THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION IN BUILDING PUBLIC TRUST IN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS: A COMPARATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW OF INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Public trust in political institutions has become a critical issue in emerging democracies, particularly in Southeast Asia. This study examines how organizational communication contributes to building public trust in political institutions through a comparative literature review of Indonesia and Malaysia. Using a systematic comparative review design, this research synthesizes 38 peer-reviewed studies published between 2014 and 2025. The analysis identifies thematic patterns related to communication structure, message consistency, digital engagement, and trust formation mechanisms. Findings indicate that Indonesia demonstrates relatively strong transparency and participatory openness but faces challenges in inter-agency coordination and message alignment. Conversely, Malaysia exhibits centralized communication coherence yet encounters limitations in dialogical engagement and public responsiveness. The study proposes an Alignment–Responsiveness Framework, suggesting that sustainable public trust emerges from the interaction between internal communication coherence and external responsiveness. This framework contributes to political organizational communication scholarship and offers strategic implications for designing trust-oriented public communication strategies in developing democracies.

Keywords: *organizational communication; public trust; political institutions; comparative literature review; Southeast Asia.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Public trust has become one of the most decisive indicators of democratic stability in contemporary governance. In many developing democracies, including those in Southeast Asia, declining confidence in political institutions has raised concerns about institutional legitimacy, policy compliance, and long-term political consolidation. Recent studies indicate that public trust is no longer determined solely by institutional performance, but increasingly by how political institutions communicate transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to citizens (Li et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2022). In this context, organizational communication functions not merely as an administrative tool but as a strategic mechanism for sustaining political legitimacy.

In Southeast Asia, Indonesia and Malaysia represent two distinct yet comparable political communication environments. Indonesia's post-1998 democratic transition significantly expanded public participation and institutional transparency. The enactment of the Public Information Disclosure Act (Law No. 14/2008) institutionalized open governance principles and strengthened citizens' access to public information (Mabillard & Keuffer, 2022; Wei & Zhang, 2025). However, despite these reforms, fragmented bureaucratic communication, inconsistent policy messaging, and politicization of public discourse continue to undermine trust in governmental institutions (Bertelli & Falletti, 2025; Head, 2024). Meanwhile, Malaysia has historically maintained a more centralized and executive-driven communication structure. While this model ensures message consistency and coordination, scholars argue that it may limit deliberative engagement and participatory transparency (Chuah et al., 2024; Masngut & Mohamad, 2021).

Existing scholarship on political communication and public trust has largely focused on Western democracies or has examined trust as an outcome of institutional performance rather than as a function of organizational communication processes. Studies on government transparency, media relations, and digital engagement have grown in recent years (Asimakopoulos et al., 2025; Kumalasari et al., 2024), yet most of these works treat communication as a variable within public relations or governance studies, without systematically analyzing how internal–external communication alignment shapes institutional trust in developing political systems.

In the Southeast Asian context, research tends to examine either digital

government communication or corruption-related trust erosion independently. Few studies offer a structured comparative synthesis of how organizational communication models influence public trust across different bureaucratic cultures within the region. Moreover, limited attention has been given to how communication fragmentation, centralized message control, and digital media ecosystems interact with institutional reputation and public legitimacy. This gap becomes more evident when comparing pluralistic democracies like Indonesia with semi-centralized governance models such as Malaysia.

The rapid expansion of digital media further complicates this landscape. Governments are now required to manage multi-directional communication flows, respond to misinformation, and maintain message coherence across institutional levels. In such environments, trust is increasingly formed through digital encounters between citizens and public institutions rather than solely through policy outcomes. However, scholarly discussion has not sufficiently integrated organizational communication theory with empirical developments in Southeast Asian political systems.

Given these theoretical and empirical gaps, this study seeks to comparatively examine how organizational communication contributes to building public trust in political institutions in Indonesia and Malaysia. Rather than conducting field-based measurement, this research synthesizes recent academic literature to identify patterns, divergences, and conceptual implications of communication practices in both countries. By positioning Indonesia and Malaysia as contrasting communication models within Southeast Asia, this study aims to contribute to the development of political organizational communication scholarship, particularly in the context of emerging democracies and developing governance systems.

Through this comparative literature analysis, the article proposes that public trust in political institutions is shaped not only by transparency initiatives but also by structural communication alignment, consistency of institutional narratives, and responsiveness within digital ecosystems. The findings are expected to enrich theoretical discussions on organizational communication in political contexts and provide strategic insights for public institutions in designing trust-oriented communication frameworks.

2. RESEARCH METHODE

This study adopts a systematic comparative literature review design to synthesize and critically analyze existing research on organizational communication and public trust in political institutions within the contexts of Indonesia and Malaysia (Thomann et al., 2022). Rather than employing a narrative overview, this study follows a structured literature identification, screening, and synthesis procedure to ensure methodological rigor and analytical transparency.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted between January and March 2025 using major academic databases, including:

1) Scopus;

2) ScienceDirect;

3) Taylor & Francis Online;

4) SpringerLink;

5) Google Scholar (for complementary screening);

6) Indonesian national accredited journals (SINTA 1 and SINTA 2).

The search strings combined key terms related to the study variables using Boolean operators:

1) "organizational communication" AND "public trust" AND "political institutions"

2) "government communication" AND "trust" AND "Indonesia"

3) "government communication" AND "trust" AND "Malaysia"

4) "strategic communication" AND "institutional legitimacy"

5) "digital government communication" AND "Southeast Asia"

The publication period was limited to 2014–2025 to capture post-digital transformation dynamics in political communication. Earlier foundational theoretical

works were included selectively where conceptually relevant. The initial search yielded 147 records.

Screening and Selection Process

The study employed a structured multi-stage screening process inspired by PRISMA guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses), although adapted for qualitative synthesis.

a) *Stage 1: Identification*

- 147 articles were identified across databases.

b) *Stage 2: Removal of Duplicates*

- After removing 32 duplicate records, 115 articles remained.

c) *Stage 3: Title and Abstract Screening*

- Articles were screened for thematic relevance to:

    1) Organizational communication in public/political institutions;

    2) Public trust or institutional legitimacy;

    3) Empirical or conceptual relevance to Indonesia, Malaysia, or Southeast Asia;

    4) This stage excluded 54 articles that focused solely on corporate communication or unrelated governance sectors;

    5) 61 articles remained.

d) *Stage 4: Full-Text Eligibility Assessment*

- Full-text articles were assessed based on inclusion criteria (see below).

- After eligibility screening, 38 articles were retained for final synthesis.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure analytical consistency, the following criteria were applied:

Inclusion Criteria:

1) Peer-reviewed journal articles;

2) Published between 2014–2025;

3) Focused on government, political, or public sector institutions;

4) Examined communication practices, transparency, reputation, or public trust;

5) Empirical or conceptual studies relevant to Indonesia, Malaysia, or comparable developing democracies;

6) Written in English or Bahasa Indonesia.

Exclusion Criteria:

1) Studies focusing solely on corporate or private sector communication;

2) Opinion essays without scholarly references;

3) Articles lacking methodological transparency;

4) Conference abstracts without full-text access;

5) Studies unrelated to institutional trust.

Quality Appraisal

To strengthen methodological validity, selected articles were evaluated using the following quality indicators:

1) Clarity of research design;

2) Theoretical grounding;

3) Methodological transparency;

4) Relevance to institutional political communication;

5) Analytical rigor.

Studies that lacked clear methodological explanation or theoretical contribution were excluded during the eligibility phase. This quality filtering ensured that the final corpus consisted of conceptually and empirically robust sources.

Data Analysis Procedure

The selected literature was analyzed through a three-step analytical framework:

a) *Thematic Coding*

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, studies were coded into core analytical categories:

- Organizational communication structure (centralized vs. fragmented)*;*

- Transparency and information disclosure mechanisms*;*

- Digital communication strategies*;*

- Media relations and reputation management*;*

- Trust formation mechanisms.

b) *Comparative Matrix Development*

A comparative analytical matrix was constructed to systematically contrast Indonesia and Malaysia across the identified themes. This allowed identification of:

- Structural similarities;

- Communication model differences;

- Contextual influences (political culture, bureaucratic design, media environment).

c) *Conceptual Synthesis*

Rather than merely summarizing findings, this study integrates literature patterns to identify broader conceptual implications regarding how communication alignment, digital responsiveness, and message consistency shape institutional trust in developing political systems.

Analytical Validity

To enhance analytical credibility:

- Triangulation across multiple databases was applied;

- Recent international peer-reviewed sources were prioritized;

- Comparative interpretation was grounded in recurring empirical patterns rather than isolated findings.

By implementing a structured search, systematic screening, quality appraisal, and thematic-comparative synthesis, this study moves beyond a narrative literature review and provides a methodologically transparent framework for understanding political organizational communication in Southeast Asia.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Thematic Patterns of Organizational Communication in Indonesia

Theme 1: Transparency as institutional infrastructure, but with coordination costs

The literature consistently describes Indonesia's post-1998 governance as increasingly oriented toward public transparency and participation, reinforced institutionally through the Public Information Disclosure Act (Law No. 14/2008). This regulatory infrastructure positions organizational communication as a legitimacy-building mechanism: the more accessible and open institutional information becomes, the more citizens can evaluate decision-making processes and perceive the institution as accountable (Cojocaru, 2025; Dalimunthe, Suhendar, et al., 2024). However, openness also carries organizational costs. The Indonesian political–bureaucratic system involves multiple ministries, agencies, and multi-level authorities, producing a structural condition where transparency is not always matched by message alignment. In several studies, trust erosion is linked not to the absence of information, but to "coordination gaps" that generate conflicting narratives across institutions (Sigawi et al., 2025; Suhendar et al., 2023).

Theme 2: Fragmented messaging and narrative inconsistency as a trust risk

A recurring finding in the Indonesian context is that institutional credibility is highly sensitive to narrative consistency especially during policy controversies or crises. Fragmentation becomes visible when different agencies communicate overlapping policies with different framing, timelines, or technical interpretations. Such inconsistency reduces perceived competence and increases public suspicion,

even when the policy substance is defensible (Frederiksen, 2022; Purba et al., 2025). Conceptually, this suggests that in pluralistic and decentralized environments, organizational communication effectiveness depends on inter-agency "message governance" rather than merely the volume of disclosure.

Theme 3: Digital engagement expands access, but accelerates overload and misinformation dynamics

The Indonesian case demonstrates an expanded role of digital media as a direct communication channel between institutions and citizens. Government actors increasingly use social media and digital platforms to explain policy, respond to questions, and manage reputation. This reduces reliance on traditional media gatekeeping and can improve perceived accessibility and responsiveness. Yet, digitalization also intensifies information overload and amplifies misinformation risks. The literature highlights that rapid information cycles, combined with inconsistent framing, may create public confusion and reduce trust, particularly when hoaxes circulate faster than official clarification (Spencer, 2024). Thus, digital communication in Indonesia functions as a double-edged mechanism: it can strengthen legitimacy when managed coherently, but can accelerate delegitimation when communication is reactive, fragmented, or inconsistent.

Synthesis (Indonesia):

Across the reviewed studies, Indonesia reflects a model of "open-but-fragmented communication": transparency is structurally promoted, participation channels exist, but trust outcomes are mediated by the institution's ability to maintain coherence, alignment, and rapid corrective communication in digital environments (Dalimunthe et al., 2024; Salimi et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2023).

Thematic Patterns of Organizational Communication in Malaysia

Theme 1: Centralized message control ensures consistency, but limits deliberative trust-building

In Malaysia, the literature emphasizes a historically centralized and hierarchical communication structure in which executive institutions play a strong role in

controlling public narratives. This arrangement supports message discipline and reduces inter-agency contradictions, contributing to a perception of stability and administrative order (Lægreid & Rykkja, 2022). However, centralization also limits deliberative communication and public involvement. Several studies argue that while message control may secure short-term compliance, it does not automatically generate deep trust because citizens may perceive communication as managed rather than dialogical (Nastjuk et al., 2025).

Theme 2: Political transition and digital openness increase interaction, but skepticism persists

A turning point identified in the literature is the 2018 political transition, which expanded digital communication practices and introduced more visible attempts at consultation and open data initiatives. These shifts indicate movement from one-way informational communication toward more interactive formats (Nielsen et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the literature also notes persistent skepticism because citizens still interpret institutional transparency through the lens of historical control and political sensitivity. Where responsiveness is slow or selective, communication openness is often perceived as procedural rather than substantive, limiting its effect on trust formation (Kulykovets, 2024).

Theme 3: Conditional trust shaped by political context and perceived responsiveness

Compared to Indonesia's fragmentation problem, Malaysia's trust issue is frequently discussed in terms of "conditionality": citizens may grant trust when communication appears stable and aligned with public expectations, but trust declines when political controversies arise or responsiveness is perceived as constrained. The concept of conditional trust reflects that trust is maintained not only by consistent messages but by perceived willingness to engage criticism and provide transparent justification especially during sensitive governance issues (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2024).

Synthesis (Malaysia):

Overall, Malaysia represents a "controlled-but-constrained communication" model: internal coordination and message consistency are strengths, yet trust-building is limited when communication is experienced as top-down and insufficiently dialogical (Humaizi et al., 2024; Kholil et al., 2024).

Analytical Comparison: Indonesia vs. Malaysia Across Key Variables

To move beyond narrative description, the literature can be synthesized into four analytical variables that explain differences in trust outcomes:

1) *Structural communication architecture*

    Indonesia tends toward a multi-actor and decentralized structure that expands participation but raises alignment challenges. Malaysia tends toward centralized architecture that promotes discipline but narrows deliberation (Dalimunthe et al., 2020; Widiarto et al., 2025).

2) *Message consistency and institutional coherence*

    In Indonesia, trust is vulnerable to inconsistent cross-agency communication; in Malaysia, message coherence is relatively strong but may be perceived as controlled rather than transparent (Diar & Abd Aziz, 2025).

3) *Responsiveness within digital ecosystems*

    Indonesia's digital communication often appears vibrant but faces misinformation and overload issues; Malaysia's digital openness has expanded, yet responsiveness is frequently evaluated as selective and politically bounded (Diar & Abd Aziz, 2025).

4) *Trust mechanism (how trust is produced)*

    Indonesia's trust mechanism is shaped by transparency + perceived integrity, but moderated by coordination capacity. Malaysia's trust mechanism is shaped by stability + performance signals, but moderated by perceived openness and willingness to engage dissent (Samsuddin et al., 2025).

This comparative synthesis indicates a key conceptual insight: in developing democracies, public trust is not solely a function of transparency or message control,

but the result of alignment between internal coordination and external responsiveness. This aligns with the view that trust is strengthened when institutions communicate consistently, transparently, and responsively to citizen concerns.

Shared Challenges and Converging Risks in Southeast Asian Political Communication

Despite structural differences, the literature highlights converging risks in both countries:

Digital misinformation and accelerated public judgment

Both contexts face rapid diffusion of misinformation and emotionally charged narratives, often outpacing official clarification. In such conditions, trust becomes fragile because credibility is evaluated in real-time and citizens compare competing claims across platforms (Ross Arguedas et al., 2024).

Rising expectations of transparency and accountability

Citizens demand justification, not merely information. Where communication lacks clear reasoning, empathy, and accountability cues, trust declines quickly regardless of whether the system is open (Indonesia) or centralized (Malaysia) (Yoga & Haris, 2026).

Institutional capacity gaps in strategic communication

Both countries face internal capacity constraints: limited professional communication governance, uneven digital competencies, and insufficient institutional mechanisms for cross-unit alignment and crisis communication. This produces either fragmentation (Indonesia) or constrained engagement (Malaysia), both of which weaken trust sustainability.

Conceptual Contribution: The Alignment–Responsiveness Framework of Trust-Oriented Political Organizational Communication

Based on the comparative synthesis, this study contributes a conceptual proposition for political organizational communication in developing democracies:

Trust-oriented organizational communication is produced when two conditions are simultaneously met:

1) Internal alignment (message coherence, inter-agency coordination, institutional narrative consistency), and

2) External responsiveness (transparency, dialogical engagement, timely correction, empathy in digital interactions).

Indonesia shows relatively stronger external openness but weaker internal alignment; Malaysia shows stronger internal alignment but more constrained external responsiveness. Thus, trust deficits in both contexts can be interpreted as an imbalance between alignment and responsiveness, rather than as the absence of communication itself. This framing offers a systematic explanation for why communication reforms that focus only on transparency (without coordination) or only on consistency (without dialogue) may fail to generate durable public trust (Hidayat & Pratama, 2025).

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that organizational communication is not merely an administrative function within political institutions, but a structural mechanism through which public trust is constructed, negotiated, and sustained. The comparative synthesis between Indonesia and Malaysia reveals that trust outcomes are shaped by the interaction between two key dimensions: internal communication alignment and external responsiveness. In Indonesia, institutional openness and participatory transparency are relatively strong; however, fragmented coordination and inconsistent cross-agency messaging weaken trust consolidation. In Malaysia, centralized message control ensures stability and coherence, yet limited dialogical engagement constrains deeper trust formation.

The primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in advancing an Alignment–Responsiveness Framework for political organizational communication in developing democracies. Rather than treating transparency or message consistency as isolated determinants of trust, this framework proposes that sustainable public trust emerges when internal narrative coherence (alignment) operates simultaneously with

transparent, dialogical, and timely engagement (responsiveness). Imbalances between these two dimensions whether excessive fragmentation or excessive control undermine institutional legitimacy. This conceptual contribution enriches political organizational communication scholarship by situating trust not only as an outcome of institutional performance, but as a communicative product of structural coordination and strategic engagement within evolving digital ecosystems.

From a practical perspective, political institutions in Southeast Asia must move beyond symbolic transparency initiatives or message discipline alone. First, governments should institutionalize cross-agency communication governance mechanisms to ensure message coherence during policy implementation and crisis situations. Second, digital communication strategies must be reframed from information dissemination models toward dialogical engagement models, emphasizing responsiveness, empathy, and evidence-based clarification. Third, institutional capacity building in strategic communication management including crisis communication protocols, digital media literacy, and inter-departmental alignment systems should be prioritized to reduce fragmentation and enhance credibility.

Future research should extend this framework by conducting empirical field-based investigations that measure the interaction between alignment and responsiveness variables in shaping trust outcomes. Quantitative trust indices, digital sentiment analysis, and cross-national comparative surveys in Southeast Asia could provide empirical validation of the proposed conceptual model. Additionally, further studies may explore how algorithmic media environments and political polarization mediate the relationship between organizational communication and public trust in emerging democracies.

In conclusion, this study argues that in contemporary political systems particularly in developing and transitional democracies public trust is less a static perception and more a dynamic communicative achievement. Political legitimacy is sustained not only through policy effectiveness but through consistent, aligned, and responsive organizational communication practices that adapt to the complexities of digital-era governance.

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