**Strategic Cultural Communication: Indigenous Public Relations in Managing Religious Polarization in Indonesia**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study explores how cultural strategic communication functions as a form of public relations (PR) based on local wisdom in managing religious polarization in Indonesia's pluralistic society. Although formal initiatives such as FKUB aim to build harmony, these approaches often fail to address the symbolic dimensions of social tensions at the community level. Using a communication ethnography approach, this study qualitatively explores how religious and traditional leaders in two contrasting regions—Parepare, a predominantly urban Muslim area, and Tana Toraja, a predominantly rural Christian area—use value- and tradition-based communication strategies to build understanding between groups. Findings indicate that these leaders leverage values such as Sipakatau, Sipakainge, and Aluk Todolo, as well as rituals like Rambu Solo', to build social trust and symbolic legitimacy. They act as cultural PR agents, conveying messages of moderation through traditional forums, symbolic narratives, and digital media. These communication practices serve as community-based alternatives in areas where formal authorities are weak or lack trust. This study introduces the Hepta Helix communication model, reflecting the synergy between culture, media, and community participation, and offers practical and theoretical contributions to inclusive and contextual religious moderation in support of SDG 16.*

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana komunikasi strategis budaya berfungsi sebagai bentuk public relations (PR) berbasis kearifan lokal dalam mengelola polarisasi agama di masyarakat majemuk Indonesia. Meskipun inisiatif formal seperti FKUB bertujuan membangun harmoni, pendekatan tersebut sering gagal menyentuh dimensi simbolik dari ketegangan sosial di tingkat komunitas. Dengan pendekatan etnografi komunikasi, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi secara kualitatif bagaimana tokoh agama dan tokoh adat di dua wilayah yang kontras Parepare yang mayoritas Muslim perkotaan dan Tana Toraja yang mayoritas Kristen pedesaan menggunakan strategi komunikasi berbasis nilai dan tradisi lokal untuk membangun pemahaman antar kelompok. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa para pemimpin ini memanfaatkan nilai-nilai seperti Sipakatau, Sipakainge, dan Aluk Todolo, serta ritual seperti Rambu Solo’, untuk membangun kepercayaan sosial dan legitimasi simbolik. Mereka berperan sebagai agen PR budaya yang menyampaikan pesan moderasi melalui forum tradisional, narasi simbolik, dan media digital. Praktik komunikasi ini menjadi alternatif berbasis komunitas di wilayah yang otoritas formalnya lemah atau tidak dipercaya. Studi ini memperkenalkan model komunikasi Hepta Helix yang mencerminkan sinergi antara budaya, media, dan partisipasi komunitas, serta memberikan kontribusi praktis dan teoretis bagi moderasi agama yang inklusif dan kontekstual dalam mendukung SDG 16.

**Keywords:** *Strategic Communication, Indigenous Public Relations, Religious Moderation, Cultural Legitimacy, Pluralism.*

1. **INTRODUCTION**

Religious polarization has emerged as a critical and worsening issue across Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, where multicultural societies are governed by overlapping legal frameworks and norms (Khan, 2022; Rizal, 2022). These communities must navigate a complex matrix of state regulations, customary law (adat), and religious doctrine, which often leads to friction and misalignment between formal institutions and actual social realities. In areas such as Parepare and Tana Toraja, this fragmentation is particularly visible: while the state promotes legal harmony through instruments such as FKUB (*Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama*) and national policies, these initiatives often fail to address the symbolic and emotional roots of local identity politics. Social media further exacerbates this problem, with algorithmically driven echo chambers reinforcing exclusionary narratives that foster distrust and reduce opportunities for dialogue (Febriani & Ritonga, 2022; Humaizi et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2021). As the formal legal system weakens in day-to-day conflict resolution, communities tend to rely more on informal authorities-religious or traditional leaders-whose legitimacy is rooted in cultural traditions and trust between individuals. This growing reliance on non-state actors reflects a broader regional pattern, where legal pluralism creates a persistent gap between regulation and reality. In response to this polarization, there is an urgent need for culturally embedded communication strategies that operate within the symbolic framework of local communities, rather than solely through institutional authority. While the state has initiated several institutional policies such as FKUB, these strategies have not fully tapped into the cultural and symbolic roots of local communities, giving rise to the need for alternative approaches that are more contextual and participatory.

A growing body of literature has addressed religious moderation in Indonesia, especially in the wake of rising radicalism and identity-based conflict. Existing studies focus on formal approaches-state-issued curriculum Suryanto (2024), interfaith forums, online counter-narratives Kustati et al. (2023), and algorithmic interventions through media platforms (Achfandhy et al., 2024; Hameed & Adnan, 2024). While informative, these studies often overlook the role of informal leaders and culturally rooted communication in mediating social tensions. This gap is also emphasized by Sulvinajayanti et al. (2024), who illustrate how religious leaders and community stakeholders in South Sulawesi strategically use digital platforms and culturally embedded narratives to communicate religious moderation across diverse groups.

In fact, in the context of communities characterized by legal pluralism and complex social relations, local leaders often play a key role as communicators rooted in cultural experiences and community beliefs. For example, Anwar et al. (2024) emphasizes the importance of symbolic engagement and emotional communication, but even they focus on structured environments such as schools or the media. Khan (2022) and others note that most research remains focused on urban, institutional, or policy driven spaces, leaving a significant gap in understanding the role of local leaders and their authority embedded in communities governed by legal pluralism. The indigenous modes of communication rituals, oral stories, kinship dialogues used by these leaders to build and strengthen social harmony are also less explored. Failure to consider these factors limits the practical applicability of top-down moderation strategies and weakens their cultural legitimacy. This study addresses such research gaps by documenting the everyday practices of opinion leaders in different cultural settings, thus providing a more holistic view of how moderation operates as a living, adaptive and symbolically laden process.

To address this void, this study examines in depth how religious and traditional opinion leaders in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, promote religious moderation through local communication strategies embedded in local culture. Focusing on two contrasting locations, Parepare is an urban Muslim neighborhood, and Tana Toraja is a rural area with a majority Christian community, some of which still adhere to aluk todolo. This research aims to understand how these leaders utilize rituals, narratives and relational authority to foster intergroup harmony. The two regions were chosen to illustrate variations in symbolic legitimacy: in Parepare, Islamic clerics and FKUB (*Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama*) representatives rely on religious texts and moral authority, while in Tana Toraja, traditional leaders claim influence through cultural rituals such as Rambu Solo' and normative traditions such as pamali (Alam, 2023; Bachrong & Ansar, 2021). Both groups play a vital role in shaping community attitudes towards pluralism, often more effectively than formal legal structures. Using ethnographic methods with data collection through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, this study captures how communicative legitimacy is built and maintained in these local systems (Carbaugh, 2007; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hymes, 1974). The aim is not only to describe these strategies, but also to analyze how they function within the broader governance ecosystem, especially where formal institutions are weak or distrusted.

With this approach, this article offers a novel contribution by repositioning religious moderation not as a state-imposed directive, but as a form of strategic cultural communication embedded in indigenous public relations practices. The authority of opinion leaders in this context does not stem from formal appointments but from community recognition, ritual performance, and symbolic mediation rooted in local traditions (Freeman et al., 2018; Rogers, 2003; Srivastava & Moreland, 2012). In Parepare, Islamic clerics and FKUB representatives utilize values such as *Sipakatau* (mutual respect), *Sipakainge* (reminding one another), and *Sipakalebbi* (mutual honor) to strengthen solidarity in their sermons and online narratives, while in Tana Toraja, traditional leaders uphold *Karapasan* (harmony and balance) through rituals like *Rambu Solo’* and *Rambu Tuka*’, embedded in *Aluk Todolo* cosmology (Alam, 2023; Bachrong & Ansar, 2021). These communicative practices are not static customs but serve as active frameworks for public engagement, social cohesion, and conflict prevention. Viewed through the lens of cultural public relations, these practices show how community-based legitimacy and symbolic communication can fill governance gaps often left by top-down regulation, offering a culturally grounded model for managing polarization and promoting SDG 16 (Carbaugh, 2007; Geertz, 1973; Hall, 1997).

1. **METHOD**

To answer the main research objective of understanding how local opinion leaders promote religious moderation through local culture-based communication strategies. A qualitative approach with communication ethnography design was chosen as the main methodology. This approach is considered the most relevant because it allows researchers to capture symbolic meanings, ritual practices, and the dynamics of social interaction contextually in the community under study. As emphasized by Hymes (1974) and Carbaugh (2007), communication ethnography not only captures what is said, but also how, to whom, and in what context meaning is socially formed and negotiated.

Conceptually, this research is underpinned by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Stakeholder Theory Freeman et al. (2018) and Diffusion of Innovations Theory Rogers (2003). Stakeholder Theory is used to understand the role of local leaders as connectors of various groups in plural societies, and how they build social legitimacy in the context of conflict and diversity. Meanwhile, Diffusion of Innovations Theory explains the mechanism of how moderation values are spread and adopted through symbolic intermediaries and social networks within the community. The combination of these two theories was used as the basis for the interview instrument and as an interpretative framework in analyzing the communication strategies identified in the field (Achfandhy et al., 2024).

While Stakeholder Theory and Diffusion of Innovations provide the theoretical backbone of this study, the analysis is further enriched by a cultural public relations perspective to understand how opinion leaders function as community-based communicators, negotiating legitimacy and message acceptance through relational and symbolic engagement (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Heath & Johansen, 2018). This interpretive lens positions local leaders as context-specific PR actors who engage in persuasive and ethical communication embedded in cultural rituals, informal authority, and value-based narratives (Botan, 2021; Falkheimer & Heide, 2022).

Field research was conducted in two socio-culturally contrasting regions in South Sulawesi, namely Parepare and Tana Toraja. Parepare was chosen because it is an urban environment with Islamic dominance and strong religious institutional structures. In contrast, Tana Toraja represents a rural area with strong customary traditions and the dominance of Christianity and the influence of *Aluk Todolo* values. The location selection was purposed to illustrate the diversity of legitimacy structures and local communication forms. Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews with 20 key informants consisting of religious leaders, traditional leaders, academics, and representatives of community institutions; participatory observation in interfaith forums, traditional ceremonies, and social religious activities; and document analysis in the form of harmony charters, digital campaign materials, and community social media content archives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The data analysis process was conducted thematically using inductive coding to identify patterns of narratives, symbols, and communication practices that represent the values of religious moderation. The validity of the findings is maintained through triangulation strategies between data sources (interviews, observations, documents), participant verification (member checking), field reflection, and audit trail to ensure replicability and transparency of the analysis process (Nowell et al., 2017). This analysis also pays attention to the local context that shapes the dynamics of legitimacy and resistance, so that the research results not only describe communication practices but also explain the strategic position of opinion leaders as agents of cultural change amid complex socio-political challenges.

In line with this, the communicative activities of religious and traditional leaders in this study are also interpreted through the lens of cultural public relations, where legitimacy, message framing, symbolic resonance, and relational engagement form the core of strategic influence (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Grunig, 2013). This perspective situates local opinion leaders as context-specific PR actors who practice persuasive communication grounded in ethical and cultural legitimacy.

With this methodological approach, this research not only explains what local leaders do, but also how and why these communication strategies can be effective channels to mediate identity conflicts, strengthen social cohesion, and realize contextual and sustainable local wisdom-based moderation practices. The researcher’s positionality as both an academic observer and a culturally affiliated actor enabled deeper relational access to key informants but also required methodological reflexivity to balance interpretation with community-defined meanings.

1. **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

**Social Legitimacy and the Strategic Role of Opinion Leaders**

As a first step in understanding the communication dynamics of religious moderation in Indonesia, it is important to examine the symbolic foundations that shape the social authority of opinion leaders at the local level. The findings of this study show that the strategic legitimacy of religious and traditional leaders in Parepare and Tana Toraja does not stem from formal positions, but rather from community recognition of symbolic values, deep-rooted traditions and their active involvement in the social life of the community.

Cultural values such as *Sipakatau* and *Karapasan* become the foundation of symbolic authority that is recognized across generations. *Sipakatau* (mutual respect) in Bugis society and *Karapasan* (social balance) in Tana Toraja act not only as social ethics, but also as legitimacy systems that strengthen the position of local leaders in delivering messages of moderation (Alam, 2023; Bachrong & Ansar, 2021). In this framework, religious and traditional leaders not only appear as messengers, but also as guardians of cultural values and dampeners of social tensions. These communicative roles reflect not only traditional authority but also a form of strategic public relations, where local leaders serve as community-based communicators who maintain public trust, negotiate meaning, and promote inclusive values using culturally embedded messages (Falkheimer & Heide, 2022).

This concept is supported by Garing et al. (2023) who assert that local figures act as culture-based strategic communicators in the face of identity polarization. Their social legitimacy is bottom-up and contextual, and is built through relationships, social recognition and symbolic performance that are continuously reinforced through involvement in rites, conflict mediation and cross-group communication. Table 1 below classifies the types of opinion leaders based on region, source of legitimacy, and their role in promoting religious moderation:

*Table 1. Classification table of opinion leaders and their sources of cultural legitimacy.*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Region** | **Type of Opinion Leaders** | **Legitimacy Source** | **Role in Religious Moderation** |
| Parepare | Muslim Religious Leaders (Ustadz, Imam, Kyai) | Religious authority, public acceptability | Integrating cultural values into preaching, responding to religious conflicts, and mediating intergroup tensions. |
| Parepare | Non-Muslim Religious Leaders (Pastors, Nuns) | Interfaith social relations, inclusive commitment | Active participation in interfaith forums and solidarity activities promoting religious coexistence. |
| Parepare | Academics and FKUB Members | Intellectual authority, formal policy structures | Designing dialogic spaces, developing community response strategies, and supporting policy frameworks on moderation. |
| Tana Toraja | Customary Leaders (To Minaa, To Parenge) | Genealogical legitimacy, ritual authority, cultural symbolism | Mediating social norms, leading Rambu Solo' and Rambu Tuka' rituals, and preserving communal harmony through traditional roles. |
| Tana Toraja | Christian Religious Leaders (Pastors, Catechists, Elders) | Spiritual authority, congregation-based legitimacy | Promoting moderation through liturgical peace narratives, ritual collaboration with customary leaders, and faith-based community education. |

The contextual differences between Parepare and Tana Toraja show that the legitimacy structure of opinion leaders is formed through different social and symbolic channels, but both have similar functions in reducing conflict and building harmony between groups. In Parepare, religious leaders combine local values such as Sipakainge with Islamic teachings to respond to sensitive issues, such as the rejection of non-Muslim Hajj officials or the establishment of Christian schools. In this situation, the FKUB, academics, and religious leaders play an active role in creating deliberative spaces as mechanisms for participatory and peaceful conflict resolution.

Meanwhile, in Tana Toraja, traditional leaders have a more dominant role in social and cultural affairs. Traditional rituals such as *Rambu Solo'* and pamali norms are a means of articulating values of tolerance, respect, and social cohesion. These cultural symbols and practices are not only a form of heritage but also an authentic cultural communication mechanism with a strong influence in building interfaith understanding.

The symbolic legitimacy model implemented by opinion leaders in these two regions emphasizes the urgency of culture-based communication in maintaining social integration. In Parepare, although digital campaigns that explicitly link the value of moderation to Bugis philosophies such as Sipakatau are still limited in public documentation, the increasing involvement of religious figures with platforms popular among the younger generation such as Instagram and YouTube illustrates the great potential for translating traditional ethics into contextual digital visual formats (Zhang, 2025). This shift demonstrates not only the adaptability of local narratives but also the need for further strategic exploration in the development of culture-based digital messages.

In Tana Toraja, indigenous youth have documented rituals such as *Rambu Solo'* and *Rambu Tuka'* in video format and disseminated them online, expanding the reach of messages of tolerance across generations (Bachrong & Ansar, 2021). This practice demonstrates how new media can strengthen the legitimacy of opinion leaders through the integration of tradition and technology, while reaching a wider and younger audience.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings reinforce Hall (1997) theory of cultural representation and Geertz (1973) cultural symbolism, which emphasize that social legitimacy is formed through symbolic processes, value interpretation, and ongoing social dialogue. This study also confirms the findings of Walter & Bruggemann (2020) and Indainanto et al. (2023), that collaboration between local leaders and educational institutions is an effective strategy in disseminating values of moderation.

The main contribution of this section is to emphasize that opinion leaders' communication strategies are not only determined by the content of the message, but also by how the message is packaged in symbols, communicated through relevant media, and received in a living and dynamic cultural context.

**Local Value-Based Communication Strategy**

Departing from this legitimacy, the communication strategies implemented by *opinion leaders* show efforts to articulate local values as the basis for moderation messages. In Parepare and Tana Toraja, the communication strategy of religious moderation is built on the foundation of cultural values that have taken root and function as ethical tools as well as a medium of public communication. Values such as *Sipakatau*, *Sipakalebbi*, *Sipakainge* in Bugis tradition, as well as *Aluk Todolo* in Toraja culture, become the foundation that facilitates the delivery of messages of tolerance between people.

These values are not just cultural symbols but are social mechanisms that live in community practice. When contextualized into da'wah spaces, traditional rites, and digital media, these values expand the reach of moderation messages and strengthen public acceptance of harmony narratives.

The study by Muthoifin et al. (2024) shows that the integration of cultural values in religious practices strengthens social cohesion and prevents identity-based conflict. In Parepare, *Sipakatau* is actualized in digital dakwah-such as short videos and visual quotes on social media-delivered by local religious leaders. *Sipakalebbi* is reinterpreted in interfaith forums as a principle of dialogue and respect for differences Hameed & Adnan (2024). Meanwhile, in Tana Toraja, *Aluk Todolo* not only survives in the form of rites such as *Rambu Solo'* and *Rambu Tuka’ but* is also adopted in local Christianity as a symbol of inclusive spiritual identity (Bachrong & Ansar, 2021; Walter & Bruggemann, 2020). The study of Pajarianto et al. (2023) reinforces these findings by asserting that local cultural values are an important factor in educating the younger generation through digital media-based participatory approaches and formal education. Policy-wise, the state's alignment with cultural values is reflected in the Religious Moderation Roadmap 2020–2024 and Presidential Regulation No. 58 of 2023, which emphasizes the importance of internalizing local wisdom in national and religious narratives (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2019; Presiden Republik Indonesia, 2023).

Thus, the communication strategies carried out by religious and traditional leaders in these two regions show that local cultural values are not only complementary, but instead the main foundation of the moderation narrative. Values such as *Sipakatau* and *Aluk Todolo* have been transformed from traditional symbols into relevant, contextual and effective public communication frameworks in voicing tolerance across generations.

However, the success of this strategy does not occur in a sterile social space. In the field, this strategy must deal with various forms of resistance and complex social dynamics. Viewed from a public relations perspective, these activities represent a form of cultural PR practice that transforms local wisdom into persuasive narratives capable of sustaining interfaith solidarity and influencing public perception on religious coexistence (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

**Social Challenges and Identity Polarization**

Although local culture-based communication strategies have shown effectiveness in building harmony, their implementation in the field is not barrier-free. In practice, the spread of religious moderation values often faces serious challenges, both ideological and structural. One of the main obstacles is resistance to messages of tolerance and inclusiveness voiced by religious and traditional leaders. This resistance comes not only overtly, but also in disguised forms from conservative groups that have an exclusive understanding of religious doctrine and community identity.

This phenomenon confirms that religious moderation does not take place in a sterile social space but must contend with a growing conservative backlash through various communication channels, particularly digital media. In Parepare, for example, resistance to moderation is reflected in the rejection of non-Muslim hajj officials and strong reactions to the establishment of Christian schools. Meanwhile, in Tana Toraja, although open conflict is rare, symbolic tensions emerge in discussions surrounding the participation of non-Christians in traditional rituals, sparking debates about cultural purity and spiritual identity. As explained by Mahyuddin et al. (2022) the challenge of mainstreaming religious moderation in digital public spaces is exacerbated by disinformation, algorithmic bias, and low digital literacy, which create discourse fragmentation and reinforce identity exclusivism. In a global context, Campbell (2017) add that digital mediatization not only changes the way religious values are disseminated, but also reshapes religious authority and individual spiritual experiences, often displacing the dominance of conventional religious figures. This creates serious challenges for the dissemination of messages of moderation based on symbolic authority and social proximity.

Furthermore, the presence of social media as the main arena for shaping public opinion presents new challenges for moderation campaigns. On the one hand, digital media provides a wide and fast space to spread tolerance values. However, on the other hand, social media algorithms work based on affinity preferences, creating *echo chambers* and *filter bubbles* that lock individuals into uniform and often intolerant narratives. In this environment, provocative content from anonymous accounts or non-structured religious figures is often more viral and effective in mobilizing public emotions than peaceful messages from official figures. Baidawi (2025) findings show how the *virtual religious authority* created by digital popularity can rival, and even surpass, the influence of conventional religious figures. As a result, many religious and traditional leaders have been delegitimized, especially in the eyes of younger generations who are more connected to digital discourse. The loss of narrative control by traditional leaders in digital spaces reveals a shift in public relations dynamics—from authority rooted in community proximity to popularity-driven engagement on digital platforms (Baidawi, 2025; Mowlana, 2021).

The challenge becomes more complex when disinformation and intolerant narratives infiltrate the public sphere through unverified media channels, eroding the credibility of moderation messages. In this situation, reconstructing communication strategies becomes a necessity. Local figures need to not only rely on symbolic authority and tradition but also adopt a narrative approach that is adaptive to the logic of digital distribution. If this strategy fails to be anticipated, the dominance of algorithms and extreme rhetoric will continue to narrow the space for inclusive narratives.

In addition to the mediatic aspect, other challenges stem from social fragmentation exacerbated by economic inequality, political exclusion, and weak inter-group linking institutions. In marginalized communities, the message of moderation is often perceived as an elitist discourse that does not address real needs. The rejection of official forums that are considered symbolic and unrepresentative shows that successful moderation requires a real presence that hears and responds to grassroots aspirations. In this condition, the role of religious and traditional leaders becomes very important as a link between the formal power structure and the social reality of the community.

The study by Muthoifin et al. (2024) underlines that to reduce social fragmentation, local actors need to play a dual role: as value communicators and social justice facilitators. However, this role is only effective if it is supported by an open, participatory and responsive social system. Without these conditions, opinion leaders can be trapped in a representation dilemma - between maintaining credibility in the eyes of the community or submitting to the formal agenda of state institutions.

In general, challenges to religious moderation communication come not only from outside (extreme groups, intolerant content), but also from within the communication system itself. Many official narratives fail to build emotional and cultural connections with diverse audiences. In terms of Stakeholder Theory Freeman et al. (2018), this failure reflects the lack of bridges of trust between stakeholders. Meanwhile, according to Diffusion of Innovations Theory Rogers (2003), value dissemination requires proper social mapping and adaptation of messages according to the readiness of recipients.

Thus, a differential approach is needed that considers social typology, digital literacy, and the legitimization of local values. Communication is not enough to be normative; it must be able to touch people's daily realities. This is where the role of opinion leaders becomes vital: as translators of moderation values into meaningful, contextualized narratives that can be accepted by various social segments. This role places them not just as messengers, but as guardians of dialogue space amidst the increasingly strong currents of identity polarization.

**Moderated Communication Model**

In response to the social, political and digital challenges outlined above, this research offers an integrative and contextual model of moderation communication. The model was developed based on field findings in Parepare and Tana Toraja and theoretically interpreted through the framework of Stakeholder Theory Freeman et al. (2018) and Diffusion of Innovations Theory Rogers (2003). Both support that the successful spread of moderation values cannot be separated from the dynamics of relations between actors and adaptive strategies in delivering messages.

The model has four main components: actors, communication channels, messaging strategies and social impact. The first component, actors, includes representations of the seven pillars of society as per the Hepta Helix approach: government, academics, religious leaders, traditional leaders, civil society, industry/media players, and digital platforms. In Parepare, formal authorities such as FKUB and the Ministry of Religious Affairs play a central role in mainstreaming moderation narratives through religious forums and digital channels. Meanwhile, in Tana Toraja, customary authorities such as To Minaa and To Parenge express tolerance values through cultural rites and traditional deliberative forums such as Tongkonan. Figure 1 visually explains the structure of this network, showing how synergies between actors form a cohesive communication system that is responsive to the local context.

A diagram of a media

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

Figure 1. Hepta Helix-Based Communication Model for Religious Moderation in Parepare and Tana Toraja.

This figure visualizes the interaction between seven societal pillars (government, academia, religious leaders, cultural authorities, civil society, industry/media, and digital platforms), demonstrating how cultural public relations strategies are adapted to both face-to-face and digital communication channels rooted in local values.

The model illustrates the collaboration between seven pillars of society-government, academia, religious leaders, cultural leaders, civil society, industry players, and media platforms-in promoting inclusive religious communication. The visualization highlights the dynamic interplay between face-to-face and digital communication channels, emphasizing the use of local values and cultural narratives as reinforcers of tolerance and interfaith harmony.

The second component is communication channels, which are divided into face-to-face channels (e.g. lectures, traditional deliberations, interfaith meetings) and digital channels (such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and local online media). These channels are not parallel, but complementary. In Parepare, digital da'wah based on the values of *Sipakatau* and *Sipakainge* targets the younger generation, while in Tana Toraja, visual documentation of traditional rites such as *Rambu Solo'* and *Rambu Tuka'* is disseminated to instill the value of *karapasan* across generations (Bachrong & Ansar, 2021; Zhang, 2025).

The third component, the message delivery strategy, includes the use of cultural symbols, local language, a reflective narrative approach, and framing the message according to audience characteristics. This strategy also involves an emotional approach through symbols that have high legitimacy in their respective communities, as described in cross-cultural communication theory by Geertz (1973) and Gudykunst (2003). Such a strategy increases the chances of adoption of moderation messages because it adapts to the symbolic framework and meaning system of the community.

The last component, social impact, includes the spread of tolerance values, increasing diversity literacy, strengthening social cohesion, and public legitimization of local figures as agents of change. Communication effectiveness is not only measured by how widely the message is spread, but also by how deeply the message is rooted in the social practices of the community. This success can be seen from the reduced escalation of religious-based conflicts, increased community participation in interfaith forums, and the growth of community-based moderation campaign networks (Kustati et al., 2023; Muthoifin et al., 2024).

This model expands the horizon of normative approaches in the study of moderation communication, which has tended to center on policy or formal education. Unlike Youngblood (2025) *hospitality model*, which emphasizes universal openness, or Guo (2025) *conflict mediation model*, which focuses on conflict negotiation, the model in this study positions communication as a value reproduction process that occurs in layers: from rites to public spaces, from communities to policies. This makes moderation communication not just an instrument, but a social space that shapes meaning and collective action.

In terms of policy, the model offers potential applications at various levels, from local regulations such as the Perda on Religious Harmony, to national policies such as the implementation of Presidential Regulation No. 58 of 2023 (Presiden Republik Indonesia, 2023). Local governments, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and educational institutions can use this model as a basis for developing tolerance education curricula, moderator training modules, and community-based policy communication guidelines. In addition, non-governmental organizations and creative industry players can utilize this model to design digital campaigns that are not only technically communicative, but also culturally meaningful.

More broadly, this model can be read as a framework for local cultural diplomacy that can strengthen Indonesia's position in promoting pluralism internationally. As global pressure on intolerance and radicalism increases, local contributions such as this become part of *soft power* diplomacy that makes culture and community the point of departure for policy. This is in line with the national strategy for value-based sustainable development (Bappenas, 2023) and UNESCO recommendations on education for living together (UNESCO, 2023).

With a cross-channel, participatory and culture-based approach, this moderation communication model is not only able to answer local challenges but also make a real contribution to strengthening SDGs 16 at the national and international levels. This model presents communication as a vibrant, dynamic and relevant form of social governance in maintaining diversity and preventing polarization in the digital era.

This local culture-based moderation communication model is not only relevant in the Indonesian context but also has the potential for replication in other regions experiencing polarization of religious and cultural-based identities. Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar, Southern Thailand and Malaysia, which also have the dynamics of legal pluralism and ethnoreligious diversity, can learn from the community-based approach and local values developed in Parepare and Tana Toraja. This model is in line with the principles promoted by UNESCO in the *Intercultural Dialogue and Cultural Diversity Framework* (UNESCO, 2021), which emphasizes the importance of *local cultural assets* in maintaining social peace and building solidarity across identities.

In addition, this model can be positioned as part of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy in the ASEAN and G20 forums, especially in initiatives such as the *ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025*, which emphasizes the importance of cultural diversity as a regional strength. The experience of local value-based moderation can be used as material for cultural exchanges, interfaith training, or even as the basis for *policy toolkits* for developing countries seeking alternative approaches to religious-based conflict. Thus, this model not only provides local solutions to local challenges but also contributes to *global knowledge production* relevant to the Sustainable Development Goal 16 agenda on *peace, justice, and strong institutions* (UNDP, 2023).

1. **CONCLUSION**

This research confirms that religious moderation in Indonesia's pluralistic society cannot rely entirely on top-down formal regulations. Instead, it requires a communication strategy that is contextual, participatory and rooted in local culture that lives in the social practices of the community. The findings in Parepare and Tana Toraja show that religious and traditional leaders play a strategic role as opinion leaders with social and symbolic legitimacy. They not only deliver messages, but also build collective meaning through rites, proselytizing and cultural narratives delivered both face-to-face and through digital media. Values such as *Sipakatau*, *Sipakalebbi*, *Sipakainge*, and *Aluk Todolo* have proven effective in facilitating interfaith dialog, preventing identity conflicts, and strengthening social cohesion across generations.

However, this success faces serious challenges, ranging from conservative resistance, social fragmentation due to inequality, to disruption by intolerant narratives in the digital space. In this context, this research offers a Hepta Helix-based moderation communication model, which brings together seven pillars of society-government, academia, religious leaders, traditional leaders, civil society, industry/media players, and digital platforms. This model not only explains how the value of moderation is disseminated across channels and generations but also provides a strategic framework for public policies that are more inclusive and responsive to social diversity.

Theoretically, the model enriches discussions on intercultural communication and symbolic legitimacy and shows that communication is not just a message channel, but a dynamic space of value negotiation. Practically, this approach can be applied in multicultural policymaking, interfaith moderator training, and digital campaigns rooted in local wisdom. Moreover, this model contributes to Indonesia's cultural diplomacy by offering a peaceful communication approach that can be replicated in other regions facing identity polarization. As such, this study provides a strategic alternative to strengthen SDG 16 on peace, justice and inclusive community-based institutions, not just formal norms.

As such, this study not only contributes to the discourse on religious moderation but also expands the understanding of public relations as a culturally grounded practicerooted in local legitimacy, social ethics, and community-based messaging strategies.

1. **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) IAIN Parepare for assisting in the entire administrative process. The authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to the traditional and religious leaders in Parepare and Tana Toraja who have been willing to share their knowledge and experience during the field research process. Appreciation is also given to the academic partners and reviewers who have provided constructive input in improving this manuscript. Special thanks go to the editorial team of the International Journal of Law and Society for the opportunity and guidance during the review process. All errors in this article are the sole responsibility of the author.

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