

Conflict Management in Intercultural Communication: Adaptive Strategies in a Multicultural Environment

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Abstract: In the era of globalization marked by the increasing intensity of cross-cultural interactions, intercultural communication has become a crucial aspect in various contexts of life, from the work environment, education, to daily social relationships. However, differences in value systems, social norms, languages, and perceptions between cultures often give rise to communication challenges that lead to cultural conflicts. This conflict not only affects the effectiveness of communication, but can also hinder cooperation and create social tension. This study aims to identify common forms of cultural conflict and analyze effective conflict management strategies in the context of intercultural communication. Using a qualitative approach through literature studies and limited interviews with individuals who have cross-cultural experience, this study found that cultural conflicts most often arise in the form of communication misunderstandings, negative stereotypes, and inability to adapt to differences in values. The strategies that have proven effective in managing cultural conflicts include increasing cultural intelligence, strengthening empathy in communication, and using cross-cultural mediation as a form of neutral and fair resolution. The results of this study emphasize the importance of developing intercultural communication competencies as part of the basic skills that individuals need to have in a multicultural society, in order to create a harmonious, inclusive, and productive environment.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, cultural conflict, conflict management, cultural intelligence, mediation

1. Introduction

Indonesia is the largest archipelago in the world consisting of more than 17.000 islands spread from Sabang to Merauke. This geographical diversity not only creates biodiversity, but also gives rise to extraordinary cultural wealth (Septyana, 2019). Each religion in Indonesia has a distinctive and unique local wisdom, which is reflected in language, customs, value systems, social practices, and other intangible cultural heritage. This local wisdom has been passed down from generation to generation and has become an inseparable part of people's daily lives. Not only does it become the identity of a community, local wisdom also forms a social system and becomes a foothold in solving problems, including conflicts, that arise in the community (Jati, 2013).

However, the reality of globalization and modernization has brought great challenges to the existence of local wisdom (Indrawati & Sari, 2024). The rapid and unstoppable flow of information through digital media, as well as the massive influx of outside culture, often leads to cultural homogenization effects that erode local values. Under these conditions, the younger generation as the inheritors of culture are even further away from their own cultural roots. They are more familiar with global popular culture than their ancestral cultural heritage (Farhaeni, 2023). This phenomenon raises concerns about the disorientation of cultural identity, which in turn can trigger social friction and conflict between community group.

Social conflicts that have occurred in Indonesia in recent decades, whether ethnic, religious or culture, have been triggered by a lack of understanding of differences (Ridho, 2024). In this context, local wisdom actually has great potential to

reduce conflict. Noble values such as mutual cooperation, deliberation of consensus, tolerance, and mutual respect contained in various local traditions can be the basis for building dialogue and understanding between groups (Alfian, 2013). Local wisdom has been proven in history as a natural social mechanism used by communities to resolve differences without violence. This indicates that efforts to maintain and strengthen various local wisdom values are one of the most crucial strategic approaches in managing conflicts rooted in cultural differences.

In this context, the role of communication is vital. Communication not only functions as a means of conveying messages, but also plays an important role in creating shared understanding among individuals and groups. In cultural preservation efforts, communication has a vital role as a medium for transmitting local values to the next generation (Putranto, 2024). Through effective cultural communication, people's collective identity can be strengthened, intercultural understanding can be expanded, and social and cultural differences can be bridged. Moreover, communication has the potential to raise public awareness about the importance of preserving cultural heritage, as well as fostering concern for local traditions that are increasingly marginalized by modernity.

Based on Saharuddin's research (2009), communication strategies that emphasize local wisdom have proven to be highly effective in empowering communities. In his research, Saharuddin asserts that methods that rely on local norms and culture are able to encourage the active involvement of citizens in solving social problems in their environment independently and sustainably. This approach not only produces solutions that are appropriate to the local socio-cultural context, but also fosters a sense of confidence among the community to deal with various problems without having to rely on outside assistance, which often does not fully understand the local situation.

In accordance with these findings, in his articles Arifianto (2013) pointed out the importance of increasing media literacy as part of a strategy to preserve local culture. In his view, people who have the ability to think critically about media information will be better prepared to face the swift flow of globalization. They will not only be consumers of information, but also able to utilize digital platforms to archive, disseminate and promote their own culture. Therefore, media literacy serves as a strategic instrument in preserving local wisdom from the negative impacts of globalization, while making it more relevant and adaptable amid the rapid development of information technology.

A conflict resolution approach that emphasizes local cultural values has proven to be able to maintain social harmony effectively. Hendariningrum (2021) in his research revealed that the use of local cultural elements in reducing conflict not only reduces the potential for conflict, but also strengthens Indonesia's national identity. In this case, local culture acts as a social guideline that directs interactions between citizens and provides a peaceful platform to resolve differences in views. Therefore, it is important to continue to explore and revive forms of conflict resolution that originate from the cultural roots of society.

To ensure that the preservation of local wisdom and the strengthening of its role in handling conflict can run optimally, a comprehensive approach is needed and involves various parties in a synergistic manner. The active involvement of the government is needed in establishing regulations that favor the protection of local culture. Meanwhile, academics are expected to be able to contribute through scientific studies and research results that can be used as a foothold in designing programs that are relevant and have real impact (Zunaidi, 2024). The role of traditional leaders and community leaders is equally important, so they need to be given adequate space to express and internalize traditional values to the wider community. On the other hand, conventional media and digital platforms have a moral responsibility to help disseminate cultural heritage in a communicative, engaging and timely manner.

In addition, the education sector also has a significant contribution in efforts to preserve local wisdom. Whether through formal or non-formal education channels, the learning process acts as an important tool to transfer cultural values from one generation to the next. When elements of local culture are integrated into teaching materials, students not only gain cognitive understanding, but also develop sensitivity and respect for the cultural heritage of their ancestors. Moreover, education can be an effective space to develop cross-cultural communication skills, which are indispensable in establishing harmonious relationships in an increasingly socially diverse society.

Considering these factors, it can be concluded that the preservation of local wisdom through an inclusive and strategic communication approach is an important step in building a harmonious, empowered and adaptive society to change. Local culture should not be seen as a legacy of the past, but as an active force that can shape the future. Efforts to preserve local wisdom must be part of national development policy, so that the noble values contained in it remain alive and able to answer the challenges of the times.

2. Research Objectives

Analyze adaptive conflict management strategies in intercultural communication in a multicultural environment.

3. Methodology

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to deeply understand the role of local wisdom in cultural conflict management and how communication plays a role in the community empowerment process. The qualitative approach was chosen because this research focuses on complex social and cultural phenomena, which cannot be explained numerically, but rather through understanding the context, meaning, and experience of the research subjects.

This method allows researchers to explore various forms of cultural communication that occur in society, especially in the context of preserving local values and conflict resolution. Data were collected through literature study, observation, and in-depth interviews. Literature study was used to review theories and previous research relevant to the topics of intercultural communication, cultural conflict, and local wisdom. Literature sources used included books, scientific journals, research reports, and official documents from cultural and government institutions.

Interviews were conducted with a number of informants who have direct knowledge and experience in cultural preservation and intercultural conflict management. Informants in this study included traditional leaders, cultural communication practitioners, academics, and community members involved in cultural preservation activities in their neighborhoods. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to provide space for informants to express their views freely but remain focused on the research focus.

In addition to interviews, participatory observations were also conducted in several local cultural activities, such as traditional events, traditional festivals and community discussion forums. These observations aimed to get a real picture of the forms of cultural communication that occur in the field as well as conflict management mechanisms based on local values. Data from the observations were recorded in the form of field notes, photo documentation, and videos which were then analyzed descriptively.

The data analysis technique used was thematic analysis, namely by identifying the main theme patterns that emerged from the interview and observation data. The analysis stage in this research includes three main steps, namely the data filtering stage, the information organization stage, and the conclusion formulation stage. The filtering process was carried out by sorting out data that was directly related to the formulation of the research problem, so that only essential information was retained. Furthermore, the selected data was presented systematically in the form of narrative descriptions and tables that grouped the main themes. In the final stage, conclusions were drawn by referring to the most frequent findings and supported by the relevant literature review.

To determine the accuracy and reliability of the data collected, this research applied triangulation techniques in terms of both sources and methods. To strengthen validity, researchers also discussed with experts in the field of cultural communication to assess the consistency of understanding of the finding. Through this approach, this research is expected to present a comprehensive picture of the utilization of local wisdom as a communication tool in culture-based conflict resolution, as well as illustrate its role in strengthening social relations in the midst of community diversity.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Forms of Cultural Conflict that Occur in Society

Indonesia's cultural conflict is a complex phenomenon that reflects disharmony in the management of existing diversity. According to findings from observations and interviews, cultural conflicts usually arise due to differences in basic values, perceptions of social reality, and ways of communicating between ethnic groups. In the context of a multicultural society like Indonesia, differences in ways of interacting, the use of body language, manners, and views on time and authority often trigger misunderstandings that lead to conflict. These disagreements do not only occur in the public sphere, but also in the work environment, education, and in daily inter-community relations (Safei, 2020). For instance, in conflicts between Dayak and Madurese in Kalimantan, differences in work ethic, communication patterns, and collectivity values are the main causes, which are further complicated by a lack of understanding of each other's cultures. This conflict proves that in addition to the substance of differences, communication imbalances are also the main trigger of tension between social groups.

More deeply, cultural conflicts are not solely caused by outward or symbolic differences, but are often exacerbated by the failure to bridge differences in communication styles (Baidhaw, 2005). In practice, people with low-context communication styles, which are more direct and explicit, often clash with people who apply high-context communication styles, which rely more on nonverbal cues, implications, and social harmony in conveying messages (Liliweri, 2021). When two groups with contrasting communication styles interact without cultural awareness, the potential for misunderstanding increases dramatically. This is exacerbated by the presence of stereotypes, prejudices, and assumptions that have been embedded for a long time, thus narrowing the space for healthy dialogue. In this context, communication is not only a means of conveying messages, but also a space for negotiating intercultural meanings which, if not managed wisely, will become an arena for conflict that constantly recurs on various scales.

However, field findings also show that there are internal strengths within communities that can be used as instruments of conflict resolution, namely local wisdom. Traditional values such as deliberation, gotong royong, tolerance and the principle of coexistence have long been alive in various indigenous communities in Indonesia and have proven effective in reducing conflict. One concrete example of the application of local wisdom in conflict resolution is the Huma

Batang philosophy from Dayak culture. This concept teaches the importance of living together in a spirit of togetherness and accepting differences as part of the collective strength. In practice, dispute resolution is done in an inclusive manner, where traditional leaders, religious leaders and local communities are involved in a deliberative forum to reach consensus (Makkawar et al., 2013). The main focus of the process is not to find who is to blame, but rather to repair and restore social relations that were disrupted by the conflict. This approach, based on local values, has proven effective in preventing the escalation of horizontal conflicts and creating sustainable peace in the community. In many situations, this customary mechanism has succeeded in reconnecting fractured relationships between citizens and rebuilding overall harmony (Fitriati et al., 2020).

In addition to utilizing cultural values, strategically designed communication also plays an important role in controlling and defusing cultural tensions. Peaceful communication approaches that involve neutral figures—such as traditional leaders or religious figures—can provide an inclusive and pressure-free platform for dialogue. In addition, non-verbal forms of communication, such as the use of cultural symbols, traditional ceremonies and local art performances, have proven effective as a means of rebuilding fractured social relations. In the current digital era, social media has two sides: on the one hand it has the potential to trigger conflict due to the spread of hoaxes and provocations, but on the other hand it can also be an educational tool and campaign for peaceful cultural values (Susanti & Nurmianti 2022). Therefore, media literacy and cross-cultural communication skills are much-needed competencies in a multicultural society. The power of communication in creating inclusive spaces and promoting local wisdom values is the main foundation in building sustainable and culture-based conflict management.

4.2 Cultural Communications Strategy in Conflict Management

Communication approaches in culture-based conflict resolution generally prioritize empathy and active involvement of all parties. One method identified is the application of mediative communication by a neutral figure—such as a religious or traditional leader—who has the moral authority and trust of both conflicting parties (Praditha et al., 2024). This communication process is generally conducted slowly and gradually in an informal setting, to restore mutual trust.

Not only relying on verbal conversations, nonverbal communication also plays a significant role in defusing conflict. The use of traditional symbols, the performance of unification rituals, and the expression of local cultural arts are often effective means of restoring social relations. In some communities, traditional art performances or cooperation in social activities after conflict become a medium of reconciliation that strengthens solidarity. This confirms that cultural communication includes all forms of meaningful expression, not just oral speech.

Communication strategies that are aligned with local wisdom also often utilize a narrative-based approach, which provides space for each party to share their experiences and perspectives. This allows for empathy, as each party can understand the emotional background and values underlying the other's actions. Through the exchange of stories, conflicts are not only viewed in terms of differences, but also in a deeper human context, so that the path to peace becomes more open.

As part of preventive efforts, the development of cross-cultural communication is also needed for the long term. Intercultural dialogues involving various community groups, cultural awareness training, and the organization of intercultural forums in educational institutions and the general community can create inclusive learning spaces. Through safe and open interactions, people can grow in diversity without feeling suspicious or threatened by differences, so that the potential for conflict can be suppressed early on.

4.3 The Role of Media and Digital Literacy in Cultural Empowerment

In this digital era, digital media plays a very important role in maintaining and strengthening local wisdom values. Based on research findings, some communities have begun to utilize social media as a means to spread peaceful cultural messages and respond to various conflict issues with approaches based on local culture (Haryanto, 2022). As an example, several cultural groups in Kalimantan are now producing videos that highlight the philosophy of Huma Batang and the value of togetherness as part of a communication campaign aimed at introducing and strengthening a culture of peace in the community.

However, challenges arise when the media is also used to spread hoaxes and provocations that can trigger identity conflicts. Therefore, digital literacy is an important element in cultural conflict management. People need to be equipped with the skills to filter information, understand the cultural context of the messages received, and be able to respond to conflict wisely through available communication channels (Susanto & Rico, 2025) verifying the truth of information before responding. Strong digital literacy can encourage people to become critical media consumers and not be easily provoked by divisive narratives. This literacy education should be developed through collaboration between educational institutions, local communities and digital media platforms, in order to reach various levels of society with an approach that is appropriate to their cultural context.

Furthermore, digital media also opens up opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration that were previously difficult to reach by conventional media. Communities from different regions can share good practices in resolving culture-based conflicts through online forums, podcasts, vlogs and other forms of digital content. Such collaborations not only enrich cross-cultural insights, but also strengthen solidarity and empathy in diversity, which are important foundations for social cohesion.

For the media to truly serve as an agent of cultural empowerment, it is important for strategic actors - such as journalists, content creators and influencers - to prioritize the values of inclusivity and diversity in the narratives they build. When the media is used responsibly, it can be a powerful tool in supporting conflict resolution, building a positive collective identity, and celebrating the rich culture of Indonesian society.

4.4 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the results of this study strengthen the intercultural communication approach that emphasizes the importance of cultural context in understanding communication behavior. Local values are proven to be an important component in peace communication strategies. The practical implication is the need to integrate local values into multicultural education and community empowerment programs. The government, educational institutions, and mass media should work together to develop positive narratives about cultural diversity and the importance of resolving conflicts peacefully and culturally.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1 Conclusion

This research shows that cultural conflicts that occur in multicultural societies such as Indonesia are generally triggered by differences in values, ways of communicating, and social perceptions between groups. Misunderstandings arising from different communication styles, prejudices, and stereotypes are the main triggers for social tensions. However, Indonesian society has internal resources in the form of local wisdom that has proven effective in reducing cultural conflicts. The values such as tolerance, solidarity, mutual cooperation (gotong royong), and deliberation are fundamental in creating a peaceful and fair space for dialogue. In particular, cultural communication plays a central role in managing conflict and strengthening social cohesion. The use of mediative, empathic and participatory communication strategies that prioritize cultural symbols and expressions has proven capable of rebuilding trust between disputing parties. Therefore, the preservation of local culture is not only important as a form of respect for ancestral heritage, but also as an active strategy in building a harmonious and inclusive society amid the challenges of globalization.

5.2 Recommendation

To maintain and empower local wisdom as a means of resolving cultural conflicts, synergy is needed from various parties, including the traditional leaders, educational institutions, academics, government, the media, and the wider community. The government needs to develop policies that favor the preservation of local cultural values, while the education sector is expected to include cultural elements in the curriculum so that the younger generation grows up with a strong cultural identity. On the other hand, increasing digital literacy and training in cross-cultural communication needs to be encouraged so that people are able to manage differences wisely and productively. Moreover, support for the preservation of cultural rituals and symbols as a medium for social reconciliation is also very important. Revitalization of these cultural elements must be adjusted to the times, so that they remain relevant amid advances in information technology. By implementing a comprehensive and inclusive strategy, the noble values of the nation's culture can remain alive, thrive, and become a strong foundation in building harmony and maintaining social cohesion in the midst of diversity.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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