

Model of Media Relations at the Cultural and Tourism Office of Aceh Tengah, Indonesia: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The impact of effective media relations on the prominence of Aceh Tengah Regency in Aceh Province, Indonesia as a tourist destination in the province is significant. These connections are vital for promoting tourism, and the use of social media to present tourist attractions has become essential. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this study aims to evaluate the practical application of the media relations model at the Aceh Tengah Cultural and Tourism Office in 2023. This model encompasses a range of initiatives, such as press tours, meetings, press releases, press conferences, press receptions, press relations, and media events. The Aceh Tengah Cultural and Tourism Office aimed to boost media coverage, tourist appeal, and engagement through the active pursuit of various initiatives. The media relations model, in addition to providing advantages to mass media organizations by facilitating the dissemination of information about tourism in the Aceh Tengah Regency, also serves to cultivate mutually beneficial relationships between the two parties. The use of information technology has made content tourism a beneficial resource for individuals intending to travel to the Aceh Tengah Regency in Indonesia.

Keywords: Aceh Tengah Regency, Culture and Tourism, Media Relations, Tourism Promotion.

Introduction

The growing interest in research on media relations is evident in government organizations, which can be attributed to the need for transparency in governance in Indonesia. This development guarantees that the general public has access to information from the inception of government initiatives until their implementation (1). The government often employs media relations to disseminate information about its programs and activities, raise public awareness, and promote engagement in these initiatives (2). Promoting tourism is one of the primary objectives of the Aceh Tengah Regency Government (3). Strengthening the promotion of tourist attractions requires strong cooperation between regional media outlets and digital platforms such as television, radio, and print media (4). Additionally, the use of information and communication technology based on the Internet has enabled the local government of Aceh Tengah to take advantage of various features and social media platforms to optimize tourism promotion efforts (5). The Aceh Tengah Tourism Office recognizes the importance

of cultivating positive relationships with media professionals and utilizes these connections to promote various events and activities. This approach involves promoting not only formal ceremonies but also a diverse array of tourist attractions, including natural, historical, and agro tourism destinations that are developed and supported by the local government and community of the Aceh Tengah Regency. The aim of promoting tourist destinations is to attract tourists to specific areas. The Cultural and Tourism Office in the Aceh Tengah Regency has not demonstrated the media relations skills required to effectively promote diverse tourist destinations, particularly nature tourism. Owing to this lack of recognition, the local government of the Aceh Tengah Regency has failed to realize the full potential of the tourism industry, resulting in the absence of economic development within the local community through the multiplier effect. Government agencies in Indonesia extensively practice media relations with journalists to boost their tourism.

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The government views these relations as essential for positive tourism coverage, and has a dedicated Ministry of Tourism to manage the sector (6). The Central Aceh District Tourism Office uses these strategies to foster effective communication with journalists and media institutions. Media plays a significant role in the realm of public relations, particularly in the tourism industry, where the promotion of favorable relationships is paramount for attracting potential tourists to various destinations. Nurudin (2018), in an article entitled 'Media Relations: Concepts and Applications', stated that the audience of mass media comprises potential tourists who could be interested in exploring different attractions (7). Therefore, it is crucial to inform media audiences of the historical importance, accessibility, advantages, and natural beauty of tourist destinations. According to Frank William Jefkins, media relations involve actively pursuing extensive coverage of public relations messages or information to educate and inform readers (8,9).

Yosal Iriantara, in his study titled "Media Relations," simplified media relations as a strategy or tactic for forming partnerships with the mass media. He identified seven media relations strategies as follows (10):

- Development of a public relations strategy for mass media
- Implementing communication initiatives that leverage existing media channels
- Creating and nurturing relationships with members of the media
- Establishing the organization as a reliable and reputable source of information for mass media within a particular industry
- Positioning key leaders within the organization as spokespersons or committee chairs in industry associations or similar professional organizations
- Collaborating with other internal departments to ensure access to current information and resources.

Media relations entail constructing favorable connections with the media to position the organization as a reliable source of information and strategic partners. The primary objective is to enhance the relationship between the institution or organization and its stakeholders, thus cultivating trust in the institution. The different methods used in media relations activities to

disseminate information include press conferences, press releases, press briefings, and media events. The most conventional method of spreading information is through press conferences and events designed to bring journalists together to provide detailed explanations of specific information and present it to the public. Press releases, which are prepared information that takes the form of news, are often used for this purpose and are intended for delivery to journalists or media outlets, who can then publish the information in mass media, making it accessible to the general public. Press briefings typically involve informal gatherings with journalists to discuss specific issues. Media events are often held as award ceremonies to recognize journalists or mass media organizations that have played a significant role in disseminating information from government agencies. The objectives of media relations for organizations include increasing public awareness of their activities, fostering long-lasting and mutually respectful relationships, soliciting feedback on initiatives, and providing decision-makers with relevant information for well-informed policy and decision-making. According to Steiner and Miner (1978) in their book "Management Policy and Strategy," A strategy is typically a collection of objectives, policies, and programs that are designed to achieve the goals of an organization. A well-developed strategy can be highly beneficial to organizations, allowing them to successfully achieve their desired outcomes. In public relations, it is essential to convey an organization's goals to the public through various media channels. Reaching people from diverse backgrounds, including educational, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, is of paramount importance. To effectively communicate with a broad audience, it is crucial to employ media that resonates with a wide range of people. Consequently, the concept of media relationships is significant (11). Organizations must cultivate favorable relationships with the media to establish solid connections with the public. The effective communication of reality, priorities, and strategic directions to all stakeholders is critical for competent entities, allowing them to focus on achieving their primary objectives in daily operations. Establishing positive relationships with external stakeholders can be achieved

through two primary methods: communication and non-communication. Media relations activities are critical components of communication efforts, and can include press releases, publications, public service announcements, and other forms of communication that leverage the latest advancements in information technology. The undertaking comprised various preliminary stages, including situational analysis of public relations research, evaluation of the organization's vision and mission, formulation of action and communication strategies, development of a tactical plan, determination of the program type, allocation of the budget, hiring of staff, and execution of a concluding assessment.

In his study titled "Exceptional Learners: An Introduction to Special Education," Daniel P. Hallan outlined six sequential steps for formulating these activities (12):

Serving the Media

The mass media domain encompasses a range of activities, including the creation of written content, the production of images and audio/video materials, and the determination of the optimal timing for releasing press releases. For example, some media outlets require press releases to be submitted by 10 p.m., which necessitates the submission of releases to ensure that journalists have ample time to disseminate information before the editorial deadline.

Establishing a Reputation for Reliability

The primary objective of this approach is to protect an institution's reputation by addressing the issues that could harm it. It is crucial to offer prompt responses to any negative concerns to counteract any unfavorable information that may be present in an organization's explanations. In addition, the public is expected to remain impartial when evaluating apologies or expressions of regret communicated through various media outlets.

Supplying Good Copies

The objective of this plan was to provide exceptional information to the public through mass media outlets that cater to diverse audiences. It is crucial that agencies differentiate between the information they distribute through their internal channels, such as websites and social networks, and the information intended for distribution on mass media. Content intended for mass media should meet news values, including being pertinent to the audience and relaying essential

messages that must be widely distributed. Consequently, the agency thoroughly reviews the information before releasing it to the media.

Cooperation in Providing News Material

This strategy was created to assist journalists in obtaining information by expressing appreciation for and extending warm invitations. This strategy involves providing time and resources to the media representatives. For example, a designated media center equipped with fundamental amenities, such as computers, Internet access, and refreshments, can serve as a comfortable workspace for journalists covering the agency's offices.

Providing Verification Facilities

This approach equips journalists with the requisite means to disseminate the information that the organization is presenting, such as transportation and internet access in rural regions. For example, providing journalists with transportation, Internet access, and suitable lodging during a tourism event in remote areas ensures that they have the support needed to report back to their newsrooms.

Building personal Relationships

A significant aspect of this strategy is fostering personal relationships between media representatives and journalists, for example, by presenting presents and offering congratulations at weddings.

Evaluations are essential for the successful implementation of a work plan. The primary purpose of an assessment is to provide information on the extent to which performance targets have been achieved, analyze and critique the principles that guide the selection and objectives, and recommend appropriate actions based on the evaluation findings. Sahrin (2022) emphasized the importance of government agencies periodically evaluating their initiatives, particularly in cultivating favorable relationships with the media (13). According to Jefkins (1992), public relations efforts tend to yield qualitative results that are not quantifiable and are instead evaluated based on subjective perceptions and comparisons (14). Quantitative results of public relations initiatives can be influenced by several factors, including increased publicity, improved corporate earnings, reduced customer complaints, and an expanded customer base for a company's products. An approach to assessing the effectiveness of a public relations program is to evaluate the extent to which

the media coverage of organizational activities is covered.

The evaluations encompass the following aspects: analyzing statistical data on audience reach and engagement, such as participation levels in media relations programs or activities carried out by public relations agencies; assessing the impact of public relations messages from specific newspapers or magazines by assigning weighted scores to each medium; employing surveys and interviews to periodically obtain feedback from target audiences and gauge any changes in their perceptions or viewpoints; and evaluating success by utilizing statistical feedback measures based on improvements in the statistical metrics of the promoted messages (9).

The extent of the statistical improvement varies depending on the specific message and campaign objectives. Gathering feedback through media evaluation is essential. In the face of biased, skeptical, or cynical media coverage, it is imperative for public relations to implement initiatives aimed at correcting misconceptions and providing transparent and truthful education to both the media and public. Public relations agencies typically assess the level of audience comprehension of their initiatives by evaluating growth in the understanding and awareness of the target audience. To study the practical application of the media relations model at the Aceh Tengah Cultural and Tourism Office, Indonesia, in 2023.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research methodology that incorporates a constructivist approach. Qualitative research examines natural phenomena using researchers as key instruments (15). Robert Bogdan explained that qualitative research aims to gain a deep understanding of the experiences of research subjects, including their behaviors, perceptions, motivations, and actions, by using descriptive language to describe their natural contexts and employing various naturalistic methods (16). Qualitative research primarily aims to explore a topic systematically by collecting extensive information that emphasizes the complexity and depth of the examined data. This form of research investigates the various realities that people construct and the consequences of these constructions on their social exchanges from a constructivist perspective (16). Generally, the findings of this study involve

the identification of typologies, guidelines, models, or patterns associated with the examined subject matter (17). This approach guarantees the identification of reliable information and provides scientific evidence. The participants were selected using purposive sampling. Tourism Office employees were selected based on their role in promoting tourism and maintaining media relations. Journalists from *Tribun Gayo*, the largest readership of the Central Aceh Regency, were included. Data from media professionals provided insights into the development of media relations between Central Aceh officials and journalists, ensuring a balanced perspective aligned with the study's objectives. This qualitative research used data collection techniques, such as field observations, content analysis of social media and websites managed by the Central Aceh Tourism Office, and interviews with government officials and local journalists. It also compares rudimentary press releases from the Central Aceh Tourism Office with edited versions produced by journalists. Press releases were limited to data or direct interviews with journalists responsible for converting them into news, audio, and video narratives. The limited content production skills of government officials hinder professional information dissemination, comparable to that of larger institutions at the ministerial level in Indonesia. The interview protocol included both structured and semi-structured interviews. Key questions were posed to interviewees, such as those from the Central Aceh District government, about their regular preparation for tourism press releases, methods of contacting journalists, and their media relations strategies. Additional questions were asked if further clarification was required, such as the annual frequency of press releases. This study found that press releases on tourism in Central Aceh are not distributed regularly, but rather incidentally, coinciding with official events. Journalists were contacted only during these events to share tourism information. The main reason for this irregularity is budget constraints resulting from the Covid-19 impact on Indonesia, including the Central Aceh Regency. The agency's responses were corroborated by journalists in Central Aceh. Three primary methods are typically used for data collection in academic research: observation, interviews, and surveys. Observation involves the direct

monitoring of the subject being studied. The interviews involved a question-and-answer session between the researcher and the research sources. The surveys comprised a series of inquiries placed on the sample population. Additionally, the document or literature review technique requires a search for relevant data references or citations as well as consulting snowball informants and cross-checking the information. When discrepancies arise between various sources, it is essential to consult a third source to verify the most accurate information.

Results and Discussion

In 2023, the tourism industry in Aceh Tengah Regency, which had suffered significantly from the COVID-19 pandemic, began to experience resurgence. During the pandemic, which lasted from 2019 to 2022, all tourist attractions within the region were closed and residents were advised to remain indoors to reduce the risk of infection. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial effect on regional budgets. Before the pandemic, the public health and food security sectors had larger budgets than before. The government of Aceh Tengah Regency failed to allocate adequate funds to its 2023 regional budget to improve and promote its tourism attractions. Consequently, the objectives set by the Aceh Tengah Regency Tourism Office are affected by these financial constraints (18). In 2022; the Aceh Tengah Regency boasted 57 tourist destinations, nine of these which were designated as superpriority sites. These sought-after locations are significant attractions for both domestic and international travelers. Among the top priority destinations were Pantan Terong (a scenic attraction), Lake Lut Tawar, Putri Pukes, Tedoh 7 Piyoh, Ujung Paking, Teluk Mapar, Loyang Koro, Menye Beach, and Atu Belah. The prominent locations featured in the itinerary included Bur Kelieten, known for its hiking opportunities, Megaya Falls, and Raft. The Aceh Tengah Regency Tourism Office welcomes approximately 12,000 visitors to its diverse range of tourist attractions per month, the vast majority of which are residents of the region (19,20). According to the Aceh Tengah Tourism Office, the surge in the number of tourists visiting the Aceh Tengah Regency represents a significant accomplishment. The hospitality industry's flourishing perspective is

reinforced by the wealth of lodging options that are currently accessible. By 2022, the total number of hotels in a specified location was 47. According to projections, the number of people employed in the accommodation industry in Aceh Tengah Regency is 4 expected to increase from 40 in 2023 to 60 by the end of the year, with further expansion expected as more people enter the field (20). This study also examines the communication patterns between government employees and journalists in the Central Aceh Regency using the Gayo language associated with the dominant ethnic group. This shared linguistic and cultural background enhances mutual comprehension and fosters productive dialogue on tourism information in the region. Notably, there are no journalists from non-Gayo ethnic backgrounds in Central Aceh Regency. Cultural attribution in this media relationship is based on ethnic similarities, specifically the Gayo tribe, between government employees and journalists in the Central Aceh Regency. Social relationships within the Gayo tribe are termed *sedere* (brotherhood), with members of the tribe as siblings. This allows for effective communication aimed at promoting regional tourism in their native areas. This social kinship system is fundamental to the Gayo Tribe. The unique nature of media relations between the Tourism Office and journalists in Central Aceh stems from cultural factors that share a common tribal affiliation following the principle of *sedere*. They collectively understand the need to develop and promote central tourism to attract more visitors. Geographically, Central Aceh is located in the interior of Aceh Province, making it less popular than other Indonesian tourist spots. This shared understanding, rooted in *sedere* culture, reinforces their bond as siblings from the same region. They communicate in Gayo, the native language of Central Aceh District. They share the social responsibility to elevate the global recognition of Central Aceh tourism. Increased tourist visits to Central Aceh are anticipated to improve the socioeconomic status of local communities. Unlike other Indonesian regions that use Malay or Indonesian and have ethnic diversity, Central Aceh is primarily inhabited by the Gayo ethnic group, comprising 99 percent of its 223,833 population as of 2023 (20).

The Present Study Revealed Several Media Relations Models Implemented by The Tourism and Culture Office of Central Aceh District

Media Relations Using Press Releases

The Aceh Tengah Tourism Office prioritized fostering strong media relations with regional and national media outlets to increase tourism. The head of the Cultural and Tourism Office for Aceh Tengah Regency, Zulkarnain, acknowledged the critical role of the media and emphasized the need for prompt responses to journalists' inquiries and providing them with relevant information about the region's tourist attractions. A standardized press release template was also implemented to guarantee uniformity in the information provided to journalists, with a particular focus on conforming to the demands of broadcast news formats. The use of a standardized template simplifies the process of transferring employees within the regency government, resulting in a seamless and unimpeded transition between workstations. This template also improved the dissemination of news information to journalists by providing a structured and user-friendly format that includes headlines, detailed content, and contact information for journalists seeking further interviews. Undertaking these initiatives led to an increase in the reach of the audience, promotion of tourism, and promotion of collaboration between stakeholders at the Aceh Tengah Tourism Office.

Media Relations Using Press Tours

A potentially more efficient approach would be to extend personal invitations to journalists by directly using the Aceh Tengah Regency Tourism Office. The distribution of press releases is typically limited to journalists residing outside of Aceh Tengah. For instance, when international travelers visit Aceh Tengah, the Aceh Tengah Tourism Office often assists them in visiting their favorite attractions.

Media Relations Using the Online Press

Generally, foreign travelers seek information about popular tourist destinations through online research. Local reporters from Aceh Tengah were present during these visits. Budi Patria, the head of the Tribun Gayo News Office, stated that the Tribun Group had intentionally established an office in Aceh Tengah due to the substantial influx of tourists. Tribun acknowledged Aceh Tengah as a desirable location for digital readers, as mentioned

by Budi Patria during an interview on October 9, 2023. According to Tribun Gayo, the public is interested in information about popular tourist attractions on digital media platforms. To obtain tourism data, Tribun Gayo regularly receives press releases from the Aceh Tengah Regency Tourism Office. Both parties have established productive relationships to share information. The Aceh Tengah Tourism Office has been significantly influenced by the extensive global news coverage provided by Tribun Gayo, which has been intensified by the ongoing advancement of information digitization related to tourist destinations. This is because several subsidiaries of the Kompas Gramedia Group have distributed news broadcasts from Tribun Gayo. Subsequently, various media outlets within the Kompas Gramedia Group disseminated news sourced from Tribun Gayo, thus augmenting the audience's acquaintance with tourist attractions in the Aceh Tengah Regency. The local media in Aceh Tengah typically charges between 1 million and 5 million Indonesian rupiahs for tourism promotion, despite the high cost of advertising. Owing to financial constraints, only a limited number of tourism promotions are available in the form of advertisements. Undeniably, only one advertisement is permitted per medium annually. According to the 2024 Work Plan Program, the Aceh Tengah Regency Tourism Office allocated funds to promote and improve tourist attractions to revitalize the tourism industry in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Media Relations Using Regular Media Meetings

A potential means of accomplishing this objective is to organize periodic coffee meetings with journalists in Aceh Tengah to publicize the notion that tourism is vital to the local economy. In addition, these gatherings gave reporters the opportunity to solicit feedback on proposed initiatives aimed at increasing the number of tourists. Positive news pertaining to tourist attractions in Aceh Tengah spurred a community's willingness to accommodate visitors. The implementation of village-based businesses in the tourism industry in various villages has yielded favorable outcomes. This trend signifies increased participation of local communities in the tourism sector and stimulates economic expansion in these regions. The website maintained by the Aceh Tengah Tourism Office at

<https://dispar.acehtengahkab.go.id> is designed to promote tourism initiatives and provide valuable information about a variety of tourist attractions. However, the website's management has not been entirely optimized, as indicated by the absence of recent updates (last updated in 2021). One major obstacle to website management is the scarcity of IT professionals. According to government regulations, it is mandatory to disseminate important information about Aceh Tengah through an official website (<http://humas.acehtengahkab.go.id/>) supervised by the Public Relations Division of the Aceh Tengah Regency Government. This website, overseen by the government's public relations unit, serves as a comprehensive source of information on Aceh Tengah Regency, including its tourist attractions. Although the Aceh Tengah Tourism Office's internal website has been developed and maintained, but it has not received the same level of care as its external counterpart. Although it is managed independently by the Aceh Tengah Tourism Office, its internal website remains a vital platform on which staff members can access important information. The Aceh Tengah Tourism Office manages an Instagram account with the username @dispar_acehtengah, specifically designed to target social media users. In March 2024, the account contained 490 posts that showcased official updates by the office. The visually appealing design of accounts has successfully captured the attention of social media users. The account curation team strategically placed an account to promote the tourist destinations in the region. The act of capturing and disseminating images on social media has become prevalent among travelers and has demonstrated significant advantages for Aceh Tengah as a tourist destination. The Google search results page contains numerous photographs and videos submitted by the general public to various tourist attractions in Aceh Tengah, thus offering promotional support to the tourism department. Visitors exploring the Gayo Highlands contributed to this promotional effort through photographs and videos. The same framework provides journalists with information on a multitude of media platforms in the Aceh Tengah Regency, including print, online, electronic, and cyber media platforms. The dissemination of news has experienced remarkable improvements owing to

the emergence of various media channels such as radio, television, print, and online media. To accommodate journalists' diverse needs, the agency team has created written content specifically designed for print and online publications, audio content tailored for radio journalists, and audiovisual content suitable for television journalists. Regarding media relations, digital advancements have not notably influenced media relations in promoting tourism in Central Aceh District. Mobile phone technology, particularly WhatsApp, streamlines communication by allowing the transfer of photographs, videos, and press releases to journalists. However, the Central Aceh Tourism Office has inadequately leveraged social media for tourism promotion, primarily because of a shortage of skilled personnel. As a result, social media content production and dissemination are minimal. In contrast, media institutions create and distribute tourism content via online news sites and social media platforms, such as Tribun Gayo. The agency prepares publication-ready content and submits it to mass media outlets, which then writes, edits, and publishes the material in digital formats. The media relations model can be employed to construct positive relationships with the media and effectively manage social networks to improve exposure to information about tourist attractions in Aceh Tengah Regency. Utilizing this model at the regency level represents a comprehensive approach that aims to achieve the ultimate goal of reaching a broad audience in the current digital era. The primary objective of media relations is to disseminate information from governmental agencies to the public through mass media channels to foster a positive perception of tourism in Central Aceh Regency. The fundamental essence of media relations lies in cultivating a favorable perception of the populace. The media relations between the Central Aceh Regency Tourism Office and journalists or mass media institutions function effectively and in a mutually beneficial manner.

Conclusion

The Tourism Office has successfully implemented a media relations model; however, modifications are necessary to account for the distinct social and cultural characteristics of journalists in Aceh Tengah Regency. A significant obstacle is obtaining a tourism promotion budget that is distributed

periodically throughout the fiscal year, which is vital for allocating resources for promotional initiatives and engaging media professionals in Aceh Tengah Regency.

An essential aspect to consider is the need to optimize all social media platforms that extend beyond websites and Instagram. It is vital that the Aceh Tengah Tourism Office have a strong presence on each of these platforms because the audience and followers possess unique characteristics. The diverse nature of netizens on these platforms represents various market segments that can contribute to the promotion of tourism in Aceh Tengah Regency.

Abbreviation

Nil.

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Authors Contribution

All authors contributed equally.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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