

Activist Public Relations in Heritage Preservation: Prefigurative Practices and Affective Publics in Lasem, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

Activist Public Relations; Prefigurative Politics; Affective Publics; Heritage Communication; Community-Based Preservation; Lasem

This study reconceptualizes public relations (PR) as practice by analyzing how communicative processes in Lasem, Indonesia are embedded in community-based heritage preservation, operating as enacted, relational, and activist practices rather than as representational and campaign-oriented functions. It explores how prefigurative practices and affective digital mobilization sustain heritage while strengthening Lasem's reputation as a heritage city (Kota Pusaka). Using a qualitative case study, data were collected through interviews with community actors, academics, media activist, tourism entrepreneurs, young digital communicators and visitors, complemented by participant observation and digital content analysis. Findings show that heritage communication operates through embodied enactment, narrative legitimacy, affective circulation, and micropolitical negotiation. Communication is embedded in everyday practice rather than promotional strategy. Prefigurative practices generate authenticity and symbolic legitimacy, while tourists amplify narratives through digital storytelling, forming affective publics that enhance visibility and credibility. This study extends activist PR beyond campaigns, integrates prefiguration into communication theory, and highlights affective publics in shaping place-based reputation.

1. Introduction

Lasem, a coastal town in Central Java, Indonesia, is shaped by a long history of encounters, maritime trade, Islamic learning, Chinese migration, and colonial influence. These layers are still visible today in its batik traditions, pesantren life, and multicultural social relations, creating a rich and living heritage landscape. What is striking, however, is that efforts to sustain this heritage do not depend primarily on formal promotion or state-led branding. Instead, they grow out of everyday practices, through making batik, teaching and learning in religious settings, sharing stories within the community, and increasingly, through the ways these experiences are carried into digital spaces.

Although Lasem is often referred to as a "Little China" (Tiongkok kecil) due to the strong visibility of Chinese cultural heritage, this label only partially captures its complexity. The strength of Lasem as a heritage city lies in the convergence of four interrelated cultural dimensions: Javanese, Chinese, Islamic, and colonial influences. These layers are not merely coexisting but are historically intertwined and continuously reproduced through everyday practices. Javanese social norms shape communal interaction, Chinese heritage informs material culture, architecture, and culinary traditions that reflect long-standing acculturation processes, Islamic practices are sustained through pesantren networks, and colonial legacies contribute to spatial and historical narratives. Together, these

dimensions form a hybrid cultural foundation that reinforces Lasem's identity as a living heritage site, where diversity becomes a source of resilience and communicative richness rather than fragmentation. In recent years, Lasem has also become the object of state-led revitalization projects, including the *Kota Pusaka* (Heritage City) initiative. While such projects aim to promote preservation and tourism development, tensions have emerged between centralized planning and community-based practices. Building designs were developed by the central ministry rather than by local residents, revealing the structural gap between top-down heritage governance and grassroots enactment. At the same time, community actors actively mobilize narratives of tolerance, historical continuity, and cultural identity through both offline interactions and digital storytelling. These narratives generate emotional attachment among visitors and supporters, creating what can be understood as affective publics. In this context, heritage preservation is not merely an administrative policy; it is a communicative struggle over meaning, memory, and legitimacy.

This study begins with this story: heritage in Lasem is lived before it is branded. Communication is practiced before it is strategized. The case therefore provides an opportunity to rethink public relations not as representation but as enactment. Public relations scholarship has traditionally been dominated by managerial paradigms that conceptualize communication as a strategic tool for managing reputation and stakeholder relationships (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Within this framework, communication functions primarily as message transmission aimed at persuasion and consensus-building.

However, critical perspectives have increasingly challenged this orthodoxy. Activist public relations scholarship argues that PR is not exclusively a corporate instrument but also a field of power negotiation, advocacy, and resistance (Ciszek, 2015; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Rather than being positioned outside PR, activists are understood as actors who strategically engage in public discourse to challenge dominant narratives and reshape public policy.

Recent studies suggest that activist communication today is less about direct confrontation and more about how people connect, collaborate, and share stories within networked environments. In this context, legitimacy grows through relationships and narratives rather than opposition alone (Johnston & Taylor, 2020; Toledano & Ihlen, 2021). This perspective opens up a way of understanding public relations as a practice that is not only communicative, but also political and relational, shaped by its connection to wider social movements.

Alongside these developments, scholarship on social movements has introduced the idea of prefigurative politics. At its core, prefiguration is about bringing the future into the present, about living out desired social values through everyday practices rather than waiting for them to be realized through policy or formal change (Yates, 2015). Instead of focusing only on demands or outcomes, prefigurative actors express their vision through what they do in their daily lives. Recent studies suggest that this is precisely where their strength lies: by showing that alternative ways of organizing and governing are not only possible but already being practiced, they build a form of moral credibility that is difficult to ignore (Monticelli, 2021).

In communication studies, this shift resonates with calls to move beyond representational models toward performative and relational approaches. Communication becomes not merely symbolic but constitutive of social reality. Meanwhile, digital media research has foregrounded the role of affect in mobilizing publics. Papacharissi (2015) introduced the concept of affective publics to describe networked formations sustained by emotional resonance. Subsequent studies confirm that emotional storytelling fosters durable engagement in political and cultural movements (Gerbaudo, 2022; Kavada, 2020). Affect operates not only as a trigger of protest but as a mechanism of long-term attachment.

Within heritage studies, scholars have increasingly critiqued state-centric and market-driven approaches that reduce culture to commodified branding (Smith, 2020; Winter, 2022). Community-based heritage governance models emphasize participatory storytelling, local knowledge production, and ethical stewardship (Bogan et al., 2021). However, these discussions rarely intersect systematically with activist public relations theory.

Taken together, three strands of scholarship 1) activist PR, 2) prefigurative politics, and 3) affective publics, offer powerful analytical tools. Yet they remain insufficiently integrated, particularly in Global South heritage contexts. The majority of activist PR research is grounded in Western political movements, while heritage communication studies often overlook grassroots enactment.

Despite theoretical progress, several critical gaps remain. First, activist public relations scholarship still tends to focus on strategic campaigns, media advocacy, and policy confrontation. Less attention has been paid to everyday cultural practices as forms of activist communication. When PR is conceptualized primarily as representation, it obscures the possibility that communication may be embedded in lived routines such as craft production, religious education, or intergenerational storytelling. Second, prefigurative politics has rarely been examined within PR research. While social movement scholars emphasize enactment, PR theory continues to privilege strategic messaging. This creates a conceptual divide between communication as performance and communication as persuasion.

Third, affective publics research has largely focused on political protest or electoral mobilization. The application of affect theory to heritage preservation remains underdeveloped. How emotional storytelling sustains long-term cultural commitment—rather than short-term protest—requires further empirical investigation.

Fourth, Global South heritage contexts introduce structural tensions that complicate existing models. In Lasem, preservation unfolds amid: 1) Centralized state revitalization projects, 2) Market pressures linked to tourism development, 3) Internal fragmentation within artisan communities, 4) Generational challenges in cultural transmission.

These tensions create a communicative environment where activism is neither purely confrontational nor purely institutional. Instead, it operates through micropolitical negotiation and relational power.

The pain point, therefore, lies in the conceptual gap between representation and enactment. If PR scholarship continues to conceptualize communication primarily as strategic messaging, it risks overlooking the transformative potential embedded in everyday cultural practice. Similarly, if heritage communication is reduced to branding, it obscures the moral and affective dimensions that sustain preservation.

This study seeks to address these pain points by examining how prefigurative practices and affective mobilization intersect in Lasem's community-based heritage preservation. Specifically, it asks: How do prefigurative public relations practices and affective digital mobilization integrate to form an activist communication model in community-based heritage preservation in Lasem, Indonesia? By answering this question, the study aims to:

1. Extend activist public relations theory beyond campaign-centered frameworks.
2. Integrate prefigurative politics into communication scholarship.
3. Apply affective publics theory to heritage sustainability.
4. Provide empirical grounding from a Southeast Asian context.

In doing so, the article advances a shift from representation to enactment, reconceptualizing public relations as a lived, relational, and transformative practice embedded in community governance.

The dominant paradigm in public relations has historically emphasized managerial rationality, control, and strategic communication planning (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Within this framework, communication is positioned as an instrumental function serving organizational interests through reputation management, stakeholder alignment, and legitimacy construction. Although this paradigm significantly shaped PR education and professional practice, it has been criticized for privileging institutional power and overlooking asymmetrical power relations embedded in communication processes (Edwards, 2020).

Critical public relations scholarship has increasingly sought to destabilize this managerial dominance. Rather than conceptualizing PR as neutral or technical, critical scholars argue that public relations is inherently political, embedded in systems of power, ideology, and social negotiation (Motion & Leitch, 2009; Demetrious, 2013). This perspective reframes PR as a terrain of struggle where meanings, identities, and values are contested.

Within this critical turn, activist public relations has emerged as a significant research trajectory. Ciszek (2015) challenged the conventional boundary between “organizations” and “activists,” arguing that activists strategically employ PR tools to influence public discourse. Coombs and Holladay (2012) similarly demonstrated that activism has moved critical PR concerns into the mainstream of the discipline.

More recent scholarship extends this argument by emphasizing relationality. Activist PR is no longer understood solely as oppositional protest but as a networked process of alliance-building, narrative framing, and collaborative legitimacy construction (Johnston & Taylor, 2020; Toledano & Ihlen, 2021). Ihlen and Levenshus (2022) further argue that activist communication frequently operates through “power-with” rather than “power-over” dynamics, foregrounding relational agency.

However, despite this relational shift, much activist PR research remains campaign-centered. Studies often focus on issue advocacy, corporate social activism, or media strategy. Less attention has been devoted to everyday cultural practices as sites of activist communication. This creates a theoretical blind spot: what if activism is enacted not primarily through campaigns, but through lived cultural routines? This question is particularly relevant in community-based heritage preservation contexts, where communication may be embedded in daily practices rather than organized protest.

The concept of prefigurative politics offers a powerful lens to address this gap. Originally articulated in social movement scholarship, prefiguration refers to the enactment of desired social relations within present practice (Yates, 2015). Rather than deferring change to future institutional reforms, prefigurative actors embody alternative futures through everyday organizational forms, governance practices, and social interactions. Monticelli (2021) argues that prefigurative politics provides credibility because it demonstrates the feasibility of alternative social arrangements. By living the change they advocate, actors produce moral authority. Raekstad and Gradin (2020) similarly suggest that prefiguration collapses the divide between means and ends: the process of organizing becomes the outcome itself.

In communication studies, this perspective shifts attention from persuasion to performance. Communication is not simply about convincing external audiences; it is about constituting alternative realities through relational practice. This aligns with performative approaches to communication, which view discourse and practice as co-constitutive (Edwards, 2020). Yet, prefiguration has rarely been integrated into public relations theory. PR scholarship continues to emphasize strategic messaging, media engagement, and stakeholder management. The potential for PR to function as prefigurative enactment remains under-theorized.

In the context of heritage preservation, prefigurative practice may include intergenerational knowledge transmission, craft production as cultural continuity, participatory community governance, ritual practices sustaining collective memory. These practices do not merely communicate heritage, they enact heritage futures. Integrating prefiguration into activist PR theory therefore expands the discipline’s analytical horizon beyond campaigns toward everyday relational enactment. If prefiguration explains how heritage is enacted offline, affective publics theory helps explain how heritage is sustained online. Papacharissi (2015) conceptualized affective publics as networked formations organized through emotional expression rather than purely rational deliberation. In digital environments, affect circulates rapidly, binding dispersed individuals into communities of identification. Emotional resonance, such as pride, nostalgia, anger, or fear, becomes a catalyst for participation.

Recent scholarship confirms that affective storytelling sustains durable engagement. Gerbaudo (2022) argues that digital activism increasingly relies on emotional choreography to maintain cohesion. Jackson and Foucault Welles (2022) show how networked counterpublics mobilize affect to challenge dominant narratives. Kavada (2020) emphasizes that collective identity formation in

digital movements is deeply emotional. In heritage contexts, affect operates through memory and belonging. Smith (2020) argues that heritage is inherently emotional, involving attachments to place, ancestry, and identity. Winter (2022) highlights how heritage diplomacy and preservation efforts often mobilize affect to secure legitimacy. However, affective publics research has largely focused on political protest movements. Its application to cultural sustainability and heritage preservation remains limited. Moreover, affect is often treated as episodic mobilization rather than long-term attachment.

Community-based heritage preservation requires sustained commitment across generations. Emotional resonance must translate into durable stewardship rather than temporary engagement. This creates an analytical need to connect affective publics with prefigurative practice. Heritage studies provide a necessary contextual layer. Scholars increasingly critique state-centric and market-driven heritage models that prioritize tourism branding and economic growth over community agency (Labadi, 2021; Winter, 2022). Smith (2020) argues that heritage is not an object but a cultural process, a “doing” rather than a “thing.” This processual perspective aligns with prefigurative enactment. Similarly, Bogan et al. (2021) emphasize participatory heritage governance as essential to sustainability.

However, heritage governance often involves tensions between centralized policy intervention, tourism-driven commodification, community-based stewardship, internal power fragmentation. These tensions are particularly acute in Global South contexts, where modernization agendas intersect with local traditions. In such contexts, activist communication may not take the form of public protest but rather subtle negotiation, relational diplomacy, and everyday practice. Heritage activism can therefore operate as micropolitics—shaping governance through relational influence rather than confrontation (Ristilampi, 2022).

To systematically examine these relational and micropolitical forms of activist communication, an interpretive qualitative approach is necessary. Accordingly, this study employs a case study methodology to explore how such dynamics are enacted and negotiated within the context of community-based heritage preservation in Lasem.

2. Method

Lasem, Central Java, was selected as the case due to its role as a multicultural heritage site where community practices intersect with state-led preservation initiatives. This context provides a relevant setting to examine how communication, power, and cultural meaning are negotiated.

Data were collected through three methods. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected participants, including batik artisans, pesantren, cultural activists, academics, media activists, visitors and digital storytellers. Second, participant observation was carried out in batik workshops and community heritage activities to capture everyday communicative practices. Third, digital content analysis examined heritage narratives shared on social media.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving iterative coding and interpretation to identify key patterns related to enacted communication, relational legitimacy, affective circulation, and micropolitical negotiation. Triangulation across data sources was used to enhance credibility, while ethical considerations included informed consent and participant anonymity.

3. Result and Discussion

The findings of this study challenge the dominant understanding of public relations as a strategic, campaign-driven function centered on message control and stakeholder management. Instead, the case of Lasem demonstrates that public relations operates as a practice-based, relational, and affective process embedded in everyday life. Communication is not external to social practice; it is constitutive of it. This shifts the analytical focus from representation to enactment, where meaning is continuously produced through lived cultural practices rather than transmitted through planned messaging.

Empirically, the study identifies four interconnected dimensions: enacted cultural practice, relational legitimacy, affective digital mobilization, and micropolitical negotiation. Rather than treating these as separate phenomena, the findings suggest that they function as an integrated communicative system. Everyday practices—such as batik production, religious learning, culinary preparation, and storytelling—simultaneously sustain heritage and generate meaning. This supports the argument that public relations can operate as an immanent dimension of social life, rather than as a specialized organizational function.

This perspective directly challenges campaign-centric models of activist public relations. Existing literature tends to frame activism in terms of visibility, confrontation, and strategic advocacy (Ciszek, 2015; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). However, the Lasem case suggests an alternative form of activism grounded in continuity, relationality, and everyday practice. Activism here is not episodic or event-based, but ongoing and embedded. It is enacted through consistent participation rather than strategic intervention. This extends activist public relations beyond its conventional boundaries and reframes it as a form of lived cultural practice.

The concept of prefigurative politics provides a critical lens to understand this shift. In Lasem, actors do not merely advocate for heritage preservation—they enact it in the present. Cultural continuity is sustained through practice, not policy. This collapses the distinction between means and ends, aligning with prefigurative theory (Yates, 2015; Monticelli, 2021). However, this study goes further by demonstrating that such enactment is inherently communicative. Prefigurative practices are not only social or cultural—they are also communicative acts that produce legitimacy, identity, and shared meaning. This suggests that public relations can function as prefigurative enactment, a dimension that remains underdeveloped in existing PR scholarship.

At the same time, the findings reveal that these localized practices gain broader significance through affective digital circulation. Visitors do not simply consume heritage; they translate their experiences into emotionally resonant narratives shared across digital platforms. This process aligns with the concept of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), but extends it beyond short-term mobilization. In the context of heritage, affect operates as a mechanism of long-term attachment. Emotional experiences—such as authenticity, nostalgia, and cultural connection—become the basis for sustained engagement and narrative amplification. This demonstrates that affective publics can play a central role in cultural sustainability, not only in political protest.

Crucially, the interaction between prefigurative practice and affective mobilization forms a self-reinforcing cycle. Prefigurative practices generate authentic, meaningful experiences, while affective publics amplify and circulate these experiences across networks. Without the depth of lived practice, digital narratives would lack emotional resonance. Conversely, without digital circulation, these practices would remain locally bounded. It is through this integration that heritage communication in Lasem becomes both grounded and scalable. This finding contributes a processual understanding of public relations as a dynamic interplay between offline enactment and online affective circulation.

Another key contribution of this study lies in its identification of micropolitical communication as a central mechanism of governance. Rather than engaging in overt confrontation, local actors navigate power through relational strategies—dialogue, negotiation, and cultural sensitivity. This aligns with the notion of “power-with” rather than “power-over” (Ihlen & Levenshus, 2022), but extends it by situating such dynamics within heritage governance. Importantly, the data reveal a tension between participation and influence, particularly among youth actors who are included in formal dialogues but excluded from substantive decision-making. However, instead of responding with resistance, actors adopt a long-term orientation that prioritizes relational continuity and cultural harmony.

This suggests that activist public relations in this context operates as micropolitical practice—subtle, relational, and sustained over time. Influence is not achieved through visibility or disruption, but through persistence, trust, and cultural alignment. This challenges dominant assumptions that

equate activism with confrontation and highlights the importance of context-sensitive communication strategies in Global South settings.

Taken together, these findings support a reconceptualization of public relations as a practice-based activist communication model, characterized by three core dynamics:

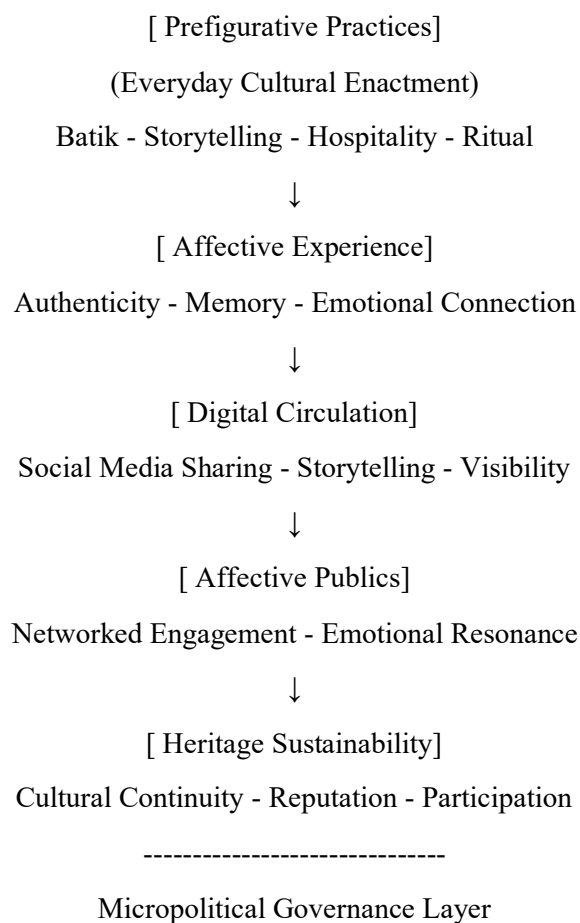
- (1) prefigurative enactment in everyday practice,
- (2) affective amplification through digital publics, and
- (3) micropolitical negotiation within governance structures.

This model shifts public relations theory in three significant ways. First, it moves from representation to enactment, positioning communication as constitutive of social reality. Second, it shifts from strategy to practice, emphasizing everyday action over planned intervention. Third, it expands activism from campaign-based advocacy to relational and affective engagement embedded in lived experience.

In doing so, the study not only extends activist public relations theory but also provides an empirically grounded framework for understanding communication in community-based heritage contexts. More broadly, it demonstrates that in Global South settings, the sustainability of communication does not depend primarily on institutional strategy, but on the ongoing interplay between practice, emotion, and relational power.

When viewed together, these patterns suggest that what is happening in Lasem is not a set of isolated practices, but a connected process. To better capture this dynamic, the findings can be brought together into a conceptual model of activist communication, as shown in Figure 1.

Toward a Practice-Based Activist Public Relations Model



(Relational Negotiation Power-with - Harmony)

Figure 1. A Practice-Based Activist Public Relations Model in Heritage Preservation

3.1 From Representational PR to Enacted Practice

The findings in this study challenge the conventional view of public relations as primarily a managerial tool for shaping reputation and influencing stakeholders. In Lasem, communication is not something that happens after action—it is embedded within it. This resonates with critical perspectives that see public relations as socially situated and deeply intertwined with everyday life (Demetrious, 2013; Edwards & Hodges, 2012).

In practice, activities such as batik-making, religious learning, and informal storytelling already function as communication. People do not separate between “doing culture” and “communicating culture”, the two happen at the same time. This reflects what scholars describe as the “practice turn,” where meaning emerges through lived, routine activities rather than formal representation alone (Wetherell & Smith, 2018).

This becomes particularly visible in how local actors interact with visitors. A batik artisan shared:

“I really enjoy talking with visitors. When they come, I don’t just explain the batik process, but I also tell them stories about Lasem—its history, the Chinese heritage, and how we live together here. It just flows naturally while we work” (Batik Artisan, Interview, 2026)

What is striking here is that communication is not planned or scripted. It grows organically from the activity itself. Storytelling is not an added layer, it is part of the work. Meaning, therefore, is not delivered but co-created through interaction.

A similar pattern appears in media practices. A journalist who frequently covers Lasem explained:

“Writing about Lasem is not just about reporting facts. It’s about capturing its atmosphere, its tolerance, its layered history. I often return, talk to people, and each story grows from those relationships” (Journalist, Interview, 2026)

This suggests that media actors are not simply observers. They become part of the meaning-making process, shaping how Lasem is understood by wider publics.

The same dynamic extends into digital spaces. Visitors do not just document their trips, they reinterpret and circulate what they experience:

“When I visited Lasem, I felt something different... I shared it on Instagram, and many of my followers became curious. It felt like I was sharing a meaningful story, not just a trip.” (Digital Storyteller, Interview, 2026)

Here, heritage is not consumed passively. It is reworked and redistributed through personal narratives. In this sense, publics are not pre-existing audiences but emerge through these ongoing communicative practices (Lünenborg & Raetzsch, 2017; Pieczka, 2019).

3.2 Prefigurative Politics as Communicative Practice

One of the key insights from this study is that heritage preservation in Lasem is not only about protecting the past, but about living out a particular vision of the future in the present. This aligns with the idea of prefigurative politics, where values are not just advocated but enacted in everyday life.

For local actors, preservation is not a separate agenda, it is part of what they do daily. A batik business owner explained:

"We don't just produce batik to sell, it's part of our identity... what we do now is actually how we protect Lasem's future" (Batik Business Owner, Interview, 2026)

This reflects a simple but powerful idea: continuity is maintained through practice, not policy. Heritage survives because it is lived.

This logic also appears in the hospitality sector. A hotel owner described:

"We don't just offer rooms... we want guests to feel the culture, not just see it." (Hotel Owner, Interview, 2026)

Another added:

"If visitors feel connected, they will care. So we try to create that feeling in small ways." (Hospitality Entrepreneur, Interview, 2026)

These examples show that communication is embedded in everyday interactions—hosting, talking, designing spaces. There is no formal campaign, yet meaning is consistently reproduced.

What emerges here is a form of quiet activism. Rather than confronting or campaigning, actors sustain heritage by practicing it. This expands how we understand activist public relations—not as loud advocacy, but as ongoing, lived commitment.

3.3 Affective Publics and Sustainability

The findings also show that what sustains heritage communication in Lasem is not just information, but feeling. People stay engaged because they are emotionally connected.

Visitors often describe their experiences in ways that go beyond observation. One academic visitor noted:

"Lasem is a very rich site... I'm interested in bringing students here so we can contribute directly." (Academic Visitor, Interview, 2026)

This kind of response shows that engagement does not stop at appreciation—it turns into intention and action.

Importantly, these emotional connections are not accidental. They are shaped through interaction, particularly by actors such as tour leaders. In this study, tour leaders can be seen as grassroots practitioners of activist public relations. They do more than guide—they interpret, connect, and give meaning to what visitors experience.

As one visitor explained:

"It wasn't just information—it felt like a story about real people... I felt inspired to share it on my social media." (Visitor, Interview, 2026)

What makes this significant is how values—like tolerance and coexistence—are communicated not as abstract ideas, but as lived stories. This reflects what Coombs and Holladay (2012) describe as public relations as activism: communication that is driven by values and aimed at shaping how people understand and engage with an issue.

These experiences often extend beyond the visit itself. Many visitors, especially digital creators, share their impressions online, bringing Lasem into wider networks.

This becomes even more visible in international perspectives:

"It reminds me of old China... but here it feels more alive. I was amazed by the Chinese style architecture here. It feels incredibly authentic. Honestly, I never imagined I would find something like this in Indonesi." (Chinese Visitor, Interview, 2026)

Here, emotion is shaped through comparison and memory. Lasem is not just seen, it is felt in relation to other places and histories.

When these experiences are shared online, they form what we can understand as affective publics: groups connected not by proximity, but by shared emotional engagement.

"I will share photos and stories... many of my friends were curious." (Visitor, Interview, 2026)

In this process, visitors become part of the communication itself. They do not just receive meaning—they help circulate it.

Taken together, this suggests that heritage communication is sustained not only by authenticity, but by the ability to generate and circulate affect. Emotion keeps people interested, connected, and willing to share. It is this ongoing circulation of feeling and meaning that allows heritage to remain visible and relevant across time and space.

3.4 Micropolitics and Relational Governance

Another important finding from this study relates to how heritage governance in Lasem is shaped through everyday negotiation rather than open confrontation. Instead of positioning themselves in opposition to the state or the market, local actors tend to work through relationships—adjusting, negotiating, and finding ways to move forward without breaking social ties. This reflects a shift from confrontational activism toward more relational forms of power (Chidgey & Garde-Hansen, 2024).

In practice, this means that influence is exercised subtly. One local activist explained:

"We don't choose to protest loudly against the government, even when policies are not fully aligned with our vision of Lasem as a heritage city. It's not that we don't have a voice—we do. But we express it in ways that are more appropriate to our culture" (Local Heritage Activist, Interview, 2026)

Rather than silence, what we see here is a different communication style—one that prioritizes tone, context, and relationships. The same activist added:

"We use platforms like YouTube to share our perspectives... not as opposition, but as an invitation to understand." (Local Heritage Activist, Interview, 2026)

This illustrates how critique is still present, but it is delivered in ways that are constructive and culturally grounded. Communication becomes a tool for alignment rather than conflict.

This pattern is also reflected in the experiences of younger activists, who occupy a more ambiguous position within governance processes. While they are often invited to participate in dialogues with government institutions, their perspectives are not always meaningfully incorporated into decision-making. As one youth activist explained:

"We are often invited to discussions with the government, so it's not that we are excluded. But in many cases, our ideas are not really taken into consideration. Sometimes the policies that come out feel counterproductive to the development of Lasem as a heritage city. Even so, we choose not to confront directly. For us, maintaining the harmony of Lasem is important. We believe this is a long journey, and we prefer to keep contributing in our own ways rather than creating conflict" (Youth Activist, Interview, 2026)

The emphasis on long-term engagement over confrontation is further reinforced by perspectives from academic actors involved in community development. Rather than framing their efforts as resistance to the state, they highlight the importance of strengthening internal community capacity, particularly among younger generations. As one academic noted:

"Our struggle today is not about opposing government policies, but about encouraging more young people in Lasem to take part in its development. Many of them are currently more interested

in working as laborers in multinational industrial factories because it offers more immediate economic benefits. But if this continues, we risk losing the next generation who will sustain Lasem's heritage. So for us, the challenge is how to inspire them to see value beyond short-term economic gain." (Academic, Interview, 2026)

This account shifts the focus of activism from external confrontation to internal regeneration. It highlights a critical challenge in heritage sustainability: the tension between economic pragmatism and cultural continuity. At the same time, it reinforces the idea that activism in Lasem operates through persuasion, engagement, and long-term commitment rather than direct resistance.

This approach is closely tied to local values. As the activist noted:

"In Lasem, we value harmony. So even when we disagree, we try to communicate it in a way that keeps relationships intact" (Local Heritage Activist, Interview, 2026)

What emerges from these accounts is a form of micropolitical practice, where power is exercised through relationships rather than authority. Public relations, in this sense, is not about controlling messages, but about maintaining trust, navigating differences, and sustaining collaboration over time.

This finding is important because it challenges dominant assumptions about activism. It shows that influence does not always depend on visibility or confrontation. In contexts like Lasem, it often works through consistency, cultural sensitivity, and long-term relational engagement.

3.5 Rethinking Heritage Communication in the Global South

The findings also invite a reconsideration of how heritage communication is understood, particularly from a Global South perspective. Much of the existing literature tends to focus on Western contexts, where activism is often associated with protest, campaigns, and formal advocacy.

The case of Lasem suggests a different picture. Here, activism is not something that happens occasionally—it is embedded in everyday life. Preservation is carried out through routine practices: making batik, hosting visitors, telling stories, and maintaining relationships. These activities may appear ordinary, but they play a crucial role in sustaining cultural continuity. This challenges the assumption that activism must be visible or confrontational. In Lasem, it is often quiet, ongoing, and deeply rooted in cultural practice.

At the same time, heritage communication in this context is shaped by multiple forces—government policies, tourism markets, and community values. These are not always in conflict, but they do require constant negotiation. What emerges is not a fixed model of governance, but a fluid and relational process. Understanding this complexity is important. It allows us to move beyond binary views (state vs community, global vs local) and instead see heritage as something that is continuously shaped through interaction.

3.6 Toward a Practice-Based Model of Public Relations

Taken together, the findings point toward a different way of understanding public relations. Rather than seeing it as a purely strategic or managerial function, this study shows that PR is deeply embedded in everyday practice.

In Lasem, communication is not something that is designed separately from action. It happens through doing, through making batik, guiding visitors, telling stories, and hosting guests. These activities are not only economic or cultural; they are also communicative. They shape how heritage is understood, experienced, and shared. This perspective aligns with the broader "practice turn" in public relations, which emphasizes that communication is something people do in context, rather than something organizations simply plan and deliver (Rittenhofer & Valentini, 2015; Edwards, 2018).

Another important insight concerns legitimacy. In this setting, legitimacy does not come from formal authority or carefully crafted messages. It grows from relationships—from trust, consistency, and demonstrated commitment. People believe in what they can see and experience over time. This reinforces relational approaches to public relations, where the focus is not on persuasion, but on building and maintaining meaningful connections (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). The findings also show that publics are not fixed groups waiting to be targeted. They emerge through interaction. Visitors, researchers, journalists, and digital creators become part of the communication process as they engage, interpret, and share their experiences.

Emotion plays a key role in this process. Experiences of authenticity, memory, and connection encourage people to stay engaged and to pass those experiences on to others. This reflects the growing recognition of affect in communication studies, where publics are formed through shared emotional experiences (Yeomans, 2019).

At the same time, activism in this context takes a different form. It is not primarily expressed through campaigns or protest, but through everyday practices and small, consistent actions. Change happens gradually—through how people produce, interact, and sustain cultural life.

Taken together, these insights suggest a shift in how public relations can be understood:

1. from strategic management to lived practice
2. from institutional control to relational legitimacy
3. from audience targeting to emergent publics
4. from campaign-based activism to everyday, practice-based action

This study therefore proposes a practice-based model of public relations, where communication is not just a tool for representing reality, but a process that helps create and sustain it. Such a model is especially relevant in community-based and Global South contexts, where communication is closely tied to cultural practice, relationships, and lived experience.

4. Conclusion

This study contributes to a reconceptualization of public relations as a practice-based, relational, and affective process embedded in everyday life. In the case of Lasem, prefigurative public relations practices and affective digital mobilization are not separate, but work closely together and reinforce one another. Everyday activities—such as making batik, guiding visitors, hosting guests, and sharing stories—form the basis through which heritage is communicated and experienced. These lived interactions do not end at the site; they continue to circulate through digital platforms, where visitors share their experiences and bring Lasem into wider networks.

In Lasem, public relations is not something planned as a campaign or strategy. It is part of daily life. People communicate heritage through what they do, how they interact, and how they maintain relationships. Values such as tolerance, hybridity, and continuity are not explained in abstract terms—they are experienced directly. This creates a form of quiet activism, where preservation happens through consistent practice rather than visible or confrontational efforts.

These lived experiences often leave a strong emotional impression on visitors. Many of them describe feeling connected, surprised, or even responsible for sharing what they have seen. These feelings then move into digital spaces, where stories, photos, and reflections are shared with others. In this way, personal experiences become part of a wider circulation of meaning, contributing to the formation of affective publics.

What is important here is how these two processes work together. The everyday practices in Lasem create meaningful and authentic experiences, while digital sharing helps those experiences reach a broader audience. Without the depth of local practices, the stories would feel empty, but

without digital circulation, those experiences would remain limited. It is this connection between lived experience and sharing that allows heritage communication to grow and sustain itself.

This process is supported by local actors (artisans, tour leaders, hospitality providers, and community activists) who play an important role in shaping how visitors understand and experience Lasem. They do not simply provide information, but help translate values into stories and experiences that people can relate to and share.

The form of activism that emerges from this is different from what is often discussed in the literature. It is not loud, confrontational, or campaign-driven. Instead, it is embedded in everyday practice, shaped by relationships, and sustained through emotional connection. Activism, in this context, happens through doing, feeling, and sharing.

From a theoretical perspective, this study offers a way to bring together ideas of prefigurative politics and affective publics within public relations, showing how activist communication can emerge from the connection between lived practice and digitally shared experience.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that efforts to promote and preserve heritage should not rely only on formal campaigns, but should focus on supporting authentic experiences and empowering local actors, as these are what encourage people to engage, connect, and share in meaningful ways.

Overall, this study highlights those public relations, in contexts like Lasem, is not just about communicating heritage, it is part of how heritage is lived, experienced, and kept alive over time. In this sense, effective public relations is not only about delivering messages but about enabling more people to speak positively and share their experiences organically.

Theoretically, this study extends activist PR beyond campaigns, integrates prefigurative politics into PR scholarship, and expands affective publics into cultural sustainability. It advances a shift from representation to enactment, positioning public relations as a constitutive social practice, particularly within Global South context.

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