

Communication Strategy Of Private University's PR Practitioners To Attract Students' Interest In Time Of Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract. *Public relations practitioners from private universities have a strategic role in formulating and implementing creative and innovative communication programs through the use of technology and new media, especially in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic like today. This study aims to map the performance of private-public relations practitioners in optimizing the role of social media to overcome problems that arise due to the pandemic, such as the absence of direct promotion and communication to prospective students and the decline in interest in high school/vocational equivalent graduates to continue to higher education, by using the method of qualitative case study approach. Data collection techniques are carried out through FGD, in-depth interviews, observations of Unisba-assisted private universities in Bandung, and literature review. The results of the study show that in responding to the application of communication technology during the pandemic, it is necessary to implement strategic steps, including the building of a special team, empowering the entire academic community and students as well, coordinating with related parties, and evaluating the use of social media as a means of promotion. The results of this study contribute to universities that want to design promotional activities through social media.*

Keywords: *Communication Strategies, Public Relations Performance, Attracting Students' Interest, Promotion, Pandemic Era*

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INTRODUCTION

Advances in information technology make it easier for people to access information since the media serves as a platform for disseminating information (Latifa & Setiawan, 2019), especially during a pandemic like today. The current Covid-19 pandemic has shocked the world's population, and educational institutions are no exception. As a result, face-to-face activities usually carried out in doing various things become constrained. Today, all educational institutions are trying to quickly find the right strategy to avoid going out of business. Based on data presented by the Head of the Central Indonesian Private Higher Education Association (Aptisi), many private universities were affected by the pandemic. There are around 120 private universities that cannot pay the

salaries of their lecturers (Citrawan, 2021). State universities may not feel too big of an impact. It is different from private universities, which rely their finances on students who register.

Such condition causes the implementation of technology in daily activities to become commonplace. A public relations practitioner has to understand the work process through digital media, but not all educational institutions are ready to adapt to these conditions. Currently, the performance of public relations practitioners is being tested by facing difficulties in carrying out public relations activities online. A public relations practitioner should think outside the box in utilizing social media. In addition, public relations practitioners need to maintain the image and reputation of the institution by creating content that

is packaged in such a way to attract the attention of students and prospective students. It is because the Public Relations profession is related to efforts to create and maintain the image of an institution, either government or private (Oktaviani, 2018).

Public relations practitioners must be more creative in using existing media to convey information to prospective students. "The existence of a public relations unit in a government-owned institution or agency is a functional and operational necessity to disseminate or publicize an activity of the agency concerned which is intended for both internal and external public relations. Public relations can be tools or channels (of government publication) to facilitate the course of interaction and dissemination of information about publications" (Ruslan, 2012).

Digital Public Relations is not a new thing, especially in this era of technology. However, that does not mean that the existing resources at the university are necessarily able to use it. The pandemic has resulted in many private universities having to be able to learn it instantly so as not to be left behind by other universities. Nevertheless, there is still a possibility that the conventional method is still being used considering regional conditions, community culture, and income of the people who become the target market.

Every institution must be able to choose the right social media. The selection of social media needs to be adjusted to the target market of universities since social media marketing communications are intended for different goals and targets (Adetunji et al., 2018). Therefore, the message can be directly received by the target. According to Shirky, "Social media and social software are tools to increase users' ability to share, cooperate among users, and take collective action, all of which are outside the institutional and

organizational framework" (in Nasrullah, 2016).

The selection of the right media should also be followed by media management regulated by a public relations practitioner since public relations activities are always related to how we manage communication between the public and organizations (Petrovici, 2014). Media management will greatly affect it if it uses the right working principles. Moreover, community environmental factors also determine the strategic steps taken by each public relations practitioner in carrying out their duties.

The implementation of the performance of public relations practitioners in the use of social media is also carried out differently. Some are already proficient in utilizing social media. Some still need to learn to adapt and find the best solution for every problem they encounter. Every university tries to do its best to design activities through social media. The divisions formed to explain the work portion of each also provide uniqueness in mapping the performance of public relations practitioners in every institution. It will be interesting to see the performance of public relations practitioners in using social media in public relations activities during the admission of new students during the time of the Covid 19 pandemic.

METHOD

The research method used is qualitative research focuses on efforts to explore reality in the micro scope with in-depth analysis. A case study approach is also used to refine the research results because it can provide a comprehensive explanation of a group, organization, program, or social situation (Mulyana in Noviar et al., 2021). Through this approach, the researchers try to explore the steps taken by public relations at

private universities in attracting new students in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study's primary data collection techniques were conducted through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGD), and observation. According to Bogdan and Taylor, this is done because qualitative research is a research procedure that produces descriptive data in written or spoken words from people and observed behavior (Kusumalestari et al., 2021). Subjects of this study were public relations practitioners from Bale Bandung University (UNIBBA), Sangga Buana University (USB), PPNI STIKep, and Indonesian Computer University (UNIKOM) as Unisba assisted universities located in Bandung City. Table 1 lists the public relations practitioners who became informants in this study.

In this study, the researchers also tried to involve observers and public relations practitioners from other universities to look at the performance of PR practitioners of UNIBBA, USB, STIKep, and UNIKOM during the covid 19 pandemic. These observations were made to examine why such actions need to be taken by PR practitioners to carry

out changes and improvements for the better.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the pandemic, public relations practitioners must be more creative and innovative in utilizing various media supporting public relations activities. Based on the interview results with public relations practitioners from universities that become subjects of this research, there are obstacles in undertaking their activities, two of which are costs and human resources. With all the existing limitations, public relations practitioners need to maximize their activities, especially in providing education and information to prospective students who become the target market. The fact that currently, prospective students are active users of social media should be utilized as an opportunity for public relations practitioners to optimize the existence of that social media. Optimal use of social media can provide its advantages, such as easy access that is fast and cheap (Suryono et al., 2020).

During the current pandemic, public relations practitioners have an essential role in the process of new student

TABLE 1. Subjects of Research

No.	Name	Position	University
1.	Gi	Head of Public Relations of UNIBBA	Bale Bandung (UNIBBA) University
2.	Nu	Head of Public Relations of Sangga Buana University (Old)	Sangga Buana (USB) University
3.	Mu	Head of Public Relations of Sangga Buana University (New)	Sangga Buana (USB) University
4.	Ti	Head of Public Relations of STIKep	STIKep PPNI
5.	De	Director of Public Relations and Protocol of Unikom	Indonesian Computer University (UNIKOM)
6.	Ag	Public Relations and Protocol Staff of Unikom	Indonesian Computer University (UNIKOM)
7.	Fu	Public Relations Observer and Practitioner of Unisba	Bandung Islamic University (UNISBA)

admission. The university's image that is formed among prospective students must be excellent. Research shows that a positive college image will affect the interest of new students (Sabando et al., 2019). The pandemic condition that requires all activities to be carried out online is a big challenge for university public relations practitioners to be still able to get prospective students. Unlike today, before the pandemic, promotions for new students could be done offline by directly visiting schools.

The transition from offline to online requires public relations practitioners to maximize internet-based media to reach audiences through cyberspace, such as Instagram. Instagram is one of the most popular social media, as evidenced by the increase in its users within four months to 100 million users (Dalila et al., 2021). Instagram is the most widely used media after YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp (Dalila et al., 2021). Instagram is a photo-sharing media application that allows users to take photos, apply digital filters, and share them on various social networking services. Instagram has become the favorite means for each individual who wants to publish activities, goods, places, or himself/herself in the form of photos (Mahendra, 2017).

Strategic Steps Taken by Public Relations Practitioners of Private Universities Assisted by Unisba

Based on the study results, all private universities assisted by Unisba (UNIBBA, USB, STIKep PPNI, and UNIKOM) took several steps in carrying out public relations performance amid the COVID-19 pandemic, including: first, forming a special team for social media management. The use of social media as an instrument in implementing public relations strategies provides a new perspective, namely, how to build a reputation with audience participation,

not only from the public relations of organizations or companies (Mizanie & Irwansyah, 2019). Private universities attempt to do marketing through social media and optimize that platform to persuade consumers, namely students, to use educational services. Social media marketing is a strategic and methodical process to build a company's influence, reputation, and brand in a community of potential customers, readers, and/or supporters (Dewi, 2018).

The performance of public relations practitioners of private universities assisted by Unisba in managing social media is also different. Some public relations practitioners are directly involved in managing social media. However, some only provide ideas or references and hand over social media management to a team, as happened at UNIBBA. UNIBBA PR practitioners have a special team in charge of supervising the social media system and uploading social media content, such as brochures that the team has previously made, to help PR practitioners disseminate information related to the events being held, including promotions for new student admissions. "There is a special team: a head of systems and information in academia, staff of social media section, and other employees. I often ask for their help, but we're still the ones who create the concept and so on. Indeed, someone manages the system" (Gi, informant).

STIKep also has admins, competent in their fields, to manage accounts well and post on social media daily. "...so the old admin was part of the academic community who couldn't do much of the hype on social media, until finally we tried to replace him with someone competent and we tried to post every day" (Ti, Informant). Meanwhile, making videos for social media content still uses vendors' services. UNIKOM has its special team for optimizing social

media, such as creating content, videos, captions, hashtags, and others. There is also a special division that handles the process of new student admissions, where public relations practitioners are tasked with writing captions and uploading information that the team has compiled. However, there are differences in choosing a specific team. The special team for social media at UNIBBA and UNIKOM comes from internal UNIBBA and UNIKOM itself, selected by competencies that match the needs; At the same time, STIKep works with an external team paid professionally to manage social media, especially videos.

The second is collaborating with alumni, students, lecturers, and employees to use social media. Limitations in reaching potential customers do not have to be an obstacle in PR performance as PR can take advantage of various things. Likewise, in colleges or universities, the academic community can be used positively to disseminate information about new student admissions. UNIBBA Public Relations also took advantage of this opportunity, among others, by collaborating with alumni and students to upload UNIBBA content on alumni and students' respective social media. "... (We) ask for help there (alumni and students). They also participate in spreading it (content) because if it is related to information through the media, it is easy, from person A to person B to person C, especially when they are already in the chat room, making it viral is easy" (Gi, Informant). Disseminating information in this way turned out to be more effective, especially for new students, from the number of questions and responses via Whatsapp or office telephone.

Similar to UNIBBA, USB also utilized the academic community to convey information on new student admissions. The approach they used in

the new student admissions program during the COVID-19 pandemic was to involve employees, lecturers, and students in promoting USB to the surrounding environment. They were expected to be able to carry out the function of public relations. Employees, lecturers, and students not only upload content on their personal social media but also disseminate information by word of mouth. It is a quite capable marketing strategy where consumers become parties with high involvement in the marketing. Word of mouth marketing does not require a large amount of money but can be very effective (Lestari & Dedet, 2019). USB PR practitioners chose this strategy because, "We have the advantage of alumni who have spread across several agencies and have become entrepreneurs" (Nu, Informant).

The third involves students in the creation of social media content. Students with an age range that is not much different from prospective students are empowered by STIKep public relations practitioners to create social media content. This is done based on the assumption that the mindset of students can describe the mindset of prospective students so that PR can get an idea of the content to be created. "...we ourselves don't know the characteristics of prospective students well; basically our target is high school students, so we ask for help from student friends who are not too different in age so that our programs always involve our students." (Ti, Informant).

The second and third strategic steps were considered positive by Fu as a public relations observer and practitioner; for him, "engagement is crucial. Connectivity with the public is the main thing since these consumers have enormous power. Consumers can also act as prosumers (producers and consumers simultaneously), especially for students and prospective students who

have attended certain high schools. They become our prosumers who produce information and testimonials related to the college where they are currently studying” (Fu, Informant).

Fourth is coordinating with related sections for social media management. Not all public relations practitioners in universities have full authority in managing social media. Therefore, good teamwork with other departments in social media management is needed in concept generation, planning, and execution. At UNIBBA, public relations practitioners coordinate with the head of systems and information in academics regarding systems on social media. However, UNIBBA public relations practitioners have full authority in managing social media. Meanwhile, at USB, social media management, especially dealing with new student admissions, requires public relations practitioners to coordinate and communicate with the promotion team. This is due to the separation of public relations and promotion divisions under the same unit but is now separated.

“Yes, Public Relations (PR) is different from marketing since the marketing team is directly involved in promotions for new student admissions. Admission of new students is in a separate institution, namely a special promotion team managing social media. Although there are many components involved in the institution or university, both faculties and study programs including public relations also participate in evaluating how and what to do, especially in the imaging and information process” (Nu, Informant).

Regarding social media, STIKep’s public relations practitioner said that coordination was carried out with leaders

who were always involved in planning the concept of student admissions. In addition to the leadership, public relations practitioners also coordinate with the new student admissions committee members of the Whatsapp group. While at UNIKOM, public relations practitioners coordinate with the new student admissions (NSA) and UPT sections of social media for social media content. Moreover, public relations practitioners have a role in providing input on new student admissions content that the NSA section will make; public relations practitioners themselves are more involved in open session activities of the senate for new students. “PR is not directly involved since we have a special New Student Admissions team. UNIKOM’s Directorate of Public Relations and Protocol related to NSA is involved as the person in charge of the open session of the Senate in the context of New Student Admissions every academic year” (De, Informant).

Fifth is supervising and evaluating social media. Monitoring and evaluation are important in managing social media due to the rapidly changing nature of social media, where public relations practitioners must be adaptive to developments. Thus it is necessary to carry out a continuous evaluation. Evaluation is a special strategic step in PR performance since it measures how much planning has been carried out, especially on social media. It also evaluates the constraints that caused the plans that have been made were not implemented properly. Evaluation is carried out in the hope of knowing the needs and interests of the public so that it can encourage a mutually beneficial understanding with the public (Kriyantono, 2014). It is necessary to have a measurement system to ensure organizational performance and increase productivity (Sookdeo, 2019).

The evaluation can be conducted every month like USB does, namely,

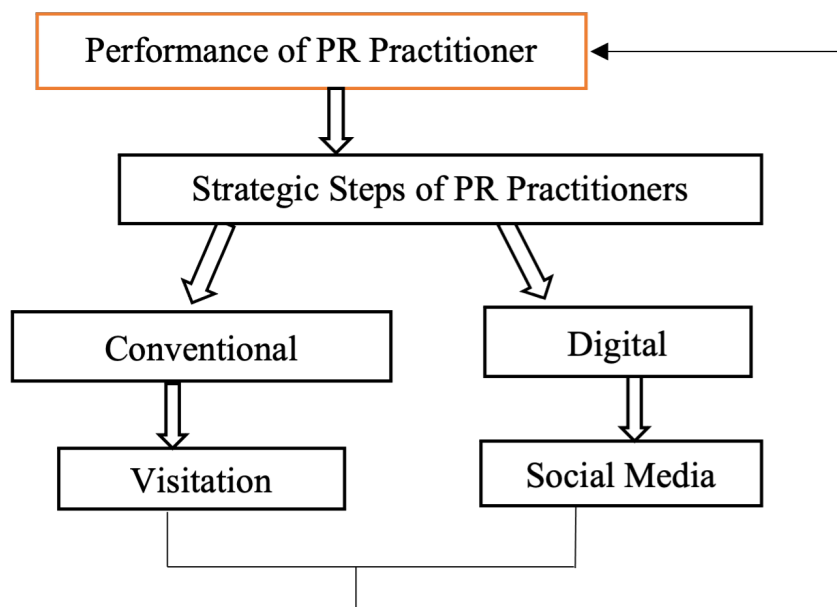


FIGURE 1. The reality of Public Relations Performance through Media
(Source: Research Results)

measuring the performance of the programs or activities that have been done. Evaluation is carried out by checking the comments on social media and figuring out what plans have been implemented and which ones have not to improve future plans for social media content. Whereas, STIKep evaluation of social media is done through the number of incoming Direct Message (DM) responses from the increase in followers and the number of prospective students who register on the google link. In contrast to UNIKOM, where public relations do the supervision of social media collaborates with the Head of NSA, Director of Public Relations, and Director of UNIKOM's social media UPT, evaluations are carried out continuously in new student admissions meetings.

The internet makes life easier and changes the way people communicate. The internet can help the public, especially prospective students, communicate with universities or colleges. Technological developments provide convenience for students to access information through social media (Nurohman & Yahya, 2018). The public feels more flexible when they want to ask about new student information

and can interact directly through the features on social media. Knowing these things, it is necessary to take strategic steps in managing social media in dealing with new student admissions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this context, a public relations practitioner needs to fully understand the four stages of the Public Relations process as stated by Cutlip, Center, and Broom (in Wiwitan and Yulianita, 2017), namely defining public relations problems, planning dan programming, taking action and communicating, evaluating the program. The stage of defining public relations problems includes assessing and monitoring opinions, attitudes, and behaviors related to the actions and policies of the organization. The second stage, planning, and programming, uses the information collected in the first stage to make various decisions about the public, goals, strategies, actions, tactics, and communication objectives in making the program. The third stage is taking action and communicating. This stage embodies program actions and communications designed to achieve certain goals for each public. In other

words, it is the achievement of program objectives. The fourth stage is evaluating the program, which includes the readiness of the assessment and implementation and the program's results (Ardianto in Palapah, 2020).

Fostering good relations with the media is a form of communication between institutions and the public to achieve the organizational goals set. This is a unit of activity that a public relations practitioner must carry out. According to Frank Jefkins (in Darmastuti, 2012), several things have to be done using the right working principles when a public relations practitioner carries out good media relations activities, namely serving and understanding the media at all times, building a reputation as an organization that can be trusted by the media, providing adequate and accurate copies of information, cooperating in providing information materials, providing verification facilities, and building strong personal relationships with the media.

Although many institutions have switched to digital media, it turns out that the performance of public relations still faces the use of conventional media. Figure 1 shows the reality of Public Relations performance faced by educational institutions.

The success of implementing the performance of public relations practitioners cannot be separated from their abilities. According to Jefkins (in Wardasari et al., 2013), there are five basic requirements for someone who works in Public Relations: the first two are the ability to communicate and organize. These requirements require that a public relations practitioner should be able to carry out activities from collecting data to evaluating. The next requirements are the ability to get on with people (the ability to get along or build relationships), personal integrity (honest personality), and imagination (have a strong imagination). When it comes to creating social media

content, PR is required to always be creative in an attempt to attract the attention of prospective students.

These basic requirements emerged because public relation is not just a science but also a profession. It has something to do with efforts to build harmonious relations between institutions and their publics to generate mutual understanding, create a positive image and improve the organization's reputation, and foster public trust (Trimanah & Wulandari, 2018). This condition shows that although PR activities are carried out digitally, the human relations aspect is still needed. There must be human relations touch to be applied. The difference here is that human relations are applied using social media. The use of digital platforms by institutions is influenced by three factors: digital literacy, customer relationship development, and digital ecosystem development (Ramdan et al., 2020).

The explanation above underlies that there must be the ability to be creative and innovative in every activity or content creation. The application of the human relations aspect is expected to be able to persuade prospective students to be interested in continuing their studies at their institution since, basically, human relations will be related to persuasive communication. There will be happiness and satisfaction by applying human relations on both sides. Likewise, in the context of the performance of public relations practitioners during this pandemic, persuasive communication must be carried out in work situations and work organizations to evoke enthusiasm and work activities in a spirit of productive cooperation with feelings of happiness and satisfaction (Mustikawati & Husnul, 2016).

The Implementation of Performance of Public Relations Practitioners of Private Universities Assisted by Unisba

During this covid-19 pandemic, many prospective new students find it difficult to get information about universities because they cannot directly visit the campus. Therefore, public relations practitioners must work harder to coordinate with the various teams involved in maximizing the content uploaded on social media. The number of prospective new students who register is not only the benchmark for success in using social media. However, it should also consider the engagement of social media users.

“We need the team’s creativity, so this team cannot work alone. With the autonomous promotion team, we build maximum communication and supply activities that can be uploaded continuously, which appeal to the audience, especially prospective students. (It must be

noted) how many (contents) have been implemented, and how many have not been implemented. (Then) we do an evaluation, so that once a month it will be updated by counting how many like this one, how many for this one” (Nu, Informant).

The implementation of the performance of public relations practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic is very different. There is a shift in the performance of public relations practitioners from conventional to digital, which also applies to new student admissions in every university. It happens because “This pandemic impacts the world of education, where the purchasing power of the people decreases so that the interest in each university decreases” (Fu, Informant).

The role of social media before and

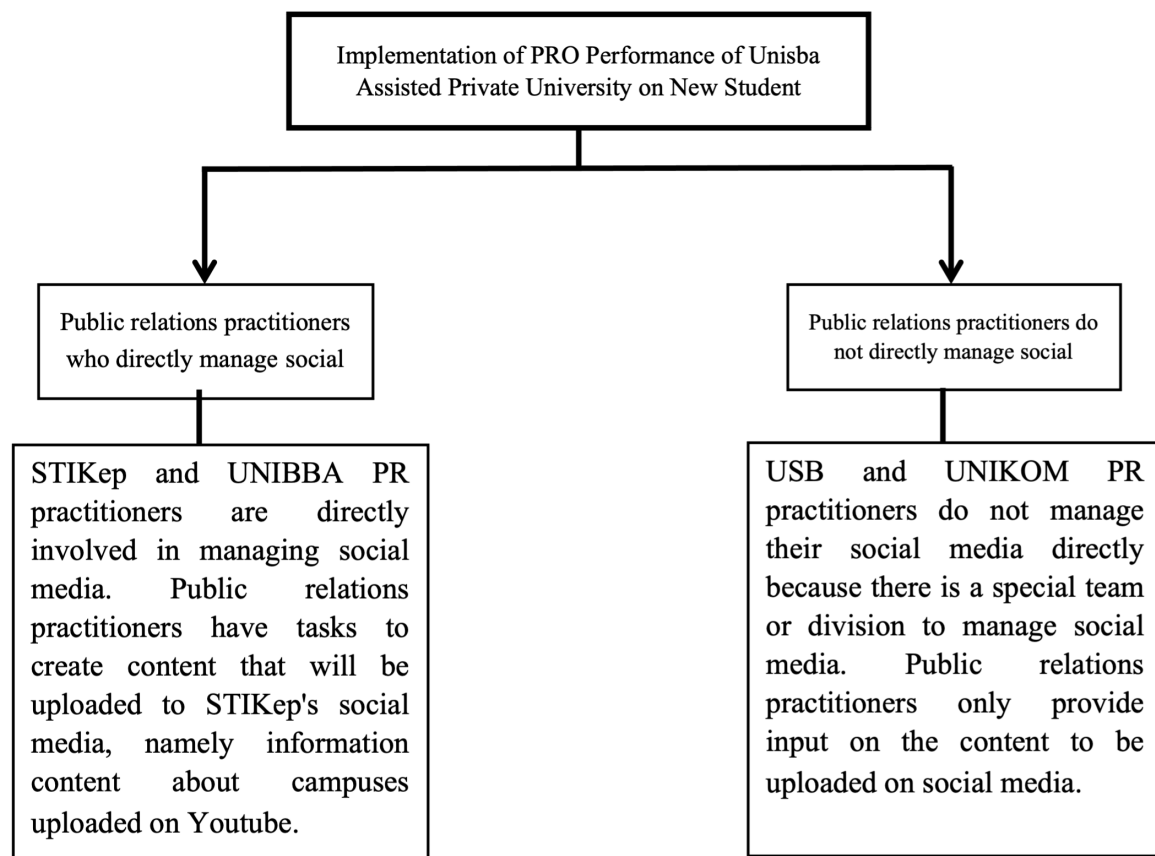


FIGURE 2. Implementation of PRO Performance of Unisba Assisted Private Universities on New Student Admissions (Source: Results of Research)

after the covid-19 pandemic is crucial and greatly helps the performance of public relations practitioners in disseminating information about universities. "There is a new culture in this pandemic era, where the use of communication technology has become the main media and no longer an alternative" (Fu, Informant). Using social media as an instrument in carrying out public relations strategies provides a new perspective, namely, how to build a reputation with audience participation, not only from the public relations of organizations or companies (Mizanie & Irwansyah, 2019).

Positive perceptions toward the target universities are significant since prospective targets play an important role in achieving higher education goals (Aghaz et al., 2015). The content uploaded on college social media should be created as attractive as possible to attract the attention of prospective new students. This has become one of the strategies of public relations practitioners in carrying out public relations strategies. Not only that, before implementing new student admissions, to achieve the targets set by private universities, public relations practitioners must create a concept that is designed according to the concept of the university.

The performance of private-public relations practitioners assisted by Unisba in managing social media is also different. Some public relations practitioners are directly involved in managing social media, while others only provide ideas or references to the team that manages social media (Figure 2).

At USB, public relations practitioners are not directly involved in managing social media because there is a special team for it, including social media management for new student admissions. The special team in charge of managing social media consists of people who are experts and experienced in their fields.

USB PR practitioners only help with references or content ideas uploaded on USB social media. Content uploaded on USB social media has a distinctive identity to the red color as USB identity. Information disseminated through social media is directly supervised by the campus supervisory team.

Unlike USB, STIKep's PR practitioners directly manage social media as there is no special team. They have tasks to make a storyline of information about the campus which will be uploaded to YouTube. Activities carried out during the pandemic include podcasts and webinar programs targeting high school students. STIKep considers social media to be the main media as a promotional event for universities in admitting new students. Before being uploaded to social media, the content created by public relations practitioners will be discussed first with the leadership. The content uploaded to STIKep's social media has its characteristics according to the identity of STIKep. Public Relations STIKep also mentioned that the leadership is always involved in planning the concept of new student admissions and coordination, especially for social media. Not only with the head of public relations, but coordination is also carried out with the admissions committee of new students who are members of the WA group and regular meetings for progress reports.

The implementation of the performance of UNIBBA's PR practitioners during the Covid-19 pandemic is to directly manage their social media, including content creation and others. In managing its social media, UNIBBA's public relations team coordinates with a special team consisting of the head of the academic system and the information division (two people). UNIBBA also uses the ads feature on social media to reach its target audience. Public relations practitioners are tasked

with recommending the content being created. UNIBBA's social media uploads pay close attention to the language used, which is semi-formal and contains invitations.

The implementation of UNIKOM's public relations practitioners' performance on social media is that public relations practitioners do not engage directly in managing their social media. They are only helping to provide references or content ideas to be uploaded to social media and create content according to the chancellor's request. A special team manages social media management itself. Making videos in the form of campus introductions is not done independently by UNIKOM's PR practitioners but in collaboration with the UNIKOM Multimedia directorate and uploaded to YouTube.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

In the process, not all the performance of public relations practitioners can run well and smoothly due to several things that become obstacles to the work being done. Thus, there are supporting and inhibiting factors in improving the performance of public relations practitioners of private universities assisted by Unisba when facing new student admissions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Supporting factors include support from various parties in managing social media as part of the performance of public relations practitioners so that the use of social media in disseminating information about new student admissions can be carried out as widely as possible. A strong and widespread alumni network and the role of lecturers and employees are also very helpful in realizing the achievement targets set by the university. In addition, there are also programs of colleges or universities that are in line with the performance of public relations

practitioners, especially in the admissions of new students. The presence of social media can be utilized, and technology is made to facilitate work during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In addition to supporting factors, there are also inhibiting factors in the PR activities of Unisba-assisted private universities that must be resolved, such as obstacles to Human Resources (HR). Not everyone understands IT or technology, so qualified human resources are needed for social media management. Some colleges or universities even pay and involve competent people outside the PR division, such as paying vendors to work on videos they uploaded on social media. In addition, the pandemic period has limited universities to reach prospective new students due to the transition from conventional to digital. Infrastructure is also an inhibiting factor since it is not simultaneously available in all places.

However, amid all the existing inhibiting factors, the private universities assisted by Unisba, in the end, still found a way out. They overcame all problems, despite all the limitations they had, such as cutting various set budget ceilings. This condition is not easy, but they still have to adapt to all the changes, calling it a decrease in the new student admissions achievement target. This needs to be done so that the University can continue to rise and survive amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research and discussion described above, it can be concluded that the communication strategy of public relations practitioners to attract new students in the current pandemic era must be carried out by focusing on the interests or preferences of the target prospective students. It can start with selecting social media and content packaging that high school students are interested in to which parties can be

involved in disseminating information. It is important to pay attention to the compatibility between the cultural background of the target market and the ones who do the promotion.

Public relations practitioners should form a special team to disseminate information. In this context, public relations practitioners should also take advantage of the community of young people who have an age that is not much different from high school students, namely involving students. This needs to be done so that there is a commonality of interest and mindset between the target market and the educational institutions. However, the main content regarding new student admissions information still has to come from public relations practitioners. It is also important to strengthen the alumni network to reach a greater audience in disseminating the information.

Coordination and supervision and periodic evaluations also need to be carried out in implementing Public Relations performance through social media. This is intended to detect various kinds of inhibiting factors early on so that further solutions can be immediately sought.

The results of this study describe opportunities for further research related to how effective the strategic steps taken by public relations practitioners are in attracting new students during the Covid-19 pandemic and providing novelty in terms of references and new findings on qualitative data about communication strategies among similar research.

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