



## **Communication Strategy of the Indonesian Kabaddi Federation (FOKSI) Central Java for Image and Popularity**

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### **Abstract**

Research on sport communication has concentrated on established mainstream sports, leaving emerging sport organizations underexplored. This study analyzes how the All-Indonesia Kabaddi Sports Federation (FOKSI) of Central Java builds kabaddi image and popularity, an emerging sport facing low recognition and limited media exposure. A constructivist interpretive qualitative case study was conducted; data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and documentation from eight informants and analyzed thematically following Miles and Huberman. The findings reveal an "achievement based communication strategy" in which credibility is sequenced before visibility: athletic achievement is converted into symbolic legitimacy amplified through athlete-led storytelling, decentralized social media generating electronic word of mouth, and a hybrid of mass media partnership and event-based engagement. The study extends strategic sport communication by positioning symbolic legitimacy and organizational reputation as the mediating mechanism linking communication strategy to popularity in resource constrained, emerging-sport contexts, while identifying funding constraints, vacant regional boards, and low public literacy as structural inhibitors. The novelty lies in reframing "achievement first, popularity later" from a practitioner maxim into an analytic model of credibility-led communication, offering a transferable framework for developing sports.

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## INTRODUCTION

The sport of kabaddi has experienced rapid growth in various Asian countries since the launch of professional competitions such as the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) India in 2014. PKL is the first professional league in the sport of kabaddi that brings together the best athletes from various countries and has proven to be successful in gaining widespread popularity in India, as well as contributing to introducing the sport of kabaddi to the global level (Santoso et al., 2022). This development opens up opportunities for countries that are not traditional kabaddi, including Indonesia. The sport of kabaddi was first introduced in Indonesia through the Asian Beach Games I event held in 2008 in Denpasar, Bali, becoming an initial milestone in the development of kabaddi as well as opening opportunities for national athletes to compete in the international arena (Subekti & Santika, 2021). Since its first participation, Indonesia has recorded a number of achievements, including a bronze medal at the Asian Beach Games I (2008), a bronze medal at the Asian Beach Games II (2012), a silver medal at the Beach Kabaddi Thailand Open 2019, and a bronze medal at the Martial Art Indoor Kabaddi in Korea in 2019 (Subekti & Santika, 2021). In 2018, kabaddi was officially included in the 18th Asian Games in Jakarta-Palembang, Indonesia (Lalwani & Mukherjee, 2025). However, the diffusion of a relatively new sport doesn't happen automatically; it depends on how its parent organization communicates its values, credibility, and identity to a segmented audience.

Contemporary studies in strategic sports communication understand this effort as the purposeful management of mediated and interpersonal interactions through which sports organizations create, disseminate, and manage shared meaning among their stakeholders (Pedersen, Laucella, Kian, & Geurin, 2020). This perspective integrates organizational communication, sports media, and audience engagement into a single managerial process, shifting analysis from the mere transmission of messages to the strategic construction of relationships and reputation (Billings, Butterworth, & Turman, 2018; Hambrick, 2017). Three key concepts serve as the analytical framework for this research. First, symbolic legitimacy refers to the publicly recognized right to be taken seriously, earned through verifiable achievements rather than mere promotional claims. This concept differs from formal legitimacy (legality or licensing) because it focuses on bottom-up recognition based on a track record of actual performance (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Second, organizational image is understood as the evaluative impression accumulated in the public mind through consistent messaging, credible performance, and stakeholder experiences. Third, the popularity of sport is no longer understood solely as the number of spectators, but rather as the result of continuous, networked and participatory engagement which in the digital age is realized through electronic word-of-mouth. (Varmus et al., 2022). In this study, popularity is operationalized through multi-dimensional indicators that include: (1) level of recognition among school and university students; (2) increased participation of event participants; (3) curiosity responses from social media content; (4) expansion of media reach; and (5) success in entering the national event agenda such as POMNAS. These three concepts form a mediation chain: communication strategy → symbolic legitimacy → organizational image → sports popularity.

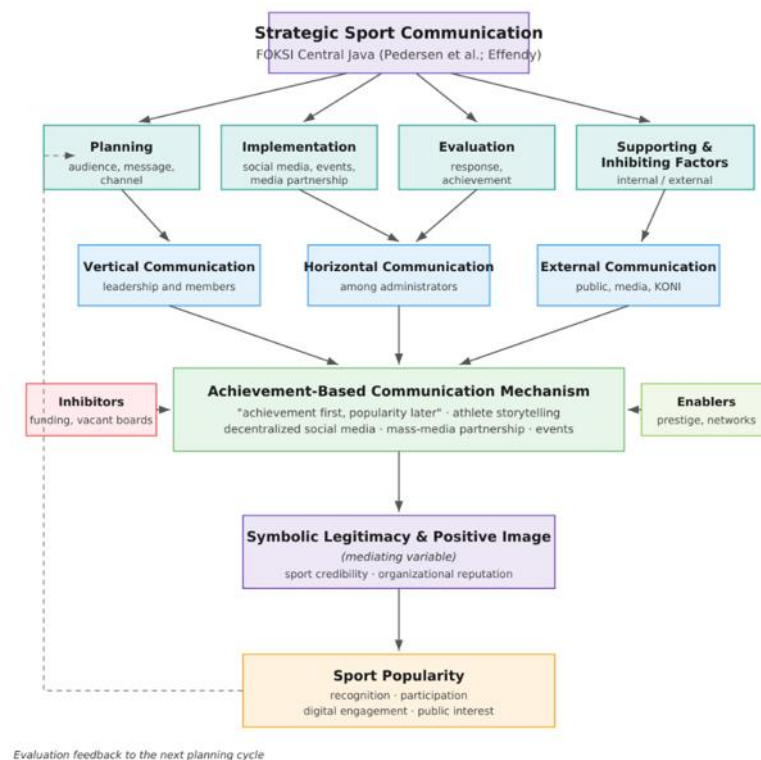
Factually, the state of kabaddi in Central Java provides a strong urgency for this research. The Indonesian Kabaddi Sports Federation (FOKSI) of Central Java is the provincial-level kabaddi parent organization listed in the Central Java KONI directory. At the time of the research, FOKSI Central Java had approximately 61 active athletes whose development was centered at Semarang State University (UNNES), while regional management in all 19 regencies/cities had expired, so development still relied on campus networks. In terms of achievements, FOKSI Central Java won one gold, two silver, and three bronze medals at the XX Papua PON, and successfully qualified kabaddi as an exhibition sport at the 2025 POMNAS in Semarang. However, media exposure to kabaddi in Central Java remains relatively limited, the organization's social media management is inconsistent and unplanned, and information about FOKSI activities has not been optimally conveyed to the wider community (Sari & Ayuh, 2024). Public knowledge of kabaddi remains incidental and tends to emerge only during certain major events, without sustained interest and participation. According to (Wang, 2024), the main obstacle to the development of kabaddi at the regional level is the weakness of the regional

federation's communication strategy, including limited use of social media and news framing which results in low visibility of competitions.

Three gaps motivate this research. Empirically, sports communication research is dominated by studies on commercially mature, mainstream sports like soccer, futsal, and global mega-events, (Febriyanto, 2024) while emerging sports facing challenges building recognition from near-zero remain largely under-researched. (Li, 2025) Contextually, no study has analyzed the strategic communication of provincial-level kabaddi organizations in Indonesia, despite the fact that regional federations are the operational units where sport development actually takes place. Theoretically, previous works have emphasized but rarely modeled the pathways linking organizational communication to image, and subsequently to popularity; the role of athletic legitimacy in generating and converting reputation under resource scarcity has not been theorized (Munawar et al., 2025).

This study examines how FOKSI Central Java strategically communicates itself to build the image and popularity of kabaddi. The study pursues four objectives: (1) analyzing the federation's communication planning in constructing the sport's image; (2) examining the implementation of its communication strategy in increasing popularity; (3) interpreting how the organization evaluates the strategy; and (4) identifying the internal and external factors that enable and constrain it. The research's novelty lies in reinterpreting the practitioner's axiom "achievement first, popularity second" into a credibility-led communication analytical model, where symbolic legitimacy mediates between strategy and popularity.

## METHODS



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework: an achievement-based sport communication model in which symbolic legitimacy mediates the link between communication strategy and sport popularity.

This research adopts a qualitative case study design based on the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm. This paradigm is appropriate because the object of study meaning, intention, and strategic reasoning behind organizational communication is a social construction that can only be accessed through interpretation of actors' accounts in their context, not through variable measurement (Arsyam & Tahir, 2021). The single-embedded case design was chosen because FOKSI Central Java is an information-rich and theoretically instructive case, allowing for analytical rather than statistical generalization.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on the criteria of direct involvement in the planning, implementation, or evaluation of organizational communication (Sugiyono, 2019). Eight informants participated: the chairperson, secretary, coach, active athletes, and four students representing the primary audience for the socialization. This composition intentionally combined message senders (leaders), message intermediaries (coaches and athletes), and message recipients (students) to allow for triangulation of perspectives along the communication chain. Sampling adequacy was assessed based on thematic saturation, not statistical representation. The number of four student informants was deemed sufficient because the research objective was not to generalize statistically to the entire student population, but rather to deepen the perspectives of message recipients in this single case. This approach aligns with the principles of qualitative research that prioritize depth and relevance of information over quantity of respondents (Sugiyono, 2019). All student quotes presented in the analysis come from these four informants.

Data collection was conducted through two methods. First, semi-structured interviews using a guide derived from the five elements of the communication process: communicator, message, channel, receiver, and effect (Novianti, 2019). The researchers remained open to new findings. All interviews were conducted on May 11, 2026, at the Faculty of Sport Science, UNNES for informants who attended in person, and via the Zoom platform for informants who were unable to attend face-to-face. Interview duration ranged from 45 to 90 minutes per session. All sessions were audio-recorded with the informants' consent, then transcribed verbatim before analysis. Second, documentation included the organization's track record (management structure, meeting minutes, activity reports, and proposals), visual materials of activities, and screenshots of the federation's social media accounts on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook (Fitrah & Luthfiyah, 2017).

The social media documentation analyzed included posts from January to May 2026, including training content, PON XX Papua matches, the 2025 POMNAS exhibition, and outreach to schools and campuses. Indicators observed included content types (activity photos, match videos, event announcements, athlete testimonials), organic public comment and question patterns as an indication of engagement, and platform distribution. Instagram was chosen as the primary analysis platform because it is most actively used by organization members for public content, as evidenced by the comparison of the @kabaddijateng account (regional: 86 followers, 11 posts) with @kabaddi\_indonesia (national: 2,664 followers, 319 posts), which also proves the gap in digital communication capacity between the regional and national levels.



**Figure 1.** Indonesian Kabaddi social media Instagram



**Figure 2.** Central Java Kabaddi social media instagram

The analysis followed Miles and Huberman's interactive model (Hasmawati, 2022): interview transcripts and documents were read repeatedly, segmented into meaningful units, and then openly coded. Through constant comparison, conceptually related codes were grouped into categories and abstracted into analytical themes: planning, implementation, evaluation, and enabling/inhibiting factors. Interpretations were always linked to the literature on strategic sport communication and sport branding. Credibility was ensured through triangulation of sources and techniques, member checking of interpreted accounts with informants, and prolonged engagement with the organization's activities. Because the principal investigator participated in FOKSI's jury certification activities during data collection, reflexivity was treated as a methodological requirement: the researcher maintained an audit trail of coding decisions, actively sought evidence that refuted the organization's claims, and used member checking to distinguish participants' meanings from the researcher's inferences.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis yields four interrelated themes, presented as findings, interpretations, theoretical connections, and implications, rather than simply stand-alone descriptions. FOKSI Central Java treats athletic achievement as raw material for communicative credibility and engineered its conversion into image and, ultimately, popularity.

### Planning: Generating Credibility before Visibility

FOKSI Central Java did not begin its communication with an outreach campaign; it began by consolidating an internal community rooted in family values and then developing athletes whose competitive records could later validate the external message. From a communication strategy perspective (Effendy, 2011), the target audience is referred to as the communicant, namely the party receiving the communication message. FOKSI Central Java identified school and college students as the primary communicants because this group was considered more receptive to new sports and had the potential to become athletes and administrators in the future. Socialization was carried out consistently through visits to universities such as UNNES, UNPAD, UNDIP, Jenderal Soedirman University, and Pancasakti University in Tegal, as well as to high schools in Rembang, Pati, Kudus, and Salatiga. The Chairman of FOKSI Central Java emphasized:

*"To introduce and popularize the sport of kabaddi, FOKSI Central Java has conducted outreach to various high schools in Rembang, Pati, Kudus, and Salatiga, as well as to a number of universities. The strategy implemented by FOKSI Central Java is to prepare and promote athletes to participate in the national selection. This effort is carried out as part of a strategy to build a positive impression in the community, which can be achieved through achievements."* (Mr. Giri Dahono, interview 2026).

The Secretary of FOKSI Central Java framed dissemination as an organic narrative process that is sown from within the organization:

*"My goal for those here is that with this story, they will retell Kabaddi, and it will circulate in Central Java. I mean, it will be easier for people to accept it in a joking way rather than in a very dictatorial way."* (Dhias Fajar Widya, Interview 2026).

Analytically interpreted, this is not simply a welcoming culture, but rather a deliberate sequence of communication phases in which source credibility is established before outreach is sought. The mechanism at work is *athlete-led storytelling*, with senior athletes competing in the 20th Papua National Games serving as credible, peer-level communicators whose lived experiences carry persuasive weight that cannot be replicated by top-down institutional campaigns. This aligns with what strategic sports communication theory describes as the strategic selection of high-credibility communicators and the narrative construction of meaning (Billings et al., 2018; Pedersen et al., 2020), and with branding theory's claim that authentic, experiential associations are more powerful drivers of brand attitudes than declarative promotions (Arai et al., 2014). The presence of proven, competitive athletes supplies the symbolic raw material of credibility on which all downstream strategies depend (Hendrawan et al., 2023).

Communication channel planning is decentralized: each member, both athletes and administrators, is encouraged to actively upload kabaddi activity content through their personal social media accounts. The secretary explained this mechanism clearly:

*"We often take videos, even with us in the background, and then share them on our WhatsApp status. Well, that's one of the things we want to experience there: knowing that out of maybe 100 people who see a status, 50 will definitely criticize it. But on the other hand, there will definitely be 1 or 5 people who ask, 'What sport is that?' (Dhias Fajar Widya, Interview 2026).*

The theoretical implication is that for a developing sport, planning is best understood as legitimacy engineering: organizational, training, and recruitment decisions are also communication decisions, as each contributes to the stock of credibility that communication messages will eventually deplete. This redefines planning from a preparatory step to a constitutive first stage of a performance-based communication model, in line with the finding (Munawar et al., 2025) that kabaddi development efforts at the regional level should not be short-term outreach, but rather a systematic effort to equip each member with the knowledge, skills, and networks that enable them to develop independently.

### **Implementation: Converting Achievements into Networking Visibility**

In practice, the federation operationalizes the principles that form the analytical core of this research. The chair stated this clearly:

*"Popularity is indeed the goal. But what's the point of popularity without achievement? So Foksi thinks the other way around: achievement comes first, then popularity. We show off our achievements first. So that when we socialize, we can walk upright. Not hunched, but upright." (Mr. Giri Dahono, interview 2026).*

Read through reputation management and legitimacy theory, this axiom represents a deliberate achievement-framing strategy in which rare and hard-won performance (a medal at the 20th Papua National Games; athlete Hanif Putra Roma advancing to international competition in Bangladesh) is positioned as the central evidential claim in all persuasive messages. By leading with verifiable achievements, organizations produce symbolic legitimacy a publicly recognized right to be taken seriously that serves as capital that subsequent visibility efforts can convert into attention. This was further emphasized by the chairman:

*"To build a positive impression with the public, it can only be achieved. There's no other word than achievement. Once we achieve something, we can speak for ourselves with published data. If we don't achieve something, and if we try to talk about it, the public will laugh." (Mr. Giri Dahono, interview 2026).*

The visibility apparatus itself is a hybrid of mass media partnerships and participatory digital culture. A structured alliance with Suara Merdeka's print media outlets provides institutional credibility and pre- and post-event coverage through a network of regional correspondents:

*"We have 100% confidence in Suara Merdeka. We entrust the Suara Merdeka editor-in-chief and his staff to support, promote, and publicize Kabaddi activities. For example, for activities like outreach in Rembang, the correspondent in Rembang reports the news to the head office, which is then printed by the head office for publication." (Mr. Giri Dahono, interview 2026).*

Athletes and administrators share organic content on Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok. A FOKSI Central Java athlete confirmed this:

*"Social media is a source of information frequently used to disseminate information about kabaddi activities, particularly through Instagram, such as through story features and event announcements."* (Athlete, interview 2026).

FOKSI Central Java's social media documentation for the period January-May 2026 shows that the content that most often triggers public interaction is uploading photos and videos of competition activities, especially documentation of PON XX Papua and the 2025 POMNAS exhibition. In competition-type content, the comments section consistently contains questions from users unfamiliar with kabaddi, such as questions about the rules of the game, how to join, and the match schedule. This pattern confirms the secretary's claim that out of every hundred status viewers, one to five always ask "what sport is this?" an *electronic word-of-mouth* (EWOM) effect that is not centrally planned but repeats organically. A comparison between the *@kabaddi\_indonesia* account (national: 2,664 followers, 319 posts) and *@kabaddijateng* (regional: 86 followers, 11 posts) shows a clear capacity gap, but also emphasizes why FOKSI Central Java developed a decentralized strategy as a solution to limited formal communication resources. Instagram has become the platform with the largest public reach, while TikTok has begun to be utilized for more educational demonstration content of game techniques.

The perspectives of four students as recipients of messages concretely reveal how they interpret kabaddi after receiving FOKSI communication. The students consistently stated that they first learned about kabaddi not through mass media, but through content uploaded by FOKSI members on Instagram and WhatsApp stories. One student informant stated:

*"I didn't know what kabaddi was at first. But when I saw a photo of an athlete in a friend's Instagram story who was participating in FOKSI, I became curious. So I looked for more information and ended up attending a FOKSI outreach event on campus."* (Student, interview 2026).

Other students shared similar experiences, with match videos shared via WhatsApp status by acquaintances who had joined FOKSI becoming their first contact with the sport. Another student stated:

*"I first learned about kabaddi from a friend who frequently posted training sessions on Instagram. At first, I thought it was just another sport, but after watching the videos, it turned out to be fun and challenging. That's when I became interested in joining."* (Student, interview 2026).

The four students also acknowledged that after learning about kabaddi through these channels, their curiosity led them to seek further information through mass media and ultimately to direct participation in events. This recognition confirms that eWOM mechanisms originating from organizational members rather than from institutions are the most effective audience acquisition channels in the context of this emerging sport (Siguencia et al., 2016).

Decentralized posting is a form of participatory and networked communication in which members act as distributed nodes co-producing sports visibility, and the resulting eWOM operates as *bottom-up* grassroots promotion, rather than centrally controlled publicity. This pairing of traditional media for credibility with networked digital culture for reach integrates formal and informal channels, considered complementary in strategic sports communication theory (Effendy, 2011). Events like POMNAS 2025 serve as a live experiential communication platform where credibility and visibility are simultaneously demonstrated, as evidenced by the registrants for one event reaching 170 people, far exceeding the quota.

It is important to emphasize that the popularity claims in this study do not refer to popularity on a mainstream sports scale. The popularity of kabaddi in this study is measured through specific indicators proportional to the development phase: (1) increased *recognition* among school and university students as reflected in organic questions on social media content; (2) a significant increase in event participant participation; (3) successful entry into the POMNAS 2025 national event agenda as an indicator of *media visibility*; and (4) expansion of outreach to secondary schools in four cities and several universities. These indicators are

gradual and represent evidence of meaningful traction from a very low starting point (Varmus et al., 2022).

### **Evaluation: Achievement as a Strategy and a Benchmark**

Consistent with its communicative logic, FOKSI Central Java evaluates success primarily through its achievements and mediated effects, although the evaluation is still informal and undocumented. The evaluation covers five aspects: (1) achievement, (2) media and publication effectiveness, (3) human resource involvement, (4) organizational reach in the region, and (5) future targets and plans.

The main evaluation is based on athletic achievement:

*"We can be proud of Hanif Putra Roma, who already has experience competing in Bangladesh. I've already made the breakthrough. When I was called up to the National Training Center, I saw his technique, his Kabaddi chemistry, and I met everyone, so I went."* (Mr. Giri Dahono, interview 2026).

In terms of media evaluation, reliance on Suara Merdeka as the sole outlet was deemed insufficient to reach the younger generation active on digital platforms. The human resources evaluation revealed a critical fact: the minimal active contribution of management in publications and outreach.

*"The current management also barely writes about it in the media. They already have certified referees, judges, and coaches. It's actually easier to communicate it to the classrooms."* (Mr. Giri Dahono, interview 2026).

In addition, weak administrative discipline resulted in four athletes Muhammad Ali Mahfud, Ika Natasya, Elvi, and Asrendo who were called for the 2025 SEA Games national selection failing to continue the selection process due to indiscipline in administrative reporting:

*"The four Central Java athletes were not disciplined in submitting activity reports. They still passed the first three months, but they failed the next three months."* (Mr. Giri Dahono, interview 2026).

Evaluation of the area coverage revealed worrying conditions:

*"The decrees for all 19 regencies/cities have now expired, as of last December. We haven't received them all yet from the regencies/cities. Person-to-person representation is not possible. But all individuals must have a shared commitment to disseminating information in their respective communities."* (Mr. Giri Dahono, interview 2026).

Interpreted through the hierarchy of communication effects (Effendy, 2011), the evidence suggests movement across cognitive, affective, and conative levels: the conversion of curiosity into 170 event registrants signals affective and conative responses, not simply awareness. Theoretically, this reflects the symptoms of an organization rich in credibility but weak in capacity strong in symbolic resources but weak in institutionalized communicative infrastructure. The SPOT verification mechanism used before releasing information reflects an intuitive concern for the communicator's credibility (Effendy, 2011), but because it is undocumented, it relies on individuals, not systems. The implication is that merit-based communication is necessary but unable to sustain itself without formalized evaluation (Munawar et al., 2025).

### **Supporting and Inhibiting Factors: The Structural Limits of Symbolic Capital**

The effectiveness of FOKSI Central Java's communication strategy is conditioned by internal and external forces (Effendy, 2011). Internally, a climate of open and friendly communication maintains approximately 61 active volunteer athletes, an example of effective horizontal communication that fosters organizational identification. The Secretary asserted:

*"There are virtually no boundaries between athletes and coaches, and the administrators are virtually non-existent. Because none of us are keeping anything secret, all information is easily accessible to the athletes."* (Dhias Fajar Widya, Interview 2026).

A track record of accomplishments and a strategically designed management structure, including a university lecturer, a member of the Provincial House of Representatives, and the editor-in-chief of Suara Merdeka as Deputy Chairman, provide both credibility and networking

access. This social capital enabled kabaddi to enter POMNAS through what the chairman calls a "majority follower" strategy. (Sari & Ayuh, 2024). This strategy is admittedly not easy:

*"I entered it in the POMNAS exhibition. It wasn't easy, it wasn't easy at all, it was very difficult. But thank God, we were able to get through it together."* (Mr. Giri Dahono, interview 2026).

Repeated vertical miscommunication, weak athlete administration, a vacuum in regional management, the absence of dedicated social media personnel, and acute funding shortages (almost Rp300 million in expenditure in two months with KONI support of only around Rp40 million) reveal the limits of implementing a communication strategy solely with the goodwill of volunteers and symbolic capital.

Externally, institutional legitimacy and regulatory momentum, including the involvement of the Provincial Parliament (DPRD), the university athlete pathway, and the confirmation of kabaddi as a medal-winning sport at the 2027 National Sports Week (POMNAS), provide concrete, long-term communication targets that anchor planning (Hadi et al., 2024a). The opposing barrier is low public literacy:

*"People don't even know that it's actually another name for the sport of bending over. When I was little, bending over was like that: you touch it and then go back to something else."* (Mr. Giri Dahono, interview 2026).

The lack of private sponsorship and intense competition from established sports like soccer also hinder this. This final paradox theoretically reveals that achievement does not automatically translate into popularity, but only when mediated by effective communication that builds an image the very mediation mechanism that is the primary focus of this research. FOKSI's response, namely building comparative advantage through distinctive, authentic, and achievement-based messaging (Hadi et al., 2024; Keller, 1993), is a strategically coherent move, but its upper limits are determined by the structural capacity that the organization has not yet managed to build.

### **Towards a Performance-Based Communication Model for Developing Sports**

The synthesis of these four themes yields the central theoretical claim of this study. In the context of developing sports, communication strategies do not operate directly on popularity; they operate by generating symbolic legitimacy credibility and reputation produced primarily through athletic achievement, which then mediates the strategy's conversion into popularity (Varmus et al., 2022). FOKSI Central Java embodies this through a coherent sequence: plan for credibility, implement by converting achievement into networked visibility through athlete storytelling and eWOM, and evaluate the achievement and its mediated effects. This reinterprets the practitioner's axiom "achievement first, popularity second" as an analytical model rather than a slogan and contributes to the study of strategic sports communication a transferable account of how resource-constrained organizations can substitute hard-earned credibility for money-bought visibility. The model's boundary conditions are equally clear: symbolic capital must be institutionalized through documented evaluation, dedicated communication capacity, and diversified funding, or its mediating power will weaken.

This model also has practical relevance beyond the case of FOKSI Central Java. For other developing sports organizations in Indonesia, whether kabaddi in other provinces or new sports seeking a social foothold, these findings offer an adaptable framework. The key principle is simple yet demanding discipline: build a verifiable track record first, then use that track record as the primary communication material. This approach is more sustainable than publicity campaigns that lack tangible performance substance, because it generates legitimacy that comes from within—from the athletes, from achievements, and from the experiences of members—rather than from an artificially projected image. Thus, the performance-based communication model positions the quality of athlete development and organizational governance not as merely technical sporting matters, but as a long-term communication investment whose value will continue to grow over time (Munawar et al., 2025).

## CONCLUSION

FOKSI Central Java implements an achievement-based communication strategy through a coherent sequence, planning to build an internal community based on family values and developing competitive athletes as legitimacy capital; implementation of converting achievements into networked visibility through athlete storytellers, decentralized social media participation that generates EWOM, Suara Merdeka partnerships, and the 2025 POMNAS event, evaluation, although informal, uses achievements and their mediated effects as benchmarks. Strengths in the form of networked leadership, competitive track records, and media alliances are balanced by structural constraints in the form of scarcity of funding, vacuum regional management, and low public literacy.

This study details a previously inferred but rarely modeled mediating mechanism: in the context of resource-constrained developing sports, symbolic legitimacy and organizational reputation mediate the relationship between communication strategy and popularity, allowing earned credibility to replace purchased visibility. Reimagining “achievement first, popularity second” as an analytical model expands the study of strategic sports communication and *sports branding* beyond the usual mainstream cases (Billings et al., 2018; Pedersen et al., 2020).

FOKSI Central Java needs to formalize its evaluation routine (institutionalizing SPOT checks), build dedicated social media capacity, reactivate its leadership in all 19 districts/cities, and diversify funding through partnerships with educational institutions, local governments, and sponsors steps that will convert volatile symbolic capital into durable communicative infrastructure. The single-case qualitative design limits statistical generalizability; future research should quantitatively test the proposed mediation and compare emerging sport organizations across provinces to assess the model's transferability.

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