Cultural Harmony in Management: Exploring the Mediating Role of Religious Communication in Workplace Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Cultural and religious diversity has become a defining feature of modern organisations, yet management scholarship has not fully explored how religious communication shapes workplace relationships. This conceptual paper proposes that religious communication mediates the relationship between management practices and workplace relational outcomes, including trust, psychological safety, inclusion, and cultural harmony. The paper draws on foundational theories of social construction, symbolic interaction, identity performance, and cultural interpretation to explain how religious expression operates through verbal, symbolic, and behavioural cues that influence meaning-making in organisational settings. A thematic synthesis of existing literature reveals that management practices acquire relational significance only when viewed through everyday communicative experiences that involve religious identity. Supportive practices foster open and respectful communication, whereas insensitive or unclear practices can contribute to discomfort, misunderstanding, or relational strain. The proposed conceptual framework positions religious communication as the central mechanism through which employees interpret managerial intent and negotiate their sense of belonging in diverse environments. This paper contributes to current discussions on diversity and inclusion by identifying religious communication as an essential yet underexamined construct in organisational life. Practical implications underscore the importance of communicative competence and culturally sensitive leadership in promoting workplace harmony in multicultural and multireligious contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Workplaces around the world are increasingly shaped by cultural and religious diversity. Employees bring with them a wide range of beliefs, values, and identity practices that influence their behaviour, expectations, and workplace interactions. Religious identity, in particular, often guides moral reasoning, interpersonal communication, and perceptions of fairness. As a result, religious expression frequently enters the workplace, not only through formal observances but also in everyday interactions, symbolic displays, language use, and ethical decision making.

Despite this widespread influence, management studies have often treated religion merely as a demographic variable rather than a meaningful communicative and cultural dimension. Consequently, organisations may overlook how religious communication shapes workplace relationships, trust, and perceptions of inclusion. This conceptual paper addresses that gap by examining how religious communication mediates the relationship between management practices and workplace relationships, particularly in multicultural and multireligious societies.

Many contemporary societies are religiously plural, and this is reflected in their organisational environments. Workplaces in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Europe and North America increasingly consist of employees from diverse religious backgrounds. Such diversity can create opportunities for learning, richer collaboration, and improved cultural understanding when managed well.

However, religious diversity can also present challenges. Research in Malaysia shows that religious identity remains a significant factor affecting employees' experiences. In a study involving 402 working women in Peninsular Malaysia, Mokhtar et al. (2022) found that 12.5% of respondents experienced difficulty performing their daily prayers, 5.7% encountered restrictions on their religious attire, such as the hijab, and 14.5% believed that their religious identity negatively affected their promotional opportunities. Additionally, 7.5% reported that their relationship with their employer deteriorated due to their religious identity. These findings demonstrate that barriers to religious expression continue to persist in workplace environments.

At the same time, discrimination does not always manifest openly. Perceived discrimination can be just as damaging as explicit exclusion. Messarra (2014) showed that employees who perceive religious discrimination tend to be less engaged, less committed to their organisation, and more likely to experience psychological discomfort. These relational consequences directly affect productivity, team cohesion, and organisational culture.

In contrast, some research finds more positive trends. Salleh et al. (2021), studying 759 employees across the Malaysian public and private sectors, reported that many workplaces actively allow religious expression and respect religious freedom. This suggests that organisational approaches to diversity differ significantly across sectors and industries, influenced by leadership attitudes, policy enforcement, and organisational culture.

While most diversity research focuses on policy and representation, much less attention has been given to the communicative aspects of religious identity. Religious communication includes verbal expressions, symbolic rituals, attire, ethical vocabularies, and negotiations surrounding religious duties. These forms of communication shape how individuals interpret managerial decisions, workplace interactions, and relational dynamics.

For example, greetings with religious undertones, requests for prayer breaks, discussions related to festivals, or the wearing of religious attire all carry meaning for both the individuals expressing them and those observing them. Whether these expressions are acknowledged, ignored, restricted, or respected influences employees' feelings of belonging and dignity.

Islamic jurisprudence scholars argue that respecting religious diversity in the workplace aligns with the principles of justice and human dignity. According to Mahmod et al. (2022), religious diversity and freedom in the workplace are supported within Islamic ethical frameworks, as long as organisational functionality and the rights of others are respected. This reinforces the notion that religious accommodation is not only a legal or organisational priority but can also be grounded in the ethical traditions of employees themselves.

Recent scholars have begun to explore the beneficial aspects of religiosity in the workplace. Seo et al. (2022) found that intrinsic religiosity among Malaysian Muslim employees was positively associated with meaningful work, mediated by existential labour that reflects authentic psychological engagement. This suggests that supporting employees' religious identity may foster deeper motivation, enhanced meaning at work, and stronger organisational commitment.

These findings indicate that religious communication, when understood and integrated into organisational practices, has the potential to contribute constructively to workplace harmony. However, this potential is often overlooked because organisations lack theoretical frameworks to understand the role of religious communication in shaping workplace relationships.

Many organisations respond to religious diversity either by promoting neutrality, avoiding religious discussions, or limiting religious expression to prevent conflict. However, such approaches may inadvertently suppress religious identity, cause misunderstanding, or generate subtle forms of exclusion.

Moreover, diversity, equity and inclusion policies often treat religion simply as a category for non-discrimination rather than a relational and communicative dynamic. Without recognising religious communication, organisations may fail to appreciate how employees make sense of identity, belonging, and fairness in their work environment.

Problem Statement

Although organisations frequently articulate commitments to equality and non-discrimination, empirical evidence shows that employees continue to experience barriers to religious expression. Mokhtar et al. (2022) have demonstrated that restrictions on religious attire, difficulties fulfilling religious obligations, and perceived disadvantages in promotion remain current issues. These experiences indicate a disjuncture between policy and practice.

Perception of religious discrimination influences employee behaviour and attitudes. Messarra (2014) found that perceived discrimination reduces engagement and organisational commitment, both of which are essential for effective teamwork and productivity. When employees feel that their religious identity is not respected or accommodated, relational trust deteriorates and interpersonal tensions may rise.

The core problem lies in the limited attention given to religious communication. Without recognising religious communication as a meaningful aspect of workplace interaction, managers may adopt narrow or superficial approaches to diversity, which fail to address the relational consequences of religious expression or restriction.

In addition, existing organisational culture theories do not sufficiently integrate religious identity as a dynamic communicative process. This leaves managers without guidance on how religious communication shapes trust, psychological safety, conflict mitigation, or cooperation among employees. As a result, organisations risk implementing policies that are legally compliant but relationally ineffective.

There is a clear need for a conceptual framework that identifies and explains the mediating role of religious communication in shaping workplace relationships. Such a framework would support managers in creating inclusive environments that foster cultural harmony and minimise relational tensions.

The aim of this conceptual paper is to develop an integrative theoretical framework that explains how religious communication mediates the relationship between management practices and workplace relationships in culturally and religiously diverse organisations, with the aim of guiding managers toward fostering cultural harmony, trust, inclusion, and employee well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organisational studies now understand that religious communication plays an essential part in creating cultural unity between different management teams who work with diverse cultural backgrounds. Research indicates that interreligious dialogue fosters more effective workplace relationships, enabling employees from diverse backgrounds to collaborate more smoothly. The research by Siddiq et al. (2024) demonstrates that Indonesian interreligious communication dynamics have achieved better religious harmony, indicating that understanding different faiths leads to successful teamwork and a more effective organisational environment. The research shows that organisations that create open communication channels welcoming religious differences will experience better acceptance levels and decreased conflicts due to cultural differences.

Organisations need to understand that interfaith dialogue serves as a vital tool to achieve their strategic objectives. The Kenyan case study presented by Lando et al. (2018) demonstrates how interfaith initiatives created positive working relationships between staff members who practised different religions. Organisations that implement strong interfaith communication systems will achieve their goals more effectively because their employees experience value and understanding within a supportive community environment. The implementation of these frameworks leads to improved workplace relations and increased employee satisfaction and commitment, as they foster a sense of community among staff members.

Khori (2024) explains that organisations need to develop diversity tolerance as their main focus to sustain social unity between their members. Management should develop communication strategies that include consideration of religious identities to establish workplaces where different cultures can work together successfully. The research by Héliot et al. (2020) supports this concept through their systematic review, which studied how religious identity affects workplace engagement. The research shows that organisations which successfully communicate religious differences will build stronger relationships and create workplaces that promote innovation and empathy.

Organisations need to implement more than dialogue to achieve cultural harmony, as they must also develop suitable conflict resolution systems. Sutama et al. (2025) demonstrate that organisations should enhance their intercultural communication methods to help teams with diverse backgrounds resolve conflicts and build stronger relationships. The research on Wetu Telu local wisdom values demonstrates how traditional conflict resolution methods based on cultural values help organisations handle complex workplace interactions to achieve stability and teamwork among employees.

The research by Paroli (2024) examines particular conflict resolution methods that organisations can use to establish harmony in their fast-paced work environments. The successful implementation of these strategies depends on organisations that actively share religious beliefs and practices, demonstrating that acceptance of religious diversity forms the basis of an inclusive workplace environment. The approach helps organisations reduce culture-based workplace conflicts while building stronger employee relationships, which demonstrates how religious communication affects workplace harmony.

Research evidence shows that effective religious communication methods help organisations achieve cultural harmony by enhancing workplace connections and uniting employees from diverse cultural backgrounds. Organisations that practice interfaith dialogue and promote tolerance and conflict resolution will establish workplaces where diversity becomes a source of strength, rather than an obstacle. The integration of religious communication strategies into workplaces creates a harmonious environment which represents the diverse nature of modern globalised communities, according to various research studies and case examples.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a conceptual research design that synthesises, interprets, and integrates existing scholarship to develop a theoretical framework explaining the mediating role of religious communication in workplace relationships. Conceptual papers do not involve primary data collection; instead, they rely on systematic engagement with prior studies to generate new theoretical insights, refine constructs, and propose relational linkages that have not yet been formally theorised. The methodology, therefore, centres on a structured narrative review and thematic synthesis of multidisciplinary literature.

The review process began with the identification of core domains relevant to the topic: workplace religious diversity, organisational communication, cultural harmony, diversity management, and employee relational outcomes such as trust, engagement, and psychological safety. Literature was sourced from peer-reviewed journals in management, organisational psychology, sociology, communication studies, and research on religion in society. Databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar were used to identify articles published within the last two decades, with particular attention given to empirical studies from Malaysia and other multi-faith societies to ground the conceptual model in relevant contexts. The literature search employed keywords such as "religious communication", "workplace diversity", "religious identity at work", "organizational communication", and "cultural harmony".

Following the selection of key sources, the content was analysed using an interpretive thematic approach. Studies were examined for how they conceptualised religious identity, religious expression, diversity policies, communication practices, and relational outcomes. Recurring themes were categorised into clusters, such as forms of religious communication, management responses to religious expression, perceived discrimination, organisational culture, and positive religiously oriented work outcomes. These thematic clusters will later be presented in a table to clearly map the major constructs, definitions, and key findings from existing studies. This thematic table serves as a foundation for generating conceptual linkages and identifying theoretical gaps.

The synthesis process integrates findings across these themes to propose a relational model in which religious communication mediates the influence of management practices on workplace relationships.

Rather than testing hypotheses, this paper focuses on clarifying constructs, defining boundaries of the proposed mediation, and offering propositions that future empirical researchers may operationalise and validate.

Overall, this methodology enables a structured and rigorous conceptualisation process grounded in existing evidence while offering theoretical innovation. It provides the analytical basis for developing the framework, advancing academic discussion, and constructing a thematic table that summarises literature patterns and supports the subsequent discussion section.

DISCUSSION AND THEMATIC FINDING

Much of the literature has focused on structural policies, demographic characteristics, or legal frameworks, while overlooking the communicative processes through which religious identity is enacted and interpreted in everyday organisational life.

This gap mirrors a broader challenge found in sociological and organisational theory, where identity expression, meaning construction, and symbolic interaction are often treated as secondary to formal structures and managerial policies. Therefore, a grounding in seminal theoretical perspectives is necessary to understand why religious communication emerged as a central analytical theme.

The first theoretical foundation derives from Berger and Luckmann's (1966) work on social construction, which argues that reality is produced and sustained through everyday communicative acts. This perspective highlights that the meaning of religious expression in the workplace is not fixed but negotiated through interaction. Such negotiation shapes whether expressions of belief are perceived as normal, disruptive, or meaningful.

Without examining communication itself, research risks overlooking how organisational members co-create the social reality of inclusion or exclusion.

The second foundational perspective is Goffman's (1959) presentation of self, which emphasises how individuals manage their identities through performances shaped by audience expectations. In organisational settings, employees frequently make decisions about whether to reveal, suppress, or subtly signal their religious identity. These micro-performances often reflect concerns about professionalism, acceptance, or stigma. Goffman's framework provides insight into why religious communication becomes a sensitive and relationally significant aspect of workplace behaviour.

A third seminal contribution comes from Geertz (1973), who conceptualised culture as a web of meanings expressed through symbols, rituals, and narratives. This cultural lens demonstrates that religious communication is not merely personal but embedded within broader systems of meaning that employees use to interpret managerial decisions and relational cues. Geertz's interpretive anthropology clarifies why religious symbols or practices carry emotional and moral weight that can influence workplace harmony.

Finally, Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory approach underscores the importance of deriving conceptual categories from recurring patterns observed in empirical studies. Although this paper does not employ grounded theory as a full methodology, its principle of identifying core categories from diverse data guided the emergence of key themes such as management responses, perceived discrimination, and relational consequences. These categories reflect consistent patterns documented across multidisciplinary research on organisational diversity and religious practice.

These seminal works sensitise the analysis toward the centrality of communication, identity negotiation, symbolic meaning, and emergent relational patterns. They also justify the development of a thematic structure, which addresses the conceptual gaps left by earlier studies and supports the construction of a theoretical model explaining how religious communication mediates workplace relationships.

Table 1: Thematic Description and Key Findings

Theme	Description	Key Findings	Literature Supports
1. Forms of Religious Communication	Verbal, symbolic, behavioural and interactional expressions of religious identity within workplace settings.	Includes greetings, religious attire, requests for prayer time, festival discussions, moral vocabularies, and symbolic expressions that influence workplace meaning-making.	Mokhtar et al. (2022); Seo et al. (2022)
2. Management Responses to Religious Expression	How managers and organisations regulate, tolerate, encourage, or restrict religious communication.	Policies may promote religious freedom, restrict visible symbols, or adopt neutrality. Management style strongly influences relational climate.	Salleh et al. (2021); Mahmod et al. (2022)
3. Perceived Religious Discrimination	Employee perceptions of unfair treatment linked to religious identity or practices.	Leads to reduced engagement, lower commitment, strained relationships, and psychological discomfort. Even subtle restrictions may be interpreted as discrimination.	Messarra (2014); Mokhtar et al. (2022)
4. Organisational Culture and Inclusion Climate	The norms, values, and cultural expectations that shape how diversity is practiced in daily operations.	Inclusive cultures enable open communication and mutual respect, while rigid cultures increase silence, tension, and symbolic suppression.	Salleh et al. (2021); Mahmod et al. (2022)
5. Positive Work Outcomes from Religious Identity Support	Productive effects that arise when religious identity and communication are respected and integrated.	Intrinsic religiosity enhances meaningful work, moral behaviour, motivation, and sense of belonging.	Seo et al. (2022)
6. Role of Religious Communication as a Mediator	How religious communication channels management practices into relational outcomes.	Communication shapes trust, psychological safety, and relational harmony. Mediates the impact of organisational decisions on employee experience.	Integrated synthesis from all themes

The thematic synthesis, based on Table 1 above, reveals that religious communication plays a central yet underrecognized role in shaping workplace relationships. Studies consistently demonstrate that employees express their religious identity through verbal communication, symbolic practices, attire, rituals, and value-based interactions. When these expressions occur, they serve as important cues for meaning-making, group belonging, and moral positioning. As noted by Mokhtar et al. (2022), even small restrictions on religious practice can significantly affect relational dynamics, signalling to employees whether their identities are respected.

At the managerial level, organisational responses to religious expression serve as a critical amplifier of inclusion or exclusion. Salleh et al. (2021) showed that supportive policies and enabling environments can foster religious freedom, whereas inadequate or restrictive approaches may undermine employee trust and satisfaction. Mahmod et al. (2022) further argue that workplaces that acknowledge religious needs through ethical principles align themselves with broader moral frameworks valued by employees. This suggests that religious communication is

not merely symbolic; it carries deep relational meaning that influences how employees interpret managerial decisions.

The literature also highlights the detrimental effects of perceived religious discrimination. According to Messarra (2014), when employees believe they are mistreated due to their religion, their engagement and commitment decline. This relational fracture often emerges not only from overt discrimination but also from ambiguous or inconsistent communication from leadership about religious expression. Employees may interpret these cues as identity threats, contributing to psychological withdrawal.

Conversely, integrating religious identity into workplace meaning systems can yield positive outcomes. Seo et al. (2022) demonstrated that intrinsic religiosity enhances meaningful work through authentic engagement. When religious communication is welcomed or at least respected, employees feel safer internalising organisational goals and relating to colleagues with trust and sincerity.

Bringing these themes together, the discussion suggests that religious communication functions as the central pathway through which management practices affect workplace relationships. Communication acts as a mediator because it translates organisational policies into relational experiences. Supportive management approaches foster inclusive communication climates, which enhance trust, psychological safety, and cultural harmony. Restrictive or insensitive approaches disrupt these relational processes, increasing the likelihood of tension, withdrawal, and dissatisfaction.
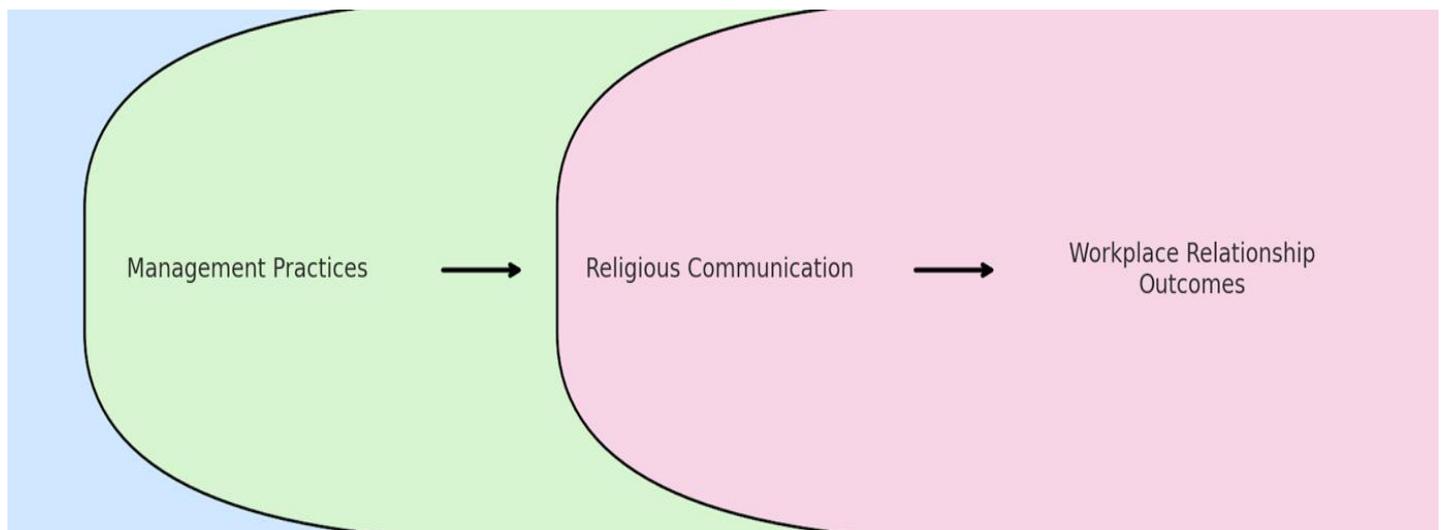

Figure 1: Management Communication in Workplace Conceptual Diagram

The conceptual framework illustrates how management practices shape workplace relationship outcomes through the mediating mechanism of religious communication. The model begins with management practices, which include organisational policies, leadership behaviour, and diversity strategies. These practices form the first point of influence because they structure the environment in which employees interpret identity, fairness, and inclusivity. Management decisions about scheduling, dress codes, dialogue norms, or accommodation of religious obligations directly shape how employees experience respect and recognition in relation to their religious identity.

The framework positions religious communication as the mediating construct. Religious communication refers to symbolic expressions, verbal and nonverbal cues, identity negotiation, and relational interactions that reflect employees' religious beliefs and practices. These communicative expressions may include greetings, requests for religious accommodations, attire choices, or discussions about values and festivals. When management practices are supportive, religious communication is more likely to be open, respectful, and harmonious. However, when practices are restrictive or insensitive, communication becomes strained, discouraged, or suppressed. This mediation function reflects that employees evaluate organisational fairness and relational inclusion through everyday communicative experiences rather than merely through written policy.

The final element of the framework is workplace relationship outcomes. These outcomes include trust, psychological safety, inclusion, and cultural harmony. Positive communication climates fostered by supportive management enable employees to feel safe expressing their identities, building stronger interpersonal bonds and trust. Conversely, negative or suppressed religious communication can lead to alienation, reduced engagement, and relational conflict.

Overall, the diagram demonstrates that management practices do not directly produce relational outcomes; instead, their effect is channelled through how employees communicate and interpret religious identity in organisational settings. The mediating role of religious communication underscores the significance of symbolic and relational processes in fostering workplace harmony within culturally and religiously diverse contexts.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This concept explains how religious communication mediates the relationship between management practices and workplace relationship outcomes within culturally and religiously diverse organisations. Through the integration of foundational theories, empirical literature, and thematic synthesis, the proposed framework emphasises that organisational harmony is not solely determined by formal policies but by the communicative processes through which employees interpret identity, respect, fairness, and belonging. Management practices, whether supportive or restrictive, gain meaning only when filtered through the everyday religious communication that employees experience. This reinforces the understanding that diversity management is not merely structural but relational, symbolic, and interpretive.

The discussion demonstrates that religious communication is a powerful mechanism that shapes trust, psychological safety, and collaborative relationships. When employees are free to express their religious identity through respectful communication, symbolic practices, and open dialogue, they are more likely to experience a sense of dignity and inclusion. This, in turn, strengthens interpersonal trust, improves team cohesion, and fosters a climate of cultural harmony. Conversely, when religious expression is suppressed or misinterpreted, employees may experience identity threat, discomfort, or alienation. These experiences weaken relational bonds, reduce engagement, and can contribute to subtle forms of conflict. The framework, therefore, highlights the importance of understanding how communication connects managerial intent to relational outcomes.

From a theoretical perspective, this paper extends existing diversity and organisational communication literature by introducing religious communication as a distinct mediating construct. While previous research has addressed religious discrimination, religiosity, and diversity policies, the communicative dimension has received far less attention. By positioning religious communication at the centre of the organisational dynamic, this framework offers scholars a new lens for examining how inclusion is co-created through symbolic and relational processes. The model also contributes to cultural and organisational theory by demonstrating how identity performance, symbolic meaning, and social construction processes converge in multi-faith workplace settings.

The managerial implications are significant. Organisations must recognise that employees interpret managerial actions through communicative cues, not merely through written rules. Managers who demonstrate cultural sensitivity, acknowledge religious values, and engage in open dialogue can cultivate climates of trust and respect. This includes providing reasonable accommodations for religious practices, encouraging respectful interpersonal communication, and addressing concerns with empathy and fairness. Training programmes should therefore emphasise communicative competence, cultural humility, and awareness of religious symbolism. Leadership behaviours that model respect for religious diversity can positively influence the relational climate and reduce instances of perceived discrimination.

Practical implications also extend to policy development. Organisations should craft diversity strategies that go beyond compliance and incorporate guidelines for respectful religious communication. Clear communication protocols can help employees navigate sensitive issues such as scheduling during religious periods, attire, or festival greetings. Additionally, HR practitioners can design interventions that foster interreligious understanding, enhance team cohesion, and strengthen cultural harmony.

This framework emphasises that sustainable workplace harmony emerges when management practices are informed by supportive religious communication. By acknowledging the centrality of communication in shaping relational outcomes, organisations can create environments where cultural and religious diversity becomes a source of strength, trust, and mutual respect.

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