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# INSTITUTIONALIZING DIGITAL PUBLIC RELATIONS: STRENGTHENING GOVERNMENT-CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA IN MALAYSIA THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

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## Abstract:

The strategic use of digital public relations (PR) has become increasingly vital for enhancing government-citizen engagement in the digital era. However, in Malaysia, despite the widespread adoption of social media platforms by government agencies, digital PR remains under-institutionalized, with limited leadership commitment, organizational readiness, and formal policy guidance. This conceptual paper addresses this gap by developing a theory-driven framework grounded in Institutional Theory to explain how institutional pressures (regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive) interact with leadership commitment and organizational readiness to influence digital PR institutionalization. The model further theorizes that institutionalized digital PR enhances citizen trust and engagement quality, two critical dimensions of democratic digital communication. This study contributes to closing a theoretical and contextual gap in Malaysian public sector communication research while offering a framework for policymakers to institutionalize digital PR as a legitimate, sustainable governance function.

## Keywords:

Digital Public Relations; Malaysian Government; Public Trust; Social Media Engagement; Malaysia; Institutionalization



## Introduction

In the digital age, public relations has undergone a profound transformation with governments increasingly adopting social media platforms to interact with citizens. Globally, countries like the United States and the United Kingdom have developed institutionalized frameworks for digital public relations that are aligned with transparency, responsiveness, and strategic engagement objectives (Wright & Hinson, 2017a). In Southeast Asia, governments have increasingly recognized the strategic value of social media to foster civic engagement and legitimacy. This has led to national frameworks, policy mandates, and communication strategies tailored to promote active dialogue and two-way communication. In Singapore, the government's Smart Nation initiative has strategically embedded social media in digital governance. Ministries and agencies employ data-driven communication strategies to optimize responsiveness and build public trust (Shaker, 2025). Likewise, Indonesia has adopted institutional guidelines requiring ministries to engage the public on Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, utilizing metrics for public sector accountability (Maulana et al., 2022; Syaftiani et al., 2024). South Korea's government integrates digital communication within its disaster response frameworks, ensuring that real-time engagement is not just a convenience but a public service necessity (Lee-Geiller & Lee, 2022). These regional examples demonstrate the potential of digital public relations when embedded within institutional frameworks.

Malaysia has made similar strides, especially through national digital agendas such as the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint (MyDigital) and the Public Sector ICT Strategic Plan. Most federal ministries now maintain official social media accounts, and platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok are used for announcements, crisis communication, and citizen interaction. However, existing practices remain uneven, lacking formal guidelines, performance indicators, and inter-agency coordination (MCMC, 2024). The absence of institutional standardization has led to fragmented efforts that are highly dependent on individual agency, initiative, and leadership commitment.

This paper argues that institutionalizing digital public relations in Malaysia's public sector can align communication practices with democratic values, improve public trust, and enhance participatory behavior. By employing Institutional Theory as the theoretical lens, this paper develops a conceptual framework that links institutional pressures, leadership commitment, organizational readiness, and communication outcomes. The goal is to provide a structured understanding of how digital public relations can be embedded within governance systems to strengthen citizen engagement in Malaysia.

## Problem Statement

Despite the proliferation of social media use among ministries in Malaysia and agencies, digital PR practices remain underdeveloped. While agencies frequently update content and publish government announcements online, interactive, dialogic communication with citizens is limited. Communication is mostly unidirectional, and few government bodies conduct structured audience analysis, digital listening, or real-time responsiveness. These deficiencies

undermine the democratic potential of social media and weaken public trust in government messaging (Samsi et al., 2021).

Institutional and policy frameworks for digital public relations remain vague in Malaysia. Although national initiatives such as MyDigital encourage digital innovation, they do not provide agency-specific protocols for digital public relations practices. The Ministry of Health in Malaysia's use of strategic messaging during the COVID-19 crisis illustrates how leadership commitment shapes communication outcomes. The government's ability to deploy all five image repair strategies, particularly "reducing offensiveness" and "corrective action," demonstrated not only responsiveness but also a high level of top-down communication planning and leadership involvement (Masngut & Mohamad, 2021).

The study by Nadzir (2019) examined how Malaysian government institutions use social media, especially Facebook, to share information about their services and encourage public interaction. Analyzing eight government agencies, the study found that Facebook was the most popular platform for sharing service-related content, surpassing other social media channels. Public interaction was mainly passive, with the "Like" button being the most common form of engagement, indicating limited two-way communication. These findings highlight a gap between content dissemination and meaningful engagement, stressing the need for public relations departments to adopt more interactive and dialogic content strategies. In line with the same research group's later findings, the use of visually appealing formats, real-time updates, and emotionally resonant storytelling was recommended to boost direct citizen interaction. Overall, these studies emphasize the importance of optimizing content for platforms like Facebook and Instagram to strengthen more participatory government-citizen digital communication.

This leads to inconsistencies across ministries, with some being proactive and engaging while others remain passive and focused on content. The lack of clear institutional guidance also contributes to inefficiencies in assessing the impact of communication. Comparative evidence from neighbouring countries, such as Indonesia and Singapore, shows that digital public relations is more effective when embedded in national governance frameworks. Institutional mechanisms such as audit systems, leadership scorecards, and dedicated digital engagement teams have led to improved transparency and accountability (Putra, 2024). Malaysia's lack of institutionalized frameworks for digital public relations jeopardizes the country's broader digital transformation agenda, especially in critical areas such as public participation, government transparency, and service responsiveness.

Despite growing scholarly attention on e-governance and digital transformation in Malaysia, few conceptual frameworks explicitly focus on digital public relations institutionalization. Existing research tends to examine operational, platform, or campaign-level strategies rather than exploring how communication functions are shaped by institutional structures and norms. This paper addresses this critical research gap by proposing a theory-driven, multi-variable model grounded in Institutional Theory to conceptualize how digital PR can be strategically institutionalized in the Malaysian government sector.

### **Theoretical Framework: Institutional Theory**

Institutional Theory provides a useful lens for understanding how public organizations conform to societal and governmental expectations. First introduced by Krücken (2021), the theory identifies three main components, regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive, that drive organizational isomorphism. In a public governance context, these components translate into mandates from government policies, pressures from professional communities, and societal beliefs about transparency and engagement.

In the case of digital PR, regulatory forces include the MyDigital Blueprint (Kementerian Ekonomi, 2021), federal ICT masterplans, and digital policy frameworks that shape agency behavior. Normative pressures come from professional benchmarks such as Key Performance Indicator (KPI) assessments, media scrutiny, and ministerial expectations, which drive conformity across agencies. Cultural-cognitive factors include citizens' growing expectations for government responsiveness and openness, which shape the perceived legitimacy of communication efforts (Glynn & D'aunno, 2023). However, Institutional Theory also recognizes that internal agency dynamics such as leadership commitment and organizational readiness can mediate the adoption of externally imposed norms. In the Malaysian context, agency leadership often plays a critical role in championing digital initiatives and allocating communication resources (Shabdin et al., 2025). Likewise, organizational readiness, including IT infrastructure and trained personnel, significantly affects whether digital PR is successfully adopted.

In the Malaysian context, the interplay of these external and internal factors helps explain variations across agencies: while some federal ministries have institutionalized digital PR through structured social media teams and clear SOPs, others, especially at the state or local level, struggle with fragmented efforts or symbolic compliance. By adopting Institutional Theory, this study captures how regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pressures interact with leadership and readiness to shape the institutionalization of digital PR. Thus, Institutional Theory provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing digital public relations within Malaysian government organizations, highlighting both the external governance landscape and the internal influences.

This paper adopts Institutional Theory to explain both external and internal influences on the institutionalization of digital PR. By integrating external pressures with leadership commitment and readiness, this model explains why some agencies innovate and engage while others lag. Institutional Theory is thus relevant for this study as it captures the multilevel interplay between national governance, agency structure, and citizen expectations, providing a comprehensive framework for examining digital PR within the Malaysian government organizations.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Digital PR in The Public Sector***

Digital PR has become an integral part of governance as governments worldwide leverage social media platforms, websites, and digital applications to engage citizens. Unlike traditional PR, digital PR emphasizes two-way communication, transparency, and responsiveness (Macnamara, 2016). Studies from Western contexts suggest that when institutionalized, digital PR can enhance public trust, improve service delivery, and strengthen democratic participation

(Ignacio Criado et al., 2018; N. M. Lee & VanDyke, 2015). However, in many developing nations, digital PR is still practiced sporadically and often lacks formal structures, leading to uneven implementation (Feeney & Porumbescu, 2021; Mergel, 2013; Wukich, 2021). The adoption of digital PR in the public sector is also influenced by broader trends in e-governance and digital transformation. Governments are increasingly expected to deliver services and information online in real time, reflecting citizen expectations shaped by private sector digital experiences. When communication practices are not aligned with these expectations, citizens may perceive public agencies as outdated, inaccessible, or unaccountable (M. Lee et al., 2021; Liu & Horsley, 2007). This highlights the need for governments not only to adopt digital tools but also to institutionalize PR functions that foster engagement, dialogue, and inclusivity.

In the Asian context, countries such as Singapore and South Korea have demonstrated how digital PR can be effectively embedded in governance. Both countries have established dedicated digital communication teams, standardized response protocols, and long-term strategies to build trust through transparency and interactivity (Kim & Lee, 2020). These experiences contrast sharply with those of many Southeast Asian nations, including Malaysia, where digital PR often relies on individual ministries' initiatives rather than systemic institutionalization. This uneven development risks creating disparities in citizen engagement across regions and agencies.

Moreover, digital PR in the public sector must navigate unique challenges compared to corporate settings. Governments operate in highly regulated environments, where communication is bound by bureaucratic procedures, political oversight, and resource limitations (Dong et al., 2023). Unlike private organizations that prioritize customer satisfaction, public agencies must balance multiple stakeholders' demands, including accountability to taxpayers, compliance with legal frameworks, and alignment with national policy priorities. These constraints can slow down innovation in digital PR, making institutionalization both more complex and more necessary.

Finally, scholars argue that digital PR should be understood not only as a communication practice but also as a democratic tool. By enabling citizens to question, criticize, and interact with government agencies, digital PR has the potential to reduce the gap between the state and society (Zhou & Xu, 2021a). When governments respond respectfully to feedback and criticism, they can gradually build legitimacy and foster a culture of participatory governance. Conversely, when responses are inconsistent, censored, or absent, digital PR risks reinforcing scepticism and eroding trust.

### ***Institutional Pressure***

Institutional pressure refers to the formal and informal forces that shape organizational behavior and compliance (Scott, 2001). In the context of digital PR, regulatory pressure comes from digital governance policies such as Malaysia's (Kementerian Ekonomi, 2021), Public Sector ICT Strategic Plan, and various media transparency guidelines issued by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC, 2024).

These frameworks encourage public agencies to enhance digital engagement. Normative pressure is generated through benchmarking, performance KPIs, and public sector reform initiatives that emphasize interactive communication and citizen-centric services (Wright & Hinson, 2017b).



Cultural-cognitive pressure stems from society's evolving expectations for transparency, participation, and real-time communication, especially among urban youth populations accustomed to fast, digital interactions (Khan & Krishnan, 2021; Zhou & Xu, 2021b). Agencies that respond positively to these multi-dimensional pressures are more likely to internalize digital PR practices in their institutional workflow.

### ***Leadership Commitment***

Leadership commitment is a decisive internal variable that reflects the extent to which top management prioritizes and promotes digital PR practices (Bahri, 2025). Scholars have highlighted that the adoption of digital initiatives is often a top-down process, where agency heads must authorize resources and implement structural changes to support social media operations (Marienfeldt et al., 2025). Ministries led by digitally-savvy or reform-oriented leaders tend to have more active and strategic digital engagement teams. Leadership also influences policy enforcement and employees' morale. A committed leader will embed digital PR goals in strategic plans, allocate budgets for digital communication, and support institutional learning (Ehrenreich et al., 2021; Marion & Augtania, 2023a). Without this commitment, even strong institutional pressures may fail to translate into meaningful change.

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Beyond resource allocation, leadership also sets the vision and culture for digital transformation. Leaders who champion openness, responsiveness, and citizen-centric values encourage their organizations to treat digital PR as a strategic function rather than a routine task. Studies in Southeast Asia suggest that when leaders model digital engagement, for example, by actively participating in online communication or promoting transparency, employees are more motivated to adopt innovative practices (Marion & Augtania, 2023b; Shabdin et al., n.d.). Conversely, the absence of leadership commitment often results in fragmented efforts, resistance to change, and the perception of digital PR as a symbolic compliance exercise. Therefore, leadership is not only an enabler of structural reform but also a cultural driver that legitimizes digital PR as an integral part of governance.

### ***Organizational Readiness***

Organizational readiness refers to an organization's capability to adopt, implement, and sustain new practices, particularly in terms of human resources, digital infrastructure, and culture (Kabra & Dhaundiyal, 2024; Rossanty et al., 2024; Yeni & Yasri, 2020). A public department with trained communication personnel, real-time monitoring tools, and established workflows is more likely to institutionalize digital PR. Readiness is also influenced by internal digital literacy, interdepartmental coordination, and prior innovation adoption. In Malaysia, studies have shown wide discrepancies in readiness across agencies, with urban federal ministries

generally outperforming state or rural-based departments (Ismail et al., 2024; Shabdin et al., n.d.; Tham & Atan, 2021a). Without sufficient readiness, institutionalization remains symbolic rather than substantive.

In addition, organizational readiness is closely tied to leadership vision and the willingness of employees to embrace change. Agencies that foster a culture of continuous learning and provide regular training programs for staff are more likely to sustain digital PR initiatives in the long run. Investment in collaborative digital platforms, standardized protocols, and data-driven decision-making further enhances readiness by reducing reliance on individual expertise and creating organizational resilience. Comparative studies from Singapore and South Korea suggest that when readiness is supported through strong interdepartmental coordination and professional capacity-building, digital PR transitions from an experimental initiative into a long-term strategic function (Park & Kim, 2022; Simonofski et al., 2021b).

### ***Institutionalization of Digital PR***

Institutionalization refers to the extent to which digital PR becomes embedded in formal structures and is treated as a legitimate, recurring organizational function (Krücken, 2021). This may include appointing digital PR officers, allocating annual budgets for online communication, integrating digital PR in crisis plans, and conducting performance audits. Institutionalized digital PR is not ad hoc or event-based but is part of strategic public administration. It is associated with improved interactivity, consistent branding, and measurable outcomes (Putra, 2024). In the Malaysian public sector, the lack of institutionalization is a major cause of sporadic citizen engagement.

Institutionalized digital PR can be observed through several organizational features: the appointment of dedicated digital PR officers or teams, allocation of annual budgets for online communication, integration of digital PR into crisis management frameworks, and the use of performance audits or KPI assessments to evaluate impact. When digital PR is institutionalized, it becomes embedded in standard operating procedures (SOPs), policy documents, and strategic communication plans, ensuring continuity even amid changes in political leadership or administrative personnel.

Unlike ad hoc or event-driven communication efforts, institutionalized digital PR is strategic, sustained, and systematic. It enables consistent branding across agencies, promotes interactive two-way engagement with citizens, and supports measurable outcomes, such as trust-building, transparency, and responsiveness (Eitrem et al., 2024; Putra, 2024). Comparative evidence from advanced e-governance countries such as South Korea and Singapore shows that institutionalization through clear structures, dedicated resources, and staff capacity directly improves communication quality and strengthens democratic responsiveness (Kim & Lee, 2020; Tsao, Tan & Lim, 2024).

In the Malaysian public sector, however, the lack of institutionalization remains a significant challenge. Many agencies engage in irregular and fragmented digital communication, often relying on short-term campaigns or reactive responses to public pressure. This leads to inconsistent citizen engagement, weak follow-up mechanisms, and symbolic rather than substantive compliance with digital governance mandates (Shabdin et al., 2025). Without formal structures and resources, digital PR efforts risk being temporary and vulnerable to leadership turnover or political shifts.

Therefore, institutionalizing digital PR is not simply a matter of adopting new tools but requires embedding digital practices into organizational culture, resource allocation, and performance evaluation systems. For Malaysia, this shift is critical to transforming digital PR from symbolic adoption into a sustained mechanism for strengthening public participation, transparency, and trust.

### **Public Trust**

Trust is the bedrock of effective government-citizen communication. Citizens are more likely to engage, comply, and participate when they trust that government agencies are transparent, competent, and responsive (Bokayev et al., 2024; Lee & Li, 2021). Digital PR helps build this trust by enabling two-way communication, accountability, and empathy in crisis response. However, trust cannot be achieved without consistency, hence the need for institutionalized digital PR. Studies in Indonesia, China, and Singapore show that sustained digital engagement leads to the accumulation of trust over time, especially when governments respond respectfully to criticism and questions (Eom & Lee, 2022; Murdhani, 2025; Tan & Lim, 2022). Building public trust also requires aligning communication with citizens' lived realities. Research has shown that when agencies demonstrate cultural sensitivity, use simple and relatable language, and provide timely updates, citizens feel more respected and valued (Cho & Park, 2022). In Malaysia, this is particularly relevant in a multilingual, multi-ethnic context where the use of inclusive digital messaging can reduce perceptions of marginalization. Moreover, trust is fragile—misinformation, delayed responses, or contradictory messaging can quickly erode credibility. Thus, institutionalized digital PR not only strengthens trust but also safeguards it by ensuring that communication is systematic, fact-checked, and responsive to citizens' evolving concerns.

### **Engagement Quality**

Engagement quality captures the level of depth, frequency, and interactivity in digital public discourse. Unlike likes or views, it reflects meaningful interaction such as comments, participation in online polls, and feedback on policy proposals. Digital PR institutionalization contributes to the quality of engagement by creating structures that encourage content relevance, establish clear reply protocols, and foster citizen feedback loops. In Malaysia, most government agencies still emphasize one-way communication, which reduces engagement quality (MCMC, 2024). Comparative evidence from South Korea and Singapore demonstrates that institutionalized digital PR, with dedicated social media teams and clear SOPs, improves engagement quality and democratic responsiveness (Lee-Geiller & Lee, 2022; Soon & Soh, 2014).

Beyond interactive platforms, engagement quality is also shaped by how governments act on citizen input. Studies highlight that when feedback is visibly incorporated into policy adjustments or service improvements, citizens perceive their participation as meaningful, thereby deepening engagement (Ignacio Criado et al., 2018). For Malaysia, moving beyond symbolic participation requires not only more frequent interactions but also mechanisms for follow-up communication that demonstrate impact. Quality engagement is therefore not just about listening but also closing the loop by showing citizens that their voices matter. This requires dedicated teams, institutional support, and continuous monitoring to ensure digital PR fosters genuine two-way governance.



***Malaysian Context: Challenges and Gaps***

Malaysia's MyDigital Blueprint (Kementerian Ekonomi, 2021) and ICT Strategic Plans highlight the government's ambition to institutionalize digital communication. Yet, research shows uneven readiness across agencies: federal ministries with urban resources often outperform rural and state-level departments (Alenzi & Miskon, 2024). This disparity results in symbolic rather than substantive institutionalization, where digital PR practices are adopted superficially to comply with policy directives but not fully embedded in organizational structures.

Leadership commitment has emerged as a decisive internal factor. Studies emphasize that when agency heads prioritize digital communication, they embed it into strategic plans, allocate budgets, and support staff training (Shabdin et al., 2025). Conversely, without leadership backing, digital PR risks remaining a temporary or ad hoc function.

**Operational Definitions of Key Variables**

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Operational Definition</b>	<b>Citation(s)</b>
<b>Institutional Pressure</b>	The external forces (regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive) compel public agencies to adopt DIGITAL PR practices. Includes digital policy mandates, stakeholder expectations, and societal norms.	DiMaggio & Powell (1983); Pan & Fan (2023)
- Regulative Pressure	Formal rules, laws, and digital strategies such as MyDigital require agencies to adopt DIGITAL PR.	Kementerian Ekonomi (2021); Xavier (2021)
- Normative Pressure	Expectations from professional bodies, KPI systems, media, and reform mandates for transparent and responsive communication.	Wright & Hinson (2017); Hartmann et al. (2021)
-Cultural-Cognitive Pressure	Social norms and citizen expectations for interactivity, especially among digital-native populations.	Arpaci, (2020); Zhou & Xu (2021)
<b>Leadership Commitment</b>	The degree to which top leadership prioritizes, champions, and allocates resources for digital PR initiatives within the agency.	Bahri (2025); Marienfeldt et al. (2025); Marion & Augtania (2023)

<b>Organizational Readiness</b>	The agency's capacity (technical infrastructure, human capital, workflows) to adopt and sustain digital PR.	Rossanty et al. (2024); Yeni & Yasri (2020); Ismail et al. (2024)
<b>Institutionalization of DPR</b>	The embedding of digital PR into formal structures, workflows, SOPs, budgets, and performance assessments. Reflects routinization and legitimacy.	Krücken (2021); Putra (2024); (Criado & Villodre, 2022; Villodre et al., 2021)
<b>Public Trust</b>	Citizens' confidence in the government's transparency, reliability, and responsiveness in digital communication.	(Hermawan, 2025; Shen et al., 2025)
<b>Engagement Quality</b>	The depth and interactivity of citizen participation on digital platforms (e.g., feedback, policy dialogue, responsiveness).	(Gil et al., 2022; Secinaro et al., 2022; Shen et al., 2025b)

## Methodology

This study adopts a theory-driven conceptual development methodology to construct a comprehensive model that explains the institutionalization of digital PR within the Malaysian government context. Conceptual research of this type emphasizes theory building rather than empirical testing and is particularly valuable in areas where existing empirical evidence is fragmented or insufficient (Reese, 2023; Rocco et al., 2022). The methodological process integrates a systematic literature review, theoretical synthesis, and comparative contextual analysis to establish logical relationships between key constructs derived from Institutional Theory and digital governance research.

A structured literature review was undertaken to identify recurring variables and themes across disciplines such as public relations, e-government, digital transformation, and public sector communication. Academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar were searched for English-language articles published between 2015 and 2025 using key terms such as “digital public relations,” “institutional theory,” “government communication,” and “Malaysia.” The inclusion criteria emphasized peer-reviewed studies that examined government communication practices, digital engagement strategies, or institutional frameworks in both developed and developing contexts. This systematic process ensured comprehensive coverage of both theoretical and empirical foundations relevant to digital PR institutionalization.

The conceptual development process involved three stages. First, Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2013) was used as the primary lens to interpret how institutional pressures, regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive, affect government adoption of digital PR practices. Second, core variables such as leadership commitment,

organizational readiness, public trust, and engagement quality were identified as complementary constructs based on their prominence in prior governance and communication research (Kim & Lee, 2020; Criado & Villodre, 2021). Third, logical reasoning and pattern matching were employed to hypothesize the relationships among these variables, aligning them with established theoretical mechanisms such as isomorphism, legitimacy, and organizational adaptation.

Additionally, the paper adopts a comparative contextual analysis approach to enhance relevance and generalizability. Evidence and best practices from regional case studies in Singapore, Indonesia, South Korea, and China were reviewed to identify transferable lessons for Malaysia's digital governance environment. This comparative dimension strengthens the validity of the proposed conceptual model by situating it within broader regional and theoretical contexts.

Finally, this methodology aligns with the standards of conceptual research by integrating deductive reasoning and theoretical triangulation. The deductive logic enables the formulation of testable hypotheses grounded in Institutional Theory, while theoretical triangulation combines perspectives from digital communication, public sector management, and organizational behavior to enrich conceptual depth. Although this paper does not employ empirical data, the model developed here provides a robust theoretical foundation for future quantitative or mixed-methods research that can empirically validate the proposed relationships.

### **Hypotheses Development**

Institutional Pressure, consisting of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive forces, serves as a key driver for transformation in public sector organizations. Regulatory mandates such as Malaysia's MyDigital Blueprint and ICT Strategic Plans impose expectations that agencies must modernize communication practices and improve digital service delivery (Xavier, 2021). Normative forces arise from professional and public expectations for transparency, accountability, and timely communication (Hartmann et al., 2021). Cultural-cognitive pressures are rooted in citizens' growing reliance on digital platforms and expectations of interactivity. However, external pressure alone is insufficient without internal capability. According to Institutional Theory, organizations must develop readiness to conform to institutional expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2013; Tham & Atan, 2021). When agencies perceive strong institutional pressure, they are more likely to invest in staff training, infrastructure, and digital literacy to meet demands. Thus, the stronger the institutional pressure, the more likely agencies are to become organizationally prepared for digital PR implementation.

#### ***H1: Institutional Pressure Positively Influences Organizational Readiness for Digital PR Institutionalization***

While institutional pressure provides the context for change, leadership acts as the catalyst that translates pressure into action. In the public sector, leadership commitment involves prioritizing digital engagement, empowering communication teams, and allocating necessary resources. Leaders also help align agency goals with national digital transformation mandates (Angus-Leppan et al., 2010; Thelen et al., 2021; Yue et al., 2023). When leadership is strong and committed, it strengthens the link between external pressures and internal agency action.

Agencies with visionary and proactive leadership are more likely to respond to institutional demands by building internal capacity, setting up SOPs, or appointing dedicated communication teams. Conversely, weak or indifferent leadership may downplay external signals, thereby diluting readiness. This moderating role is supported by prior research that highlights leadership as a success factor in digital public sector transformation (Bahri, 2025; Shabdin et al., n.d.; Xavier, 2021).

### ***H2: Leadership Commitment Moderates the Relationship Between Institutional Pressure and Organizational Readiness***

Organizational readiness is the internal environment that allows new practices like digital public relations to be successfully adopted and sustained. It includes technological infrastructure, skilled communication teams, a culture supportive of transparency, and digital workflow systems (Rossanty et al., 2024; Yeni & Yasri, 2020). Agencies that are well-prepared through planning, resources, and training are better able to embed DPR into their daily operations. This includes scheduling content, managing social media crises, analysing citizen feedback, and responding to online inquiries. The literature confirms that organizational preparedness is a precursor to the routinization and legitimacy of new institutional practices (Wright & Hinson, 2017).

### ***H3: Organizational Readiness Positively Affects the Institutionalization of Digital PR***

Public trust in government communications depends on perceptions of credibility, consistency, and transparency. When digital public relations is institutionalized, it becomes an official and consistent aspect of governance. This institutionalization fosters predictability, accountability, and professionalism in digital communication, which in turn enhances trust (Deephhouse et al., 2008; Tahir et al., 2021). Studies from Indonesia, China, and Korea show that formal structures supporting government communication, such as response SOPs, transparency policies, and continuous engagement, directly affect how much citizens trust government intentions (Hartanto et al., 2021; Maulan & Fitriani, 2025; Simonofski et al., 2021b; Xiang et al., 2015). Organizational readiness plays a crucial role in this process because without adequate infrastructure, skilled human resources, and a supportive digital culture, institutionalization efforts remain superficial. Agencies that invest in training communication officers, adopting monitoring tools, and creating integrated digital workflows are more capable of embedding digital PR into their core functions (Rossanty et al., 2024; Yeni & Yasri, 2020). In contrast, agencies with limited readiness tend to adopt digital PR reactively, relying on individual champions rather than systemic practices, which undermines consistency and long-term legitimacy. Thus, organizational readiness not only facilitates institutionalization but also ensures that digital PR becomes a sustainable driver of transparency, responsiveness, and citizen trust in governance.

### ***H4: Institutionalization Of Digital PR Positively Influences Public Trust***

Institutionalized digital PR transforms sporadic and symbolic communication into strategic, interactive, and citizen-focused engagement. With trained personnel, SOPs, and leadership oversight, digital PR becomes capable of delivering relevant content, responding in real time, and building online communities. High engagement quality goes beyond likes or shares; it includes two-way conversations, participation in policy discussions, and responsiveness to

citizen feedback (Wright & Hinson, 2017). Institutional theory suggests that routinized practices lead to consistent performance and higher stakeholder satisfaction. Therefore, the more institutionalized digital PR becomes, the higher the quality of engagement on digital platforms.

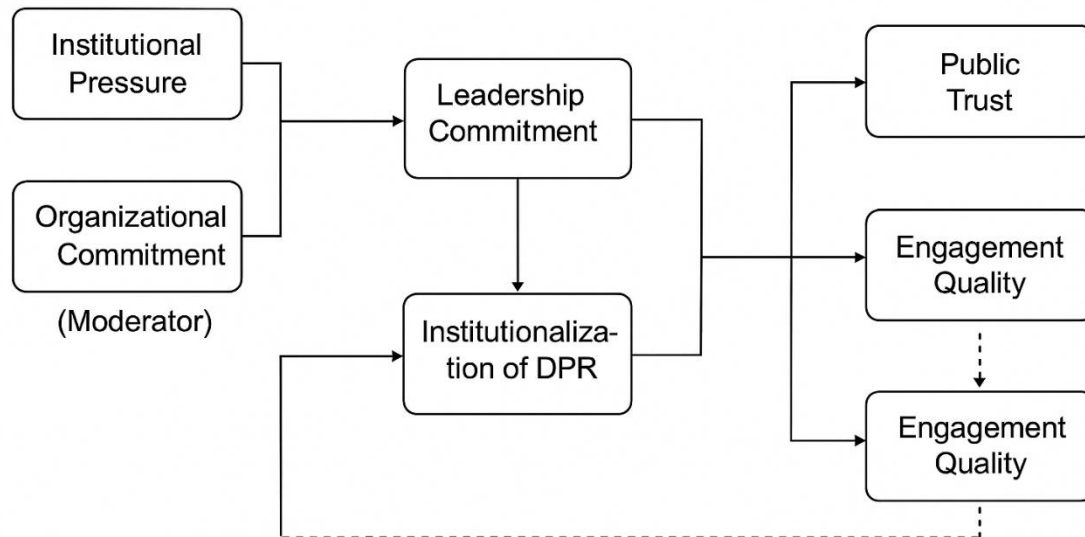
Empirical evidence from countries such as South Korea, Indonesia, and Singapore demonstrates that governments with structured digital communication frameworks experience higher levels of citizen trust and participation (Simonofski et al., 2021b; Hartanto et al., 2021; Criado & Villodre, 2021). In these contexts, institutionalization reduces uncertainty and signals accountability, making citizens more confident in government intentions. In Malaysia, where digital PR remains uneven, embedding institutional mechanisms such as standardized response systems and transparent reporting can help bridge the trust gap. This underscores that trust is not built on ad-hoc initiatives but through systematic, institutionalized digital PR that assures citizens of consistency, reliability, and credibility in government communication.

#### ***H5: Institutionalization Of Digital PR Enhances Engagement Quality on Social Media Platforms***

Trust is a key mechanism that explains how institutionalized digital PR affects citizen behaviour (Zhou & Xu, 2021). Institutionalization provides a structure for transparent and consistent communication, which helps build public trust. In turn, trust fosters more active participation, especially in online platforms where government messages are scrutinized publicly (Bornstein & Tomkins, 2015).

This mediating relationship is supported by the Dialogic Theory of Public Relations, which posits that trust must precede meaningful engagement (Huang et al., 2017; Kent, 2023; McAllister-Spooner & Kent, 2009). In the digital context, citizens are more likely to interact, comment, or contribute when they believe the government is sincere, responsive, and accountable (Hutahaeen et al., 2023). Therefore, public trust acts as a psychological bridge that transforms institutionalized digital PR into sustained engagement quality.



***H6: Public Trust Mediates the Relationship Between Digital PR Institutionalization and Engagement Quality*****Figure 1: Conceptual Model****Conceptual Model**

The proposed conceptual model is grounded in Institutional Theory, which posits that organizations align their practices to conform to external institutional expectations and gain legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Krücken, 2021). In this model, six key constructs are integrated to explain how institutional, organizational, and public factors interact to produce quality digital engagement between the government and citizens. The model begins with Institutional Pressure as the primary independent variable. It encapsulates regulative forces (Pan & Fan, 2023) (e.g., digital policy mandates), normative forces (e.g., public service communication standards), and cultural-cognitive forces (e.g., citizen expectations for digital responsiveness). These pressures act as catalysts for change within public agencies, compelling them to adopt modern communication strategies.

The relationship between Institutional Pressure and an agency's Organizational Readiness is moderated by Leadership Commitment. A high level of commitment by leadership, evident in strategic prioritization, budget allocation, and human capital investment, can amplify the agency's readiness to institutionalize digital PR. Conversely, even strong external pressure may not lead to readiness if leadership is passive or disengaged.

Organizational Readiness, which includes digital infrastructure, staff capabilities, and internal alignment with innovation goals (Rossanty et al., 2024), is positioned as a mediator that enables the translation of institutional pressure into the Institutionalization of digital PR. Institutionalization refers to the formalization and routinization of DPR within the agency's policies, workflows, and culture. Once digital PR is institutionalized, it yields two critical public-facing outcomes: Public Trust and Engagement Quality. Public Trust is conceptualized as a mediator in the relationship between DPR institutionalization and engagement quality.

Trust reflects the perception that the government is transparent, reliable, and responsive, an essential condition for sustained engagement in digital spaces.

Engagement Quality is the ultimate dependent variable, representing the depth and authenticity of citizen interaction on social media platforms (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021; Trunfio & Rossi, 2021). High engagement quality signifies two-way communication, co-creation of content, and inclusion of citizen voices in policy discourse.

In summary, the model captures a dynamic system in which external pressures and internal capacities interact to institutionalize digital PR, which then fosters trust and enhances the quality of government-citizen engagement on digital platforms.

## Conclusion

This conceptual paper presents a novel framework for understanding how digital PR can be institutionalized in the Malaysian government context to foster deeper, more strategic citizen engagement through social media. Despite significant investments in digital infrastructure and communication platforms, digital PR in Malaysia remains under-institutionalized, largely reliant on individual agency initiative and lacking in formal structure, policy guidance, and performance evaluation.

By grounding the proposed model in Institutional Theory, this paper makes a significant contribution to both theory and practice. It emphasizes that institutional pressure comprising regulatory mandates, normative expectations, and societal values must be matched by internal readiness and committed leadership to successfully embed digital PR in governance. Once institutionalized, digital PR has the potential to generate higher levels of public trust and engagement quality, two key markers of democratic communication.

Furthermore, this model adds to the regional discourse by contextualizing Malaysia's digital PR efforts alongside practices in countries such as Singapore, Indonesia, and South Korea, where digital communication has been more successfully integrated into public administration. In doing so, it responds to a pressing research gap in public relations scholarship, namely, the lack of theory-driven frameworks for understanding how digital PR becomes a legitimate and strategic component of government communication.

Future empirical research can test the proposed relationships and further explore the mediating and moderating effects identified in this model. Ultimately, institutionalizing digital PR is not just a technical or managerial endeavour; it is a democratic imperative that can strengthen government legitimacy, transparency, and participatory governance in the digital age. At a practical level, this framework has direct implications for policymakers and government agencies. Institutionalizing digital PR requires not only policies and directives but also robust monitoring mechanisms, professional training programs, and inter-agency collaboration. Malaysian agencies could benefit from developing standardized digital communication guidelines, annual digital PR audits, and capacity-building workshops to ensure uniform adoption across ministries and departments. Such initiatives would help move digital PR from fragmented practices to a coherent, nationwide communication strategy. Theoretically, the proposed framework bridges the gap between institutional theory and public relations by highlighting how external pressures and internal capacities interact to shape communication practices in government. This contributes to the broader literature on

institutionalization by showing that communication functions, often overlooked in governance studies, are equally subject to the dynamics of isomorphism, legitimacy, and organizational readiness.

Ultimately, this study highlights the significance of regional learning. Malaysia's path toward digital PR institutionalization can be accelerated by adapting lessons from global and regional leaders in digital governance. Benchmarking best practices, sharing knowledge across ASEAN networks, and fostering South-South collaborations can help Malaysia design context-sensitive yet globally informed strategies. In the long run, institutionalized digital PR will not only improve citizen engagement but also position Malaysia as a model for democratic digital governance in the Global South.

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