

Buzzers, Bots, and Brands: Ethical Analysis of Manipulative Technology in Digital PR Practices

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Abstract

This study examines the use of buzzers and bots in digital public relations (PR) strategies for Indonesian e-commerce, with a focus on the Shopee competition. The background of the study highlights the shift in PR communication from traditional media to algorithm-based practices that are often manipulative. The main issues are how these practices are carried out, their impact on consumer perceptions, and the ethical dilemmas that arise. The objectives of this study are to analyze buzzer-bot practices in digital PR, examine the ethical perceptions of stakeholders, and identify the boundaries between legitimate communication and manipulative campaigns. The methodology adopts a qualitative constructivist employing techniques such as case studies, interviews, netnography, and document analysis. The results indicate that buzzers and bots are effective in increasing visibility but lead to trust crises, ethical degradation, and reputational risks. The conclusions emphasize the need for regulation, transparency, and sustainable ethical communication strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global economy is undergoing rapid digital transformation, driven by advancements in technology and the demands of Industry 4.0. This shift

has created a pressing need for a digitally skilled workforce that can adapt to evolving industry requirements (Soekiman et al., 2025). The global digital transformation has redefined how businesses operate, particularly in emerging economies (J. E. Putra et al., 2025). In Public Relations studies, all activities carried out by Public Relations on the internet are referred to as Digital Public Relations activities (Rona et al., 2022). PR involves building, maintaining, and improving good relationships with stakeholders such as employees, customers, the media, and the general public, aiming to positively influence public perception to support business objectives (Lisdiantini et al., 2024). In the contemporary era of digital communication, Public Relations (PR) strategies have expanded beyond traditional media relations to incorporate algorithm-driven technologies, notably through the deployment of buzzers and bots.

Buzzers, commonly defined as social media users or accounts tasked with disseminating targeted messages, play a pivotal role in shaping public sentiment, particularly within political contexts (Dewantara et al., 2022; Maulana et al., 2022; A. Putra, 2023). Operating in a coordinated manner alongside political elites, they reinforce narratives, mobilize support, and substantially influence public opinion and campaign dynamics. Their effectiveness derives from their capacity to simulate grassroots approval or dissent, leveraging extensive networks of followers to amplify engagement (S. P. Santoso, 2022; Sibaroni & Prasetyowati, 2022).

Bots, particularly social bots, further transform this communicative landscape by functioning as automated accounts capable of amplifying messages or distorting public discourse. They have assumed a critical role in health communication, most notably during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, social bots actively shaped debates surrounding vaccination, both by promoting pro-vaccination perspectives and disseminating misinformation (Ruíz-Núñez et al., 2022; R. K. Santoso & Dewi, 2023). Their ability to interact dynamically with human users establishes them as a powerful tool in health communication and broader public relations strategies, allowing them to direct discussions toward predetermined agendas while simultaneously increasing the visibility of selected narratives (Ruíz-Núñez et al., 2022; Xu & Sasahara, 2020).

The role of public relations in branding has become increasingly critical in an era characterized by heightened consumer activism and demands for transparency. Organizations are expected to employ both proactive and reactive public relations strategies. Proactive efforts emphasize reinforcing brand values and fostering transparency to cultivate consumer trust, whereas reactive strategies concentrate on managing crises by delivering timely and effective responses to reputational challenges (Summak, 2024). This integrated approach is indispensable for shaping public perception and maintaining brand competitiveness in highly dynamic markets.

In the Indonesian context, particularly on platforms such as Twitter (now rebranded as X), the use of buzzer networks as instruments of digital manipulation has emerged as a significant phenomenon. These practices often constitute a form of “engineered disinformation” designed to influence public perceptions of specific brands or issues. Recent cases highlight the involvement of buzzers in competitive rivalries among leading e-commerce platforms, such as Shopee and its market counterparts. Shopee, for example, has been portrayed as a company facing not only direct competition but also the influence of opaque buzzer algorithms that blur the boundaries between legitimate promotion and manipulative propaganda. This situation has intensified public scrutiny, particularly as Bukalapak’s withdrawal from the physical goods sector and the KPPU’s antitrust investigation into Shopee and Lazada raise critical questions about the authenticity of consumer voices and the extent of algorithmic control in shaping digital discourse (Reuters, 2024).

The construction of narratives in digital communication encompasses not only positive promotional efforts but also negative campaigns that blur the boundary between persuasion and manipulation. Fischer and Jarren (2023) emphasize that within technology-mediated public spheres, control over narratives serves as a decisive mechanism in shaping collective opinion and guiding social behavior.

This challenge becomes particularly pressing in the Indonesian context, where digital literacy remains at a relatively early stage of development. A considerable proportion of social media users struggle to identify manipulative practices such as astroturfing where artificial support is fabricated through bots or fake accounts and framing strategies intentionally

designed to create an illusion of public consensus.

These practices raise profound ethical concerns regarding the moral responsibilities of brands in orchestrating their communication strategies. While prior research has predominantly focused on the technical efficiency and effectiveness of digital communication, it has largely overlooked the ethical dimensions, particularly within the domain of digital public relations in the commercial sector (Putri & Naili, 2023).

This study therefore seeks to address the neglected dimension of ethical dilemmas associated with the use of manipulative technologies in brand-driven digital PR strategies. A notable research gap exists in the limited examination of the ethical implications of buzzer technology within commercial brand communication. Given the persistence of low public awareness regarding digital manipulation and the growing prevalence of automated accounts, this study aims to fill this critical gap (Sameen, 2025; Utama et al., 2025).

Building on this background, the study formulates several guiding questions. It seeks to examine how brands employ buzzers and bots within the framework of digital public relations, to investigate the ethical rationales that either justify or neglect the use of such manipulative technologies, and to analyze how key stakeholders including consumers, PR practitioners, academics, and regulators perceive the responsibility of brands in preserving the integrity of the digital ecosystem. Furthermore, it aims to delineate the ethical boundary between legitimate counter-narrative strategies and manipulative black campaigns in digital PR practices.

These questions underscore that the research extends beyond identifying manipulative techniques in digital communication; it also seeks to illuminate the ethical dimensions that accompany such practices. Ethical considerations are therefore central to assessing whether digital PR strategies remain within the bounds of legitimacy or whether they infringe upon principles of fairness and transparency in public communication (Duvenhage, 2024; Stanić & Stanić, 2024).

The primary objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive understanding of how manipulative technologies, particularly buzzers and bots, are integrated into the digital PR practices of e-commerce brands in

Indonesia. Specifically, it explores the implementation of these strategies in both promotional activities and competitive attacks. Within this framework, the rivalry between Shopee and its competitors over the past year serves as the focal case for analysis.

The second objective of this study is to investigate stakeholders' ethical perceptions concerning the use of manipulative technologies in brand communication. It will assess how consumers, academics, communication practitioners, and regulators interpret and evaluate the actions of brands that incorporate such technologies into their strategies. The examination focuses on the analysis of fundamental values such as transparency, integrity, and social responsibility (Maseko, 2024).

The third objective is to evaluate the ethical positioning of brands in relation to their responsibilities when engaging in competition and shaping narratives within the digital public sphere. The study further seeks to differentiate between legitimate counter-narrative practices such as defending against false accusations and black campaigns that deliberately undermine a competitor's reputation through manipulative tactics. Clarifying this distinction in both normative and empirical terms is essential for advancing a more precise comprehension of ethical boundaries within digital public relations (Duche-Pérez et al., 2023).

This study offers both theoretical and practical contributions. From a theoretical perspective, it advances the field of ethical communication in the digital era by integrating Discourse Ethics (Habermas), Virtue Ethics, and the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) framework. In doing so, it broadens academic discussions on the ethical boundaries of technology-driven strategic communication and proposes a conceptual model that differentiates between legitimate persuasive practices and unethical digital manipulation.

From a practical standpoint, the research provides valuable guidance for brands and public relations practitioners in designing communication strategies that are not only commercially effective but also ethically sound and socially responsible. In a context where brand reputation is increasingly shaped by public perception, understanding the ethical implications of employing buzzers and bots has become indispensable. Moreover, the study's findings can support regulators in formulating policies that promote

accountability and transparency in digital communication, while also contributing to efforts that enhance public digital literacy and foster critical engagement with narratives circulating in online spaces (Hasan et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2020).

This study introduces a novel perspective by offering an ethical-critical examination of the use of buzzers and bots within the framework of digital public relations in Indonesia, a subject that remains underexplored in academic discourse. Existing research has predominantly emphasized technical dimensions, including bot algorithms, the effectiveness of digital communication strategies, and the short-term effects on brand perception. In contrast, the ethical implications of employing manipulative technologies in brand communication, particularly within the highly competitive e-commerce sector, have not been systematically investigated.

By integrating communication theory, ethics, and technology into a unified analytical framework, this study advances an interdisciplinary and contextually grounded approach. Furthermore, its reliance on case studies drawn from Indonesia's digital environment adds empirical depth and strengthens the connection between theoretical insights and practical realities. These features underscore the originality, relevance, and urgency of this research within the current socio-political landscape of digital communication in Indonesia.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a constructivist qualitative approach to examine how meanings surrounding the use of buzzers and bots in digital public relations (PR) by Indonesian e-commerce brands are socially constructed through interactions, symbols, and narratives (Creswell & Cresswell, 2018). This framework is particularly relevant in the post-truth era, as it enables an exploration of manipulative practices such as astroturfing, framing, and bot usage, while also addressing the motives, justifications, and ethical implications of these practices (Guba & Lincoln, 2000).

An interpretive case study design focuses on Shopee as the primary case due to its involvement in highly competitive e-commerce rivalries that feature digital PR strategies, including alleged buzzer and bot use. The purpose is not

to generate statistical generalizations but to provide a holistic understanding of narrative construction, manipulation, and stakeholder interpretations, while clarifying the boundary between legitimate communication and manipulation (Merriam, 2009).

Data collection involves triangulation through in-depth interviews, netnography, and document analysis. Interviews with 15–25 informants including PR practitioners, media activists, academics, and digital consumers will explore ethical evaluations of buzzer and bot practices (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Netnography will analyze Twitter/X conversations, focusing on buzzer networks, hashtag campaigns, and bot activity (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2022). Document analysis will examine PR codes of conduct, corporate statements, and platform regulations to identify discrepancies between ethical norms and actual practices.

Data analysis integrates thematic coding Miles & Huberman (2014), narrative analysis of online conversations (Riessman, 2008), and critical discourse analysis Fairclough (1995) to reveal how buzzers and bots frame narratives, exercise symbolic power, and establish hegemonic logics. This layered approach highlights ethical boundaries between counter-narratives and black campaigns.

The study's target population consists of PR practitioners, social media users, academics, and regulators. Sampling combines purposive and snowball techniques to access both open and closed networks, such as buzzer communities and former digital agency employees (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). With 15–25 informants selected based on experience, expertise, and strategic roles, the study aims to capture diverse perspectives and deepen understanding of the ethical perceptions and meaning-making processes involved in manipulative technology driven digital PR practices.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Use of Buzzers in Digital PR

The study's findings reveal that the use of buzzers in digital public relations strategies by Indonesian e-commerce brands has evolved into a systematic practice. Evidence from the rivalry between Shopee and its competitors in 2023 demonstrates that buzzers were employed not only to

enhance brand image through positive promotional campaigns but also to conduct digital offensives against competitors. For instance, narratives such as “fake discounts” and “unreliable sellers” were strategically disseminated by buzzer accounts exhibiting consistent activity patterns. This practice demonstrates an agenda-setting mechanism enabled by social media algorithms, whereby specific topics are deliberately amplified to shape and dominate public discourse (Fischer & Jarren, 2023).

Figure 1. Strategic Use of Buzzers in Digital PR

The strategic deployment of buzzers in digital PR refers to the use of social



media accounts whether operated individually or through coordinated networks to influence public opinion, enhance brand image, and direct digital conversations toward specific agendas. Within the intensely competitive like e-commerce landscape, buzzers fulfill several critical functions. They reinforce brand positioning by disseminating positive messages through reviews, endorsements, and promotional campaigns, thereby fostering consumer trust and strengthening brand loyalty. At the same time, they are employed as tools to counter competition by constructing narratives that discredit rivals, often through negative framing such as claims of “fake discounts,” “unreliable sellers,” or poor service, which undermine competitors’ credibility.

Buzzers also play a pivotal role in agenda-setting within the digital sphere, amplifying certain topics through frequent posting, hashtag

campaigns, and mass account engagement so that specific narratives dominate public discourse. Moreover, their extensive follower bases and consistent interaction patterns generate the impression of widespread support, creating an artificial perception of brand popularity and trustworthiness.

While the use of buzzers offers brands a strategic advantage in shaping consumer perceptions and gaining competitive leverage, it simultaneously raises pressing ethical concerns. Issues of transparency, authenticity of consumer voices, and manipulation of public opinion highlight the dual nature of this practice, positioning it not only as a matter of strategic communication but also as a subject of ethical scrutiny in digital public relations.

The use of buzzers in public relations (PR) primarily serves to enhance organizational and brand communication strategies within the digital sphere. Buzzers, typically individuals or networks of social media accounts with substantial follower bases, function as instruments to shape, reinforce, and guide public opinion. Their purpose includes expanding the reach of PR messages, allowing information to circulate more widely and rapidly than organic distribution. They also contribute to building and strengthening brand image by amplifying positive messages through reviews, recommendations, and promotional campaigns, thereby fostering consumer trust and loyalty.

In addition, buzzers generate social proof and establish narrative legitimacy by producing high levels of interaction such as likes, comments, and shares that create the perception of widespread public endorsement. This perceived validation encourages audiences to view campaigns as credible and relevant. In competitive contexts, buzzers are often employed to influence the balance of public opinion by reinforcing favorable narratives for the organization while simultaneously diminishing competitors' credibility, for example by highlighting issues such as "fake discounts" or "poor service."

Buzzers further play a significant role in agenda-setting by ensuring that specific issues or campaigns achieve high visibility in digital spaces. Through strategic use of hashtags, frequent posting, and large-scale interactions, they can elevate certain narratives into trending topics, thereby dominating public discourse. Moreover, in times of reputational crisis, buzzers support communication strategies by disseminating clarifications, promoting positive narratives, or introducing counterbalancing messages to mitigate the impact

of negative issues.

Overall, the strategic purpose of employing buzzers in PR is to broaden message dissemination, cultivate a favorable image, shape public opinion, and establish legitimacy and narrative dominance in the digital environment. Nonetheless, this practice also raises ethical concerns regarding transparency, the authenticity of public voices, and the risks of manipulating public opinion.

The Role of Bots in Scaling Narratives

Beyond the role of human buzzers, this study identified the use of bots as a mechanism to amplify pre-existing messages. Bots function by generating large volumes of retweets, automated comments, and likes, thereby constructing the illusion of broad public endorsement. During the observation period, several hashtags promoted by both brands and competitors exhibited abnormal surges in engagement, including sudden spikes of thousands of retweets within a short timeframe. This pattern corresponds with global evidence on the influence of bots in shaping public health debates, where automated accounts supporting both pro vaccine and anti-vaccine positions exerted significant impact on public discourse (Ruíz-Núñez et al., 2022). Such parallels suggest that similar strategies are actively employed in the commercial sphere, particularly within e-commerce.



Figure 2. Strategies for Bot Usage in PR

The deployment of bots within public relations constitutes a deliberate digital communication strategy designed to enhance visibility, accelerate message dissemination, and strengthen resonance. Their function extends

beyond the reproduction of pseudo-interactions, as they are strategically employed to shape and manage public perception on a broad scale.

One strategy involves message amplification, in which bots increase interactions such as likes, shares, retweets, or comments on public relations content. These artificially generated interactions create *social proof*, fostering the perception that a message is widely supported and relevant. As a result, social media algorithms are more likely to prioritize and circulate the content to broader audiences.

Another strategy is agenda-setting, where bots ensure that specific issues dominate digital discourse through frequent postings, the strategic use of hashtags, and carefully timed distribution. This practice elevates public relations messages into trending topics or improves their search visibility, thereby directing public attention toward the intended narrative.

Bots are also employed in framing strategies to reinforce particular narrative constructions. For example, when a brand aims to be recognized as a market leader, bots systematically promote content that emphasizes service excellence, product quality, or brand reputation. Repetition within this strategy encourages audiences to internalize the narrative as credible and valid.

In contexts of competition or reputational crises, bots serve as instruments of counter-narratives. They undermine opposing discourses by magnifying competitors' weaknesses, amplifying criticisms, or casting doubt on credibility. Issues such as "fake discounts" or "poor service quality" are often disseminated and reinforced through bot activity, making them appear as widespread public sentiment.

Another significant strategy is the creation of artificial virality, whereby bots generate sudden surges of interaction that make content appear to receive extraordinary audience engagement. This manufactured visibility stimulates organic participation by human users, thereby transforming bot-driven narratives into seemingly authentic public conversations.

Finally, bots provide operational efficiency by enabling organizations to disseminate messages at scale with speed, consistency, and sustainability. Automation reduces temporal and financial constraints, allowing public relations campaigns to be executed more effectively, particularly in times of

crisis or heightened market competition. Collectively, these strategies illustrate how bots are employed not merely as technical tools but as integral components of communication management, designed to expand narrative reach, secure dominance in digital discourse, and sustain organizational visibility in competitive environments.

The strategic use of bots in public relations (PR) can be understood through the perspectives of strategic communication, digital technology, and social psychology. Bots primarily function to extend message reach by automatically amplifying interactions such as retweets, shares, likes, and comments, thereby accelerating dissemination beyond the limits of human-driven engagement. They also create the illusion of widespread support, triggering the *bandwagon effect* and reinforcing agenda-setting and framing by ensuring narratives dominate timelines, algorithms, and trending topics.

In competitive contexts, bots strengthen favorable brand messages while weakening competitors' credibility through criticisms, negative reviews, or counterarguments. They further provide cost efficiency and speed, operating continuously and at scale to sustain large communication campaigns. Additionally, bots generate *social proof* by producing early engagement, which enhances perceived credibility and increases the likelihood of public acceptance.

Overall, bots serve to accelerate dissemination, broaden reach, and enhance narrative resonance for purposes of reputation management, persuasion, and competition. However, their use also raises ethical concerns regarding transparency, authenticity of public voices, and the potential manipulation of public opinion.

Impact on Consumer Perception

Survey findings and interviews reveal that consumers frequently struggle to differentiate between organic conversations and those influenced by buzzers or bots. Although some consumers recognize the presence of buzzers, they remain unable to verify the accuracy of the circulating information. This condition underscores the limited level of digital literacy within the public, which renders consumers highly susceptible to manipulative framing. The immediate consequence is a decline in consumer trust toward brands, affecting both those initiating attacks and those targeted by them. These observations

are consistent with prior studies demonstrating that misleading information framing can significantly alter consumer attitudes toward a brand (Ünlü et al., 2024).

Figure 3. Impact of Buzzers and Bots on Consumer Behavior

The impact of employing buzzers and bots in public relations (PR) practices can be analyzed through the lenses of communication, consumer psychology, and digital ethics. Their presence broadens the dissemination of



messages, exposing consumers repeatedly to particular narratives. Such repeated exposure often produces a *mere exposure effect*, whereby individuals are more likely to accept or believe information simply because of its frequent appearance, even when its accuracy cannot be verified.

Buzzers and bots also construct the illusion of public support by generating large volumes of likes, comments, and shares. This manufactured interaction creates the perception that a narrative or brand enjoys widespread popularity and credibility, which subsequently influences consumer trust and purchasing decisions. At the same time, these practices increase consumer vulnerability to manipulation, particularly among individuals with limited digital literacy who cannot easily distinguish between authentic conversations and engineered interactions. Consequently, consumers are more susceptible to exaggerated positive portrayals or negative framing directed at competitors.

The use of buzzers and bots can also erode brand trust over the long term.

When consumers recognize manipulation, their confidence in both the attacking and targeted brands diminishes, thereby jeopardizing organizational credibility. Moreover, information amplified by these mechanisms can significantly shape consumer perceptions of brand quality, pricing, and reputation. Misleading or manipulative framing may alter consumer attitudes, prompting behaviors such as boycotts, brand switching, or the uncritical dissemination of questionable narratives.

Ultimately, these practices create ethical dilemmas for consumers, who become not only the targets but also the victims of engineered communication. The difficulty in distinguishing authentic from manipulated information fosters confusion and skepticism toward brand communication as a whole.

Ethics of Virtue and Digital PR

From the standpoint of virtue ethics, the use of buzzers and bots demonstrates a lack of honesty and integrity, values that should fundamentally guide brand communication. Public relations practitioners who endorse or orchestrate such practices encounter a moral dilemma between fulfilling business imperatives to secure market advantage and adhering to ethical obligations to preserve the truthfulness of information. This perspective is consistent with Maseko's (2024) assertion that moral courage in upholding honesty constitutes the cornerstone of ethical communication. Within this framework, the deployment of buzzers represents a strategy that prioritizes immediate market gains at the expense of the long-term sustainability of a brand's ethical reputation. Some negative impacts that can arise from the use of buzzers are as follows, when consumers become aware that a brand employs buzzers to manipulate public opinion, their trust in the brand declines, and such erosion of trust is difficult to restore, ultimately undermining consumer loyalty. Although buzzer-driven strategies may yield short-term gains in popularity or digital visibility, these benefits are outweighed by the long-term reputational risks. Brands that rely on such practices risk being perceived as opaque, manipulative, and lacking integrity, thereby damaging their image over time.

Awareness of buzzer practices also fosters heightened consumer skepticism, reducing confidence in subsequent brand communications. This diminished trust compromises the effectiveness of future public relations

campaigns, as messages are no longer fully accepted as credible. Furthermore, the use of buzzers places PR practitioners in a moral conflict between the pursuit of business objectives and the ethical obligation to convey accurate and truthful information. Prolonged reliance on such practices threatens to erode professional standards in the communication field.

If the use of buzzers is publicly exposed, brands face the possibility of a severe reputational crisis. Negative responses from consumers, media, and regulatory bodies can result in both material and non-material losses that are difficult to reverse. Ultimately, the most significant consequence of this practice is the erosion of a brand's sustainable ethical reputation, which should serve as the foundation for cultivating long-term relationships with consumers and the wider community.

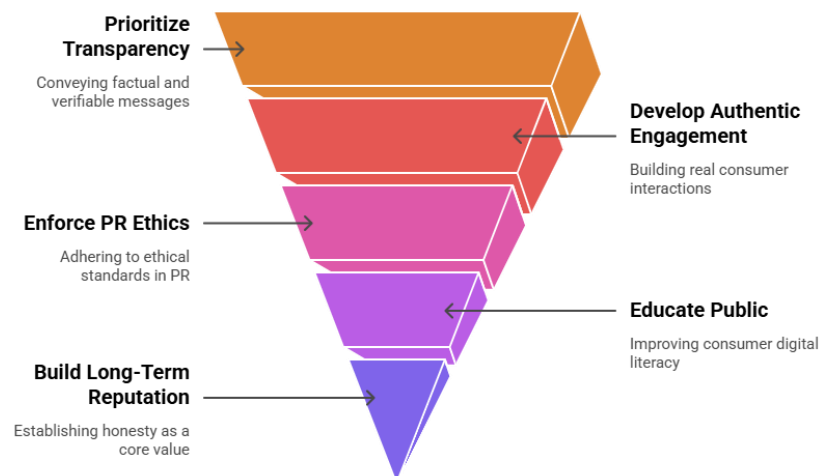


Figure 4. Building Sustainable Brand Communication

If the use of buzzers and bots reflects a prioritization of short-term interests, a more sustainable alternative lies in developing authentic and long-term communication strategies. Brands should emphasize transparency by delivering factual and verifiable messages, as openness fosters consumer trust and diminishes reliance on manipulative practices. Authentic engagement must also be cultivated by encouraging genuine interactions, such as through user-generated content, customer communities, or loyalty programs that promote organic participation. Furthermore, adherence to professional ethical standards in public relations is essential. As Maseko (2024) highlights, the moral courage to reject manipulative practices should be regarded as both a

professional responsibility and an investment in long-term reputation.

Brands also play a critical role in enhancing public digital literacy, enabling consumers to engage more critically with circulating information while reinforcing the brand's commitment to empowerment rather than exploitation. Most importantly, honesty must serve as the core value of brand communication. Strategies grounded in honesty not only sustain ethical reputation but also foster stronger emotional connections with consumers over time. Ultimately, the optimal solution is to reorient PR communication away from short-term manipulation toward strategies that are ethical, transparent, and sustainable, ensuring that brand reputation is both preserved and reinforced as a valuable asset in market competition.

CSR Perspective on Buzzer and Bot Practices

From the perspective of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), the deployment of buzzers and bots reflects a fundamental conflict between commercial objectives and social responsibility. By employing manipulative techniques, brands disregard their ethical obligations toward consumers, who constitute their primary stakeholders. Such practices contradict the principles of the "triple bottom line" in CSR, which requires the integration of economic profitability, social responsibility, and environmental sustainability (Hasan et al., 2023; Putri & Naili, 2023). Consequently, the use of buzzers can be categorized as a "CSR failure," as it compromises social values in pursuit of short-term economic advantages.

The principle of the "triple bottom line" (TBL) in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) serves as a conceptual framework that highlights the necessity for organizations to pursue not only financial gain but also social impact and environmental sustainability. TBL shifts the orientation of business from being solely profit-driven to value-driven by integrating three interrelated dimensions: economic, social, and environmental.

The economic dimension underscores the importance of maintaining sound financial performance to ensure organizational survival, growth, and the creation of added value for shareholders and stakeholders. However, such benefits must be achieved through ethical, transparent, and sustainable practices rather than manipulative or exploitative approaches.

The social dimension requires companies to assume responsibility for the

welfare of society, encompassing consumers, employees, local communities, and the broader public. This obligation entails adopting communication practices that are honest, fair, and free from deception. When organizations employ buzzers to manipulate public opinion, they undermine essential social values such as trust and fairness, which should form the basis of long-term consumer relationships.

The environmental dimension emphasizes corporate accountability in reducing ecological harm by adopting environmentally responsible practices. Although the use of buzzers and bots may not directly damage the physical environment, these practices contradict the spirit of sustainability by fostering an “unhealthy” digital ecosystem characterized by misinformation, lack of transparency, and declining public trust.

Therefore, the TBL principle calls for a balance between economic profit, social responsibility, and environmental sustainability. When organizations prioritize short-term economic gains through manipulative buzzer practices, this balance is disrupted, as social values such as integrity, trust, and digital literacy are sacrificed. Such conditions represent a “CSR failure,” in which companies neglect their social role as agents of sustainable development and fail to create shared value for all stakeholders.

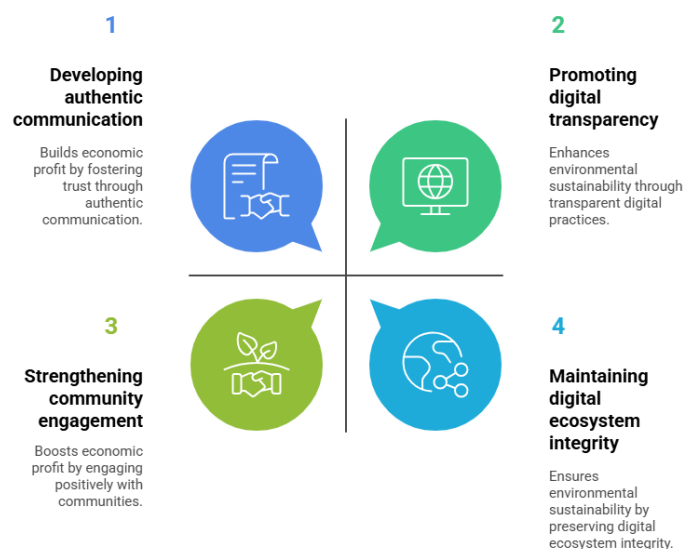


Figure 5. Balancing CSR Through Triple Bottom Line

The most effective solution to address buzzer practices, which can be classified as a form of CSR failure, is to realign corporate communication and business strategies with the principles of the triple bottom line (TBL), which emphasize the balance between economic profitability, social responsibility, and environmental sustainability. Organizations must adopt communication strategies that are transparent and authentic, ensuring that information shared with the public is factual, verifiable, and free from manipulation, thereby preserving consumer trust as a foundation of long-term social capital. Furthermore, companies should prioritize positive social impact by fostering healthy relationships with consumers, communities, and stakeholders through genuine participation in community engagement initiatives, the promotion of digital literacy, and the establishment of honest and inclusive communication platforms.

Although buzzer practices may not directly harm the physical environment, firms still bear the responsibility of sustaining the integrity of the digital ecosystem by ensuring the circulation of accurate information, promoting transparency, and eliminating manipulative practices that compromise digital trust. Ultimately, the optimal solution lies in shifting from manipulative tactics toward ethical, transparent, and sustainable communication strategies. Such an approach not only safeguards corporate

ethical reputation but also reinforces the brand's role as an agent of sustainable development in accordance with TBL principles, thereby creating shared value for all stakeholders.

Regulatory Perspective

The regulator emphasized that the use of buzzers and bots is difficult to oversee because of regulatory limitations and the lack of transparency on digital platforms. Existing regulations in Indonesia primarily address the dissemination of hoaxes in general, while strategic manipulations conducted by brands remain situated in a legal gray area. This condition underscores the urgent necessity of formulating more specific policies on digital communication ethics to safeguard the integrity of the public sphere and protect consumers from manipulative practices (Hasan et al., 2023; Samoilenko, 2021).

The most effective solution to address this issue is to reinforce the regulatory framework governing digital communication ethics while simultaneously promoting transparency at both platform and brand levels. The government should establish more comprehensive regulations on digital communication practices, extending beyond the dissemination of hoaxes to include strategic manipulations conducted by brands through buzzers or bots. Such regulations must provide precise definitions, clear indicators of violations, and robust mechanisms for monitoring and enforcement. Digital platforms, particularly social media, must also be required to enhance transparency by labeling paid content, automated accounts, and buzzer-related activities, thereby enabling consumers to differentiate between organic and orchestrated interactions.

In addition, regulators should collaborate with professional communication associations and academics to formulate a digital communication code of ethics grounded in honesty, openness, and accountability. This approach ensures that regulation functions not only as a repressive measure but also as a preventive framework through the establishment of professional standards. Strengthening public digital literacy should further serve as a long-term strategy, equipping consumers with the critical capacity to identify manipulative practices and reducing their vulnerability to misleading framing. By integrating clear regulations, platform

transparency, professional ethical guidelines, and enhanced digital literacy, it becomes possible to safeguard the integrity of the public sphere while protecting consumers from harmful digital communication manipulations.

4. DISCUSSION

Based on the presented data, the discussion on the use of buzzers and bots in Digital Public Relations (PR) strategies highlights several critical dimensions. Buzzers serve a strategic role by disseminating positive messages such as reviews, promotions, and testimonials, thereby cultivating brand image, consumer loyalty, and trust. At the same time, they function as competitive tools, spreading negative narratives such as “fake discounts” or “untrustworthy sellers” to undermine rivals. Through repeated postings, hashtags, and large-scale interactions, buzzers are able to dominate digital discourse, creating the impression of widespread public support, even though such visibility is often artificial. While effective in reinforcing brand positioning, their use raises ethical concerns due to their manipulative nature.

Bots further reinforce digital narratives by automatically amplifying messages through likes, shares, retweets, and comments, significantly expanding message reach. They operate through strategies such as message amplification, agenda-setting to ensure specific issues trend, framing to enhance credibility through repetition, counter-narratives aimed at weakening competitors, and generating artificial virality through sudden spikes in engagement. Bots offer advantages in speed, cost-efficiency, and continuity, yet they also contribute to the illusion of genuine public support, raising questions about authenticity and ethical integrity.

The influence of buzzers and bots significantly affects consumer perceptions. Many consumers struggle to distinguish organic conversations from orchestrated ones, leading to heightened susceptibility to manipulation. Repeated exposure to certain narratives produces the mere exposure effect, where information is more likely to be believed regardless of its accuracy. This dynamic erodes consumer trust, not only in the brands that employ such tactics but also in those targeted by them, and fosters potential negative consumer behavior such as boycotts, brand switching, or the uncritical sharing of misinformation. Although these strategies increase brand visibility, they

pose long-term risks to consumer trust and brand credibility.

From the standpoint of virtue ethics, the use of buzzers and bots contradicts the principles of honesty and integrity. Public relations practitioners face a moral dilemma between achieving business goals and fulfilling ethical obligations to provide accurate communication. The exposure of manipulative practices often results in a loss of consumer trust, reputation crises that are difficult to overcome, and the gradual erosion of professional standards within the communication field. Although such practices may yield short-term benefits, they ultimately compromise ethical reputation and long-term brand sustainability.

When analyzed through the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) framework, particularly the triple bottom line perspective of profit, people, and planet, the use of buzzers and bots constitutes a CSR failure. While these tactics may generate short-term economic gain, they undermine social values such as trust, fairness, and digital literacy, while also contributing to an unhealthy digital environment characterized by manipulation and misinformation. To safeguard long-term credibility, companies must adopt transparent, authentic, and sustainable communication strategies that protect consumer trust and fulfill social responsibilities.

From a regulatory perspective, the use of buzzers and bots remains difficult to oversee due to limited legal frameworks and platform transparency. Indonesian regulations currently focus on hoaxes in general, leaving manipulative brand practices in a legal gray area. Addressing this issue requires more specific regulations on digital communication ethics, mandatory labeling of paid content and automated accounts, the development of ethical codes in collaboration with professional associations and academics, and the strengthening of public digital literacy to reduce susceptibility to manipulation.

In conclusion, buzzers and bots have become significant tools in digital PR strategies, enabling brands to expand their reach, build stronger images, and compete more aggressively in the marketplace. However, their use entails considerable risks, including manipulation of public opinion, diminished consumer trust, reputational crises, CSR shortcomings, and ethical degradation in communication practices. To strike a balance, organizations

must transition toward ethical, transparent, and sustainable communication strategies that prioritize honesty, authenticity, enhanced digital literacy, and stricter regulatory frameworks in order to preserve both brand reputation and consumer trust in the long run.

5. CONCLUSION

The use of buzzers and bots in Digital Public Relations (PR) offers strategic advantages but simultaneously raises significant ethical challenges. Buzzers promote positive brand messages such as testimonials and promotions, while also discrediting competitors through negative framing; by leveraging hashtags, repetitive postings, and large-scale interactions, they shape public discourse and create an artificial perception of widespread support. Similarly, bots automate message amplification through likes, shares, and comments, increasing visibility and simulating virality; although efficient in spreading narratives and reinforcing credibility, their lack of authenticity raises ethical concerns regarding transparency.

These practices strongly influence consumer perceptions, as audiences often cannot distinguish organic from orchestrated interactions, leaving them vulnerable to manipulation through repeated exposure that fosters misplaced trust. While such strategies enhance brand visibility, they ultimately risk eroding consumer confidence and long-term credibility. Ethically, the use of buzzers and bots contradicts principles of honesty and integrity, producing short-term gains at the expense of reputation, trust, and professional standards, and creating potential crises that are difficult to resolve. From a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) perspective, they neglect social obligations by prioritizing profit over public trust and by fostering a digital environment dominated by misinformation and manipulation.

Regulatory frameworks remain insufficient, as current laws broadly address hoaxes but fail to regulate manipulative brand practices. Effective mitigation requires precise regulations, greater platform transparency, enforcement of professional ethical codes, and enhanced public digital literacy. In conclusion, although buzzers and bots are effective tools for extending reach and shaping narratives, they present profound ethical, social, and reputational risks, making transparent, authentic, and responsible strategies essential for

sustainable brand communication.

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