

CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION OF CHRISTIAN STUDENTS IN STRENGTHENING RELIGIOUS MODERATION IN LANGSA CITY

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Abstract: This study aims to analyse the cross-cultural communication patterns of Christian students in Langsa City and explain their contribution to strengthening religious moderation at the interpersonal level. The research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to understand the lived experiences of Christian students as a minority group in a Muslim-majority environment. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, and then analysed using Creswell's phenomenological procedures through the stages of coding, categorization, and theme development. The results show that Christian students develop three cross-cultural communication patterns: adaptive, integrative, and defensive-situational patterns. Adaptive patterns are used to reduce initial anxiety and uncertainty through the adjustment of communication styles and respect for local norms. Integrative patterns develop as more harmonious and inclusive social relationships are formed. Meanwhile, defensive-situational patterns emerge under certain conditions as a strategy to avoid conflict. This study confirms that religious moderation is a result of daily communication practices. Theoretically, this study integrates Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) with the concept of religious moderation at the micro level. In practical terms, these findings have implications for the development of an inclusive and diversity-sensitive campus environment.

Keywords: *Aceh, cross-cultural communication, minority students, religious moderation.*

A. Introduction

Aceh has a long history with a strong Islamic tradition and is the only region in Indonesia that formally implements Islamic Sharia. This religious-based regulation affects almost all aspects of social life, from dress rules, gender relations, to social interaction in public ¹. Langsa City as one of the educational cities in Aceh is inhabited by students from various regions, including Christian students from outside Aceh. Their presence in the midst of the majority of Muslims who practice Islamic Sharia raises an interesting cross-cultural communication dynamic to explore. As a minority group, they often experience culture shock, especially in the face of differences in language, social norms, and religious practices ². Language barriers arise because the people of Langsa use Acehnese as the language of daily communication, while immigrant students do not always master the language. The norms of dress and social behaviour strictly regulated by Islamic values also require them to conform ³.

This situation raises anxiety and uncertainty in cross-cultural interactions, both on campus and in residential environments. However, Christian students are not only passive, but also show agency by developing proactive communication strategies. They learn the local language, adapt to the customs of the local community, and build positive social relationships. These efforts not only facilitate the adaptation process, but also contribute to strengthening religious moderation.

This study aims to analyse the cross-cultural communication patterns of Christian students in Langsa City and understand how these patterns are used to manage cultural differences and contribute to strengthening religious moderation at the interpersonal level. This research phenomenon focuses on the experience of Christian students as a minority

¹ Muhammad Ansor and Yaser Amri, "Beyond Pious Critical Agency: Women, Interfaith Marriage and Religious Conversion In Aceh," *Analisa* 1, no. 2 (December 21, 2016): 217, <https://doi.org/10.18784/analisa.v1i2.368>; Muhammad Ansor and Yaser Amri, "Being Christians in the Acehnese Way: Illiberal Citizenship and Women's Agency in the Islamic Public Sphere," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 14, no. 1 (2020): 77–112, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2020.14.1.77-112>; Muhammad Ansor, Ismail Fahmi Arrauf, and Yaser Amri, "Under The Shadow of Sharia: Christian Muslim Relations from Acehnese Christian Experience," *KOMUNITAS: INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INDONESIAN SOCIETY AND CULTURE*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.15294/komunitas.v8i1.4966>.

² Muhammad Aulia, Dohra Fitrisia, and Rizki Maulidza Haqqu, "Understanding Culture Shock and Its Relationship to Intercultural Communicative Competence," *Studies in English Language and Education* 10, no. 3 (2023): 1420–33, <https://doi.org/10.24815/siele.v10i3.31074>; Liwei Zhu, "Personal Mental Impacts of Christian Faith in Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Chinese Migrants in Ireland," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 25, no. 4 (2022): 448–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2022.2028749>; R Alatas and I Sayimer, "Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges Faced by International Students in Türkiye: A Psychological Perspective," *Space and Culture, India* 12, no. 4 (2025): 30–42, <https://doi.org/10.20896/zbgl8c81>; A Tarawneh, "Communicating Climate Change Risks Across Cultures and Languages," in *Studies in Computational Intelligence*, vol. 1171, 2025, 175–85, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-77925-1_16.

³ Ansor, Arrauf, and Amri, "Under The Shadow of Sharia: Christian Muslim Relations from Acehnese Christian Experience."

group interacting in a social environment dominated by the religious values of the majority. This research uses a qualitative approach to explore students' subjective experiences in cross-cultural interactions on campus and in society.⁴ Academically, this research is expected to contribute to the development of cross-cultural communication studies in the context of religious minorities, especially through the integration of interpersonal communication perspectives and religious moderation. Thus, this study not only enriches the communication literature, but also provides a new perspective in understanding the practice of religious moderation through everyday experience.

In a global context, cross-cultural communication has become an increasingly urgent issue in modern society characterised by increasing human mobility and intercultural interaction.⁵ Various studies show that individuals in multicultural environments face challenges in the form of uncertainty and anxiety during interaction, which have an impact on the effectiveness of communication.⁶ The success of cultural adaptation is largely determined by the individual's ability to manage differences in values, norms, and social identities.⁷ Interpersonal communication strategies are also crucial in building harmonious relationships in the midst of diversity.⁸ In the context of higher education, student diversity is an important factor that affects the dynamics of social interaction and the formation of cultural identity.⁹ Correspondingly, the study of religious

⁴ John W Creswell and J David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2023).

⁵ T L Warren, *Cross-Cultural Communication: Perspectives in Theory and Practice*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315224855>.

⁶ Alatas and Sayimer, "Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges Faced by International Students in Türkiye: A Psychological Perspective"; R F Alhasan, "Cross-Culture Communication Apprehension in Communicating in English among Jordanian Students in Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)," *Multidisciplinary Reviews* 6 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.31893/multirev.2023spe010>; A Florack et al., "How Initial Cross-Group Friendships Prepare for Intercultural Communication: The Importance of Anxiety Reduction and Self-Confidence in Communication," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 43, no. PB (2014): 278–88, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2014.09.004>.

⁷ Colleen Ward, Stephen Bochner, and Adrian Furnham, *The Psychology of Culture Shock* (Routledge, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003070696>; Y.-L. Chen et al., "Religious Practices in Cross-Cultural Contexts: Indonesian Male Science Students' Adjustment in Taiwan," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 62, no. 3 (2015): 464–75, <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000076>; Zhu, "Personal Mental Impacts of Christian Faith in Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Chinese Migrants in Ireland."

⁸ Stella Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999); Alo Liliweri, *Dasar-Dasar Komunikasi Antarbudaya* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2003); Lusiana Andriani Lubis, *Pemahaman Praktis Komunikasi Antarbudaya* (Medan: Penerbit Press USU, 2018).

⁹ Chris R. Glass and Christina M. Westmont, "Comparative Effects of Belongingness on the Academic Success and Cross-Cultural Interactions of Domestic and International Students," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 38 (January 2014): 112, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2013.04.004>; Simon Marginson, "Student Self-Formation in International Education," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 18, no. 1 (February 27, 2014): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315313513036>; Muhammad Aulia, Dohra Fitrisia, and Rizki

moderation is also growing globally in response to the increasing potential for identity-based conflicts.¹⁰ Nevertheless, most international studies still place cross-cultural communication in a general context, without specifically linking it to religious practices in everyday life. This gap becomes even more significant in regions such as Aceh, where religious norms formally govern social behaviour and intergroup relationships.

In the local context of Indonesia, especially Aceh, cross-cultural communication has different characteristics because it is influenced by the application of Islamic sharia as a social and cultural system. Aceh as a region with a strong religious identity presents unique dynamics in the interaction between majority and minority groups.¹¹ Research on interreligious relations in Aceh shows that although minorities are accepted and live peacefully, space for their public expression remains limited, as in the case of the establishment of houses of worship.¹²

Langsa City as an education centre strengthens this dynamic with an increase in the number of students from various regions. Institutional data from Universitas Samudra shows a consistent increase in the number of students in the last three years, from 1,574 students in 2023 to 1,922 students in 2024 and reaching 2,556 students in 2025, with a total of more than 8,000 active students.¹³ Most of the students come from outside Aceh, especially from the North Sumatra region and several regions of Eastern Indonesia which have a relatively high level of social and religious diversity. This condition indicates an increase in educational mobility while strengthening the intensity of cross-cultural interaction in academic life. The phenomenon of adaptation of immigrant students in cross-cultural communication also occurs in various regions of Indonesia, such as the experience of Pattani students in Lampung and students outside Java at the

Maulidza Haqqu, "Understanding Culture Shock and Its Relationship to Intercultural Communicative Competence," *Studies in English Language and Education* 10, no. 3 (September 16, 2023): 1420–33, <https://doi.org/10.24815/siele.v10i3.31074>.

¹⁰ Setinawati et al., "The Framework of Religious Moderation: A Socio-Theological Study on the Role of Religion and Culture from Indonesia's Perspective," *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 11 (2025): 101271, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.101271>; Momy Hunowu et al., "RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN MUSLIM-MAJORITY COUNTRIES: Comparing Gorontalo, Indonesia and Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia," *MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 49, no. 1 (July 1, 2025): 222, <https://doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v49i1.1350>.

¹¹ Ansor and Amri, "Beyond Pious Critical Agency: Women, Interfaith Marriage and Religious Conversion In Aceh"; Ansor, Arrauf, and Amri, "Under The Shadow of Sharia: Christian Muslim Relations from Acehnese Christian Experience"; Eka Srimulyani et al., "Diasporic Chinese Community in Post-Conflict Aceh: Socio-Cultural Identities, and Social Relations with Acehnese Muslim Majority," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 56, no. 2 (August 26, 2018): 395–420, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2018.562.395-420>.

¹² Faradilla Fadlia and Ismar Ramadani, "Toleransi Ala Aceh (Intoleransi): Sebuah Analisis Sense of Place Dalam Pendirian Rumah Ibadah Agama," *Journal of Political Sphere* 1, no. 1 (2020): 1–13.

¹³ Universitas Samudra, "Data Mahasiswa Aktif Universitas Samudra Periode 2025/2026 Genap" (Langsa, Aceh, Indonesia: Universitas Samudra, June 28, 2026), <https://data.unsam.ac.id/>.

Semarang Islamic Boarding School.¹⁴ Mawardi et al.'s research also shows that Muslim and Christian students in Langsa develop a pattern of identity negotiation through a functional biculturalism approach, which allows them to maintain their identity while adapting to the social environment.¹⁵ However, the research still emphasises more the aspect of identity negotiation, without discussing in depth the communication patterns formed in daily interactions. The condition of intolerance in Langsa City was also recorded in the Setara Institute's research which placed Langsa in fifth place as the city with the lowest tolerance index in Indonesia in 2021, with a score of 4.363 on the scale 1–7.¹⁶

Despite the wealth of existing studies, previous research still leaves a number of significant gaps. Previous studies have generally focused on the phenomenon of culture shock, tolerance, or identity negotiation; but have not specifically explored how cross-cultural communication patterns are constructed and used by minority students in everyday interactions. In addition, most studies still use macro or normative approaches, so they do not pay attention to the dynamics of interpersonal communication as a concrete social practice.

Mawardi et al.'s research has made an important contribution to explaining identity negotiations, but has not yet integrated the perspective of cross-cultural communication with the concept of religious moderation.¹⁷ On the other hand, the study of religious moderation in Indonesia is still dominated by normative and policy approaches, so there is not much emphasis on how moderation is practised in daily interactions.¹⁸ This condition is becoming increasingly relevant in the context of increasing student mobility in Langsa which brings together individuals from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. This gap between the theoretical framework and empirical reality is the main academic concern in this study, namely the need to understand cross-cultural communication as a social practice that contributes directly to the formation of religious moderation.

¹⁴ Atika Fadhilatul Rodiyah Saputri, Muhamad Bisri Mustofa, and Siti Wuryan, "Adaptasi Dan Interaksi Mahasiswa Pattani (Thailand) Dalam Tinjauan Komunikasi Antar Budaya Di Lampung," *Jurnal Peurawi: Media Kajian Komunikasi Islam* 4, no. 2 (October 29, 2021): 131, <https://doi.org/10.22373/jp.v4i2.10949>; Heru Sofyan, "PERAN KOMUNIKASI LINTAS BUDAYA DALAM MEMBANGUN KEHARMONISAN ANTAR SANTRI (Studi Kasus Pesantren Life Skill Daarun Najaah)," *Jurnal Peurawi: Media Kajian Komunikasi Islam* 6, no. 2 (October 31, 2023): 127, <https://doi.org/10.22373/jp.v6i2.18573>.

¹⁵ Mawardi Mawardi et al., "Identity Negotiation of Christian and Muslim Students in Interaction Between Religions in Langsa," *MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 43, no. 2 (2019): 58, <https://doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v43i2.643>.

¹⁶ Tri Meilani Ameliya, "Ini 10 Kota Masing-Masing Paling Toleran Dan Intoleran," ed. Redaksi Antara News, April 2, 2022, <https://kaltara.antaranews.com/berita/493213/ini-10-kotamasing-masing-paling-toleran-dan-intoleran>.

¹⁷ Mawardi et al., "Identity Negotiation of Christian and Muslim Students in Interaction Between Religions in Langsa," 61.

¹⁸ Setinawati et al., "The Framework of Religious Moderation: A Socio-Theological Study on the Role of Religion and Culture from Indonesia's Perspective."

Departing from this gap, this study uses the Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) framework developed by Gudykunst.¹⁹ This theory explains that individuals in cross-cultural interactions face two main challenges: anxiety and uncertainty. Anxiety refers to feelings of discomfort or tension, while uncertainty refers to the inability to predict the behaviour of others. This theory emphasises that effective communication can only be achieved when individuals are able to manage both factors in a balanced manner. Using this framework, this study aims to analyse the cross-cultural communication patterns of Christian students in Langsa City and explain the contribution of these communication patterns to managing differences and strengthening religious moderation in daily life. The theoretical contribution of this research lies in the integration between AUM theory and the concept of religious moderation in a micro-context, while its practical contribution is to provide recommendations for the development of a more inclusive and diversity-sensitive campus environment.

This study not only examines cross-cultural communication among minority students but also identifies three communication patterns—adaptive, integrative, and defensive-situational—as practical mechanisms for constructing religious moderation at the interpersonal level.

B. Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological study design. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows researchers to deeply understand the lived experiences of Christian students as a minority group, who face adaptation challenges in interacting with the Muslim-majority community in Aceh.²⁰

The research informants were selected using purposive sampling techniques based on the specified criteria namely, active students, Christians, from outside Aceh or having experience as a minority group, have lived in Langsa City for at least two years, and having experience of direct interaction with Muslim students or the local community. A total of three main informants were conducted with in depth interview, while two questionnaire respondents were used for supporting data. The number of informants in phenomenological research is not aimed at statistical generalisation, but rather at achieving a depth of understanding of subjective experience. In this study, the data have reached a saturation point where no new information emerged from the additional interviews.

¹⁹ William B Gudykunst, “Applying Anxiety\uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory to Intercultural Adjustment Training,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 22, no. 2 (1998): 227–50, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0147-1767\(98\)00005-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0147-1767(98)00005-4).

²⁰ Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 191–92.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the informants, including gender, age, regional origin, length of stay, study programme, and church denomination.²¹

Table 1. Key Informant Demographic Characteristics

Code	Gender	Age	Regional Origin	Length of Stay (years)	University/Study Programme	Denomination
INF-1	Male	22	Pematangsiantar, North Sumatra	5	UNSAM /Technology	Protestant
INF-2	Female	20	Dolok Sanggul, North Sumatra	3	UNSAM / Biology Education	Protestant
INF-3	Male	21	Samosir, North Sumatra	4	UNSAM /PGSD	Protestant
RK-1	Female	22	Langsa, Aceh	>5	UNSAM	Protestant
RK-2	Female	21	Aceh Singkil	2	UNSAM	Protestant

Source: Research data (2024-2025)

Ethics in research is a major concern in this study. Each informant was given a thorough explanation of the objectives, procedures, and potential risks of the research before giving informed consent. Participation is voluntary and informants can withdraw at any time. To protect privacy, all names of informants and institutions are redacted in the report, and each informant is assigned an identity code (INF-1, INF-2, RK1, RK2.). Raw data (interview recordings and transcripts) are stored securely and only accessed by the research team.

Data were collected through three techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore informants' experiences and communication strategies, participatory observations to record patterns of interaction on campus and in the community, and documentation studies to reinforce findings. In addition to the five key informants, this study also involved additional informants from the campus environment to enrich contextual understanding.

Data analysis follows Creswell's phenomenological analysis procedure which consists of several steps.²² *First*, the researcher organized and prepared the data for analysis, including verbatim transcription of interviews, typing field notes, and archiving all data. *Second*, the researcher read all the data repeatedly to get an overview and record the initial note in the margins of the text. *Third*, the researcher coded the data by segmenting the text and labelling the code, using in vivo code (participants' words) and code developed by the researcher. *Fourth*, the researcher identified the

²¹ Creswell and Creswell, 198.

²² Creswell and Creswell, 205–12.

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themes by grouping similar codes into broader categories, then compiling textural descriptions (what participants experienced) and structural descriptions (how participants experienced them). *Fifth*, the researcher developed a description of the essence of the informant's experience by combining the two descriptions into a complete picture.

The validity of the data is maintained through several strategies in accordance with Creswell's qualitative validation procedures.²³ *First*, triangulation of sources and methods was carried out by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation. *Second*, member checking is carried out by bringing back themes or the whole story to the participants to ensure the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation. *Third*, researchers conduct reflexivity by identifying personal experiences and how these experiences have the potential to shape interpretations of data. *Fourth*, researchers involve peers (peer debriefing) to provide critical input to the process and results of the analysis. With this approach, the research is expected to produce a comprehensive picture of Christian students' strategies in managing communication uncertainty while strengthening religious moderation in Aceh.

C. Results and Discussion

Communication Patterns of Christian Students in Langsa City

The results of the study show that Christian students in Langsa City develop three patterns of cross-cultural communication, namely adaptive, integrative, and defensive-situational patterns. These three patterns are formed as a response to cultural and religious differences as well as strategies for managing anxiety and uncertainty in social interactions as described in the theory of Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM).²⁴

These three communication patterns do not stand alone, but form a gradual and dynamic process of adaptation: students start with an adaptive pattern to reduce initial anxiety, then progress to an integrative pattern when social relationships are established, and sometimes return to a defensive-situational pattern when faced with conflict situations. This condition shows that cross-cultural communication is circular and contextual, not linear.

1. Adaptive Communication Pattern

In the early stages of interaction, Christian students experience a state of uncertainty and anxiety that is influenced by negative perceptions of

²³ Creswell and Creswell, 2013–14.

²⁴ Gudykunst, "Applying Anxiety\uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory to Intercultural Adjustment Training."

cultural and religious social environments that are different from their own. This can be seen from the experience of informants who stated:

"First of all, I must have a doctrine... He said I had to be careful because of different religions." (INF-1)

This experience is in line with Ansor's finding that public spaces in Aceh, framed by Islamic values and identities, often encourage minority groups to adapt—even merge into the cultural collectivity of the majority.²⁵ However, these efforts do not necessarily succeed in standardising the performance of public spaces, because the visibility of public spaces is always diverse, multiple, and contested.²⁶ In the context of Christian students, this initial anxiety arises because they are faced with situations in which their personal identity as a minority tends to be forced to conform to a social environment dominated by the religious values of the majority.²⁷

However, this condition did not last long because students actively adjusted themselves through communication. The dominant form of adaptation can be seen in changes in communication styles, especially in the use of language and intonation:

"We're a bit tough, so we have to be a little soft here." (INF-3)

This adjustment is a tangible form of what Siregar et al. call functional resistance, in which minority groups conform to local norms as a strategy to survive and build harmonious relations.²⁸ In the perspective of Stella Ting-Toomey's theory of identity negotiation, this action shows the existence of mindful communication, which is the readiness of the individual to change perceptions and frames of reference and to be motivated to understand cultural and ethnic differences.²⁹

In addition, students also show sensitivity to social and religious norms, such as respecting the worship time of the majority community:

"If you are here, you must respect Maghrib time." (INF-3)

²⁵ Muhammad Ansor, "Agensi Perempuan Kristen Di Ruang Publik Islam Aceh" (UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2019), xvii, https://repository.uinjkt.ac.id/dspace/bitstream/123456789/65908/1/MUHAMMAD_ANSOR_SPs.pdf.

²⁶ Ansor, xvii.

²⁷ Ansor, xvii.

²⁸ Mustamar Iqbal Siregar, Bahtiar, and Mhd Rasid Ritonga, "Religious Moderation in the Land of Syari'a: Christian Women's Resistance in Acehese Education Institutions," *Edukasia Islamika* 8, no. 1 (June 25, 2023): 97–116, <https://doi.org/10.28918/jei.v8i1.366>.

²⁹ Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures*; Stella Ting-Toomey, "Identity Negotiation Theory," in *The International Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Communication* (Wiley, 2015), 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118540190.wbeic129>.

This reverence for the religious rituals of the majority is an indication that Christian students are achieving what Ting-Toomey calls shared meaning in cross-cultural communication, where individuals have reached a common understanding and received the desired outcome of such communication.³⁰ In the context of Aceh, these findings also strengthen the argument that despite the dominance of Islamic values in the public sphere, the rights of minorities to practise religious values according to their beliefs are still respected.³¹

These findings suggest that students use adaptive communication strategies to bridge cultural differences. From an AUM perspective, these actions are individual efforts to reduce uncertainty (uncertainty reduction) and anxiety (anxiety management) so that communication can take place effectively.³²

Thus, adaptive communication patterns become the initial foundation for building more stable cross-cultural interactions.

2. Integrative Communication Pattern

After going through the adaptation phase, Christian students show progress towards a more integrative communication pattern. This pattern is characterised by the formation of harmonious, inclusive, and sustainable social relations with the majority community. In the perspective of cross-cultural communication, integrative patterns reflect the ability of individuals to not simply survive in the midst of differences, but actually build bridges of understanding that allow for mutually beneficial interactions.³³

Most of the informants stated that they did not experience discrimination in their daily lives:

"There is no discrimination... All are welcome." (INF-2)

"As long as you're here, it's safe." (INF-3)

This statement shows that despite the initial stigma and prejudice against Aceh as an intolerant region, the reality at the micro level actually shows a more open acceptance. These findings are in line with what Fadlia and Ramadani refer to as "Acehnese tolerance", where minorities are

³⁰ Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures*.

³¹ Mumtazul Fikri, "Relasi Antarumat Beragama Pada Lembaga Pendidikan: Studi Kasus Pada Perguruan Kristen Methodist Banda Aceh," *Penamas* 30, no. 2 (November 24, 2017): 195–212, <https://doi.org/10.31330/penamas.v30i2.151>.

³² Gudykunst, "Applying Anxiety\uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory to Intercultural Adjustment Training"; W B Gudykunst and T Nishida, "Anxiety, Uncertainty, and Perceived Effectiveness of Communication across Relationships and Cultures," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 25, no. 1 (2001): 55–71, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767\(00\)00042-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767(00)00042-0).

³³ Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures*.

accepted and can live peacefully in society, although space for their public expression remains limited.³⁴ However, in contrast to Fadlia and Ramadani's findings which highlight structural limitations (such as the establishment of houses of worship), this study shows that at the interpersonal level, harmonious social relationships actually develop dynamically.³⁵

In an academic context, relationships with lecturers and other students also run professionally:

"Professional lecturer... values are not differentiated." (INF-2)

These findings strengthen the argument that educational institutions in Aceh, especially Samudra University, have provided a relatively inclusive space for minority students. This is important to remember, as stated by Srimulyani et al., the relationship between the Chinese community and the Muslim community in Aceh shows that harmonious social interaction can flourish despite differences in identity and beliefs.³⁶ In the context of education, the professionalism of lecturers is a key factor that allows Christian students to feel equal and valued regardless of religious background.

Positive social interactions are also seen in residential life:

"At the boarding house, we are treated like their own children." (INF-2)

This experience shows that warm and supportive personal relationships are an important bridge in cross-cultural adaptation. Maisara recounted that her boarding mother constantly monitored her well-being, reflecting a concern that went beyond just rent-rent relationship. This kind of relationship, as explained by Ansor and Amri, shows that Acehnese people have their own way of building social relations with minorities—a form of citizenship that is illiberal but still allows for social cohesion at the micro level.⁵

These findings are reinforced by questionnaire data. One of the respondents stated:

"I am well received in the city of Langsa regardless of religious differences." (RK-1)

³⁴ Fadlia and Ramadani, "Toleransi Ala Aceh (Intoleransi): Sebuah Analisis Sense of Place Dalam Pendirian Rumah Ibadah Agama," 1–13.

³⁵ Fadlia and Ramadani, 8.

³⁶ Srimulyani et al., "Diasporic Chinese Community in Post-Conflict Aceh: Socio-Cultural Identities, and Social Relations with Acehnese Muslim Majority," 395–420.

Other respondents also affirmed:

"With an open mind, adapting is easier." (RK-2)

The questionnaire data showed that the openness of both parties, Christian students and the local community, was a determining factor in the success of adaptation. Within the framework of Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory, this open attitude is part of ethical interaction that allows individuals to respect diversity and maintain integrity in cross-cultural interactions.³⁷

Analytically, this pattern indicates conditions of low anxiety and low uncertainty, where cross-cultural communication has reached a high level of effectiveness. In AUM theory, this condition relates to the ability of individuals to connect with strangers and maintain ethical interactions in a multicultural environment.³⁸

Furthermore, this integrative communication pattern contributes directly to the formation of inclusive and harmonious social relationships, which are an important prerequisite in the life of a multicultural society. As Hunowu et al. argue, religious pluralism in Muslim-majority countries does not necessarily mean conflict; instead, there are often negotiations and adaptations that allow minority groups to coexist peacefully.³⁹

Thus, integrative communication patterns show that Christian students are not only able to manage initial anxiety, but are also able to build meaningful relationships with the majority community. This is in line with what Fariza et al. refer to as the "hijab as an identity negotiation site," in which religious symbols become the arena of negotiation between minority identities and the cultural dominance of the majority.⁴⁰ In the context of Christian students in Langsa, this negotiation of identity does not only occur through physical symbols, but also through daily communication practices that build trust and acceptance.

3. Defensive-Situational Communication Pattern

Although the interaction is generally harmonious, this study also found that there is a pattern of defensive communication that arises in certain situations. This pattern is seen when students are faced with potential conflicts or social tensions, especially in interactions with certain groups. This defensive-situational pattern is an adaptive response to social

³⁷ Gudykunst, "Applying Anxiety\uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory to Intercultural Adjustment Training."

³⁸ Gudykunst.

³⁹ Hunowu et al., "RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN MUSLIM-MAJORITY COUNTRIES: Comparing Gorontalo, Indonesia and Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia."

⁴⁰ M R Fariza et al., "Christian Women in Aceh: The Hijab as a Site of Identity Negotiation," *Social Identities*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2025.2532487>.

conditions that are not always conducive, in which individuals must navigate a public space that is sometimes filled with tension and prejudice.⁴¹

One of the informants revealed:

"If parents welcome... but sometimes young people like to be bullied."
(INF-1)

The difference in response between the old and young generations shows that the level of acceptance of minorities is not homogeneous in Acehese society. These findings are in line with what some researchers refer to as egocentrism and exclusivism that are often expressed in public spaces as a form of identity recognition and a desire to be recognised by society. In the context of Aceh, this exclusive attitude arises from extreme judgments and defences by the majority group who want to show self-recognition as devout Muslims and orally obedient to the religion, thus giving rise to the understanding that only Islam can develop and exist in Aceh.⁴² This attitude of exclusivism encourages a person to feel superior and to act inappropriately towards adherents of minority religions.

In addition, communication conflicts can also occur due to misunderstandings:

"Lack of communication... so it was a clash." (INF-1)

The case of clashes mentioned by the informant—in which a fellow Christian student was the victim of vandalism—shows that miscommunication can quickly escalate into physical conflicts when not properly managed. In such a situation, defensive communication becomes a defensive strategy chosen to avoid a greater escalation of the conflict.⁴³

In dealing with these conditions, students tend to use defensive communication strategies by avoiding conflicts:

"It's better to be safe." (INF-1)

This "*ngalah*" strategy shows that Christian students prefer to maintain the stability of social relations rather than impose their rights or opinions.⁴⁴ This approach is in line with the strategies used by various groups in Aceh in dealing with conflict situations—as described in a study of women activists in Aceh, where they used a strategy of "manipulating"

⁴¹ Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures*.

⁴² Fathayatul Husna and Annisa Zulkarnain, "Digitizing Tolerance Practices as an Effort to Prevent Religious Conflict in Aceh through New Media," *Profetik: Jurnal Komunikasi* 17, no. 1 (June 29, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.14421/pjk.v17i1.3011>.

⁴³ Jack R. Gibb, "Defensive Communication," *Journal of Communication* 11, no. 3 (September 1, 1961): 141–48, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1961.tb00344.x>.

⁴⁴ Gibb.

topics of conversation to avoid suspicion from the military or armed groups. In the case of Christian students, the "*ngalah*" strategy serves as a self-protection mechanism to avoid the potential for greater conflict.

From an AUM perspective, this situation shows an increased level of anxiety and uncertainty in certain interactions. Therefore, individuals respond with protective strategies to maintain the stability of social relationships.⁴⁵

This pattern shows that cross-cultural communication does not always run linearly towards harmony, but is dynamic and contextual depending on the social situation at hand. As stated by the researchers, efforts to prevent and resolve conflicts in Aceh have been carried out by various parties, but there are still community leaders who have not heeded this direction of tolerance—such as the case of intolerance that occurred in Aceh Singkil. This shows that despite progress in interreligious relations, there are still groups that maintain an exclusivist attitude that can trigger conflict at any time.

In a broader context, these findings also show that minority groups in Aceh are constantly negotiating identity and risk management in their social interactions. As explained in the study by Mustaqilla et al., Christian women in Aceh, including those serving in police institutions, must negotiate their religious identity by wearing the hijab and limiting their expression in public spaces to avoid conflict with the majority of Muslims who position themselves as "hosts".⁴⁶ They also manage social risks by accepting the status of 'guests' who must respect sharia rules, even if it limits their access to worship facilities, career development, and full participation in public spaces.

Thus, defensive-situational communication patterns are an important part of Christian students' cross-cultural communication strategies—a reminder that adaptation and integration do not always go smoothly, and that the ability to read situations and respond protectively is just as important a skill as the ability to build harmonious relationships. As the researchers conclude, the conflict resolution model in Aceh requires an approach that is not only normative but also takes into account complex and layered social dynamics.⁴⁷

Religious Moderation as an Outcome of Communication Patterns

⁴⁵ Gudykunst and Nishida, "Anxiety, Uncertainty, and Perceived Effectiveness of Communication across Relationships and Cultures."

⁴⁶ Safira Mustaqilla et al., "The Existence of Non Muslim Minority in Aceh, Indonesia: A Study Civil and Police Institution," *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Dan Hukum Islam* 8, no. 1 (April 28, 2024): 628, <https://doi.org/10.22373/sjhk.v8i1.17386>.

⁴⁷ Husna and Zulkarnain, "Digitizing Tolerance Practices as an Effort to Prevent Religious Conflict in Aceh through New Media."

The results of the study show that religious moderation does not appear normatively, but is formed through the practice of cross-cultural communication that takes place in daily life. These findings are in line with the view that religious moderation is not a concept born of formal policy or religious discourse alone, but a product of real and continuous social interaction.⁴⁸ In the context of Christian students in Langsa, religious moderation is manifested through a series of adaptive, inclusive, and situational communication practices.

Christian students show tolerance by respecting local norms and customs:

"We have to respect the customs here." (INF-3)

This attitude of respect is the initial foundation of religious moderation. As explained by Setinawati et al., religious moderation from a socio-theological perspective is not only concerned with passive tolerance, but also involves active involvement in understanding and respecting differences.⁴⁹ Their research shows that religion and culture have a mutually reinforcing role in shaping moderate attitudes, where religious values serve as moral guides while local cultures provide concrete social practices.⁵⁰ In the case of Christian students, respect for local customs such as Maghrib time or the way of dressing reflects the integration between their own religious values and the social norms that prevail in Aceh.

Meanwhile, the community and educational institutions also provide space for the religious practices of minority students:

"Our religious values are taken from the church." (INF-2)

The campus policy that provides flexibility for non-Muslim students to take religious course grades from their respective churches shows that educational institutions have a strategic role in creating inclusive spaces for minority religious practices. These findings reinforce the argument that religious moderation is not only the responsibility of the individual, but also requires structural support from institutions.⁵¹ As stated by the researchers, religious moderation education can be developed through holistic learning,

⁴⁸ Setinawati et al., "The Framework of Religious Moderation: A Socio-Theological Study on the Role of Religion and Culture from Indonesia's Perspective."

⁴⁹ Setinawati et al.

⁵⁰ Setinawati et al.

⁵¹ Mustamar Iqbal Siregar, Bahtiar, and Mhd Rasid Ritonga, "Religious Moderation in the Land of Syari'a: Christian Women's Resistance in Acehese Education Institutions."

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which combines the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains to foster a strong moderate attitude.⁵²

Analytically, religious moderation in this study is the result of the interaction between three communication patterns that develop: *First*, adaptive patterns function to reduce initial tension through adjustment of communication styles and respect for local norms. As explained in Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory, the reduction of uncertainty and anxiety in the early stages of interaction is the foundation for the development of effective communication and harmonious relationships.⁵³

Second, the integrative pattern builds harmonious relationships through active involvement in social activities and the formation of close personal relationships with the community. This pattern shows that religious moderation does not only occur at the level of discourse, but is also practised through daily interactions that build mutual trust and understanding.

Third, the defensive pattern maintains stability in conflict situations by avoiding escalation and choosing a "*ngalah*" strategy for security. This pattern suggests that religious moderation also requires the ability to read situations and respond wisely when faced with potential conflicts.

Thus, religious moderation can be understood as a product of adaptive, inclusive, and situational cross-cultural communication practices, not merely as a normative concept. As confirmed by research on religious moderation in Aceh, the practice of moderation does not only occur in formal spaces such as educational institutions or government policies, but also in everyday social spaces where individuals from different backgrounds meet and interact.

These findings are also in line with the researchers' concept that religious moderation can be understood as a process that involves three main components: strengthening the values of tolerance, developing national insights, and instilling anti-violence attitudes.⁵⁴ In the context of Christian students in Langsa, these three components are seen in their communication practices: tolerance is manifested through respect for local norms; national insight is seen in their ability to adapt to a different culture; and anti-violence is reflected in defensive strategies that avoid physical conflict.

Furthermore, this study also confirms that religious moderation is not a static end goal, but a multidimensional construct that is constantly

⁵² Muhaini Muhaini, "Internalisasi Pendidikan Moderasi Beragama Dalam Sistem Pendidikan Dayah Tradisional Di Kota Langsa .," *Edukasi Islami: Jurnal Pendidikan* ..., 2021, <https://doi.org/10.30868/ei.v10i02.1636>.

⁵³ Gudykunst, "Applying Anxiety\uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory to Intercultural Adjustment Training."

⁵⁴ Muhaini, "Internalisasi Pendidikan Moderasi Beragama Dalam Sistem Pendidikan Dayah Tradisional Di Kota Langsa ."

negotiated through social interaction.⁵⁵ The experience of Christian students in Langsa shows that religious moderation is the result of communication practices that are constantly updated and adapted to changing social dynamics, as reflected in the way they manage tolerance, national insight, and conflict avoidance in daily life.⁵⁶ This confirms that religious moderation cannot be separated from the social and cultural context in which it is practised.⁵⁷

Thus, the main contribution of this study is to show that religious moderation is not born from formal policies alone, but from adaptive, inclusive, and situational daily communication practices. The experience of Christian students in Langsa is proof that religious moderation is the product of real social interaction, not just a normative concept imposed from above.

Discussion

This study confirms that cross-cultural communication among Christian students in Langsa City operates through three interrelated patterns—adaptive, integrative, and defensive-situational—that reflect the dynamic process of managing cultural and religious differences in a Muslim-majority environment. These patterns demonstrate that cross-cultural communication is not a linear progression toward harmony, but a circular and contextual process shaped by structural conditions, interpersonal relationships, and situational challenges.

The adaptive pattern extends Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory by showing that uncertainty reduction in Aceh's context involves not only psychological adjustment but also symbolic negotiation of identity through communication style modification. While Ansor emphasized coercive adaptation in Aceh's public spaces, this study reveals a more agentic pattern: students proactively adjust their communication to build meaningful relationships, not merely to comply with external pressure.⁵⁸ The adjustment from a harsh to a soft communication style represents what Siregar, Bahtiar, and Ritonga term functional resistance—a strategy for survival and harmonious relations.⁵⁹ From Ting-Toomey's Identity Negotiation Theory perspective, this demonstrates mindful communication: the readiness to change perceptions while being motivated

⁵⁵ Sonny Eli Zaluchu, Priyantoro Widodo, and Agus Kriswanto, "Conceptual Reconstruction of Religious Moderation in the Indonesian Context Based on Previous Research: Bibliometric Analysis," *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 11 (2025): 101552, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101552>.

⁵⁶ Imam Subchi et al., "Religious Moderation in Indonesian Muslims," *Religions* 13, no. 5 (May 17, 2022): 451, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050451>.

⁵⁷ Setinawati et al., "The Framework of Religious Moderation: A Socio-Theological Study on the Role of Religion and Culture from Indonesia's Perspective."

⁵⁸ Ansor, "Agensi Perempuan Kristen Di Ruang Publik Islam Aceh."

⁵⁹ Mustamar Iqbal Siregar, Bahtiar, and Mhd Rasid Ritonga, "Religious Moderation in the Land of Syari'a: Christian Women's Resistance in Acehese Education Institutions."

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to understand cultural differences.⁶⁰ This finding suggests that minority agency in cross-cultural communication is more dynamic than previously documented.

The integrative pattern demonstrates that interpersonal relationships function as a critical mechanism for social cohesion in Aceh's public sphere. While Fadlia and Ramadan highlighted structural limitations on minority expression—such as restrictions on places of worship—this study reveals that at the interpersonal level, harmonious relationships develop dynamically through everyday interactions.⁶¹ This disjuncture between structural policies and micro-level social practices complicates the dominant narrative of Aceh as an intolerant region.

The experience of being treated "like their own children" by boarding house mothers indicates that personal relationships can transcend religious boundaries, creating what Ansor and Amri term "illiberal citizenship"—a form of social cohesion that operates outside formal institutional frameworks.⁶² As Srimulyani et al. argue, relations between different communities in Aceh demonstrate that harmonious social interaction can flourish despite identity differences.⁶³ From an AUM perspective, the integrative pattern shows conditions of low anxiety and low uncertainty conditions, where cross-cultural communication has reached a high level of effectiveness through the ability to connect with strangers and maintain ethical interactions.⁶⁴

The defensive-situational pattern reveals that cross-cultural communication remains contingent on situational factors, particularly generational differences in attitudes toward minorities. The differing responses between older and younger generations indicate that acceptance of minorities is not homogeneous in Acehnese society. This aligns with Husna and Zulkarnain's identification of egocentrism and exclusivism in Acehnese public spaces—attitudes emerging from the majority group's desire to assert Islamic identity.⁶⁵ The "*ngalah*" (giving in) strategy employed by students shows that they prefer maintaining social stability over imposing their rights. This approach parallels Mustaqilla et al.'s findings on Christian women in Aceh who must negotiate their religious

⁶⁰ Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures*.

⁶¹ Fadlia and Ramadan, "Toleransi Ala Aceh (Intoleransi): Sebuah Analisis Sense of Place Dalam Pendirian Rumah Ibadah Agama."

⁶² Ansor and Amri, "Being Christians in the Acehnese Way: Illiberal Citizenship and Women's Agency in the Islamic Public Sphere."

⁶³ Srimulyani et al., "Diasporic Chinese Community in Post-Conflict Aceh: Socio-Cultural Identities, and Social Relations with Acehnese Muslim Majority."

⁶⁴ Gudykunst, "Applying Anxiety/uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory to Intercultural Adjustment Training."

⁶⁵ Husna and Zulkarnain, "Digitizing Tolerance Practices as an Effort to Prevent Religious Conflict in Aceh through New Media."

identity by limiting self-expression in public spaces.⁶⁶ From an AUM perspective, this represents protective communication triggered by heightened anxiety in specific interactions.⁶⁷ This underscores that religious moderation is not a static achievement but an ongoing negotiation requiring constant situational awareness.

The findings on religious moderation as an outcome of communication patterns demonstrate that moderation does not appear normatively, but is formed through daily cross-cultural communication. This aligns with Setinawati, Tanyid, and Marilyn's view that religious moderation involves active engagement in understanding and respecting differences, not merely passive tolerance.⁶⁸ The campus policy providing flexibility for non-Muslim students to take religious course grades from their respective churches shows that educational institutions have a strategic role in creating inclusive spaces. This reinforces that religious moderation is not solely an individual responsibility, but requires structural institutional support.⁶⁹

Analytically, religious moderation results from the interaction between three patterns: the adaptive pattern reduces initial tension; the integrative pattern builds harmonious relationships; and the defensive pattern maintains stability in conflict situations. Thus, religious moderation can be understood as a product of adaptive, inclusive, and situational communication practices, not merely a normative concept. This aligns with the view that religious moderation involves three main components: strengthening tolerance values, developing national insights, and instilling anti-violence attitudes.¹³ In the context of Christian students in Langsa, these components are evident in their communication practices: tolerance through respect for local norms; national insight through their ability to adapt to a different culture; and anti-violence through defensive strategies that avoid physical conflict.

Theoretically, this study extends the AUM framework by applying it in a society that formally implements Islamic law, showing that managing anxiety and uncertainty is influenced by complex structural and cultural factors. The integration of AUM with the concept of religious moderation produces a new analytical framework showing moderation as a product of adaptive, inclusive, and situational communication practices—not merely a normative concept. Practically, these findings provide recommendations for developing inclusive campus environments, designing cultural orientation programmes for minority students, and developing policies responsive to

⁶⁶ Mustaqilla et al., "The Existence of Non Muslim Minority in Aceh, Indonesia: A Study Civil and Police Institution."

⁶⁷ Gudykunst and Nishida, "Anxiety, Uncertainty, and Perceived Effectiveness of Communication across Relationships and Cultures."

⁶⁸ Setinawati et al., "The Framework of Religious Moderation: A Socio-Theological Study on the Role of Religion and Culture from Indonesia's Perspective."

⁶⁹ Mustamar Iqbal Siregar, Bahtiar, and Mhd Rasid Ritonga, "Religious Moderation in the Land of Syari'a: Christian Women's Resistance in Acehese Education Institutions."

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minority existence, such as creating spaces for interfaith dialogue. This study has limitations: the limited number of informants restricts generalization; the study focuses only on Christian students' experiences without exploring majority perspectives; and it was conducted in one location. Future research should expand to other regions, involve more diverse minority groups, and develop quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to test these models more comprehensively.

D. Conclusion

This study found that Christian students in Langsa City developed three cross-cultural communication patterns, namely adaptive, integrative, and defensive-situational in managing cultural and religious differences. These three patterns suggest that cross-cultural communication is dynamic and progresses from initial conditions of anxiety and uncertainty to the creation of relatively harmonious social relationships, although still facing situational challenges. Conceptually, these findings reinforce the theory of Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) by showing that the management of anxiety and uncertainty not only results in effective communication, but also forms specific communication patterns in minority contexts. The novelty of this research lies in the integration between cross-cultural communication patterns and religious moderation at the praxis level, where moderation is not understood as a mere normative concept, but as a result of adaptive, inclusive, and situational daily communication practices.

Practically, these findings imply that strengthening religious moderation can be done through the development of cross-cultural communication competencies, both in students and in the campus environment and the community. Educational institutions have a strategic role in creating an inclusive space for interaction through diversity-sensitive policies. However, this study has limitations in the limited number of informants and the focus on the location of Langsa City, so it cannot be generalised widely. Therefore, further research is recommended to expand the scope of the region, involve more diverse minority groups, and develop a quantitative approach or mixed methods to test cross-cultural communication pattern models more comprehensively.

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