The Communication Strategy of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Tebing Tinggi for the Prevention of Early Marriage in Padang Hulu Subdistrict

Sholahuddin Al Ayyubi

Communication Sciences, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara, Sumatera Utara

sholahuddinalayuubi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Early marriage has become a complex social issue in various regions of Indonesia, including Padang Hulu Subdistrict, Tebing Tinggi. The Ministry of Religious Affairs of Tebing Tinggi has taken initiatives to reduce the prevalence of early marriage through various programs and communication activities. The Ministry of Religious Affairs in Padang Hulu plays an essential role in preventing the community from engaging in early marriage. This study aims to explore the communication strategies of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Tebing Tinggi in preventing early marriage in Padang Hulu Subdistrict. The research method employed is descriptive analysis with a qualitative approach, which seeks to describe and explain actual conditions based on factual evidence. Data were collected through interviews with four respondents, consisting of the head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, members of the institution, and two community members. The Ministry has implemented several efforts to prevent early marriage, including outreach to community leaders, subdistrict officials, and neighborhood heads. Programs initiated by the Ministry include the Sakinah Family Counseling Program and the selection of religious cadres, which are expected to discourage early marriage practices among the community. The findings of this research show that the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Tebing Tinggi applies an informative communication strategy aimed at influencing the public by providing enlightenment and awareness.

Keyword : Communication strategy, ministry of religious affairs

1. INTRODUCTION

Early marriage remains a serious issue in Indonesia, particularly in rural areas. Marrying at an age that is not yet physically, mentally, or emotionally mature has negative consequences for the health, psychological well-being, education, and economic conditions of young couples. Girls who marry at an early age are at higher risk of pregnancy complications, anemia, sexually transmitted infections, and are more vulnerable to stress and depression. In addition, early marriage limits access to education and career opportunities, thereby increasing the likelihood of structural poverty within households.

This phenomenon is generally influenced by cultural and traditional factors, as well as parental perceptions that marrying off children at a younger age can prevent promiscuity and negative social behavior. However, in reality, early marriage often leads to higher divorce rates, lower quality of life, and hindered personal development. Data indicate that cases of child marriage in Indonesia increased sharply during the Covid-19 pandemic. In Tebing Tinggi City, particularly in Padang Hulu Subdistrict, 2023 recorded a rise in the number of couples entering into early marriage.

In this context, the Ministry of Religious Affairs through the Office of Religious Affairs (Kantor Urusan Agama or KUA) plays an important role not only in providing marriage registration services but also in implementing preventive measures against early marriage. The involvement of the KUA is expected to help reduce the rate of child marriage through effective communication strategies and community-based programs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1 Strategy

Strategy is defined as a plan or action employed to achieve specific objectives. It not only functions as a direction but also serves as a tactical guide in addressing opportunities, challenges, and environmental changes within an organization. Thus, strategy plays a crucial role in long-term decision-making, change management, and achieving optimal performance at various levels, ranging from individuals to organizations.

According to Iman (2010), strategy is the science and art of utilizing capabilities, resources, environment, and objectives effectively. These four elements are integrated to generate various alternatives that can be evaluated in order to select the most appropriate one. The chosen strategy then becomes a tactical guideline to be implemented within the operational environment.

2.2 Communication

Etymologically, the term communication derives from the Latin word communis, meaning "common," and the verb communicare, meaning "to inform" (Zulkarnain, 2013). Thus, communication can be understood as the process of conveying information to create a shared understanding between the communicator and the communicant.

Communication is a fundamental human activity as social beings. Its definitions vary widely, ranging from conversation, information dissemination, to nonverbal expression (Fiske, 2016; Zulfahmi, 2017). The classical communication model proposed by Lasswell highlights five essential elements: who says what, in which channel, to whom, and with what effect (Shoemaker, 2003).

According to Cangara (2011), the elements of communication consist of:
1. Communicator (sender) – the party who conveys a message.
2. Message – the content or information being communicated.
3. Communicant (receiver) – the party who receives and interprets the message.
4. Channel (medium) – the means or media used to deliver the message.
5. Effect (feedback) – the impact or response that arises as a result of the communication process.

In addition, communication also involves other components such as the communicator, communicant, channel, effect, and feedback (Wulandari, 2021; Suryanto, 2017). Feedback plays an essential role in assessing the effectiveness of communication, as it indicates whether the message has been received and understood as intended.

2.3 Communication Strategy

Communication strategy is the planning of message delivery to make it more effective, easier to understand, and capable of influencing or changing one's attitudes and behaviors (Effendy, 2011). Essentially, a communication strategy combines communication planning and management to achieve specific objectives (Iman, 2010).

According to Effendy & Onong (2003), a communication strategy does not merely provide direction (planning) but also includes operational tactics that are adjusted to existing conditions and situations. In its planning, the selection of a communication strategy must be carried out carefully, as mistakes may result in serious implications in terms of time, effort, and resources (Cangara, 2011).

2.4 Socialisation

Sosialization is the process of learning norms, values, and habits within a social group that continues throughout an individual's life. It enables a person to adapt and behave in accordance with societal norms (Fahmi & Pohan, 2022).

Socialization is closely related to communication, since communication serves as the medium through which messages are transmitted, allowing society to understand certain rules or policies. According to Sukarni in Fahmi & Pohan (2022), the elements of communication strategy in socialization include:
a. Formulating objectives using the SMART system (Specific, Measurable, Appropriate, Realistic, Temporal);
b. Selecting target groups (primary and secondary target groups);
c. Developing key messages that are relevant to the program's objectives.

2.5 Ministry of Religious Affairs

The Ministry of Religious Affairs is a government institution responsible for managing religious affairs in society. Its duties include regulating worship, funding religious institutions, providing religious education, registering marriages, organizing the Hajj pilgrimage, and promoting interfaith dialogue (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2020).

In the context of marriage, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, through the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA), holds the authority to register marriages as well as to provide religious counseling. With this role, the KUA is expected to reduce the incidence of early marriage through education and regulation.

2.6 The Impact and Risks of Early Marriage

Early marriage, particularly among children under the age of 18, poses various serious impacts on health, psychological well-being, and social conditions:
a. Health: increases the risk of pregnancy complications and maternal-child mortality (WHO, 2020).
b. Education: disrupts schooling, thereby limiting future employment opportunities.
c. Psychological: triggers stress, depression, and even mental disorders.
d. Relationships: may lead to unhealthy and unequal partnerships.
e. Economic: heightens financial dependence on the spouse.
f. Divorce: divorce rates are higher among couples who marry young compared to those who marry at a mature age.

Thus, early marriage can be considered a violation of children's rights to education, health, and a better future.

2.7 Prevention of Early Marriage

Several strategies to prevent early marriage include:

a. Adequate Formal Education: Expanding access to education up to senior high school can reduce the rate of child marriage.

b. Sexuality Education: Providing counseling on reproductive health and the risks of early marriage (Aliansi Remaja Independen, 2016).

c. Community Empowerment: Raising parents' awareness of the negative impacts of early marriage.

d. Government Role: Enforcing regulations, such as Law No. 35 of 2014 on Child Protection, which sets the minimum marriage age at 19 years old.

e. Gender Equality: Encouraging a shift in public perception that both men and women have equal rights in determining their life choices.

These efforts require synergy between the government, communities, and educational institutions to reduce the practice of early marriage in Indonesia.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Type of Research

The descriptive analysis method was chosen to solve problems by describing the conditions of objects (individuals, institutions, and communities) as they are, according to the facts found in the field.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

This study employs the category of Communication Strategies of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Tebing Tinggi for the Prevention of Early Marriage in Padang Hulu Subdistrict, which includes six indicators:

a. Redundancy (message repetition)

b. Canalizing (adjustment to group values)

c. Informative (providing enlightenment)

d. Persuasive (influencing the audience)

e. Educative (delivering facts and experiences)

f. Coercive (enforcement through regulations)

These categories are used to analyze the communication strategies carried out by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in addressing early marriage.

3.3 Concept Definition

The conceptual definition of this study is "public perception of street robbery (begal) crimes." Perception is understood as the process by which an individual receives and interprets information from the environment through the five senses in order to form a response toward an object (Azizi et al., 2022).

3.4 Research Categorisation

The concept in this study refers to Kriyantono's (2012) view that a concept is an abstract idea generalised from the facts of observation. The conceptual framework of this study connects:

Ministry of Religious Affairs → Communication Strategy → Early Marriage.

3.5 Resource Person

Informants are parties who understand the details of the research issues, including employees of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Tebing Tinggi and the community of Padang Hulu Tebing Tinggi Subdistrict.

3.6 Data Collection Techniques

Data was collected using three main techniques:

1. Observation, which involved directly observing the research subjects to record behaviours and phenomena related to the community's perception of the police.

2. Interviews, which involved in-depth discussions with members of the public regarding their satisfaction with the police's performance in combating muggers.

3. Documentation, which involved reviewing written materials or archives such as regulations, media reports, and documents related to mugging crimes in Medan.

7. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis employed the Miles and Huberman model (Kase et al., 2023), which consists of three main stages:

a. Data Reduction, namely the selection and simplification of data from field notes.

b. Data Display, the organization of data into a systematic narrative to facilitate the drawing of conclusions.

c. Conclusion Drawing/Verification, the process of interpreting the data and verifying the findings to ensure validity and accountability.

8. Research Time and Location

The research was conducted in Padang Hulu Subdistrict, Tebing Tinggi City, from December 2023 to March 2024.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results

This research was conducted in Padang Hulu District, Tebing Tinggi City, North Sumatra. Geographically, the area is located in the central part of Tebing Tinggi City, bordered to the north by Padang Hilir District, to the south by Tebing Tinggi Kota District, to the east by Padang Hilir District, and to the west by Tebing Tinggi Kota District.

Interviews with the Head of the Tebing Tinggi Ministry of Religious Affairs Office, Dr. Muhammad David Saragih, S.Ag., M.M., revealed that the communication strategies implemented in preventing early marriage were carried out through various approaches. The Ministry of Religious Affairs actively visited community leaders, sub-district heads, and neighborhood leaders to deliver messages regarding the negative impacts of early marriage. In addition, counseling and education served as essential channels, such as seminars, religious gatherings, Qur'anic studies, and other religious activities aimed at raising public awareness and understanding. The Ministry also established collaborations with various stakeholders, including government agencies, educational institutions, community organizations, and religious figures, to strengthen the effectiveness of prevention programs. According to him, early marriage has serious consequences, such as increased risks to maternal and child health, disruption of education, economic dependency, and psychological pressure leading to high divorce rates. Nevertheless, monthly reports indicated a downward trend in early marriage cases after the implementation of socialization and educational programs.

Similar information was obtained from interviews with Muhammad Fitri Anshori, S.EI., a marriage registrar (penghulu) at the Tebing Tinggi Ministry of Religious Affairs. He emphasized that early marriage is closely linked to poverty, household instability, and high divorce rates. To address these issues, the Ministry has carried out various activities, including Keluarga Sakinah counseling, which provides insights on the importance of building a harmonious and stable family, as well as training for religious cadres prepared to act as agents of change within the community. Anshori expressed hope that these activities would increase awareness among both youth and parents regarding the dangers of early marriage, thereby fostering healthier, higher-quality families and communities capable of improving overall well-being.

Interviews with community members further reinforced these findings. Ahmad Ramli, a resident of Padang Hulu District, expressed his appreciation for the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which he believed had significantly contributed to educating the public about the dangers of early marriage. According to him, lectures, discussions, and campaigns conducted by the Ministry—both directly and through mass media and social media—provided new perspectives on the importance of postponing marriage until a more mature age. A similar view was shared by Budi, another resident, who acknowledged that the Ministry's counseling programs had successfully raised community awareness of the social, psychological, and economic impacts of early marriage. He further hoped that the programs would not only focus on awareness campaigns but also expand through collaborations with educational institutions and community organizations, complemented by practical training for adolescents to better manage relationships and make informed decisions about marriage.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the communication strategies of the Tebing Tinggi Ministry of Religious Affairs in preventing early marriage in Padang Hulu District were implemented through counseling, education, cross-sector collaboration, and direct engagement with community leaders. These strategies proved effective in reducing early marriage rates while also raising public awareness of its negative consequences. Furthermore, the community responded positively and supported the programs, with the hope that such initiatives would continue on a sustainable basis and reach broader audiences, thereby achieving the goal of building healthier and higher-quality families and communities.

4.2 Discussion

The Ministry of Religious Affairs has successfully implemented its communication strategies, as evidenced by the monthly decline in early marriage rates reflected in official data and reports. This demonstrates the effectiveness of the strategies employed, which function to continuously gain public support and participation.

Based on interviews with the Head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Padang Hulu, Tebing Tinggi, the communication strategy used by the Ministry to promote and prevent early marriage was through informative communication techniques. The Ministry also collaborated with community leaders to enhance public participation in early marriage prevention programs.

The effectiveness of the Keluarga Sakinah counseling program organized by the Tebing Tinggi Ministry of Religious Affairs was also highlighted. Survey and interview results indicated a high level of community participation in this program. Respondents stated that the program provided them with a better understanding of the importance of maintaining family harmony and the risks associated with early marriage.

Furthermore, collaboration carried out by the Ministry of Religious Affairs with relevant stakeholders—such as government institutions, non-governmental organizations, and community leaders—was found to play

a crucial role in expanding the reach and impact of early marriage prevention programs. Through such collaborations, the programs could be implemented more effectively and reach broader segments of society.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on data on early marriage events in Tebing Tinggi City, Padang Hulu District, in 2024 up to the present, no young couples have been found to marry at an early age. This indicates a significant decline in early marriage cases in the area. This achievement cannot be separated from the role of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Tebing Tinggi, which has implemented an informative communication strategy. Through this strategy, the messages delivered become easier for the community to understand and respond to. The application of informative communication principles such as comprehension checks, concept development, and action determination has greatly contributed to raising public awareness of the negative impacts of early marriage. These principles also help to clarify the objectives of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and strengthen the involvement of community leaders. In addition, the success in preventing early marriage is also influenced by technical, political, social, and economic factors. Therefore, collaboration among community leaders, subdistrict heads, and neighborhood chiefs is essential to address these factors and reinforce the role of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in preventing early marriage within the community.

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