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DAFTAR ISI (TABLE OF CONTENT)

Fulfillment of Local Content in The Era of Democratization and Digitalization In West Java — Ahsani Taqwim Aminuddin, Tryan Nugraha —	1 – 17
Dialogical Framing: A Content Analysis of National Online Media Coverage on the “Indonesia Gelap” Issue in 2025 — Agus Priyanto, Sarah Ayu Putri Novaria, Husnaeni Fauziah Amani —	18 – 40
Thick Description Analysis of Solo Keroncong Music as Indonesia’s Cultural Diplomacy — Danis Sugiyanto, Denik Iswardani Witarti, Komarudin Subekti, Christophe Moure —	41 – 65
Accommodation Strategies IN Cross-cultural Communication of Rohingya Ethnicity in Interacting with The Community of Pekanbaru City — Ringgo Eldapi Yozani, Qori Gita Cahyani, Nova Yohana, Mutia Novela Sari, Tutut Ismi Wahidar, Riyanda Elsera Yozani —	66 – 89
Marketing Communications Mix in Sabang Tourism Promotion: Interaction of Political and Multicultural Communication — Rangga Saptya Mohamad Permana, Sri Seti Indriani, Lilis Puspitasari, Tito Quiling, Jnr. —	90 – 117
Marketing Public Relations for Hospital Brand Awareness through Indonesian Cultural Communication — Renata Anisa, Hanny Hafiar, Retasari Dewi, Yustikasari, Nguyen Tan Khang —	118 – 137

Implementing Communication Networks in Developing the Smart Tourism Village of Dieng Wonosobo — Rialdo Rezeky Manogari Lumban Toruan, Yos Horta Meliala, Eni Kardi Wiyati —	138 – 172
Intercultural Health Communication in Islamic Medicine among Generation Z — Rita Destiwati, Lucy Pujasari Supratman, Junardi Harahap, Wan Maryam Wan Ahmad Kamil —	173 – 194
Framing Power in Japan’s Digital Sphere: A Corpus-Based Functional Approach — Ketut Gede Adi Putra Laksana, Rohali, I Kadek Purnawan, Ni Di Ya —	195 – 216
Strategic Da’wah Communication of Dewan Masjid Indonesia in Strengthening Religious Moderation at the Community Level — Suharto Suharto, Hasriani Hasriani, Ardillah Abu, Halimah Abdul Manaf —	217 – 248
Media Landscape Subculture in the Society 5.0: Case Study on Indonesia Urban Toys Scene — Rani Chandra Oktaviani, Donna Asteria, Niken Febrina Ernungtyas —	249 – 274

Accommodation Strategies IN Cross-cultural Communication of Rohingya Ethnicity in Interacting with The Community of Pekanbaru City

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ABSTRACT

Pekanbaru City has become one of the destinations for asylum seekers, including members of the Rohingya ethnic group who have experienced forced migration from Myanmar. This study aims to examine the strategies of convergence, divergence, and the phenomenon of over-accommodation in communication interactions between Rohingya refugees and the local community. The research employs a qualitative method using a symbolic interaction approach. The findings reveal that the communication accommodation practices of the Rohingya refugees are dynamic, reflecting both efforts to adapt to the host community and attempts to maintain their cultural identity. Convergence strategies are demonstrated through the use of the Indonesian language, open nonverbal communication, and cultural adjustments such as shared religious practices with the local population. In contrast, divergence strategies are reflected in the continued use of the Rohingya language among fellow refugees, the tendency to withdraw from conversations they do not fully understand, and the preservation of traditional dietary habits, clothing styles, and social roles. Furthermore, the phenomenon of over-accommodation appears in the form of reliance on refugees who are more proficient in Indonesian to act as communication intermediaries, which may limit opportunities for independent adaptation. These findings highlight that the communication accommodation process among Rohingya refugees in Pekanbaru is complex and shaped by the simultaneous need for social integration and cultural preservation.

Keywords: Communication accommodation, Rohingya, refugees

ABSTRAK

Pekanbaru merupakan salah satu wilayah tujuan bagi imigran pencari suaka, termasuk Etnis Rohingya yang mengalami migrasi paksa dari Myanmar. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis strategi konvergensi, divergensi, serta fenomena akomodasi berlebihan dalam interaksi komunikasi antara pengungsi Rohingya dan masyarakat lokal. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan interaksi simbolik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa akomodasi komunikasi Etnis Rohingya bersifat dinamis, yang mencerminkan upaya adaptasi sekaligus pelestarian identitas budaya mereka. Strategi konvergensi terlihat melalui penggunaan Bahasa Indonesia, komunikasi nonverbal yang terbuka, serta penyesuaian budaya seperti praktik keagamaan yang serup dengan masyarakat setempat. Sementara itu, strategi divergensi tampak pada penggunaan Bahasa Rohingya di antara sesama pengungsi, kecenderungan menarik diri dari percakapan yang tidak dipahami, serta pelestarian kebiasaan makan, gaya berpakaian, dan peran sosial tradisional. Selain itu, fenomena akomodasi

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berlebihan muncul dalam bentuk ketergantungan pada pengungsi yang lebih fasih berbahasa Indonesia sebagai perantara komunikasi, yang berpotensi menghambat proses adaptasi mandiri. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa proses akomodasi komunikasi pengungsi Rohingya di Pekanbaru berlangsung secara kompleks dan dipengaruhi oleh kebutuhan adaptasi sekaligus upaya mempertahankan identitas budaya.

Kata Kunci: Akomodasi komunikasi, Rohingya, pengungsi

INTRODUCTION

Migration refers to the movement of populations with the intention of settling in a particular location across administrative, political, or national boundaries (Munir, 2000). In demographic and social science studies, migration is understood as the process of population movement from one region to another accompanied by a change in primary residence, either permanently or semi-permanently. Migration generally involves movement across specific geographic or administrative boundaries so that individuals or groups settle in the destination area for a certain period of time (Kok, 1999). This phenomenon is an important part of the dynamics of human mobility that plays a role in shaping population distribution and influencing social and economic development in various regions (Douglas et al., 2019). From the perspective of modern migration studies, migration is not only understood as the physical movement of people, but also as a complex social process influenced by various factors such as economic opportunities, political conditions, social networks, and environmental factors that encourage individuals to move from their area of origin to their destination (Tsegay, 2023).

Furthermore, migration can also be classified based on the region crossed, namely internal migration that occurs within a country and international migration that involves movement between countries (Skeldon, 2014). The migration process has various implications for development, including changes in the workforce structure, knowledge flows, and economic and social impacts on both origin and destination regions (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). Therefore, migration can be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon involving the movement of people across regions influenced by various structural and individual factors and having important consequences for development and demographic dynamics.

Indonesia, particularly the Province of Riau, has frequently functioned as a transit country for undocumented migrants prior to their departure to a third country (Olivia et al., 2021). This condition is largely attributable to Riau's strategic geographical position, as it shares maritime proximity with Singapore and Malaysia and is traversed by international trade routes. This strategic location has also made Riau a transit point for Rohingya migrants

from Myanmar, thereby facilitating interaction between Rohingya migrants and the local community in Pekanbaru, whose cultural backgrounds differ significantly from their own.

The primary factor driving the migration of the Rohingya ethnic group from Myanmar is the persistent refusal of the Myanmar government to recognize their citizenship status (Irwansyah et al., 2021). The Rohingya, who are predominantly Muslim, have been regarded as a non-indigenous ethnic group that did not exist in Myanmar prior to the country's independence in 1948. Since the military regime assumed power in 1962, the Rohingya have been subjected to systematic discrimination (Sarmin, 2020). They are excluded from the officially recognized national ethnic groups and consequently classified as stateless (Bhattacharjee, 2024). Such discriminatory policies have resulted in the revocation of civil rights, restrictions on mobility, and land dispossession.

The daily life of this community is heavily influenced by their refugee status. Their status as illegal immigrants makes them highly dependent on humanitarian aid and donations from the local community. Although they strive to build social networks among themselves, their interaction with the local population remains limited. In terms of religious practice, they strive to maintain their religious activities despite the limited circumstances, with some temporary shelters providing dedicated spaces for religious activities.

The social life of Rohingya refugees in Pekanbaru exhibits a different dynamic. Most Rohingya refugees often occupy dispersed locations and live closer to local communities. While this pattern creates opportunities for interaction, it simultaneously increases the vulnerability to social friction. For example, in December 2023, thirteen Rohingya refugees were found abandoned on Jalan Sudirman in Pekanbaru due to their inability to understand Indonesian or English. Then, in December 2024, a minor dispute broke out between the refugees and local residents due to miscommunication during the distribution of rambutan fruit. According to the fruit owner, they initially had good intentions in giving the fruit to the Rohingya refugees. However, they arrived in large numbers and demanded more rambutan, often in an angry tone, causing discomfort for the fruit owner.

The cases described above illustrate the phenomenon of communication barriers that frequently arise from linguistic and cultural differences. Communication obstacles constitute a central factor within this dynamic. Differences in language, gestures, and cultural norms generate misunderstandings that may potentially escalate into social conflict. From the perspective of Communication Accommodation Theory, as proposed by Howard Giles, such dynamics can be understood through three primary strategies: convergence, divergence, and overaccommodation. Convergence is reflected in the refugees' efforts to learn the

Indonesian language and adjust certain religious practices to the local context. Divergence is evident in the maintenance of the Rohingya language and traditional customs. Overaccommodation, meanwhile, appears in the form of reliance on individuals who are more proficient in Indonesian, which may inadvertently hinder the development of independent adaptive capacities.

Based on the foregoing discussion, research on the communication accommodation of the Rohingya ethnic community in Pekanbaru holds significant urgency, both academically and practically. From an academic perspective, this study contributes to the enrichment of intercultural communication literature by highlighting refugee interactions within the broader context of globalization and forced migration, particularly the interactions between Rohingya migrants and the local community of Pekanbaru. From a practical standpoint, this research is expected to provide valuable insights for governmental authorities, international organizations, and local communities in formulating policies related to the management of undocumented migrants, especially those of Rohingya ethnicity, as well as in designing more inclusive communication strategies. Such efforts align with the broader global political agenda of upholding human rights while simultaneously strengthening social cohesion within multicultural societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural Communication and Cultural Adaptation

Intercultural communication refers to communication processes that occur between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds, where differences in values, language, beliefs, and communication styles may influence interaction outcomes (Piller, 2017). Research on refugee communities shows that intercultural communication is closely related to cultural adaptation processes when migrants interact with host societies (Castles et al., 2014). Cultural adaptation involves changes in communication patterns, behavioral adjustments, and the negotiation of identity to enable effective interaction in new social environments (Kim, 2001).

Research on Rohingya refugees in Indonesia indicates that intercultural communication plays a crucial role in maintaining social relationships with local communities (Saputra et al., 2023). A qualitative study examining Rohingya refugees in Medan found that refugees adapt to their host society through changes in language use, social behavior, food habits, and daily interaction patterns in order to maintain their social existence in the new

environment (Siregar, 2018). The findings show that communication and culture are inseparable, and individuals tend to adjust their communication practices according to the cultural norms of the host society. Similarly, another study investigating communication interaction and self-concept among Rohingya refugees in Medan demonstrates that interaction with the host community significantly influences the development of refugees' self-identity and their ability to integrate socially (Karim & Zakia, 2025). The research highlights that communication experiences with local residents shape refugees' perception of themselves and their social position within the host society (Rahman et al., 2025). These studies suggest that intercultural communication between Rohingya refugees and local communities involves continuous negotiation of cultural identity and social acceptance.

Communication Accommodation Strategies

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) explains how individuals adjust their communication behavior to reduce social distance or emphasize group differences during interactions (Dragojevic et al., 2015). Accommodation strategies may involve convergence, divergence, and maintenance of communication styles. Recent studies on intercultural interaction demonstrate that communication accommodation strategies are commonly used by migrants and minority groups when interacting with host communities. For instance, a study on international exchange students interacting with local students found that communication barriers such as language differences and cultural misunderstanding encourage individuals to adapt their speech patterns, communication style, and behavior in order to facilitate mutual understanding and social integration (Giles & Watson, 2013).

Another study examining interpersonal communication strategies in multicultural living environments found that intercultural interaction often leads individuals to negotiate meaning through dialogue, empathy, and openness. These communication strategies help individuals overcome culture shock and reconstruct hybrid cultural identities while maintaining their original cultural background (Berliano & Fajri, 2025). These findings reinforce the relevance of accommodation strategies in intercultural contexts, particularly in situations where individuals must adapt to unfamiliar social and cultural environments (Brunner, 2021; Rathnapala & Chongyue, n.d.; Gudykunst, 2005 Yunita et al., 2022).

Intercultural Conflict and Social Perception toward Rohingya Refugees

While intercultural communication can facilitate adaptation, interactions between refugees and host communities may also generate tensions. Differences in cultural values, economic competition, and negative stereotypes may lead to misunderstanding and conflict. Research on the rejection of Rohingya refugees in Aceh demonstrates how intercultural interaction can be influenced by negative public narratives and social perceptions. Media discourse and social media narratives have contributed to the construction of Rohingya refugees as a perceived threat, which subsequently influences community attitudes and increases social tensions (Karim & Zakia, 2025).

Another study analyzing intercultural conflict through the Face-Negotiation Theory shows that cultural differences in managing identity and social face can lead to communication breakdowns between refugee communities and local residents. Ineffective communication strategies may exacerbate misunderstandings and reinforce social rejection (Berry, 2005). These findings highlight the importance of appropriate intercultural communication strategies to reduce prejudice and facilitate social integration between refugees and host communities (Ward & Geeraert, 2016) and (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2006).

Intercultural Communication Strategies for Social Integration

Effective intercultural communication strategies are essential to promote social harmony in multicultural environments. Studies on intercultural conflict resolution emphasize that cultural awareness, inclusive dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving are key elements in fostering mutual understanding between culturally different groups. Research examining intercultural communication strategies in Indonesia suggests that increasing cultural awareness and facilitating inclusive dialogue can reduce stereotypes and strengthen mutual respect between communities. These strategies are important in bridging social differences and creating cooperative relationships in diverse societies (Farid & Hakimi, 2025).

Furthermore, studies on community responses toward Rohingya refugees show that local identity, religious values, and humanitarian considerations strongly influence community attitudes toward refugees. While cultural and identity differences may initially create social distance, humanitarian values and social solidarity can facilitate more positive interactions (Alwi et al., 2024). These studies suggest that intercultural communication strategies play a critical role in shaping the quality of interactions between refugees and host communities.

Research Gap

Previous studies have extensively examined intercultural communication, cultural adaptation, and social perception toward Rohingya refugees in various contexts such as Medan and Aceh. However, most existing research focuses on general intercultural interaction, social perception, or conflict dynamics, rather than specifically examining communication accommodation strategies used by Rohingya refugees in everyday interaction with local communities. Moreover, there is still limited research exploring these communication strategies in the context of Pekanbaru City, which has its own socio-cultural characteristics and community dynamics. Therefore, this study aims to fill this research gap by analyzing how Rohingya refugees employ accommodation strategies in cross-cultural communication when interacting with the local community in Pekanbaru.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs an interpretive qualitative approach grounded in symbolic interactionist. The purpose of this approach is to provide an in-depth description of the interaction processes occurring between the Rohingya ethnic community and the local residents of Pekanbaru, both verbally and nonverbally, within the context of communication accommodation. In addition, the study aims to identify various forms of intercultural communication accommodation that emerge in the interaction between the two groups.

Symbolic interactionism assumes that human experience is constructed through the interpretation of objects, situations, and social interactions. Through this perspective, communication is understood as a process through which individuals generate and negotiate meanings within social life (Mulyana, 2021). While symbolic interactionism primarily focuses on how individuals construct meanings through everyday interactions, this study also considers the broader social context in which these interactions occur. In the case of Rohingya refugees, communication practices cannot be separated from their position as a displaced and stateless community. Therefore, the analysis does not only interpret communicative meanings at the interactional level but also situates these meanings within the wider structural conditions that shape refugees communication experiences in the host society.

This study employed purposive sampling to select research informants (Mulyana & Solatun, 2016). The criteria included Rohingya migrants who had lived in Pekanbaru for at least one year and had regular interactions with the local community. Based on these criteria, six Rohingya refugees were selected as primary informants. In addition, one officer from the Immigration Detention Center responsible for handling Rohingya refugees and three local

residents living near the refugee shelter were also included to provide complementary perspectives.

This research was conducted at a Rohingya refugee shelter located near the Pekanbaru Immigration Office (RUDENIM). This location was chosen because it is where Rohingya refugees carry out their daily activities and interact with the community. The research was conducted from April to July 2025 using in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation studies. In-depth interviews were conducted to obtain answers about the cross-cultural communication experiences of Rohingya refugees and local residents. Interviews were conducted with the informants' consent and lasted 30–60 minutes. Because some Rohingya informants had limited Indonesian language skills, the interview process was sometimes conducted with the help of simplified Indonesian, gestures, and clarification from colleagues with better language skills. This condition is understood not only as a technical obstacle in the field, but as part of the empirical reality of communication accommodation itself.

Non-participant observation was used to observe interactions between Rohingya refugees and the community. Observations focused on verbal and nonverbal communication practices in everyday situations, such as greeting patterns, requests for assistance, turn-taking, use of iconic gestures, mediated translation, hesitations in speaking, misunderstandings, and self-portrayals in interactions. Documentation studies were also conducted by examining mass media reports and other relevant documents related to the presence of Rohingya refugees in Pekanbaru.

To clarify the analytical framework used in this research, concepts derived from Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) were operationalized into several analytical dimensions, including convergence, divergence, and overaccommodation. The operationalization of the research concepts is presented in the following table.

Table 1. Operationalization of Communication Accommodation in Rohingya Interactions with Local Communities

CAT Dimensions	Data Source	Analysis Indicator	Unit of Analysis	Analysis Techniques
Convergence	Interviews with Rohingya refugees and local residents; observations	Adjusting language, tone, gestures, and religious references to reduce social distance	Use of simplified Indonesian, kinship-based greetings, shared Islamic expressions, adaptive gestures	Thematic analysis through adaptive coding of verbal and nonverbal strategies
Divergence	Interviews with Rohingya refugees and local residents; observations	Efforts to maintain the identity of the Rohingya language and culture in interactions	Use of Rohingya language, withdrawal from difficult conversations, preservation of cultural and gender norms	Thematic analysis through coding of communication practices that maintain identity
Overaccommodation	Interviews with refugees, local residents, and immigration officers; observations	Excessive or unequal communication adjustments that lead to dependency or stereotypes	Reliance on more eloquent intermediaries, oversimplification, mediated participation, asymmetric interactions	Thematic analysis through coding of forms of dependency, inequality, and stereotypes in interactions
Communication Output	Interviews with all informants; documentation; observation	The impact of accommodation strategies in the local social context	Partial adaptation, misunderstanding, social distancing, fragile solidarity, and cultural identity that remains intact	Thematic analysis through coding the consequences of interactions and communicative outcomes

Source: Research Finding, (2025)

Data analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. The data analysis process included the following stages: (1) transcribing interview data and observation notes into written form; (2) rereading all data repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content and context of the data; (3) initial coding, namely identifying parts of the data relevant to the research questions by combining categories derived from Theory; (4) grouping codes that have close meanings into broader themes; (5) reviewing these themes against the data as a whole; (6) defining and naming themes according to their conceptual boundaries; (7) compiling findings in the form of interpretive narratives

supported by interview quotes and observational evidence. This study also applied source triangulation by comparing statements from Rohingya refugees, local residents, and immigration officers, as well as method triangulation by cross-checking the results of interviews, observations, and documents. For research ethics, all informants were given an explanation of the research objectives before data collection, participation was voluntary, and pseudonyms were used to protect the identity and confidentiality of informants, especially Rohingya refugees who are in a vulnerable position.

RESULTS

Convergence Strategy

Within the framework of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), convergence can be understood as an individual's effort to adjust both verbal and nonverbal communication styles in order to reduce social distance with interlocutors. When individuals engage in convergence, they rely on their perceptions of their conversational partner's speech and behavior (Yasir, 2024). However, in the context of Rohingya refugees in Pekanbaru, linguistic convergence does not occur within an equal social space. The process of language adaptation takes place under conditions of forced migration and structural constraints, where proficiency in the Indonesian language becomes a crucial prerequisite for securing social access, preventing misunderstandings, and establishing a sense of safety in everyday interactions. Convergence is reflected in the refugees' efforts to use Indonesian despite their limited vocabulary. As expressed by one informant, MF:

"I sometimes get stuck in conversations with local people. I use Google Translate to continue the conversation. At first, I just used body language or other nonverbal communication when they could not understand me." (Interview with MF, 15 May 2025).

The experience of becoming "stuck" in conversation reflects not only a gradual learning process but also a condition of linguistic limitation that shapes their position within interaction. In a social space dominated by the majority language, failure to understand or to be understood may place refugees in a passive communicative position. The use of Google Translate and body language can therefore be interpreted as strategic efforts to maintain participation in conversation and to minimize the risk of social exclusion. In this context, linguistic convergence cannot be understood solely as an attempt to achieve social closeness, as described in classical interpretations of Communication Accommodation Theory. Rather, it also functions as a pragmatic strategy aimed at sustaining interaction under conditions of constraint and structural limitation.

As a stateless group that depends heavily on the social acceptance of the local community, the ability to communicate in Indonesian becomes a form of negotiating social position within the public sphere. Beyond language use, refugees also adopt interpersonal communication patterns commonly employed by local residents, such as the use of kinship-based address terms like “kakak” (older sibling) or “adik” (younger sibling). This practice reflects an awareness of local communicative norms and functions as a mechanism to reduce social distance. In addition, the use of nonverbal communication such as hand gestures, open facial expressions, and eye contact serves as an alternative means of ensuring that messages are conveyed when linguistic barriers arise. A small shop owner, AY, provides a concrete illustration of this interaction:

“Usually, if they don’t understand, they just leave. Or they point at what they want and gesture it. Sometimes when we scold them, they just laugh or remain silent. When that happens, it means they don’t understand.” (Interview with AY, 27 May 2025).

This excerpt illustrates the alternative communicative strategies employed when linguistic barriers hinder interaction, while also reflecting a relaxed and humorous attitude that may alleviate tension in such encounters. Responses such as laughter or silence when being reprimanded can be interpreted as forms of nonverbal adjustment aimed at diffusing potential conflict. Rather than being perceived as indifference, such behavior demonstrates caution within interactions that carry the potential for misunderstanding or confrontation. In a context marked by social vulnerability, strategies of this kind contribute to maintaining relational stability and preventing the escalation of misunderstanding.

Such adjustments are not confined solely to linguistic aspects but are also evident in everyday life, particularly within the domain of popular culture. One noteworthy form of cultural adaptation is reflected in the entertainment preferences of Rohingya refugees in Pekanbaru, especially in relation to music. Based on interview findings, one informant stated:

“Yeah, I listen to dangdut music. Sometimes it makes me feel sad.” (Interview with SI, 15 July 2025).

From a cultural perspective, the shared religious affiliation between Rohingya refugees and the local community constitutes a significant factor facilitating processes of adjustment and integration. A refugee named Hasimulah emphasized this point by stating:

“There is no difference; it is the same. Indonesia is an Islamic country, and we Rohingya also follow Islamic principles. During Ramadan or religious holidays, we observe them in

the same way. There is no difference. These similarities make communication smoother because we share a bond as fellow Muslims.” (Interview with Hs, 15 May 2025).

This shared religious identity not only accelerates the process of adaptation but also serves as a point of identity convergence that strengthens their social legitimacy within a predominantly Muslim society. In this context, religious convergence can be understood as a strategy to expand the sphere of social acceptance through the affirmation of shared values. The convergence practiced by Rohingya refugees in Pekanbaru cannot be regarded merely as a neutral form of interpersonal adaptation. Rather, it reflects an ongoing negotiation of identity and social position within conditions of forced migration and structural limitation. Language, gestures, and religious commonality function as essential instruments for sustaining interaction, minimizing the risk of exclusion, and constructing relatively safe communicative spaces in everyday life.

Thus, the convergence that emerges extends beyond linguistic and verbal/nonverbal communication to encompass cultural and spiritual dimensions. Rohingya refugees endeavor to adjust to their new environment by adopting the language and social practices of the local community, while simultaneously preserving core values that remain aligned, particularly in relation to religion. This process reflects a complex dynamic of social adaptation between Rohingya refugees and the residents of Pekanbaru, in which communication functions as the primary medium for fostering harmonious relationships and cultivating a sense of solidarity within diversity.

Divergence Strategy

Within Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), divergence is understood as a form of positive accommodation in which communicators emphasize differences whether verbal or nonverbal even though its application is often grounded in stereotypical perceptions (Yasir, 2024). However, in the context of Rohingya refugees in Pekanbaru, divergence cannot be interpreted merely as a neutral preservation of cultural identity. Rather, it unfolds within asymmetrical social relations. The refugees’ position as a minority and stateless group shapes the ways in which they negotiate the boundaries of interaction with the local community. One of the most salient forms of divergence is the continued use of the Rohingya language in daily communication, particularly among older refugees. A local resident described this situation as follows:

“Often the older ones use the Rohingya language; of course we don’t understand it. If there’s a child with them, we usually ask the child to translate. The younger ones are good at speaking our language.” (Interview with Dev, 27 May 2025).

Limited proficiency in the Indonesian language constitutes a primary barrier, as expressed by several refugees:

“Only Rohingya language. It’s a bit difficult; we have to call someone who can speak [Indonesian].” (Interview with MF, 15 May 2025).

“Only Rohingya language. Sometimes people here understand, or we ask for help from someone who can.” (Interview with AA, 15 May 2025).

These findings demonstrate that linguistic differences constitute a form of verbal divergence that is not negatively intended, but rather emerges from limited proficiency in the Indonesian language. At the same time, however, the Rohingya language functions as a symbolic boundary marker between groups. Within a social space dominated by the majority language, the mother tongue becomes a linguistic safe space that reinforces internal community solidarity. Linguistic divergence, therefore, does not merely reflect an inability to adapt, but also represents a practice of maintaining social cohesion amid adaptive pressures. Nevertheless, this practice simultaneously generates perceptions of social distance within the local community. When language cannot be mutually understood, interaction becomes constrained, and the potential for stereotyping more readily emerges. In this regard, a paradox becomes evident: while divergence serves to protect internal identity and solidarity, it also carries the risk of widening external social distance. Field data further indicate that when communication encounters obstacles, some refugees choose to remain silent or withdraw from the conversation, as expressed by one refugee:

“We try as well, but if we still don’t understand, we just leave. People here have been around for a year and understand a little of our language.” (Interview with MFI, 15 May 2025).

This statement is corroborated by a local resident’s account: “Usually, if they don’t understand, they just leave.” (Interview with AY, 27 May 2025). Such behavior may initially be interpreted merely as a difference in communicative culture. However, within the broader context of migration and social vulnerability, withdrawal can also be understood as a strategy of conflict avoidance. When social positioning is no longer fully secure, refugees may choose

silence or terminate interaction as a self-protective mechanism to prevent misunderstanding or escalation. A similar dynamic can be observed in practices related to apologizing. Whether due to limited language comprehension or because apologizing is not commonly practiced within their cultural framework, behaviors that may be perceived as “impolite” or “less courteous” carry heightened implications in asymmetrical social contexts. In unequal interactions, such actions may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes toward minority groups. Nonverbal divergence in this context thus reveals a tension between maintaining internal normative practices and the risk of negative public perception.

Findings regarding the dominance of Rohingya men in public spaces must likewise be situated within the broader context of displacement. Observations indicate that Rohingya men are more actively engaged in public activities, such as shopping, while women tend to remain within domestic spaces. Culturally, refugees explained that women are expected to occupy primarily domestic roles. However, under conditions of migration and legal uncertainty, restrictions on women’s mobility may also be intensified by considerations of safety and social caution. In other words, gender role patterns are not solely rooted in static cultural traditions but are renegotiated within the constraints of forced migration. When a new social environment is not yet fully understood or perceived as safe, families may opt to preserve patterns considered more secure. This suggests that divergence in social roles is not merely an expression of cultural identity but also a response to a social context that remains unstable. These role patterns are further reinforced by the following statement from a refugee:

“In our Rohingya culture, women and girls do not go out or somewhere unless it’s necessary. They go out just for necessary things like something to buy, for school.” (Interview with MF, 15 May 2025).

Overall, the divergence practiced by Rohingya refugees serves to preserve identity, internal cohesion, and a sense of security within their community. At the same time, however, divergence also carries the potential to reinforce social distance and trigger stereotyping in everyday interactions. When behaviors such as silence, the use of a language not fully understood by others, or gender role patterns are interpreted without contextual awareness, local communities may perceive them as signs of aloofness or impoliteness. In the context of Rohingya refugees in Pekanbaru, divergence cannot be understood solely as a cultural expression. Rather, it reflects an ongoing negotiation of social boundaries within conditions of minority status and structural uncertainty.

Overaccomodation Strategy

Overaccommodation in Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) refers to a form of communicative adjustment that is carried out excessively, thereby creating an impression of condescension or reinforcing social distance. Among Rohingya refugees in Pekanbaru, this phenomenon does not solely manifest in the form of exaggerated speech adjustments by members of the local community, but also appears in patterns of communicative dependency that develop within the refugee community itself. Field data indicate that not all refugees possess adequate proficiency in the Indonesian language. Consequently, interactions with local residents and authorities are often mediated by a small number of individuals who are more fluent in Indonesian. An online motorcycle taxi driver described this situation as follows:

“They rarely start conversations with us; they mostly talk among themselves. If we ask them something, they try to speak a little Indonesian, or if they don’t understand, they just look at us. We can give directions in our language, but it’s limited. Not everyone can respond, so usually only the ones who can speak will answer.” (Interview with Sn, 15 May 2025).

This situation demonstrates that, under certain circumstances, only individuals with stronger language proficiency assume active roles in communication, while other members remain relatively passive. Such a pattern reflects a concentration of communicative responsibility in specific figures who function as language brokers. In the short term, this practice facilitates the smooth flow of interaction. However, in the long term, repeated reliance on the same individuals may create imbalances in access to information within the community.

When only a small number of individuals possess the capacity to negotiate directly with local residents or authorities, they function not merely as translators but also, indirectly, as informal representatives of the community. This condition may give rise to internal hierarchies that are not always consciously acknowledged, whereby access to the majority language translates into access to information, social networks, and broader interactional opportunities. In this context, overaccommodation is not solely a matter of communicative style but is also closely related to the distribution of power and social positioning within the refugee community.

On the other hand, forms of overaccommodation are also evident in the way some members of the local community adjust their communication when interacting with refugees, such as by speaking excessively slowly or employing overly simplified gestures. Although

such practices are often motivated by the intention to assist, they may inadvertently convey the impression that refugees are positioned as communicatively incapable or incompetent. Within the framework of CAT, this situation has the potential to reinforce stereotypes and widen social distance, as the interaction does not occur on a fully equal footing. This asymmetrical interaction reveals a tension between agency and dependency. On the one hand, the refugee community demonstrates agency by seeking language intermediaries and relying on more fluent individuals to ensure that communicative needs are met. On the other hand, repeated patterns of dependency may narrow the participatory space for other members and reinforce external perceptions that the community lacks autonomy. If such conditions persist over time, the risk of broader social rejection may increase, as the relationships formed tend to remain mediated and indirect rather than direct and reciprocal.

In the context of Rohingya refugees in Pekanbaru, overaccommodation thus reflects a more complex dynamic than merely excessive or misguided communicative adjustment. It illustrates how linguistic inequality and minority social positioning can shape imbalanced patterns of interaction for both refugees and the local community. This suggests that communication accommodation does not always produce social closeness; under certain conditions, it may subtly and continuously reproduce dependency while reinforcing social distance.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the communication interactions between Rohingya refugees and the local community in Pekanbaru are characterized by dynamic accommodation strategies shaped by linguistic limitations, cultural differences, and structural inequalities. These interactions reflect the simultaneous processes of social adaptation and identity preservation, which are central themes in intercultural communication studies. Within the framework of Communication Accommodation Theory, the strategies of convergence, divergence, and overaccommodation illustrate how minority groups negotiate their communicative position within a host society.

First, the findings indicate that convergence plays a crucial role in facilitating interaction between Rohingya refugees and local residents. The use of the Indonesian language, even with limited vocabulary, demonstrates the refugees' efforts to reduce communicative barriers and establish social acceptance within the host community. In addition to verbal adjustments, refugees also adopt nonverbal communication strategies such as gestures, facial expressions, and kinship-based address terms commonly used in Indonesian culture. These adjustments

reflect an attempt to minimize social distance and create more harmonious interpersonal relationships. This finding is consistent with previous studies on Rohingya refugees in Indonesia which highlight that refugees often develop various survival strategies and processes of acculturation when interacting with local communities (Irwansyah et al., 2021). However, unlike classical interpretations of convergence, which emphasize voluntary adaptation to achieve interpersonal similarity, convergence in this context is influenced by structural conditions associated with forced migration. Refugees must adapt linguistically and culturally to navigate everyday life, access social resources, and prevent misunderstandings that may threaten their sense of security. In this context, convergence cannot be interpreted solely as a voluntary attempt to achieve interpersonal similarity, as commonly assumed in Communication Accommodation Theory. Rather, it reflects a form of communicative adaption shaped by structural vulnerability, where refugees adjust their communication practices in order to secure participation, safety, and social legitimacy within the host society (Castles et al., 2014).

Moreover, the findings reveal that religious similarity between Rohingya refugees and the predominantly Muslim local community serves as an important factor facilitating convergence. Shared religious practices during Islamic celebrations, such as Ramadan and other religious observances, provide a common cultural framework that strengthens social bonds between the two groups (Gudykunst, 2005). Similar patterns of cultural adjustment have also been identified in previous studies of Rohingya refugees in Indonesia, which show that adaptation occurs through everyday practices such as language use, food, clothing, and social interaction with local communities (Berry, 2005; Siregar, 2018). This finding supports previous research on intercultural adaptation which suggests that shared cultural or religious values can accelerate social integration between migrants and host communities (Berry, 2005). Religious identity therefore functions as a symbolic bridge that reduces perceived cultural distance and promotes mutual understanding.

Second, the study also highlights the presence of divergence strategies, particularly in the continued use of the Rohingya language and the preservation of cultural norms within the refugee community. Divergence in this context does not necessarily indicate resistance to integration but rather reflects efforts to maintain cultural identity and internal solidarity. The Rohingya language functions as a cultural marker that reinforces group cohesion, especially among older refugees who have limited proficiency in Indonesian. This finding aligns with intercultural communication research suggesting that minority groups often maintain their native language as a means of preserving cultural identity in new social environments (Giles & Watson, 2013).

However, divergence also contributes to the creation of social distance in everyday interactions. Limited linguistic mutual understanding between refugees and local residents can restrict communication and increase the likelihood of misinterpretation. Behaviors such as remaining silent, withdrawing from conversations, or relying on fellow refugees to interpret messages may be perceived negatively by the host community if the broader context of linguistic limitation is not understood. As a result, divergence can unintentionally reinforce stereotypes and shape social perceptions toward refugee communities (Dragojevic et al., 2015). This situation reveals a paradox within intercultural communication involving refugee communities (Piller, 2017). While divergence serves as a mechanism for maintaining cultural identity and internal solidarity, it may simultaneously be interpreted by the host society as a sign of social distance or unwillingness to integrate. Such interpretations illustrate how communication practices are often evaluated through dominant cultural expectations rather than through an understanding of the structural constraints faced by refugee communities (Piller, 2017).

Another important finding relates to the phenomenon of overaccommodation, which emerges through communicative dependency within the refugee community. Due to unequal language proficiency, a small number of refugees who are fluent in Indonesian frequently act as intermediaries between the community and local residents. While this arrangement facilitates communication in the short term, it also concentrates communicative authority in particular individuals. Over time, this pattern may create internal hierarchies within the refugee community, where language proficiency becomes associated with greater access to information and social interaction. From this perspective, language proficiency functions not merely as a communicative tool but also as a form of communicative capital that shapes authority in interaction and participation in broader social networks. Consequently, individuals who possess greater linguistic competence may occupy more influential positions within the community, while others remain dependent on mediated forms of communication (Piller, 2017).

Overaccommodation is also evident in the communication patterns of some local residents who attempt to simplify their language excessively when interacting with refugees. Although these efforts are often motivated by good intentions, such adjustments may unintentionally reinforce perceptions of inequality in interaction by positioning refugees as communicatively less competent. According to Communication Accommodation Theory, excessive accommodation can produce unintended social consequences, including the reinforcement of stereotypes or the reproduction of power imbalances in communication relationships (Dragojevic et al., 2015).

Taken together, these findings suggest that communication accommodation among Rohingya refugees in Pekanbaru is shaped not only by interpersonal communication dynamics but also by broader structural conditions related to forced migration, statelessness, and social vulnerability. The structural vulnerability experienced by Rohingya refugees cannot be separated from the long history of persecution and exclusion in Myanmar, which has rendered them one of the largest stateless populations in the world (Sarmin, 2020). In this context, communication occurs within asymmetrical social relations in which refugees must continuously negotiate linguistic limitations, social acceptance, and everyday interaction with the host community. Accommodation strategies therefore function not merely as linguistic adjustments but also as mechanisms through which refugees negotiate identity, security, and social belonging in a new cultural environment (Berry, 2005; Kim, 2001).

Furthermore, the results of this study contribute to the development of Communication Accommodation Theory by demonstrating that accommodation processes in refugee contexts are often constrained by unequal social positions. While the theory traditionally emphasizes voluntary communicative adjustments between individuals, the findings of this research indicate that accommodation strategies among refugees are frequently influenced by structural pressures and the need to secure social legitimacy within the host society.

To synthesize the above findings, this study proposes a model of communication accommodation strategies used by Rohingya refugees in Pekanbaru. This model describes communication practices within structural conditions shaped by forced migration, language inequality, and intercultural contact. In this context, refugees navigate interactions through three accommodation strategies: convergence, divergence, and over-accommodation, which collectively shape the dynamics of cross-cultural communication in their daily lives.

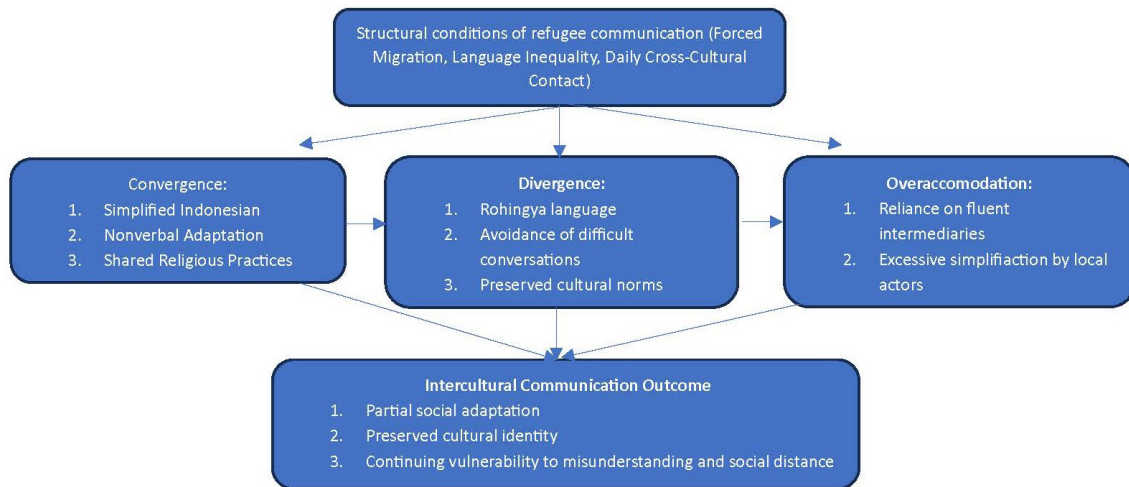


Image 1. Communication Accommodation Model of Rohingya Refugees in Interaction with The Pekanbaru Community
Source: Research Findings (2025)

Image 1 summarizes the dynamics of communication accommodation strategies among Rohingya refugees in Pekanbaru. Convergence enables refugees to participate in interaction with the local community through linguistic and cultural adjustments, while divergence functions to preserve cultural identity and internal solidarity within the Rohingya community. At the same time, patterns of overaccommodation reveal the emergence of communicative dependency and asymmetrical interaction. Together, these strategies produce communication outcomes characterized by partial social adaptation, the preservation of cultural identity, and the continued vulnerability to misunderstanding and social distance. In practical terms, the findings highlight the importance of developing inclusive communication initiatives that support intercultural understanding between refugees and local communities. Language training programs, intercultural dialogue spaces, and community based integration activities may help reduce communication barriers and promote more balanced interactions. Strengthening these communication channels is essential not only for facilitating social integration but also for preventing misunderstandings that may escalate into social tensions.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the communication accommodation strategies practiced by Rohingya refugees in Pekanbaru occur within an unequal social context shaped by language limitations, refugee status, and structural vulnerability. The findings suggest that convergence

functions as a pragmatic strategy through which refugees attempt to expand opportunities for social interaction and acceptance within the host community. Through the use of Indonesian, nonverbal attunements, and shared cultural or religious references, refugees attempt to reduce communication barriers and maintain participation in daily interactions. At the same time, divergence emerges as an important mechanism for preserving cultural identity and strengthening internal solidarity within the Rohingya community. The continued use of the Rohingya language, the maintenance of traditional social norms, and the selective withdrawal from difficult-to-navigate interactions illustrate how refugees negotiate social boundaries in an unfamiliar environment. While these strategies contribute to internal cohesion, they can also inadvertently reinforce social distance when interpreted without contextual understanding by the host community. Over-accommodation manifests itself through patterns of communicative dependency within the refugee community. Reliance on individuals with better Indonesian language skills to act as language intermediaries facilitates communication in the short term, but can also create unequal access to information and participation. These patterns demonstrate how accommodation processes can simultaneously enable interaction while reproducing subtle forms of communicative inequality.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of Communication Accommodation Theory by highlighting how accommodation strategies operate in the context of forced migration and statelessness. The findings suggest that communicative adjustments within refugee communities are not entirely voluntary interpersonal choices, but are shaped by structural conditions, social vulnerability, and the need to secure legitimacy within the host society. Practically, these results emphasize the importance of providing structured linguistic support and creating spaces for intercultural dialogue that facilitate more balanced communication between refugees and host communities. Such initiatives can help reduce misunderstandings and strengthen social cohesion in multicultural environments. Given that this research focuses on a single local context, future studies are encouraged to explore the dynamics of communication accommodation across different refugee communities and sociocultural environments to develop a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural communication in the context of forced migration.

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