The Position and Function of Strategic Public Relations in Iran's Banking System: A Case Study of Two Banks

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Abstract

As an institution fundamentally dependent on public trust, the banking system requires professional, responsive, and strategic public relations in order to preserve social legitimacy, manage public perception, and maintain effective interaction with stakeholders. Despite the emphasis of theoretical and empirical literature on the central role of strategic public relations, evidence indicates that public relations in many Iranian banks—particularly in terms of structural position and organizational role—remain confined within traditional, executive-oriented, and announcement-centered frameworks. Differences in ownership structure and governance models between state-owned and private banks provide an appropriate context for the comparative analysis of the position and performance of public relations. The purpose of this study is to explain the position and function of strategic public relations in Iran's banking system, with a focus on comparing the structure, professional independence, and performance of public relations in state-owned and private banks. This study demonstrates how power structure, decision-making centralization, level of professional autonomy, and the quality of human capital influence the capacity of public relations to perform a strategic role. The research was conducted using a qualitative–analytical approach based on documentary analysis, a systematic review of domestic and international literature, and the analysis of expert perspectives and the lived experiences of banking public relations practitioners. Its theoretical framework is grounded in the theory of two-way symmetrical public relations, concepts of organizational legitimacy, and power structure analysis. The findings indicate that public relations in state-owned banks, due to bureaucracy and limited professional autonomy, predominantly performs a passive and non-strategic role, whereas private banks possess greater flexibility in adopting modern and digital approaches. Through an interdisciplinary approach integrating communication studies and cultural studies, this research analyzes banking public relations as a sphere for the reproduction of meaning, power, and trust within the context of organizational culture.

Keywords: *Asymmetrical public relations, strategic public relations, public relations in Iran's banking system, applied public relations model*

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1. Introduction

In contemporary organizations, public relations has evolved from a merely operational and information-dissemination unit into a strategic institution responsible for managing communication, organizational legitimacy, stakeholder engagement, and reputation governance. This transformation has become particularly significant in service-oriented sectors such as banking, where public trust, transparency, and continuous communication with stakeholders constitute the foundations of organizational sustainability and competitiveness [1, 2]. In the modern banking environment, public relations is no longer limited to media representation or dissemination of institutional news; rather, it functions as an integrated managerial mechanism for strategic communication, crisis management, customer engagement, social responsibility, and digital interaction with audiences [3, 4]. Consequently, the effectiveness of banking organizations increasingly depends on the ability of public relations departments to establish sustainable, transparent, and interactive communication systems.

The expansion of communication technologies and the digital transformation of organizations have fundamentally altered the conceptual and operational foundations of public relations. The emergence of digital media, social platforms, artificial intelligence, data analytics, and smart communication systems has generated new expectations regarding organizational responsiveness, transparency, and stakeholder participation [5, 6]. Public relations in the digital era is expected to move beyond one-way communication models and toward data-driven, participatory, and interactive communication structures capable of responding rapidly to environmental changes and stakeholder demands [7, 8]. This transformation has also reshaped the structure of organizational communication, requiring institutions to redesign traditional communication mechanisms in accordance with technological and social developments.

Within this evolving environment, strategic public relations has become increasingly associated with organizational strategy formulation and implementation. Strategic public relations involves the alignment of communication policies with organizational objectives, stakeholder expectations, and environmental dynamics [2]. Andersson conceptualized public relations strategizing as a dynamic organizational process through which communication professionals actively participate in shaping organizational decision-making and strategic adaptation [1]. Similarly, Page and Capizzo emphasized that modern organizations operate within permeable stakeholder environments in which communication legitimacy depends on continuous negotiation among multiple organizational identities and stakeholder groups [9]. These perspectives indicate that public relations is no longer peripheral to organizational governance but constitutes a core component of strategic management.

In the banking industry, the strategic role of public relations is intensified due to the sensitivity of financial operations and the dependence of banks on public confidence. Banking institutions continuously interact with diverse stakeholder groups, including customers, investors, governmental agencies, media organizations, and broader society. Any disruption in trust or organizational reputation may directly affect customer retention, financial stability, and institutional legitimacy [10, 11]. Therefore, public relations departments in banks are expected to manage organizational narratives, coordinate communication during crises, and support strategic positioning within competitive financial markets. The growing complexity of banking ecosystems has also increased the necessity for integrated communication management and professional stakeholder engagement.

Research on banking communication demonstrates that digital public relations strategies significantly influence customer trust, brand awareness, and organizational resilience. Medina et al. showed that digital public relations practices in banking institutions played a substantial role in maintaining and increasing customer engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic through digital interaction and online communication systems [12]. Likewise, Mounesan et al. emphasized that effective presence in social media environments enhances the communication effectiveness of banking public relations and strengthens stakeholder interaction [13]. These findings suggest that contemporary banking public relations requires continuous adaptation to digital communication environments and emerging stakeholder expectations.

The emergence of artificial intelligence has further accelerated the transformation of public relations theory and practice. Artificial intelligence technologies provide new opportunities for data analysis, automated communication, predictive analytics, audience segmentation, and personalized content production [14, 15]. Yue et al. argued that artificial intelligence integration within public relations has significantly enhanced organizational communication efficiency and strategic responsiveness [6]. Similarly, Bowen highlighted that artificial intelligence simultaneously creates opportunities and ethical challenges for public relations practitioners, requiring the establishment of ethical standards and governance mechanisms [16]. In the Iranian banking context, Hosseini et al. demonstrated that artificial intelligence is increasingly influencing the structure and operational processes of banking public relations by enabling more intelligent communication systems and data-driven decision-making [17]. The convergence of artificial intelligence and public relations therefore represents a major paradigm shift in organizational communication management.

Despite these advancements, public relations in many organizations—particularly in developing contexts—continues to face structural, managerial, and professional limitations. Several studies have shown that public relations units frequently remain subordinate to bureaucratic structures and lack strategic autonomy within organizational hierarchies [18, 19]. In many cases, public relations is still perceived primarily as an executive or ceremonial function rather than a strategic communication institution. This issue becomes more critical within governmental and semi-governmental organizations where centralized decision-making structures often constrain communication flexibility and stakeholder participation.

The Iranian banking system presents a particularly important context for examining the role and function of strategic public relations. Iranian banks operate within a highly dynamic environment characterized by economic uncertainty, regulatory pressures, technological transformation, and changing public expectations. Simultaneously, the expansion of digital banking services and social media platforms has intensified public scrutiny of banking institutions and increased the importance of organizational transparency and communication responsiveness [20, 21]. Consequently, public relations departments are increasingly required to manage complex communication ecosystems while balancing institutional objectives and stakeholder expectations.

The literature on public relations in Iran highlights several challenges related to organizational structure, professional competencies, digital transformation, and communication effectiveness. Rastin et al. emphasized that the educational and professional infrastructure of public relations in Iran requires substantial modernization in order to respond effectively to contemporary technological and strategic demands [22]. Similarly, Dashtizad reported that many public relations managers in governmental organizations continue to face limitations associated with inadequate professional authority, insufficient strategic integration, and weak organizational recognition [18]. These structural limitations often reduce the capacity of public relations departments to perform strategic functions effectively.

Furthermore, the relationship between public relations and public opinion management has become increasingly important in banking organizations. Public perception directly influences customer loyalty, organizational legitimacy, and institutional reputation. Akbarivand et al. demonstrated that effective public opinion management in banking organizations depends on communication transparency, audience engagement, and trust-building strategies [10]. Likewise, Nezafat Darab emphasized that public relations contributes significantly to shaping and expanding public opinion through systematic communication and stakeholder interaction [23]. These findings underscore the strategic importance of public relations in maintaining social legitimacy within financial institutions.

Another critical dimension of contemporary public relations involves crisis communication and organizational resilience. In highly sensitive sectors such as banking, communication failures during crises may generate widespread reputational and financial consequences. Hashemloo and Hemmati emphasized that public relations plays a central role in organizational crisis management through rapid communication, stakeholder reassurance, and coordinated media interaction [24]. The increasing frequency of digital crises, misinformation, and reputational threats has further strengthened the need for crisis-ready communication systems within banking institutions.

At the same time, organizational transformation and sustainability agendas have expanded the responsibilities of public relations departments. Shaya and Ahmad argued that public relations contributes significantly to organizational transformation processes by facilitating communication alignment, stakeholder adaptation, and institutional legitimacy during periods of change [25]. Geysi also emphasized that public relations increasingly functions as a mechanism for promoting sustainability and social responsibility within organizations [26]. Similarly, Yue et al. highlighted the role of public relations in advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and organizational advocacy within modern institutions [27]. These developments indicate that public relations has become deeply integrated with broader organizational governance and sustainability strategies.

The theoretical foundations of public relations also demonstrate the transition from traditional information dissemination models toward interactive and participatory communication paradigms. Contemporary theories emphasize dialogue, stakeholder engagement, and organizational permeability rather than unilateral communication control [5, 9]. This shift is particularly relevant for banking institutions because stakeholder trust increasingly depends on transparency, responsiveness, and participatory communication processes. Public relations departments are therefore expected to function not only as organizational spokespersons but also as facilitators of mutual understanding and social legitimacy.

Digital inclusivity and communication accessibility have also emerged as critical concerns in modern public relations research. Hidayat et al. argued that public relations contributes to reducing digital inequalities and enhancing communication accessibility through inclusive digital engagement strategies [28]. In banking systems, this issue is especially important because diverse customer groups possess different levels of digital literacy and communication accessibility. Consequently, strategic public relations must simultaneously address technological innovation and communication inclusivity.

The structural dimension of public relations within organizations further affects communication effectiveness and strategic influence. Organizational structure determines the degree of authority, flexibility, and strategic integration available to communication departments [29]. Public relations units positioned close to organizational leadership generally possess greater capacity for strategic participation and crisis responsiveness. Conversely, highly centralized and bureaucratic structures often limit communication agility and stakeholder engagement. This issue is particularly significant in comparative analyses of state-owned and private banks, where differences in governance systems may produce substantial variations in public relations autonomy and performance.

Iranian scholars have also emphasized the growing necessity of integrating social media and smart communication systems into organizational public relations. Azizian et al. demonstrated that social media platforms significantly enhance communication effectiveness and stakeholder engagement in service organizations [30]. Naseri conceptualized “smart public relations” as a technologically integrated communication system capable of utilizing digital data, artificial intelligence, and interactive platforms for strategic communication management [20]. Similarly, Nirouei described the relationship between artificial intelligence and public relations as an emerging communication paradigm reshaping professional practices and organizational interactions [31]. These developments indicate that future-oriented public relations increasingly depends on technological adaptation and digital communication capabilities.

Moreover, public relations contributes to broader processes of social development and organizational legitimacy. Zamani conceptualized public relations as an instrument of social development through communication participation and public engagement [32]. In another study, Zamani highlighted the epistemological role of public relations in shaping organizational knowledge and social understanding [33]. These perspectives reinforce the idea that public relations extends beyond organizational publicity and functions as a socio-cultural institution embedded within broader systems of communication and legitimacy.

Although the literature has extensively discussed strategic communication, digital transformation, artificial intelligence, and stakeholder engagement, comparative studies examining the structural and functional differences between public relations in state-owned and private banks within Iran remain limited. Existing studies have often focused either on technological aspects of communication or on general organizational communication challenges without providing an integrated analysis of structural autonomy, strategic participation, digital adaptation, and stakeholder-oriented performance in the banking sector [34, 35]. Additionally, few studies have combined theoretical frameworks of strategic public relations with empirical analysis of banking communication structures in Iran.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to explain the position and function of strategic public relations in Iran’s banking system through a comparative analysis of public relations structures and performance in state-owned and private banks.

2. Methodology

The present study is applied in terms of purpose and qualitative in nature and methodology, employing an Integrative Qualitative Approach. The study was conducted with the aim of explaining the position and function of strategic public relations within Iran’s banking system and comparatively analyzing the performance of public relations in state-owned and private banks. The research design is comparative–analytical, and one state-owned bank and one private bank were purposively selected in order to compare differences in public relations structures and decision-making processes.

Data collection was conducted through several complementary sources:

1. Examination of upstream documents, regulations, organizational charts, and internal reports.
2. Semi-structured interviews with public relations managers, experts, and specialists across 31 provinces.
3. The researcher’s lived experience and field observations.

Table 1. General Characteristics of the Research Method

Component	Description
Type of Research	Applied
Research Approach	Qualitative
Research Method	Integrative – Comparative Study
Research Strategy	Comparative Case Study
Unit of Analysis	Bank Public Relations Department/Management
Theoretical Framework of Analysis	Grunig and Hunt Public Relations Model

Sampling was conducted using purposeful and theoretical sampling and continued until theoretical saturation was achieved.

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis and qualitative coding methods:

• **Open Coding:** Extraction of primary concepts from the data.

Open coding enables the researcher to analyze the data with an open and unbiased perspective without relying on existing theories, thereby facilitating the discovery of new concepts. This stage is particularly important when the researcher is in the preliminary process of identifying themes and semantic structures within the data.

• **Axial Coding:** Organizing related concepts into major categories.

At the axial coding stage, the researcher establishes connections between codes and primary concepts. The main objective of axial coding is the identification and organization of core and subsidiary categories present in the data. At this stage, similar or related codes are grouped into broader classifications and more general concepts, which are recognized as major categories. Axial coding assists the researcher in integrating the data and extracting meaningful and systematic patterns from it.

• **Selective Coding:** Explaining relationships among categories and developing the analytical model. Selective coding constitutes the third and final stage of grounded data analysis, during which the researcher identifies central categories and finalizes the theory. At this stage, the researcher attempts to integrate all previous codes and categories in order to construct a coherent theory. The primary objective of this phase is to provide a comprehensive and holistic representation of the phenomenon under investigation.

Table 2. Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Research Stage	Tool / Method
Document Review	Upstream documents, organizational charts, directives
Field Data Collection	Semi-structured interviews
Data Completion	Lived experience and field observation
Data Analysis Method	Qualitative coding (open, axial, selective)
Interpretive Framework	Grunig and Hunt theory and model

To evaluate the level of strategic orientation in public relations performance, the four models proposed by Grunig and Hunt were employed as the dominant theoretical framework.

3. Findings and Results

The first stage of the study, focusing on the analysis of upstream documents and the examination of the actual performance of public relations in the selected private and state-owned banks, indicates that both banks possess relatively transparent formal structures and codified policymaking in the field of public relations. However, their approaches and communication models demonstrate significant differences.

The public relations unit of the private bank possesses a strategic and internally organization-oriented nature. The missions of this unit are based on articulating macro-level organizational objectives, targeted information dissemination, and systematic interaction with internal and external stakeholders. Examination of the alignment between official documents and actual performance demonstrates that most activities are consistent with the declared missions and policies, and tools such as annual reports, internal publications, and the official website are regularly utilized. Nevertheless, weaknesses in feedback assessment, limitations in international interaction, and restricted public media coverage are among the major challenges faced by this bank. Based on Grunig and Hunt's four models, the public relations approach of the private bank combines one-way informational and publicity models with limited balanced two-way communication.

In contrast, the public relations unit of the state-owned bank adopts an external organization-oriented, media-centered, and socially oriented approach. The missions and objectives of this bank are primarily represented through media outlets, social networks, and news reports, with the principal focus placed on information transparency, accountability, social responsibility, and public trust. Examination of actual performance demonstrates that information dissemination policies have been implemented to a relative extent; however, the one-way nature of social media content, weaknesses in evaluating message effectiveness, and the lack of long-term planning constitute major limitations. Overall, both banks perceive public relations not merely as an information dissemination unit but also as an instrument for managing organizational communications. Shared strengths include transparency of missions, utilization of diverse media platforms, and efforts to engage stakeholders. Conversely, shared weaknesses include the absence of comprehensive feedback systems, limited evaluation of effectiveness, and restricted presence in international media. Strengthening a data-driven approach, expanding sustainable two-way interaction, and updating communication policies can significantly enhance the effectiveness of public relations in both banks.

Table 3. Analysis of Upstream Documents and Examination of the Actual Performance of Public Relations in the Private and State-Owned Banks

Analytical Dimension	Private Bank	State-Owned Bank
Dominant Public Relations Approach	Strategic, organization-oriented, formal	Media-centered, socially oriented, responsive
Main Missions	Explaining macro objectives, stakeholder interaction, professional information dissemination	Representing the bank’s mission, trust-building, social responsibility
Public Relations Objectives	Targeted information dissemination, alignment of communications with strategic goals	Information transparency, accountability, strengthening social capital
Media Policies	Controlled media diversity (publications, website, reports)	Active presence in media and social networks
Alignment Between Official Documents and Performance	High alignment, but weak feedback assessment	Relative alignment, with instability in two-way interaction
Structural Strengths	Mission transparency, strategic framework, organizational order	Extensive media communication, news transparency, audience accessibility
Key Weaknesses	Weak feedback mechanisms, limited international coverage	One-way content, lack of systematic effectiveness evaluation
Dominant Grunig and Hunt Model	One-way informational + publicity with some two-way elements	Asymmetrical two-way + one-way publicity
Ultimate Function of Public Relations	Strategic management tool for organizational communication	Tool for trust-building and social interaction

An expert panel was conducted with the participation of 15 senior managers and internal and external stakeholders in order to identify practical solutions for improving the performance of bank public relations. The balanced composition of panel members in terms of organizational position, educational background, professional experience, and perspectives enabled an in-depth analysis of challenges and opportunities. The primary objective was to achieve expert consensus regarding pathways for transformation and improvement in public relations performance based on the research findings and the practical experiences of experts.

Based on content analysis, six key themes were extracted:

1. Improving the internal performance of public relations: including intra-team coordination, strategic planning, utilization of digital tools, and data-driven decision-making.
2. Developing relationships with media: transitioning from one-way communication to professional, continuous, and multi-level interactions at both national and international levels, particularly during crises.
3. Enhancing transparency and information dissemination: employing simple, accurate, and timely messages, utilizing digital media, and establishing effective feedback systems.
4. Strengthening two-way interaction with stakeholders: through digital surveys, modern communication channels, and service improvement based on feedback.
5. Analyzing and evaluating public relations performance: emphasizing the importance of an accurate, data-driven, and continuous evaluation system for genuine performance improvement.
6. Increasing bank brand awareness: pursuing professional branding in parallel with the

development of human resource competencies and crisis management.

The findings indicate that bank public relations is currently in a transitional phase from an executive and information-dissemination unit toward a strategic, data-driven, interactive, and digital institution. Achieving the desired condition requires overcoming structural barriers, investing in emerging technologies, and strengthening crisis management capabilities. This expert consensus provides the foundation for developing practical recommendations and the final research model.

Table 4. Findings of the Expert Panel and the Improvement Pathway for Bank Public Relations

Key Dimension	Current Situation	Desired Situation	Main Challenges	Expert Consensus Solutions
Internal Public Relations Performance	Limited coordination, non-data-driven decision-making	Full coordination and professional project management	Bureaucracy, lack of analytical tools	Use of digital tools, KPIs, strategic planning
Media Relations	Predominantly one-way communication	Sustainable two-way interaction	Weakness in crisis management and international media relations	Media strategy, professional relationships, crisis team
Transparency and Information Dissemination	Fragmented and inconsistent communication	Transparent and timely communication	Complex messages, weak feedback systems	Simple content, digital media, feedback analysis
Stakeholder Interaction	Limited and inconsistent communication	Continuous and two-way interaction	Lack of modern communication channels	Online surveys, interactive platforms
Performance Analysis and Evaluation	Lack of accurate evaluation systems	Continuous and data-driven evaluation	Absence of indicators and reporting systems	Analytics systems, periodic reports
Technology and Digitalization	Limited use of technology	Extensive utilization of AI and automation	Lack of infrastructure and skills	CRM systems, artificial intelligence, automation
Bank Brand Awareness	Focus on traditional advertising	Digital and community-oriented branding	Weakness in targeted campaigns	Digital campaigns, influencers
Human Resources	Insufficient training and lack of expertise	Specialized and professional workforce	Skill deficiencies	Specialized training, recruitment of experts
Crisis Management	Limited preparedness	Full preparedness and rapid response	Absence of crisis planning	Scenario design and crisis teams

The research findings derived from the four principal stages—analysis of upstream documents, the researcher's lived experience, in-depth interviews, and the expert panel—were systematically integrated in order to extract a comprehensive model of the optimal structure and performance of bank public relations. The integration of data was conducted based on an inductive approach and theory-building logic, and overlapping and corroborative points among different sources were identified. As a result, four overarching themes emerged that explain the key dimensions of the strategic role of public relations:

1. **Transparency and Access to Information:** This theme constitutes the foundation of stakeholder trust and organizational legitimacy. Effective public relations extends beyond the mere dissemination of news and designs a multi-channel, data-driven, and coherent process for timely information dissemination, the development of transparent strategies, and continuous evaluation of feedback. During crises, message coordination and professional media communication strengthen the strategic role of public relations in reputation management and the reduction of environmental uncertainty.
2. **Two-Way Communication and Participation:** This theme reflects the transition of public relations from one-way information dissemination toward an interactive and participatory system. Continuous engagement with stakeholders, obtaining customer feedback, participation in decision-making, and alignment with organizational macro objectives are among the requirements of effective performance. The international and cultural dimension also highlights the necessity of considering multicultural environments and international media.
3. **Needs-Oriented Content:** This theme emphasizes the central role of producing targeted, attractive, and data-driven content in the success of public relations. Content personalization, development of media content, and production of educational and interactive content increase audience engagement and message effectiveness. Content data analysis facilitates the continuous refinement of

communication strategies and establishes a direct link between information transparency and stakeholder participation.

4. **Crisis Management and Responsiveness:** This theme explains the capacity of public relations to function effectively under emergency conditions. The existence of specialized crisis teams, clear protocols, rapid responsiveness, and the use of digital platforms are among the primary components of effective public relations. Active participation in resolving social crises and interaction with governmental institutions strengthen the social and responsible position of banks, making this theme complementary to the other overarching themes.

Overall, the integration of findings demonstrated that bank public relations must evolve from an executive and reactive unit into a strategic, data-driven, interactive, and crisis-ready institution. The proposed integrative model provides a coherent framework for enhancing the structure and performance of public relations based on transparency, participation, content intelligence, and preparedness for crises, and it may serve as the basis for designing the final research model in Chapter Five.

Table 5. Integrated Findings Related to the Optimal Structure and Performance of Bank Public Relations

Overarching Theme	Constituent Themes	Most Important Key Components (Summarized)	Confirming Sources
Transparency and Access to Information	Timely Information Dissemination	Timely publication of news, crisis communication, use of digital systems, continuous updates	Documents, lived experience, interviews, panel
	Development of Information Dissemination Strategy	Message alignment, transparent policies, strategy evaluation, digital tools	Documents, lived experience, interviews, panel
	Effective Media Communication	Professional relationships with journalists, media coverage analysis, media responsiveness	Documents, lived experience, interviews, panel
	Evaluation and Feedback	Feedback analysis, surveys, measurement of message effectiveness	Documents, lived experience, interviews, panel
Two-Way Communication and Participation	Stakeholder Communication	Continuous interaction, use of digital platforms, networking	Documents, lived experience, interviews, panel
	Customer Feedback Collection	Online surveys, CRM systems, complaint responsiveness	Documents, lived experience, interviews, panel
	Participation in Decision-Making	Goal alignment, data utilization, managerial collaboration	Documents, lived experience, interviews, panel
	International and Cultural Dimension	Global interaction, understanding cultural needs, international media	Documents, interviews, panel
Needs-Oriented Content	Content Personalization	Targeted content, storytelling, video and graphics	Documents, lived experience, interviews, panel
	Educational and Specialized Content	Webinars, specialized reports, academic collaboration	Documents, lived experience, interviews, panel
	Interactive Content	Surveys, competitions, social media interaction	Documents, lived experience, interviews, panel
	Content Data Analysis	Digital analytics tools, optimization of content strategy	Documents, lived experience, interviews, panel
Crisis Management and Responsiveness	Communication Crisis Management	Crisis teams, scenario planning, misinformation management	Documents, lived experience, interviews, panel
	Rapid Responsiveness	Immediate information dissemination, dedicated crisis channels	Documents, lived experience, interviews, panel
	Protocols and Platforms	Crisis guidelines, crisis communication platforms	Documents, lived experience, interviews, panel

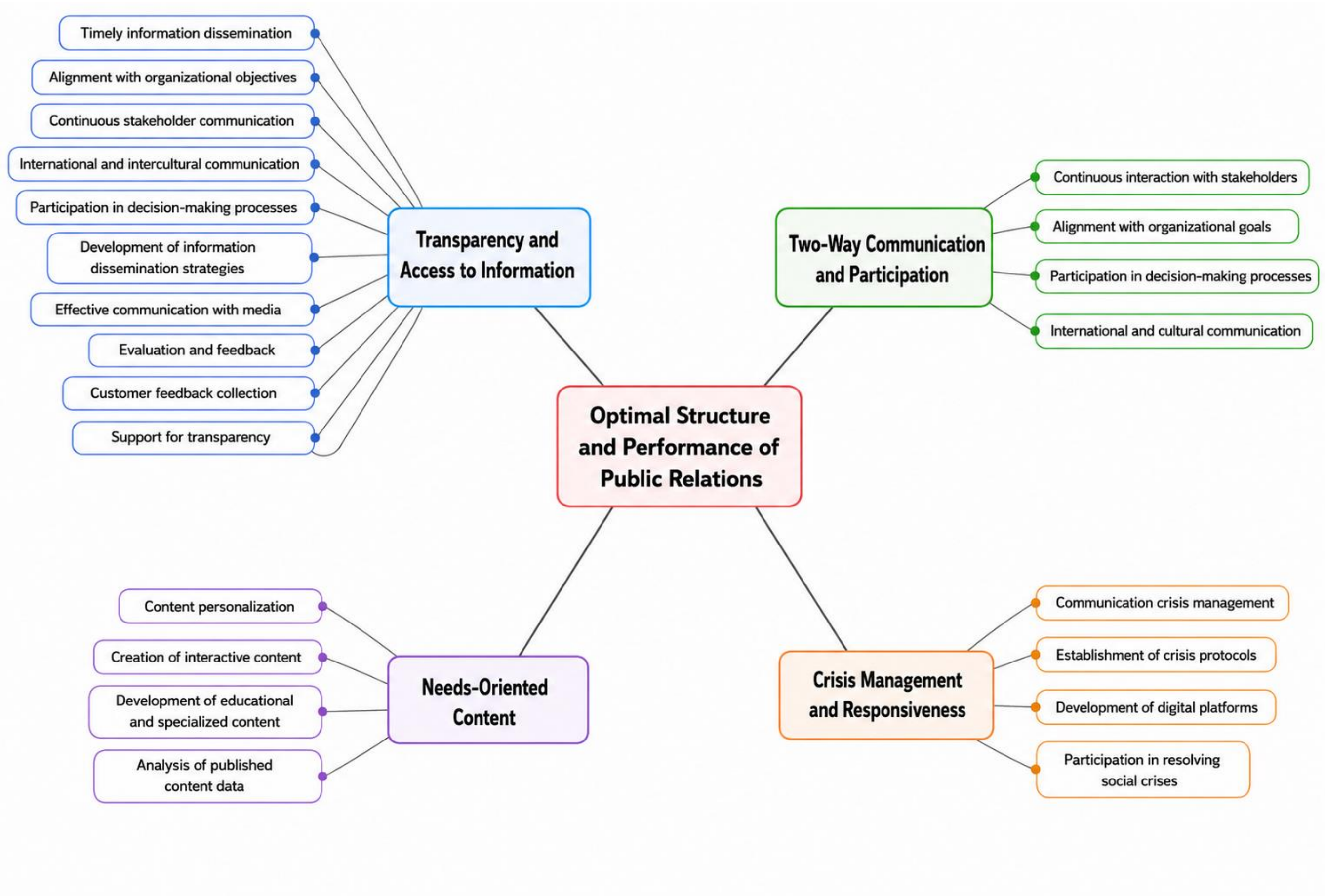

Figure 1. Integrative Model of Findings Related to the Optimal Structure and Performance of Public Relations Based on the Four Research Stages.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study demonstrated that public relations in Iran's banking system is undergoing a gradual transition from a traditional executive-oriented structure toward a strategic, data-driven, interactive, and digitally integrated communication institution. However, the extent and quality of this transformation differ significantly between state-owned and private banks. The results revealed that private banks possess relatively greater flexibility, strategic coherence, and organizational adaptability in implementing modern public relations approaches, whereas state-owned banks continue to operate within more bureaucratic, centralized, and media-oriented frameworks. These findings indicate that organizational structure, professional autonomy, and technological readiness substantially influence the strategic capacity of public relations within banking institutions.

One of the principal findings of the study was that public relations in private banks demonstrated stronger alignment between organizational communication policies and strategic objectives. This result reflects the increasing integration of communication management within organizational governance structures and supports the argument that strategic public relations contributes directly to organizational adaptability and institutional legitimacy [1, 2]. The higher degree of coordination observed in private banks may be explained by their comparatively decentralized decision-making structures and competitive orientation within the banking market. These characteristics enable communication units to participate more actively in strategic processes and organizational positioning. In contrast, the findings showed that state-owned banks are more constrained by bureaucratic procedures and centralized governance systems, which limit the responsiveness and strategic flexibility of public relations units. This finding aligns with the observations of Dashtizad regarding the structural limitations and restricted professional authority experienced by public relations managers in governmental organizations [18].

Another important finding concerned the dominant communication models employed by the banks. The results demonstrated that both state-owned and private banks continue to rely partially on one-way informational and publicity-oriented communication patterns, although private banks have increasingly incorporated limited forms of two-way communication and stakeholder interaction. This finding is consistent with contemporary public relations theories emphasizing the transition from unilateral communication toward dialogic and participatory communication systems [5, 9]. Nevertheless, the persistence of one-way communication structures suggests that strategic public relations within the Iranian banking sector has not yet fully institutionalized participatory communication practices. This issue may stem from organizational cultures that continue to prioritize message control over stakeholder engagement.

The findings further indicated that transparency and access to information represent foundational dimensions of effective public relations in banking institutions. Both banks emphasized transparency, information dissemination, and communication responsiveness as major communication objectives. However, weaknesses in feedback evaluation, inconsistent stakeholder interaction, and limited assessment of communication effectiveness were observed. These findings support the arguments of Akbarivand et al., who emphasized that public trust and public opinion management in banking organizations depend substantially on communication transparency and stakeholder engagement [10]. Similarly, Nezafat Darab highlighted the role of public relations in shaping public opinion through systematic communication and transparency-oriented interaction [23]. The present findings therefore suggest that transparency alone is insufficient unless accompanied by institutionalized feedback systems and continuous stakeholder dialogue.

The study also revealed that digital transformation has become one of the most influential factors shaping contemporary public relations within the banking system. The expert panel findings demonstrated broad consensus regarding the necessity of utilizing digital platforms, artificial intelligence, CRM systems, and automated communication technologies. These results are highly consistent with recent literature emphasizing the growing integration of digital technologies and artificial intelligence into public relations practice [6, 14]. The findings particularly support the perspective of Naseri, who conceptualized smart public relations as an integrated communication system based on digital technologies and intelligent data management [20]. Moreover, the emphasis on digital communication and artificial intelligence within the banking context aligns with the findings of Hosseini et al., who argued that artificial intelligence significantly affects the structure and operational processes of banking public relations in Iran [17].

The role of social media and digital stakeholder engagement also emerged as a major theme within the findings. The expert panel highlighted the necessity of moving from fragmented and one-way communication toward continuous, interactive, and sustainable engagement through digital platforms. These findings correspond closely with previous studies emphasizing the effectiveness of social media and digital communication in enhancing public relations performance within service organizations [13, 30]. Likewise, Yunandika and Bangun argued that storytelling strategies and digital communication significantly contribute to organizational reputation development in the digital era [8]. The present findings therefore reinforce the argument that modern banking public relations increasingly depends on digital interactivity and audience-centered communication strategies.

The findings related to media relations further demonstrated important differences between state-owned and private banks. State-owned banks were found to possess broader media visibility and stronger presence within public and governmental communication channels; however, their communication remained predominantly reactive and media-centered rather than strategically interactive. Conversely, private banks displayed stronger internal strategic coherence but weaker international communication and media influence. These findings reflect the structural and operational distinctions between governmental and market-oriented organizations and are consistent with organizational communication theories emphasizing the influence of organizational structure on communication behavior [29]. In this regard, the findings suggest that effective strategic public relations requires not only media visibility but also institutional flexibility and strategic integration.

Another significant finding concerned the growing importance of crisis management within banking public relations. The expert panel emphasized the necessity of establishing crisis teams, developing crisis protocols, and utilizing digital platforms for rapid response during emergencies. These findings support the arguments of Hashemloo and Hemmati, who identified public relations as a central component of organizational crisis management through rapid communication, stakeholder reassurance, and media coordination [24]. The increasing complexity of digital communication environments and the rapid spread of misinformation have intensified the strategic importance of crisis communication in financial institutions. Therefore, banking public relations can no longer function effectively without institutional preparedness for communication crises.

The study additionally demonstrated that content management and content personalization constitute essential dimensions of effective strategic public relations. The integrated findings highlighted the importance of targeted content production, educational communication, storytelling strategies, and content analytics. These results align with the findings of Al Hadeed et al., who emphasized the mediating role of new media platforms in public relations content management [36]. Furthermore, the findings correspond with the work of Yunandika and Bangun regarding the strategic role of storytelling in developing organizational reputation [8]. The emphasis on content analysis and audience-oriented communication also reflects the broader transformation of public relations into a data-driven and analytical discipline.

The findings related to stakeholder participation demonstrated that public relations in banking institutions increasingly functions as a mechanism for social interaction and organizational legitimacy rather than merely an information dissemination unit. Continuous stakeholder engagement, customer feedback collection, and participation in organizational decision-making were identified as essential dimensions of effective communication management. These findings strongly support the stakeholder-oriented perspective proposed by Page and Capizzo, who argued that contemporary organizations operate within permeable and multi-stakeholder environments requiring continuous communication negotiation [9]. Moreover, the findings align with the broader conceptualization of public relations as a mechanism for social participation and legitimacy development [32, 33].

The results also demonstrated that human resource development and professional competencies remain critical challenges within banking public relations. The expert panel emphasized deficiencies in professional training, digital competencies, and analytical capabilities. These findings correspond with the conclusions of Rastin et al., who highlighted weaknesses within the educational infrastructure of public relations in Iran and emphasized the necessity of updating professional competencies in accordance with technological developments [22]. Likewise, Kheiri argued that the organizational position and effectiveness of public relations depend substantially on professional expertise and institutional recognition [19]. Therefore, the strategic transformation of banking public relations requires simultaneous structural and professional development.

Another important aspect of the findings was the increasing integration of public relations with broader organizational transformation and sustainability agendas. The expert panel emphasized that banking public relations should move beyond traditional promotional functions toward strategic participation in organizational adaptation, brand development, and social responsibility. These findings support the arguments of Shaya and Ahmad, who identified public relations as a facilitator of organizational transformation processes [25]. Similarly, Geysi emphasized the growing role of public relations in sustainability-oriented organizational communication [26]. The findings also align with the perspective of Yue et al. regarding the strategic role of public relations in promoting organizational diversity, inclusion, and institutional advocacy [27].

Overall, the findings indicate that public relations in Iran's banking system remains positioned between traditional bureaucratic communication structures and emerging strategic communication paradigms. While both state-owned and private banks have increasingly recognized the importance of communication management, significant differences remain in terms of organizational flexibility, strategic integration, digital readiness, and stakeholder orientation. The integrated model derived from the study suggests that effective banking public relations requires a combination of transparency, data-driven communication, digital integration, crisis preparedness, stakeholder participation, and professional autonomy. In this regard, strategic public relations should be understood not merely as a communication support unit but as an institutional mechanism for organizational legitimacy, social trust, and strategic governance within the banking sector.

One of the limitations of the present study was the restricted access to confidential organizational information and internal communication policies within certain banking institutions, particularly state-owned banks. In addition, because the study employed a qualitative and comparative approach, the findings are context-dependent and may not be fully generalizable to all banking institutions or other organizational sectors. Another limitation involved differences in organizational transparency and cooperation during interviews, which may have influenced the depth of data obtained from some participants.

Future research can expand the present study by employing mixed-method or quantitative approaches to examine the relationship between strategic public relations and organizational performance indicators in banking institutions. Comparative studies involving a larger number of private and governmental banks, as well as cross-national comparative analyses, may provide broader insights into the influence of organizational structure and governance systems on communication effectiveness. Future studies may also investigate the impact of artificial intelligence, digital transformation, and social media analytics on stakeholder trust, customer loyalty, and crisis management within banking public relations.

From a practical perspective, banking institutions should strengthen the strategic position of public relations within organizational decision-making structures and reduce excessive bureaucratic limitations that constrain communication flexibility. Investment in digital communication infrastructure, artificial intelligence systems, social media analytics, and professional crisis management mechanisms is essential for enhancing communication effectiveness. Furthermore, banks should prioritize the professional development of public relations personnel through specialized training in digital communication, strategic management, stakeholder engagement, and crisis communication in order to establish more responsive, transparent, and stakeholder-oriented communication systems.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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