

Digital Synergy in Urban Image Building: Surabaya City Government and @info_surabaya on Instagram

Avin Nur Aini

Communication Science Program, Faculty of Dakwah and Communication, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya

E-mail: nuraini@uinsa.ac.id

City image is increasingly shaped by social-media communication, yet less is known about how local governments coordinate with independent community accounts to produce credible and accessible urban narratives. This study examines the digital communication strategy through which the Surabaya City Government and the Instagram community @info_surabaya collaborate to build Surabaya's city image. A descriptive qualitative design was used. Data were collected through interviews with five purposively selected government and community informants, non-participant observation of Instagram content and collaborative activities, and documentation. Data were condensed, displayed, and interpreted through an interactive analysis model and source and technique triangulation. The collaboration operated as partial digital synergy: the government supplied verified information, issue briefs, event access, and institutional legitimacy, while @info_surabaya contributed speed, creative adaptation, and community reach. Success depended on shared communication goals, complementary roles, rapid reciprocal response, message consistency, and two-way interaction. The main constraints were different work rhythms, uneven public-relations capacity, and contrasting bureaucratic and community cultures. Digital synergy can make local-government communication more adaptive and socially proximate, but this study does not measure causal changes in public image. Formal coordination protocols and outcome-based evaluation are needed to sustain the partnership.

Keywords—digital communication strategy; digital synergy; city image; city branding; local government; Instagram

Corresponding Author:	
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Avin Nur Aini	
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Department: Communication Science	
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Institution: Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya	
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Email: nuraini@uinsa.ac.id	
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I. INTRODUCTION

A city's image is no longer formed only through its physical infrastructure, historical reputation, or official promotional materials. It is continuously negotiated through the stories, images, evaluations, and interactions that circulate among residents, visitors, institutions, and digital communities. In this environment, city image refers to the set of perceptions and associations through which people recognize and evaluate a city, whereas city branding concerns the strategic effort to organize identity, meaning, and experience so that those perceptions become more coherent. The distinction matters because a city may issue a slogan or visual identity without achieving a corresponding public image. Contemporary city branding therefore requires communication that connects institutional intentions with lived experiences and community interpretations [1], [2], [26], [27].

Social media has intensified this process by making urban communication immediate, visual, and participatory. A government can publish a program, a community account can reinterpret it, and citizens can comment on or redistribute the resulting narrative within minutes. Instagram is particularly relevant because photographs, short videos, captions, tags, mentions, and collaborative distribution combine informational and affective appeals. Studies of city branding show that social-media content can shape awareness, perceived attractiveness, and emotional attachment, but also demonstrate that the credibility of a place narrative depends on participation beyond official promotion [4], [5]. Evidence from Solo, for example, indicates that social-media promotion and electronic word-of-mouth can mediate the relationship between city branding and visitor decisions, suggesting that city image develops through a network of public and user-generated communication rather than a single campaign [6].

For local governments, the expansion of social media creates both an opportunity and a governance problem. Official accounts possess authority, access to primary data, and the ability to explain policy, but they commonly work through bureaucratic procedures and institutional styles. Community accounts may be more agile, conversational, and connected to everyday concerns, although they do not automatically possess the same institutional legitimacy. Research shows that the combination of digital tools influences citizen relationships and participation [7], [8], while Indonesian studies emphasize visual quality, timeliness, interaction, and the limits of highly formal communication [9], [10]. The practical question is how these different capacities can be coordinated without sacrificing accuracy, autonomy, or public accountability.

This question is especially important in city branding because urban narratives are claims about what a city is, what it values, and how it treats residents. Triple-helix and related collaborative approaches challenge government-centered branding by emphasizing non-governmental stakeholders [16]. Inclusive place branding research likewise shows how communities and creative actors authenticate a place narrative [15], while the Zibo case illustrates how influencer-led storytelling can generate a new city brand when supported by institutional coordination [14]. Indonesian studies of smart-city and tourism communication similarly connect branding to coordinated public narratives [28], [29], [30]. Collaboration is therefore treated here as a constitutive part of branding, not as an additional promotional tactic.

Surabaya offers a productive setting for examining this problem. The city has long been associated with trade, industry, maritime activity, and the historical memory of resistance. Its contemporary branding efforts seek to connect those historical resources with the image of a modern, innovative, human-centered, and sustainable metropolis, including a newer visual identity that frames Surabaya as a city of heroes [3], [33]. Studies of the official Instagram presence of the Surabaya City Government emphasize content planning, visual presentation, and public interaction [10]. Other research has examined the personal branding of the mayor and the use of the official account, but these approaches leave open the question of how the city government works with non-governmental digital actors to make official information more socially accessible [12].

The present study examines the relationship between the Surabaya City Government, represented by the Communication and Informatics Office (Diskominfo) and @BanggaSurabaya, and the local Instagram community @info_surabaya. The community account is treated not as a neutral advertising outlet but as an intermediary actor whose value lies in reach, speed, platform fluency, and proximity to everyday public concerns. The relationship makes it possible to observe how institutional authority and community credibility are combined in an urban narrative.

The term digital synergy is used in this article to describe a coordinated communication relationship in which actors retain distinct identities but combine resources and functions through digital channels. The analytical foundation is Peter A. Corning's theory of synergy, which explains collective outcomes through interaction, complementarity, and the combination of capacities that are not available to the components separately [22], [23]. Applied to public communication, the framework directs attention to four connected questions. First, is there

dynamic interaction rather than a one-way transfer of information? Second, do the actors exhibit functional interdependence? Third, are their roles complementary? Fourth, does the relationship produce a communicative value added, such as broader reach, quicker clarification, or greater audience proximity? This framework allows the article to distinguish genuine collaboration from simple cross-posting.

The research gap is located at the intersection of these literatures. Existing work has established that social media supports city branding, that official accounts need responsive and interactive content, and that external actors can strengthen public engagement [4], [6], [10], [13]. Yet the operational mechanisms of government-community coordination remain under-described, particularly in Indonesian city communication. The question is how a government protects the factual and strategic core of a message while allowing a community account to adapt the style, timing, and visual form. A second gap concerns evaluation. Collaboration is often described as successful when content becomes visible or engagement is perceived to rise, but less is said about the organizational conditions that make such success possible and the limits of claims about public image.

This article addresses the gap through two objectives: (1) to identify how the Surabaya City Government and @info_surabaya plan, coordinate, produce, and distribute Instagram-based public communication; and (2) to explain the factors that support or hinder the success of that digital communication strategy in building Surabaya's city image. The study contributes empirically by documenting a local-government partnership that is operationally active but not governed by a formal memorandum of understanding. It contributes conceptually by translating the synergy framework into observable communication indicators: dynamic interaction, functional interdependence, complementary roles, and synergistic value. It also contributes practically by identifying ways to institutionalize coordination while protecting the community account's creative autonomy and preserving the distinction between communication output and measured public perception.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

A. Research design and analytical orientation

This study used a descriptive qualitative design to understand the processes, meanings, and relationships involved in digital communication between a municipal government and a local Instagram community. A qualitative design was appropriate because the research questions

concerned how strategy was planned and enacted, how roles were negotiated, and how participants interpreted the value and difficulty of collaboration. The study did not test a causal hypothesis or calculate the statistical effect of Instagram activity on public image. Instead, it reconstructed the communication process from the perspectives of the actors involved and from the digital traces of their collaboration. The design follows the logic of qualitative communication research in which context, interaction, and the participants' own accounts are treated as central evidence [24], [25].

The analysis was guided by the synergy framework rather than by a pre-established checklist of content performance. Corning's account of synergy was operationalized into four sensitizing concepts: dynamic interaction, functional interdependence, complementary roles, and synergistic effects [22], [23]. These concepts directed the interpretation of the data while leaving room for inductive themes, including informal trust, speed of response, creative autonomy, message consistency, and organizational constraints. The approach was therefore theoretically informed but not mechanically deductive.

B. Research setting and participants

Fieldwork was conducted in Surabaya, East Java, with Diskominfo Kota Surabaya as the institutional setting and @info_surabaya as the community setting. Diskominfo is the municipal office responsible for communication and informatics, statistics, and information security under the city's administrative framework. In the communication process examined here, it provides public information, event access, issue clarification, and direction for official city narratives. @BanggaSurabaya is treated as the official city communication channel associated with this institutional function, while @info_surabaya is treated as an independent local community account that distributes information through its own editorial and creative practices. The article standardizes variant spellings appearing in interview materials as @info_surabaya and @BanggaSurabaya.

Five informants were selected purposively because they were directly involved in planning, coordinating, producing, or evaluating the collaboration. Three were connected to the municipal communication function: the head of a public-communication working team, a public-relations staff member, and another communication staff member. Two were connected to @info_surabaya: the account founder and an operational administrator. Participants were selected for their direct knowledge rather than for demographic representativeness. The interviews took place between August and November 2025 through face-to-face meetings and

WhatsApp calls or messages, depending on the participant's availability. To minimize unnecessary exposure of personal information, the findings identify participants primarily by organizational role.

Table 1. Data sources and participant roles

<i>Code</i>	<i>Organizational position</i>	<i>Contribution to the study</i>	<i>Interview date</i>
GI-1	Municipal public-communication team lead	Strategic rationale, audience targeting, stakeholder coordination	12 August
GI-2	Municipal public-relations staff member	Content workflow, briefs, media coordination, response practices	12 August
GI-3	Municipal communication staff member	Operational coordination and issue discussion	14 November
CI-1	@info_surabaya founder	History of partnership, editorial autonomy, audience response	15 August
CI-2	@info_surabaya operational administrator	Production process, verification, event coverage, constraints	17 November

C. Data collection

Three complementary techniques were used. First, semi-structured interviews explored the origins and objectives of the collaboration, the selection of audiences and messages, the flow of information, the division of production work, the use of WhatsApp and Instagram, the treatment of sensitive issues, perceived engagement, and future needs. The interview format allowed follow-up questions when participants described practices that were not anticipated in the initial guide. Second, non-participant observation examined public Instagram posts and selected collaborative activities. The observation focused on the visual angle, headline and caption style, message format, timing, evidence of cross-channel amplification, and the relationship between official and community presentations of the same event or issue. Third, documentation included field notes, photographs of relevant activities, and screenshots of public Instagram content.

The observed material covered several communicative situations represented in the thesis research: the 10 November ceremony, information concerning flooding, public-service or city-information posts, and event coverage including Surabaya Vaganza 2025. The purpose of comparison was not to calculate a representative sample of all posts. It was to identify recurrent differences and similarities in the way the same city agenda was transformed across channels. Official posts tended to use a formal and informational register, whereas @info_surabaya tended to use more compact, dynamic, and audience-oriented packaging. The observation was used to test and contextualize interview accounts, especially claims about access to media areas, advance information, publication speed, and consistency of substantive messages.

D. Data analysis and trustworthiness

Data analysis followed an interactive model of qualitative analysis consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification [24]. During condensation, interview transcripts, field notes, and digital documentation were read repeatedly and excerpts relevant to strategy, coordination, message, roles, response, and constraints were retained. During display, the excerpts were organized into analytic matrices that compared the government and community perspectives and mapped each practice to the synergy indicators. The final stage involved drawing interpretations about the form of the collaboration and repeatedly checking those interpretations against the full data set.

Coding combined deductive and inductive procedures. The deductive layer asked whether the data demonstrated dynamic interaction, functional interdependence, complementary roles, and value added. The inductive layer captured operational themes that explained how these conditions were produced, including a shift from conventional media to social media, WhatsApp-group coordination, advance event information, creative freedom, rapid issue verification, different institutional rhythms, and the absence of a formal evaluation schedule. A claim was treated as robust when it was supported by more than one interview perspective or when interview evidence converged with observation or documentation. Contradictions were retained as part of the findings, particularly the difference between government procedural timing and community publication speed.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation and technique triangulation. Source triangulation compared the accounts of municipal staff with those of the founder and administrator of @info_surabaya. Technique triangulation compared interviews with observation notes and documented Instagram material. The study also used role-based quotations and contextual descriptions so that readers can distinguish a participant's perception from the researcher's interpretation. The absence of numerical engagement data is treated as a methodological boundary rather than as evidence of success. Claims about reach, speed, or engagement are therefore reported as observed or participant-perceived outcomes, not as statistically verified effects.

E. Ethical considerations and scope

The fieldwork was conducted for academic purposes with permission from the relevant institutional and account representatives. Interview participants were informed about the study's purpose and consented to the use of their statements in an academic manuscript.

Personal names are not necessary for the argument and are omitted from the analytical presentation except where an organizational role is relevant. The study analyzed public-facing communication practices and public Instagram materials; no private audience data, passwords, or confidential administrative documents were collected. The design is intentionally limited to the communication process between the two actors. It cannot establish how far the collaboration changed the wider public's perception of Surabaya, nor can it compare the account with all other local-government or community accounts in Indonesia.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. The communication ecosystem: institutional authority and community proximity

The collaboration is best understood as an arrangement between two different communication systems. Diskominfo works within a public institution with formal responsibilities for accurate information, coordination across municipal units, and accountability to government policy. @info_surabaya operates as a local digital community account with a more flexible editorial rhythm and a relationship with audiences built around immediacy, relevance, and everyday familiarity. Neither system replaces the other. The government cannot easily reproduce the speed and informal tone of a community account without changing its institutional procedures, while the community account cannot independently provide the same level of primary data, policy authority, or access to official events.

This distinction is visible in the way each actor describes its role. Government informants emphasized the need to adapt to the public's movement from radio, newspapers, and television toward internet and social-media sources. They also situated media and community accounts within a pentahelix understanding of city development: the city cannot be built by the government alone, and media stakeholders help connect programs to residents. The community informants, in turn, emphasized the usefulness of receiving information directly from the government because access to primary information supports accuracy and makes it easier to prepare content. The relationship thus begins with mutual recognition of unequal but complementary resources.

The findings support earlier arguments that city branding is a communication and governance process rather than a visual campaign alone [1], [2]. Surabaya's historical and developmental identity provides the substantive material, but its digital image depends on how that material is selected, framed, and circulated. The community account becomes a translation node between

institutional language and public attention. This does not mean that @info_surabaya simply speaks for the government. Its contribution lies precisely in retaining enough editorial and stylistic independence to make city information feel native to the platform and recognizable to its audience.

B. Planning the digital communication strategy

The planning process began with a situational assessment of changing media consumption. Government participants described the decline of conventional media as the sole or dominant route through which residents seek information. The strategic implication was that official channels alone could not guarantee exposure among digitally active residents, especially younger or productive-age groups who follow community accounts rather than municipal channels. The decision to work with @info_surabaya was therefore not presented as a decorative partnership but as a response to a distribution problem: how to make public information visible in the places where residents already spend time and exchange opinions.

The government also monitored local digital accounts and considered their feedback about issues developing in the city. Informal meetings and introductions at the Siola municipal complex helped turn observation into a working relationship. Initial contact could occur through an Instagram direct message, followed by WhatsApp communication and occasional face-to-face meetings. This sequence is important because it shows that the partnership did not begin with a fully specified contract or a standardized campaign plan. It developed through relational work: the actors became familiar with one another, recognized mutual usefulness, and created a practical channel for future coordination.

The strategic objectives had three linked dimensions. First, the government sought to extend the dissemination of information about city programs, services, and activities to audiences that might not follow official channels. Second, it sought to respond to public issues and misinformation with greater speed and visibility. Third, it sought to support a positive and progressive image of Surabaya by making public communication more accessible and relevant. These objectives correspond with research showing that local-government digital communication must combine information, responsiveness, and relationship-building [7], [8]. They also align with findings that city branding becomes more credible when official identity is connected to community experience and interaction [15], [31].

Audience and message selection were consequently linked. The government identified digitally active residents as a priority audience and framed the key message around factual information, public education, issue clarification, and the broader identity of Surabaya as a responsive city. When an issue was considered significant, municipal staff provided key points or an issue brief. The purpose was to preserve factual and policy accuracy while leaving the community account free to determine how the message should look and sound. This arrangement avoids the false choice between complete government control and unregulated publication: the government retains responsibility for the substantive core, while the community account exercises creative judgment over the form.

Instagram served two functions in the strategy. As a public channel, it enabled visual storytelling, rapid updates, tagging, sharing, and interaction with residents. As a coordination environment, it helped the actors identify one another and establish initial contact. Once the partnership developed, WhatsApp became the central operational channel. A group included the municipal communication team and several local media or influencer accounts, including @info_surabaya, Asli Surabaya, and Suara Surabaya. The group distributed invitations, event information, issue signals, and documentation. The choice of a fast, low-friction channel reflects the adaptive nature of digital public relations described in recent local-government studies [17], [18].

Planning therefore involved reading the communication environment, selecting an audience, defining the message, choosing a distribution network, and creating feedback routes. Its combination of institutional responsibility and community adaptation is the first sign of partial digital synergy: aligned purpose and resources without full organizational integration.

Table 2. Strategic functions and complementary resources

<i>Actor</i>	<i>Primary resources</i>	<i>Communication function</i>	<i>Value for the partnership</i>
Surabaya City Government / Diskominfo	Official data, policy authority, issue briefs, invitations, event access	Define substantive direction and verify public information	Legitimacy, accuracy, institutional access
@info_surabaya	Local audience, platform fluency, creative production, rapid publication	Translate, package, and amplify information	Speed, reach, proximity, audience relevance
Public and digital communities	Reports, questions, comments, and reactions	Signal emerging issues and interpret messages	Feedback, issue visibility, participatory connection

C. Implementing the strategy through content coordination

Implementation confirms that the government-community relationship is a division of production rather than a simple reposting arrangement. Municipal staff commonly supplied

invitations, essential information, issue points, or raw documentation. They did not normally send a finished package that @info_surabaya had to upload unchanged. For many activities, the community team attended the event, obtained its own photographs and video, and produced a post using its own editorial decisions. This distinction resolves a possible ambiguity in the field accounts: the government was willing to provide information and access, but the community account retained control over the creative production of the final content.

Advance information and access were significant operational resources. @info_surabaya described receiving information about a forthcoming program or event in advance, sometimes together with access to a suitable content position or media area. Field observation during the research period indicated that community or influencer accounts were placed in the media area at selected municipal activities. In comparisons of posts about the same agenda, the camera angle and physical position in some @info_surabaya materials were similar to those visible in official documentation, while the visual treatment, caption length, and tone differed. Access allowed the community account to prepare before or at the beginning of an event, which contributed to the perception that its posts were timely and contextually rich.

The two accounts also differed in packaging. Official municipal content generally used a formal and informational register, with institutional visual conventions and a clear emphasis on the activity or service. @info_surabaya used a more dynamic and compact presentation oriented toward social-media attention. The community account could use a more conversational caption, a different selection of images, or a more immediate angle while maintaining the substantive information supplied by the government. This is consistent with the principle that platform adaptation should change the expression of a message without necessarily changing its central meaning [4], [19], [20]. The practical advantage is that the same city agenda can occupy two communicative positions: official and authoritative in one channel, familiar and easily shareable in another.

Speed was a recurring theme in implementation. Government staff stated that community accounts were often faster to post than the official channel. Their working rhythm was closer to the event and less constrained by internal approval procedures. One government participant explained that the official account adjusted its formula so that it could record and upload rather than wait for a longer live-production process. The statement is analytically useful because it shows that the government did not view the community account only as an amplifier; it also treated the account's speed as a benchmark that could stimulate institutional adaptation.

At the same time, speed did not eliminate the need for verification. When reports from residents, viral posts, or sensitive issues appeared, the actors used WhatsApp to ask for clarification and prepare a brief. The community account could signal that a topic was attracting attention, while the government could supply the factual position or official explanation. This two-way sequence is different from a top-down model in which a government prepares a message without learning how an issue is being discussed in the community. It also differs from an unverified citizen-reporting model because the community account did not treat every incoming report as ready for publication.

In short, the government opened an information and access window, the community account produced content within it, and government intervention focused mainly on accuracy or misinformation. Flexibility preserved responsiveness but also made the partnership dependent on personal connectivity and staff availability.

D. Message reinforcement, consistency, and creative autonomy

Message reinforcement occurred most clearly when the public issue was sensitive or had the potential to generate misinformation. Municipal staff prepared key points and discussed the content with relevant partners. In some situations, the official account waited until an issue had become sufficiently visible before publishing a clarification, while the community account could help distribute the clarification to audiences already following the issue. The purpose of coordination was not to require identical captions or visual designs. It was to ensure that different presentations did not contradict one another in their factual substance, a concern also visible in research on coordinated government information [21].

This distinction between semantic consistency and stylistic uniformity is central to the collaboration. Participants repeatedly indicated that @info_surabaya was free to package content in its own style. Government staff did not prescribe a fixed tone, format, or visual template as long as the post remained informative and accurate. The community account likewise described publication as open to the ideas of its media and content creators, with responsibility for the resulting message. The government therefore controlled the factual boundary more than the expressive surface. Such a model protects the account's perceived authenticity, which is an important source of its communicative value.

The observed comparisons of flooding information and city-event content illustrate this arrangement. The government channel organized information in a formal structure, whereas

@info_surabaya created a presentation that was shorter, more visually immediate, and more closely aligned with the habits of social-media users. Despite those differences, the central information about the issue or event remained aligned. The result was not one standardized city voice but a coordinated repertoire of voices. For city branding, this is potentially more productive than uniformity because a coherent identity can be expressed through different registers as long as the underlying values and facts remain stable.

Message consistency also depended on trust. The government had to trust the community account not to distort a brief or add dramatic framing that would undermine public understanding. The community account had to trust the government as a source of primary information and timely clarification. The interviews suggest that trust was built through repeated interaction, access, and the experience of solving issues together rather than through a formal agreement. It was practical trust: each party learned that the other would perform its expected function under time pressure.

The arrangement nevertheless carries an accountability challenge. Without a formal label or agreement, the public may not always distinguish official claims from community interpretation. Although the field data indicated no dispute over this boundary, a minimum transparency standard would help: sources of key facts should be clear, corrections traceable, and community autonomy should not be confused with institutional authorization.

E. The form of the partnership: partial digital synergy

The evidence indicates a form of collaboration that is substantial in practice but incomplete in institutional formalization. The study calls this partial digital synergy. The term is an analytic label, not a claim that the partnership follows a separate established model. It describes a relationship with regular communication, reciprocal access, complementary labor, and a common public purpose, but without a memorandum of understanding, a binding publication obligation, or a fully integrated organizational structure. The relationship is therefore neither a purely informal exchange nor a formal inter-organizational program.

The first synergy indicator, dynamic interaction, is present in the multiple channels and repeated feedback cycles. Instagram direct messages and face-to-face introductions enabled initial contact. WhatsApp supported daily coordination, invitations, rapid verification, and issue discussion. Occasional informal meetings maintained interpersonal connection. Importantly, the communication did not move in one direction. Government staff sent information and briefs,

while community actors sent signals about public issues and field conditions. The collaboration thus operated as an adaptive communication loop in which the actors changed their response according to the evolving digital environment.

The second indicator, functional interdependence, is visible in the unequal distribution of resources. Diskominfo controls or can access official information, policy explanations, municipal agendas, and institutional legitimacy. @info_surabaya contributes an established local audience, platform-specific production knowledge, creative speed, and the ability to render formal information in a more conversational form. The government needs the community account to reach publics that may not follow official channels; the community account needs the government to verify facts and provide access to primary information. Each can publish independently, but the particular value of the partnership depends on their connection.

The third indicator, complementary roles, is not the same as functional interdependence. Interdependence explains why the actors need one another; complementarity explains how their work fits together. The municipal side defines the substantive and institutional frame. The community side chooses the angle, produces the visuals, writes the caption, and distributes the message in a platform-native form. The government can also learn from the community account's monitoring of public conversation, while the community account can strengthen its credibility through direct access. The collaboration is productive because the roles are differentiated rather than duplicated.

The fourth indicator, synergistic value, appears in the reported combination of speed, reach, and proximity. Government information can travel beyond the official audience and enter a more familiar communication environment. The community account can publish with greater confidence because its content is connected to a verified source. Government participants described the benefit as making more residents aware of city information, especially those not reached by official channels. The community administrator associated advance access and suitable content positions with stronger audience engagement. Because the study did not collect standardized reach or engagement metrics, these claims are interpreted as perceived and process-based value added, not as a measured causal effect.

The finding extends synergy theory to communication by showing that value is not located in technology alone. WhatsApp and Instagram enable coordination, but the outcome depends on interaction, trust, and functional difference. A group chat without role clarity would not

guarantee better communication; reach without verified information could amplify uncertainty. Synergy arises when the combination changes what each actor can accomplish.

Table 3. Synergy indicators in the Surabaya collaboration

<i>Synergy indicator</i>	<i>Empirical manifestation</i>	<i>Interpretive meaning</i>
Dynamic interaction	DM contact, WhatsApp-group discussion, issue signals, verification, occasional meetings	The relationship is reciprocal and adapts to changing public issues
Functional interdependence	Government authority and data combined with community reach and platform fluency	Neither actor alone provides the same mix of legitimacy, speed, and proximity
Complementary roles	Government defines factual direction; @info_surabaya determines creative packaging and timing	Distinct functions fit together without full organizational merger
Synergistic value	Wider dissemination, rapid updates, accessible language, and public-issue feedback	The partnership produces process value beyond isolated channel activity

F. Factors supporting strategy success

The first supporting factor is alignment of communication goals. Both parties understood that digital communication should provide information that is fast, relevant, and credible. The government sought to adapt to a public that increasingly uses social media, while @info_surabaya sought reliable information that would strengthen the quality and credibility of its content. This common orientation reduced the possibility that the partnership would become merely a paid promotional transaction or an uncoordinated transfer of government publicity. The shared goal also connected distribution to city image: Surabaya was presented as an active, responsive, and publicly engaged city rather than only as a location for official ceremonies.

The second factor is clear and complementary role distribution. Government staff understood themselves as the provider of data, policy context, issue points, invitations, and access. @info_surabaya understood itself as a creative intermediary and distributor. The absence of strict control over style helped prevent role overlap. The government did not need to become the community account's content editor, and the community account did not claim to replace official authority. This finding is consistent with collaborative public-relations research showing that external digital actors can extend participation when their distinct communication strengths are recognized [13].

The third factor is rapid reciprocal response. The WhatsApp group allowed an issue to be reported, clarified, and returned to the public without requiring every interaction to move through a slow formal chain. The community account could flag what was becoming salient; the government could provide a brief; and the account could distribute the result. The value of response speed was especially evident in a media environment where misinformation can gain

visibility before a formal statement is ready. Rapid response did not mean reacting without thought; it meant shortening the time between issue detection and verified explanation.

The fourth factor is substantive message consistency. The parties did not need identical language, but they needed a shared factual basis and a compatible direction. Key points for significant issues, direct verification, and discussion of possible misinformation helped maintain that basis. Consistency is important for city image because contradictory messages from connected channels can fragment public understanding and weaken trust. The findings support previous research that identifies consistent, interactive, and responsive government communication as important for institutional image [11], while adding that consistency can be achieved through coordination across different styles rather than through a single official format.

The fifth factor is two-way interaction with the broader public. @info_surabaya functioned as an intermediary through which questions, reports, and reactions could reach the government, helping communicators identify active issues. This brings the collaboration closer to participatory communication than to one-way publicity and reflects research linking interactive local-government posts with citizen participation [8]. The degree of participation should not be overstated because the study did not analyze all comments or quantify response rates.

G. Constraints and unresolved tensions

The main operational constraint was the difference in work rhythm. The community account was expected to be fast, alert, and ready to publish when an event or issue was unfolding. The government had to coordinate internally, follow public-sector procedures, and protect the accuracy of its statements. Community participants described municipal work as sometimes sudden and requiring constant readiness, while government staff acknowledged that local digital accounts could post more quickly than the official channel. This gap can generate frustration or duplication: the community account may publish first, while the government is still completing its internal process; the government may then need to adjust its own timing to remain visible and relevant.

A second constraint was uneven human-resources capacity in public relations. Government staff described situations in which some responses were fast and others slow. The team had to divide attention among field documentation, internal coordination, public inquiries, and content production. Sharing raw documentation for the community account to process was an effective short-term solution, but it also reveals a capacity asymmetry. The government relies on the

community's production flexibility to compensate for the limits of its own content team. Research on digital content management similarly emphasizes that platform strategy requires specialized creative and operational skills, not only access to a social-media account [19], [20].

A third constraint was organizational culture. The municipal office operates under rules and procedural expectations; the community account works through a flexible and informal structure. The government cannot always move freely because its communication carries institutional consequences. The community account can decide more spontaneously, but it lacks the same legal or administrative framework. The difference does not appear as interpersonal conflict in the data. Rather, it creates a structural mismatch in decision speed, risk tolerance, and accountability. Digital synergy therefore requires translation not only between messages but also between organizational cultures.

A fourth unresolved issue is evaluation. Participants described evaluation mainly as conditional discussion in the WhatsApp group when an issue became busy or controversial. There was no clearly described routine system for comparing reach, audience composition, response time, correction rates, or changes in public perception. This is a significant limitation for a strategy that is described as successful. Visibility and speed are useful process indicators, but they do not by themselves demonstrate that residents understood a message, trusted it, or developed a more positive image of the city. Collaborative public communication would benefit from an evaluation framework that combines platform analytics with qualitative feedback and periodic public-perception research.

Finally, the absence of a formal memorandum creates both flexibility and vulnerability. Informality protects agility and community autonomy, but reliance on personal networks may make the arrangement unstable when staff or leadership changes. Responsibilities can also become unclear when a post requires correction. A lightweight protocol specifying verification, attribution, correction, access, and contact responsibilities could improve continuity without eliminating editorial style.

H. Implications for city branding and public communication

The findings have three implications for city branding. First, city image is co-produced through a network of communicators. The municipal government remains important because it controls official information and public resources, but it cannot fully determine how the city is perceived. Community accounts, local media, and residents interpret and circulate urban narratives. This

supports the view that branding should integrate identity, communication, stakeholder engagement, and continuity rather than focus only on logos or slogans [2], [3].

Second, the partnership demonstrates the value of controlled openness. The government opened access to information and allowed an external actor to adapt the message, but it retained responsibility for factual clarification when risk was high. This balance is more sustainable than either extreme: total government control can make content slow and distant, whereas unrestricted circulation can endanger accuracy. The Surabaya case suggests that public communication can be both institutionally reliable and platform-sensitive when the substantive core and expressive form are differentiated.

Third, digital synergy should be evaluated as a governance practice, not merely a promotional outcome. The partnership strengthens government listening through community signals, strengthens the account's credibility through primary-source verification, and can reach publics outside official channels. These functions connect the case to collaborative digital transformation and partnerships for sustainable development [17], [32]. The contribution to city image remains a plausible pathway rather than a measured outcome; future studies should combine process analysis with audience reception, longitudinal content comparison, and platform analytics.

In practice, the actors could use a shared issue-response matrix, message-verification rules, transparent correction procedures, and periodic reviews of response time, audience questions, and referral patterns. @info_surabaya should retain editorial autonomy while identifying when key facts come from official confirmation. The government should also strengthen internal content capacity so collaboration supplements rather than permanently replaces public-relations competence.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Surabaya City Government and @info_surabaya implement digital communication through a two-way, collaborative arrangement that this article characterizes as partial digital synergy. The strategy is organized around situational adaptation to social-media use, targeting digitally active audiences, coordinating substantive messages, distributing information through WhatsApp and Instagram, and allowing the community account to adapt the form of public content. The government contributes official data, policy authority, issue briefs, invitations, and event access. @info_surabaya contributes speed, platform fluency, creative packaging,

audience reach, and feedback about public issues. Their different functions are not incidental; they are the basis of the partnership's communicative value.

The strategy is supported by shared goals, clear complementary roles, rapid reciprocal response, message consistency, trust, and two-way interaction with the public. Its principal constraints are different work rhythms, limited and uneven public-relations capacity, contrasting bureaucratic and community cultures, informal dependence on personal networks, and the absence of a regular outcome-based evaluation system. The collaboration can make municipal communication more accessible and responsive, and it can support the strategic construction of Surabaya's city image. Nevertheless, the study does not measure changes in public perception and therefore does not claim a causal effect on city image. A lightweight coordination protocol, transparent attribution and correction rules, routine evaluation, and further audience research are needed to make the partnership more accountable and sustainable.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Avin Nur Aini: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review and Editing, and Project Administration.

The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The Instagram materials discussed in the article were publicly accessible at the time of observation. Interview transcripts and field notes are not publicly posted because they contain participant statements and contextual information that could affect confidentiality. An anonymized coding framework and selected non-identifying excerpts are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to the consent conditions of the participants.

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants. Participants were informed about the academic purpose of the research, the use of interview statements, and the use of role-based identification in the manuscript.

ANIMAL SUBJECTS

There were no animal subjects.

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