Interfaith Harmony: Optimizing Digital Media and Stakeholder Collaboration in Communicating the Message of Moderation

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Abstract

The digital era has brought significant changes in communication and social interactions, including in the context of interfaith harmony in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. This study explores the multifaceted communication strategies employed by interfaith leaders and religious figures to foster tolerance and mutual understanding among religious communities in South Sulawesi. The study uses a qualitative approach through case studies, in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies. Key informants include religious leaders, communities involved in interfaith activities, communication and information technology experts, and government officials related to religion and communication. The findings reveal that the strategic use of cyberculture and social media platforms is effective in promoting religious harmony. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp play a crucial role in facilitating communication and interaction among religious communities. Maintaining interfaith harmony in a digital society requires a comprehensive approach, including increased interfaith dialogue, inclusive religious education, active community engagement, and collaboration between religious institutions and government agencies. This study provides new insights into communication strategies for maintaining religious harmony in the digital era, emphasizing the need for digital literacy and effective detection and prevention strategies.

Keywords: *Communication Strategies, Digital Media, Interfaith Harmony, South Sulawesi, Stakeholder Collaboration.*

INTRODUCTION

The digital era has brought about significant changes in various aspects of life, including communication and interaction. In 2023, internet penetration in South Sulawesi reached 78.81%, a significant increase compared to previous years (APJI, 2023). This ongoing upward trend reflects the increasing accessibility and utilization of digital technologies nationwide. The high penetration rate is largely driven by young generations, with Millennials and Generation Z being the largest group of internet users. This high penetration rate highlights the rapid digital transformation in Indonesia, emphasizing the need to address the challenges and opportunities brought about by the widespread use of the internet. Specifically, it underscores the necessity of strategies to ensure that digital platforms positively contribute to social and religious harmony.

This digital surge not only facilitates communication and information exchange but also brings new dynamics to social and religious interactions. One example is the use of the internet to disseminate religious information, such as video sermons or discussion forums, which allow people worldwide to interact and learn about religion online. The internet also enables the people of South Sulawesi to access information about ongoing religious events in the region, allowing them to choose to attend these events. In addition, the internet allows users in South Sulawesi to interact with people from various backgrounds and cultures through social media and other communication platforms.

In the context of a digital society, communication challenges and solutions for maintaining interfaith harmony have many facets. Interfaith leaders and religious figures play a crucial role in socializing the values of harmony

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and implementing various strategies to foster tolerance and mutual understanding among religious communities (Kholil et al., 2020; Tilome et al., 2022). The use of cyberculture and social media platforms by religious leaders has been highlighted as an effective communication strategy to promote religious harmony in multicultural societies (Novebri et al., 2021; Pratiwi et al., 2022). Interestingly, while the digital world offers tools to enhance communication and tolerance, it also presents challenges such as the potential spread of extremist ideologies and the politicization of religion (Idris et al., 2024).

Maintaining interfaith harmony in a digital society requires a multifaceted approach that includes the strategic use of cyberculture by religious leaders, increased interfaith dialogue, and the implementation of inclusive religious education. These efforts are supported by active community engagement and collaboration between religious institutions and government agencies to create systematic and sustainable practices in fostering tolerance and peace (Abas & Ghofur, 2023; Karimullah & Arif Sugitanata, 2023; Nasution et al., 2023; Rahawarin, 2023).

Social media plays a significant role in facilitating communication and interactions among religious communities. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp allow individuals to share information, discuss, and build relationships across religious divisions. The use of social media can promote constructive dialogue and a deeper understanding of one another's values and beliefs. Social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, have become integral in facilitating communication and interaction among religious communities (Paul, 2024). These platforms allow religious organizations to interact directly with their congregations, encouraging participation and engagement in religious activities and organizational affairs. Interestingly, while Facebook and Twitter are highlighted for their use by religious organizations, the role of WhatsApp in crisis communication, particularly in university management, has been emphasized, demonstrating its effectiveness in rapid and widespread message dissemination (Kimibei & Wabwire, 2021).

The reliability of information shared on social media, including Facebook and WhatsApp, is considered to vary, with most users finding it trustworthy (Shahid et al., 2019). This aspect is crucial in the context of religious communication, in which the accuracy and authenticity of information can be highly sensitive. Overall, social media platforms play a crucial role in religious communication by offering spaces for engagement and sharing religious content. While the effectiveness of these platforms varies, their widespread use in various contexts, including religious communication crisis management, and information dissemination, underscores their importance in modern society (Kimibei & Wabwire, 2021; Paul, 2024; Shahid et al., 2019).

The digital era presents significant communication challenges, particularly with the rapid spread of misinformation and hate speech on social media, which can spark religious conflicts. Castaño Pulgarín et al. (2021) conceptualized online hate speech as the use of abusive, aggressive, or offensive language directed at specific groups based on religion, race, gender, or political affiliation, facilitated by the inherent power imbalances in digital media. This is corroborated by Blanco-Herrero & Calderón (2019), who examined how fake content on social media contributes to the spread of hate speech against migrants and refugees, which can also apply to religious groups.

Although Jougleux (2022) does not directly address this conflict, this study highlights the social threats posed by the combination of hate speech and fake news, which can alter public perception and incite real-world violence. This underscores the complex interaction between misinformation and social tension. Arora (2021) highlighted the role of fake accounts and bots in spreading misinformation that can exacerbate social and religious tensions. Overall, the reviewed literature indicates that the digital era has amplified the challenges of misinformation and hate speech, with significant implications for social harmony, particularly in interfaith relations. The spread of such content on social media platforms can incite conflict and requires concerted effort to mitigate it, including enhancing digital literacy and implementing effective detection and prevention strategies.

The phenomenon of interfaith conflict on social media in South Sulawesi is a multifaceted issue that can be influenced by the misuse of digital platforms to spread divisive messages (Nasrudin, 2017). However, the community has made efforts to address these challenges. For example, the Islamic education system is positioned as a means to instill moral and ethical behavior in society, which can mitigate the negative impact of

social media and promote harmony (Nasrudin, 2017). Additionally, the role of the Interfaith Harmony Forum is crucial in fostering morality among social media activists, especially given their strategic position in addressing ethnic and religious issues that can trigger disharmony on these platforms (Kewuel, 2019).

While social media can be a breeding ground for conflict, it also serves as a tool for positive communication and information dissemination, as seen in the use of digital media by legislators in South Sulawesi to interact with its constituents (Ramadhan et al., 2022). Moreover, the Indonesian Ulema Council of South Sulawesi has embraced digital preaching, utilizing various digital platforms to disseminate religious messages that foster a more connected and informed community (Ahmad, 2023).

Although social media in South Sulawesi has the potential to exacerbate interfaith conflicts, there are collaborative efforts by religious leaders and communities to leverage educational and digital platforms to promote understanding and harmony. The success of these initiatives depends on the active engagement of various stakeholders, including government agencies, religious organizations, and community leaders, to foster a culture of tolerance and respectful communication (Alimuddin, 2023; Hutabarat, 2023; Idris et al., 2024; Kholil et al., 2020; Soffi & Haque, 2023).

While several studies have discussed the role of social media in promoting interfaith dialogue, in-depth research on effective communication strategies for maintaining religious harmony in the digital era remains limited. This research provides a new perspective by focusing on South Sulawesi, a region with high religious diversity and significant internet penetration, which has not been extensively studied before. This research offers a more holistic and comprehensive strategy than previous studies by adopting a multifaceted approach that includes cyberculture, increased interfaith dialogue, and inclusive religious education. Additionally, this research provides specific policy recommendations for the South Sulawesi Provincial Government that can be directly implemented to enhance religious harmony literacy and maintain harmonious relations between religious groups. This study also highlights the importance of digital literacy as a solution to address the challenges of misinformation and hate speech on social media, making it an innovative aspect relevant to the current dynamics of the digital era.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, social media has become a major platform for interactions between various religious communities and adherents. Individuals from different religious backgrounds can quickly interact, share views, and convey messages. However, interfaith interactions on social media also have significant implications for faith harmony (Sazali et al., 2022). Social media has the potential to promote tolerance, understanding, and dialogue among religious communities and to become a forum that exacerbates religious tensions and conflicts (Iskandar, 2022). Disturbing content, intolerance, or religion-based discrimination can also be found on social media. Interfaith harmony is a fundamental value in a multicultural society that emphasizes the importance of tolerance, understanding, and dialogue among different religious groups (Pradnyaningrat et al., 2020). However, as the digital society becomes more connected and complex, we face new challenges in maintaining this harmony. Social media, online news platforms, and online communication can positively and negatively influence faith intercations.

In an increasingly connected and complex digital society, maintaining interfaith harmony has become a pressing issue. This harmony is an important foundation in a religiously diverse society and has a direct impact on social harmony and sustainable development (Taopan et al., 2020). One factor that influences interfaith harmony is the development of information and communication technology, especially social media, which has become a key element in shaping opinions, views, and interactions among individuals and religious groups.

A literature review on "Digital Society: Communication Challenges and Solutions for Maintaining Interfaith Harmony" covers the dynamics of religious coexistence in the digital era, focusing on how digital communication platforms affect interfaith relations and the strategies used to foster harmony. The reviewed studies explore the role of digital media in shaping public discourse on religious issues and potential conflicts, as well as cooperation that can be facilitated by these platforms. Interestingly, while there are no studies directly discussing the impact of digital society on interfaith harmony, some provide insights into communication

strategies and the role of faith dialogue in promoting harmony (Grit, 2019; Karimullah & Arif Sugitanata, 2023; Kholil et al., 2020; Widyanto et al., 2021). This can be extrapolated to the digital context, where the principles of tolerance, equality, cooperation, mutual respect, and communication are equally important (Widyanto et al., 2021). Furthermore, the importance of government policies, inclusive education, and interagency cooperation in fostering religious tolerance can be relevant to the governance of digital platforms (Karimullah & Arif Sugitanata, 2023).

These studies offer valuable perspectives on communication strategies and interfaith dialogue that can be applied to the digital context. The role of religious moderation (Gumuruh, 2023) and the dynamics of religious pluralism (Hutabarat, 2023) are also important for understanding how digital platforms can be utilized to promote understanding and cooperation among diverse religious communities. Therefore, a comprehensive literature review on this topic needs to integrate these findings with research focusing on digital communication to address the unique challenges and solutions to maintaining interfaith harmony in a digital society (Grit, 2019; Gumuruh, 2023; Hutabarat, 2023; Karimullah & Arif Sugitanata, 2023; Kholil et al., 2020; Widyanto et al., 2021).

Lisniasari (2019) in her research found a positive influence of social media on faith harmony among cross-faith youth of INGAGE in Medan. Social media should function as a medium for social interaction by conveying constructive values and serve as a platform to maintain interfaith harmony (Latip, 2020). The use of social media must always be positively oriented to spread messages of peace, and goodness, and strengthen interfaith relationships. The nature of social media allows for smoother information dissemination. However, this freedom sometimes cause some parties to forget the importance of maintaining faith harmony. Posts leading to SARA issues, such as the incident of Ahok's religious blasphemy, are often found on social media (Nusa, 2019).

The goal of this research is to analyze the impact of social media and digital society on interfaith harmony in depth. This research is expected to provide new insights and recommendations for the South Sulawesi Provincial Government regarding the importance of harmony literacy in maintaining harmonious relations among religious communities in the digital era. This research also emphasizes the importance of religious understanding in creating social harmony and tolerance of differences as valuable cultural heritage.

Method

Qualitative research approach was used. This approach was chosen to deeply understand the phenomenon of interfaith communication in the digital era. The research design used is a case study. A case study allows researchers to explore the communication strategies used in South Sulawesi in depth. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The informants in this research are religious leaders, communities actively involved in interfaith activities, communication and information technology experts, and government officials related to religion and communication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal several key observations and results related to the strategies used for communication in the digital era. Communication strategies in the digital era have played a crucial role in maintaining interfaith harmony in South Sulawesi.

Use of Digital Media by the Government

The use of social media, websites, and other digital platforms helps the government to reach a wider audience and communicate important messages regarding interfaith harmony. As found in the research of Ramadhan et al. (2022), the effective use of digital media by legislators to disseminate information and build trust within communities can encourage dialogue and understanding. In Sidrap Regency, particularly in the Ministry of Religion, digital media use has been implemented through https://sipakatabe.id/. This website serves as a platform that supports various communication activities and public services, particularly in maintaining interfaith harmony. Through sipakatabe.id, the Sidrap Regency Ministry of Religion can disseminate the latest

information regarding religious programs, interfaith events, and government policies related to interfaith harmony. This information is easily accessible to the public, there by increasing transparency and trust.

The website provides discussion forums and virtual dialogue spaces for religious leaders and communities to discuss religious and social issues. These discussion spaces are expected to create constructive and deep dialogue that contributes to better understanding and tolerance among religious communities. Sipakatabe.id also offers various online public services, such as registration for religious activities, religious consultations, and complaints related to religious issues. These online services facilitate the public's access to services without having to come directly to the Ministry of Religion's office.

Through educational content and digital campaigns, websites actively promote the tolerance and harmony. These campaigns included articles, videos, and infographics designed to spread messages of peace and mutual respect among religious communities. The website is also used as a platform for religious training and education, where the community can access learning materials, participate in online courses, and attend webinars organized by the Sidrap Ministry of Religion. Thus, sipakatabe.id has become a very useful tool for the Ministry of Religion in Sidrap Regency to support effective communication, transparency, and maintaining interfaith harmony in the digital era.

Adaptation of Preaching to Digital Platforms

In South Sulawesi, including cities such as Parepare, Sidrap, and Toraja, the adaptation of preaching to digital platforms has become an integral part of communication strategies for maintaining interfaith harmony. As found by Ahmad (2023), the adaptation of preaching to digital platforms by the Indonesian Ulema Council of South Sulawesi shows an innovative response to technological advances that can facilitate interfaith harmony by reaching a wider audience with messages of tolerance and cooperation.

In Parepare, religious leaders and institutions actively use platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to disseminate preaching messages emphasizing the importance of tolerance and mutual respect. Video content, interfaith discussions, and tolerance campaigns are conducted regularly to reach a wider audience. In Sidrap, the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) and other religious institutions often hold webinars and online discussions on religious and social topics relevant to interfaith harmony. These events allow participation from various religious groups and provide a platform for open dialogue. The social media platform often utilized is TikTok https://www.tiktok.com/@sidenrengberdakwah17. Ustadz Muhammad Yusuf is religious figures in Sidrap Regency who actively uses social media to disseminate preaching and maintain interfaith harmony.

Yusuf utilizes social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to share sermons, religious studies, and moral messages. Through these platforms, he can reach a wider audience, including young people who use social media more frequently in their daily lives. The content shared by Ustadz Muhammad Yusuf covers various religious topics, including the importance of tolerance, peace, and cooperation among religious communities. He often holds live Q&A sessions on social media, allowing the community to discuss and gain a deeper understanding of religious teachings. In addition to online activities, Ustadz Muhammad Yusuf is involved in various religious programs and activities in Sidrap. He often speaks at interfaith events, seminars, and workshops aimed at promoting harmony and cooperation among religious communities.

In Toraja, in addition to using social media, some initiatives include the development of applications and websites specifically for preaching. These applications provide religious materials, prayer schedules, and interactive features that facilitate user discussion. Websites such as sipakatabe.id in Sidrap also play a crucial role in disseminating information and providing religious services online. Throughout South Sulawesi, digital tolerance campaigns are launched to promote messages of peace and mutual respect. These campaigns have been involve creating educational content that invites communities to understand the importance of interfaith harmony. Videos, infographics, and articles disseminated through social media and official websites were the primary tools used in these campaigns.

In Parepare, Sidrap, and Toraja, religious leaders often collaborate with influencers and community leaders with large followings on social media platforms to spread preaching messages. This collaboration helps to reach young people and the general public who are more active in the digital world. With the adaptation of preaching

to digital platforms in various regions of South Sulawesi, efforts to maintain interfaith have become stronger and more effective. This research shows that the use of digital technology not only facilitates the dissemination of positive messages but also provides a space for more intensive interfaith dialogue and collaboration. This contributed to creating a harmonious and tolerant environment in Southe's Sulawesi multicultural society.

In South Sulawesi, several religious figures have utilized social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to spread religious messages and maintain interfaith harmony. Ustadz Khalid Basalamah is a preacher who is popular on YouTube. Through his YouTube channel https://www.youtube.com/@khalidbasalamah, he often shares sermons covering various Islamic topics. His channel not only focuses on religious teachings but also often conveys messages of tolerance and interfaith harmony.

Ustadz Abdul Somad, also known as UAS, is very active on various social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube https://www.youtube.com/channel/UClvc6c04-xEYKFFyeP3yjKA, and TikTok https://www.tiktok.com/@sahabatuaschannel. Through his sermons, he often conveys messages encouraging interfaith harmony and tolerance. The UAS frequently uses social media to answer questions from the community and provides moderately religious views.

Role of Interfaith Forums

Interfaith forums in South Sulawesi, such as the Interfaith Harmony Forum (FKUB), play a crucial role in maintaining harmony among various religious communities. FKUB and other interfaith forums act as mediators in resolving conflicts that may arise between religious groups. They facilitate dialogue, seek peaceful solutions to issues, and avoid conflict escalation into violence. Interfaith forums hold various dialogue and discussion activities involving religious leaders, community leaders, and the general public. The aim is to increase interfaith understanding, eliminate prejudice, and promote the values of tolerance and mutual respect. Interfaith forums in South Sulawesi also actively respond to social issues such as intolerance, discrimination, and radicalism. They collaborated with authorities and civil society organizations to address these issues. FKUB South Sulawesi routinely holds dialogues between religious leaders to discuss current issues that have the potential to cause interfaith tensions.

FKUB Parepares routinely hold dialogues between religious leaders to discuss current issues that have the potential to cause interfaith tensions. These dialogues involve leaders from Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions. In late 2023, there was a demonstration of the rejection of the establishment of Gamaliel Christian School (Abduh, 2023). FKUB Parepare immediately took mediation steps by gathering the parties involved, including representatives from the Gamaliel Christian School, the opposing community, and religious leaders from various communities. This mediation aimed to open a space for dialogue and to find a peaceful and fair solution for all parties.

Youth Involvement in Interfaith Activities

The Interfaith Harmony Forum (FKUB) of South Sulawesi has collaborated with the Islamic University of Makassar (UIM) Al-Gazali to hold the "Goes to Campus" program. This program aims to increase the understanding and tolerance of religious communities among students and promote harmony on campus. In 2022, the Islamic State Institute of Parepare collaborated with the Ministry of Religion of Sidrap Regency in a community service activities (Husna, 2022). The results of this community service program include: (1) the formation of a cross-religious youth organization that strengthens the concept of brotherhood as the foundation of interfaith harmony; and (2) harmonious youth leaders gaining knowledge in creating harmonious content such as photos, videos, and messages uploaded to the website https://sipakatabe.id/. This initiative aims to ensure that the Interfaith Harmony Youth Leaders and the community of Amparita Village, Tellu Limpoe District, and Sidrap Regency continue to foster and guide future generations through the Guidance of the Interfaith Harmony Awareness Village (PDSKUB).

In 2023, Parepare's Islamic State Institute implemented a Community Service Program (KKN) with the theme of religious moderation. This program aims to promote of religious moderation in the community through

various community service activities involving students. This program involves students from 52 State Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKN) throughout Indonesia (Khoeron, 2023). The purpose of this program is to increase the understanding and application of religious moderation values in the community, encourage active student participation in promoting interfaith harmony, and equip students with hands-on experience through community service activities focused on religious moderation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that communication strategies in the digital era play a crucial role in maintaining interfaith harmony in South Sulawesi. The government's use of social media, websites, and other digital platforms helps reach a wider audience and communicate important messages about interfaith harmony. For example, Ramadhan et al. (2022) showed that the use of digital media by legislators effectively builds trust within communities and encourages interfaith dialogue. In Sidrap Regency, the Ministry of Religion utilizes the sipakatabe website (https://sipakatabe.id/) to support public communication services and maintain interfaith harmony by providing up-to-date information, discussion forums, and online services.

In South Sulawesi, cities such as Parepare, Sidrap, and Toraja have adopted digital platforms for preaching to facilitate interfaith harmony. Ahmad (2023) showed that the adaptation of preaching to digital platforms by the Indonesian Ulema Council of South Sulawesi reaches a wider audience with messages of tolerance and cooperation. Religious leaders in Parepare use platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to disseminate preaching messages that emphasize tolerance. In Sidrap, religious leaders, such as like Ustadz Muhammad Yusuf, use social media, such as TikTok to share sermons and hold Q&A sessions. In Toraja, initiatives include developing applications and websites to disseminate religious materials and facilitate discussion.

Interfaith forums in South Sulawesi, such as the Interfaith Harmony Forum (FKUB), act as mediators in resolving conflicts between religious groups, facilitating dialogue, and seeking peaceful solutions. FKUB routinely holds dialogues between religious leaders to discuss issues that have the potential to cause interfaith tensions. For example, FKUB Parepare took mediation steps in the case of the rejection of the establishment of the Gamaliel Christian School in late 2023 to find a peaceful solution.

Youth involvement in interfaith activities is also crucial for promoting harmony and tolerance in Parepare, Sidrap, and Tana Toraja. In Parepare, the Pelita Program holds routine discussions and visits to places of worship to increase understanding of faith. In Sidrap, the Forum of Cross-Religious Youth (FPLA) promotes dialogue and cooperation through seminars and social activity. In Tana Toraja, the Interfaith Dialogue Program for Youth encourages involvement in dialogue and social activities to promote tolerance. FKUB South Sulawesi also collaborates with the Islamic University of Makassar (UIM) Al-Gazali in the "Goes to Campus" program, which aims to increase understanding and tolerance among religious communities among students.

CONCLUSION

The digital era has brought about significant changes in communication and social interactions, including in the context of interfaith harmony in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. With a high internet penetration rate of 78.81% in 2023, largely driven by younger generations, the region faces both opportunities and challenges in maintaining religious harmony in the digital age. This study explored the multifaceted communication strategies employed by interfaith leaders and religious figures to foster tolerance and mutual understanding among religious communities. The strategic use of cyberculture and social media platforms has been highlighted as an effective means to promote religious harmony. However, the digital world also presents challenges such as the spread of extremist ideologies and the politicization of religion. Maintaining interfaith harmony in a digital society requires a comprehensive approach, including increased interfaith dialogue, inclusive religious education, active community engagement, and collaboration between religious institutions and government agencies. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp play a crucial role in facilitating communication and interaction among religious communities, but the reliability of information shared on these platforms varies. The rapid spread of misinformation and hate speech on social media can spark religious conflicts, emphasizing the need for enhanced digital literacy and effective detection and prevention strategies. The Islamic education

system and the Interfaith Harmony Forum are key players in instilling moral and ethical behavior and addressing ethnic and religious issues that can trigger disharmony on social media platforms in South Sulawesi.

This research is important because it explores the communication strategies employed by interfaith leaders and religious figures in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, to foster tolerance and mutual understanding among religious communities in the digital age. This study highlights the strategic use of cyberculture and social media platforms as an effective means of promoting religious harmony. However, the digital world also presents challenges such as the spread of extremist ideologies and the politicization of religion. Maintaining interfaith harmony in a digital society requires a comprehensive approach, including increased interfaith dialogue, inclusive religious education, active community engagement, and collaboration between religious institutions and government agencies.

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