



The Political Communication of the Regent of Garut in Enhancing Public Trust in Garut Regency

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A B S T R A C T

This study aims to determine the effectiveness of the Regent of Garut's political communication in enhancing public trust in the digital era. The research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive method. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, then analyzed systematically through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The theoretical framework used is political communication theory, encompassing three main dimensions: political communicators, political messages, and political audiences. The findings indicate that the political communication of the Regent of Garut has utilized social media and direct communication to build closer relationships with the community. Communicator credibility, message clarity, and issue relevance are key factors in shaping public perception. However, a gap was found between the image constructed in digital media and the reality experienced by some members of the public, which has unevenly affected the level of public trust. This study concludes that effective political communication requires consistency between delivered messages and policy implementation, improved responsiveness to public aspirations, and optimized participatory two-way communication. Periodic evaluations of digital-based communication strategies are also necessary to ensure transparency, accountability, and alignment with community needs, in order to sustainably strengthen the legitimacy of regional leadership.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, political communication in Indonesia has undergone a major transformation driven by advances in digital technology. This transformation has created opportunities for political actors to leverage digital platforms to build trust, enhance interaction with the public, and strengthen public legitimacy through interactive digital representation. Whereas political communication was previously conducted mainly through traditional media such as newspapers, television, radio, and face-to-face meetings, social media and digital platforms have now become the primary arena for building more direct, participatory, and information-network-based political communication. According to Alvin (2022:27), the development of digital technology such as social media has shifted the traditional relationship between political actors and the public, enabling interaction that is more direct, participatory, and network-based. Social media is not only a channel for distributing political messages but also a discursive arena that allows the public to actively participate through criticism, support, and public debate. In Indonesia, the use of social media in public communication is supported by Law Number 14 of 2008 on Public Information Disclosure, Ministerial Regulation of PANRB Number 83 of 2012, and Presidential Instruction Number 9 of 2015 on Public Communication Management, which encourage government agencies to use social media effectively and productively. The high level of internet use has also strengthened the development of digital political communication, as shown by the 2025 APJII survey, which recorded national internet penetration reaching 80.66%, with West Java at 86.52% and around 229 million Indonesians using the internet. These social media users can be seen in the following figures:

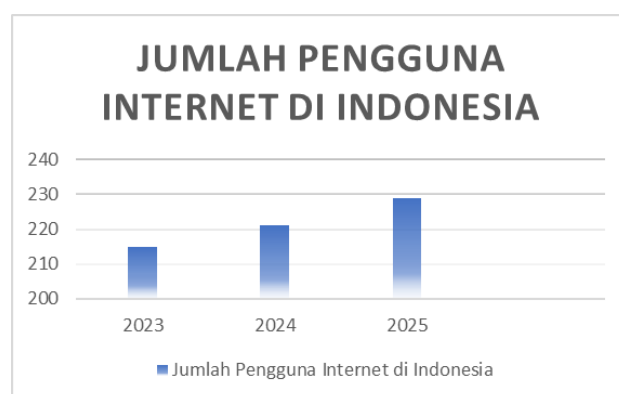


Figure 1. Number of Internet Users in Indonesia



Figure 2. Growth of Internet Penetration Rate in Indonesia, 2023–2025

Source: APJII, 2025

The data show that internet penetration in Indonesia has reached 80.66%, or around 229 million users, with West Java as

the province with the largest number of users, namely 41.3 million people with a penetration rate of 86.52%. According to IDN Times in the Indonesia Gen Z Report 2024, TikTok is the most popular social media platform, especially among Gen Z and millennials, because it offers short, interactive, and creative content. Meanwhile, YouTube is accessed more by older generations because it is considered to provide longer and more informative content. This condition requires regional heads to be able to adapt their political communication strategies to developments in information technology. Ambardi et al. (2025:112) explain that in a digital society, the distribution of power is influenced by the ability of political actors to control the flow of information and build strategic narratives in the digital space.

This phenomenon can be seen in the figure of Dedi Mulyadi, who actively uses various digital platforms through grassroots-visit ("blusukan") content, resolving community problems, and direct communication with residents. Yunita et al. (2025:20) state that Dedi Mulyadi employs an agenda-setting approach by emphasizing closeness to the people, local values, and pro-people policies, thereby forming a political brand as a leader who is down-to-earth, humanist, and responsive. The popularity of this social media use has even led the public to nickname him the "Content Governor." This digital strategy is also considered effective because it has managed to reduce the West Java Provincial Government's publication budget from around IDR 50 billion to IDR 3 billion without reducing the reach of its messages. A similar phenomenon can also be seen in Garut Regency, where the local government uses social media as a means of publicizing government activities, disseminating policies, and ensuring public transparency, supported by community accounts such as Info Garut and Garut Update, which actively disseminate information to the public.

Garut Regency has strong Sundanese socio-cultural characteristics, with a digital literacy level that continues to rise as internet users increased by 10.39 percentage points over the past three years, according to BPS Garut (2025). This phenomenon can be analyzed through Scammell's (2015:66) Political Branding theory, which explains that political figures use communication strategies like a brand to gain public sympathy. In addition, Gerbaudo's (2018:105) Digital Populism theory explains how social media is used by political leaders to demonstrate emotional closeness with the people. Johnston & Taylor (2022:87) also assert that the two-way communication model is becoming increasingly relevant in the digital era because social media enables participatory and responsive reciprocal dialogue between government and the public. Thus, social media serves not only as a means of publication but also as a participatory space to strengthen leadership image and increase public trust in local government.

Year	Using a Mobile Phone or Wireless Device or a Computer (PC/Desktop, Laptop/Notebook, Tablet)	Accessing the Internet (Including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc.) (in percentage)
1	2	3
2022	71,84 %	57,97 %
2023	75,69 %	61,55 %
2024	77,12 %	65,03 %

Source: BPS Garut, 2025

Based on 2025 BPS Garut Regency data, the rate of mobile phone or computer use as well as internet and social media access showed consistent growth from 2022 to 2024. In 2022, around 71.84% of Garut residents aged five and above used digital devices, rising to 77.12% in 2024. The percentage of residents accessing the internet and social media also rose from 57.97% in 2022 to 65.03% in 2024, with an average annual growth rate of around 9.7%. This increase shows that the people of Garut are becoming increasingly integrated with digital technology for communication, information, and economic activities such as e-commerce. This condition creates both opportunities and challenges for the local government in building political communication through the promotion of government programs, the dissemination of policies, and interaction with and accommodation of public aspirations through digital media.

Empirically, the communication style of regional heads on social media has become an important focus in contemporary political communication studies. Habibi (2022:5) and Hamadi (2024:1) explain that regional heads in various parts of Indonesia have developed a personal, relaxed, responsive, and interactive communication style to gain public sympathy and trust. According to Balqis et al. (2024:10), political image is shaped through symbolic messages such as photo and video uploads, policy narratives, and direct interaction on social media. In the digital era, the boundary between formal government communication and personal communication is becoming increasingly blurred, as regional heads often use personal accounts to convey public policy. This condition requires regional heads to be more transparent, responsive, and inclusive of public aspirations. The Garut Regency Government, under the leadership of Regent Abdusy Syakur Amin, has utilized various social media platforms, including the official Instagram accounts @pembkab_garut and @garutkab_official managed by the Department of Communication and Informatics (Diskominfo), as a means of faster, more interactive, and more transparent public communication. In addition, community-based accounts such as Info Garut (300,000 followers) and Garut Update (253,000 followers) also play an active role in disseminating government information to the wider public. This dynamic of political communication not only demonstrates the use of technology but also presents challenges regarding the consistency between messages constructed in the digital space and the reality directly experienced by the public in the field.

Table 1. Internet and Social Media Users in Garut Regency

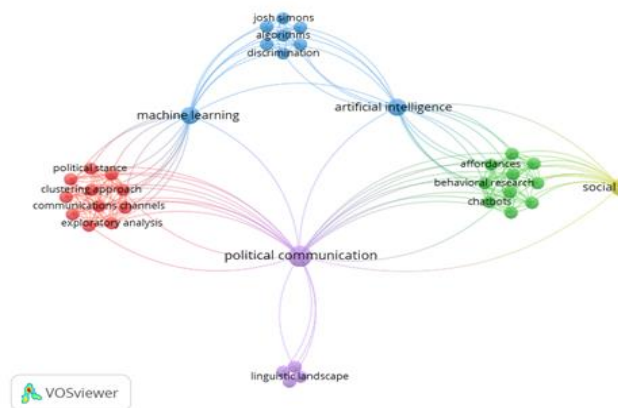


Figure 3. Mapping Results Using VOSviewer

Source: Processed by the researchers, 2025

The research gap is an important basis for why this study needs to be conducted. A number of previous studies have examined the digital political communication of regional heads, but with different focuses and contexts. Hamadi (2024) studied regional heads' social media strategies in building a positive image and implementing their vision and mission, but focused on the branding aspect without analyzing the gap between digital image and field reality. Kharisma and Zaenuri (2025) examined the construction of political image in the digital space by national party chairpersons, making the context different from active local government leadership. Firmansyah (2020) discussed social media political communication in the context of electoral campaigns, rather than communication during an ongoing term of leadership. Habibi et al. (2022) analyzed the communication style of regional heads on social media in general, without an in-depth study of local community perceptions in non-metropolitan areas. Nugroho (2020) discussed the political communication of regional heads in the digital era but did not address the dimension of alignment between digitally constructed messages and the reality experienced by communicants in the field. This study therefore aims to fill that gap by examining in depth Nimmo's (2005) three dimensions of political communication—political communicators, political messages, and political audiences—within the context of the active leadership of the Regent of Garut in a non-metropolitan region with a distinctive Sundanese socio-cultural character.

The novelty of this study lies in three main aspects. First, the object of research focuses on the Regent of Garut as a representation of non-metropolitan regional leadership with strong Sundanese socio-cultural characteristics, differing from most previous studies that have focused on leaders in metropolitan areas or national political elites. Second, this study does not examine communication during the campaign period but rather political communication during an ongoing active term of leadership, giving it stronger relevance in the context of governance. Third, this study specifically analyzes the gap between the image constructed in the digital space (the image-reality gap) and the reality experienced by communicants in the field, a dimension that has not been widely studied in the literature on regional political communication in Indonesia. The urgency of this study is further reinforced by the fact that public trust in local government is a foundation of leadership legitimacy that ultimately determines the effectiveness of governance and public participation in regional development.

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The theoretical foundation of this study rests on Nimmo's (2005) Political Communication Theory, which covers three main dimensions: (1) political communicators, encompassing credibility, communication style, message clarity, and accessibility; (2) political messages, encompassing relevance, clarity, symbolic content, and consistency with real action; and (3) political audiences, encompassing public understanding, participation, perception, and response. In addition, this study also employs Scammell's (2015) Political Branding theory to understand how the Regent of Garut builds an identity and leadership image through social media in the manner of a brand. Gerbaudo's (2018) Digital Populism theory is used to analyze how social media is utilized as an instrument of emotional closeness between leaders and the people. Johnston and Taylor's (2022) Two-Way Communication theory is used to examine whether the communication built is participatory and responsive, rather than merely one-way information distribution.

Based on the background and the identified research gap described above, the problem statements of this study are: (1) How does the communicator (the Regent of Garut) convey political messages to the people of Garut Regency? (2) What communication strategies does the Regent of Garut use to build public trust in the digital era? (3) How well does the message conveyed through social media align with the reality experienced by communicants in the field? The objective of this study is to analyze in depth and comprehensively the effectiveness of the Regent of Garut's political communication in enhancing public trust in Garut Regency through the use of social media and direct communication, and to identify the factors that influence the alignment between the constructed digital image and the reality of public services experienced by the community.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method. This approach was chosen based on the consideration that the research aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning, experience, and social interaction related to the practice of the Regent of Garut's digital political communication in building public trust — a phenomenon that is complex, contextual, and cannot be adequately explained through numbers or statistics alone (Creswell & Creswell, 2021). The descriptive method was chosen because this study aims to systematically and accurately describe the facts and characteristics of a particular population or field (Moleong, 2018). The analytical framework is based on Nimmo's (2005) Political Communication Theory, which covers three main dimensions: political communicators, political messages, and political audiences.

The research data come from two sources: primary data and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews and direct documentation in the field, while secondary data were collected through observation, internet searches, and content analysis of the Regent of Garut's official social media accounts and related community accounts such as Info Garut and Garut Update.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling and controlled quota sampling techniques to ensure the relevance and depth of the information obtained. The informants included the Regent of Garut as the main communicator, officials of the Garut Regency Department of Communication and Informatics, the Head of the Protocol and Leadership Communication Division of

the Garut Regional Secretariat, the manager of the Regent of Garut's social media accounts, and the people of Garut Regency as message recipients and the political audience. The researchers acted as the primary instrument, supported by tools such as cameras and voice recorders to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the data.

Data collection was carried out using three techniques: observation, to examine patterns of communication and interaction in both the digital space and face-to-face settings; direct and indirect interviews, to explore in-depth perspectives from the informants; and documentation, to gather supporting data such as policy archives, social media content, and official local government publication materials.

Data analysis employed the Data Analysis Procedure by Application (DAPA), assisted by NVivo 12 Plus software. The analysis process was carried out through the stages of data reduction, to simplify and select relevant data; data presentation, to organize information systematically; and thematic analysis and coding, to identify the main patterns and themes emerging from the data. Data visualization was used to clarify the findings and enhance the transparency of the analysis results. Conclusions were drawn inductively based on the overall field findings, which were verified through source and technique triangulation to ensure the validity and reliability of the research results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

How the Communicator Conveys Political Messages to the Public

The delivery of political messages to the public in order to enhance public trust in Garut Regency was carried out in accordance with the stages of political communication proposed by Nimmo (2005), based on the results of in-depth interviews, observation, and social media content analysis conducted using NVivo 12 Plus. This section presents the research findings and discussion in an integrated manner, in line with the three main dimensions of the political communication theory used: political communicators, political messages, and political audiences. Each dimension is analyzed based on field data and linked to previous research findings to strengthen the academic relevance of this study. In line with McNair's (2020) view that effective political communication requires the integration of communicator credibility, message relevance, and audience response, these three dimensions cannot be separated when analyzing public trust.

Political communicators play an important role in enhancing public trust through integrity, competence, and consistency of message, attitude, and action in the public sphere.

a. Communicator Credibility. Communicator credibility is a key factor in enhancing public trust because it determines the effectiveness of political message delivery. The Regent of Garut emphasizes the importance of honest, transparent, accurate information that has undergone data verification before being conveyed to the public. Social media management is also carried out using concrete data, visual documentation, and consistency with official policy. The NVivo analysis results show that the word "accurate" appears most frequently, indicating that accuracy is a core value in the Regent of Garut's political communication. This finding is consistent with Habibi et al. (2022:5), who state that the credibility of regional heads on social media is built through information consistency, data openness, and content relevance to actual policy. In addition, Rahmawati

and Haryono (2025) assert that communicator credibility has a significant effect on audience satisfaction and trust toward the messages conveyed. Credibility is built through informational accuracy, message consistency, and transparency of the verification process.

Communication Style. The Regent of Garut's communication style is simple, clear, flexible, responsive, and empathetic so that it can be easily understood by all levels of society. In formal situations, a structured and authoritative style is used, while in informal meetings a more relaxed and open style is used. The NVivo analysis results show that the word "flexible" appears most frequently. The use of simple language, two-way communication, and a warm attitude toward the public helps build emotional closeness and increase the effectiveness of political communication.

b. Message Clarity. Message clarity is achieved through the use of simple language, concrete examples, dialogue with the community, and re-delivery of messages through community leaders and village officials. Diskominfo also conducts focus group discussions (FGDs) to test the public's level of understanding of the messages to be conveyed. Social media is used with a combination of text, visuals, and videos to make information easier to understand. The NVivo results show that the word "visual" appears most frequently, indicating the importance of visual media in the Regent of Garut's political communication. Message clarity is pursued so that information can be understood by all segments of society without causing message distortion.

Communicator Accessibility. Communication accessibility is achieved through social media, official complaint channels, letters, audiences, and face-to-face activities. Social media is the main channel because it makes it easier for the public to directly convey aspirations, complaints, and opinions. The NVivo analysis results show that social media is the most dominant form of accessibility. The use of various communication channels reflects the government's effort to remain inclusive and reach all segments of society. In addition to opening access, the government also follows up on public input through the relevant regional agencies.

Communication Strategies Used by the Communicator to Build Public Trust

Political communication strategies are used to build public trust by delivering messages that are relevant, clear, symbolically meaningful, and consistent with government action.

Political messages serve as the primary tool for conveying a vision, promises, and values that align with public aspirations. Transparent and authentic messages can strengthen legitimacy and increase public participation.

a. Message Relevance. Message relevance is built based on the regional development agenda, urgent community needs, and trending issues. Political messages focus on basic services such as health, education, infrastructure, and civil administration to align with the real conditions of the community. The NVivo results show high attention to trending issues as a strategy to increase public attention and build public trust. Message relevance is achieved by balancing the government's strategic agenda with responses to dynamic public issues.

Message Clarity. Message clarity is achieved through the use of simple language, presentation of concrete data, and complete

explanations of the process, challenges, and objectives of policies. Social media is used by combining text, visuals, photos, infographics, and videos to make information easier to understand. The government also avoids using content that could lead to multiple interpretations, such as memes or jokes. The NVivo results show that the word “visual” is the most dominant, indicating the importance of visual media in helping the public understand political messages and increasing public trust.

b. Symbolic Content. The symbolic content of political communication is built through the use of religious values, mutual cooperation (gotong royong), kinship ties (silaturahmi), and Sundanese Garut culture in both speeches and social media. Visuals showing the Regent among the community strengthen the image of a leader who is close to and cares for residents. The use of hashtags such as #SyakurAmin, #BupatiGarut, and #GarutHebat reflects a personal, positional, and regional-vision branding strategy. The NVivo results show that the use of local symbols is able to create emotional closeness, strengthen collective identity, and increase public trust.

Consistency with Action. Message consistency is maintained by ensuring alignment between social media communication, speeches, policies, and program implementation in the field. The core vision and mission messages are maintained, while policy changes are explained openly to the public. Coordination among regional agencies and periodic evaluations are conducted to maintain alignment between government messages and actions. Hamadi (2024:17) found that consistency between social media content and policy implementation is a determining factor in building public trust in regional heads, because the public tends to compare digital narratives with their direct experience. This consistency helps strengthen government legitimacy, increase public participation, and reduce skepticism toward political promises.

The Alignment Between the Message Conveyed and the Reality Experienced by Communicants in the Field

The alignment between political messages and the reality on the ground is an important factor in building public trust in the Regent of Garut. The research was conducted among communities in the Tarogong Kidul, Sukaresmi, and Talegong Sub-districts, selected based on their proximity to the center of local government.

The political audience is the primary recipient of political messages, consisting of members of the public with varying levels of attention to and understanding of public issues. Public trust is built through messages that are relevant, clear, and consistent with actual conditions in the field.

a. Audience Understanding. Public understanding of political messages is influenced by regional factors and access to information. People living close to the center of government tend to have better understanding than those in more distant areas, because internet access and direct interaction with the Regent are easier. The NVivo analysis results show that the word “comment” appears most frequently, indicating that social media is the main means of gauging the public's level of understanding of political messages. However, digital communication has not yet been able to fully overcome regional disparities, so additional strategies are needed to reach communities in remote areas and those less active on social media.

Political Participation. Public political participation emerges through the expression of aspirations, involvement in

public activities, and interaction on social media. The level of public participation is influenced by message relevance and the speed of government response. The people of Tarogong Kidul appear more active and engaged than those in other areas. Participation increases when the public feels that their aspirations are being addressed and are producing real change. Conversely, slow responses and a mismatch between messages and field conditions can reduce public participation.

Public Perception. Public perception of the Regent of Garut's political communication is formed from direct experience of receiving services, interaction on social media, and local media coverage. Transparency and digital closeness help build a positive government image. The NVivo results show that the words “blusukan” (grassroots visits) and “understood” are the most dominant, indicating that the public still highly values the leader's direct presence among the community. A communication strategy that combines direct and digital approaches is considered quite effective, although some members of the public still feel there is a gap between political messages and the reality on the ground.

b. Public Response. Public response is reflected through appreciation, criticism, and complaints conveyed via social media, complaint channels, and face-to-face activities. The level of government response varies by area, with regions close to the center of government tending to feel more attended to than remote areas. The findings show that the public rates the government's response as “adequate” and “appropriate,” but not evenly distributed. The main obstacles are slow responses and limited service reach, especially in remote areas such as Talegong. This finding aligns with Rasyid and Pribadi (2021:430), who found that the responsiveness gap between the center and the periphery significantly affects residents' levels of trust and satisfaction, and recommend expanding inclusive communication channels. Therefore, improving government responsiveness is important for sustaining participation and building public trust over the long term. Overall, this study's findings confirm Alodat et al.'s (2023) proposition that the effectiveness of political communication in the digital era is determined not only by the intensity of social media platform use but also by the quality of interaction, message relevance, and consistency between digital narratives and the reality of public services in the field. The image-reality gap found in this study serves as a warning that social-media-based political communication not matched by real performance can, in fact, erode public trust in the long run, as cautioned by Papathanassopoulos (2025), who notes that the era of digital platforms presents a paradox: it is becoming easier to build a positive image, but also easier for public trust to collapse when there is dissonance between message and reality.

CONCLUSION

The political communication of the Regent of Garut in the digital era produced three main, interrelated findings. First, communicator credibility proved to be the main foundation of public trust, built through a flexible communication style that balances formal and informal approaches, message consistency, and openness of access to information, indicating that regional heads need to develop adaptive and contextual communication competencies. Second, social media has transformed from a mere publication channel into a participatory two-way communication space that combines information transparency,

symbolic approaches, and responsiveness to public aspirations, indicating that local governments need to design digital communication strategies oriented toward inclusive and sustainable dialogue. Third, there is a significant gap between the image constructed in the digital space and the reality experienced by part of the community, showing that public trust must be supported by real government performance, not merely symbolic communication. Overall, the Regent of Garut's political communication has made a positive contribution to building public trust, but its effectiveness is uneven and highly dependent on consistency between digital narratives and the actual quality of public services, since public trust is dynamic and fragile.

This study has a number of limitations that must be openly acknowledged. The qualitative approach, with a limited number of purposively selected informants, means that the findings are contextual and cannot be statistically generalized to other regions or leadership contexts in Indonesia. Data collection over a specific time period also means that the findings only represent conditions during the observation period, so changes in political communication dynamics before or after regional head elections have not been fully captured. In addition, the social media content analysis focused mainly on content publicly published by the Regent of Garut's official accounts, so communication in private spaces or closed forums could not be accessed, and the qualitative measurement of public trust is subjective and has not been standardized into numerical or index form.

Based on these findings and limitations, future research is recommended to use a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative analysis with a larger-scale quantitative survey so that the level of public trust can be measured more representatively and compared across regions. Comparative studies among regencies/cities in West Java, as well as longitudinal studies on changes in patterns of public trust before, during, and after a leadership period, are also needed to enrich contextual and long-term understanding. Further research is also recommended to develop a more structured policy evaluation framework for examining the image-reality gap—for example, by incorporating a public service satisfaction index—and to explore the role of artificial intelligence and big data analytics in local government political communication strategies as technology continues to advance rapidly.

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