

Digital Communication of Local Governments in Building Public Trust in Sidenreng Rappang Regency

Nurhayati^{1*}, Abdul Jabbar², Herman Dema³, Herman Lawelai⁴

^{1,2,3}Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang, Angkatan 45 St, No. 1A, Sidenreng Rappang Regency

⁴Universitas Muhammadiyah Buton, Betoambari St, No.36 Baubau Regency

*Corresponding Author: nurhayati@gmail.com

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Abstract: This research aims to analyze the role of digital communication in building public trust in local governments, with a focus on the Sidenreng Rappang Regency Government. In the context of digital governance, social media serves as a strategic instrument to bridge communication between government and society; however, its effectiveness in fostering public trust remains a challenge. This study employs a qualitative case study approach, utilizing in-depth interviews, observations of official government social media, and document analysis. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The findings reveal that digital communication practices are still dominated by informative approaches that emphasize information dissemination rather than interactive engagement. While this approach contributes to transparency and the formation of cognitive-based trust, it has not been effective in fostering relational trust characterized by responsiveness, integrity, and empathy. A gap also exists between government communication strategies and public expectations, particularly in terms of interaction and participation. Practically, these findings suggest that local governments and public communication managers need to shift from one-way informational communication toward more dialogical and engagement-based strategies. This includes strengthening responsiveness to public feedback, developing interactive content, and adopting more empathetic communication styles. Such improvements are essential to enhance sustainable public trust and ensure the effectiveness of digital governance practices.

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of digital technology has fundamentally reconfigured the communication pattern between the government and the community, from a hierarchical and one-way communication model to a more open, interactive, and participatory communication system (Robles Pedro, 2023). In this landscape, digital communication no longer functions simply as a medium for conveying information, but as a social space that allows interaction, the exchange of meanings, and the formation of public perception dynamically (Matheus & Janssen, 2022; Sutanto et al., 2026). These changes place public *trust* as a key variable in determining the legitimacy and effectiveness of governance, especially in the context of digital-based governance (Men & Tsai, 2021).

Public trust is conceptually understood as a multidimensional construct that reflects public perception of the government's competence, integrity, and goodwill in carrying out public service functions (Sastrawan & Rahmawati, 2025). From a communication perspective, trust is not formed instantly through the delivery of information, but through a process of continuous interaction between the government and the community (Kurniawan & Wijoyo, 2025). Thus, the quality of public communication confirms its role as a key determinant in building and maintaining public trust in government institutions (Kumalasari & Musa, 2024). Informative communication alone is not enough to build sustainable trust without responsive and relational interaction (Prasodjo, 2025).

In the Indonesian context, this dynamic is strengthened by the implementation of the Electronic-Based Government System (SPBE) which encourages the integration of digital technology in government administration (Latif & Roespinoedji, 2021; Pratama et al., 2025). SPBE

is not only oriented towards bureaucratic efficiency, but also on increasing transparency, accountability, and public participation. However, digital communication practices within the framework of SPBE confirm the insynchronization between technology adoption and communication paradigm transformation (Nugroho & Zuiderwijk, 2022). Government digitalization tends to develop in the technological aspect, while the dimension of dialogical and participatory communication has not been fully implemented optimally (Mergel et al., 2019).

In the framework of digital-based governance (*digital governance*), social media such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, X (Twitter), and YouTube are strategic instruments in bridging communication between the government and society (Bonsón et al., 2017). These digital platforms allow the government to reach the public at large while opening up a space for two-way interaction through comments, messages, and public participation features (Criado et al., 2018). However, empirical practice shows that the use of social media by the government still emphasizes the tendency to reduce its function as a channel for information dissemination (Lovari & Valentini, 2020). This indicates that the potential of social media as a space for public dialogue has not been optimally utilized in building participatory communication (Kent & Taylor, 2021; Vasilenko et al., 2020).

This tendency also reflects the limitations in the existing literature. Most government digital communication studies are still dominated by quantitative approaches that focus on measuring relationships between variables, such as engagement levels or frequency of interactions. This approach has not been able to explain in depth the interactional process and construction of meaning in digital communication, especially in understanding how people interpret government messages and shape public trust. This condition underscores the urgency of using an interpretive approach to understand digital communication as a complex social process.

Another limitation in the literature is seen in the dominance of studies focusing on national contexts and urban areas. In fact, the dynamics of digital communication at the local government level, especially in non-urban areas, have different characteristics. Socio-cultural factors, digital literacy levels, and patterns of interaction of local communities present a more complex and contextual communication configuration (Verbytska et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2017). Therefore, studies that focus on local contexts are important to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the government's digital communication practices in building public trust (Taiwo, 2025; Verbytska et al., 2024).

Sidenreng Rappang Regency is one of the regions that has adopted social media as a means of public communication through the official account of the local government. The use of platforms such as Instagram and Facebook reflects the efforts of local governments to increase transparency and information disclosure. However, the ongoing communication practices still affirm the dominance of one-way communication, where content is more oriented to the publication of government activities than to the development of public dialogue. The low level of community involvement, which is characterized by a lack of comments and interactions, shows that digital communication has not been able to encourage active community participation.

This condition shows that there is a gap between the ideals of participatory digital communication and empirical practices that are still informative and top-down. Although normatively the government has a strong regulatory foundation in encouraging information disclosure and public participation through electronic-based government policies, its implementation has not fully reflected dialogical communication. This confirms that digital communication cannot be understood solely as a technical process, but as a social practice that plays a role in shaping government legitimacy and public trust.

This situation raises fundamental questions about the extent to which local government digital communication is able to play a role in building public trust in the context of digital-based government. Answering this, this study integrates the perspective of Two-Way Symmetrical Communication and Public Trust theory in the analysis of digital communication of local governments. This approach places digital communication not only as a means of conveying information, but as an interactional process that shapes meaning, social relations, and institutional legitimacy. In order to avoid theoretical integration that is declarative, the two theories are operationally explicitly as an analytical framework. The Two-Way Symmetrical Communication

Theory is used to assess the extent to which digital communication practices reflect dialogical principles through indicators of interaction, responsiveness, feedback management, and public participation, so as to identify whether communication is still one-way or has evolved towards symmetrical communication.

Meanwhile, the Public Trust theory is operationalized through three main dimensions of trust, namely ability, integrity, and benevolence, which are used as an analysis category to evaluate the contribution of digital communication to the formation of public trust, both cognitive and relational. By integrating these two perspectives, this study builds an analytical framework that connects communication patterns with the process of forming public trust in a more systematic manner. Based on this framework, the research aims to analyze local governments' digital communication practices, evaluate communication strategies through social media, and understand public perception of government communication. Thus, this research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of digital government communication studies as well as a practical contribution in formulating a more effective, participatory, and oriented communication strategy to strengthen public trust.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to analyze in depth the digital communication practices of local governments in building public trust (Sugiyono, 2017). The qualitative approach was chosen because it is able to explain social phenomena that are complex, contextual, and meaning-based, especially in understanding the interaction between government and society in the digital space (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The case study design was used because this research focuses on contemporary phenomena that occur in real-life contexts, where the boundaries between phenomenon and context cannot be explicitly separated (Yin, 2018). Thus, this approach allows researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of digital communication that takes place in local government practices.

The location of this research is Sidenreng Rappang Regency, South Sulawesi Province, which was chosen purposively based on the consideration that the local government actively uses social media as a means of public communication. Local government digital communication activities through platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Tiktok are the main objects in this study. The selection of this location is based on empirical relevance in examining the relationship between digital communication and the formation of public trust in the context of local government. The research is carried out in a certain period of time which includes the process of data collection, observation, and analysis in a gradual and continuous manner.

The data sources in this study consist of primary data and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews with key informants who had direct involvement in local government digital communication practices (Vlad et al., 2023). The informants include officials of the Communication and Information Service, government social media managers, and people who actively follow and interact with the official accounts of local governments. Secondary data were obtained from various supporting documents, such as archives of social media uploads, reports on public communication activities, as well as policy documents and literature relevant to the research topic. The use of these two types of data aims to strengthen the validity of findings through triangulation of data sources.

The determination of informants in this study was carried out using the purposive sampling technique, which is the selection of informants based on certain criteria that are relevant to the purpose of the research. These criteria include the level of involvement in the management of government digital communication as well as experience in interacting with local government social media. In addition, the snowball sampling technique is also used to identify additional informants based on recommendations from the initial informants, thus allowing researchers to obtain broader and in-depth data. This approach aims to ensure that the data obtained truly reflects the social realities being studied.

Data collection techniques are carried out through interviews, observations, and documentation. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to explore information related to practices, strategies, and perceptions of local government digital communication. Observations were made on government communication activities on social media, including the type of content presented, the interaction patterns that occurred, and the level of responsiveness to the community. Documentation is used to complement and verify data through digital archive analysis, such as uploads, comments, and other forms of interaction. These three techniques are used in an integrated manner to produce comprehensive and in-depth data.

Data analysis was carried out using the Miles and Huberman model which includes three main stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. The analysis process is carried out continuously from the initial stage of data collection to the interpretation of research results. To ensure the validity of the data, this study uses source and method triangulation techniques, as well as member checking to ensure the suitability between the data and the researcher's interpretation. In addition, researchers also maintain the consistency of the research process through systematic recording (audit trail) so that research results can be scientifically accounted for.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Digital Communication of Local Governments in Building Public Trust

The digital communication practice of the Sidenreng Rappang Regency Government shows a shift towards digital-based communication governance, but it is still dominated by informational orientation. The use of social media has enabled the government to convey information in a broad, fast, and structured manner to the public, which on the one hand strengthens transparency and institutional legitimacy (Ernungtyas & Boer, 2023). However, these findings also indicate limitations in the relational function of digital communication, where the interactions formed have not developed into meaningful dialogue. Thus, digital communication in this context does not fully function as a public deliberative space, but still operates as an instrument of information distribution (Nurfitriani, 2024). This condition shows that there is a tension between the normative potential of social media as a participatory space and empirical practices that are still top-down (Haryanti & Rusfian, 2018).

The dominance of the informative dimension is strengthened by NVivo's findings which show high indicators of communication approach (15%), information delivery (11.82%), and legitimacy (10.83%). These findings not only confirm previous studies that emphasized the importance of transparency in increasing legitimacy (Matheus & Janssen, 2022), but also show that government digital communication tends to stop at a cognitive level. In this context, communication functions as a mechanism for conveying information that shapes people's initial perceptions, but has not been able to encourage the formation of deeper trust. This shows that the success of digital communication at the informational level does not automatically transform into sustainable public trust.

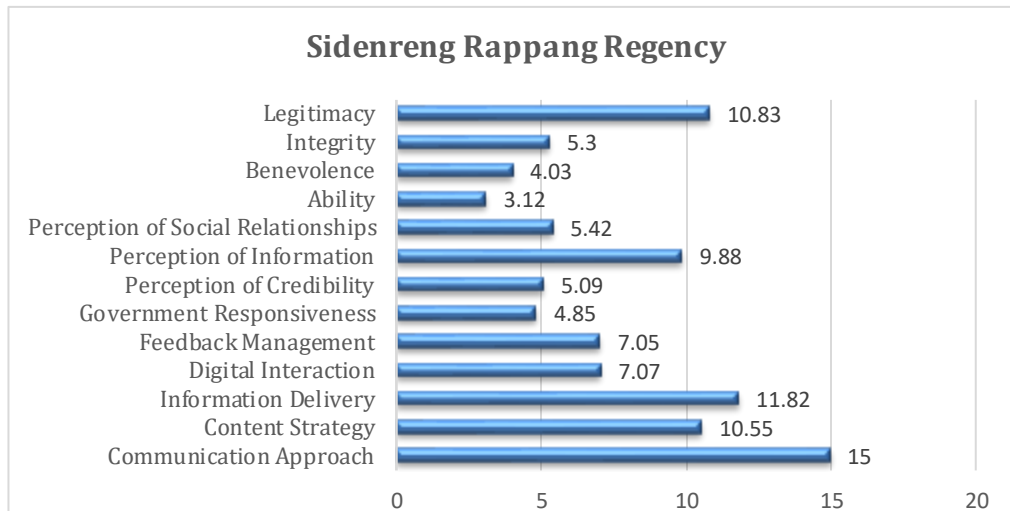


Image. 1 Results of Thematic Coding of Digital Communication of Local Government

Source. Crosstab Query Nvivo 12 Analyst

On the other hand, the low indicators of integrity (5.3%), government responsiveness (4.85%), and benevolence (4.03%) reveal structural weaknesses in the relational dimension of communication. Within the framework of Public Trust Theory (Mayer et al., 1995), these three dimensions are the main foundations in building sustainable trust. These findings expand on studies that show that it is not only the quality of interaction that is at issue, but also the absence of communication that is able to represent empathy and institutional concern. In other words, government digital communication has not been fully able to construct social meanings that strengthen the emotional relationship between government and society (Lee & Kim, 2021). Furthermore, these findings confirm the limitations of the transparency approach when used as the only strategy in building public trust. Transparency that is not accompanied by responsiveness tends to only result in trust that is superficial and susceptible to erosion (Alessandro et al., 2021). In the context of this study, this condition is reflected in the strong dimension of information delivery that is not balanced with adequate quality of interaction. This shows that one-way digital communication not only limits public participation, but also has the potential to widen the social distance between the government and the public. Thus, transparency needs to be understood as a prerequisite, not the final goal in building public trust (Song & Lee, 2021).



Image. 2 Word Cloud Visualization of Local Government Digital Communication

Source. Data analysis results using NVivo 12

Word cloud analysis showing the dominance of the words "information" and "government" as well as the emergence of "interaction" and "comments" indicates a dissonance between communication practices and public expectations. These findings are in line with the

phenomenon of asymmetric digital communication, where the government actively conveys information, but is passive in responding to the public (Criado & Villodre, 2022). This condition shows that society no longer positions itself as passive recipients of information, but as actors who expect involvement in the communication process. Thus, failure to respond to these expectations has the potential to hinder the formation of public trust (Bertot et al., 2020).

In the perspective of Grunig & Hunt's (1984) Two-Way Symmetrical Communication, these findings place government digital communication in a transitional phase that has not yet reached ideal dialogical communication. In contrast to previous studies that tend to place digital communication as a linear evolution towards interactivity, this study shows that the transformation is not automatic and is influenced by structural factors and organizational culture. Thus, the contribution of this research lies in the affirmation that the development of public trust in the context of digital governance does not only depend on the adoption of technology, but also on the transformation of the communication paradigm towards a more dialogical, empathetic, and responsive model. This transformation is the main prerequisite for building sustainable public trust.

Local Government Digital Communication Strategy through Social Media

The digital communication strategy of the Sidenreng Rappang Regency Government shows that there is a relatively systematic planning in the management of social media, but it is still dominated by an informative approach. The use of social media is more directed at delivering information related to government activities, development programs, and public services in a structured manner (Sagar, 2025; Thi Uyen Nguyen et al., 2024). This pattern reflects a communication orientation that places social media as an instrument of information dissemination, not as a dialogical space for public interaction. In this context, the communication strategies implemented have not fully reflected the participatory communication principles that are the main character in modern digital governance (Bonsón et al., 2017).

The dominance of the informative approach is strengthened by the results of NVivo's analysis which shows a high content strategy indicator (10.55%). These findings show that the government has the capacity to design communication content in a systematic and structured manner. From a strategic communication perspective, good content planning is an important element in building institutional visibility and legitimacy. However, the excessive focus on the delivery of administrative information indicates that communication strategies are not yet fully geared towards encouraging active public engagement

These limitations are increasingly seen in the indicators of digital interaction (7.07%) and feedback management (7.05%) which are still at moderate levels. This condition shows that although the government has provided a space for interaction through social media, its use has not been optimal in building sustainable two-way communication. In the digital communication literature, effective interaction is determined not only by the presence of communication features, but also by the quality and consistency of the response to the audience. Thus, existing communication strategies are still semi-interactive and do not fully reflect dialogical communication (Medaglia & Zheng, 2017).

The dominance pattern of informative content is also reflected in the tendency of communication themes that focus on information, services, programs, and government activities. On the other hand, the emergence of indications of people's needs for interaction spaces shows that there is a gap between the communication strategies implemented and public expectations. From the perspective of engagement theory, public involvement is the main indicator in assessing the effectiveness of digital communication. Therefore, communication strategies that do not accommodate public participation tend to result in less effective communication in building relationships with the community (Boulianne, 2019).

In a theoretical framework, this condition shows that the government's digital communication strategy is still at the broadcasting or informational stage. At this stage, communication focuses on delivering information without significant interaction with the public. These findings suggest that the transformation towards more participatory communication has not been fully achieved. This also indicates that changes in communication strategies require not

only the adoption of technology, but also a paradigm shift in the management of public communication (Mergel et al., 2019).

The use of various social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook shows that there are efforts by the government to adopt a multiplatform strategy (DePaula & Dincelli, 2018). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this strategy largely depends on the adaptability of the content to the characteristics of each platform (Jardim et al., 2025; Yassen et al., 2026). Without content differentiation, the use of multiplatform will only expand the reach of information without improving the quality of interaction (Fayvishenko et al., 2025). Therefore, the government's digital communication strategy needs to be directed at strengthening interaction, responsiveness, and public participation as the basis for building more effective and sustainable communication (Zavattaro & Brainard, 2019).

Public Perception of Government Content and Communication Style on Social Media

Public perception of the government's content and communication style shows a relatively positive acceptance of the informative aspect, but still leaves room for improvement in the relational dimension. The high perception of information indicator (9.88%) shows that the public considers the information submitted by the government to be quite clear, relevant, and easy to understand. In addition, achievements in the aspect of communication approach also indicate that the communication style used by the government is able to reach public understanding effectively. This condition shows that the government has succeeded in fulfilling the basic function of public communication, which is to provide information that can be accessed and understood by the public.

However, acceptance of information is not automatically proportional to the level of trust in government institutions. This is reflected in the low indicators of perception of credibility (5.09%), ability (3.12%), and benevolence (4.03%). This inequality shows that there is a gap between the quality of information conveyed and the public's perception of the government's credibility and concern. Within the framework of Public Trust Theory, trust is not only built through the ability to convey information, but also through integrity and goodwill felt by the public. Thus, the government's digital communication has not been fully able to build comprehensive and sustainable trust (Mayer (1995).

Furthermore, the tendency of the public's response shows that there is appreciation as well as expectations that have not been fully fulfilled for government communication. Expressions of appreciation reflect that the public recognizes the government's efforts in providing public information. However, indications of unmet expectations suggest that people not only need information, but also want more direct involvement in the communication process. This confirms that digital communication is no longer understood as a one-way process, but rather as a space of social interaction that demands responsiveness and emotional closeness.

Public participation in digital communication is also seen from the tendency of engagement through comments and interactions, which indicates that the public has a desire to participate actively. However, this participation has not been fully balanced with an adequate response from the government. This condition shows the existence of a communication gap which in the literature is referred to as asymmetric interaction, where communication is unbalanced between the delivery of information and the response to the public. In this context, responsiveness is a key element that determines the success of digital communication in building public trust (Porumbescu, 2021).

The limitations in responsiveness show that the government's digital communication is still oriented to an informative function and has not been fully transformed into relational communication. From a public communication perspective, unresponsive interactions can reduce the effectiveness of communication and potentially lower public trust. This shows that the quality

of communication is not only determined by the content of the message, but also by how the government responds and builds relationships with the community in an ongoing manner.

Thus, public perception confirms that the government's digital communication has succeeded in fulfilling its informative function, but has not fully fulfilled the relational function that is the basis for forming public trust. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen a communication strategy that is more empathetic, responsive, and oriented to the needs of the community. These efforts can be made through improving the quality of interaction, active responses to public comments, and the development of more humanistic and contextual content. This transformation is important to ensure that digital communication not only conveys information, but also builds social relationships that are able to strengthen public trust in a sustainable manner.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the Sidenreng Rappang Regency Government's digital communication has not been fully effective in building public trust comprehensively. Although digital communication practices are able to increase transparency and build trust at a cognitive level, approaches that are still dominated by one-way information delivery have not been able to create relational trust based on interaction, responsiveness, and empathy. Thus, the purpose of this study shows that the success of digital communication is not only determined by the quality of information, but also by the government's ability to build dialogical social relationships with the community.

The findings of this study also indicate that there is a gap between government communication strategies and public expectations, which puts digital communication in a transitional phase towards more participatory two-way communication. In this context, this research makes a conceptual contribution through strengthening the perspective that effective digital communication must integrate informative and relational dimensions simultaneously. This emphasizes that the development of public trust in the era of digital governance is not automatic through technology, but requires a transformation of the communication paradigm that is more empathetic and responsive.

Based on these findings, this study recommends that local governments develop an engagement-based digital communication strategy with an emphasis on active interaction, feedback management, and more contextual and humane content delivery. Further research is suggested to empirically test digital communication models, including the development and validation of conceptual models such as the Digital Symmetrical Trust Model (DSTM) in various local government contexts. In addition, the use of a mixed methodological approach is also needed to strengthen the generalization of findings and deepen understanding of the relationship between digital communication and public trust.

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