



Relational Marketing Communication and Institutional Resilience: Evidence from Ganesha Operation

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ABSTRACT: This study examined how relational marketing communication practices sustained the institutional resilience of Ganesha Operation (GO), Indonesia's longest-operating tutoring institution, amid the digital disruption of non-formal education. Using a qualitative embedded single-case design, data were collected from eight informants, marketing staff, branch managers, tutors, and alumni, across GO's Cimanggis and Kranggan branches in the Greater Jakarta (Jabodetabek) area through in-depth interviews and document analysis. The data were analysed thematically using a hybrid inductive–deductive coding approach guided by Varey's relational communication framework. The findings revealed six interlocking practices: personalised tutorial services, gamified competition, an unbundled digital product, appreciation-based pricing, inclusive positioning, and the management of operational pressure. Together, these practices functioned as relationship-constituting forms of communication. Personalised services generated trust and organic word-of-mouth advocacy, while pricing and product decisions operated as social communicators of value, sustaining enrolment without heavy reliance on paid promotion. However, the model became fragile when target-driven communication became non-humanistic, potentially threatening student retention. The study's novelty lay in extending Varey's marketing-mix-as-communicator thesis, previously applied mainly in commercial and formal education settings, to conventional non-formal tutoring institutions. Practically, the findings suggested that tutoring institutions should manage service delivery, competition, digital products, and pricing as an integrated relational communication system while maintaining a humane approach to performance-oriented management to support student retention and long-term institutional resilience.

KEYWORDS: Marketing communication; relationship marketing; word of mouth; tutoring institution; institutional resilience; ganesha operation

1. Introduction

Marketing communication has traditionally been understood as the delivery of persuasive messages from producers to prospective consumers. Since the late 1990s, however, this view has been challenged by perspectives that position communication, rather than persuasion, as

the foundation of relationships between organizations and their publics [1]. Varey [1] argues that marketing communication is fundamentally a social process characterized by interaction and relationship building rather than one-way transmission intended solely to influence purchasing decisions. This perspective is reinforced by relationship marketing scholarship, which places interaction and dialogue at the center of the marketing process [2], and by the concept of communication-in-use, which shifts attention from company-designed messages to meanings constructed by consumers within their own ecosystems [3].

This relational perspective has become increasingly relevant with the emergence of the platform society, in which algorithms and data increasingly mediate interactions between institutions and their audiences [4, 5]. Within this environment, organizations no longer exercise complete control over communication; visibility and meaning are increasingly co-constructed through platforms, user participation, and algorithmic processes. Algorithms organize relevance and visibility [6], while datafication increasingly shapes how social reality is represented and interpreted [7]. These developments also raise ethical concerns because personalized algorithmic decision-making may affect user autonomy and create asymmetries in access to information and visibility [8]. Consequently, contemporary marketing communication must be understood not only in terms of message delivery but also in terms of how relationships are established and sustained amid the interaction between face-to-face and platform-based communication.

This tension is particularly evident in Indonesia's non-formal education sector. Over the past decade, the rapid expansion of online learning platforms has transformed how students and parents access educational services and has reshaped expectations regarding convenience, personalization, speed, and affordability. Such developments have frequently been interpreted through disruptive innovation theory, which suggests that established providers may be displaced by challengers offering simpler, more affordable, and more flexible alternatives [9]. However, technological superiority alone does not necessarily guarantee organizational sustainability. Some conventional institutions have remained resilient by relying on social trust, personalized services, and community relationships—forms of relational capital that are difficult to replicate through platform-based mechanisms [10]. Moreover, subsequent developments in disruption theory emphasize that not every technology-driven transformation constitutes genuine disruption and that the responses of incumbent organizations also influence eventual outcomes [11]. Institutional resilience may therefore depend not only on technological adaptation but also on the relational architecture through which organizations maintain connections with their stakeholders.

Ganesha Operation (GO) provides a particularly relevant case for examining this phenomenon. Established in Bandung in 1984, GO has survived successive changes in Indonesia's educational environment while continuing to expand its operations across numerous cities through a centralized management system rather than a franchise model. Its longevity is particularly noteworthy at a time when digital learning platforms have placed increasing competitive pressure on conventional tutoring institutions. GO therefore presents an important empirical question: how has a conventional tutoring institution sustained its existence amid digital and platform-based disruption? Addressing this question requires examining marketing communication not simply as advertising or promotion but as a broader relational process through which institutional value, trust, and relationships are continuously produced.

Varey's relational marketing communication framework [12] provides an appropriate analytical lens for this purpose. The framework emphasizes four interconnected principles. First, marketing communication should shift from message-making toward relationship-building, meaning that communication effectiveness is reflected in the quality of relationships rather than merely the persuasiveness of promotional messages. Second, communication involves multiple stakeholders, including customers, employees, communities, and broader publics, because organizational reputation is constructed across multiple interactions. Third, elements of the marketing mix, including product, price, and distribution, function as social communicators because organizational decisions regarding these elements convey meanings about value, accessibility, and attitudes toward consumers. Fourth, internal and external communication must be aligned because external promises become credible only when they are supported by organizational practices [13, 14]. These principles allow institutional resilience to be examined through relational architecture rather than solely through promotional intensity.

This perspective is consistent with relationship marketing theory, particularly the commitment-trust framework, which identifies trust and commitment as central mechanisms for sustaining exchange relationships [15]. Trust is generally developed through repeated positive experiences rather than promotional claims alone. Service quality therefore becomes a critical foundation for relational communication. Perceived service quality reflects the relationship between customer expectations and actual service experiences [19], while the quality of interactions between providers and users strongly influences overall perceptions of service [13]. Previous research indicates that high-quality service contributes to satisfaction, which subsequently strengthens loyalty, repurchase intentions, and word-of-mouth communication [16–20]. More recent evidence similarly identifies corporate image, service quality, satisfaction, and trust as important determinants of customer loyalty [17, 21].

Word-of-mouth communication is particularly important in educational services because service outcomes are difficult to evaluate before participation. Students and parents therefore frequently depend on the experiences and recommendations of previous users when assessing educational providers. Both institution-generated and user-generated communication can shape brand perceptions and prospective students' enrollment decisions [18]. Reputation is thus not produced exclusively by formal institutional communication but is co-created through experiences, interpersonal interactions, and subsequent conversations among stakeholders. This mechanism closely reflects Varey's proposition that meaning emerges through relational interaction rather than unilateral message transmission [1].

Organizations can also intentionally encourage such relational engagement by creating memorable and shareable service experiences. Personalized and responsive services, including academic assistance beyond formal instructional hours, can function as direct forms of relational communication because they demonstrate institutional commitment and strengthen interpersonal trust. Gamification provides another potential mechanism. Rather than being limited to points, badges, or rewards, gamification can be understood as the creation of service experiences that stimulate participation and engagement [22]. Previous studies have shown that appropriately designed gamification can strengthen customer engagement and loyalty-related attitudes [23], including through mobile applications that extend interaction beyond physical service settings [24]. Competitions, recognition, and rewards may therefore simultaneously

increase student participation and generate positive experiences that encourage interpersonal communication.

Varey's proposition that the marketing mix itself communicates meaning is also relevant to pricing and product decisions [1]. Pricing is not solely an economic mechanism; it may signal affordability, recognition, fairness, or exclusivity. Pricing and sales promotion can influence consumer perceptions and behavior when coordinated with other marketing activities [25]. Discounts and other pricing mechanisms may communicate appreciation for achievement while reducing financial barriers. However, their effects depend on how they are structured because promotional incentives can enhance brand-related perceptions [26] and price attractiveness [27], but excessive or poorly designed discounts may reduce perceived value [28].

Similarly, digital products can serve both functional and communicative purposes. A digital learning application does more than deliver educational content; it also becomes a branded touchpoint through which an institution extends its interaction with students beyond physical classrooms. Digital products may therefore communicate adaptability and accessibility while allowing conventional institutions to participate in the platform environment without abandoning their relational foundations. From this perspective, service delivery, gamification, pricing, and digital products are not independent marketing instruments but interconnected forms of communication through which relationships and institutional meanings are constructed.

Despite these theoretical developments, research on marketing communication among tutoring institutions in Indonesia remains limited. Existing studies generally emphasize tactical approaches, including the marketing mix, digital promotion, personal engagement, community referrals, and SWOT analysis [29, 30]. Although these approaches are useful for identifying promotional strategies, they are primarily transactional and descriptive and therefore provide limited explanations of how relationships become a source of organizational resilience. They also rarely examine how service experiences, trust, engagement, pricing, digital products, and internal management practices interact to constitute a broader communication pattern. This limitation becomes particularly important in the platform era, where questions of transformation, participation, and ethics increasingly shape institutional communication.

The present study addresses this gap by applying Varey's relational marketing communication framework to examine GO's organizational resilience. It integrates the relational principles of communication with the trust-commitment mechanism and the service quality–satisfaction–loyalty–word-of-mouth pathway [15, 16, 31]. Personalized services, gamification, pricing policies, and digital products are examined as communicative practices through which relational mechanisms are enacted. This integrated framework is situated within the broader context of an algorithmic society [4, 5], allowing the study to examine how a conventional educational institution combines face-to-face relational practices with emerging platform logic.

Empirically, the study focuses on GO's Cimanggis and Kranggan branches in the Greater Jakarta (Jabodetabek) area. The sites were selected purposively based on theoretical rather than merely accessibility considerations. Cimanggis is located in northern Depok near the southern boundary of Jakarta, within a densely populated residential and educational corridor. Kranggan, located in Jatisampurna, Bekasi, forms part of the rapidly developing Cibubur–Transyogi residential and educational corridor. Both branches operate at a comparable scale

within the same centralized GO management system, making them suitable for examining whether similar relational communication practices occur across different local contexts.

The use of two branches also provides analytical advantages. Because both operate under the same centralized non-franchise system, differences associated with independent governance are minimized. Both are located within competitive suburban educational markets in Greater Jakarta, providing information-rich settings for investigating relational marketing communication under substantial market pressure. Furthermore, examining two sites enables replication logic: similar patterns across the branches strengthen the transferability of the findings, whereas differences may reveal the influence of local context [32].

Accordingly, this study asks: How has Ganesha Operation sustained its existence in the platform era through marketing communication? The study aims to identify and analyze GO's relational marketing communication practices and explain how these practices contribute to institutional sustainability. The study contributes theoretically by extending Varey's relational framework to conventional non-formal education and by conceptualizing service delivery, engagement, pricing, and digital products as interconnected social communicators. Practically, it provides insights into how established tutoring institutions can respond to digital disruption while preserving the relational foundations that support trust, loyalty, student retention, and long-term institutional resilience.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design and Setting.

This research employs a qualitative approach within the constructivist-interpretive paradigm. This paradigm is consistent with the ontological assumption that the reality of marketing communication is plural and socially constructed by the actors involved, as well as with the epistemological assumption that knowledge arises through interactions between the researcher and the researched [33, 34]. Consequently, research questions of a “how” nature require an understanding of the meanings (*verstehen*) underlying communicative practices rather than the measurement of frequencies or the testing of hypotheses [35]. The study employs an embedded single-case design, as developed by Yin [32]. Ganesha Operation's (GO) marketing communication practices are treated as a single case, while the Cimanggis and Kranggan branches serve as two embedded units of analysis. Because both branches operate under the same centralized system, they are examined as two windows onto a single institutional model. Thus, the inclusion of two sites serves to enrich and cross-check the data rather than to enable direct comparison between them. Both branches are located within the Jabodetabek corridor, which is characterized by high demand for tutoring services and intense competition, thereby providing a rich setting for examining marketing communication practices under market pressure [36]. The two branches are therefore treated as complementary sub-units that together provide a coherent and comprehensive portrait of the single case.

2.2. Participants and Sampling Technique.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research aims and the depth of their experience [36]. The inclusion criteria required participants to be directly involved in the planning, implementation, or reception of branch communication, to have at least one year of direct involvement with GO, and to be willing to participate

voluntarily. To obtain a comprehensive and multi-perspective understanding of GO's marketing communication practices, informants were selected from four stakeholder categories representing different stages of the communication process, from planning and strategic decision-making to frontline implementation and message reception. These categories comprised marketing staff involved in designing program promotions, branch heads responsible for strategic decision-making, tutors serving as frontline implementers, and GO alumni or students as recipients of communicative messages. One representative from each category was selected from each branch, resulting in a total of eight participants. As summarized in Table 1, this participant composition ensured representation of key perspectives across the planning, implementation, and reception of GO's marketing communication practices.

Table 1. Participant profile.

No	Branch	Category	Name Initials	Length of Involvement with GO
1	Kranggan	Marketing Staff	CC	15 years
2	Cimanggis	Marketing Staff	AS	5 years
3	Kranggan	Tutor	MG	10 years
4	Cimanggis	Tutor	NS	4 years
5	Kranggan	Branch Head	GS	15 years
6	Cimanggis	Branch Head	YM	10 years
7	Kranggan	Alumni (2 persons)	CH & RS	2 years
8	Cimanggis	Alumni (2 persons)	AT & CN	2 years

This resulted in a total of ten informants. However, within the qualitative research tradition, sample adequacy is determined not merely by numerical size but by the richness and sufficiency of the information generated. In this study, sample adequacy was supported by the interrelated principles of information power and data saturation. Information power suggests that the more specific the research aim, the more relevant the informant selection, and the richer the interview dialogue, the fewer participants are required. These conditions were met because the research aim was clearly focused, informants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement, and the interviews were conducted in depth. Sample adequacy was further supported by data saturation, defined as the point at which additional interviews no longer generate new relevant codes or themes [37]. The researchers continuously monitored the emergence of codes and themes throughout the data collection process and concluded data collection once saturation had been reached.

2.3. Data Collection.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the primary data source and document analysis as a supplementary source. The interviews were conducted online between May and June 2025 and lasted approximately 45–60 minutes per informant. A semi-structured format was adopted to provide sufficient direction while allowing flexibility to explore unexpected issues beyond predetermined conceptual boundaries. The interview guide was developed following a systematic framework for constructing semi-structured interview questions [38]. It covered key themes related to branch marketing communication strategies, relationship-building practices with students, parents, and alumni, the use of digital media and algorithmically mediated platforms, and challenges, adaptation, and resistance in communication practices. Interviews began with descriptive, open-ended questions, followed by more in-depth questions designed to explore participants' interpretations and experiences

of relevant events and phenomena [39]. All interviews were audio-recorded with the informants' consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy of their accounts. NVivo was used to organize, manage, and code the interview transcripts. Document analysis examined institutional marketing communication materials, including printed and digital promotional materials, official branch social media content, and documentation of institutional activities. These materials served as complementary and comparative data, enabling the researchers to assess the consistency between informants' accounts and documented institutional practices [40].

2.4. Data Analysis.

Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's framework [41], which involves familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification and review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the final report. The coding process employed a hybrid deductive-inductive approach based on Fereday and Muir-Cochrane [42]. Rather than restricting the analysis to predetermined concepts derived from the literature, this approach allowed new codes and themes to emerge inductively from the field data. This process enabled the analysis to capture the nuances of relational interactions as well as emerging patterns of communication adaptation and resistance in an increasingly algorithmically mediated environment. Operationally, the analysis involved data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification [43]. Interview transcripts and documentary materials were read repeatedly, coded systematically, and organized into meaningful themes. The resulting themes were subsequently refined, interpreted, and critically discussed in relation to the study's theoretical framework.

2.5. Data Trustworthiness.

Data trustworthiness was established through triangulation and member checking. Triangulation was conducted across both sources and methods [33]. Source triangulation involved comparing accounts across different informant categories and branches, while method triangulation involved comparing interview findings with documentary evidence. Member checking was conducted by sharing the researchers' interpretations with informants to confirm that the findings accurately reflected their experiences and intended meanings [34, 44]. Together, these procedures strengthened the credibility and consistency of the study's interpretations.

2.6. Ethical Considerations.

This research was conducted with official permission from Ganesha Operation and in accordance with established research ethics principles. All informants received an explanation of the study's purpose and procedures before providing informed consent to participate and to have their interviews audio-recorded. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning codes to informants and removing or masking identifying information from the research data. All collected data were used solely for academic and research purposes.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results.

This section presents findings from the in-depth interviews and document analysis conducted at GO's Cimanggis and Kranggan branches. In accordance with qualitative reporting conventions, each theme is supported by verbatim quotations from informants, followed by an interpretation of the empirical findings. Broader theoretical interpretations are presented in the Discussion section to maintain a clear distinction between empirical findings and their theoretical implications.

3.1.1. TST Service Facilitation as a Vehicle for Relational Communication.

Tutorial Service Time (TST), a supplementary tutoring service offered outside regular class hours, was consistently identified by informants as an important service used by students. A tutor from the Cimanggis branch explained:

“There's this TST program that helps students who haven't yet understood material and exam questions at school, even Olympiad questions. Under the system, they will request the additional subjects they need, either one-on-one or in groups. TST is also held every day; subjects that are always available include math, physics, English, and Indonesian, and other subjects can be requested and will be provided” [45].

The findings also indicate that demand for TST fluctuates according to the academic calendar. Informants reported that attendance may increase to 10–15 students per class before mid-semester and final examinations but decline to only one or two students on ordinary days. A Cimanggis alumnus further described how a positive service experience encouraged advocacy among peers:

“I have already invited younger schoolmates and friends to study at GO. I can testify to the success of learning at GO, which has helped my learning process throughout senior high school among other things, I was able to get good exam scores, and now I've also gotten a satisfying UTBK score and been accepted into my dream state university” [46].

These accounts suggest that personalized service experiences may encourage students to share positive experiences with their peers, thereby contributing to organic word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. However, because the study did not measure subsequent enrollment behavior, this finding should be interpreted as a reported relational pattern rather than evidence of a direct effect on new-student enrollment.

3.1.2. Competition- and Appreciation-Based Stimulus Strategy.

GO also implements an enrichment strategy through The Champion Race (TCR), a student competition that combines academic engagement with promotional communication. According to a tutor from the Kranggan branch, TCR also functions as a cross-branch communication campaign through social media:

“TCR is a kind of competition for GO students, similar to an Olympiad or an educational e-sport. Each branch is also asked for cheers and to submit content along with the students who

will participate, which will then be uploaded to GO's official Instagram account per branch. This is also a form of GO promotion as well as support to keep students motivated” [47].

Informants indicated that student participation in TCR is influenced strongly by how teachers communicate and encourage participation in the classroom rather than by incentives alone. They also reported that ninth-grade students at the Kranggan branch achieved the highest question-completion ranking and subsequently received a national-level award. As this achievement was reported by informants but was not independently verified through official documentation, it is treated here as an informant-reported outcome.

3.1.3. Commercialization and Accessibility of the Digital Product.

GO commercializes its digital learning application separately from its face-to-face tutoring packages, allowing the application to function as an independently accessible product and a unique selling proposition (USP). A marketing staff member explained the perceived competitive advantage of this digital product:

“We have a question bank with tens of thousands of questions in that application. There are even other institutions whose students are not GO students but who use the GO application. They buy questions in the GO application to get accurate practice questions for the UTBK” [48].

This account indicates that the digital product extends GO’s reach beyond students enrolled in its face-to-face tutoring programs. The application therefore serves not only as a learning resource for existing students but also as an independent branded touchpoint accessible to non-GO students.

3.1.4. Pricing Policy and Special Fee Reductions.

GO applies a structured discount scheme that combines academic achievement incentives with special fee reductions for particular groups. The scheme includes discounts of 20% for students ranked first academically, 10% for those ranked second or third, 7% for those ranked fourth or fifth, and up to 50% for children of teachers. A marketing staff member described this pricing policy as follows:

“We have a discount facility of up to 50% if the parent works at an elementary through senior high school, while for high-achieving students ranked 1–5, the maximum can be up to 20%” [48].

The same informant linked the pricing strategy and quality of service to WOM communication:

“Applying these discounts is also a form of marketing; we have to maximize our service so that parents know about it and can promote it to their friends or relatives” [48].

These accounts indicate that pricing is communicated not merely as an economic incentive but also as a form of appreciation and social recognition. Informants further associated service quality and special pricing with positive WOM, although the study did not independently measure their effects on enrollment.

3.1.5. Inclusive Marketing Model.

GO positions itself as an inclusive tutoring institution that does not impose strict academic selection at entry. A marketing staff member from the Kranggan branch emphasized that the institution targets students from diverse educational backgrounds and levels of academic achievement:

“Our market target for GO reaches all students, whether from private schools, Islamic boarding schools, or public schools. GO also doesn't restrict students based on whether they are high-achieving or not at their school; we teach from zero until they can [understand], and there's no entrance-exam system at GO, so every child has the opportunity to learn” [48].

This inclusive positioning also extends to socioeconomic diversity through scholarship schemes involving external partners. A Kranggan tutor explained:

“GO also partners with third parties such as Bank BSI. There are students who passed the SNBP and SNBT and thus got scholarships. We help support their parents' economic situation because the parent is a motorcycle-taxi driver, so there's a scholarship from the bank for high-achieving GO students” [47].

Together, these findings indicate that GO's inclusive positioning encompasses both academic accessibility and socioeconomic considerations, broadening the range of students who can participate in its educational services.

3.1.6. Digital Communication in GO's Relational Practices.

The findings identify three digital channels within GO's relational communication practices: the digital learning application, social media, and broadcast messaging. The digital learning application functions primarily as a value-added learning channel, particularly through its question-bank feature. Documentary evidence also suggests that the application may facilitate parental monitoring, although this function was less prominent in the interview data and therefore requires further empirical confirmation. Social media, particularly Instagram, is managed at the branch level and is used to disseminate information and document activities such as TCR. It therefore serves as an amplification channel for institution- and user-generated content. In addition, the document analysis indicates that GO uses broadcast messaging to communicate with parent databases obtained through school seminars, complementing its face-to-face communication activities. Overall, these digital channels appear to complement rather than replace GO's interpersonal communication practices. However, the study did not compare their effectiveness in terms of marketing outcomes, such as enrollment conversion or student retention. Accordingly, no conclusions are drawn regarding the comparative effectiveness of individual digital channels.

3.1.7. Operational Barriers Affecting Student Retention.

The findings also reveal operational challenges that may influence students' experiences. Variations in learning needs arising from the flexibility of the Merdeka Curriculum create challenges for tutors, particularly during periods of high TST demand. When attendance increases to approximately 15 students per class before examinations, tutors may need to

accommodate different learning materials and individual needs within a single 90-minute session. Informants also reported that question-completion targets, locally referred to as *push soal*, may create psychological pressure when communicated too rigidly. Tutor accounts suggest that strict performance targets can generate discomfort among some students. These findings highlight a potential tension between performance-oriented practices and the relational emphasis on personalized, supportive communication.

3.1.8. Cross-Thematic Summary.

The findings collectively reveal six interconnected communication practices and one operational barrier that characterize GO's marketing communication model. As summarized in Table 2, these themes encompass TST service facilitation, competition-based engagement through TCR, digital product commercialization, pricing and discount policies, inclusive marketing, digital communication channels, and operational barriers. Evidence from marketing staff, tutors, and alumni provides multiple perspectives on how these practices operate across the two branches.

Table 2. Matrix of Themes, Subthemes, Evidence, Informant Groups, and Implications.

Main Theme	Subtheme	Supporting Evidence	Informant Group	Implications
TST Service Facilitation	Daily availability & flexibility	"...TST is also held every day...they can request..."	NS (Tutor, Cimanggis)	Personal interaction is reported as a trust-building mechanism; communication occurs through the service experience (Varey, 2002).
	Organic student-to-student WOM	"...I have already invited younger schoolmates and friends to study at GO..."	CN (Alumnus, Cimanggis)	A narrative pattern consistent with the satisfaction–loyalty–WOM chain (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), not yet quantitatively tested.
TCR Stimulus (Gamification)	Competition & social-media amplification	"...TCR is a kind of competition...uploaded to GO's official Instagram per branch..."	MG (Tutor, Kranggan)	Engagement designed through teacher mediation, consistent with Huotari & Hamari (2017); one of the clearest digital-communication touchpoints.
Digital Product Commercialization	Question bank as USP	"...we have a question bank...they buy questions in the GO application..."	Coco (Marketing Staff, Kranggan)	Digital product as a branded touchpoint that complements — not replaces — face-to-face relationships (Varey, 2002).
Pricing Policy & Discounts	Achievement & teacher's-child discount as value signal	"...discount up to 50%...high-achieving students...up to 20%..."	Coco (Marketing Staff, Kranggan)	Price communicated as social recognition, not merely an economic instrument.
	WOM as unpaid marketing	"...we have to maximize our service so that parents...can promote to their friends..."	Coco (Marketing Staff, Kranggan)	Service quality reported as a WOM driver; not yet verified against actual enrollment data.
Inclusive Marketing Model	Open admission & socioeconomic diversification	"...doesn't restrict high-achieving or not...no entrance-exam system..."; "...scholarship from Bank BSI..."	Coco (Marketing Staff); MG (Tutor)	Inclusive positioning as a value differentiator difficult for tightly selective competitors to replicate.
Operational Barriers	Question targets as psychological burden	General pattern reported by tutors regarding students' comfort-related complaints about strict targets	Tutor (cross-branch)	The fragile side of the relational model: the trust-building mechanism can depress satisfaction if non-humanistic.

Source: compiled from interview results and the documentation study (2026).

As shown in Table 2, evidence from different informant groups generally converges within the identified themes, strengthening the interpretation through source triangulation. The

findings suggest that service experiences, gamified engagement, digital touchpoints, pricing practices, and inclusive positioning operate as interconnected components of GO's relational communication model. Nevertheless, their associations with outcomes such as enrollment, retention, and institutional performance remain interpretive rather than causal because these outcomes were not independently measured in the present study.

3.1.8. A Conceptual Model of GO's Relational Marketing Communication.

Figure 1 integrates the empirical themes into a conceptual model of GO's relational marketing communication. The model positions the identified communication practices and digital channels as empirical themes derived from the interview and documentary data. Trust, satisfaction, WOM advocacy, and new-student enrollment are presented as interpretive constructs reflecting patterns perceived and narrated by informants rather than independently measured outcomes. Accordingly, the relationships among these constructs are represented as reported associations rather than causal pathways. Institutional resilience is positioned as a theoretical implication of these interconnected relational practices rather than as an empirically verified outcome. The present study does not include longitudinal, financial, enrollment, or retention data sufficient to establish a causal relationship between the identified communication practices and institutional resilience. Operational barriers are therefore incorporated into the model as potential constraints that may weaken relational outcomes when performance-oriented communication is perceived as overly rigid or insufficiently responsive to students' needs. Figure 1 summarizes these relationships and provides the conceptual basis for the theoretical discussion that follows. The construct-status legend and reading notes at the bottom of Figure 1 are an integral part of the figure and must be retained in the print version so that readers do not interpret the arrows as statistically tested causal relationships.

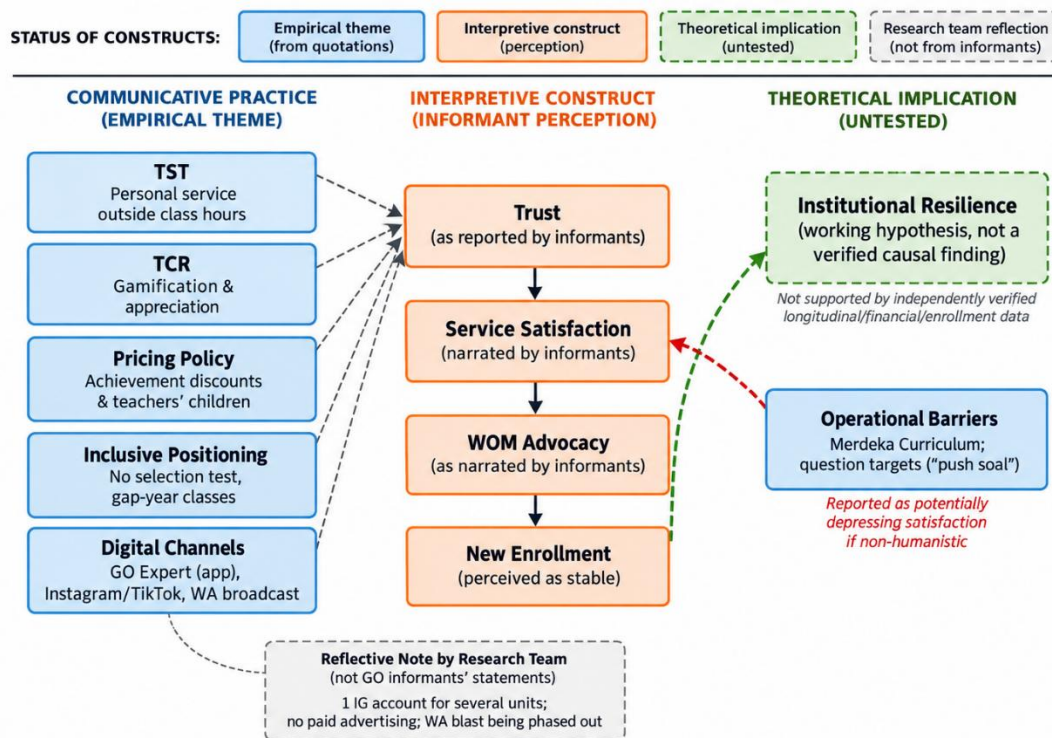


Figure 1. A Conceptual Model of GO's Relational Marketing Communication: Construct Status and the Direction of Relationships as Reported by Informants.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Relational Service (TST) and Advocacy as Reported by Informants.

Tutor and alumni informants reported that the daily availability of TST and personalized service experiences were associated with the sharing of positive experiences among peers, as reflected in the NS and CN quotations presented in the Results section. This narrative pattern is consistent with commitment–trust theory [15] and Varey’s [1] argument that marketing communication constructs relationships rather than merely conveying messages. Previous studies have similarly identified an association between academic service quality and word-of-mouth (WOM) communication mediated by satisfaction [49, 50]. Satisfied students may subsequently become brand advocates [51], with recommendations potentially extending across generations of students [52]. If this pattern is confirmed across a broader population, investment in the quality of service interactions may complement, rather than automatically replace, paid promotional activities. This interpretation should be regarded as a working hypothesis for further quantitative investigation rather than as a causal relationship established by the present study. Furthermore, fluctuations in TST attendance according to the examination calendar indicate variations in demand that require adequate tutor capacity during peak periods rather than necessarily reflecting structural weaknesses in the service.

3.2.2. Gamified Competition (TCR) as a Digitally Connected Communicative Practice.

A Kranggan tutor reported that TCR operates as a competition communicated across branches through social media, particularly Instagram, and that student participation is strongly influenced by teachers’ communication and motivational approaches in the classroom rather than by the size of incentives alone. This finding aligns with the gamification literature, which suggests that points, leaderboards, and rewards can enhance motivation by satisfying needs for competence and social relatedness [53, 54]. Gameful experiences may also strengthen engagement and brand loyalty [55, 56]. The present findings add an important relational dimension by suggesting that teachers’ communicative mediation, rather than interface automation alone, plays an important role in encouraging participation, consistent with Varey’s relational perspective [1]. Because TCR activities are also disseminated through official branch social media, the program represents a clear intersection between interpersonal relational communication and digital marketing communication. Viewed through the lens of customer engagement, TCR may simultaneously activate cognitive engagement through recognition of academic relevance, emotional engagement through competitive enthusiasm, and behavioral engagement through increased question-completion activity. Social media may then function as an amplification layer for engagement originating in face-to-face interactions. This interpretation is consistent with service-dominant (S-D) logic, which conceptualizes value as being co-created through meaningful interaction [57]. However, whether relationship-based gamification provides an advantage over predominantly algorithm-driven gamification in digital-native EdTech platforms requires a comparative research design and cannot be established from this single case.

3.2.3. The Digital Product as a Branded Touchpoint Complementing Relationships.

Marketing staff reported that GO's digital learning application is commercialized independently and is also purchased by non-GO students, particularly because of its question bank. This finding is consistent with Varey's [1] proposition that elements of the marketing mix function as social communicators. In this context, the digital product appears to serve simultaneously as a unique selling proposition and a branded touchpoint that extends the institution's reach [58]. Previous research indicates that many educational institutions continue to face challenges in developing integrated digital marketing strategies [2, 59]. A similar pattern appears in the present case, where GO's digital-channel integration remains partial. Within a channel-integration perspective [60, 61], the digital product can therefore be interpreted as a relational complement that extends customer touchpoints without replacing face-to-face services. This interpretation is consistent with the proposition that human interaction remains an important distinguishing feature of incumbent service institutions [62]. From an S-D logic perspective, the strategic value of GO's digital product may therefore lie not only in its technical features but also in its capacity to support value co-creation with users. Nevertheless, this proposition was not tested against fully digital-native institutions. Consequently, the relative effectiveness of GO's hybrid model compared with a purely digital model remains an important question for future research.

3.2.4. Pricing and Discount Policy as Value Communication.

GO applies tiered achievement-based discounts and special discounts for teachers' children, which marketing staff described as both forms of appreciation and mechanisms for encouraging WOM communication. This interpretation is consistent with the argument that fee-setting in educational institutions involves strategic as well as economic considerations [63]. Meaningful rewards may also strengthen consumer–brand relationships [64]. Within the context of shadow education, affordability represents an important social consideration [65, 66]. Linking discounts to academic achievement and recognition of the teaching profession may therefore communicate values of merit, appreciation, and social recognition rather than functioning solely as a price-reduction mechanism. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of discounting as a value signal must be balanced against the potential risk that excessive discounting could weaken perceived value [27, 28]. This trade-off was not independently examined in the present study and warrants further investigation.

3.2.5. Inclusive Positioning and the Narrative of Process Success.

GO positions itself as an institution without entrance selection and serves students from diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, including those supported through third-party scholarship schemes. This positioning addresses multiple stakeholder groups, including students, parents, and school communities [67], and may function as a value differentiator that is difficult for highly selective competitors to replicate [68]. From a signaling perspective, such perceived differentiation may contribute to brand credibility [69]. However, the proposition that inclusive positioning provides a distinctive resilience advantage for incumbent shadow-education institutions remains untested. Establishing such an advantage would require

systematic comparison with more selective competitors and across different institutional contexts.

3.2.6. Fragility of the Relational Model: Communication Pressure as a Risk Factor.

Variations in learning materials arising from the Merdeka Curriculum place additional pressure on tutor capacity during periods of high TST attendance. At the same time, question-completion targets were reported as potentially creating psychological pressure when communicated in an overly rigid manner. This finding is important because it illustrates the potential fragility of relational communication: practices intended to encourage performance and engagement may undermine satisfaction when they are perceived as excessive pressure. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that excessive competitive pressure may be counterproductive to student motivation [54] and that heavy study demands in shadow education can impose burdens on students and their families [66]. The retention literature further suggests that sustainable relationships depend on affective experiences, the quality of customer-experience management [70], and effective communication between institutions and students [71]. Varey's [1] concept of internal–external communication alignment provides a useful framework for interpreting this tension. An institution's external relational promise can remain credible only when it is supported by the commitment and communication practices of frontline employees [72]. However, the present study did not independently measure the effect of target-related communication on student retention. The proposed relationship should therefore be treated as an interpretive proposition requiring further empirical testing.

3.2.7. Synthesis of the Reported Relational Communication Pattern.

Taken together, the findings reveal an interconnected set of communicative practices in which personalized service, gamified competition, digital products, pricing policies, inclusive positioning, and digital communication channels collectively shape informants' perceptions of GO's relational marketing communication. These practices were generally narrated as contributing to trust, satisfaction, and advocacy, whereas operational barriers were perceived as factors that could disrupt these relational processes. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that organizational responses and intangible assets can influence the capacity of incumbent organizations to navigate disruptive pressures [73] and that integrated marketing communication is associated with institutional performance [2]. Theoretically, the study provides qualitative evidence consistent with Varey's [1] conceptualization of the marketing mix as a social communicator within the relatively underexplored context of a conventional tutoring institution in a developing country integrating digital channels into an established relational architecture. Viewed through the combined perspectives of relational marketing, S-D logic, and customer engagement, the identified themes can be understood as an ensemble of operant resources. Some are predominantly grounded in human interaction, such as TST, TCR, and inclusive positioning, whereas others involve digital touchpoints, including the learning application, social media, and broadcast messaging. Together, these resources are narrated by informants as mechanisms through which value is co-created with students, parents, and school communities rather than merely as channels for one-way promotional communication [57, 74]. The principal contribution of the study is therefore to demonstrate how relational practices, supported rather than replaced by digital channels, are perceived by informants as helping an

established shadow-education institution navigate platform-driven disruption. Based on these narrative patterns, the study proposes a testable theoretical proposition: the effectiveness of marketing digitalization in high-trust service institutions may depend on its alignment with an established relational architecture rather than solely on the sophistication of the technology adopted.

4. Conclusions

This study identified an interconnected relational marketing communication architecture at GO comprising personalized academic support, gamified competition, independently commercialized digital products, appreciation-based pricing, inclusive positioning, and digital communication channels, alongside the management of operational barriers. Informants' accounts suggest that personalized service experiences contribute to trust, satisfaction, and organic WOM advocacy, while digital products and pricing practices operate as complementary communicators of value. Rather than demonstrating that GO's resilience is caused by these practices, the findings indicate that informants perceive relational communication as an important component of the institution's response to an increasingly digital and platform-mediated educational environment. Theoretically, the study extends the application of Varey's relational marketing communication framework to conventional non-formal education and integrates it with S-D logic and customer engagement perspectives. The findings suggest that relational capital may provide a useful framework for understanding how incumbent educational institutions respond to technological disruption while maintaining human-centered service interactions. Practically, similar institutions may benefit from treating service delivery, gamified engagement, digital products, pricing, and inclusive positioning as interconnected elements of a relational communication system while ensuring that performance-oriented communication remains supportive and responsive to students' needs. Several limitations should be acknowledged. As a qualitative embedded single-case study involving two branches and eight informants, the findings provide in-depth contextual understanding and conceptual transferability rather than statistical generalizability. Moreover, the concept of an algorithmic society was treated as an interpretive context rather than as an empirically measured variable. The study also did not independently verify longitudinal enrollment, retention, or financial outcomes. Future research should therefore quantitatively test the proposed relationship among service experience, trust, satisfaction, WOM advocacy, and enrollment; employ multi-case and longitudinal designs across different regions and educational institutions; compare incumbent hybrid models with digital-native competitors; and examine more directly how algorithmic mediation and student well-being influence the sustainability of relational marketing communication.

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Author Contribution

Nur Indah Kumala contributed to the conceptualization of the study and the drafting and revision of the manuscript. Muhammad Imam Syafi'i was responsible for developing the research methodology and contributed to the translation and proofreading of the manuscript. Ismatul Kholilah conducted the data analysis and interpretation and supervised the overall research process. All authors contributed to data collection and organization and supported the acquisition of funding and resources for the study. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Competing Interest

All authors should disclose any financial, personal, or professional relationships that might influence or appear to influence their research.

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