

Socio-Political Interaction and Public Perception Toward Papuan Separatism: A Qualitative Study in Papua Island

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Abstract

Papuan separatism remains a complex issue shaped not only by armed conflict and historical claims, but also by socio-political interaction, governance experience, identity narratives, and public perception. This study aims to analyze how socio-political interactions among local communities, customary leaders, religious figures, youth actors, local government officials, and security-related stakeholders shape public perceptions toward separatist narratives in Papua. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with nine purposively selected informants and field observations conducted in Jayapura City, Papua Province, and Manokwari City, West Papua Province. Informants were selected based on their social roles, local experience, length of residence, and direct knowledge of community perceptions, governance practices, and conflict-related narratives. Data were analyzed using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, supported by NVivo 12 to organize codes, identify thematic patterns, and validate relationships among themes. The findings show that public perceptions of separatism are shaped by four interrelated factors: governance distrust, perceived inequality, identity-based narratives, and transnational advocacy. These factors interact through everyday experiences of public service delivery, security encounters, local elite behavior, and digital information flows. The study contributes to the literature by proposing an interactional model linking governance failure, perceived deprivation, identity reinforcement, digital narrative circulation, and separatist sympathy. Policy implications include strengthening inclusive dialogue, improving Special Autonomy governance, enhancing community-based public communication, and involving customary and religious leaders in conflict transformation.

Keywords: West Papua, Public Perception of Separatism, Socio-Political Interaction, Conflict Governance, Identity Politics. Indonesian Defense.

Abstrak

Separatisme Papua tetap menjadi isu kompleks yang dibentuk tidak hanya oleh konflik bersenjata dan klaim historis, tetapi juga oleh interaksi sosial-politik, pengalaman pemerintahan, narasi identitas, dan persepsi publik. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana interaksi sosial-politik di antara masyarakat lokal, pemimpin adat, tokoh agama, aktor pemuda, pejabat pemerintah daerah, dan pemangku kepentingan terkait keamanan membentuk persepsi publik terhadap narasi separatisme di Papua. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan sembilan informan yang dipilih secara purposif dan observasi lapangan yang dilakukan di Kota Jayapura, Provinsi Papua, dan Kota Manokwari, Provinsi Papua Barat. Informan dipilih berdasarkan peran sosial mereka, pengalaman lokal, lama tinggal, dan pengetahuan langsung tentang persepsi masyarakat, praktik pemerintahan, dan narasi terkait konflik. Data dianalisis menggunakan pengkodean terbuka, pengkodean aksial, dan pengkodean selektif, didukung oleh NVivo 12 untuk mengorganisasi kode, mengidentifikasi pola tematik, dan memvalidasi hubungan antar tema. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa persepsi publik terhadap separatisme dibentuk oleh empat faktor yang saling terkait: ketidakpercayaan terhadap pemerintahan,

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persepsi ketidaksetaraan, narasi berbasis identitas, dan advokasi transnasional. Faktor-faktor ini berinteraksi melalui pengalaman sehari-hari dalam penyampaian layanan publik, pertemuan keamanan, perilaku elit lokal, dan aliran informasi digital. Studi ini berkontribusi pada literatur dengan mengusulkan model interaksional yang menghubungkan kegagalan pemerintahan, persepsi kekurangan, penguatan identitas, sirkulasi narasi digital, dan simpati separatis. Implikasi kebijakan meliputi penguatan dialog inklusif, peningkatan tata kelola Otonomi Khusus, peningkatan komunikasi publik berbasis masyarakat, dan pelibatan pemimpin adat dan agama dalam transformasi konflik.

Kata kunci: West Papua, Public Perception of Separatism, Socio-Political Interaction, Conflict Governance, Identity Politics. Indonesian Defence.

INTRODUCTION

Papuan separatism remains one of the most complex national security and governance issues in Indonesia. It cannot be understood solely as an armed security problem or as a legal dispute over sovereignty, but rather as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by historical narratives, ethnic identity construction, socio-economic inequality, local governance performance, public perception, and transnational advocacy. Although Papua possesses abundant natural resources, persistent disparities in access to education, health services, infrastructure, political representation, and social justice continue to influence how different groups perceive the presence and legitimacy of the state in the region (Agustus et al., 2025)

From the perspective of the Indonesian state, Papua is an integral part of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, grounded in Pancasila, the 1945 Constitution, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, respect for human rights, and the rule of law. The historical integration of Papua into Indonesia is frequently associated with the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, decolonization, and the transfer of administration in 1963. However, public perceptions of this historical process remain contested. Separatist narratives often reinterpret historical events, mobilize Melanesian identity, and emphasize perceived injustices, marginalization, and development gaps as sources of political grievance. These narratives are not formed in isolation, but are reproduced through interactions among local communities, political elites, traditional authorities, security institutions, church and youth groups, diasporic networks, and transnational advocacy actors (Akhmad & Dir, 2022).

The continuing tension in Papua indicates that separatism is not merely a matter of ideology, but also a problem of social interaction, public trust, political communication, and governance legitimacy. Armed separatist violence in several areas of the Papuan highlands, including Nduga, Intan Jaya, Yahukimo, Pegunungan Bintang, Puncak, and related conflict-affected areas, has contributed to insecurity and social fragmentation. At the same time, resistance to government development programs, criticism of Special Autonomy, rejection of new administrative regions, and competing claims about welfare inequality have shaped public debate over the effectiveness of state policy in Papua. These conditions demonstrate that public perception plays a critical role in determining whether state policies are viewed as inclusive and legitimate or as coercive and insufficiently responsive to local aspirations (Wangge, 2023).

The theoretical foundation of this study draws on several complementary perspectives. Horowitz's theory of ethnic conflict and separatism explains how status inequality, identity competition, and political exclusion may intensify separatist tendencies (Horowitz, 2000). Gurr's Relative Deprivation Theory emphasizes that political mobilization may arise when communities perceive a gap between their expectations and actual socio-economic conditions (Gurr, 1993). Identity Politics Theory, particularly the work of Castells (1997) and Chao (2022), helps explain how Melanesian identity, colonial memory, and

experiences of marginalization shape political consciousness in Papua. Meanwhile, Giddens' Structuration Theory and Bourdieu's theory of practice provide a lens for analyzing how public perception is produced through repeated interactions between social actors, institutions, and power structures (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1990). Securitization Theory by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) further helps explain how separatism becomes framed as a security issue through state discourse, policy response, and institutional practice (Beale, 2023).

Previous studies have made important contributions to understanding the Papuan conflict. Woodman (2023) examined how international advocacy shapes global narratives on Papua and influences external perceptions of the Indonesian state. Wangge (2023) highlighted the role of social and political actors, including local elites, traditional authorities, security forces, churches, youth groups, diasporic networks, and transnational actors, in shaping public opinion and political mobilization. Lele (2023) focused on decentralization, Special Autonomy, and governance challenges in Papua, particularly the gap between policy design and local implementation. Meanwhile, Li and Zheng (2023) emphasized the importance of socio-economic inequality, marginalization, and development disparities in influencing political grievances and public dissatisfaction (Wangge, 2023).

Although these studies provide valuable insights, they tend to examine international advocacy, decentralization, identity politics, and socio-economic inequality separately. Limited studies have integrated governance failures, identity construction, public perception, socio-political interaction, and transnational influence within a single analytical framework supported by qualitative field evidence. As a result, the mechanisms through which different actors interact to shape public perceptions of separatism remain insufficiently explained. In particular, there is still limited understanding of how local communities interpret separatist narratives in relation to everyday governance experiences, security encounters, identity discourse, and external advocacy (Kristin et al., 2025).

This study addresses that gap by focusing specifically on socio-political interaction and public perception toward Papuan separatism. Unlike studies that primarily emphasize international advocacy or formal state policy, this research examines how perceptions of separatism are socially constructed through interactions among communities, local elites, traditional authorities, security institutions, and transnational actors. The novelty of this study lies in its integrative analytical approach, which connects identity narratives, governance experience, security discourse, and external influence to explain how public perceptions are formed, negotiated, and contested in Papua. By narrowing the focus to socio-political interaction and perception, this study seeks to provide a more empirically grounded and methodologically manageable contribution to the study of separatism, conflict governance, and national security (Cetera & Utama, 2022; Febrianty et al., 2024; Mulyadi et al., 2025).

Accordingly, this study does not attempt to explain all dimensions of Papuan separatism, such as the entire history of integration, all economic inequalities, or the full spectrum of ideological orientations in Papuan society. Instead, it focuses on how socio-political interactions influence public perception toward separatist narratives. This narrower focus is important because public perception functions as a strategic arena where state legitimacy, local grievances, identity claims, and separatist mobilization intersect. Understanding this arena is essential for developing more constructive, inclusive, and evidence-based policy responses to the Papuan conflict (Fatem et al., 2023).

Based on this focus, the research questions are formulated as follows: (1) How do socio-political interactions among local communities, local elites, traditional authorities, security institutions, and transnational actors shape public perceptions of Papuan separatism? and (2) What factors within these interactions contribute to public support for, resistance to, or ambivalence toward separatist narratives? (Harefa & Harsono, 2025). The objective of this research is to analyze how socio-political interactions

shape public perceptions of Papuan separatism and to identify the key interactional factors that influence public support, resistance, or neutrality toward separatist narratives. By doing so, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of separatism in Papua, not merely as a security threat, but as a contested social and political phenomenon shaped by governance experience, identity construction, actor interaction, and public interpretation (Aziz & Fauzi, 2026).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to examine how socio-political interactions shape public perceptions toward Papuan separatism. A qualitative design was selected because the study focuses on meanings, interpretations, narratives, and interactional processes rather than statistical generalization (Mezmir, 2020). The research was conducted in Jayapura City, Papua Province, and Manokwari City, West Papua Province. These two locations were selected because they represent important political, administrative, and social spaces in Papua, where state policy, local governance, community discourse, and conflict-related narratives intersect. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and field observations. Nine informants were selected using purposive sampling. The selection criteria included: (1) having direct knowledge of social and political dynamics in Papua; (2) having lived or worked in Papua for a significant period; (3) representing relevant social positions, including customary, religious, youth, community, or government-related roles; and (4) being able to provide information on public perceptions, governance experiences, and conflict-related narratives. The informants consisted of customary leaders, religious figures, youth representatives, local government-related actors, and community members. The diversity of informants was intended not to statistically represent Papuan society as a whole, but to capture multiple perspectives from actors who are directly connected to local socio-political interactions. The number of nine informants was considered sufficient because the study does not aim to generalize to the entire Papuan population. Instead, it seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of interactional mechanisms shaping public perception. Data saturation was reached when repeated interviews no longer produced substantially new themes and when recurring patterns emerged around governance distrust, perceived inequality, identity narratives, digital information flows, and the role of local and transnational actors.

The data analysis followed three stages. First, open coding was conducted by identifying significant statements from interview transcripts and field notes. Second, axial coding was used to connect related codes into broader categories, such as governance experience, public trust, identity construction, security encounters, local elite behavior, and transnational narratives. Third, selective coding was conducted to identify core themes and develop an integrated explanation of how socio-political interaction shapes public perceptions of separatism. NVivo 12 was used as a supporting tool to organize interview data, manage codes, visualize relationships among themes, and strengthen analytical consistency. However, the interpretation of themes was conducted by the researchers through iterative reading, comparison, and theoretical reflection (Dhakal, 2022). To enhance credibility, the study applied triangulation between interview data, field observations, and relevant documents. The emerging themes were also reviewed repeatedly to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in empirical data. Ethical considerations were observed by explaining the purpose of the study to informants, obtaining their voluntary consent, protecting their identities through anonymized codes, and ensuring that sensitive information was presented in a way that did not expose informants to political or security risks.

Table 1. Participant

Code	Category	Age	Occupation	Length Residence	of Area
P1	Customary actor	50-60	Customary leader	>20 years	Jayapura
P2	Religious actor	45-55	Religious figure	>15 years	Jayapura
P3	Youth actor	25-35	Youth/community representative	>10 years	Jayapura
P4	Local governance actor	40-55	Local government- related informant	>10 years	Jayapura
P5	Community member	30-45	Local resident	>10 years	Jayapura
P6	Customary	50-60	Community elder	>20 years	Manokwari
P7	Religious	40-55	Religious/community figure	>15 years	Manokwari
P8	Youth	25-35	Youth representative	>10 years	Manokwari
P9	Community member	30-45	Local resident	>10 years	Manokwari

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis generated four major themes: (1) governance distrust and public service gaps; (2) perceived inequality and relative deprivation; (3) identity-based narratives and symbolic boundaries; and (4) digital narratives, transnational advocacy, and public perception.

Theme 1: Governance Distrust and Public Service Gaps

Interviews revealed that public perception toward the state is strongly influenced by everyday experiences of governance. Several informants explained that limited access to public services, particularly in remote areas, contributes to the perception that state presence remains uneven. One community informant stated, "The government is present in offices and ceremonies, but many people still feel its absence in roads, schools, and health services" (P5). This statement indicates that public trust is shaped not only by formal policies, but also by the extent to which citizens experience tangible improvements in their daily lives. A local governance-related informant also explained that Special Autonomy has created high expectations, but implementation gaps have produced disappointment. As the informant noted, "People hear about large autonomy funds, but they do not always see clear changes in their villages" (P4). This suggests that governance legitimacy depends on transparency, accountability, and the perceived distribution of development benefits.

Theme 2: Perceived Inequality and Relative Deprivation

The second theme concerns perceived inequality. Informants repeatedly compared Papua's development conditions with other regions of Indonesia. A youth representative observed, "Many young people see pictures of progress in other provinces, and then compare them with what they experience here" (P3). This comparison produces a sense of relative deprivation, where dissatisfaction emerges not only from poverty itself, but from perceived unequal treatment and unfulfilled expectations. This finding shows that public perception is shaped by the gap between expectations of equal citizenship and lived experiences of limited infrastructure, education, and employment opportunities. Such perceived

deprivation can become a discursive resource for pro-independence narratives when it is linked to claims of historical injustice and political marginalization.

Theme 3: Identity-Based Narratives and Symbolic Boundaries

The third theme relates to identity construction. Several informants emphasized that Melanesian identity is often used as a symbolic marker to distinguish Papuans from other Indonesians. One customary leader explained, “Identity is important for Papuans, but it becomes dangerous when it is used to say that we cannot live together with others” (P1). This statement reflects the dual character of identity: it can strengthen cultural dignity, but it can also be politicized to deepen symbolic boundaries. The interviews suggest that identity-based narratives gain influence when they intersect with experiences of marginalization, racial discrimination, or exclusion from political decision-making. Thus, identity does not automatically produce separatist support; rather, it becomes politically mobilizing when combined with governance distrust and perceived injustice.

Theme 4: Digital Narratives, Transnational Advocacy, and Public Perception

The fourth theme concerns the circulation of digital narratives and external advocacy. Informants noted that social media has become a major space where competing claims about Papua are circulated. A religious figure stated, “Many people receive information from social media before they hear any explanation from the government or local leaders” (P2). This indicates that weak public communication creates space for unverified narratives to shape public interpretation. The study also found that transnational advocacy influences local perceptions by amplifying human rights narratives and identity-based claims beyond Indonesia. However, informants did not interpret external attention uniformly. Some viewed it as international solidarity, while others saw it as a factor that complicates local reconciliation. This shows that transnational influence is not linear; it interacts with local grievances, community trust, and the credibility of state communication (Bhakti et al., 2024).

Results of NVivo-Based Data Analysis



Figure 1. Thematic Map of Socio-Political Interaction and Public Perception toward Papuan Separatism

Field interviews and direct observations indicate that the dynamics of separatism in Papua to this day cannot be separated from the objective structural conditions of the region, particularly in the Central Highlands, which continue to experience severe limitations in basic facilities. Separatist actions, which manifest in the form of humanitarian violence, predominantly occur in geographically remote areas with rudimentary transport infrastructure and markedly inadequate access to education and health services compared with other regions. This situation reflects a persistent development gap that not only affects physical accessibility but also contributes to the formation of public perceptions that the state has not been present in an equitable and substantive manner (Prem, 2021). Interviews with various participants reveal that a portion of the population remains influenced by separatist narratives circulating in digital spaces, which often portray the conflict in a simplistic and emotional manner, detached from substantive facts. Such hoaxes reinforce distrust toward the government, especially when they are intertwined with grievances about uneven development, discrimination, and alleged human rights violations by security forces issues that are systematically exploited by separatist groups as instruments to delegitimize the state (Grau, 2024).

The empirical findings also highlight the complexity of the relationship between central government policies, local governance practices, and the propaganda strategies of separatist groups. Special Autonomy, conceived as an affirmative instrument to improve the welfare of the Papuan people, is in principle appreciated for granting wider fiscal and political space to the region. However, its implementation is widely perceived as far from optimal due to mismanagement and lack of transparency by segments of the local elite. This condition generates a double frustration: society perceives that the government's efforts to deliver development are not concretely realized, while local elites who should articulate and defend community aspirations are seen as prioritizing personal and group interests. Such a context creates fertile ground for separatist actors and their sympathizers to reinforce the narrative that state structures and governmental arrangements do not genuinely side with the Papuan people.

Identity based propaganda anchored in Melanesian further amplifies the resonance of these narratives (Bianchi et al., 2021). Melanesian identity is deployed not only as a marker of cultural distinctiveness, but also as a political instrument to build regional solidarity with member states of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), thereby strengthening the international legitimacy of the separatist cause. This phenomenon underscores that the Papua conflict is not merely a domestic issue of Indonesia, but is increasingly embedded in the broader geopolitical configuration of the Pacific region (Li & Ding, 2020). Moreover, the interviews underscore an urgent need for a more inclusive dialogical approach that substantively involves customary leaders, religious figures, women groups, youth leaders, and local communities as subjects not objects of conflict resolution. The participants are convinced that addressing the myriad social, political, and development problems in Papua requires consistent, honest, and structured dialogue between the government and the people. The government's limited socialization of the principle of *Uti Possidetis Juris*, which underpins the legal basis for Papua integration into the Republic of Indonesia, reveals a serious communication gap that is exploited by separatist groups to cultivate doubt among the population regarding the political status of Papua (Adeyeri & Abroshan, 2024).

Only a small portion of society understands the meaning of *Uti Possidetis Juris*, its function, and its relevance within the framework of international law, leaving ample room for information manipulation and the construction of negative perceptions. In addition, regional governments in Papua are widely viewed as having failed to perform their role effectively as extensions of the central government, as mandated by existing legislation. The lack of initiative on the part of local governments in responding to separatist issues exposes weak institutional capacity and a lack of synergy between central and local authorities in formulating coherent response strategies (Kim & Kuehn, 2022). Taken together,

these in depth interview findings and field observations demonstrate that separatism in Papua is the outcome of layered interactions between structural conditions, governance failures, identity dynamics, digital information flows, and the misalignment of state society communication in Papua. This constellation demands policy approaches that are more comprehensive, participatory, and acutely sensitive to the local socio and cultural context, if the conflict is to be managed and gradually de-escalated in a sustainable and legitimate manner (Rydén Sonesson et al., 2021).

Discussion

Main Findings

The findings show that public perceptions of Papuan separatism are not produced by a single factor, but by the interaction between governance experience, perceived inequality, identity narratives, security encounters, and transnational advocacy. This study therefore supports the need to move beyond single-theory explanations of separatism. Horowitz helps explain why identity competition becomes politically salient, while Gurr clarifies how perceived inequality generates frustration. However, these theories alone are insufficient to explain how public perception is socially produced. Giddens and Bourdieu complement these perspectives by showing how repeated interactions among communities, local elites, state institutions, and symbolic authorities create patterns of trust or distrust. Securitization theory further explains why the framing of Papua as a security issue can strengthen polarization when local communities feel excluded from policy dialogue. The empirical contribution of this study lies in showing that governance distrust acts as a connecting mechanism between structural inequality and identity-based mobilization. Perceived deprivation does not automatically lead to separatist sympathy. It becomes politically significant when it is interpreted through identity narratives, reinforced by digital information flows, and amplified by transnational advocacy. This finding refines Gurr's Relative Deprivation Theory by demonstrating that deprivation becomes politically mobilizing only when mediated by communication networks and identity-based interpretation.

The study also shows a tension between securitization and legitimacy. While the state may frame separatism as a security threat, local communities may interpret excessive security approaches as evidence of distrust or exclusion. This produces a feedback loop in which security framing, local grievances, and external advocacy reinforce one another. Therefore, the main theoretical insight of this study is that separatist perception emerges from an interactional chain: governance failure produces distrust; distrust reinforces perceived deprivation; deprivation is interpreted through identity narratives; identity narratives are circulated through digital and transnational networks; and these processes shape public support, resistance, or ambivalence toward separatist claims.

Analysis Based on Separatism and Ethnic Conflict Theory

The findings of this study demonstrate that separatist actions in Papua cannot be separated from structural conditions marked by persistent inequality, limited access to basic services, and deep seated social marginalization. These conditions align closely with Horowitz's explanation that ethnic conflict and separatism are rooted in status disparities and structural inequities (Brenner & Brenner, 2024). The limited availability of transportation, education, and health services in the Papuan Highlands not only intensifies feelings of isolation but also reinforces the public perception that the state is insufficiently present; this vacuum creates an opening for separatist groups to disseminate propaganda framed around human rights violations, discrimination, and uneven development. The widespread circulation of hoaxes through online media further mobilizes sentiments among groups that perceive themselves as

marginalized or unjustly treated, consistent with Horowitz concept of identity competition sharpened by perceptions of injustice. The prominence of Melanesian identity within separatist propaganda also reflects what Horowitz describes as ethnic outbidding, wherein ethnic identity is deployed as a political instrument to mobilize internal support while simultaneously seeking external legitimacy, particularly from Pacific states through the Pacific Islands Forum (Eriksson et al., 2020).

The failure of Special Autonomy implementation and the misuse of funds by segments of the local elite further reinforce Horowitz argument regarding the role of elites in exacerbating ethnic conflict through the manipulation of identity based grievances for political advantage. When local elites fail to function effectively as extensions of the central government, society not only loses trust in the state but also perceives an absence of fair political representation a condition that strengthens relative deprivation and creates space for the legitimization of separatist narratives. The government's minimal dissemination of information regarding the principle of *uti possidetis juris* and the weak role of local authorities have deepened public ignorance about the historical and legal foundations of *Papua* integration into Indonesia, enabling separatist groups to amplify doubts about Papua's political status. As Horowitz underscores, ethnic conflict persists when states fail to create meaningful avenues for dialogue, social integration, and equitable political representation. This dynamic is clearly reflected in the study's findings, which highlight the necessity of inclusive dialogue and the substantive involvement of Papuan leaders as prerequisites for reducing conflict and diminishing the appeal of separatist ideology (Safitra et al., 2023).

Analysis Based on Relative Deprivation Theory

The findings of this study clearly reveal a pattern of relative deprivation as articulated by Gurr, wherein Papuan communities experience a stark gap between their expectations of justice, equitable development, human rights protection, and access to public services, and the structural realities they confront in daily life. The Papuan Highlands, constrained by limited transportation, educational opportunities, and health services, present objective conditions that deepen feelings of marginalization. When these conditions are compared with those in other regions of Indonesia, a perception emerges that Papuans are not receiving equal developmental rights. This structural frustration is subsequently exploited by separatist groups as political ammunition; issues of human rights violations, discrimination, and unequal development are strategically framed to reinforce perceptions of injustice, in line with Gurr view that collective dissatisfaction is the primary driver of political resistance and mobilization. The spread of online hoaxes further widens this perceptual gap, creating a cognitive opening that enables some community members to view separatist ideas as a legitimate response to their lived injustices (Power et al., 2020).

The ineffective implementation of Special Autonomy, compounded by the misuse of funds by segments of the local elite, produces a dual frustration: first, toward the central government, perceived as failing to deliver equitable development; and second, toward local elites who are seen as unrepresentative of community aspirations. This aligns closely with Gurr's assertion that frustration arises not only from dominant state structures but also from local actors who impede the fulfillment of collective expectations. The prominence of Melanesian identity-based propaganda and the involvement of external actors through the Pacific Islands Forum further demonstrate how structural grievances can transcend national boundaries, granting broader legitimacy to separatist demands. Meanwhile, limited public understanding of the *uti possidetis juris* principle and weak local governance widen the divide between expectations for political clarity and the uncertainty experienced by communities. Consistent with Gurr framework, the misalignment between expectations for justice, representation, and welfare, and a reality far removed

from these aspirations, becomes the central catalyst driving support for separatist narratives in Papua(Koehler, 2024).

Analysis Through the Lens of Identity Politics Theory

The findings of this study reveal that Melanesian identity plays a central role in shaping the political orientations of segments of Papuan society, consistent with Manuel Castells' framework of identity politics. Castells (1997) posits that identity is not inherent but socially constructed in response to domination, marginalization, or discriminatory experiences. In the Papuan context, Melanesian identity historically, culturally, and racially distinct from the majority population of *Indonesia* serves as a symbolic foundation that reinforces internal solidarity and sharpens the distinction between "us" (Papuan) and "them" (the state and migrants)(Jansen & Delahajj, 2020). The use of Melanesian identity in separatist propaganda to secure support from Pacific states, particularly through the Pacific Islands Forum, demonstrates how this identity transcends local construction and evolves into a geopolitical tool used to seek external legitimacy. When communities encounter unequal development, limited access to education and health services, and recurring violence in the Papuan Highlands, this identity becomes a vessel for collective discontent reflecting Castells' assertion that resistance identities emerge from groups who perceive themselves as dominated by structures of power(Muldoon et al., 2021).

The work of Sophie Chao (2021, 2022) reinforces this phenomenon by showing how experiences of structural racism, cultural marginalization, and discriminatory narratives deepen Papuan's sense of alienation from the Indonesian state. The circulation of hoaxes concerning violence, human rights abuses, and development injustices intersects with collective memories of unequal treatment, amplifying the resonance of Melanesian identity as a symbol of struggle(Nair & Selvaraj, 2022). Failures in the implementation of Special Autonomy by segments of the local elite further strengthen the perception that Papuan are trapped within a political structure that does not represent their aspirations. The limited dissemination of information regarding *uti possidetis juris* and the weak role of local government widen the informational void that separatist narratives readily fill(Tear & Reader, 2023). Within the analytical logic of Castells and Chao, identity thus becomes a form of resistance against perceived domination and the state failure to acknowledge Papuan's social, political, and cultural existence. Accordingly, identity politics provides a crucial framework for understanding how separatist narratives can take deep root in long-standing experiences of discrimination and marginalization(Rushton & Reiss, n.d.).

Analysis Through the Lens of Social and Political Interaction Theory

The study findings indicate that public perceptions of separatism among Papuan result from dynamic interactions between political structures, local actors, and security institutions mirroring the core of Anthony Giddens' Structuration Theory (1984). Giddens emphasizes that social action emerges through the reciprocal relationship between agency and structure(Connery, 2021). In Papua, society responds not only to central government policies but also to the failures of local structures, including ineffective Special Autonomy implementation and the weak roles of regional governments. When the state fails to provide adequate public services such as education and healthcare in the Papuan Highlands non-state actors, including separatist groups, gain space to shape public perceptions through narratives of injustice and discrimination. The spread of hoaxes on social media underscores that social-political interactions occur within an imbalanced information ecosystem, reinforcing a cycle of negative perceptions between agency and structure, as Giddens describes(Cox & Li, 2020).

Simultaneously, Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of habitus, field, and capital offer a robust framework for understanding how local elites, customary leaders, security apparatuses, and separatist

groups compete to shape public perception. The misuse of Special Autonomy funds by segments of the local elite cultivates a habitus of distrust toward governmental structures, while separatist groups mobilize cultural capital such as Melanesian identity, human rights claims, and narratives of discrimination to gain social legitimacy. Customary and religious leaders hold symbolic capital within Papuan social structures, yet their limited involvement in formal dialogue with the state weakens the stability of public perceptions. The limited understanding of *uti possidetis juris* among the public and inadequate government socialization highlight an unequal distribution of knowledge in Papua political field. Bourdieu's framework explains that when capital and actor positions within a field are imbalanced, public perceptions gravitate toward actors with the strongest symbolic legitimacy often separatist groups in certain regions. Thus, the combined perspectives of Giddens and Bourdieu illuminate how power relations, social practices, actor interactions, and structural failures shape the ideological orientations of segments of Papuan society toward separatism.

Analysis Based on Securitization Theory

The findings indicate that the issue of Papuan separatism has undergone a clear process of securitization by the state, wherein the government frames separatism as an existential threat to national security through official discourse, policies, and military actions. Within the framework of Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998), an issue becomes securitized when state actors define it as a threat requiring extraordinary measures. In the Papuan context, separatist activities ranging from armed violence to disruptions of development programs have been positioned as direct threats to Indonesia territorial integrity. This framing has placed security oriented responses above dialogic or developmental approaches. The government's continued security operations in the Papuan Highlands reinforce the public perception that the conflict is primarily a security problem rather than one rooted in structural injustice or developmental disparities (Baele, 2021). This securitization process also shapes external perceptions, leading the broader Indonesian public to view the conflict through a narrow security lens, obscuring its social, economic, and humanitarian dimensions (Rita, 2023).

Conversely, separatist groups also engage in counter-securitization by framing the state as the primary threat to Papuan identity, dignity, and survival. This is reflected in their strategic use of narratives involving human rights abuses, discrimination, developmental inequality, and racialized violence. The invocation of Melanesian identity to garner support from the Pacific Islands Forum illustrates "bottom-up securitization," wherein non-state actors construct the state itself as the existential threat. Limited public understanding of the *uti possidetis juris* principle, coupled with inadequate governmental communication, expands the discursive space for separatist actors to frame Indonesia as a political and cultural threat. In the perspective of Buzan and Wæver, this dual-securitization where both the state and separatist actors frame one another as threats explains the deep polarization of public perception in Papua, as communities find themselves caught between competing security narratives (Rita, 2023).

Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings align with and extend insights from previous research. Clare Woodman (2023) highlights how the Papua issue is constructed not only domestically but also globally through networks of human rights advocacy, international media, and transnational organizations. Her analysis demonstrates that international advocacy often frames Papua as a site of structural oppression, thereby strengthening the global legitimacy of separatist claims. This parallels the current study findings that separatist groups leverage human rights discourses, discrimination narratives, and Melanesian identity to secure support from regional institutions such as the Pacific Islands Forum (Abas et al., 2022).

Hipolitus Wangge (2023) further contributes by mapping the securitization dynamics in Papua and identifying social and political actors that shape public perception. He emphasizes that public perceptions are produced through complex interactions between security forces, local elites, customary leaders, churches, youth groups, and diaspora networks a conclusion entirely consistent with this study's findings on the role of hoaxes, human rights narratives, and governance failures in shaping conflict discourse (Panday & Chowdhury, 2020). The study by Faonaso Harefa et al. (2025) adds a legal political dimension, demonstrating that limited dissemination of the *uti possidetis juris* principle leaves communities unaware of the legal foundations of Papua integration into Indonesia, thereby opening space for narrative manipulation. Their research also recommends formally classifying separatist groups as entities seeking secession rather than merely "criminal groups" thereby placing constitutional responsibility for managing them under the Indonesian Armed Forces pursuant to Law No. 3/2002 on National Defense (Kostyuk et al., 2025). Collectively, previous studies reveal that public perceptions of Papuan separatism are shaped by a multilayered interplay of global narratives, weak local governance, communication failures by the state, and the absence of legal education an interplay strongly reflected in the empirical findings of the present research.

Policy Implications

The findings suggest several policy implications. First, the governance of Special Autonomy should be strengthened through fiscal transparency, participatory monitoring, and clearer accountability mechanisms at the local level. Second, public communication on Papua should move from top-down messaging to community-based engagement involving customary leaders, religious figures, women's groups, and youth representatives. Third, digital literacy programs are needed to reduce the influence of misinformation and emotionally charged conflict narratives. Fourth, security responses should be balanced with sustained dialogue and conflict-sensitive development, particularly in areas where communities experience limited access to public services. Fifth, a permanent multi-stakeholder dialogue mechanism should be established to connect central government institutions, regional governments, customary authorities, religious leaders, and civil society actors. These measures are important to reduce distrust, strengthen legitimacy, and prevent local grievances from being transformed into support for separatist narratives.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to separatism and conflict governance literature by proposing an interactional model of public perception formation in conflict-affected regions. The model suggests that separatist sympathy does not arise directly from inequality or identity alone. Instead, it emerges through a sequential and interactional process in which governance failure generates distrust, distrust produces perceived relative deprivation, deprivation is interpreted through identity-based narratives, and these narratives are amplified through digital and transnational networks. This model connects ethnic conflict theory, relative deprivation, identity politics, structuration, symbolic power, and securitization into a single analytical framework grounded in qualitative field evidence.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that public perceptions toward Papuan separatism are shaped by socio-political interactions involving local communities, customary leaders, religious actors, youth groups, local governance structures, security-related stakeholders, and transnational narratives. The findings show that

separatist narratives gain resonance when governance distrust, perceived inequality, identity-based claims, and digital information flows interact with one another. Public support for or resistance to separatist narratives is therefore not determined by a single factor, but by the way local communities interpret everyday governance experiences, security encounters, identity discourse, and external advocacy.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its interactional model of public perception formation, which links governance failure, relative deprivation, identity reinforcement, digital and transnational narrative circulation, and separatist sympathy. This model extends existing theories of ethnic conflict, relative deprivation, identity politics, structuration, symbolic power, and securitization by showing how they operate together in a specific conflict-affected context.

The study also offers practical implications for conflict governance in Papua. Policy responses should prioritize transparent governance of Special Autonomy, community-based communication, digital literacy, inclusive dialogue, and the involvement of customary and religious leaders in conflict transformation. However, this study has limitations. Its findings are based on nine informants from Jayapura and Manokwari and therefore should not be generalized to all Papuan communities. Future research should involve broader geographic coverage, more diverse participants, longitudinal data, and comparative analysis across conflict-affected areas in Papua.

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