Research Article

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Cross-Religious Political Communication: Christian Candidates and Muslim Voters in Papua's 2024 Election

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the political communication strategy in the 2024 Papua Gubernatorial Election, focusing on the cross-religious approach employed by the Benhur Tomi Mano (BTM) and Yeremias Bisai pair. Specifically, this research examines how a Christian candidate navigates political marketing within a Muslim-minority context through the "Krimuha" (Christian-Muhammadiyah) branding. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through in-depth interviews and social media analysis (Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook). The study utilizes Political Marketing Theory and Identity Negotiation Theory to dissect campaign narratives. The results indicate that the BTM-Yeremias pair successfully implemented a segmentation strategy by blending nationalist figures with religious inclusivity. The effectiveness of this strategy lies in the "persona management" on social media, which framed the candidate not only as a former bureaucrat but as a figure accepted by Islamic grassroots (Muhammadiyah/NU). This research concludes that in conflict-prone areas like Papua, political communication that highlights intercultural harmony is more effective than rigid identity politics.

Keywords: Cross-Religious Communication, Krimuha, Papua Election, Political Marketing, Social Media Strategy.

INTRODUCTION

This research is pivotal as it offers a counter-narrative to the prevailing academic discourse on identity politics in Indonesia. While existing literature predominantly focuses on how religious identity is exploited to polarize voters as seen in the Jakarta 2017 or Presidential Election 2019 cases (Qodir 2025; Salim and Abdullah 2025). This study highlights a "reverse phenomenon" in Eastern Indonesia. It investigates how religious identity, specifically the "Krimuha" (*Christian-Muhammadiyah*) branding, functions as a tool for social cohesion rather than division. Furthermore, this study shifts the locus of political communication research from a "Java-centric" perspective (analyzing Muslim candidates in Muslim-majority regions) to a "pluralistic periphery" perspective (analyzing

Christian candidates winning Muslim votes in conflict-prone areas) (Jayadi 2025; Salim and Abdullah 2025). By doing so, this research contributes to the development of an "Intercultural Political Marketing" model, providing practical insights on how to manage diversity in democratic contests without triggering sectarian conflict (Azhari and Rangkuti 2025; Hutagalung and Sazali 2024).

In the landscape of Indonesia's 2024 concurrent regional elections spanning 37 provinces and 508 regencies/cities the gubernatorial election in Papua Province emerged as a unique locus of democratic maturity amidst structural challenges (Aminuddin 2016). With a Permanent Voter List (DPT) of 750,959, the contest was not merely a procedural event but a battle between "structural power" and "communicative power." The election featured two pairs: Benhur Tomi Mano-Yeremias Bisai (BTM-YB) versus Matius D. Fakhiri-Aryoko Rumaropen (MDF-AR). Theoretically, the MDF-AR pair was predicted to secure an easy victory due to their "fat coalition" (supported by major parties like Golkar, Gerindra, Nasdem, PKS) and alleged backing from the state apparatus, often referred to colloquially as the "Brown Party" (*Partai Coklat*/Police influence) (Jayadi 2025). In contrast, BTM-YB, supported only by PDIP and PKN following a last-minute Constitutional Court ruling, was the definitive underdog. Yet, the results defied political logic: BTM-YB won with 51% of the vote (269,970 votes), defeating the massive coalition which garnered 49% (262,777 votes) (Lewis 2020).

The central problem this study addresses is the anomaly of this victory. How could a candidate lacking structural dominance and facing a rival with a background as a former Regional Police Chief (*Kapolda*) win in a conflict-prone region? The answer lies in the nuanced interplay of religious identity and political marketing. While previous studies in Indonesia often frame identity politics as a divisive tool polarizing Muslims and Christians (Hidayah et al. 2025; Setiawan et al. 2018). This research presents a different reality. The MDF-AR pair, despite MDF's background as a Muslim convert (*mualaf*) and support from Islamic parties, failed to consolidate the Muslim vote fully. Conversely, BTM, a devout Christian, successfully neutralized religious polarization by constructing the "Krimuha" (*Kristen-Muhammadiyah*/Christian-Muhammadiyah) persona. Leveraging his educational background in a Muhammadiyah Junior High School, BTM positioned himself not as an "outsider" to Muslims, but as an "inter-religious bridge." (Mujiburrahman 2017; Nelwan 2022).

The MDF-AR pair attempted to capitalize on religious identity; MDF is a Muslim convert (*mualaf*) and was supported by Islamic-based parties (PKS, PKB, PPP). Theoretically, this should have solidified the Muslim vote, which constitutes a significant minority in Papua's urban centers. However, they failed to consolidate this base fully. Conversely, BTM, a devout Christian (GKI), successfully neutralized potential religious polarization by constructing the "Krimuha" (*Kristen-Muhammadiyah*/Christian-Muhammadiyah) persona. Leveraging his authentic educational background in a Muhammadiyah Junior High School in Abepura, BTM positioned himself not as an "outsider" to Muslims, but as an "inter-religious bridge." This strategy went beyond superficial symbolism; it tapped into the "cultural trust" of the grassroots. BTM

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demonstrated that in the specific context of Papua, *cultural proximity* and *inclusive engagement* (associational affinity) are far more persuasive than *formal religious identity* (ascriptive identity). The "Krimuha" branding effectively deconstructed the rigid boundaries of identity politics, allowing a Christian candidate to harvest votes from the traditional bases of his Muslim rival (Schmidt and Miles 2017, 2017).

Research Gap This is where the significant academic gap exists. Extensive literature on political communication in Indonesia currently focuses on: (1) Polarization, specifically how identity politics divides voters; (2) Java-Centrism, where studies mostly analyze Muslim candidates in Muslim-majority regions; and (3) Conventional Marketing, which relies on logistics and party machinery (Firmanzah, 2012). There is a scarcity of research analyzing "Cross-Religious Political Marketing" in non-Muslim majority regions (like Papua), specifically how a Christian candidate effectively negotiates support from Muslim minorities. Existing models (Amalia 2025) often overlook the "cultural sub-identities" (like *Krimuha*) that can override formal religious lines in the Global South. This study fills this gap by demonstrating that in Papua, political communication highlighting cultural hybridity is more effective than structural mobilization.

Theoretical Framework To dissect this anomaly, this study employs a dual-theoretical framework. First, Political Marketing Theory, particularly the concept of *Positioning* (Baert 2012; Henneberg and O'shaughnessy 2007) is utilized to examine how the candidate segmented the electorate and positioned himself as a moderate figure amidst a polarized market. Second, Identity Negotiation Theory (Rostandi and Rohandy 2024)serves as the analytical lens to understand the *Krimuha* strategy. This theory explains how the candidate managed the "identity tension" between his Christian faith and his cultural affiliation with Muslim organizations, transforming potential religious barriers into electoral capital through "mindful communication" and identity inclusivity.

Research Objective Consequently, this study aims to analyze the political communication strategy of the Benhur Tomi Mano and Yeremias Bisai pair through the lens of Political Marketing and Identity Negotiation Theory. It specifically examines how the pair utilized social media and offline networks to: (1) Counter the "fat coalition" and structural intervention narratives, and (2) construct an inclusive persona that appealed to both the GKI Christian base and the Muslim minority. By doing so, this article contributes to the field of *Islamic Communication* by offering a model of inclusive political campaigning that fosters harmony rather than division.

METHODS

Research Design This study employs a qualitative research design with a descriptive case study approach (Kim, Sefcik, and Bradway 2017).This method was chosen to provide a comprehensive analysis of the political communication strategy used by the Benhur Tomi Mano and Yeremias Bisai (BTM-YB) pair during the 2024 Papua Gubernatorial Election. The case study focus is critical to understanding the anomaly of their victory amidst a complex political landscape involving ethnic and religious identity dynamics in Papua.

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Data Collection Techniques To ensure data validity, this study utilizes data triangulation through two primary collection techniques:

1. Digital Netnography: The researcher conducted digital observation on the candidate's official social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook) and online news portals. This serves to capture the "political discourse" and "identity framing" (such as the *Krimuha* narrative) constructed in the digital space during the campaign period (September–November 2024).

2. Documentary Study: Data were also sourced from official documents, including the General Elections Commission (KPU) plenary results, campaign manifestos, and statements from customary/religious institutions (Adat/Church/Mosque) that declared support. This replaces the generic "literature study" with a more specific analysis of primary political documents.

Data Analysis The collected data were analyzed using the Interactive Model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). The process involves three concurrent flows of activity:

1. Data Condensation: Selecting and focusing on data related to "Identity Negotiation" and "Political Marketing strategies," while discarding irrelevant campaign noise.

2. Data Display: Organizing the information into narrative texts and matrices to map out the segmentation and targeting strategies.

3. Conclusion Drawing/Verification: Interpreting the findings to answer how the BTM-YB pair effectively co-opted religious and ethnic identities to secure electoral victory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from field data (in-depth interviews) and digital observation, followed by a comprehensive discussion linking the results to Political Marketing and Identity Negotiation theories.

1. Political Marketing Strategy: The "STP" Approach in a Pluralistic Society
The victory of the Benhur Tomi Mano (BTM) and Yeremias Bisai (YB) pair in the 2024 Papua Gubernatorial Election is an anomaly that defies the logic of "structural power." Data analysis reveals that their success was driven by a precise application of the Segmentation, Targeting, and Positioning (STP) strategy, effectively neutralizing the opponent's "fat coalition."

a. Segmentation: Mapping the "Cultural-Religious" Terrain The BTM-YB winning team did not merely rely on generic demographic data. Interviews with the campaign team reveal a "psychographic segmentation" approach. They mapped voters not just by religion (Muslim/Christian) but by "cultural affinity."

1) Segment 1: Indigenous Papuans (OAP) in Tabi and Saireri regions (Base of BTM & YB).

2) Segment 2: The "Nationalist-Religious" Muslim minority (Muhammadiyah, NU, HMI).

3) Segment 3: Urban Millennials/Gen Z who are digitally active.

Marschel Morin, the spokesperson for the BTM-YB team, explained this segmentation strategy:

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"We conducted initial data collection called segmenting... to prepare 'key words' that the local community wants to hear. For the Muslim base, Mr. BTM must convey his vision on how to build harmonization... such as the construction of a Hajj Embarkation in Jayapura City. He also conveyed about the closeness of Mr. BTM with Muslim groups such as Muhammadiyah, MUI, LDII, HMI, and NU." (Interview, December 29, 2024).

b. Targeting: The "Krimuha" Niche The most critical targeting decision was to penetrate the opponent's base. While MDF (the rival) is a Muslim convert, BTM targeted the "moderate Muslim" niche by framing himself as a "Culturally Muslim-Friendly Christian." This is where the term "Krimuha" (Kristen-Muhammadiyah) became a potent political weapon. By targeting Muhammadiyah and NU members, BTM disrupted MDF's consolidation of the Islamic vote.

Table 1. Targeting Matrix of BTM-YB vs. MDF-AR

Strategy Component	BTM-YB (Winner)	MDF-AR (Loser)
Primary Base	Christians (GKI) & Indigenous Tabi-Saireri	Structural Bureaucracy & Police Network
Secondary Target	Moderate Muslims (via "Krimuha" narrative)	Traditional Muslims (via Formal Identity)
Messaging	"Inclusive Leader for All Religions"	"Stability & Central Govt Support"
Outcome	Split the Muslim vote; Solidified Christian vote	Failed to consolidate Muslim vote fully

c. Positioning: The "Bridge Builder" Persona BTM positioned himself as an "Inter-religious Bridge Builder." Unlike identity politics that divides, BTM used his personal history (schooling in Muhammadiyah) to build trust.

"I visited many Papuan figures... religious organizations such as Muhammadiyah, because I am indeed a son of Muhammadiyah... For political parties, initially... I was only with PDIP and PKN, even thanks to the Constitutional Court's decision." (Interview with BTM, December 29, 2024).

This positioning was reinforced by concrete program offers, such as the *Hajj Embarkation* plan, which served as "political proof" of his commitment to Muslims, effectively countering the "Christian-only candidate" black campaign.

2. Digital Media Strategy: The "Pull Marketing" & Millennial Engagement

To compensate for the lack of party machinery, BTM-YB utilized a **"Pull Marketing Strategy"** (Zhang, Kim, and Chakravarty 2023) via social media to bypass traditional gatekeepers.
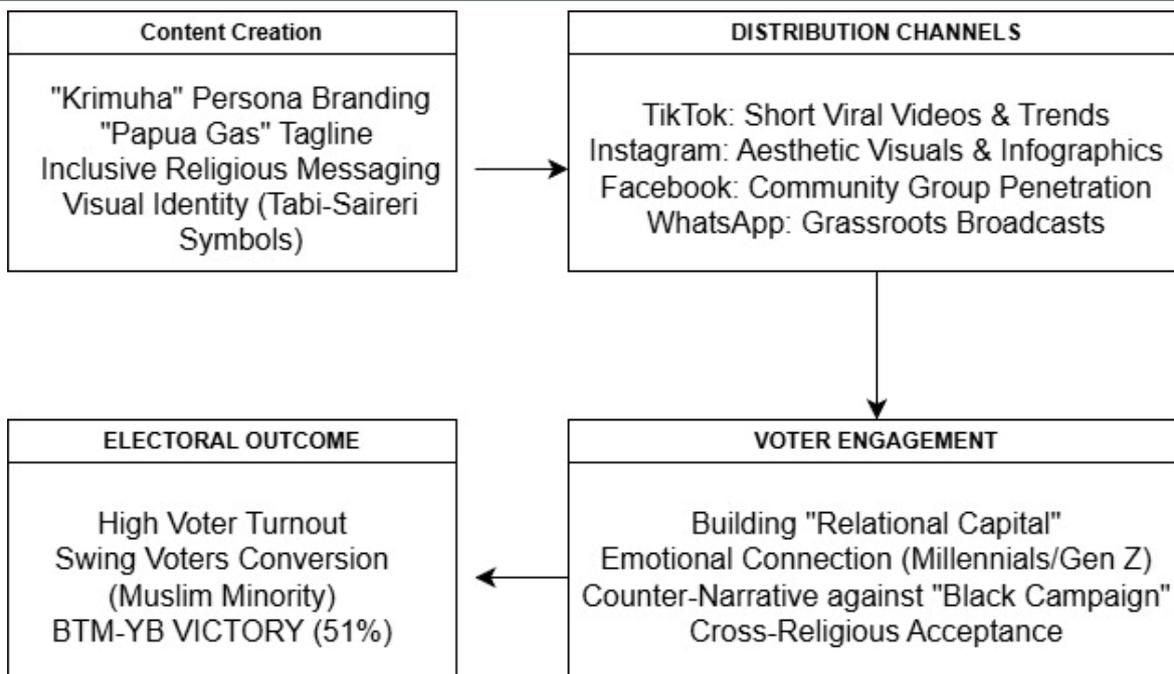
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Content Creation	DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS
"Krimuha" Persona Branding "Papua Gas" Tagline Inclusive Religious Messaging Visual Identity (Tabi-Saireri Symbols)	TikTok: Short Viral Videos & Trends Instagram: Aesthetic Visuals & Infographics Facebook: Community Group Penetration WhatsApp: Grassroots Broadcasts

ELECTORAL OUTCOME	VOTER ENGAGEMENT
High Voter Turnout Swing Voters Conversion (Muslim Minority) BTM-YB VICTORY (51%)	Building "Relational Capital" Emotional Connection (Millennials/Gen Z) Counter-Narrative against "Black Campaign" Cross-Religious Acceptance

Figure 1. Digital Engagement Flow of BTM-YB Campaign

Figure 1 illustrates the operational mechanism of the "Pull Marketing" strategy employed by the BTM-YB team. The process begins with Content Creation, where political messages are packaged into pop-culture formats (e.g., the "Papua Gas" jingle and "Krimuha" narratives) rather than rigid political manifestos. These messages are then disseminated through Distribution Channels specifically chosen to bypass the structural blockade—namely TikTok for virality and Instagram for visual branding. The core of this mechanism lies in the Millennial Engagement phase, where the content fosters a sense of "relatability" and "cultural hype" among young voters. Unlike traditional "Push Marketing" which forces information downward, this flow relies on voluntary sharing and algorithmic amplification. Ultimately, this digital noise translates into Voter Turnout, successfully converting online "likes" into offline ballots, particularly among the swing voters in urban centers like Jayapura.

The team adopted the tagline "Papua Gas", appropriating the popular "Oke Gas" jingle from the Presidential Election to resonate with Gen Z. This mimicry strategy proved effective in creating a sense of relevance and modernity.

"We realize that we are living in a digital age... we create TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook accounts to reach the public, especially millennials and Gen Z... the choice of 'Papua Gas' as a tagline... feels very millennial to the ears." (Interview with BTM, 2024).

3. Discussion: Identity Negotiation in Conflict Areas

This study argues that BTM's victory offers a new model for political communication in conflict-prone areas, termed here as "Inclusive Identity Negotiation."

The Failure of rigid Identity Politics Contrary to studies by (Hemay et al. 2024) or (Mietzner 2020) which suggest that identity politics in Indonesia is polarizing, the Papua

election demonstrates that voters appreciate "Fluid Identity." MDF's reliance on his formal status as a Muslim convert was perceived as transactional. In contrast, BTM's *Krimuha* identity was perceived as authentic because it was rooted in his life history (schooling), not just a sudden campaign gimmick.

The Theory of "Mindful Communication" Applying (Ting-Toomey 2017) Identity Negotiation Theory, BTM successfully practiced "mindful communication." He acknowledged the fears of the Muslim minority (fear of being marginalized by a Christian governor) and addressed them directly through the Hajj Embarkation promise. This reduced "intergroup anxiety" and allowed Muslims to vote for a Christian candidate without feeling they were betraying their faith.

Political Marketing Implication This finding refines the Political Marketing theory in the Global South. It suggests that in regions with strong religious sentiments, "Relational Capital" (closeness to religious organizations) is more valuable than "Structural Capital" (party coalitions). BTM's ability to act as a "cultural insider" to both Christians (as a GKI member) and Muslims (as a Muhammadiyah alumnus) explains the split-ticket voting behavior where Muslim voters deserted the Muslim candidate (MDF) for BTM.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the victory of Benhur Tomi Mano and Yeremias Bisai (BTM-YB) in the 2024 Papua Gubernatorial Election represents a triumph of "communicative power" over "structural power." The research findings confirm that BTM-YB effectively dismantled the hegemonic narrative of the "fat coalition" and state apparatus backing their rivals through a precise application of Political Marketing and Identity Negotiation. The victory was not solely determined by their incumbency as former regional heads, but rather by their ability to construct the "Krimuha" (*Christian-Muhammadiyah*) persona. This strategy successfully hybridized the "Indigenous Papuan" sentiment (Tabi-Saireri ethnicity) with "Religious Inclusivity," thereby capturing the critical Muslim minority vote without alienating the Christian majority base. The effective use of "Pull Marketing" via digital platforms (TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook) further amplified this message, allowing the pair to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and engage directly with Millennial and Gen Z voters through the "Papua Gas" narrative.

Theoretically, this research offers a significant contribution to the field of Political Communication and *Islamic Communication* in pluralistic societies. It challenges the prevailing academic consensus that identity politics in Indonesia is inherently polarizing. Instead, this study introduces the concept of "Inclusive Identity Negotiation," demonstrating how a non-Muslim leader can effectively communicate with a Muslim constituency not through transactional politics, but through "associational affinity" (e.g., educational background in Muhammadiyah). For practitioners of *Da'wah* and political communication, this finding implies that in conflict-prone regions like Papua, the most effective political message is one that bridges theological differences with cultural proximity, transforming religious symbols from tools of division into instruments of social cohesion.

However, this study has limitations, primarily its reliance on qualitative data from the winning team's perspective and digital observation. It has not quantitatively measured the

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direct correlation between the "Krimuha" campaign and the actual voting behavior of the Muslim community at the grassroots level. Therefore, future research is recommended to employ quantitative surveys to measure the efficacy of cross-religious marketing strategies or to conduct comparative studies in other non-Muslim majority provinces with similar demographic contours, such as North Sulawesi or East Nusa Tenggara.

Ultimately, this research asserts that the BTM-YB victory serves as a mature model of democracy in the Global South. It proves that a sophisticated political marketing strategy, which respects and integrates diverse religious identities (Islamic and Christian) into a unified "nationalist-humanist" narrative, is capable of defeating massive logistical and structural dominance. This phenomenon enriches the discourse of *Wasathiyah* (moderation) in Indonesian politics, showing that political communication can be a vessel for inter-religious harmony rather than sectarian conflict.

Declaration of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

Declaration of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process During the preparation of this work, the authors used generative AI tools (e.g., Grammarly and translation software) for the purpose of grammar checking and language refinement to ensure the English proficiency meets academic standards. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the integrity, accuracy, and originality of the publication's final version.

CRediT Authorship Contribution Statement

Imam Alfian Kadir: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation (Fieldwork & Interviews), Writing – Original Draft, and Visualization. **Abdul Qadir:** Supervision, Validation, Project Administration, and Writing – Review & Editing..

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. The authors further declare that they have no formal affiliation with the Benhur Tomi Mano-Yeremias Bisai campaign team or any political party mentioned in this study.

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Data Availability Statement

Funding Statement

Ethical Approval Statement

The authors confirm that this study adheres to ethical research standards involving human subjects. **Informed consent** was obtained verbally from all interview participants prior to data collection. The research ensures the confidentiality of sensitive information and respects the rights of all participants involved in the 2024 Papua Gubernatorial Election context.

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