

Customer Relations in the Transportation Industry during Pandemic (Netnography Study on Instagram @kai121)

Alifa Nur Fitri¹, Heni Indrayani²

¹ORCID iD: 0000-0003-3494-5996, Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo, Jl. Prof. Dr. Hamka, Semarang, Central Java 50185, Indonesia

²ORCID iD: 0000-0003-3659-1191, Universitas Dian Nuswantoro, Jl. Imam Bonjol No. 207, Semarang, Central Java 50131, Indonesia

*Corresponding author, e-mail: alifanurfitri89@walisongo.ac.id

Abstract

Introduction: On restrictions during the pandemic, significantly reducing passenger numbers. PT KAI adapted by introducing innovations like Genose testing, online ticketing, and vaccination services to ensure safety and compliance. This paper examines PT KAI's customer relations via Instagram (@kai121) during the pandemic. It focuses on using digital public relations and the SMART Relationship Management Process Model to maintain engagement and satisfaction. These efforts highlight KAI's adaptability in meeting customer needs.

Methods: This research employs Virtual Ethnography to observe interactions on 427 KAI posts made between March 2020 and October 2021. The data is then analyzed using Customer Relationship Management theory, incorporating the stages of Scan, Map, Act, Roll Out, Track, and Stew.

Findings: The study found that during the pandemic, KAI's Instagram content focused on various topics: corporate events (13.81%), national transportation policies (15.45%), health protocols (11.07%), train service promotions (38.38%), railway education (13.38%), and giveaway content (7.96%). The content prominently highlighted KAI services such as Rail Express, schedule updates, rapid/antigen testing, and KAI Access. Posts related to transportation policies and health protocols received significant engagement, with transportation policy updates garnering the most comments as followers sought the latest travel information. KAI effectively utilized digital public relations through Instagram to engage with customers.

Originality: This study is novel as it is the first in Indonesia to analyze KAI's customer relations through digital public relations during the pandemic.

Keywords: Customer Relations, Customer Relationship Management Theory, Instagram, KAI, Railway Transportation.

Introduction

The pandemic led the government to impose restrictions on transportation as part of efforts to curb the spread of Covid-19. These mobility restrictions, such as the Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB), were outlined in Government Regulation No. 21 of 2020 and implemented starting March 30, 2020. PSBB was introduced to mitigate risk factors in specific areas and included limitations on public activities, teaching and learning processes, working from home, social and cultural events, religious practices, defense and security operations, and modes of transportation (Azanella, 2020).

The transportation restrictions under PSBB resulted in a sharp decline in the number of transportation users in Indonesia. This decrease was primarily due to the government's recommendation to limit activities. For instance, the Toll Road Regulatory Agency (BPJT) adjusted operational hours, while the aviation sector restructured schedules by optimizing routes and eliminating unprofitable ones (Luthfiyah & Miro, 2020). A survey conducted by Indonesia's Central Statistics Agency (BPS) revealed a significant reduction across all modes of transportation, with railways experiencing the steepest decline. Before

the pandemic, in December 2019, PT KAI recorded 37.46 million passengers, which drastically dropped to 5.9 million in April 2020 as a direct impact of the PSBB implementation.



Figure 1. National Transportation Development, Official Statistics News, October 01, 2020 (BPS, 2020)

The rise in Covid-19 cases, the emergence of new variants, and the onset of a second wave prompted the government to reintroduce restrictions through the Enforcement of Community Activity Restrictions (PPKM) on January 11, 2021, followed by Emergency PPKM starting July 3, 2021. The Covid-19 Task Force stated that Indonesia was experiencing a second wave, with daily cases reaching 21,324, largely attributed to holiday and homecoming activities as well as the emergence of new virus variants (CNN, 2021). The vision of the Covid-19 Task Force for Emergency PPKM, 'Protect yourself, protect the country,' was implemented through strict measures, including 100% work-from-home (WFH) policies, online teaching and learning activities, temporary closure of shopping centers and malls, suspension of worship activities, and public facility restrictions in red zones at the RT/RW level under micro PPKM. Public transportation was limited to 70% capacity, and antigen or PCR tests became mandatory for travel. The Emergency PPKM led to a significant decline in train passenger numbers, with a survey by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) reporting a 60.52% decrease. Another contributing factor was the discontinuation of antigen and Genose swabs as valid travel requirements.

To adapt during the pandemic, PT KAI introduced various innovations to sustain operations despite the government's mobility restrictions. In compliance with these policies, KAI ensured passenger safety and comfort through stringent travel regulations. As a solution, KAI offered Genose testing as a travel requirement and, starting in July 2021, began providing vaccination services for passengers, demonstrating its commitment to addressing passenger needs during this challenging period.

Railway Transportation, July 2020 - July 2021



Figure 2. National Transportation Development, Official Statistics News, September 01, 2021 (BPS, 2021)

The goal of this paper is to examine the role of Indonesian Railways Public Relations (KAI), particularly in Customer Relations activities carried out through the @kai121 Instagram account during the pandemic. Data was collected from 427 Instagram posts made by KAI between March 2020 and October 2021. Customer relations, as a public relations activity, not only involves providing services and information but also focuses on building engagement with consumers.

KAI has developed various innovations to enhance its services, including introducing a new ticketing and train purchasing system. Leadership plays a critical role in shaping organizational behavior (Anggadwita, 2013). Through these innovations, KAI aims to deliver excellent service and achieve customer satisfaction, as facilities and services significantly influence customer satisfaction (Syahlina & Nasib, 2019).

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on customer relations activities conducted by KAI during the pandemic through Instagram @kai121, a subject that has not been previously studied. KAI has utilized various digital platforms to communicate with customers, aiming to enhance customer satisfaction through continuous innovation and service improvement. This study employs virtual ethnography to analyze KAI's Instagram activities, a method that has not been used in prior research.

Public Relations is responsible for establishing relationships with both internal and external stakeholders (Cultip, 2009). However, new technologies and increasingly fragmented audiences pose challenges for PR professionals (Wolf & Archer, 2018). The theory of relationship management is particularly relevant in exploring how Public Relations builds and nurtures relationships. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) serves as a key tool to enhance customer loyalty, which subsequently improves organizational performance (Guerola-Navarro et al., 2021).

Digital public relations (PR) has become essential in fostering effective communication between brands and customers in the digital era. It allows for more direct and responsive interactions through online platforms such as social media, SEO, blogs, and websites (Oncioiu et al., 2021; Bulantseva, 2022). Websites, in particular, offer several advantages--they are accessible, cost-effective, and highly beneficial as digital PR tools (Sezgin & Cesur, 2019). Effective digital PR builds trust and loyalty, which are critical for achieving customer satisfaction (Ahli et al., 2024). High engagement and excellent service are essential for fostering customer loyalty (Andreassen & Olsen, 2008).

Relationship management theory refers to the process of managing public relations in such a way as to benefit the organization and the public (Purnamawati & Hatane, 2024). Relationship management theory emphasizes strategies and processes aimed at acquiring, nurturing, and strengthening relationships with customers to create shared value

(Chatterjee et al., 2024). It highlights the importance of understanding customer needs and fostering long-term partnerships (Presutti et al., 2021). Strong customer relationships are vital for business sustainability as they directly impact customer loyalty and repeat purchases (Mang'anyi et al., 2017; Jara et al., 2018). Factors related to the readiness of implementing Customer Relationship Management (CRM) among others are Customer Service Information, Customer Relations Value, Lack of Service and Communication (Sardjono et al., 2021). CRM success is influenced by factors such as the use of information technology, customer orientation, organizational capabilities, and customer knowledge management (Soltani et al., 2018).

Implementing a comprehensive CRM strategy allows businesses to automate interactions and personalize communications, enhancing customer engagement (Zhou et al., 2024). Maintaining effective communication and understanding customers are essential for creating value and sustaining a competitive advantage (Zeng, 2022). The SMART relationship management process model--Scan (Environmental Analysis), Map (Setting goals and results), Act (Develop and pretest initiatives), Rollout (Implement the program), Track (Evaluate success), and Stew (Monitor and maintain quality relationships)--is particularly effective in managing relationships (Heath, 2013). Its purpose is to create mutually beneficial relationships between companies and stakeholders, addressing needs, expectations, and fulfillment (Putzer & Posza, 2024). KAI applies this relationship management model to build strong connections with its customers, especially during the pandemic. By complying with government policies and adapting to changing travel requirements, KAI has introduced affordable Genose and antigen tests to accommodate customer needs. This paper further explores KAI's efforts in relationship management with customers by employing the SMARTS Relationship Development Process Model.

Methods

The research method employed in this study is descriptive qualitative research, grounded in relationship management theory. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), qualitative research involves a series of interpretative practices that aim to provide an understanding of the world. This study adopts virtual ethnography, or netnography, as its ethnographic approach. With the rise of social media as a platform for virtual community communication, numerous researchers have explored the interactions of the information society on these platforms (Iskandar & Irawati, 2023). Robert Kozinets defines netnography as a specialized research method designed to uncover the unique behaviors of various types of social interactions facilitated by the internet (Kozinets, 2010).

The object of this research is the Instagram account @kai121, which serves as a medium for KAI's customer relations activities. Data collection was conducted by analyzing 427 posts made on the @kai121 Instagram account between March 2020 and November 2021. The primary data for this study were sourced from the @kai121 Instagram account and other media platforms utilized by KAI. Additionally, the research is supported by a literature review of textbooks, journals, and media reports related to customer relations practices by PT Kereta Api Indonesia.

Results

The study's findings indicate that during the pandemic, KAI maintained its relationship with customers despite limitations on direct communication. KAI utilized social media, specifically its Instagram account @kai121, to engage with customers.

Content analysis of posts from the pandemic period revealed several key topics: corporate events (59 posts, 13.81%), national transportation policies (66 posts, 15.45%), health protocols (47 posts, 11.07%), train service promotions (164 posts, 38.38%), railway education (57 posts, 13.38%), and giveaways (34 posts, 7.96%). KAI consistently introduced its services through content such as Rail Express, bundled packages, starter kits (tickets combined with rapid/antigen tests), and ticket purchase services via KAI Access.

Interestingly, KAI's pandemic-related content also focused on adherence to transportation regulations and health protocols, evidenced by posts about national transportation policies and safety measures. Posts related to transportation policies garnered the most engagement, as followers were eager for updates on KAI's travel regulations. In contrast, posts about corporate events received less positive feedback.

The relationship management process model known as SMART (Scan, Map, Act, Rollout, Track, and Stew) proved relevant to KAI's customer relationship strategy. The Scan phase helps organizations analyze challenges and opportunities in the market, enabling a better understanding of customer needs (Wegner et al., 2023). The Map phase aligns organizational goals with customer expectations, fostering long-term loyalty (Meixell & Luoma, 2015). The Act phase focuses on implementing proactive strategies to enhance customer engagement and satisfaction (Jeong & Shin, 2020). The Rollout phase ensures consistent implementation of customer experience improvements across the organization (Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2018). The Track phase evaluates the effectiveness of initiatives based on customer feedback, enabling continuous improvement (Valero-Gil et al., 2017). Finally, the Stew phase emphasizes maintaining long-term relationships with customers, critical in a competitive environment (Edwards, 2021).

The @kai121 Instagram account has 534,000 followers and 1,264 posts. This account is integrated with KAI's other digital platforms, including the Sahabat KAI podcast and TikTok. Posts on @kai121 provide travel-related information and serve as a communication channel with customers. Highlights on the account include train schedules, boarding regulations, agglomeration train services, free vaccines, rapid antigen tests, and the KAI Access app. Engagement-focused highlights feature new habits, customer experiences, tags, hashtags, and giveaway announcements. Beyond Instagram, KAI also engages with customers via a hotline (121), email (cs@kai.id), TikTok (@KAI121_), Facebook, Twitter (@KAI121), WhatsApp (081112111121), and the KAI Access app.

Instagram is an effective platform for KAI, offering a cost-efficient alternative to traditional advertising through TV, radio, and billboards while reaching a broad audience (Fauziah et al., 2018). By leveraging Instagram and other media, KAI fosters strong communication with its customers, emphasizing the importance of long-term relationships. This approach helps create positive public perceptions, customer loyalty, and public support. To personalize interactions, KAI refers to its customers as 'Sahabat KAI' and calls its Instagram admin 'Railmin,' enhancing relatability and closeness. KAI's relationship management strategy includes a thorough situation analysis during and before the pandemic, using surveys, direct field observations, and social media analysis. Through Instagram, KAI monitors customer comments, especially regarding policy changes during the pandemic. The internet provides a dynamic platform for content

sharing and interaction between brands and consumers, surpassing traditional media in flexibility and engagement potential (AlAfnan & MohdZuki, 2023).

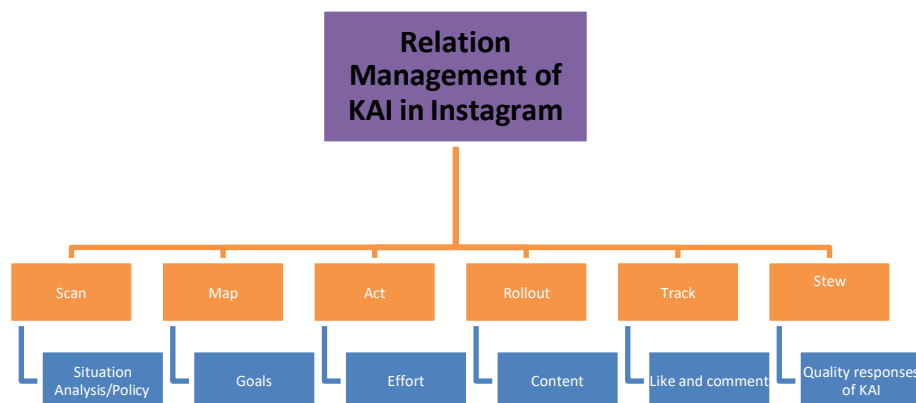


Figure 3. Relation Management of KAI Instagram using Theory Relation Management (Heath, 2013)

During the pandemic, KAI's content on Instagram covered various topics: 59 posts (13.81%) on corporate events, 66 posts (15.45%) on national transportation policies, 47 posts (11.07%) on health protocols, 164 posts (38.38%) promoting train services, 57 posts (13.38%) on railway education, and 34 posts (7.96%) for giveaways. The most frequently shared content was related to train service promotions, totaling 164 posts. Examples include the Rail Express program, launched on March 3, 2020, to deliver packages efficiently during the pandemic with the slogan 'Rail Express: Sending packages by train. Cheap, fast, safe.' This program received a positive response and showcased KAI's adaptability amid social restrictions. Additional promotional efforts included bundling packages for passengers, such as offering Rapid Antigen Tests, health kits (face shields, masks, and wet wipes), and vaccination services at stations. KAI also updated train schedules and introduced collaborations like the program with Blue Bird.

Despite the focus on service promotions, KAI remained committed to complying with transportation regulations and promoting health protocols, which accounted for 28% of posts during the pandemic. Posts aimed to educate and engage customers, such as content on proper mask use, effectiveness of cloth masks, and health recommendations. KAI utilized Instagram to understand customer needs and provide solutions, such as creating a video explaining ticket refund processes that garnered 36,052 views and 902 comments, demonstrating responsiveness to customer inquiries.

Map (Setting Goal and Objective)

The 'map' represents the planning stage of KAI during the pandemic, focusing on providing and optimizing services under challenging circumstances. During this period, KAI utilized Instagram to inform and serve its customers effectively. Key initiatives included planning train schedules during the pandemic, developing travel schemes for the new normal, launching vaccination services, and sharing updates on these activities via Instagram. Posts on KAI121's Instagram aimed to maximize information dissemination about Rail Express package services, new schedules, KAI Access, promotional offers, bundling packages, and services available via WhatsApp.

In addition to promoting services, KAI shared posts on transportation policies, such as the stay-at-home campaign to support the government's #notmudik #athome initiative during Eid al-Fitr 2020. Despite halting operations in April 2020 and July 2021 due to

government regulations, KAI maintained customer engagement through creative posts, including 'Missing the Train,' which encouraged followers to share their experiences during the period of travel restrictions.

Several posts aimed to raise awareness of health protocols, such as proper mask usage, the effectiveness of cloth masks, and recommendations for wearing masks for less than four hours. Posts designed to educate customers about railways were also featured, including the Friends of KAI Podcast launched in November 2020. Topics covered in the podcast included the eight longest tunnels, the role of conductors, unique facts about Indonesian railways, and insights into the professions of train stewards and stewardesses.

In addition to providing information, KAI focused on building customer engagement by hosting giveaways. During the pandemic, there were 34 giveaway posts, many of which were shared after podcast broadcasts or on weekends. These giveaways featured interactive games, such as 'Find Your Way to the Station' (July 18, 2020) and 'Guess the Word' (August 22, 2020), as well as challenges like the 'No Going Home' content creation challenge (April 24, 2020), the photo challenge (May 15, 2020), and KAI's Birthday Twibbon challenge. These initiatives demonstrated KAI's commitment to creating engaging and informative content for its audience during the pandemic.

Act

The 'Act' stage refers to KAI's approach to service delivery, which transitioned significantly from offline services before the pandemic to optimized online services during the pandemic. Early in the pandemic, challenges arose, particularly with ticket refunds due to widespread train cancellations under transportation policies and the PSBB (large-scale social restrictions). Customers raised numerous complaints, prompting KAI to implement a complaint handling program via Instagram. Through this platform, customers could directly submit complaints, enabling KAI to build trust by addressing issues promptly and accurately. Solutions included answering questions, providing educational posts, clarifications, and issuing apologies. For instance, KAI used its Instagram handle, @kai121, to share information on refund processes and requirements, eliminating the need for customers to visit stations.

To further strengthen customer relations, KAI expanded its efforts beyond Instagram, utilizing WhatsApp and optimizing the KAI Access application. Initially, tickets could only be purchased offline at stations. However, during the pandemic, ticket purchases at stations were limited to 'Go Show' tickets, available three hours before departure. KAI redirected ticket sales to online platforms, including KAI Access and third-party apps like Traveloka and Tiket.com. To familiarize customers with these changes, KAI released a video showcasing the simplicity of online ticket purchases, even for older adults. Additionally, customers were incentivized with reward points.

One notable service highlighted by KAI during the pandemic was Rail Express, a freight forwarding service designed to meet customer needs while adhering to health and safety protocols. Recognizing that health concerns were paramount for customers during the pandemic, KAI emphasized measures such as temperature checks, handwashing facilities, and other new normal protocols to instill confidence in train travel. These efforts were widely shared through social media posts to reassure the public of KAI's commitment to safety and comfort.

To comply with government mandates aimed at curbing the spread of Covid-19, KAI introduced health screening services for passengers. Early in the pandemic, Rapid Test services were offered at stations, with six promotional posts shared on Instagram. Later, the introduction of the Genose test, a more affordable and convenient screening

method, was promoted through 13 posts between February 26 and June 23, 2021. However, following a surge in Covid-19 cases and concerns over the validity of Genose testing, the method was phased out due to its lack of external validation (Naufal, 2021).

With the implementation of stricter travel regulations during the Enforcement of Restrictions on Community Activities (PPKM), including mandatory vaccination for travel, KAI responded by launching vaccination programs at stations starting April 8, 2021. This initiative was a demonstration of KAI's adaptability, innovation, and commitment to ensuring passenger safety. The program was well-received, with 36,226 individuals vaccinated at 24 stations (Yati, 2021). Following the vaccination program, KAI continued to offer Rapid Test services and introduced the Vaccine Card Link feature on the KAI Access application to simplify health screenings and document verification for passengers. These efforts collectively underscored KAI's dedication to maintaining safety and convenience during a challenging period.

Rollout

One notable initiative was the Corporate Event Program, shared through KAI's Instagram, which celebrated moments such as religious holidays, national days, and special company events. The program aimed to enhance the company's reputation. During the pandemic, KAI made 59 posts for religious holidays, such as Isra Mi'raj, Nyepi, Ramadan, Christmas, and others, offering greetings to customers. Posts also commemorated national days like Pancasila Day, Independence Day, and Heroes Day, showcasing the company's nationalism. Additionally, posts for KAI's anniversaries, Customer Day, and monthly greetings provided updates and operational information.

Corporate event posts generally received moderate attention, as seen in the likes and comments. However, posts paired with special programs, like free tickets for teachers, veterans, and medical workers on Heroes Day, garnered significantly more engagement, reflecting the customers' appreciation for tangible benefits.

KAI also posted 66 updates regarding transportation policies during the pandemic. These posts addressed travel conditions, operating hours, passenger restrictions, and seating arrangements. Another key focus was health protocols, with 47 posts designed to ensure safety and comfort for passengers. These posts included guidelines on wearing masks, handwashing tips, and proper use of face shields. For example, KAI's #FACESHIELDBUKANSUVENIR campaign addressed customer misuse of provided face shields, garnering substantial feedback.

To adapt to the pandemic, KAI also promoted online services, including ticket reservations and Covid-19 screening services. These services, such as rapid tests, Genose tests, and antigen swabs, were offered at affordable rates to reduce the spread of the virus while ensuring customer convenience. Despite restrictions on train operations, KAI introduced new train services in August 2021. Promotions included discount offers, RAIL express services, Covid-19 screenings, train schedules, and information about new customer stations. Through these efforts, KAI demonstrated a commitment to addressing customer needs, ensuring safety, and maintaining service quality during challenging times.

Track

Evaluating customer relations activities on KAI's Instagram account involves analyzing the likes and comments each post receives. Posts related to special events during the pandemic generally garnered fewer likes, while service promotion posts and transportation policy updates received higher engagement. Posts about transportation policies attracted the most comments. To increase engagement, KAI encouraged

followers to like, comment, share, and save posts to spread information more widely. For example, posts about updates to the KAI Access app and its latest features encouraged followers to share the information, enhancing its reach.

Most customer comments were found on transportation policy posts, which received 15,923 likes and 8,170 comments. KAI's Customer Relations team responded to many follower questions and compiled frequently asked questions. An example of this effort was the #TemanKAI Bertanya post published on April 26, 2021, addressing inquiries about the status of pre- and post-homecoming trips. Through these activities, KAI demonstrated its commitment to engaging with customers and addressing their concerns effectively.

Stew

The Stew stage is when KAI focuses on maintaining the quality of its relationship with customers through its Instagram account, @KAI121. This involves providing information and addressing various customer inquiries. The account is managed by several customer service representatives, commonly referred to as 'Railmin' to create a more relatable and friendly image for followers. KAI actively responds to comments from its Instagram followers (Heath, 2013).

KAI utilizes Instagram comments to maintain customer satisfaction and address complaints, ensuring programs align with customer needs. For instance, at the onset of the pandemic, many complaints arose regarding the ticket refund system. Interestingly, followers often helped answer each other's questions in the comments, creating a sense of community. Many followers frequently asked about operating train schedules, travel conditions, and related topics. One post that garnered significant engagement was related to KAI's recruitment, which received 5,000 comments, reflecting followers' enthusiasm about joining the organization. Conversely, posts about special religious events attracted fewer likes and comments, while posts on transportation policies and Covid-19 screening services received higher engagement.

KAI made consistent efforts to communicate effectively with its followers, particularly during transportation restrictions. For example, on May 27, 2020, KAI posted a "miss letter" from a train machinist. This post, which used empathetic communication, expressed the shared longing between KAI staff and its customers while encouraging compliance with health protocols during the new normal. The post received 12,023 likes and 956 comments, marking the first pandemic-era post to surpass 10,000 likes.

Through the @KAI121 Instagram account, followers also share information with each other. One notable example was the "Thank You, Until We Meet Again" post on April 26, 2020, which received 19,283 likes. This post, employing empathetic communication, announced a temporary goodbye as part of KAI's support for reducing the spread of the virus. While this post primarily aimed to show support, it also addressed customer complaints about ticket refunds. Followers who successfully processed refunds shared their experiences in the comments, offering helpful insights to others.

KAI also invited followers to share their experiences and express their longing for train travel. For instance, a giveaway post about missing trains received 22,857 likes and 2,990 comments, demonstrating high engagement and enthusiasm from followers. These strategies highlight KAI's commitment to empathetic communication, community building, and maintaining strong relationships with its customers.

Discussion

The Changing trends bring PR today to be more dynamic and use various media. Digital PR uses online media such as websites and social media (Saraih et al., 2021). The finding reveal that KAI effectively leveraged its instagram account, @KAI121, to maintain and strengthen customer relationship during the pandemic, overcoming the challenges posed by restrictions on direct communication. By adopting the SMART relationship management model-Scan, Map, Act, Rollout, Track, and Stew - KAI demonstrated a structured and strategic approach to customer engagement and satisfaction.

The SMART model was evident in KAI's pandemic strategy. Scan: KAI identified customer needs and concerns through surveys, social media monitoring, and direct feedback. Map: Goals such as maintaining customer loyalty and ensuring service accessibility were aligned with customer expectations. Act: Proactive measures, including launching Rail Express and integrating health protocols into services, were implemented to address challenges. Rollout: Consistency in communication and service delivery was ensured across platforms. Track: KAI regularly evaluated the effectiveness of its initiatives through customer feedback and social media analytics. Stew: Long-term relationships were nurtured through personalized interactions, empathetic communication, and community engagement.

Role of interactive communication in social media and to thus build a bridge between the orientation of communication towards dialogue and relationships. Social network with online customers networks could also support the achievement of public relation (PR) objectives (Oncioiu et al., 2021). This study reveals that during the pandemic, PT KAI utilized Instagram as the primary platform to maintain relationships with its customers. With a total of 427 posts during the pandemic period, the shared content covered various topics reflecting customer needs and interests. The findings indicate that 38.38% of the posts focused on promoting train services, making it the most dominant category of content. Programs like Rail Express, launched on March 3, 2020, were among PT KAI's efforts to adapt to social restrictions. This program, with the slogan 'Rail Express: Sending packages by train. Cheap, fast, safe,' received positive customer responses and showcased KAI's ability to understand customer needs during challenging times.

In addition, KAI introduced bundling services such as Rapid Antigen Tests, health kits (face shields, masks, and wet wipes), and vaccinations at stations. Adjustments to train schedules and collaborations with third parties, such as Blue Bird, were other innovative steps taken to ensure service continuity and meet customer expectations.

From the perspective of customer knowledge, PT KAI demonstrated a deep understanding of customer needs and wants (Nuseir et al., 2022). By analyzing customer interactions through Instagram, KAI was able to produce relevant content, such as a video tutorial on the ticket refund process, which garnered 36,052 views and 902 comments. This highlights the importance of social media, such as Instagram, in collecting, classifying, and interacting with customers, as outlined by Badham & Mykkänen (2022).

Furthermore, this study supports the view of Jacobson et al. (2020) that consumers use social media to share information and experiences with broader communities. KAI's strategy of sharing information about transportation policies, health protocol education, and service promotions reflects the company's ability to leverage the interactive features of social media to build strong relationships with customers.

Thus, these findings demonstrate that PT KAI successfully utilized Instagram as a strategic tool to understand customer needs, provide relevant solutions, and maintain

strong relationships during the pandemic. This not only strengthened customer loyalty but also enhanced the company's positive image in the public eye. KAI emphasized the use of online platforms to ensure smooth communication with customers. Instagram played a central role, not only as a communication tool but also as a platform to deliver services, considering that offline services were limited due to social restrictions and regulatory policies. The pandemic brought significant changes, including a shift towards online services, prompting KAI's Customer Relations team to develop various program plans aimed at enhancing communication with customers, particularly through social media. Social media's strengths in building personal branding and fostering close interactions proved invaluable. By connecting people without the constraints of space and time (Oncioiu et al., 2021; Harahap, 2018).

The pandemic created a crisis for KAI, one of which was the surge in customer complaints. These complaints required swift responses and effective solutions, necessitating alignment between identifying problems and implementing resolutions. Sinansari et al. (2023) highlighted that maximizing customer satisfaction and minimizing complaints are key outcomes of successful CRM performance. Similarly, Khan et al. (2022) emphasized that quick responses to customer feedback and complaints significantly contribute to customer satisfaction. Bowyer et al. (2022) also noted that timely responses and appreciation of customer opinions are essential for service improvement. Quick and timely response and appreciate consumer opinions to improve service (Arai et al., 2022). Handling criticism and feedback effectively plays a crucial role in maintaining customer trust and loyalty (Gonçalves et al., 2021). During the pandemic, KAI introduced various programs categorized into corporate events, transportation policies, health protocols, service promotions, education, and giveaways. Social media played a significant role in managing these initiatives, as it allowed individuals and stakeholders to share their thoughts in real-time (Parmelee & Greer, 2023). The next stage is tracking and evaluating KAI's efforts for each post. Evaluations are measured by the number of likes and comments each post receives, which reflect the level of engagement between KAI and its audience. Engagement includes feedback, which serves as evaluative or corrective input regarding an action or process (Gashi & Ahmeti, 2021). Effective relationship management plays a critical role in maintaining customer loyalty. Additionally, word-of-mouth communication is vital for ensuring that a product or company remains a topic of discussion, often amplified through social media.

Social media creates a multiplier effect, enabling consumers to share information widely. When consumers communicate with just two individuals, they can indirectly reach many others on social platforms, a concept referred to as the "word of net" (Heath, 2013). Consumers tend to trust recommendations from friends, family, and other users more than advertisements. Word-of-mouth communication, expert reviews, and user recommendations significantly influence consumer behavior (Gligorijevic & Luck, 2013; Javed et al., 2022). In the digital era, platforms like Instagram have become essential for product reviews and word-of-mouth promotion (Clemons et al., 2024). However, cultural differences impact the effectiveness of recommendations--while friend recommendations can reduce the influence of advertising in Western cultures, they are highly impactful in Eastern cultures (Errmann et al., 2019). Companies must integrate user-generated content and social recommendations into their strategies (Aristovnik et al., 2020). In steward phase, modern consumers expect personalized, interpersonal communication with organizations, which helps build stronger relationships and enhance service delivery. For example, KAI utilizes Instagram comments to maintain customer satisfaction and address

complaints, which has shifted from a transactional to a relational approach, prioritizing customer satisfaction and loyalty (Mahanani, 2017). Customer relations significantly influence consumer loyalty (Nawastha et al., 2020). Research indicates that customers prefer individualized and tailored services rather than generic treatment.

Instagram was one of the social media platforms that experienced a significant increase in users during the pandemic. The restrictions imposed during the pandemic altered communication patterns, which traditionally relied on direct interaction, as messages had to be conveyed through media amidst regional quarantines or lockdowns. A survey conducted by Facebook revealed that Instagram usage surged by up to 40% (Fahmi Ahmad Burhan, 2020).

Timothy Comb in Ayman et al., (2020), highlighted that social media has transformed crisis communication responses, stating that organizations could use new media technologies to ‘adjust their messages based on public opinion.’ Social media offers an interactive platform for dialogue. As Coombs suggests, organizations should not merely communicate but actively listen to platforms like Twitter and Facebook.

Post-Covid-19, PT KAI has continued to implement effective customer relations activities, including hosting events such as the KAI Festival and concerts. The company has also created engaging content, such as persona-driven campaigns representing various types of train passengers, along with educational materials on passenger etiquette, KAI policies, and crisis management. One of the crisis management strategies implemented includes upgrading economy-class seating to enhance comfort.

This study has limitations, as it focuses solely on KAI’s relationship management efforts during the pandemic using Instagram. Other platforms, such as TikTok, Facebook, or the official KAI website, were not examined. The data used in this study relies solely on Instagram posts and comments, without incorporating interviews with KAI representatives. Additionally, the research only covers customer relations activities during the pandemic up to 2021 and does not explore KAI’s efforts after the pandemic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, KAI effectively managed its customer relations during the pandemic by leveraging its Instagram account, @kai121, as a primary communication platform. By providing diverse content that included service promotions, health protocols, transportation policies, and educational posts, KAI maintained customer engagement and adapted to the challenges of restricted communication. The use of the SMART relationship management model helped KAI assess and align its strategies with customer needs, ensuring relevant and proactive interactions. During pandemic period, KAI posted 427 times on Instagram, covering corporate events (13.81%), national transportation policies (15.45%), health protocols (11.07%), train service promotions (38.38%), railway education (13.38%), and giveaways (7.96%). KAI’s commitment to customer satisfaction was evident in its prompt responses to inquiries, the introduction of innovative services like Rail Express and health screenings, and the ongoing efforts to maintain a friendly and relatable image through interactions on Instagram. The high engagement rates on posts related to transportation policies and health protocols further demonstrated the effectiveness of KAI’s digital strategy in fostering trust and loyalty among its customers, ensuring positive long-term relationships despite the pandemic’s challenges.

Conflict of Interest

We certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial, personal, or other relationships with other people or organization related to the material discussed in the manuscript.

Acknowledgements

Thank you for KAI Indonesia for data in Instagram @kai121 and good customer relation was inspiring writers. Thank you for UIN Walisongo Semarang and Universitas Dian Nuswantoro, and also thank you for our family.

References

- Ahli, M., Hilmi, M. F., & Abudaqa, A. (2024). Ethical Sales Behavior Influencing Trust, Loyalty, Green Experience, and Satisfaction in UAE Public Entrepreneur Firms. *Aptisi Transactions on Technopreneurship (ATT)*, 6(2), 149–168. <https://doi.org/10.34306/att.v6i2.422>
- AlAfnan, M. A., & MohdZuki, S. F. (2023). Positive and Negative Politeness in Nonverbal Communication Contexts: An Examination into Driving Behaviors in Europe. *Studies in Media and Communication*, 11(1), 66–77. <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v11i1.5884>
- Andreassen, T. W., & Olsen, L. L. (2008). The impact of customers' perception of varying degrees of customer service on commitment and perceived relative attractiveness. *Managing Service Quality: An International Journal*, 18(4), 309–328. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09604520810885581>
- Anggadwita, G. (2013). Service Innovation in Public Sector : A Case Study on PT. Kereta Api Indonesia. *Journal of Social and Development Sciences*, 4(7), 308–315. <https://doi.org/10.22610/jsds.v4i7.766>
- Arai, K., Ming, Z. M., Fujikawa, I., Nakagawa, Y., Momozaki, T., & Ogawa, S. (2022). Customer Profiling Method with Big Data based on BDT and Clustering for Sales Prediction. *International Journal of Advanced Computer Science and Applications*, 13(7), 22–28. <https://doi.org/10.14569/IJACSA.2022.0130704>
- Aristovnik, A., Keržič, D., Ravšelj, D., Tomaževič, N., & Umek, L. (2020). ticle Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Life of Higher Education Students: *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, 12(20), 1–34.
- Ayman, U., Kaya, A. K., & Kuruç, Ü. K. (2020). The impact of digital communication and pr models on the sustainability of higher education during crises†. *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, 12(20), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12208295>
- Azanella, L. A. (2020). Apa Itu PSBB, hingga jadi Upaya pencegahan Covid-19. *Kompas.Com*. <https://www.kompas.com/tren/read/2020/04/13/153415265/apa-itu-psbb-hingga-jadi-upaya-pencegahan-covid-19?page=3>
- Badham, M., & Mykkänen, M. (2022). A Relational Approach to How Media Engage With Their Audiences in Social Media. *Media and Communication*, 10(1), 54–65. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i1.4409>
- Bowyer, A., Holt, J., Go Jefferies, J., Wilson, R., Kirk, D., & David Smeddinck, J. (2022). Human-GDPR Interaction: Practical Experiences of Accessing Personal Data. *Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - Proceedings*. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3491102.3501947>
- BPS. (2020). *Perkembangan Transportasi Nasional Juli 2020 No.78/10/Th.XXIII, 1 Oktober 2020*. <https://www.bps.go.id/id/infographic?id=673>

- BPS. (2021). *National Transportation Development, Official Statistics No.67/09/Th.XXIV*. https://web-api.bps.go.id/cover.php?f=fWgs/u5J3MEaaNqnUHd+4GQ5SjJ6Rjc4S1hGN0hKbU9NS003aVZ6TDIBSnM0eFNEZ3A2c2s3a1lNK2w1d0hRWFJb0NIL1JKYmhUaUNuQ1VrMUY4TU8wWIN0ajZtb1d0Y2INblk4aTN2VzZCMzA2RFQzRkpFQlcyd1dBRW16S1BVa0RqaHduanB2OC95VjNP&_gl=1*10yxg7f*_ga*MjA5NDQ5MjEyNi4xNzM0Nzc0NzE5*_ga_XXTTVXWHDB*MTczNDc3NDcxOS4xLjEuMTczNDc3NTA1Mi4wLjAuMA..
- Bulantseva, L. V. (2022). Digital PR and Communication with B2B Enterprises in the Digital Era. *Russian Engineering Research*, 42(10), 1089–1092. <https://doi.org/10.3103/S1068798X22100070>
- Chatterjee, S., Mikalef, P., Khorana, S., & Kizgin, H. (2024). Assessing the Implementation of AI Integrated CRM System for B2C Relationship Management: Integrating Contingency Theory and Dynamic Capability View Theory. *Information Systems Frontiers*, 26(3), 967–985. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10796-022-10261-w>
- Clemons, E. K., Savin, A., Schrieck, M., Teilmann-Lock, S., Trzaskowski, J., & Waran, R. (2024). A face of one's own: The role of an online personae in a digital age and the right to control one's own online personae in the presence of digital hacking. *Electronic Markets*, 34(1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12525-024-00713-3>
- CNN. (2021). *Satgas Sebut Indonesia Masuk Gelombang Kedua Covid 19*. <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20210630080610-20-661120/satgas-sebut-indonesia-masuk-gelombang-kedua-covid-19>
- Cultip, S. C. B. G. . (2009). Effective Public Relations. In 9. Kencana.
- Denzin, Licoln. (2011). *Handbook of Qualitative Reseach*. The SAGE.
- Edwards, L. (2021). Organised lying and professional legitimacy: Public relations' accountability in the disinformation debate. *European Journal of Communication*, 36(2), 168–182. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323120966851>
- Errmann, A., Seo, Y., Choi, Y. K., & Yoon, S. (2019). Divergent Effects of Friend Recommendations on Disclosed Social Media Advertising in the United States and Korea. *Journal of Advertising*, 48(5), 495–511. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2019.1663320>
- Fahmi Ahmad Burhan. (2020). Penggunaan WhatsApp dan Instagram Melonjak 40% selama Pandemi Corona. *Katadata.Co.Id*. <https://katadata.co.id/febrinaiskana/digital/5e9a41f84eb85/penggunaan-whatsapp-dan-instagram-melonjak-40-selama-pandemi-corona>
- Fauziah, R., Ratnamulyani, I. A., & Kusumadinata, A. A. (2018). Efektifitas Promosi Destinasi Wisata Rekreasi Gunung Pancar Melalui Postingan Instagram Media Sosial. *Jurnal Komunikatio*, 4(1), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.30997/jk.v4i1.1210>
- Gashi, R., & Ahmeti, H. G. (2021). Impact of social media on the development of new products, marketing and customer relationship management in Kosovo. *Emerging Science Journal*, 5(2), 125–138. <https://doi.org/10.28991/esj-2021-01263>
- Gligorijevic, B., & Luck, E. (2013). Engaging social customers - influencing new marketing strategies for social media information sources. *Communications in Computer and Information Science*, 332, 25–40. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-34447-3_3
- Gonçalves, G., Piñeiro-Naval, V., & Toniolo, B. P. (2021). Who Do the Portuguese Trust? Government Communication Management in the Covid-19 Pandemic.

- Comunicacao e Sociedade*, 40, 169–187.
[https://doi.org/10.17231/COMSOC.40\(2021\).3251](https://doi.org/10.17231/COMSOC.40(2021).3251)
- Guerola-Navarro, V., Gil-Gomez, H., Oltra-Badenes, R., & Sendra-García, J. (2021). Customer relationship management and its impact on innovation: A literature review. *Journal of Business Research*, 129, 83–87.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.02.050>
- Harahap, D. A. (2018). Perilaku Belanja Online Di Indonesia: Studi Kasus. *JRMSI - Jurnal Riset Manajemen Sains Indonesia*, 9(2), 193–213.
<https://doi.org/10.21009/jrmsi.009.2.02>
- Heath, R. L. (2013). *Encyclopedia of Public Relations* (Singapore (ed.); 2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.inc.
- Iskandar, F. A., & Irawati, I. (2023). Penelitian Etnografi Virtual dalam Mengkaji Fenomena Masyarakat Informasi di Media Sosial: Tinjauan Literatur Sistematis. *Anuva: Jurnal Kajian Budaya, Perpustakaan, Dan Informasi*, 7(4), 679–696.
<https://doi.org/10.14710/anuva.7.4.679-696>
- Jacobson, J., Gruzd, A., & Hernández-García, Á. (2020). Social media marketing: Who is watching the watchers? *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 53.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.03.001>
- Jara, M., Vyt, D., Mevel, O., Morvan, T., & Morvan, N. (2018). Measuring customers benefits of click and collect. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 32(4), 430–442.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JSM-05-2017-0158>
- Javed, S., Rashidin, M. S., & Xiao, Y. (2022). Investigating the impact of digital influencers on consumer decision-making and content outreach: using dual AISAS model. *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istrazivanja*, 35(1), 1183–1210.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1331677X.2021.1960578>
- Jeong, M., & Shin, H. H. (2020). Tourists' Experiences with Smart Tourism Technology at Smart Destinations and Their Behavior Intentions. *Journal of Travel Research*, 59(8), 1464–1477. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287519883034>
- Khan, R. U., Salamzadeh, Y., Iqbal, Q., & Yang, S. (2022). The Impact of Customer Relationship Management and Company Reputation on Customer Loyalty: The Mediating Role of Customer Satisfaction. *Journal of Relationship Marketing*, 21(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332667.2020.1840904>
- Kozinets, R. V. (2010). *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. Sage Publications.
- Luthfiah, T. S., & Miro, F. (2020). Pengaruh Covid-19 Terhadap Transportasi Di Daerah Jabodetabek. *Jurnal Thalita Sahda*, 1–6.
<https://pustaka.bunghatta.ac.id/index.php/profile/224-pengaruh-covid-19-terhadap-transportasi-di-daerah-jabodetabek>
- Mahanani, P. A. R. (2017). Customer Relations Management sebagai Salah Satu Upaya Public Relations Perusahaan Jasa Perbankan Menciptakan Good Image. *Jurnal ASPIKOM*, 1(6), 551. <https://doi.org/10.24329/aspikom.v1i6.58>
- Mang'unyi, E. E., Khabala, O. T., & Govender, K. K. (2017). The relationship between e-CRM and customer loyalty: A Kenyan commercial bank case study. *Banks and Bank Systems*, 12(2), 106–115. [https://doi.org/10.21511/bbs.12\(2\).2017.11](https://doi.org/10.21511/bbs.12(2).2017.11)
- Meixell, M. J., & Luoma, P. (2015). Stakeholder pressure in sustainable supply chain management. *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management*, 45(1/2), 69–89. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPDLM-05-2013-0155>
- Naufal, D. A. (2021). Ahli Minta Penggunaan Tes GeNoSe Dihentikan Sementara, Ini

- Alasannya. *Kompas.Com*, 1–3.
<https://www.kompas.com/tren/read/2021/06/21/160200165/ahli-minta-penggunaan-tes-genose-dihentikan-sementara-ini-alasannya?page=all>.
- Nawastha, Classica Harsya. Alversia, Y. (2020). Pengaruh Customer Engagement di Media Sosial terhadap Brand Intimacy pada Produk Fashion Lokal Indonesia The Influence of Customer Engagement in Social Media Towards Brand Intimacy to Indonesian Fashion Local Products. *Jurnal Manajemen Dan USahawan Indonesia*, 43 no 2, 1–15.
<http://www.jke.feb.ui.ac.id/index.php/jmui/article/viewFile/12786/67546810>
- Nuseir, M. T., Aljumah, A. I., & El-Refae, G. A. (2022). Digital marketing and public relations: A way to promote public relations value. *International Journal of Data and Network Science*, 6(4), 1331–1340. <https://doi.org/10.5267/j.ijdns.2022.6.002>
- Oncioiu, I., Căpușeanu, S., Topor, D. I., Tamaș, A. S., Solomon, A. G., & Dănescu, T. (2021). Fundamental power of social media interactions for building a brand and customer relations. *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, 16(5), 1702–1717. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jtaer16050096>
- Parmelee, S. D., & Greer, C. F. (2023). Corporate responses to the Covid-19 pandemic by Fortune 500 companies. *Public Relations Review*, 49(1), 102285. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2022.102285>
- Pertusa-Ortega, E. M., López-Gamero, M. D., Pereira-Moliner, J., Tarí, J.-J., & Molina-Azorín, J. F. (2018). Antecedents of Environmental Management: The Influence of Organizational Design and Its Mediating Role Between Quality Management and Environmental Management. *Organization & Environment*, 31(4), 425–443. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086026617718426>
- Presutti, M., Boari, C., & Molina-Morales, F. X. (2021). I need you, but do I love you? Strong ties and innovation in supplier–customer relations. *European Management Journal*, 39(6), 790–801. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2021.01.009>
- Purnamawati, I. G. A., & Hatane, S. E. (2024). Collaborative Governance in Strengthening Dimensions of Competitive Advantage of Sustainable Ecotourism Villages. *International Review of Management and Marketing*, 14(4), 180–190. <https://doi.org/10.32479/irmm.16270>
- Putzer, P., & Posza, A. (2024). Transition from CSR to ESG in Tourism - A Bibliometric Analysis. *Organizacija*, 57(3), 249–259. <https://doi.org/10.2478/orga-2024-0018>
- Saraih, E. F., Wong, S. L., Asimiran, S., & Khambari, M. N. M. (2021). Understanding digital public relations practices among exemplar school principals in Malaysian schools. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 29(2), 1273–1291. <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.29.2.28>
- Sardjono, W., Izrullah, M. N. F., Selviyanti, E., Mukhlis, M., & Putra, G. R. (2021). Assessment of the implementation of customer relationship management systems to support the competitive advantage of the company. *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, 747(1). <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/747/1/012114>
- Sezgin, M., & Cesur, A. B. (2019). Website usage in digital public relations - An analysis of it companies in Turkey. *International Journal of EBusiness and EGovernment Studies*, 11(2), 134–149. <https://doi.org/10.34111/ijebe.20191124>
- Sinansari, P., Salsabila, S. H., Hanoum, S., Lopatka, A., & Wlodarski, W. (2023). Identify Customer Element Through Empathy Map and User Persona. *Procedia Computer Science*, 225, 4148–4156. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2023.10.411>

- Soltani, Z., Zareie, B., Milani, F. S., & Navimipour, N. J. (2018). The impact of the customer relationship management on the organization performance. *Journal of High Technology Management Research*, 29(2), 237–246. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hitech.2018.10.001>
- Syahlina, M., & Nasib. (2019). Pengukuran Kepuasan Pengguna Kereta Api Indonesia (Persero) Medan Melalui Fasilitas Dan Pelayanan. *Abdi Ilmu*, 12(2), 51–57.
- Valero-Gil, J., Rivera-Torres, P., & Garcés-Ayerbe, C. (2017). How Is Environmental Proactivity Accomplished? Drivers and Barriers in Firms' Pro-Environmental Change Process. *Sustainability*, 9(8), 1327. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su9081327>
- Wegner, D., Foguesatto, C. R., & Zuliani, A. L. (2023). Firm performance in uncertain times: the importance of networking capabilities. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 30(2), 369–389. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSBED-03-2022-0135>
- Wolf, K., & Archer, C. (2018). Public relations at the crossroads: The need to reclaim core public relations competencies in digital communication. *Journal of Communication Management*, 22(4), 494–509. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-08-2018-0080>
- Yati, R. (2021, August 16). KAI Berhasil Vaksinasi 36.226 Orang di 24 Stasiun. *Bisnis.Com*, 1–3. <https://ekonomi.bisnis.com/read/20210816/98/1430489/kai-berhasil-vaksinasi-36226-orang-di-24-stasiun>.
- Zeng, Z. (2022). Discussion on B2B international marketing strategy based on customer relationship theory. *2022 International Conference on Artificial Intelligence in Everything (AIE)*, 384–388. <https://doi.org/10.1109/AIE57029.2022.00080>
- Zhou, P., Xie, Y., Liang, C., Zhu, J., & Zhao, S. (2024). The effect of prosocial behavior and its intensity on doctors' performance in an online health community. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 11(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03420-8>