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Analysis of social behavior and communication strategies in Women's Bathing, Washing, and Toileting (MCK) activities in the open Aek Pohon River, Pidoli Dolok Subdistrict

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the behavior of women who perform bathing, washing, and toileting (MCK) activities in the open Aek Pohon River in the Pidoli Dolok Subdistrict. The aim is to identify the causes, impacts, and appropriate environmental communication strategies. This study employed a qualitative method with a case study approach through observation and interviews. The results show that this behavior is influenced by limited facilities, long-standing traditions, and the perception of the river as the primary water source. Communication strategies are implemented through educational efforts, the involvement of religious leaders, and the provision of MCK facilities by the government. These findings are expected to contribute to studies on social behavior and environmental communication.

Keywords: Social behavior; Bathing Washing Toileting (MCK); environmental communication strategies

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1. INTRODUCTION

As social beings, humans need to interact and live alongside others in society (Musripah, 2023). Social behavior is formed as a result of individual responses to the environment and is influenced by culture, norms, religious values, and social structures (Chu, 2023). In the context of the Mandailing Natal community, known for its religiosity and strong adherence to the customary system of Dalihan Natolu and the philosophy of Holong dohot domu (affection and togetherness) (Rambe & Alfikri, 2022), individual behavior in daily life is closely bound to religious and social norms. One example is the practice of dressing modestly to cover the aurat (parts of the body that must be covered according to Islamic teachings), which has become part of the community's identity and is reinforced by local government policies regarding Muslim attire (Uyuni et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, a social phenomenon has emerged in the Pidoli Dolok Subdistrict, where some women perform bathing, washing, and toileting (MCK) activities in the open Aek Pohon River using only a waist cloth (kain basahan). These activities are located in public areas, such as along the roadside, which gives rise to tension between traditional values that consider this practice normal and religious values that emphasize the obligation to maintain modesty. This phenomenon is not merely a cultural issue, but is also related to aspects of privacy, health, and social perceptions, both from within and outside the region. Therefore, further studies are needed that do not only focus on habits or traditions but also prioritize a communication approach capable of bridging the preservation of local culture, religious awareness, and the fulfillment of the right to adequate public facilities.

As social beings, humans need to interact and depend on one another (Tran, 2023). Within the context of local culture, the Mandailing Natal community is recognized as a religious society that upholds the values of Dalihan Natolu and Islamic teachings in daily life, including modest and Sharia-compliant dress codes (Green, 2022). However, a social phenomenon has emerged in Pidoli Dolok Subdistrict, where women engage in MCK (bathing, washing, and toileting) activities in an open river using only a waist cloth. This practice has generated controversy because it takes place in public spaces with minimal privacy and is vulnerable to being seen by non-Mahrams.

This phenomenon reflects the tension between long-standing traditions and prevailing religious and social norms (Panjaitan et al., 2025). The community perceives the activity as a hereditary practice. However, from the perspective of Islamic teachings, such as those stated in Surah An-Nur verse 31, women are obligated to guard their modesty and not expose their *aurat* in public spaces. Maintaining modesty in public is a religious obligation for Muslims. On the other hand, limited access to proper MCK facilities can be a primary reason why women continue to choose the river for daily activities, despite the contradiction with the values of decency, health, and privacy that they uphold in their everyday lives.

وَقَالَ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَعْضُدْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ وَيَحْكُطْنَ فُرْوَجَهُنَّ وَلَا يُبَدِّلْنَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا وَلِيَضْرِبْنَ بِخُمُرِهِنَّ عَلَى جُبُونِهِنَّ وَلَا يُبَدِّلْنَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا لِيُعَوِّلْنَهُنَّ أَوْ أَبَاءِهِنَّ أَوْ أَبْنَاءِهِنَّ أَوْ بُعْلَتِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنِيَ الْأَوْانِيَّ أَوْ بَنِيَ الْأَخْوَيَّ أَوْ بَنِيَ الْأَخْوَيَّ أَوْ نِسَاءِهِنَّ أَوْ مَلَكَتِهِنَّ أَمْمَانِهِنَّ أَوِ الْمُتَعَبِّدَنَ غَيْرَ أُولَى الْأَرْبَةِ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ أَوِ الْأَطْفَلِ الظَّنِّيَّ لَمْ يَظْهِرُوا عَلَى عُورَتِ النِّسَاءِ وَلَا يَضْرِبُنَ بِأَرْجُلِهِنَّ لِيُعْلَمَ مَا يَخْفِيَنَ مِنْ زِينَتِهِنَّ وَتُؤْتُوا إِلَيْهِنَّ جَمِيعًا أُتْهِيَ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ لِعَلَّكُمْ تُفَلْحُونَ ٣١ (النور: 24: 31)

Meaning: Say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze, guard their chastity, and not display their adornment (parts of their bodies) except what ordinarily appears thereof. Let them draw their veils over their chests, and not display their adornment (their aurat) except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, fellow women (believers), those whom their right hands possess, male attendants who have no desire (for women), or children who are not yet aware of women's private parts. And let them not stamp their feet to reveal what they conceal of their adornment. And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers, that you may succeed (An-Nur/ 24:31).

Maintaining modesty (aurat) in public spaces is an obligation for Muslim women. On the other hand, limited access to proper MCK (bathing, washing, and toileting) facilities may be the main reason women continue to choose rivers for daily activities, even though this contradicts the values of decency,

health, and privacy that they uphold in everyday life. Therefore, it is important to conduct an in-depth study using an environmental communication approach to understand the contributing factors and seek solutions that do not focus solely on culture and habit but also consider aspects of health, safety, and religious awareness. This research is expected to generate effective communication strategies involving the government, community leaders, and residents so that change can be implemented wisely without creating social resistance while still preserving cultural identity and the values of togetherness within the Mandailing Natal community.

The existence of rivers, such as the Aek Pohon River, beneath the Pidoli Dolok Bridge has long been an integral part of life for the Mandailing Natal community. Rivers not only provide water for agriculture and religious practices, but also function as places for women's MCK activities, including bathing, washing, and defecation in open areas. The phenomenon of women carrying out MCK activities in open rivers, particularly in locations easily visible to road users, has generated both supportive and opposing perceptions related to dress norms and privacy.

This practice contradicts the general principles of the Mandailing Natal society, which strongly upholds the protection of women's modesty and the wearing of hijab as a social norm, further reinforced by regional regulations on Muslim women's attire. Through an environmental communication approach, this study seeks to explore the root causes of this behavior and formulate effective and contextual communication strategies. It is hoped that this research will contribute to scholarly discussions on social behavior and environmental communication and provide policy recommendations that are sensitive to local culture and prevailing social norms.

2. METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method to gain an in-depth understanding of social phenomena, particularly the behaviors, motivations, and perceptions of women who perform bathing, washing, and toileting (MCK) activities in the open Aek Pohon River in the Pidoli Dolok Subdistrict, Panyabungan District, Mandailing Natal Regency (Cheong et al., 2023). Using a case study design, the research focuses on exploring the social, cultural, and environmental contexts that influence this behavior, while also examining the reasons for using the river as an MCK location (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The site was selected because it is located along a main transit route and presents a phenomenon of particular interest for study (Busetto et al., 2020). The research was conducted from October 2024 to April 2025.

The data collected are qualitative in nature and derived from primary sources including observations and direct interviews with women who use the river, local residents, religious leaders, the head of the subdistrict, and other relevant stakeholders and secondary sources, such as books, journals, articles, official documents, and previous studies (Ahmed, 2024). Informants were selected based on their direct involvement in and knowledge of the phenomenon. They consisted of key informants (six women who use the river, one local resident, one religious leader, and one subdistrict head) and supporting informants (government staff or representatives from the Public Works and Spatial Planning Office/Dinas PUPR).

Data collection was carried out through field observation, in-depth interviews, literature review, and visual documentation (Naeem et al., 2023). Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation, by comparing multiple perspectives and verifying findings using different techniques. Data analysis was conducted descriptively and qualitatively through stages of data collection, editing, organization, and conclusion drawing (Dewi, 2022). The aim of this process was to describe women's social behavior related to MCK activities in open rivers and to identify relevant environmental communication strategies for addressing this phenomenon.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. General Overview of Pidoli Dolok Subdistrict

Pidoli Dolok Subdistrict is located in Panyabungan District, Mandailing Natal Regency, with a total area of 564.59 hectares. It borders Sipolu-polu Subdistrict to the north, Dalan Lidang Subdistrict to the south, Pidoli Lombang Subdistrict to the west, and Darussalam Village to the east. Based on 2024 data, the population totals 3,205 people, consisting of 1,605 men and 1,600 women, with 803 households. In terms of education, the majority of residents have completed senior high school or its equivalent (1,093 people), followed by junior high school or equivalent (875 people), elementary school or equivalent (480 people), and diploma (D4) or bachelor's degree holders (357 people).

Changes in the oil palm plantation sector, particularly through exploration and exploitation of natural resources, have had tangible consequences for the community's socioeconomic conditions. The socioeconomic impacts of development projects or activities include changes in income, business opportunities, and labor patterns. Furthermore, such impacts can be categorized into direct impacts, such as population migration or pollution, and specific impacts arising from public risk perceptions.

The livelihoods of residents are diverse, spanning both formal and informal sectors. The dominant occupations include farmers (650 people), entrepreneurs or self-employed workers (550 people), farm laborers (350 people), civil servants (250 people), students (490 people), university students (105 people), housewives (405 people), retirees (60 people), and unemployed individuals (345 people). In terms of religion, approximately 99.9% of the population is Muslim, as reflected in the presence of two mosques and three prayer halls (musala), as well as routine religious activities such as pengajian (Islamic study gatherings) and youth discussions organized by Naposo Nauli Bulung.

The socio-cultural life of the community remains strongly rooted in Mandailing traditions, marked by regular mutual cooperation (gotong royong) every Friday and the preservation of traditional arts such as Gordang Sambilan and the traditional house Bagas Godang. One of the main natural resources is the Aek Pohon River, which flows along residential areas and is utilized for bathing, washing, and toileting (MCK), fishing, and household needs, although the practice of using the river for MCK remains a concern for the local government.

Public facilities in Pidoli Dolok are relatively adequate, including PLN electricity, street lighting, paved roads, posyandu (integrated health service posts), sports fields, schools, dug wells, MCK facilities, and community halls and offices. However, the local water supply company (PDAM) has not yet reached all households, causing some residents to rely on wells or bathe in the river. The vision of the subdistrict is "To enhance the holistic development of the Pidoli Dolok community toward a dignified, independent, knowledgeable, and innovative society," with missions that include improving physical and spiritual welfare, developing infrastructure, creating a competitive community, and fostering a religious and innovative generation.

In this study, the main informants consisted of six residents who use the Aek Pohon River for MCK activities, while supporting informants included the subdistrict head, religious leaders, the Head of the Public Works and Spatial Planning Office (PUPR), and other relevant community members. In total, 11 informants were interviewed using structured methods to obtain in-depth data.

Reasons Women Use the Open River as an MCK Facility in Pidoli Dolok

Women in Pidoli Dolok Subdistrict commonly use the Aek Pohon River for bathing, washing, and defecation (MCK) not only due to economic reasons or the absence of bathrooms at home, but also because of habitual and comfort-related factors. Some residents indeed lack MCK facilities at home, making the river their only option, even though its location beneath a public bridge causes discomfort for some users. This activity has become a social behavior practiced from childhood into adulthood, and is therefore considered normal and practical, as the water is abundant and available at no cost.

In addition, the limited availability of public MCK facilities is another contributing factor. In the subdistrict, there are only two public MCK units with limited capacity, often resulting in queues, especially in the late afternoon. This situation leads residents—particularly women—to choose the river, which offers a wider space, does not require waiting, and can be used for multiple activities at once. Thus, the

use of the open river in Pidoli Dolok is driven by limited private and public facilities, long-standing traditions, and considerations of efficiency and convenience.

3.2. Environmental Communication Strategies in the Community

Environmental communication strategies in Pidoli Dolok Subdistrict aim to change the habit of women performing MCK activities in the Aek Pohon River through socialization, education, and the development of supporting facilities. Socialization and education are delivered formally through village meetings and health outreach programs, as well as informally through community discussions. The main messages emphasize the importance of maintaining modesty in accordance with Islamic teachings, preserving cleanliness, and avoiding health risks caused by polluted river water. Although some residents accept these messages, many continue to maintain long-standing habits due to comfort, daily necessities, and inherited cultural practices.

In addition to persuasive communication, the government has also provided physical solutions by constructing public MCK facilities and offering assistance for private household toilets. Temporary measures, such as installing partition tents along the riverbank, were attempted but did not last long due to natural conditions. In 2021, the Housing and Settlement Agency constructed a public MCK facility along the riverbank, but its capacity was limited. The program was later continued by the Public Works and Spatial Planning Office (PUPR), which built toilets and septic tanks for 58 households. However, these efforts have not yet covered all residents due to budget constraints and housing ownership issues. These initiatives demonstrate the government's seriousness in reducing the community's dependence on the river as an MCK facility.

3.3. Social Impacts of the MCK Phenomenon in the Aek Pohon River

The phenomenon of women bathing in the open Aek Pohon River in Pidoli Dolok Subdistrict has generated differing perspectives within the community. Some residents, particularly men, feel uncomfortable because the waist cloth worn by women during bathing clings to the body and reveals body contours, which is considered contrary to Islamic teachings on maintaining modesty. Nevertheless, women who continue to bathe in the river claim that they are compelled to do so due to the lack of MCK facilities in their homes. Local religious leaders emphasize the importance of covering the aurat in accordance with Qur'an Surah An-Nur:31 and encourage the use of more modest clothing or public MCK facilities when available.

Beyond issues of norms and religion, the habit of bathing in the river also poses health risks. The river water has been contaminated by household waste, detergents, and human excreta, which can trigger skin diseases such as irritation, itching, and bacterial infections. Exposure to polluted water also has the potential to contribute to stunting in children through recurrent infections such as diarrhea, which disrupt nutrient absorption. Poor sanitation practices, including defecation in the river, increase exposure to bacteria and parasites that endanger the health of children and pregnant women.

The local government assesses that solutions should not be limited to constructing MCK facilities alone, but must also include enhanced education on proper sanitation practices. Cooperation among village authorities, religious leaders, and the community is needed to change the habit of bathing in the river in order to prevent moral concerns, protect public health, and safeguard the growth of future generations. Effective environmental communication strategies are expected to accelerate public awareness and encourage residents to utilize proper MCK facilities. See [Figure 1](#)



Figure 1. Women's MCK Activities in the Aek Pohon River, Pidoli Dolok Subdistrict

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, the social behavior of women who carry out MCK activities in the open Aek Pohon River, Pidoli Dolok Subdistrict, represents a long-standing tradition that has been maintained to this day. The main factor underlying this practice is the limited availability of adequate bathroom facilities in households, making the river the primary alternative. Although some women feel uncomfortable, the practice continues because it is considered customary and there are no other viable options. Efforts to change this behavior have actually been undertaken through the construction of enclosed MCK facilities and the provision of toilets and septic tanks in several homes. Socialization regarding the importance of maintaining privacy and health has also been carried out by the subdistrict administration, religious leaders, and the local government.

However, the utilization of these facilities has not yet been optimal due to low public awareness and the strong persistence of long-established habits. Changing mindsets remains the main challenge in encouraging the community to place greater importance on privacy and health. From social and health perspectives, this practice has considerable impacts. Religiously, bathing in the river using only a waist cloth is considered inconsistent with Islamic teachings that emphasize the obligation to cover the aurat. From a health standpoint, using the river as an MCK facility poses risks of skin diseases, infections, and water pollution. Therefore, a more intensive and sustainable approach involving all elements of the community is required to change this behavior, in order to create an environment that is healthy and aligned with social and religious norms.

Ethical Approval

This research did not require ethical approval.

Informed Consent Statement

This research did not require informed consent.

Authors' Contributions

SNN contributed to the research conceptualization, data collection through observation and interviews, data analysis, and manuscript drafting. M contributed to the development of the theoretical framework, interpretation of findings, and manuscript revision. HJB contributed to methodological guidance, validation of the analysis, and final review of the manuscript.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

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