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Harmony in Commerce: Tolerance Communication Practices in the Chinatown District of Kelenteng Street, Bandung

Harmoni dalam Perdagangan: Praktik Komunikasi Toleransi di Kawasan Chinatown Jalan Kelenteng, Bandung

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Abstract

This study examines tolerance-based communication practices between shop owners and customers in the multicultural environment of Jalan Kelenteng, Bandung, using a qualitative descriptive approach supported by Interreligious Communication and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). Interviews with five shop owners and three customers show that accommodative strategies, such as halal-oriented branding in Chinese-themed eateries, adjusting language for Mandarin- or English-speaking customers, and providing flexibility for Muslim workers during prayer times, help reduce interreligious tension and enhance comfort in everyday interactions. Instances of divergence occur mainly due to language barriers or initial cultural unfamiliarity, yet these are typically managed through clarification and supportive nonverbal cues. Overall, the findings highlight how practical, everyday communication adjustments foster mutual respect, inclusivity, and social harmony, positioning Jalan Kelenteng as an example of peaceful interreligious coexistence in an urban multicultural setting.

Keywords: Interreligious Communication; Kelenteng Bandung Street; Multicultural Interaction; Tolerance

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji praktik komunikasi toleransi antara pemilik toko dan pelanggan di lingkungan multikultural Jalan Kelenteng, Bandung, dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif yang didukung oleh teori Komunikasi Lintas Agama dan Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). Wawancara dengan lima pemilik toko dan tiga pelanggan menunjukkan bahwa strategi akomodasi, seperti penggunaan branding halal pada kedai bernuansa Tionghoa, penyesuaian bahasa untuk pelanggan yang menggunakan Mandarin atau Inggris, serta pemberian fleksibilitas bagi pekerja Muslim saat menjalankan ibadah, berperan dalam mengurangi potensi ketegangan antaragama dan meningkatkan kenyamanan dalam interaksi sehari-hari. Bentuk divergensi muncul terutama karena kendala bahasa atau ketidakterbiasaan budaya pada awal pertemuan, namun umumnya dapat diatasi melalui klarifikasi dan isyarat nonverbal yang suportif. Secara keseluruhan, temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa penyesuaian komunikasi yang terjadi secara praktis dan sehari-hari mampu membangun saling menghargai, inklusivitas, serta harmoni sosial, sekaligus menjadikan Jalan Kelenteng sebagai contoh keberagaman agama yang hidup secara damai di kawasan urban multikultural.

Kata Kunci: Komunikasi Antaragama; Jalan Kelenteng Bandung; Interaksi Multikultural; Toleransi



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INTRODUCTION

The Kelenteng Street area in Bandung stands as a vivid example of an urban space rich in cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity.¹ Within this district, Chinese-Indonesian residents, local communities, and newcomers from various backgrounds coexist in harmony. Economic, religious, and social activities blend seamlessly, forming a distinctive rhythm of daily life. Amidst the bustling commerce, Kelenteng Street radiates a strong cultural identity through its traditional shophouse architecture, the aroma of Chinese cuisine, and the warmth of interactions between traders and customers. This unique atmosphere makes Kelenteng Street not merely a commercial hub but also a living symbol of diversity and tolerance that continues to thrive amid the social transformations of modern Bandung.

The origins of Kelenteng Street cannot be separated from the long history of the Chinese community in Bandung, which has existed since the colonial era.² This area developed into a trading center due to its strategic location near major transportation routes. Rows of shophouses lining the street reflect a way of life where economic activity and domestic life intertwine. This architectural and social pattern mirrors the hardworking and independent spirit of the Chinese community, while also showing how economic and social values reinforce one another. Over time, Kelenteng Street evolved into a social interaction space that embodies the fusion of tradition, commerce, and adaptation to the changing dynamics of an increasingly modern city.

Beyond its economic and historical value, Kelenteng Street holds deep cultural meaning for the people of Bandung. The presence of Satya Budhi Vihara, one of the oldest temples in the area, serves as a focal point for both religious practice and cultural activities.³ The temple plays a vital role in preserving the values of solidarity, mutual assistance, and respect among residents of different faiths. Religious celebrations often become moments of unity, where people from various backgrounds participate together in peace. This phenomenon demonstrates that diversity is not a source of division but rather a potential strength that nurtures social cohesion within the complex urban fabric of Bandung.

In daily life, interactions between traders and customers along Kelenteng Street extend far beyond mere economic transactions. Communication between them reflects a form of social relationship built naturally amid cultural and religious differences.⁴ The ways traders greet customers, choose their words, and show respect through service reveal the essence of intercultural communication in practice. Beneath each simple exchange lies a flow of meaning and mutual understanding that reinforces trust and belonging. Thus, the economic activity in Kelenteng Street becomes more than a marketplace—it serves as a bridge that connects people across cultural lines through genuine social encounters.

While many studies have explored interreligious tolerance within communities or formal institutions, few have examined how such values manifest in everyday communication within

1 Mustika Wardhani et al., “Study of Layout, Circulation, and Ornaments in Temple Building (Case Study: Satya Budhi Temple, Bandung),” *Jurnal Arsitektur TERRACOTTA* 4, no. 2 (2023): 145.

2 Boyi Chen, “The Kelenteng and Annual Rituals: Hokkien Community in Batavia,” *Journal of World History* 35, no. 3 (September 2024): 407–37, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2024.a935011>.

3 Tjutju Widjaja, Setiawan Sabana, and Ira Adriati, “Aesthetical and Philosophical Values of Mu Yi (Wooden Fish) in Vihara Buddhi Bandung,” in *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Arts, Language and Culture (ICALC 2018)* (Paris, France: Atlantis Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2991/icalc-18.2019.17>.

4 Dewa Agung Gede Agung et al., “Local Wisdom as a Model of Interfaith Communication in Creating Religious Harmony in Indonesia,” *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 9 (2024): 100827, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.100827>.

public spaces like marketplaces.⁵ Most existing research focuses on structured dialogues or government initiatives promoting tolerance, whereas the interpersonal dimension of daily interactions in economic contexts remains underexplored.⁶ Yet, ordinary exchanges—such as a trader’s greeting, word choice, or manner of service—can reflect authentic and lived forms of tolerance. This gap highlights the need to understand how social harmony is built not only through formal discourse but through the organic, habitual practices that emerge in people’s everyday interactions.

Based on this background, the present study aims to explore how tolerance-oriented communication practices between traders and customers take shape within the multicultural setting of Kelenteng Street in Bandung. This research seeks to demonstrate that social harmony can emerge from simple interactions in open economic spaces accessible to all. The findings are expected to offer insights into how values of respect, acceptance, and inclusivity are constructed through daily communication. By examining these dynamics, the study contributes to a broader understanding of communication as a fundamental mechanism for sustaining diversity and fostering peaceful coexistence in urban public life.

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of communication practices between traders and customers in the Kelenteng Street area, Andir District, Bandung City, West Java Province, Indonesia (postal code 40181). This approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to explore meanings, interaction patterns, and communication strategies that naturally emerge within a multicultural social environment.⁷ Through this method, the study aims to reveal how interreligious and intercultural communication processes are formed in the context of everyday trade. The qualitative approach is considered relevant for analyzing complex and context-dependent social phenomena, particularly those related to communicative behavior and interpersonal relationships shaped by cultural values and social norms.

Data were collected through participant observation, and documentation. Participant observation was conducted directly in the Kelenteng Street area to record both verbal and nonverbal communication patterns, including language use, gestures, expressions, and styles of interaction between traders and customers. A total of eight informants participated in the study, consisting of five traders and three customers, selected using purposive sampling based on their active involvement in trading activities. The traders represented diverse ethnic and business backgrounds, particularly Chinese-style culinary shops with halal certification, while the customers were selected to represent interreligious perspectives in everyday interactions within the marketplace.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, this research applied source and method triangulation, comparing findings from observation, interviews, and supporting documentation. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which includes three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, conducted simultaneously

5 Emil van Eck et al., “Moving Marketplaces: Understanding Public Space from a Relational Mobility Perspective,” *Cities* 127 (August 2022): 103721, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2022.103721>.

6 Yudi Dharma, Wistina Seneru, and Sabina Nwakaego Obi, “The Role of Communication in Building Tolerance and Unity in a Diverse Society: A Systematic Literature Review,” *Journal of Communication, Religious, and Social Sciences (JoCRSS)* 3, no. 1 (June 30, 2025): 13–24, <https://doi.org/10.60046/jocrss.v3i1.219>.

7 John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (London: Sage, 2014).

throughout the research process.⁸ The analysis was carried out reflectively to identify communication patterns that foster tolerance and mutual understanding in public spaces. The findings are expected to provide a comprehensive depiction of interreligious and intercultural communication dynamics that naturally occur within the multicultural setting of Kelenteng Street, Bandung.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Interreligious Relations in Kelenteng Street, Bandung

Kelenteng Street is one of the oldest Chinatown districts in Bandung, which began to develop during the early waves of Chinese migration to the Indonesian archipelago. Its growth strengthened with the establishment of Vihara Satya Budhi in 1855, which became the center of religious, social, and cultural activities for the Chinese community. From its earliest formation, relationships between the Chinese community and the indigenous residents of Bandung were characterized by inclusive, tolerant, and respectful patterns of interaction. This mutual coexistence in everyday life reflects the ability of local communities to maintain social harmony through shared spaces of trade, faith, and culture, making Kelenteng Street a unique representation of multicultural unity in an urban Indonesian setting.⁹

Throughout its history, the area has experienced various forms of political pressure—from the ethnic segregation policies of the Dutch colonial era to the identity restrictions imposed during the New Order period. Despite these challenges, the people of Kelenteng Street managed to sustain social cohesion through cultural resilience, economic solidarity, and enduring practices of tolerance passed down across generations. Their ability to recover, adapt, and reintegrate after episodes of political intervention demonstrates the strength of inherited social capital. This resilience has enabled Kelenteng Street to preserve its multicultural harmony and maintain a sense of belonging that transcends ethnic and religious boundaries.¹⁰

Economically, Kelenteng Street has evolved into a vibrant hub of commercial activity. The culinary sector stands as its strongest identity, with numerous food stalls, cafés, and small restaurants serving people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Alongside culinary enterprises, small workshops, electrical stores, and chemical supply shops contribute to a diversified local economy that supports community livelihoods. This diversity of businesses not only sustains the local economy but also reinforces Kelenteng Street's role as a meeting point between cultures and economic networks. Commerce, in this sense, functions not merely as an economic exchange but as a social process that nurtures understanding, trust, and cooperation among people of different faiths and backgrounds.¹¹

8 Matthew B Miles and A Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (Sage Publications, 1994).

9 Miftachul Huda et al., "Building Harmony in Diverse Society: Insights from Practical Wisdom," *International Journal of Ethics and Systems* 36, no. 2 (April 13, 2020): 149–65, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOES-11-2017-0208>.

10 Angela Gracia B. Cruz, Yuri Seo, and Margo Buchanan-Oliver, "Religion as a Field of Transcultural Practices in Multicultural Marketplaces," *Journal of Business Research* 91 (October 2018): 317–25, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.07.022>.

11 Frank Krueger and Andreas Meyer-Lindenberg, "Toward a Model of Interpersonal Trust Drawn from Neuroscience, Psychology, and Economics," *Trends in Neurosciences* 42, no. 2 (February 2019): 92–101, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tins.2018.10.004>.



Figure 1. View of Toleransi Village

Source: Take by Author

Beyond being a center of residence and commerce, Kelenteng Street also serves as a crucial space for cultural exchange—bridging Chinese traditions with Sundanese and other ethnic influences in Bandung. This intercultural interaction is visible in daily practices such as mixed language use, localized culinary adaptations, and trading habits that merge Chinese precision with local warmth. The continuity of these blended cultural expressions reveals that the area is not merely a historical relic but a living site of hybrid identity formation. The ongoing adaptation between communities allows Kelenteng Street to remain a vibrant Chinatown district that evolves with time rather than being frozen as a mere heritage landmark.

At the same time, the growing openness of Kelenteng Street to the public—both local residents and tourists—has turned it into an important heritage tourism site in Bandung. The area’s distinctive cultural atmosphere, preserved spatial layout, and nearly round-the-clock commercial activity create a unique urban charm. This phenomenon not only revitalizes the local economy but also enriches opportunities for intercultural interaction in public spaces. Kelenteng Street, therefore, stands as tangible evidence of how Chinese cultural heritage continues to transform, survive, and coexist within the framework of a modern Indonesian city while maintaining its historical character and social inclusivity.

Kelenteng Street today is recognized as one of Bandung’s most dynamic multicultural trade zones. Along its stretch, food stalls, vegetable markets, and small enterprises are run by traders from Chinese, Muslim, and other religious backgrounds. Religious buildings—such as temples, churches, and residential houses—stand side by side, forming a symbolic and physical ecosystem of religious diversity. Research findings indicate that tolerance-based communication in this area emerges naturally as part of daily economic routines. Traders and customers do not emphasize religious differences; rather, they practice respect through everyday interactions such as greetings, service, and language adjustment. The widespread use of halal, “no pork,” and “no lard” signs in Chinese eateries illustrates how the community has developed a culturally sensitive communication model that prioritizes comfort and mutual respect across identities.

Tolerance Communication Practices in the Kelenteng Street Area

The Kelenteng Street area in Bandung exemplifies how intercultural and interreligious interactions unfold naturally within everyday life. As explained in the Overview of Interreligious Relations in Kelenteng Street, Bandung, this district represents a living symbol of social harmony rooted in practical communication between traders and customers. Here, economic activity functions not only as a transactional process but also as a channel for building mutual trust and respect across faiths. Tolerance emerges organically through small, meaningful

gestures—greetings, polite speech, and customer service grounded in empathy.¹² Within this context, communication becomes more than a medium of exchange; it evolves into a cultural bridge that connects people of different religious and ethnic identities in shared urban spaces.

One of the most visible forms of tolerance communication in Kelenteng Street appears in culinary practices. Many Chinese-style restaurants and food stalls prominently display “halal,” “no pork,” or “no lard” labels to create a sense of comfort for Muslim customers. An example is illustrated in Figure 2, which shows a “No Non-Halal Food” sign displayed at a local restaurant. This act is not merely a marketing strategy but a genuine form of respect toward religious sensitivity. Such signage functions as a form of nonverbal communication that conveys awareness and inclusivity, reinforcing Kelenteng Street’s reputation as a space where tolerance is practiced through daily, tangible actions rather than abstract ideals.¹³



Figure 2. Sign stating “No Non-Halal Food Allowed” displayed in a Chinese restaurant on Kelenteng Street, Bandung.

Source: Take by Author

Beyond symbolic labeling, culinary adjustments are also reflected in ingredient choices and food preparation methods.¹⁴ Some restaurant owners ensure that all ingredients are halal-certified and even employ Muslim chefs to guarantee authenticity and trust. This demonstrates that interreligious awareness does not necessarily stem from formal regulation but from social empathy and mutual consideration. Such practices strengthen Kelenteng Street’s image as an inclusive environment where cultural and religious differences coexist harmoniously. The ability of business owners to integrate tolerance into daily operations highlights how communication can serve as a foundation for peaceful coexistence in multicultural urban settings.¹⁵

Language also plays a crucial role in facilitating mutual understanding. Traders often blend Indonesian, Mandarin, and English to communicate effectively with customers from various backgrounds. Friendly gestures and simplified explanations help bridge potential language barriers, ensuring that interactions remain smooth and respectful. This linguistic flexibility

12 Harriman Samuel Saragih, “Service Language and Small Talk: Differentiating Genuine from Mundane in B2B Contexts,” *Journal of Service Theory and Practice* 35, no. 1 (January 22, 2025): 31–55, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSTP-03-2024-0084>.

13 Miranda N Rouse et al., “Verbal and Nonverbal Communication: Creating Inclusion and Accessibility,” *The Routledge Handbook of Public Speaking Research and Theory*, 2024, 133–43.

14 Nicklas Neuman, “On the Engagement with Social Theory in Food Studies: Cultural Symbols and Social Practices,” *Food, Culture & Society* 22, no. 1 (January 20, 2019): 78–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2018.1547069>.

15 Bherta Sri Eko and Hendar Putranto, “The Role of Intercultural Competence and Local Wisdom in Building Intercultural and Inter-Religious Tolerance,” *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* 48, no. 4 (July 4, 2019): 341–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2019.1639535>.

represents a form of adaptive communication that nurtures interpersonal connection.¹⁶ In this setting, language functions as a social bridge rather than a divider, helping transform the marketplace into a comfortable and inclusive public sphere where diversity is both acknowledged and celebrated through everyday dialogue.

In addition to language adaptation, traders demonstrate religious sensitivity through workplace practices. Several establishments temporarily pause kitchen operations during Friday prayers, allowing Muslim employees to worship without disruption. Notices to customers are delivered politely, reflecting empathy and respect for religious observance. Such actions illustrate ethical and compassionate communication in practice. They also reveal that tolerance can be embedded in simple managerial decisions that balance professionalism and spirituality. This approach reflects the belief that harmony in a multicultural workplace depends not on uniformity but on mutual respect and understanding among individuals of different faiths.¹⁷

Despite these adjustments, traders continue to maintain their distinct cultural identities. Many Chinese-owned shops retain traditional decorations, such as red lanterns and auspicious symbols, while Muslim employees freely practice their religious obligations. This situation exemplifies positive divergence, where individuals uphold their cultural distinctiveness without creating social distance. Diversity thus becomes a resource rather than a barrier. The coexistence of multiple identities within one shared environment underscores that social harmony arises not from sameness but from communication practices rooted in mutual appreciation and respect.¹⁸

A clear illustration of this inclusive interaction can be seen in Figure 3, which captures an everyday market scene where traders and customers from different religious and ethnic backgrounds engage in friendly exchanges. The image reflects a lived culture of openness and cooperation that has become second nature to local residents.¹⁹ Simple activities, such as buying vegetables or food, become acts of social connection, demonstrating that interfaith communication does not require formal structures—it flourishes through routine encounters grounded in courtesy and understanding.



Figure 3. Street vendors and customers from different backgrounds engaging in trade on Kelenteng Street, Bandung.

Source: Take by Author

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- 16 Yoesoep Edhie Rachmad, “Learning Flexibility Theory” (Tuxtla Gutiérrez Selva Chiapas Publicaciones Internacionales, 2022).
 - 17 Li-ann Thio, “Irreducible Plurality, Indivisible Unity: Singapore Relational Constitutionalism and Cultivating Harmony Through Constructing a Constitutional Civil Religion,” *German Law Journal* 20, no. 7 (October 30, 2019): 1007–34, <https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2019.75>.
 - 18 Maggie Yue Zhao, “Harmony: Towards a Unified Conceptual Framework,” *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, May 6, 2025, 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2025.2500564>.
 - 19 Meg Holden, “Community Well-Being in Neighbourhoods: Achieving Community and Open-Minded Space through Engagement in Neighbourhoods,” *International Journal of Community Well-Being* 1, no. 1 (November 29, 2018): 45–61, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42413-018-0005-1>.

Employer–employee relationships in Kelenteng Street also embody tolerance communication in practice. Non-Muslim shop owners often grant Muslim workers the freedom to perform prayers without restriction, while employees reciprocate by showing respect during Chinese cultural celebrations such as Lunar New Year or Cap Go Meh. These interactions demonstrate a balanced exchange of consideration, where both sides recognize and honor each other's traditions. Rather than imposing boundaries, this mutual respect fosters a workplace culture that values human dignity and shared belonging, showing how tolerance is sustained through everyday cooperation and empathy.²⁰

Long-term relationships between traders and customers further strengthen this harmony. Some shops have operated for decades, maintaining loyal customers from various faiths and ethnicities. The friendships that emerge go beyond economic exchange, evolving into emotional and social bonds built on trust and familiarity. Over time, repeated interactions reduce prejudice and foster deeper understanding. This long-standing rapport exemplifies how consistent, sincere communication within commercial contexts can nurture interreligious harmony at the grassroots level.²¹

From the customers' perspective, traders' efforts to provide transparent and inclusive services significantly enhance comfort and trust.²² Muslim customers, in particular, appreciate the openness with which traders disclose food ingredients and display halal labels. This transparency reduces anxiety related to food consumption in a historically Chinese district. Customers describe the atmosphere as friendly and natural, suggesting that honest and empathetic communication forms the foundation of their positive experience. The relationship between traders and customers in Kelenteng Street thus extends beyond business—it reflects human connection grounded in shared respect.

Nevertheless, some visitors highlight the limited availability of public facilities such as prayer spaces for Muslim visitors. While this issue does not disrupt harmony, it points to the need for continued development toward a more inclusive environment. Several residents have expressed interest in organizing interreligious cultural events, such as festivals or community dialogues, to further strengthen social cohesion. These aspirations indicate a collective awareness that tolerance is not a static condition but an evolving process, sustained through ongoing communication and collaboration. With continued inclusivity efforts, Kelenteng Street holds great potential as a living model of urban multicultural harmony in Bandung.

When viewed holistically, communication practices in Kelenteng Street demonstrate that social harmony emerges not from formal policy but from shared consciousness and habitual empathy. The interactions between traders and customers provide a vivid example of how intercultural communication fosters urban cohesion. As emphasized earlier in the Overview of Interreligious Relations in Kelenteng Street, Bandung, diversity here is not a challenge to be managed but a collective strength. The lived experiences in Kelenteng Street show that tolerance thrives when communication—both verbal and symbolic—is used as a tool for respect, connection, and social peace.

20 Eneida Zalli, "Globalization and Education: Exploring the Exchange of Ideas, Values, and Traditions in Promoting Cultural Understanding and Global Citizenship," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development* 11, no. 1 S1 (2024): 55.

21 Pratama, Muhammad Yusuf, Luthfi Rahman, Mokh Sya'roni, Yasser Mulla Shadra, and Muhammad Alwi HS. 2025. "Aestheticizing Coexistence: Public Perceptions of the Istiqlal-Cathedral Tunnel on Social Media". *KARSA Journal of Social and Islamic Culture* 33 (2), 453-80. <https://doi.org/10.19105/karsa.v33i2.20836>.

22 Yanji Duan and Qingyun Zhu, "Blockchain Empowerment: Enhancing Consumer Trust and Outreach through Supply Chain Transparency," *International Journal of Production Research* 63, no. 14 (July 18, 2025): 5358–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207543.2024.2434951>.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that tolerance-based communication practices in the Kelenteng Street area of Bandung occur naturally and are deeply embedded in the community's everyday economic activities. Traders and customers from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds interact harmoniously, guided by mutual respect and adaptive communication. Adjustments such as halal labeling, multilingual exchanges, and accommodation for prayer times foster a sense of safety and trust among participants. These practices demonstrate that social harmony in multicultural settings is not necessarily achieved through formal policies but rather through simple, habitual acts of empathy—friendly greetings, considerate service, and inclusive interaction—that collectively sustain peaceful coexistence in a diverse urban environment.

The main contribution of this study lies in providing new insights into how interreligious and intercultural communication functions as a practical tool for strengthening social cohesion in public urban spaces. It enriches intercultural communication studies by emphasizing that tolerance is best expressed through everyday practices rather than abstract discourse. Practically, the findings offer valuable input for policymakers and cultural heritage managers in designing inclusive cross-cultural programs. Future research could expand this work by comparing other multicultural districts across Indonesia or exploring the role of younger generations in maintaining tolerance values amid rapid social and cultural change.

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