer likes it, maybe it's relatable to the customer" (Participant 2, 2 October 2022). The costs incurred by MSMEs to produce social media content are not too much. It can still be reached by micro and small entrepreneurs "... for social media analysis, approximately one to two million rupiah per month" (Participant 3, 8 October 2022).

### 3.3.3. Proximity

MSMEs greet and relate well to their consumers on social media. They think that consumers are their friends or family, who should be greeted regularly and invited to interact "... just like when our team was outing to Bandung, there was a customer who meant they didn't go out, we made a vlog, we said goodbye on Instagram like 'Wait a minute, we want to go out first', that's what they do. So the context is no longer in terms of transactions, they even want to talk about what is inside, such as talking about the outing earlier" (Participant 3, 8 October 2022).

### 3.3.4. Value

MSMEs show the value of the company through their content on social media. The value chosen, obviously, is one that is popular with the community and has a positive impact, for example, "... now we still want to focus on zero polyester. Because it's not a short-term plan, it's a big plan and it takes a long time for sure" (Participant 3, 8 October 2022).

### 3.3.5. Influencers

Participants from small and medium-sized enterprises said that they collaborated with influencers on social media "... so in the future, we still want to focus on that, while we're still playing around. The point of the game is who else, what are we going to make viral about. Because maybe yesterday we made a breakthrough and could also collaborate with a famous musician in Indonesia, Isyana Sarasvati, it was quite a breakthrough at that time. So after this, we must be playing around, what else are we going to do?" (Participant 3, 8 October 2022).

### 3.3.6. Monitoring

Monitoring is carried out routinely and seriously. MSMEs realize that monitoring is very important for the success of their PR program on social media. "Every month there is usually monitoring, especially PR, for example, what percentage of the PR is this month, next month how much will it go up or down. Continue to lose followers or do we gain followers, we usually control it every month" (Participant 1, 25 September 2022).

Details of monitoring can be obtained from the features on the social media used, such as the Instagram business account "... what kind of content is really skinned, what time, what form, and if the topic is what topic. So actually for social media, the content that we will produce again, which already knows that the content is good and can contribute to good PR, must be for the next project" (Participant 2, 2 October 2022).

## 4. Discussion & Conclusions

### 4.1. Discussion

From the results obtained from the interview data, it was found that MSMEs that survived for more than five years carried out various functions, duties, and roles regarding public relations. It is quite surprising to note that the PR program that has been carried out has included both internal and external stakeholders. They subconsciously do things that PR in big companies do. For medium companies, it turns out that they have been able to pay an agency to manage their relations with the mass media. From the results of the interview, it was also found that all PR programs in MSMEs have not yet been formulated and planned in one integrated division or section. There is no specific person in charge of all PR activities; everything is still under the control of the owners of the MSMEs.

Another interesting thing is that public opinion has not yet become an important matter to be managed by a special PR program. The government has not been made a priority, and a special program has not been created aimed at fostering good relations. This issue still requires deeper exploration regarding the details behind the reasons why MSMEs do not pay more attention to the government.

The results of PR activities carried out by MSMEs are quite good, as evidenced by the resilient and long-term relationship that MSMEs have with their stakeholders. The weakness of the entire PR program that they have implemented is that there has been no serious evaluation of any of the PR programs. This is related to the planning that has not yet been integrated.

Social media-based PR activities are very important for MSMEs. The strategies and tactics they use are not much different from those carried out by big companies. They participate in customer engagement, publications, and research by utilizing social media. These three things are fundamental in conducting PR activities. The tactics used are also very interesting, namely by employing special PICs for each social media platform, prioritizing content quality, creating proximity with followers, showing the noble values of the company, collaborating with influencers, and regular monitoring.

The highlight of the findings of this study is that MSMEs who are participants are in social media are willing to sacrifice their resources, time, human resources, and of course, their funds to make their PR program a success on social media. It was found that the costs incurred were very affordable for MSMEs, namely 800,000–2,000,000 rupiah/month.

### 4.2. Conclusions

From this study, we can conclude that MSMEs that carry out PR activities in a planned or unplanned manner can achieve good resilience in running their businesses. The three MSMEs participating in this study are MSMEs that have been established for more than 5 years, survived the COVID-19 pandemic, and have a vision to continue to develop their businesses by providing value in their products. Public relations is responsible for creating, managing, and maintaining the image and reputation of the company, even if it seems like a waste for a small business that is very focused on sales and profits. The results of this study indicate that it is not in vain for MSMEs carry out PR activities, and social media is the most suitable platform to use, because it offers low cost, but high impact. Maybe the impact is not instant, but it can be one of the factors that can produce resilience for the business. However, further research is still needed to prove the generalization of the conclusion of this study and to compare its effectiveness to another factors regarding business resilience.

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