The Role of Religious Leaders as Opinion Leaders in Government Communications Related to COVID-19

Syarifah Kusumadewi Kinanggi[1], Muh. Akbar[2], Muhammad Farid[3]
[1,2,3]Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia
Email: rifakinanggi@gmail.com

Abstract

Covid 19, it is undeniable that it has had a bad impact on people's lives, both in the health aspect, as well as in the political, economic, social, etc. This made the government then issue several handling policies, including: Implementing restrictions on community activities, implementing health protocols, including various rules in the order of religious life, one of which is an appeal to carry out worship at home. So that people can immediately know and obey these rules, of course we need an appropriate communication strategy by paying attention to the role of an *opinion leader*. Bulukumba Regency, South Sulawesi Province, which is the location of this research, is an area that has regulations on religion. Therefore, a religious figure can be said to be *an opinion leader* who has a strategic position, especially in communicating government policies related to Covid 19 on religious issues. This is in line with the two-step model of communication flow, both in the pattern of face-to-face communication and mass communication, which introduced the concept of *opinion leader*. This research method is descriptive qualitative with the aim of providing an overview of the role of religious leaders in government communication. Through the interview process with the Chairperson of the Indonesian Ulema Council and the Young Dai of Bulukumba Regency, it is known that religious leaders have a role in government communication in Bulukumba Regency, through direct da'wah or using digital media. Furthermore, of course the results of this research are expected to be an input for the government, in considering and determining *opinion leaders* on other issues.

Keywords: Religious Leaders, Government Communication, Covid-19.

— — — — — — — — — ◆ — — — — — — — — —

A. INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid 19) which was designated by WHO (World Health Organization) as a pandemic, is an outbreak of disease that is not only detrimental in terms of health, but also has a negative impact on the sector. Others are social, economic and political.

The Government of Indonesia through the Decree of the Minister of Health concerning Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Coronavirus Disease 2019, further stipulates Covid 19 as a type of disease that causes public health emergencies and non-natural disasters (Decree of the Minister of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2020).

This pandemic has given rise to various social problems that further complicate the situation that the government must deal with. Among them are the stigma and discriminatory treatment for sufferers, survivors, and close people infected with Covid 19. This attitude is due to the lack of public knowledge about the Covid 19 issue, causing excessive fear. This is further exacerbated by the

phenomenon of the infodemic (flood of information) which spreads faster than the pandemic itself, as a consequence of advances in communication and information technology. It should be noted that not all information circulated and consumed by the public is true or more popularly known as hoax.

Exposure to this hoax information makes most people have a wrong perception, which affects their attitude in dealing with the pandemic. Starting from not believing in Covid 19, rejecting the application of health protocols, to wrong assumptions regarding vaccines. All of these behaviors ultimately contributed to the success of the government's efforts in handling Covid 19.

Entering the third year of the pandemic era, the government has issued various policies to overcome the complexity of the problems that have arisen due to this outbreak. Among them are in the religious field, which among other things regulates the appeal to worship at home, as well as rules regarding the celebration of religious holidays. So that the policies issued can be understood and obeyed by the public, it is necessary to have an appropriate communication strategy from the government so that the public gets correct information from trusted sources.

In the context of accelerating the handling of Covid 19 and national economic recovery, the government then formed a task force team (Satgas) from the central, provincial to district/city levels, including Bulukumba. In Bulukumba Regency, the formation of the Covid 19 Task Force, as well as community organizations from among religious leaders, namely, the Chairperson of the Indonesian Ulema Council and the Chairperson of the Bulukumba Regency Dai Muda Council. This was conveyed directly by the spokesman for the Task Force, namely Daud Kahal.

Bulukumba Regency is indeed known to be religious with *Crash Program* (Bulkumba Regency Regional Development Planning Agency, 2020). The following are some of the regional regulations that are enforced, including:

Table 1. Regional Regulations in the Religious Sector

Regional Regulations in the Religious Sector
Regional Regulation Number 03 of 2002 concerning the Prohibition, Supervision, Control of the Circulation and Sales of Alcoholic Drinks;
Regional Regulation Number 02 of 2003 concerning Management of Professional Zakat, Infaq, and Shadaqah in Bulukumba Regency;
Regional Regulation No. 05 of 2003 concerning Muslim and Muslimah Dress in Bulukumba Regency;
Regional Regulation Number 06 of 2003 concerning Good Al-Quran Reading for Students and Prospective Bride and Groom in Bulukumba Regency.

In addition to Islam as the religion of the majority population of Bulukumba, the Central Statistics Agency also released data obtained from the Ministry of Religion of Bulukumba Regency in 2021 which stated the number of adherents of other religions, namely: 317 Protestants, 74 Catholics, 75 Hindus and 9 Buddhists, with a total of 977 mosques, 133 prayer rooms, and 1 church (Central Bureau of Statistics, Bulukumba Regency, 2021).

By looking at the data, the involvement of religious leaders in handling Covid 19 is certainly a strategic step and is expected to be able to touch the pandemic issues that are developing in the community, especially those related to religious themes. Because based on the results of research conducted by Siti Khodijah Nurul Aini quoted by Sholeh Bahruddin, et al (Bahrudin et al., 2021), it is concluded that this religious figure is considered to have a very large influence in handling Covid 19 for the community.

According to Aula in Baharuddin (Bahrudin et al., 2021), although the study said that health workers have the most important role, the position of religious leaders cannot be ruled out because they can act as communicators.

In addition, it is the responsibility of a religious figure as stated by Hamdan Rasyid (Uzma, 2019), to carry out the commandments of ma`ruf and nahi munkar, both to the community (ummah), as well as to officials and state authorities, by providing explanations for various kinds of Islamic teachings that are sourced from the Qur'an and Sunnah, and are able to provide solutions to various problems of the people.

In the Faith Based Organization communication construction model introduced by Paul Lazarfeld, religious leaders can act as *opinion leaders* because they are considered capable of having a strong impact which is the influence of their charismatic leadership style and good example (Bahrudin et al., 2021). Thus, as opinion leaders, religious leaders are expected to be able to bridge the gap between the government and the community in communicating policies for handling Covid 19, as well as straightening out various confusing information circulating in accordance with their capacities.

Therefore, this research was then carried out with the aim of finding out how the role of religious leaders as opinion leaders in communications made by the government regarding the handling of Covid 19 in Bulukumba Regency.

B.   LITERATURE REVIEW
1. Roles

From a sociological point of view as stated by Soekanto (2010), roles include three things, namely: norms associated with one's position in society; as a series of rules that guide a person in social life; is a concept of what individuals in society as an organization can do; and an individual behavior that is important to the social structure of society.

2.   Religious Figures

Shabri and Sudirman (Uzma, 2019), said that religious figures, also known as ulama, are people who are considered capable and educated in certain knowledge. Peter L. Berger (Muchammadun et al., 2021) said that religious leaders can also be called agents of socialization, because their understanding of religious values is socialized to the community. In addition, religious figures can also become one of the central figures whose behavior is able to influence the dynamics of political, social, and religious conditions.

Meanwhile, Kartini Kartono (Kartono, 1998) defines a religious figure as a leader who is not formally appointed but is considered capable of influencing the psychological condition and behavior of a group or society.

In general view, this religious figure is also known as the ulama, which is a position that is obtained by someone through the learning process. The status of a scholar is an acknowledgment that is given to him by other people, and to get this recognition a scholar must at least be knowledgeable and have followers or students.

There are several duties of a religious figure as described by Soekanto, among others as follows:

a. To develop a clear basic framework as a guide for his followers, as well as to be a guide in overcoming the problems that occur.
b. Supervise, control, and channel the behavior of the people they lead.
c. Act as a representative of the group he leads.

3. Government Communication

According to Erliana Hasan in Ananda Korlentina Luas, et al., explaining government communication as the delivery of government ideas, programs and ideas to the public in order to achieve state goals. The government in this case acts as a communicator and the community as a communicant. However, in certain circumstances, in a certain atmosphere, it can be the other way around, namely the community as the conveyer of ideas or ideas, and the government is in a position to observe what the community wants.

In government communication, of course there are some obstacles. Simon, Smithburg, and Thomson as cited by Ananda Korlentina Luas, et al describe the barriers to government communication as follows: language barriers, frames of reference, status distance, geographical distance, self-protection from initiators, other work pressures, and intentional restrictions on communication.

4. Theoretical Basis

Adelisa Pratisi (Pratiwi, 2012) says that the basic theory for understanding an act of communication is that which was coined by Harold D. Lasswell, namely by answering the question "*Who Says What in Which Channel to Whom with What Effect*?".

In this theory, if it is studied further about the expected effect in the act of communication, it will lead to the questions: *When, How, and Why.* As written by Onong Uchjana Efendi (Effendy, 2000), that the approach model to achieve this expected effect can vary. These approaches include disseminating information,

persuading, or as instructions. This is important to understand because the purpose of communication is *behavior change*.

The next step that needs attention is to determine how we communicate the message to be conveyed by choosing one of the following two methods of communicating:

a. *Face-to-face communication*, is used when we expect the effect of changing behavior from the communicant.

b. *Media communication*, in general, is widely used for informative communication.

Furthermore, to understand the position of religious leaders as opinion leaders in communication carried out by the government, by looking at the concept introduced by Katz and Lazarsfeld, namely the two-step model of communication flow (Stewart, Brent D. Ruben, 2013):

Step 1   Step 2
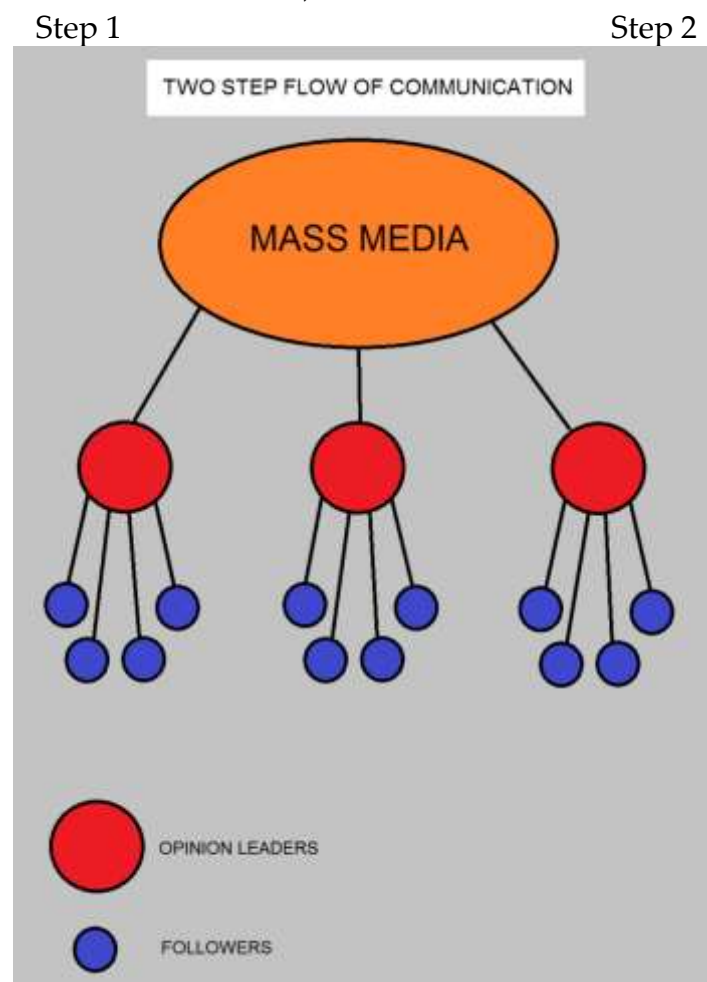
Figure 1. Katz & Lazarsfeld's 2-Step Communication

Model This model shows the relationship between face-to-face communication and mass communication by presenting opinion leaders who can act as communicants in the first step, and communicators in the second step.

C. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method with a case study approach, to analyze the role of religious leaders in government communication related to Covid 19 in Bulukumba Regency. According to Burhan Bungin (2011), descriptive qualitative case study research is exploratory research that plays an important role in creating hypotheses or people's understanding of various social variables. As part of social science, this qualitative descriptive communication research aims to describe and summarize various conditions, situations, or phenomena of social reality that exist in the society that is the object of research, and seeks to draw that reality to the surface as a characteristic, character, models, signs, or descriptions of certain conditions, situations, or phenomena.

The research data was obtained through the process of observation and interviews. Informants in this study were selected using a judgment sampling technique, with certain criteria that are considered to understand and are involved in the government's communication process regarding the handling of Covid 19. From these criteria, selected informants include: spokesperson for the Covid 19 Task Force who is also the coordinator of the Data and Information Team. Information, Muhammad Daud Kahal; Member of the Data and Information Team, Andi Ayatullah Ahmad; Chairman of the Young Dai Council, Ikhwan Bahar; and Chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council, Bulukumba Regency, Tjamiruddin.

D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Bulukumba Regency is one of the regencies in South Sulawesi with a distance of Makassar153 KmWith an area of 1,154.67 km² and a population of about 400 thousand people, Bulukumba Regency is geographically bordered by Sinjai Regency, Bone Bay, Flores Sea, and Bantaeng Regency (Regional Development Planning Agency of Bulukumba Regency, 2020).

With unique regional characteristics, namely mountains, land, and sea, as well as cultural diversity, Bulukumba also excels in various sectors including plantation agriculture, marine/fishery, services, and tourism. All of this certainly causes high mobility (in/out) of the population, both from Bulukumba and from outside Bulukumba which not only has a positive impact on the regional economy, but also has a negative impact, one of which is vulnerable to the spread of Covid 19.

As explainedAt the beginning of the article, the efforts to handle Covid 19 of the Bulukumba Regency Government were carried out by a task force team, which involved religious leaders, namely the Chair of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) and the Chairman of the Bulukumba Regency Dai Muda Council. Both are leaders of Islamic organizations that serve as forums for ulama and dai in Bulukumba Regency. This was conveyed by the spokesman for the task force, Muhammad Daud Kahal:

To support the acceleration of handling Covid 19 in Bulukumba Regency, we also involved the Chair of the Indonesian Ulema Council and the Chair of the Young Dai Council. We think this will be able to help the government a lot because the activities of these preachers are in direct contact with the community. Moreover, the people of Bulukumba are known to

be religious. There are also quite a number of these Dai and scholars. So, we hope that the da'i's work will not only be limited to preaching, but also encourage the public to obey health protocols and also correct incorrect information or better known as hoaxes.

Daud did not deny that the hoax phenomenon was one of the obstacles to the government's efforts to overcome the pandemic. This is based on the findings of health workers in the field, that many of the public do not believe in the existence of Covid 19 because of the large amount of wrong information they get through social media. In fact, according to Daud, the government has made various efforts to disseminate information, so that people get a correct understanding of this virus to prevent its transmission. According to him, this affects the level of community discipline in implementing health protocols. In addition, he also received information about the public's reluctance to vaccinate because it was influenced by hoax issues circulating in the community. As a result, Bulukumba Regency was left behind in terms of achieving the Covid 19 vaccination at the level of the South Sulawesi Province.

The following is confusing information circulating among the Bulukumba community regarding Covid 19, compiled from several sources:

1. **Nurisdah**, Head of the Health Promotion Section of the Bulukumba Health Service:
   - People do not believe in Covid 19 and believe that the government is deliberately Covid-19 every patient who comes to the hospital.
   - The Covid-19 vaccine can cause death.
2. **Andi Ayatullah Ahmad,** member of the Task Force's Data and Information Team:
   - People don't trust Covid because swab test results are not always given to patients.
   - Vaccines are a foreign attempt to slaughter the Indonesian people.
3. **Tjamiruddin**, Chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council Bulukumba Regency:
   - Vaccines are haram because they contain pork
   - Don't believe in the government's recommendation to worship at home as something that is indeed permissible in religion during an emergency outbreak of
4. **Ikhwan Bahar**, Chairperson Assembly Dai Muda Bulukumba Regency:
   - The vaccine given to President Jokowi is a vitamin.
   - After being vaccinated, the remaining life is only 2 years.
5. **Sunarti Sain**, Chief Editor of Southern Radar:
   - There is a chip in the vaccine that is injected to control humans.
   - Coconut water can neutralize the vaccine.

As discussed in the previous chapter, government communication is the process of delivering government ideas, programs, and ideas to the public in order to achieve state goals. Because Covid 19 is a pandemic, the handling policy is directly controlled by the central government. This is as stated by Andi Ayatullah

Ahmad, a member of the Task Force's Data and Information Team: *Actually, if we follow the developments of Covid, the policy is "trial and error". We as the government are only trying to do it because we have no previous experience. For example, like "lockdown". We're just trying to do it. So, in the end the regulations change. Sometimes PPKM level 2, level 3 and so on. In my opinion, this is also what causes people to finally get bored of the various regulations that are presented. But we can't blame the local government either, because we follow the rules from the central government. This is called a pandemic outbreak, meaning one policy for the entire territory of Indonesia.*

Andi added that in the end the Bulukumba Regency Government, through the task force, developed a communication strategy that was adapted to the characteristics of the people in the region. According to him, it is possible to do this as long as it does not conflict with the rules issued by the central task force. On this basis, the regional government also involved elements of religious leaders in the task force team, in the hope of communicating various general information about Covid 19 in persuasive ways to the people of Bulukumba who are known to be religious.

Regarding the content of the message conveyed to the public, Daud said that it was part of the task of the task force data and information team to prepare. The forms of information issued include news releases, infographics regarding Covid 19 data in Bulukumba Regency as well as information dissemination efforts by utilizing various media channels, including: print media, radio, television, and online media. In addition, information dissemination is also carried out by utilizing government-owned social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram). The following is additional information provided by Daud: *In compiling the message to be conveyed to the public, we obtained the data from various sources. In the data team, there are various groups. Some are from Polres and Kodim intelligence, some are in charge of surveillance at the Health Service, then some are from local government public relations. We then disseminate this information to the public through the media. There are also those through WhatsApp groups. I think in this way, the information will be able to reach the wider community.*

When it comes to Lazarsfeld's concept, the involvement of religious leaders in government communications regarding the handling of Covid 19, is as an opinion leader, which is in the second stage of the communication process. So, religious leaders who were previously communicants from the government, changed their position to become communicators who had a role in conveying ideas, ideas, and programs conveyed by the government through the mass media.

Based on the results of interviews conducted by the author, it is known that the delivery of information by religious leaders who are under the auspices of the MUI organization and the Dai Muda Council, is carried out by various methods, including:

Table 2. Methods for Submission of Covid 19 Information by Religious Leaders

Activities	Methods
1. Socialization of health protocols, and other general information regarding Covid	• 19 visit traditional markets. • Inserting da'wah material delivered through takziah activities, Friday sermons, taklim

	assembly meetings, and regular recitations.
2. Calling on the public to carry out worship at home	• Approaching mosque and mushalla administrators to temporarily close houses of worship. • Communicate directly to the people you meet while attending an activity.
3. Straightening various hoax information related to Covid 19	• Inserting da'wah material delivered through takziah activities, Friday sermons, and routine recitations. • Communicate directly to the people you meet while attending an activity. • Fulfilling interview requests from various local mass media.
4. Deliver various information on religious activities and efforts that have been made.	• Implementation of da'wah in collaboration with radio in the regions. • Publication of activities through online media.

In the activities carried out by religious leaders, it is acknowledged that it does not always run smoothly. They sometimes find the attitude of rejection from society. For example, regarding the policy to worship at home. Tjamiruddin said that there were some people who did not obey the appeal. After being traced, it turns out that several mosques and prayer rooms are still open for congregational prayers. The following is an excerpt from his interview: *"So, we have to motivate mosque administrators. We have done that by inviting them to a meeting at the MUI. Even then there are those who refuse. Not roughly, but in a way that keeps it open. Mainly in the villages. Because they think that, why worship is forbidden. Because it is said that this worship is God's command. I then straightened out that even in Mecca, Hajj has been closed several times due to disease outbreaks. It has started since the time of the Prophet."*

Another problem encountered by these religious leaders is the issue that the Covid 19 vaccine is haram, so many people refuse to be vaccinated. Related to this, Tjamiruddin added that the Bulukumba Regency MUI had made efforts to straighten the information, either through interviews conducted with local media journalists, or when meeting directly with the public. The following is his statement:
"The vaccine according to the fatwa of the Indonesian Ulema Council is allowed. Even according to Islamic law, if there is someone who is seriously ill and then examined by a team of medical experts, then this medical team argues that that person can recover from his illness if he eats pork, then this haram is obligatory but only for medicine. The law becomes mandatory because it is an endeavor. This is what the public does not understand. So, what is haram can be obligatory at one time, if in an emergency. We are currently in a Covid emergency. So, things like this actually need to be conveyed to the public."

In rectifying the misinformation circulating in the community, Tjamirudin emphasized that it must have a strong basis because the issue of religion is very

sensitive. However, according to him, the public should not have any doubts. Because the central MUI has issued a fatwa explaining that the vaccine law is allowed. The following is an excerpt from his statement: *"The ulema in the Central Ulama Council are far different from us. He is the expert of all. Religious expert. Sit together. Not just making a fatwa. But through a special meeting and then make a fatwa, open the books and match it with related hadiths. The conclusion is that the vaccine is an effort to protect oneself, to avoid unwanted things about viruses."*

The Young Dai Assembly took a different approach in addressing issues regarding worship activities and vaccines. This is as stated by Ikhwan Bahar:

"We have been doing outreach to the public about Covid for a long time. So that during the current regent period, we are still part of the task force team. In the past, the issue was about keeping the rows apart when in congregation and the use of masks when worshiping which made one's prayer invalid. Then there is also about closing the mosque. We then conveyed to the community by emphasizing that religion teaches in terms of fiqh, about emergency conditions. The point is, if it turns out that praying using a mask is more useful, taking care of yourself is okay. If you keep that distance and then avoid disease, it's okay."

Furthermore, the Ikhwan said that as chairman, he always reminded the da'i who were members of his organization, to correct incorrect information about Covid 19 through the da'wah activities carried out. In addition, he also said that young preachers could be examples, namely by getting vaccinated. Thus, it can be more convincing people to be willing to vaccinate. The following is an additional statement: *"Yesterday, through the task force, we conveyed it to the Regent and also the Head of the Health Service. Enter madrasas and boarding schools. Don't wait for them to come. Because maybe the rules from the school that make students not allowed to go out. That's why we have to come. From there, the crack program emerged. Visiting Islamic boarding schools, visiting madrasas for vaccinations. And Alhamdulillah, the response was good and according to the information we received, the activity succeeded in increasing the number of Bulukumba vaccination achievements."*

Based on the explanation above, it can be seen that the communication process carried out by these religious leaders is mostly done face-to-face. This is closely related to the da'wah method they have been doing, namely meeting the community directly.

E.   CONCLUSION

As explained in the introductory chapter, religious figures has great power in influencing society in Indonesia. Therefore, the involvement of religious leaders in communications made by the government regarding the handling of Covid 19 in Bulukumba Regency is a strategic step.

This can be seen from the results of research conducted, that religious leaders are figures who are respected by the religious Bulukumba community. Through various da'wah activities that are routinely carried out, it is a good opportunity to serve as a vehicle for socialization to the community.

In the 2-step communication concept introduced by Paul Lazarfeld (Stewart, Brent D. Ruben, 2013), it is known that mass media as a communication channel cannot directly have a meaningful effect on society. Therefore, the role of an opinion leader, in this case a religious figure, has a very important position to encourage the improvement of the effectiveness of the communication.

Through da'wah activities carried out regularly, as well as his figure as a leader of the people, making religious leaders a potential communicator who can have an influence on changing people's attitudes as the goal of communication is to "change behavior". This synergy will certainly help the government in handling Covid 19 in Bulukumba Regency.

REFERENCES

1. Regional Development Planning Agency of Bulukumba Regency. (2020). *Bulukumba Profile*. Bappeda Bulukumba Regency.
2. Bulukumba Regency Central Bureau of Statistics. (2021). *Bulukumba Regency in Figures*. BPS Bulukumba Regency.
3. Bahrudin, S., Munir, M., Rohmah, SA, & Saidah, Ima Nur Nurrochmani, Alifiyah Ahwan, Z. (2021). Religious Leader Strategic Communication Model in Reducing Stigma and Discrimination Covid 19 (A Review of Opinion Leader Theory Paul Lazarfeld). *Darussalam Journal; Journal of Education, Communication and Islamic Legal Thought*, XIII(2549–4171).
4. Bungin, HMB (2011). Qualitative Research. In *Jakarta: Prenada Media Group* (Second). Kencana Prenada Media Group.
5. Effendy, O. U. (2000). *Science, Theory, and Philosophy of Communication.pdf*. Publisher PT Citra Aditya Bakti.
6. Kartono, K. (1998). *Leaders and Leadership, what is Abnormal Leader*. King Grafindo Persada.
7. Decree of the Minister of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, Pub. L. No. Number Hk.01.07/Menkes/413/2020 (2020).
8. Muchammadun, M., Rachmad, Sri Hartini Handiyatmo, D., Tantriana, A., & Rumanitha, Eka Amrulloh, Z. (2021). The Role of Religious Leaders in Handling the Spread of Covid-19. *Journal of Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies*, *5*(2528–7249). https://journal.uinsgd.ac.id/index.php/Religious/
9. Pratiwi, A. (2012). *Communication Strategy of the Broadcasting Directorate in Communicating Regulations and Policies on the Broadcasting Licensing Process (Evaluative Study at the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology)*. University of Indonesia.
10. Soekanto, S. (2010). *Sociology An Introduction* (Cet. 43). King Grafindo Persada.
11. Stewart, Brent D. Ruben, LP (2013). *Communication and Human Behavior* (p. 423). Rajagrafindo Persada.
12. Uzma, M. (2019). *Peran Tokoh Agama Dalam Memberikan Bimbingan Agama Terhadap Lanjut Usia (Studi pada Panti Jompo Dayah Nurul Yaqin di Desa Limau*

Saring Kecamatan Labuhan Haji Timur Kabupaten Aceh Selatan). Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry Darussalam.