A Shift in Information Dissemination Methods in a Cultural Ritual amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Suhadah Suhadah*
Doctoral Program of Communication Science, Padjadjaran University, Jawa Barat, Indonesia
E-mail: suhadah17001@mail.unpad.ac.id

Pawit M. Yusup
Department of Library Science, Communication Science Faculty, Padjadjaran University, Jawa Barat, Indonesia
E-mail: pawit.m.yusup@unpad.ac.id

Deddy Mulyana
Department of Journalism, Communication Science Faculty, Padjadjaran University, Jawa Barat, Indonesia
E-mail: deddy.mulyana@unpad.ac.id

Nuryah Asri Sjafirah
Department of Journalism, Communication Science Faculty, Padjadjaran University, Jawa Barat, Indonesia
E-mail: nuryah.asri@unpad.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study aims to unravel the shift in the customary method of disseminating information about the ritual of *Perang Topat* (literally translated as "rice-cake war") as carried out by the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar in the West Lombok Regency of Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Grounded in the ethnography of communication research methodology, this study examines the process of the cultural ritual during the 2020 period of the pandemic and compares it to the ones held in 2018 and 2019 (before the current pandemic). Drawing on findings from observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation, it was revealed that the traditional or custom-oriented community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar abandoned all three prominently used methods of disseminating the information of the *Perang Topat* ritual that had been used prior to the pandemic, and that they were replaced by a strategy with solely face-to-face (FTF) interpersonal communication carried out by visiting the homes of the target participants of the cultural event. This method was relevant to the current viral crisis because it enabled the committee to minimize the number of spectators which might potentially violate COVID-19 health protocols. This finding also reinforces the hypothetical statement that interpersonal communication via FTF is effective in disseminating information in a limited manner and empowering the emotional bond between the individuals who share relationships and similar interests. The findings of the present study can be a reference for any events where physical distancing must be strictly imposed and require a limit to the number of participants during the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, cultural ritual of Perang Topat, face-to-face communication, information dissemination, Lombok Indonesia

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, which originated in Wuhan, China in December 2019, has adversely impacted the health sector, as well as almost all aspects of our social lives. It has significantly reduced the growth of the global economy (Ahmad et al., 2020), and promoted an escalating use of modern technologies for businesses (Akpan et al., 2020). The pandemic has also altered educational practices, causing a pedagogical shift from face-to-face to total online learning, especially for higher education (Aristovnik et al., 2020), although it also applies to other educational levels. In addition, it has also changed the procedures for performing traditional rituals or events in certain local communities. One example of this is the *Perang Topat* (rice-cake war), a tradition handed down from generation to generation by members belonging to the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar in the West Lombok Regency of Indonesia.

The ritual of *Perang Topat* is usually held on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the Sasak calendar of Lombok, or on the fifteenth of the same month on the Balinese calendar (typically November). During this ritual, the Muslim and the Balinese Hindu community in Lingsar pelt each other with boiled rice wrapped in coconut leaves as a symbol of their mutual gratitude for the spring water used to irrigate their farm lands. As a means of mediating interfaith communication (Wirata, 2015) and promoting interfaith harmony (Suprapto, 2017), the ritual is also carried out to commemorate the late K. H. Abdul Malik, an early Islamic preacher in the village of Lingsar. According to the beliefs of the traditional/customary community of the village, the ritual of *Perang Topat* should not be totally abandoned because of the pandemic. It has become quite problematic for this ritual to be held during the pandemic when physical distancing is mandatory. The standard health protocol for COVID-19 prohibits this traditional ritual as it involves a large number of people, including hundreds of participants and a large audience.

The ritual of *Perang Topat* has continued to take place despite the pandemic. National data recorded by the Ministry of Health and COVID-19 Task Force showed that there were a total of 714,365 positives, 583,676 recoveries and 21,237 deaths from COVID-19 as of 27 December 2020. By the same date, the number of cases in the Province of West Nusa Tenggara had reached 5,524 positive cases with 4,556 recoveries and 281 deaths (Satuan Tugas Penanganan COVID-19, 2020). The custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar seems to have been brave enough to carry out the ritual amid the increasing number of COVID-19 patients at the time. This decision is distinctive from other ritual events in Indonesia which were forced to shut down because of the the pandemic. Such events included the "Festival Budaya Tua Buton" (Cultural event of Tua Buton) (Heeryl, 2020), the "Grebek Maulid" in the Keraton/Sultanate of Yogyakarta (Hakim, 2020), the traditional marriage parties by the Batak ethnic group (Marison, 2020), and a number of other customary or traditional rituals. In this regard, it is of paramount importance to ascertain how the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar was able to carry out the ritual of *Perang Topat* without violating or going against the COVID-19 health protocols.

It turns out that information management is one of the most important aspects to successfully hold cultural events involving a large number of people such as *Perang Topat* under these conditions. The process of information and publication regarding certain events becomes the reference for people in accordance with the role of the communication, which is to inform or explain things to a target audience (Mulyana, 2017). Under normal conditions, a cultural event such as *Perang Topat* used to be on the routine agenda of the local tourism office and stakeholders. It also involved the local government of West Lombok, in order to promote and publicize information about the event so that it could encourage a great number of spectators to attend. However, under the pandemic conditions, it requires a novel method for disseminating information that is in accordance with the standard of health protocols for COVID-19.

This current study aims to unravel the strategic changes of information dissemination for the *Perang Topat* ritual held by the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar in Lingsar Village of the West Lombok Regency in Indonesia in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Information dissemination in this context refers to the enactment of spreading messages and is aimed at helping people in an informal way (Fidel, 2012). In the view of communication sciences, it refers to the symbol of interaction during which every individual is making an effort through a process of communication that aims to share meaning (West & Turner, 2010). Operationally, the terms in this research are focused on revealing the directions, strategies, and objectives of the shifted methods for disseminating information about the ritual from normal conditions to those used in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Information dissemination is a process of spreading information and delivering the message of communication to the target receivers or users who need the information that is necessary and useful for them (Tulung, 2013). To realize the objective of the information dissemination, it is necessary to carry out a serious endeavor of the interlocutors involved in the communication per se. In so doing, Welch-Ross and Fasig (2007) advocated that information dissemination is a creative and innovative endeavor that has a profound impact on public awareness and understanding, so that they can reap its merits. Based on this role, information dissemination is often pragmatically done by local governments to promote regional development programs in their respective regions. A study by Setyanto and Winduwati (2017), for example, unveiled that the local government of West Nusa Tenggara Province made use of information dissemination to promote the tourism potentials in the region. Likewise, SM and Narti (2021) uncovered that media centers as a medium of information dissemination for the local government of Bengkulu city were deployed to socialize its programs to the people.

At least two aspects distinguish the above two studies from this current research. *First*, the aspect of the actor of the information dissemination: Previous studies examined the efforts of information dissemination executed by local governments, while this current study looked into its process made by respective communities to disseminate information pertaining to cultural rituals during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Second*, the aspect of information dissemination methods is different: The two earlier studies uncovered the experiences of disseminating information by means of mass media, online, and electronic media as the methods, while this current study discovered the use of interpersonal face-to-face communication as the method.

Online media of communication as a means of information dissemination is regularly used for various events amid the pandemic to prevent the potential of violating COVID-19 health protocols. Gumilar et al. (2021) reveal how information technology was deployed to spread information regarding bushfires amid the pandemic. Similarly, Chan et al. (2020) postulated that social media had potential for disseminating information well during the pandemic if appropriately used, while the study by Lin et al. (2020) investigated the use of sophisticated information techniques and technology to provide necessary information in the face of COVID-19. In addition, Astini (2020)

examined the challenges and potentials for making use of information and technologies for online instruction in Indonesia amid the pandemic. While the four abovementioned studies focused on examining the use of information technologies in their own respective fields amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the current study aimed to unravel the shift of strategies for disseminating information from a technology-based method to the traditional method, such as interpersonal face-to-face, which is intended to minimize the presence of the public during the cultural event, preventing mass gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Studies regarding the cultural and ritual events, especially in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic, generally focus on the implementation of local culture to face COVID-19. A study by Yusuf and Basyid (2020), for instance, unveiled the ritual tradition "Mbeleh Wedhus Kendhit" (one of the rituals performed by Javanese ethnics in Indonesia) as a medium of preventing a curse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Ruhulessin and Pentury (2020) discovered the role of the "Dalu Yat" ritual as a social norm and law established by the people of Grime, Papua Province, Indonesia, to promote cultural obedience, discipline, and social awareness in protecting against the spread of COVID-19 in their region. In addition, the phenomenon of using the local culture of the Baduy tribe in the Province of Banten to face COVID-19 was also studied by Robiah and Hayat (2021). It was found that the Baduy community possessed their own traditional strategy for tackling COVID-19 that accorded with their customary beliefs, by kneeling and praying toward their ancestors and using traditional herbs to maintain their immune systems. Different from the aforementioned studies, this current research aimed to uncover strategies adopted by the customary community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar, West Lombok Regency, Indonesia, in maintaining their ritual tradition, while curbing the spread of COVID-19 through disseminating information in a limited way, via interpersonal face-to-face, to minimize public attendance.

3. METHODS

This study employed an interpretive approach (Lindlof, 1995) that drew on the ethnography of communication tradition. The ethnography of communication is a methodology that focuses on examining the organization of human discourses, including the situation, event, and action as well as communicative patterns of certain groups within a community (Ibrahim, 1994). This research meth-

od was deemed appropriate to reveal the strategies of the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar in Lingsar Village in West Lombok Regency with regard to the dissemination of information of the *Perang Topat* ritual amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The data regarding the dissemination of the information was also related with the three given aspects of ethnographic communication as coined by Hymes (1972), namely communicative situation, communicative event, and communicative act.

Fifteen respondents were purposely chosen and included the five family members of *Amangku Kemaliq* (the chairman of the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar), five committee members of the *Perang Topat* ritual, and five participants from different villages who routinely attended the ritual. The data was garnered from three distinctive events of the traditional war event, namely the events of *Perang Topat* in 2018 and 2019 with respect to the data of information dissemination during normal conditions (before the pandemic of COVID-19), and that of the *Perang Topat* ritual in 2020, during the pandemic. The time to garner the data was three months annually; hence, this study was undertaken accumulatively for nine months.

The data was collected from observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation is an appropriate data collection technique for the ethnography of communication study (Kuswarno, 2011) and is categorized as an inclusive qualitative method (Mulyana, 2018). Observation was performed through active participation in the activities of the information dissemination and in the ritual during the pandemic. In-depth structured interviews were carried out to gain the needed information directly from the participants, pertinent to the strategies of information dissemination of the *Perang Topat* ritual. It involved nine of the fifteen participants, who were purposely selected because they could represent all the elements of the total participants. Relevant documents were used to triangulate the findings.

Generally, the process of this research went through four phases. *First*, the researchers approached the customary leader of the *Kemaliq* Lingsar and the committee chair of the *Perang Topat* ritual; *second*, the researchers took part in the process of information dissemination and in the *Perang Topat* before and after the COVID-19 pandemic; *third*, selecting and comparing the data regarding information dissemination before and after the CO-VID-19 pandemic; and *fourth*, investigating the validity of the data through triangulation technique to finalize the results. The data was analyzed using Miles and Huberman'

(1992) model of data analysis, namely data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions with verification. To validate the findings, three triangulation procedures were conducted: first, peer validity triangulation through collectively reviewing the findings that involved all the researchers; second, triangulation of data sources by comparing the data gained from interviews, observations, and documentation; and third, triangulation theory, whereby the findings are related to and compared with various relevant theories to avoid personal biases of the researchers with respect to the research findings.

4. RESULTS

The findings of the study showed that there was a changing strategy for the dissemination of information regarding the ritual of *Perang Topat* enacted by this traditional customs committee of *Kemaliq* Lingsar in the West Lombok Regency of Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic. To identify the types and direction of these strategic changes, the following provides the comparison of information dissemination of the cultural event before and during the pandemic.

4.1. Dissemination of Information of *Perang Topat* before the COVID-19 Pandemic

Under normal conditions, the rice-cake war is usually carried out by involving a great number of people as participants and spectators. It was not only a routine tradition of the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar in Lingsar Village but also deemed as one of the major annual cultural tourism agendas, both regionally and nationally. For these two reasons, the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar in Lingsar Village and the West Lombok Regency Tourism Office collaboratively made maximum preparations for the success of the event. The manifestation of their collaboration is evidenced in the dissemination of information regarding the cultural event.

Generally, there were three media forms used for information dissemination for the ritual event of *Perang Topat* in the normal situation as seen during the event in 2019. The first, dissemination of information for the event, used social media. This was initiated and carried out by the Tourism Office in collaboration with the Public Relations and Protocol Division of West Lombok Regency. This local government institution uses a YouTube channel (Dinas Pariwisata Lombok Barat, 2019). This is a video promotion and invitation to participate in and attend the 2019 *Perang Topat* event. It is shared by various groups (both

state civil servants and the general public) via their social media accounts, such as Facebook and Instagram.

Promotion and socialization of the *Perang Topat* ritual through social media is the right choice in order to adjust to the growing use of social media by the community. According to the head of the Public Relations and Protocol of West Lombok Regency, the use of social media as a medium of promotion for the event is effective because social media, mainly YouTube, has a highly increasing usage in the community (Ahkam, personal interview, December 2019). The view given above indicates the desire of the regional government to celebrate the ritual as one of the regional tourism events.

One of the youths who was actively involved in the *Perang Topat* event stated that he always disseminated information about the event through his social media:

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I routinely informed others about the event of *Perang Topat* through my Facebook status. All the pre-and post-agendas of the cultural event were posted to disseminate the information to the public, so that they could attend it. We would be very happy if a large number of people attended the event, which means that a lot more people need to know our tradition of *Perang Topat* (Gilang, personal interview, November 2019).

The excerpt above reaffirms the benefit of social media as a means of information dissemination for the *Perang Topat* ritual. This independent initiative from the committee and people to socialize the cultural event was in line with the intention and efforts of the local government to promote cultural events as a part of their tourism agenda.

The second medium for disseminating information about the ritual was the use of billboards and banners.

Both the Tourism Office and the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar made use of billboards and banners to promote the cultural event. It was carried out a month before the event took place. They were installed in a number of prominent public spots, such as at the exit from Lombok International Airport, intersections in the capital of West Lombok Regency (Fig. 1), and various other strategic locations. They were also placed along the road to Lingsar Park, the focal area for the *Perang Topat* ritual.

The use of billboards and banners as media for information dissemination of cultural events indicated that the *Perang Topat* was open to the public. This means that people can access all the sacred ritual processes during the event. The customary chief of Lingsar, Mr. Supratman (interviewed in December 2019), mentioned that every ritual process during the *Perang Topat* entailed a large number of lessons, which were good for people to witness. One of the lessons that can be learnt from the ritual was one of interfaith tolerance in that it involved both Muslims and Hindus.

The third medium of information dissemination for the ritual was through the inclusion of sporting events and traditional arts. The committee always holds sports and traditional arts activities to celebrate the peak day of the cultural event. These include the performances of the *Presean* (stick fighting) competition, a traditional stick fighting competition where each of the fighters uses a stick made of rattan and a shield made of cow skin (Fig. 2), and the Sasak puppet show (Fig. 3), which is held for one week before the *Perang Topat* takes place.

The West Lombok Regency Tourism Office was responsible for the holding of the *Presean* championship, while the committee implemented the use of traditional puppet performances to disseminate information on the main event of *Perang Topat*. During the two events, the

Fig. 1. Billboard regarding the event of *Perang Topat*.

Fig. 2. *Presean* fighting to welcome the event of *Perang Topat*.

Fig. 3. Traditional puppet show.

Table 1. Changing methods of information dissemination for the *Perang Topat* ritual

| No. | Method of information dissemination | |
	Before the COVID-19 pandemic	During the COVID-19 pandemic
1	Billboards and banners	X
2	Social media	X
3	Sporting events and traditional arts	X
4	X	Door-to-door interpersonal communication

committee announced the date, purpose, and meaning of the main event, as well as including the information in routine traditional puppet events. The Master of Ceremonies (MC) of the *Presean* event, Amaq Isun (interviewed in December 2019), stated that his duty as MC was not only to lead the course of the event but also to deliver the message to the people to attend the *Perang Topat* event. The delivery of the information was at the direction of the traditional customs leader and the head of the local Tourism Office for West Lombok Regency.

The three information dissemination methods above were not employed by the community of the people of Lingsar to spread information of the ritual event of *Perang Topat* in 2020 during the COVID-19 outbreak in Indonesia. They changed the three methods, using a single means of dissemination, interpersonal communication face-to-face, by visiting the houses of the ritual committee to invite them to attend the ritual of *Perang Topat*. The changes in the method of disseminating information for the ritual are shown in Table 1.

The data on Table 1 shows that none of the traditional methods of disseminating information about the ritual of *Perang Topat* were used by the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar during the COVID-19 pandemic. This constructs a new method of disseminating the information that minimizes the crowd or number of spectators. This information dissemination technique was evidenced to be effective because the 2020 *Perang Topat* could run as planned without violating the COVID-19 health protocol.

4.2. Dissemination of Information of *Perang Topat* Ritual during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The ritual of *Perang Topat* continues to be carried out by the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar in Lingsar Village, although the procedures and stages of its imple-

mentation are adjusted according to the COVID-19 health protocol standards. The West Lombok Regency Tourism Office, which had been working with the local community, no longer provides any support for the holding of the event. Even the local government suggests terminating the holding of the event due to the rise of COVID-19 cases in the Province of West Nusa Tenggara. Therefore, the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar works independently to hold the ritual by altering some of the traditions that have long been part of the ritual.

One of the changing traditions of the ritual during the COVID-19 pandemic was the way information regarding the event was disseminated by the local community. None of the ordinary methods of information dissemination were adopted during the pandemic. All three prominent methods were replaced by interpersonal communication. This is like a snowballing technique, maintaining physical distance when visiting the homes of several people who were expected to contribute to the implementation of the ritual. People who played a direct role in the event were visited by representatives of the committee to convey plans for the hosting of the ritual. The committee also visited participants who resided beyond the village of Lingsar. The process utilizing the new information dissemination for the *Perang Topat* amid the COVID-19 pandemic is depicted in the following Fig. 4.

The villagers of *Kemaliq* Lingsar as the committee of the *Perang Topat* ritual organized a simple and conventional process of disseminating information within the family. It began with a large family gathering in the community to discuss the possible target audience and participants. Furthermore, Amangku Supratman, as the cultural leader of the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar, divided the tasks and instructed each member to invite the target participants by visiting their houses (Fig. 5). Each responsible committee member was asked to convey the
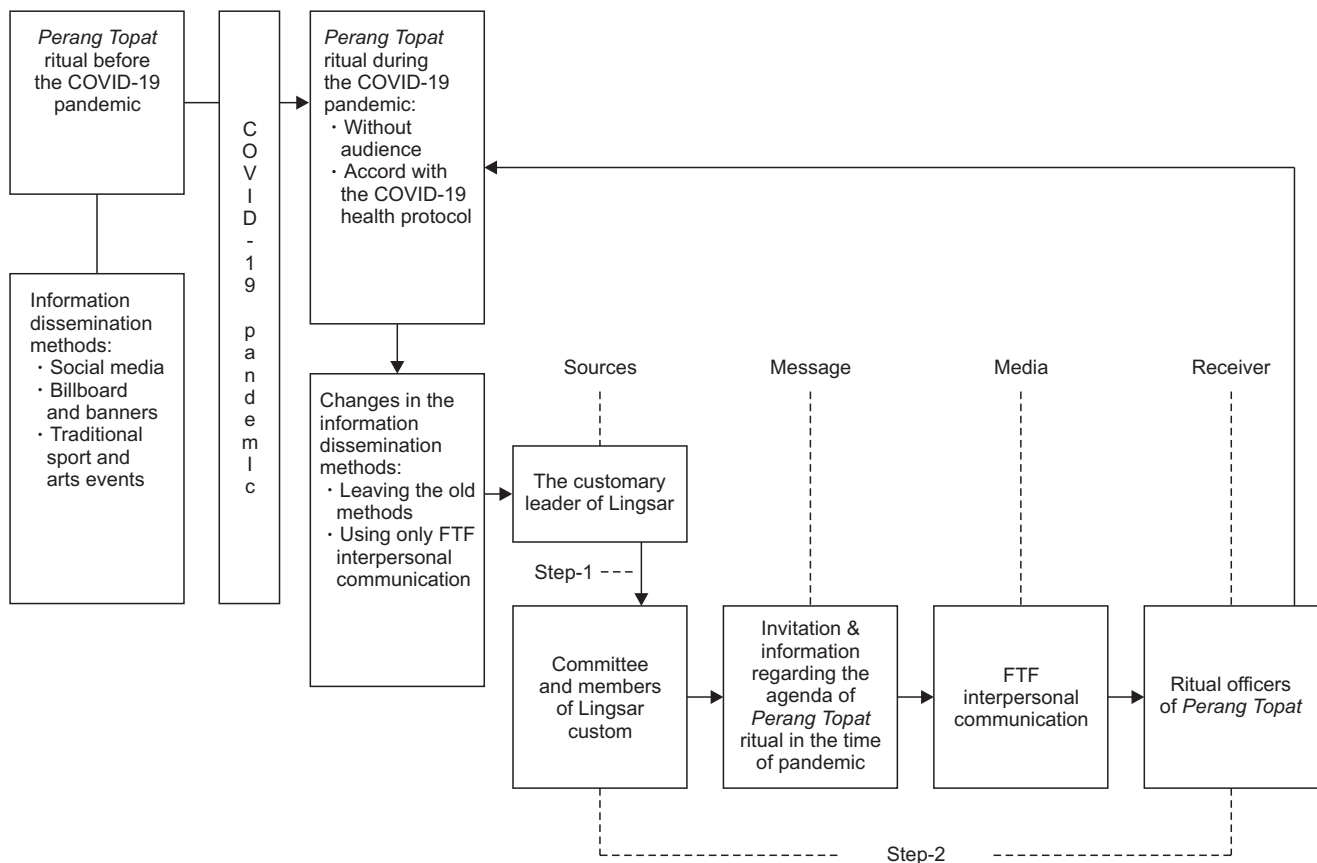
Fig. 4. Information dissemination model of *Perang Topat* ritual during the COVID-19 pandemic. FTF, face-to-face.

Fig. 5. Interpersonal communication during the information dissemination of *Perang Topat* ritual.

information regarding the time, agenda, and procedures for hosting the *Perang Topat* ritual during the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon finishing the spread of the information, the individual delegates reported the outcomes to Mr. Su-

pratman.

Prior to the pandemic, the committee, who annually calculated the time for hosting the ritual, were usually from outside the village of Lingsar. Based on their calculations, they independently decided the time to come to Lingsar Park (the arena of the *Perang Topat*). The uncertainty of whether or not the ritual was to be hosted during the COVID-19 pandemic made the hosting community take the initiative to come to each of the ritual officers earlier. This initiative, according to a member of the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar, was aimed to provide assurance and early information regarding the implementation of the event during the pandemic (Jamhur, personal interview, November 2020). The target participants of the ritual who received messages from the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar also felt happy with the presence of the representatives who came to their houses and brought information about the cultural religious event in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, in that they could get certain information earlier, enabling them to manage the time and to prepare personnel (Wayan, personal interview, De-

cember 2020).

The ritual information dissemination involved communication elements such as communicators or sources of information, messages, media, or channels, and recipients of information. In general, the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar was the source of information, and they were represented directly by the person the community delegated to visit houses. The message included information about the implementation of the ritual and various regulations imposed in order to adhere to the regulations of the COVID-19 pandemic. The information was disseminated face-to-face via interpersonal communication as the media or channel. Meanwhile, the delegates and information recipients were the participants of the ritual who had been identified and approved by the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar.

The reason for the use of face-to-face interpersonal communication as the information dissemination technique was to explain the procedures for carrying out the *Perang Topat* ritual during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, it also aimed to minimize the number of participants. According to the head of the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar, the cultural event was held without spectators and was only attended by people who were in charge (Supratman, personal interview, December 2020). This statement shows that the dissemination of information by means of interpersonal delivery of messages from house to house was considered by the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar as an effective way to minimize community presence in the event

The adherence of the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar to the COVID-19 health protocol was not only for the benefit of health but also for the sake of maintaining the implementation of the *Perang Topat*, while avoiding a complete ban by the government and security forces. It was for this reason that the traditional culture committee abandoned the ordinary media for disseminating information, such as for the *Presean* and the traditional puppet performance. Had these two traditional performances been carried out, the event would have triggered a great amount of public attendance, which might be in conflict with COVID-19 health protocols.

Mr. Arman, a youth leader from the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar, stated that the committee did not dare to hold *Presean* and the traditional puppet performances because these would encourage crowds, in that people would think there would be a *Perang Topat* as indicated by the presence of the two traditional performances. Hence, the host community did not want to face

the consequences which might lead to the total closure or prohibition of hosting the ritual. On the other side, there was a strong belief of the villagers that terminating the cultural event would result in a natural disaster (Arman, personal interview, December 2020).

The commitment of each member of the *Kemaliq* villagers to hold the *Perang Topat* ritual can be seen from the serious efforts they made. This was justified by Pak Rusli, a member of the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar who also serves as a member of the security forces which imposed strict rules on every citizen intending to attend the ritual:

> As a security force member, I do not dare to mess with the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. I have to be firm in expelling anyone who wants to form a crowd. If we let them come and gather to watch, the risk will be the banning of the event by the police and this is what we do not want because this ritual has to be held. That is why I take good care of the process, so that it runs smoothly without violating the COVID-19 health protocol (Rusli, personal interview, December 2020).

The statement above reinforces the commitment of the ritual organizers to adhere to the COVID-19 health protocol in order to maintain the hosting of the *Perang Topat* as a ritual that must take place every year, both in normal conditions and during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic conditions of early 2020.

There were two main reasons why the committee organizers decided to spread information about the event via door-to-door through interpersonal communication, namely maintaining the hosting of the event despite the COVID-19 pandemic and maintaining the standard health protocols for COVID-19. Their desire to hold the *Perang Topat* ritual is the same as their willingness to stay healthy and safe from COVID-19. Therefore, the *Kemaliq* community simplified the *Perang Topat* ritual by minimizing participants, cutting several supporting events involving the public, and abandoning the usual media methods.

The process of communication during information dissemination of the *Perang Topat* went through two stages. The first step began with the command of the committee chair and the customary members to deliver invitations to the people involved in the ritual. The second stage started when the customary leader of Lingsar visited houses of the event committee members residing in various villages

on the island of Lombok, during which diverse situations, events, and communicative acts were found (Hymes, 1972). The two stages of the dissemination processes happened to be in the informal communication and harmonious situation. The message givers and recipients already recognized each other, so the process of communication was like the meeting of family members during informal circumstances.

The communicative events during the process of disseminating the information of *Perang Topat* can be illustrated by the eight aspects known as SPEAKING by Hymes (Ibrahim, 1994), which comprise *Setting*, *Participant*, *End*, *Act*, *Key*, *Instrument*, *Norm*, and *Genre*. The setting of communication took place at the house of the customary leader and the committee of the *Perang Topat* ritual. The communication involved all the above parties as the participants. The message was delivered verbally and directly and contained an invitation to attend the event. Therefore, the purpose of the information dissemination was to invite the committee of the cultural event to attend the *Perang Topat* ritual in accordance with the COVID-19 health protocol. The expression of the information givers and recipients portrayed happiness and relaxation during their interpersonal communication taking place on a face-to-face basis. This two-way communication adhered to the norm of the Sasak tribe (the indigenous people of Lombok island, Indonesia) and the standard of the COVID-19 health protocols. They communicated in equal positions, namely sitting together and wearing face masks (Fig. 5) which related to the application of the norm of the communication. One of the committee members stated as follows:

In our Sasak tradition, the communication should be performed politely and equally, such as by sitting together or standing together in the absence of seats. We should also adhere to the regulations stipulated by the government with regard to maintaining distance and wearing face masks during the communication taking place outside our home environments and with other people. This was what we did when we invited the ritual staff of the *Perang Topat* (Ramlan, personal interview, October 2020).

The above process of information dissemination for the ritual of *Perang Topat* indicated the presence of strong intention by the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar to continue to carry out the ritual event despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The ritual committee is the core element of the event so that visiting and directly inviting each member guarantees their presence in the annual event. Utilizing a single information method through face-to-face interpersonal communication to the ritual officers was also the right moment to explain to them directly regarding the procedures and protocols for carrying out the event during the pandemic. In addition, direct explanation like this was appropriate because not all of the ritual officers were familiar with social media. The effectiveness of disseminating information to the ritual officers can be seen from their attendance and in that the number of people forming the audience attending the ritual was in accordance with COVID-19 health protocols.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that interpersonal communication was the perfect alternative medium for disseminating information about the cultural event of the ritual of *Perang Topat* in the village of Lingsar in the West Lombok Regency of Indonesia. The decision to employ such a method was driven by both its effectiveness in reducing the number of people that would form crowds and accommodating the need for information by the target individuals amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding accords with the criteria for information dissemination (Tulung, 2013). Information dissemination can occur when users receive messages or require information in accordance with their expectations and needs or factors beneficial for them.

The use of interpersonal communication as a means of disseminating information regarding the event indicates the presence of a strong emotional bond among the participants and the effectiveness of the strategy. This corresponds to the findings of Rumata (2017), who revealed that the factor of interpersonal closeness encourages a person to obtain and disseminate information by making face-to-face communication the main channel in disseminating information. Interpersonal closeness also shows cultural similarity. In the context of this research, such cultural similarity can be found in conducting the *Perang Topat* ritual. This is an important element in order to effectively fulfil the communicative purpose. Mulyana (2017) states that the more similar one's socio-cultural background is, the more likely the communication will be effective.

Drawing on the process of communication perspective, such an information dissemination strategy can be categorized into two stages of communication, namely the

delivery of information from the customary leader to the delegates (the first stage), which was subsequently conveyed to the target participants (the second stage). This process shows the willingness of the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar to proactively approach residents (ritual participants) when disseminating information pertinent to the ritual. It mediates and allows immediate feedback to take place, which is one of the advantages of interpersonal communication (Effendy, 2003). The communication process of indigenous communities as found in this research is closer to the active top-down socialization model found by Kadri (2018) in his research on the tradition of *Menyilaq* (inviting) as the communication wisdom of the Bayan indigenous community in North Lombok Regency, Indonesia.

The communication process initiated by the traditional custom community of the host village is unstructured because they do not have definite rules for implementing such a process of spreading the information. Each community member improvises in his own way without depriving the essence of the message that he or she is trying to convey. In the context of information systems, the process of disseminating information on this event is categorized into non-formal information systems (Davis, 1999), which portrays the authenticity of the cultural tradition of the traditional indigenous community as independent from any interventions of formal parties or institutions, such as the government.

The finding in this study does not correspond to that of the study by Gumilar et al. (2021), who encapsulate the use of technologies for disseminating information regarding bushfires during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is, however, reasonable that tackling forest fires required greater public attention, while the *Perang Topat* event in the current study came from the opposite direction, in that it required a limited number of audience members; hence, the use of technologies for information dissemination was not recommended.

The model for information dissemination about the *Perang Topat* ritual during the COVID-19 pandemic constructed in this study was one that combined both the activities of disseminating information and the process of cultural conservation amid the social and physical restrictions during the pandemic. This model is different from the Disaster Communication Model coined by Lestari et al. (2020) and the pattern of risk communication during the COVID-19 proposed by Abrams and Greenhawt (2020), which only delineated communication strategies during the disaster or the pandemic. Therefore, the infor-

mation dissemination model for the cultural ritual in this study can be a reference for all ethnic communities intending to carry out certain cultural events or rituals amid conditions like the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not only important for people across the globe with diverse ethnic groups and with different cultures and rituals, but also it becomes a reference for governments to stipulate appropriate policies to curb the spread of COVID-19 without hampering the performance of the rituals or cultural events of the communities.

From a socio-cultural perspective, the shift in the tradition of disseminating information regarding cultural events from the employment of technologies to face-to-face or conventional procedures can be the momentum for local people to revive their friendships, which have long been withering due to the emergence of technology-based communication media, such as mobile phones and the Internet. In this respect, Arifianto (2018) states that the massive use of digital media has degraded the value of traditional cultures that have been deeply rooted in society. Nasution (2017) regards this phenomenon as a trigger for the emergence of cultural globalization, which endangers existing local cultures.

The absence of the government (especially the West Lombok Regency Tourism Office) in celebrating the *Perang Topat* ritual during the COVID-19 pandemic can also be used as a momentum for residents (especially the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar) to carry out their cultural rituals independently, away from the hustle and bustle of ceremonies and publications full of promotional nuances. It must be admitted that so far cultural and religious rituals are often collaborated with a tourism agenda (Stausberg, 2011). This collaboration also occurred with the ritual of *Perang Topat* as a cultural heritage on the island of Lombok, in that it received special attention from domestic and foreign tourists (Maćkowiak, 2015). This can also be momentum to prioritize the aspect of the ritual itself rather than cultural and economic promotion. Also, it can be a catalyst for the local community to practice the purity of the ritual in the absence of local government intervention that is more concerned with the aspect of tourism.

To preserve the cultural values of a certain community, it is necessary to promote the level of community participation. Ideally, local governments act as facilitators and as a supporting unit by providing more space and opportunities for the community to manage their own rituals, starting from the information dissemination process to the implementation of the ritual culmination. The dominant

intervention of government over the cultural ritual can potentially reduce the sense of belonging of the community towards its own ritual. If this continues, it is possible that it will affect the level of community participation in every ritual. Providing the widest possible opportunity for the community to carry out cultural rituals is the same as supporting them to consistently hold the events (including maintaining the traditional culture of information dissemination as found in this study). This may result in the conservation of the local wisdom of each region amidst the temptations of modern culture, which is increasingly getting more intense.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Due to COVID-19, the custom community of *Kemaliq* Lingsar in the West Lombok Regency in Indonesia had to modify the implementation of the cultural rituals of *Perang Topat*. They personally visited the homes of the affected participants to inform their community members of their new plans. This meant that they disseminated their information through interpersonal communication rather than using a technology-based method of information dissemination and holding mass sporting events and traditional art performances.

The choice of interpersonal communication in the form of face-to-face as a method of disseminating the information of the *Perang Topat* ritual during the pandemic has restored traditional communication traditions that have been rarely practiced since the presence of technology-based communication media, such as cellphones and the like. This shift has also eliminated the role of the government and other stakeholders in promoting cultural tourism in its implementation. This phenomenon has contributed to the emergence of community independence in carrying out cultural rituals, as well as restoring their purity in the absence of second-hand motives, such as the promotion of the abovementioned cultural tourism.

The model of ritual information dissemination constructed in this study contributes to the theoretical state of interpersonal communication model, mainly related to strategies for disseminating information in a limited way to minimize the flocking of people to events during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study offered appropriate solutions for communities to maintain their cultural tradition amid COVID-19 without circumventing the long established cultural events or rituals of communities.

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