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Strategic Communication in Digital Philanthropy: Preventing Donation-Based Fraud Through WhatsApp Communication

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital philanthropy has transformed fundraising practices by enabling nonprofit organizations to mobilize donations through mobile messaging platforms. However, this shift has also increased the risk of donation-based fraud, particularly in closed and trust-based environments such as WhatsApp. This study examines how strategic communication is employed to prevent donation-based fraud in WhatsApp-based fundraising activities. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation analysis at the At-Taufiq Jatikramat Foundation, a socio-religious philanthropic organization actively engaged in digital fundraising. The findings reveal that fraud prevention is achieved through an integrated communication cycle consisting of communication research, planning, implementation, evaluation, and reporting. Transparency, consistency, and accountability emerge as central strategic frames that help donors recognize legitimate donation messages and reduce vulnerability to fraudulent appeals. WhatsApp communication is found to be highly persuasive due to its interpersonal affordances, yet simultaneously prone to misuse by fraud actors exploiting emotional proximity and trust. The study demonstrates that strategic communication functions not merely as a promotional tool, but as a preventive governance mechanism that stabilizes donor trust and sustains organizational legitimacy. This research contributes to the literature on strategic communication and digital philanthropy by highlighting the importance of patterned communication practices in anticipating fraud risks within closed messaging platforms.

Keywords: Communication Strategy, Digital Philanthropy, Donation-Based Fraud, Trust, WhatsApp

INTRODUCTION

Digital philanthropy has become a defining feature of contemporary charitable practices as nonprofit organizations increasingly rely on digital platforms to mobilize resources, engage donors, and sustain social impact at scale (Banerjee, 2021). The integration of digital technologies into philanthropic activities has fundamentally reshaped how charitable giving is organized, communicated, and experienced. Donation processes that once depended on physical presence, face-to-face interaction, and local trust networks are now mediated through screens, platforms, and digital interfaces. Advances in communication technology have enabled fundraising activities to transcend geographical boundaries, allowing donations to be collected rapidly through social media and mobile messaging applications (Albanna et al., 2022). These developments have increased the speed, efficiency, and reach of philanthropic campaigns, enabling organizations to respond quickly to emergencies and mobilize support from dispersed audiences.

However, while digitalization has expanded access and efficiency, it has simultaneously transformed the risk landscape of philanthropic communication. The same affordances that facilitate rapid donation flows also amplify exposure to donation-based fraud, particularly in environments where information circulates quickly and verification practices are limited (Lawson-Body et al., 2023). As fundraising increasingly occurs in digital spaces, the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate appeals become less visible, creating new vulnerabilities for both donors and organizations.

In digital environments, trust functions as the primary currency that enables donors to commit financial resources without direct physical verification of beneficiaries or organizations (Kasri & Indriani, 2021). Unlike traditional face-to-face fundraising, where trust can be built through interpersonal cues and institutional presence, online donation relies heavily on mediated signals. These include message credibility, transparency cues, consistency of communication, and perceived organizational legitimacy (Maity et al., 2020). Donors must interpret these signals quickly, often based on limited information, making communication design a central determinant of donation behavior. Recent studies indicate that donors' willingness to give online is strongly influenced by perceived trustworthiness and clarity of communication, positioning strategic communication as a core governance mechanism rather than a supplementary promotional tool (Chen et al., 2021; Zaborek et al., 2024).

The proliferation of social media platforms has further intensified this dynamic by positioning digital channels as the primary interface between nonprofit organizations and donors (Gartner et al., 2021). Within this ecosystem, mobile instant messaging services such as WhatsApp occupy a distinctive position. Unlike open social media platforms, WhatsApp is characterized by interpersonal affordances, closed-group structures, and high levels of perceived intimacy (Corten et al., 2025). Messages circulated through WhatsApp are often interpreted as personal and trustworthy, particularly when they originate from known contacts, family networks, or community groups. This perceived intimacy increases persuasive effectiveness, but it also heightens susceptibility to manipulation (Wu et al., 2023).

This dual character makes WhatsApp a critical site for donation-based fraud. Fraud actors frequently exploit emotional appeals,

urgency cues, and impersonation tactics to mimic legitimate charitable organizations and circulate deceptive donation requests (Acharya et al., 2025). These messages often invoke humanitarian crises, religious obligations, or social solidarity, encouraging rapid action and discouraging critical evaluation. Research on online donation fraud demonstrates that such schemes are particularly effective in environments where verification practices are weak and communication flows are rapid and repetitive (Intal et al., 2024). The closed and trust-based nature of WhatsApp groups can accelerate the spread of fraudulent messages, as users are more likely to forward requests without scrutiny. As a result, fraud not only causes direct financial loss but also erodes collective trust, undermining the long-term sustainability of digital philanthropy ecosystems (Cordery et al., 2023).

Recent scholarship emphasizes that fraud prevention in digital fundraising cannot rely solely on technical safeguards or post hoc clarification. Instead, prevention must be embedded within strategic communication practices that proactively shape donor perceptions and behaviors (Wymer & Čačija, 2023). In nonprofit contexts, cybersecurity studies show that donors interpret security and legitimacy through communicative cues rather than through technical indicators alone. These cues include consistency across official channels, confirmation messages following donations, transparency regarding fund allocation, and responsiveness to donor inquiries (Lawson-Body et al., 2023). Such findings suggest that anti-fraud effectiveness depends heavily on how organizations design and manage communication processes, rather than on platform infrastructure alone (Albanna et al., 2022).

From a strategic communication perspective, this condition resonates with classical persuasion theories that emphasize the direct influence of mediated messages on audience attitudes and actions. Although early models such as the Hypodermic Needle Theory have been widely critiqued, recent research suggests that in closed and trust-based digital environments, persuasive messages can still exert strong behavioral effects when delivered through credible and emotionally framed channels (Mubarok, 2022; Wu et al., 2023). In the context of WhatsApp-based fundraising, this persuasive capacity becomes a double-edged sword. On one hand, it enables rapid mobilization of legitimate donations. On the other hand, it provides fertile ground for fraudulent actors who strategically exploit emotional resonance and perceived credibility.

Organizational communication studies further highlight the importance of patterned and consistent communication in guiding collective behavior and meaning-making in digital contexts (Sidharta, 2021). Regular reporting, visual documentation of activities, and standardized messaging routines function as stabilizing mechanisms that reinforce legitimacy and reduce uncertainty among donors (Napiórkowska et al., 2025). These practices help donors differentiate between authentic and deceptive appeals by establishing recognizable communication patterns. Conversely, fragmented, irregular, or inconsistent communication increases ambiguity, making donors more vulnerable to deceptive messages that exploit information gaps and uncertainty (Zhu & Zaccour, 2025).

Despite the growing body of research on digital philanthropy, trust, and online donation behavior, empirical studies focusing specifically on strategic communication for fraud prevention on mobile messaging platforms remain limited. Much of the existing literature emphasizes open social media platforms or crowdfunding websites, while closed messaging environments such as WhatsApp

remain underexplored (Corten et al., 2025). Moreover, although donor trust is widely examined as an outcome variable, fewer studies analyze how communication strategies are intentionally designed and implemented by philanthropic organizations to anticipate and mitigate fraud risks in everyday practice (Jong & Ganzaroli, 2024).

Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining strategic communication practices in digital philanthropy with a specific focus on preventing donation-based fraud through WhatsApp communication. By analyzing how communication research, message planning, implementation, evaluation, and reporting are integrated into routine fundraising activities, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how nonprofit organizations can safeguard trust and legitimacy in increasingly complex digital environments. In doing so, it positions strategic communication not merely as a tool for persuasion, but as a critical infrastructure for governance, risk management, and sustainability in digital philanthropy.

RESEARCH METHODS

A. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a descriptive interpretive approach to examine strategic communication practices in digital philanthropy, specifically in preventing donation-based fraud through WhatsApp communication. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the phenomenon under investigation involves meaning-making processes, communication patterns, organizational practices, and perceptions of trust that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone. Qualitative inquiry enables an in-depth exploration of how communication strategies are conceptualized, implemented, and interpreted within their natural organizational and social contexts.

Rather than testing hypotheses, this study aims to describe, interpret, and contextualize communication strategies as they are enacted in everyday fundraising activities. The descriptive orientation allows the study to map strategic communication stages research, planning, implementation, evaluation, and reporting while the interpretive dimension facilitates analysis of how these strategies function as mechanisms of trust-building and fraud prevention in digital environments.

B. Research Setting and Context

The research was conducted at At-Taufiq Jatikramat Foundation, a socio-religious philanthropic organization located in Bekasi, Indonesia. The foundation was purposively selected because it actively utilizes WhatsApp as a primary fundraising and communication platform, making it a relevant case for examining digital philanthropy in closed messaging environments. Data collection took place over a three-month period, allowing sufficient time to observe communication practices, conduct interviews, and collect documentation related to donation campaigns and accountability reporting.

The organizational context is characterized by regular digital fundraising activities, the dissemination of donation appeals via WhatsApp broadcasts and groups, and routine post-donation reporting to donors and community members. This setting provides a rich empirical context for analyzing how strategic communication operates in response to increasing risks of donation-based fraud.

C. Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this study consists of four interrelated elements:

1. Strategic communication practices employed by the foundation in digital fundraising activities.
2. Donation-related messages disseminated through WhatsApp, including donation appeals, verification messages, and accountability reports.
3. Fraud prevention mechanisms, particularly communicative actions aimed at clarifying legitimacy and reducing donor vulnerability.
4. Donor and stakeholder responses to the foundation's communication practices.

Defining these units of analysis ensures analytical focus and alignment between research objectives, data collection, and interpretation. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique that enables the deliberate selection of participants who possess relevant knowledge, experience, and direct involvement in the phenomenon being studied. The primary informants included internal organizational actors such as:

1. The foundation chairperson, responsible for organizational policy and fundraising direction.
2. The public relations or communication coordinator, responsible for message design and donor communication.
3. The digital media administrator, responsible for managing WhatsApp communication channels.

To complement organizational perspectives, supporting informants included donors, volunteers, and community members who had received donation messages or participated in digital fundraising activities. This combination of informants allows the study to capture perspectives from both message producers and message recipients, thereby enhancing analytical depth and credibility.

D. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using three primary qualitative techniques:

1. In-depth interviews
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants to explore their experiences, perceptions, and rationales behind communication strategies. An interview guide was used to maintain focus on core themes communication planning, trust-building, fraud awareness, and platform use while allowing flexibility for informants to elaborate on emergent issues. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or online, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim.
2. Non-participant observation
The researcher conducted non-participant observation of digital communication practices, including WhatsApp donation broadcasts, group interactions, and reporting messages. Observation focused on message structure, frequency, tone, visual elements, and the presence of verification or anti-fraud cues. This technique enabled the researcher to examine communication practices as they naturally occur, without direct intervention.
3. Documentation analysis
Documentation analysis included organizational archives, screenshots of WhatsApp messages, donation posters, financial summaries, photographs of activity implementation,

and internal communication guidelines. These documents served to corroborate interview and observation data, as well as to provide concrete evidence of strategic communication practices.

Data analysis followed an interactive qualitative analysis model, consisting of three iterative stages:

1. Data reduction, involving the selection, coding, and condensation of relevant data from interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents.
2. Data display, in which findings were organized into thematic matrices and narrative descriptions corresponding to strategic communication stages.
3. Conclusion drawing and verification, where patterns, relationships, and meanings were interpreted and continuously verified against the data.

Coding was conducted thematically, guided by strategic communication concepts such as transparency, accountability, persuasion, verification, and trust. Theoretical sensitivity was maintained by relating empirical findings to digital philanthropy, trust, and persuasive communication literature. To ensure research rigor and credibility, this study applied several trustworthiness strategies:

1. Source triangulation, by comparing information from different informants.
2. Technique triangulation, by cross-validating interview data with observations and documentation.
3. Member checking, by clarifying key interpretations with selected informants.
4. Thick description, by providing detailed contextual accounts of communication practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Field findings show that the At-Taufiq Jatikramat Foundation has established a patterned communication practice in managing digital fundraising through WhatsApp. Rather than being formalized into a single written strategy document, communication activities are embedded in recurring routines that structure how donation messages are produced, disseminated, verified, and accounted for. These routines are not incidental; collectively, they function as a strategic communication system that anticipates fraud risk while simultaneously sustaining donor trust in a digital environment characterized by high vulnerability to impersonation and message manipulation.

Communication unfolds through a sequential and repetitive flow that begins with internal awareness of donor concerns, followed by message planning, dissemination, feedback monitoring, and post-donation reporting. This patterned flow reflects an adaptive communication process shaped by accumulated organizational experience and by the perceived risks associated with WhatsApp as a fundraising platform. Given the closed, interpersonal, and highly trusted nature of WhatsApp groups, the foundation recognizes that credibility must be continuously reinforced rather than assumed. Fraud prevention, therefore, is not addressed solely through explicit warning messages or disclaimers, but through the normalization of transparency and accountability cues across all stages of communication.

At the communication research stage, the foundation relies primarily on informal and practice-based mechanisms rather than formal audience research instruments. These mechanisms include

donor questions raised during chats, private messages sent to administrators, and feedback received after donation campaigns. Interviews with organizational actors reveal that recurring donor concerns consistently revolve around three issues: the authenticity of donation requests, the legitimacy of bank accounts used for fundraising, and the increasing circulation of fraudulent messages that exploit religious sentiment or humanitarian emergencies. These concerns are not treated as isolated complaints, but as signals that inform organizational awareness of shifting donor anxieties.

Although the organization does not conduct structured surveys or formal audience segmentation, this informal sensing plays a critical role in shaping communication sensitivity. Organizational actors become attuned to patterns in donor questions, particularly during peak fundraising periods such as religious holidays or emergency relief campaigns. During these moments, donor anxiety tends to intensify due to the simultaneous circulation of multiple donation appeals across WhatsApp networks. This heightened vulnerability prompts the foundation to adjust its communication practices, especially in terms of message clarity, repetition, and emphasis on official identity markers.

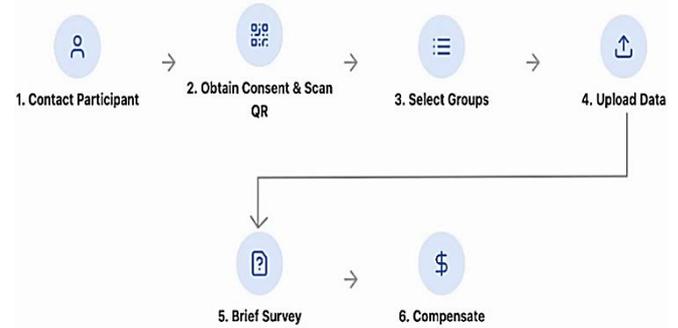


Figure 1. Flow of WhatsApp-Based Donation Communication

Message planning is therefore directly informed by these sensed concerns. Donation messages are carefully crafted to include consistent organizational identifiers, such as the foundation's official name, known administrators, and verified bank account details. Rather than relying on persuasive urgency alone, messages are designed to foreground legitimacy cues that reassure donors before prompting action. Organizational actors reported that repetition of these markers is intentional, as repeated exposure reinforces recognition and helps donors distinguish legitimate appeals from fraudulent ones circulating in parallel.

Once messages are disseminated, communication does not end. Feedback monitoring constitutes an ongoing stage in which administrators observe donor responses, questions, and hesitations within WhatsApp groups. This monitoring allows the organization to respond quickly to doubts, clarify ambiguities, and correct misunderstandings before they escalate into distrust. Importantly, responsiveness itself functions as a trust signal, demonstrating that the organization is present, accountable, and open to scrutiny.

Post-donation reporting represents a crucial final stage in the communication flow. After funds are collected, the foundation routinely shares updates on fund usage, beneficiary distribution, and activity documentation through text messages, images, or short reports. These updates serve not only as accountability mechanisms but also as retroactive verification cues. By closing the communication loop, the foundation reduces uncertainty and reinforces donor confidence in future campaigns.

Overall, the findings indicate that strategic communication at the At-Taufiq Jatikramat Foundation operates as a lived practice rather than a codified plan. Fraud prevention is embedded in everyday communication routines that prioritize transparency, consistency, and responsiveness. Through this patterned flow from informal research to reporting the organization manages to navigate the risks of WhatsApp-based fundraising while maintaining donor trust in an increasingly complex digital philanthropy landscape.

From a strategic communication perspective, this finding indicates that communication research functions as an experiential knowledge process. However, the absence of systematic documentation limits the organization's ability to institutionalize learning and detect emerging fraud patterns beyond immediate experience. Communication planning is centered on transparency as the primary framing device. Donation messages are deliberately designed to include consistent elements such as organizational identity, official bank accounts, program objectives, and contextual explanations of fundraising needs. Planning also considers timing, particularly during religious periods when donation activities intensify and fraud risk is perceived to increase.

Table 1. Communication Planning Elements and Fraud Prevention Functions

Planning Component	Description	Contribution to Fraud Prevention
Message content	Clear donation objectives and procedures	Reduces ambiguity
Identity markers	Foundation name, logo, official admin	Signals legitimacy
Channel control	Centralized WhatsApp admin	Limits impersonation
Timing strategy	Intensified messaging during peak periods	Anticipates fraud exposure

The dominance of transparency in planning reflects an understanding that donors evaluate legitimacy through repeated exposure to consistent information. Planning thus operates as a preventive mechanism that conditions donors to recognize authentic communication patterns and distinguish them from fraudulent imitations. Communication Implementation: Persuasion, Routine, and Platform Vulnerability Implementation takes place primarily through WhatsApp broadcast lists and groups managed by designated administrators. Donation messages typically combine short explanatory texts with photographs of beneficiaries or activities. Language use is factual and restrained, avoiding excessive urgency or sensational appeals that could resemble scam tactics. Despite this cautious tone, persuasive elements remain embedded through emotional proximity and visual evidence of social impact. Messages are generally disseminated in a one-way manner, with limited encouragement for public discussion or dialogic engagement.

Table 2. Characteristics of WhatsApp-Based Message Implementation

Aspect	Observed Practice	Strategic Implication
Message flow	One-way broadcast	Efficient dissemination
Visual content	Photos and documentation	Enhances credibility

Language style	Neutral and informative	Differentiates from scams
Verification cues	Repeated bank account details	Reinforces trust

These findings highlight WhatsApp's dual role as both a persuasive and risk-prone medium. While interpersonal affordances strengthen trust, they also heighten vulnerability to fraud if communicative routines are disrupted or imitated by malicious actors. Evaluation of communication effectiveness is conducted through informal monitoring, including donation response rates, donor inquiries, and anecdotal feedback. There are no standardized indicators or systematic post-campaign assessments.

This approach allows for rapid adjustments but limits strategic reflection. In the context of fraud prevention, the absence of formal evaluation mechanisms reduces the organization's capacity to identify subtle communication weaknesses that could be exploited by fraudulent actors over time. Reporting emerges as the strongest and most consistent component of the foundation's communication strategy. After fundraising activities, the organization routinely shares photographs, videos, and short narratives documenting fund utilization. These reports are disseminated through the same WhatsApp channels used for donation solicitation.

Table 3. Functions of Reporting in Digital Philanthropy

Reporting Element	Primary Function	Impact on Trust
Visual evidence	Proof of implementation	Confidence reinforcement
Narrative updates	Contextual explanation	Emotional reassurance
Financial summaries	Accountability	Trust stabilization

Reporting functions not merely as administrative disclosure, but as a post-risk communication practice that validates donor decisions and retroactively confirms message legitimacy. In fraud-prone environments, this form of accountability becomes a central trust-maintenance mechanism. Overall, the findings demonstrate that fraud prevention in WhatsApp-based digital philanthropy is achieved through an integrated communication cycle rather than isolated warning messages.

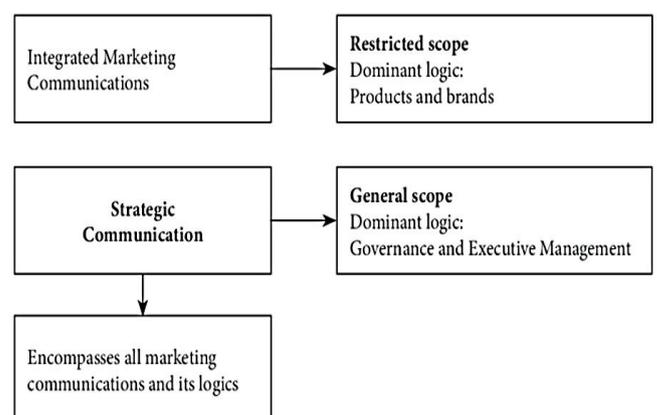


Figure 2. Integrated Strategic Communication Model for Fraud Prevention

Communication research informs planning; planning structures implementation; implementation generates feedback for evaluation; and reporting reinforces trust, completing the cycle. However, the strategy remains constrained by limited formalization, minimal dialogic engagement, and weak evaluation mechanisms. Strengthening these areas would enhance the organization's capacity to anticipate fraud proactively rather than responding reactively.

In sum, strategic communication at the At-Taufiq Jatikramat Foundation operates as an informal yet coherent system that mitigates donation-based fraud through transparency, consistency, and accountability. WhatsApp communication functions simultaneously as a tool of persuasion and a site of vulnerability, requiring careful management of routines and identity cues. The findings contribute to digital philanthropy literature by demonstrating how everyday communication practices can function as preventive governance mechanisms in closed messaging environments.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that strategic communication plays a pivotal role in safeguarding digital philanthropy from donation-based fraud, particularly within closed messaging environments such as WhatsApp. The findings demonstrate that fraud prevention is not achieved through isolated warning messages or technical safeguards alone, but through an integrated communication cycle encompassing communication research, message planning, implementation, evaluation, and post-donation reporting. At the At-Taufiq Jatikramat Foundation, transparency, consistency, and accountability function as core strategic frames that normalize verification practices and stabilize donor trust.

WhatsApp communication, while highly persuasive due to its interpersonal affordances, simultaneously increases vulnerability to fraud, making strategic management of communication routines essential for sustaining legitimacy in digital fundraising. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to strategic communication and digital philanthropy literature by highlighting how classical persuasion dynamics remain relevant in contemporary, trust-based digital environments. The findings illustrate that in closed messaging platforms, communicative cues such as repeated identity markers, visual documentation, and standardized reporting can exert direct influence on donor perceptions and behavior. This supports the continued relevance of persuasion-oriented communication models when contextualized within digital platforms characterized by intimacy and social embeddedness.

Moreover, by framing communication as a preventive governance mechanism, this study extends existing trust-based donation research beyond outcome measurement toward an examination of how trust is actively produced, maintained, and repaired through everyday organizational communication practices. Practically, the findings offer important implications for nonprofit organizations engaged in digital fundraising.

First, organizations are encouraged to formalize communication research and evaluation processes to strengthen institutional learning and proactive fraud anticipation. Second, strategic communication should integrate dialogic elements that empower donors to verify information and participate in trust-building interactions. Third, transparency and accountability must be treated as continuous communication obligations rather than post-donation

add-ons. Finally, organizations should leverage official platform features and standardized messaging formats to reinforce legitimacy and reduce impersonation risks. Collectively, these measures can enhance organizational resilience against fraud while strengthening public trust and ensuring the sustainability of digital philanthropy initiatives in increasingly complex communication environments.

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