

Communication Strategies of Digital Communities in Managing Opinion Polarization within Online Discussion Spaces

Yuzril Fadhil Muhammad^{1*}, Farida²

Universitas Dr. Soetomo, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: Yuzril Fadhil Muhammad, yuzrilyfm@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Online opinion polarization threatens the quality of public communication, yet the role of internal community communication remains underexplored. This qualitative case study uses digital netnography to examine how a WhatsApp-based RT/RW community in Surabaya manages polarization through informal moderation and shared communication norms. Data from observations, discussions, interviews with 10 informants, and document review were thematically analyzed. The findings show that informal moderation, calming message framing, and reinforcement of collective norms effectively reduce conflict and sustain dialogue. The study highlights the social capacity of digital communities to manage polarization constructively and contributes to theories of community-based digital communication governance and inclusive online dialogue strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has brought fundamental changes in public communication patterns, especially in online discussion rooms which are increasingly becoming the main arena for the exchange of public opinions. Social media and instant messaging platforms allow for fast, wide-ranging, and participatory interactions, but at the same time also pose the serious challenge of polarizing opinions. This polarization is characterized by the strengthening of extreme views, group fragmentation, and a decline in the quality of dialogue between individuals with different perspectives. International studies show that the intensity of polarization in the digital space is not only influenced by the platform's algorithms, but also by the dynamics of communication between users within the online community itself (Esau, 2024). In this context, communication is no longer neutral, but plays an active role in shaping social cohesion or conflict.

The phenomenon of polarizing opinion is increasingly relevant in local digital communities, such as citizens' WhatsApp groups, which now function as a forum for discussion of social issues, public policy, and community interests. In Indonesia, especially in urban areas such as Surabaya, WhatsApp groups at the RT/RW level are the main medium of communication for residents in their daily lives. However, social closeness that is supposed to strengthen solidarity has the potential to escalate conflicts when differences of opinion are not managed communicatively. Research shows that local community-based online discussions are vulnerable to conflict escalation due to the lack of formal moderation mechanisms and strong group identity bonds (Juditha, 2025). Therefore, communication management in the local digital community is an urgent issue to be studied scientifically.

Most of the previous research on online opinion polarization has still focused on the role of algorithms, platform architecture, as well as the spread of misinformation at the macro scale (Pratap & Pathak, 2025). This approach tends to see users as passive actors affected by technological systems, rather than as social subjects who are able to develop communication strategies collectively. As a result, the internal mechanisms of the digital community, such as communication norms, admin roles, and informal moderation practices, receive less attention in the literature. In fact, several recent studies confirm that digital communities have the social capacity to regulate interactions and mitigate conflicts independently through certain communication practices (Chueca Del Cerro, 2024). This condition shows that there is a research gap that needs to be filled.

In addition, studies that specifically address digital community communication strategies in closed or semi-closed discussion spaces, such as instant messaging groups, are still very limited. Research on online moderation is more focused on open platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, which have platform-based content regulation systems (Agarwal et al., 2024). Meanwhile, private discussion rooms like WhatsApp rely entirely on the community's internal social mechanisms. The lack of an empirical understanding of how local communities manage polarization of opinion in such spaces has the potential to

hinder the development of effective and contextual communication strategies, particularly in developing countries.

From a theoretical perspective, the management of opinion polarization in the digital community is closely related to the concepts of deliberative communication, social cohesion, and community-based communication governance. Recent research shows that communication practices that emphasize dialogue, soothing message framing, and affirmation of collective norms can strengthen the social resilience of digital communities (Kim & Ployhart, 2023). However, the integration of these concepts into local community communication practices has not been systematically explored. This is important because the digital community is not only a space for information exchange, but also an arena for negotiating meaning and social relations.

Based on these gaps, this study explicitly aims to analyze the communication strategies used by the digital community in managing the polarization of opinions in online discussion spaces. This research focuses on the WhatsApp community of RT/RW residents in the city of Surabaya by examining the practice of informal moderation, message framing, and affirmation of communication norms applied by community members and managers. A qualitative approach with a case study design is used to capture communication dynamics in depth and contextually. This focus on local communities is the main differentiator of the research compared to previous studies that were macro-scale and platform-based.

The contribution of this research is theoretical and practical. Theoretically, this study enriches the study of digital communication by placing the digital community as a social actor who is active in managing the polarization of opinions, not just as a victim of technological dynamics. Practically, the research findings are expected to be a reference for community managers, local governments, and communication practitioners in designing more inclusive and constructive online community communication strategies. Thus, this research makes a real contribution to strengthening the quality of public discourse and social cohesion in the digital era.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Communities and Online Discussion Spaces

A digital community is defined as a social group that is formed and interacts continuously through digital platforms with the aim of sharing information, building a collective identity, and maintaining social relationships. Research shows that digital communities not only function as a communication space, but also as an arena for the formation of distinctive social norms, values, and control mechanisms (Papacharissi, 2021). In online discussion spaces, interactions between users are often influenced by social closeness, common backgrounds, and common interests, which form their own communication patterns. Recent studies confirm that instant messaging-based communities tend to have a high level of internal trust, but are also prone to conflict when differences of opinion arise (Molina et al., 2021). Therefore, a digital community

needs to be understood as an active social entity that has the capacity to regulate its communication dynamics internally.

Opinion Polarization in Digital Communication

Polarization of opinion in digital communication refers to the tendency of individuals or groups to adopt increasingly extreme views and be separated from other groups in online discussion spaces. Recent literature shows that polarization does not always arise due to differences of opinion alone, but is reinforced by selective social interaction and the strengthening of group identities (Bail, 2021). When individuals interact more frequently with the aligned parties, this process can reinforce cognitive biases and reduce openness to alternative views. Cross-border comparative research also shows that online polarization negatively impacts the quality of public deliberation and social trust (Tucker et al., 2021). Thus, polarization of opinion is a complex communication problem and is rooted in social dynamics in the digital community.

Communication Norms and Social Regulation in Online Communities

Communication norms play an important role in regulating the behavior of members of the digital community and setting reasonable boundaries in expressing opinions. Studies show that mutually agreed norms, both explicitly and implicitly, can serve as effective social control mechanisms in online discussion spaces (Rossini et al., 2021). These norms include rules of decency, prohibition of offensive speech, and encouragement to present arguments rationally. When communication norms are consistently enforced, communities tend to be able to maintain the stability of interactions despite differences of view. This research confirms that communication norms are not only the product of platform regulation, but also the result of social negotiations between members of the digital community.

Informal Moderation and the Role of Community Actors

Informal moderation is the practice of managing communication carried out by community members without direct intervention from the platform's system. Research shows that the role of community actors such as admins or senior members is significant in reducing conflict and preventing the escalation of opinion polarization (Gillespie, 2020). Informal moderation practices can be in the form of reminding norms, mediating conflicts, and shifting the topic of discussion to a more neutral direction. Recent empirical studies show that social relation-based moderation is often more effective than formal moderation because it is supported by social trust and legitimacy (Zhang & Kwon, 2023). Therefore, informal moderation is an important element in the governance of digital community communication.

Message Framing and Deliberative Communication

Message framing is a communication strategy that affects the way audiences understand and respond to an issue. In the context of polarizing opinions, framing that emphasizes empathy, common interests, and collective solutions has been shown to reduce the intensity of conflict in online discussions

(Vraga & Bode, 2020). Deliberative communication research shows that dialogical and reflective communication styles encourage more constructive engagement between individuals with different views. Recent studies have also revealed that calming message framing can create a safe space for the exchange of opinions without necessitating differences (Freelon & Wells, 2020). Thus, message framing strategies are a crucial component in managing digital community communication.

METHODOLOGY

Types and Approaches to Research

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design combined with digital netnography to deeply understand the communication strategies of the digital community in managing polarization of opinions in online discussion spaces. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to capture the meaning, context, and dynamics of social interactions that cannot be reduced to statistical numbers (Creswell & Poth, 2020). The case study design was used to examine the phenomenon contextually and in-depth in one specific social unit, namely the WhatsApp community of RT/RW residents in the city of Surabaya. Meanwhile, digital netnography is used to observe online communication practices in a naturalistic manner in a closed online community environment (Kozinets, 2020). This combination of approaches allows for a comprehensive analysis of actual communication practices that are developing within the local digital community.

Population, Research Subjects, and Sampling Techniques

The population of this study is all members of the WhatsApp community of RT/RW residents in the city of Surabaya who are active in online community discussions. The sampling technique used is non-probability sampling with the purposive sampling method, which is the selection of informants based on certain criteria relevant to the research objectives (Etikan et al., 2021). This research involved 10 key informants, consisting of: 3 WhatsApp group admins, 2 RT/RW administrators, and 5 active community members who are often involved in discussions and opinion interactions. The selection of these informants is based on consideration of their strategic role in managing, moderating, and shaping the dynamics of community communication. The number of informants is considered adequate to achieve data saturation, which is a condition when the information obtained has been repeated and no longer produces new findings (Guest et al., 2020).

Data Collection Techniques and Research Instruments

Data collection was carried out through three main techniques, namely online observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Online observation was carried out by systematically observing the interaction of discussions in WhatsApp groups during the study period to identify communication patterns, forms of conflict of opinion, and informal moderation practices that emerged. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 key

informants using interview guidelines developed based on the framework of community communication and digital conflict management (Saldaña & Omasta, 2021). Documentation includes a review of community rules, admin announcement messages, and archived conversations relevant to the topic of polarizing opinion. The triangulation approach method is used to increase the credibility and validity of research data (Flick, 2022).

Research Implementation Procedure

The research is carried out through several systematic stages. The initial stage includes mapping the digital community and obtaining research permits for WhatsApp community managers. The next stage is initial observation to understand the context of communication and identify key actors in the community. Furthermore, interviews were conducted online and offline with selected informants according to their willingness and comfort. The final stage includes the process of data transcription, coding, thematic analysis, and iterative drawing of conclusions. The entire research process is carried out by paying attention to the ethical principles of research, including informant consent and data confidentiality protection (Tracy, 2020).

Data Analysis Techniques and Supporting Devices

Data analysis is carried out using thematic analysis, which aims to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning in qualitative data systematically (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis process includes the data familiarization stage, initial coding, theme development, theme review, and final theme definition. To support the data management and coding process, the study used NVivo 12 software, which helped improve the traceability and consistency of qualitative data analysis. This approach allows researchers to connect empirical findings with conceptual frameworks logically and transparently, thereby increasing the analytical validity of the research.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Informal Moderation as an Effective Mechanism for Preventing Conflict Escalation

The results of the study show that informal moderation is the most dominant and effective communication mechanism in preventing the escalation of conflicts of opinion in the online discussion rooms of the WhatsApp community. Based on observations of group interactions, informal moderation arises situationally when discussions begin to show signs of tension, such as the use of emotional language, the repetition of arguments that attack each other, or the shift of topics to personal. This moderation practice is carried out mainly by group admins and RT/RW administrators through a persuasive and relational approach, not through strict prohibitions or direct sanctions. Forms of moderation include subtle reminders of norms, clarification of the meaning of messages that have the potential to be misinterpreted, and mediation by lowering the intensity of the language of discussion. This approach has proven to be effective because it is able to maintain mutual respect and does not cut off members' participation in discussions.

A group admin said that *"If there is a discussion that starts to heat up, I usually remind you to take it slowly, don't immediately be reprimanded harshly so as not to be offended, because if it is too loud, it can even make more noise."* (A-1, interview, October 5, 2025). This statement was reinforced by another admin asserting that *"We prefer to mediate with neutral language, rather than immediately shut down the conversation"* (A-2, interview, October 7, 2025). From the side of RT/RW management, the informal moderation approach is seen as important to maintain social relations, as expressed that *"As administrators, we don't want the atmosphere to be tense, so the approach remains family"* (R-1, interview, October 9, 2025). The perspective of the community member also demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach, where one member states that *"Usually if the admin has intervened in a subtle way, the discussion immediately subsides and returns to the original topic"* (K-3, interview, October 11, 2025).

Thematic analysis shows that the effectiveness of informal moderation is highly dependent on the social legitimacy of the actors who carry out the moderation as well as the relational closeness between community members. Documentation data in the form of an archive of admin messages shows that the moderation intervention is delivered briefly, neutrally, and does not mention specific parties, so as not to cause embarrassment. Thus, informal moderation functions as a trust-based social control mechanism that is able to maintain the stability of interactions and the sustainability of dialogue in the digital community.

Calming Message Framing in Maintaining Constructive Dialogue

The second theme that emerges consistently is the use of calming message framing as a key communication strategy in reducing polarization of opinions. The results of the observation showed that when there was a sharp difference of opinion, a number of community actors consciously framed their responses by emphasizing empathy, common interests, and collective identity as citizens in one environment. This framing does not aim to eliminate differences of opinion, but rather to change the way these differences are communicated so that they do not develop into open conflicts. Calmly framed messages generally use reflective language, an invitation to think together, and a shift of focus from personal debate to the search for practical solutions.

An admin revealed that *"Usually I reply by reminding that we are all in the same environment, so don't attack each other"* (A-3, interview, October 6, 2025). A similar approach was also conveyed by the RT/RW management who stated that *"If there is an emotion, I try to switch to a solution, not argue about who is right or wrong"* (R-2, interview, October 10, 2025). From the perspective of community members, the framing of soothing messages is considered to have a direct impact on emotional control, as revealed that *"A message with a calm tone makes people think again before replying"* (K-1, interview, October 13, 2025). Another member added that *"If the discussion is made more relaxed, the discussion will not be too hot and can still run"* (K-4, interview, October 15, 2025).

Triangulation between interview results and conversation observation showed that calming message framing plays a significant role in controlling the

collective emotions of the community. Members still feel safe to express their opinions without fear of being attacked or blamed. Methodologically, these findings confirm that message framing strategies are a crucial communication instrument in maintaining the quality of dialogue and preventing polarization from developing further.

Reinforcement of Collective Communication Norms

The affirmation of collective communication norms is an important theme in managing the polarization of opinion in the digital community studied. These norms include the obligation to use polite language, the prohibition of provocative or degrading speech, and the encouragement to respect differences of opinion. The results of the documentation show that some norms are conveyed explicitly through admin announcement messages, while others are formed implicitly through repetitive and mutually agreed communication practices. This norm serves as the main reference when there is tension in the discussion.

An admin explained that *"From the beginning it has been agreed that discussions should not use harsh words, because it can provoke emotions"* (A-1, interview, October 5, 2025). The RT/RW management emphasized the importance of this norm by stating that *"Norms are important so that everyone feels comfortable participating in discussions"* (R-2, interview, October 10, 2025). From the member side, norm control is also carried out collectively, as revealed that *"If someone violates, it is usually immediately reminded together, not necessarily by the admin alone"* (K-2, interview, October 14, 2025). Another member added that *"Because people already know the rules, people become more careful when expressing their opinions"* (K-5, interview, October 17, 2025).

Thematic analysis shows that collective norms function as an effective internal social control mechanism without the need for formal sanctions. Observational data show that when norms are consistently affirmed, the intensity of conflict decreases and discussions tend to remain productive. This shows that communication norms play an important role in maintaining social cohesion and the stability of digital community interactions.

Social Legitimacy and Role Differentiation in Communication Control

The results of the study show that the effectiveness of communication strategies is greatly influenced by the differentiation of roles and social legitimacy of community actors. Group admins and RT/RW administrators have symbolic authority that makes their interventions more acceptable to members. On the other hand, active members also play an important role as a balancer in discussions by providing moderate, rational, and non-provocative responses. This division of roles forms a communication control system that is collective and not centralized to one actor only.

A community member stated that *"If the admin speaks, usually everyone is more obedient because they are considered to represent the group's rules"* (K-3, interview, October 11, 2025). The group admin also emphasized the existence of moral responsibility in the role by conveying that *"We feel that we have a responsibility to keep the atmosphere conducive"* (A-2, interview, October 7, 2025). From the perspective of the RT/RW management, neutrality is the main

principle, as expressed that "*As administrators, we try to be neutral so as not to take sides with one of the opinions*" (R-1, interview, October 9, 2025). Meanwhile, another member added that "*Members also remind each other if the discussion starts to go off track*" (K-4, interview, October 15, 2025). These findings were obtained through an in-depth interview analysis and interaction observation that showed that polarization management is the result of collective work. A clear role structure strengthens the community's capacity to manage conflict independently and sustainably.

Community Capacity in Managing Opinion Polarization

Overall, the results of the study confirm that digital communities have a strong social capacity to constructively manage polarization of opinions. The combination of informal moderation, calming message framing, and affirmation of collective norms forms a communication system that is adaptive to the dynamics of dissent. All observational, interview, and documentation research methods consistently show that polarization management does not depend on platform mechanisms, but rather on community-based communication practices that are consciously carried out by its members.

An admin concluded that "*As long as the communication is maintained, the difference is not a problem*" (A-3, interview, October 6, 2025). This view is in line with the statement of the RT/RW management which emphasizes that "*The important thing is that we can still discuss without making a fuss*" (R-2, interview, October 10, 2025). From the member side, the sustainability of dialogue is seen as a strength of the community, as expressed that "*Despite the differences, the discussion continues*" (K-1, interview, October 13, 2025). Other members affirmed that "*This group is still comfortable because the communication is maintained together, not just by the admin*" (K-5, interview, October 17, 2025). These findings confirm that digital communities are not just spaces for passive interaction, but active social actors who are able to manage the dynamics of communication and opinion polarization in a constructive and sustainable manner.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that informal moderation plays a key role in preventing the escalation of conflicts of opinion in citizens' WhatsApp communities. These findings are in line with informal social control theories that emphasize the role of norms, interpersonal relationships, and beliefs in maintaining social order without coercive formal intervention (Gibson, 2021). In the context of digital communication, informal approaches are becoming increasingly relevant because online spaces are fluid, participatory, and sensitive to emotional expression. Previous studies have also shown that relationship-based moderation tends to be more effective than formal regulation in maintaining member participation and dialogue quality (Jhaver et al., 2021). Thus, these findings strengthen the argument that the success of online conflict management is not solely determined by written rules, but by the social capacity of community actors in establishing the legitimacy of communication.

The dominant role of group admins and RT/RW administrators in informal moderation practices can be explained through the concept of social legitimacy and symbolic authority in community communication. According to the theory of communicative legitimacy, messages conveyed by actors with recognized social positions tend to be received without excessive resistance (Suchman, 2020). Previous research confirms that legitimacy comes not only from formal structures, but also from reputation, consistency of attitude, and relational closeness to community members (Kornfield & Washington, 2022). The findings of this study show that RT/RW admins and administrators are able to use this legitimacy to reduce tensions without triggering new conflicts. As a result, communication management becomes more sustainable and does not depend on sanctions or restrictions on participation.

The use of calming message framing as a key communication strategy reflects the application of framing theory in the context of digital conflict resolution. Framing theory explains that the way messages are structured and presented can affect the interpretation, emotional response, and behavior of the audience (Entman, 2020). The results of this study are in line with the findings of Lee & Choi (2023) who show that empathy-based framing and collective interest are able to suppress polarization of opinions in online discussions. Instead of erasing differences of opinion, calming framing shifts the focus of the discussion from personal confrontation to the search for a shared solution. These findings contribute to the development of communication studies by confirming that framing is not only a tool of persuasion, but also an instrument of collective emotion management in digital communities.

The affirmation of collective communication norms found in this study strengthens the concept of social norms as a mechanism of internal control of the community. Social norm theory states that compliance with unwritten rules is often more effective than formal regulation because it is supported by social pressure and mutual consensus (Bicchieri & Dimant, 2022). In citizens' WhatsApp communities, the norm of politeness and respect for differences of opinion serves as the main reference when conflicts begin to arise. International studies have also shown that consistently affirmed norms can reduce verbal aggressiveness and improve the quality of online deliberations (Strandberg et al., 2021). Thus, these findings show that communication norms are not just complementary, but the main foundation of the stability of digital community interactions.

The differentiation of roles between admins, RT/RW administrators, and active members reflects a communication control model that is collective and distributed. The governance perspective in the digital community emphasizes that effective conflict management occurs when responsibilities are not centralized on one actor, but are shared functionally (Ostrom, 2021). These findings are in line with Matias' (2022) research which shows that member participation in maintaining the quality of discussions strengthens a sense of community belonging. The role of members as a balancer in the discussion also helps prevent the dominance of one particular vote or group. As a result,

communities have become more resilient in the face of differences of opinion that have the potential to trigger polarization.

Although the results support the initial hypothesis regarding the effectiveness of informal moderation, there are several factors that could potentially affect the results differently. The social closeness between members and the homogeneity of the community background are likely to strengthen the effectiveness of the kinship approach applied. Other research suggests that in more heterogeneous or highly conflicted communities, informal moderation does not always work and requires a combination with clear formal rules (Riedl et al., 2021). In addition, this study has limitations in the scope of location and the relatively limited number of informants, so generalization of findings needs to be done carefully. Therefore, different outcomes in other contexts can be explained by variations in social structure, communication culture, and levels of trust between members.

Overall, this research makes a theoretical and empirical contribution to the study of digital communication and community conflict management. The research findings broaden the understanding of how trust-based communication practices, message framing, and collective norms can function as effective social control mechanisms in the online space. From a practical perspective, the results of this research can be a reference for digital community managers in designing inclusive and sustainable communication strategies. For follow-up research, it is recommended to conduct a cross-community comparative study with different social characteristics and a mixed-methods approach to obtain a more comprehensive understanding. Thus, this research not only answers empirical problems, but also opens up space for the development of community communication theory in the digital era.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that digital communities have significant social capacity in managing polarization of opinions constructively through adaptive internal communication strategies. Persuasive informal moderation practices, the use of soothing message framing, and the affirmation of collective communication norms have proven to be effective in preventing conflict escalation and maintaining the sustainability of dialogue in online discussion spaces. These findings suggest that the management of polarization does not depend solely on the mechanisms of digital platforms, but rather on the social legitimacy of community actors, relational proximity, and shared value agreement that develops in daily interactions. Thus, this study enriches the study of digital communication by affirming the active role of the community as an agent of communication governance that is able to maintain the quality of public discourse and social cohesion in online discussion spaces.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future research is suggested to examine digital community polarization management across different platforms and cultural contexts to assess the consistency of these findings. Further studies may also explore the long-term

effectiveness of informal moderation practices and the role of community leadership dynamics in sustaining constructive online discourse.

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