



Social Media as a New Space for Moderation Politics and Religious Expression

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Abstract

Social media has now become a significant space in the formation of religious discourse and the dissemination of moderate values in Indonesia. This study aims to understand how social media is used as a political space for moderation as well as a means of religious expression by various digital religious actors. Using a qualitative approach, this study combines content analysis and digital discourse studies on various religious content spread across platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Data were obtained through a netnography-based digital observation method, including preaching videos, uploads by religious figures, and public discussions in comments or live streaming. The findings show that social media has become an effective channel in conveying moderate, tolerant, and inclusive religious messages, especially through creative communication strategies such as the edutainment approach and redistribution of preaching content in short formats. However, this potential is also accompanied by serious challenges, including digital polarization due to platform algorithms and resistance from conservative groups who reject moderate narratives. Thus, social media can play a role as a strategic tool in supporting Religious Moderation in Indonesia, as long as it is accompanied by cross-actor collaboration and strengthening of the community's digital religious literacy.

Keywords: *Social Media, Religious Moderation, Digital Discourse, Preaching, Identity Politics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has driven a transformation in the way people access, disseminate, and discuss information, including in the religious realm. Including in the current digital era, social media has become an integral part of the lives of global society, Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, these platforms are very well-known in various countries including Indonesia, not only functioning as a means of communication, but also as a medium for voicing political, religious views, and socio-cultural values. This change marks a major transformation in the way people express their identities and beliefs. Social media as an integral part of the digital era, now functions not only as a means of personal communication, but also as a new public space where various expressions of identity, including religious identity, are displayed and negotiated (Ansari, 2013).

The phenomenon of increasing religious and political content on social media reflects how society is now more active in defining its ideological and religious positions openly. On the one hand, this is an opportunity to strengthen values of moderation, tolerance, and diversity; but on the other hand, it also raises the potential for polarization and radicalization if not managed wisely. In the context of Indonesia as a country with religious and cultural diversity, it is important to understand the role of social media in fostering or inhibiting moderate politics and inclusive religious expression.

In Indonesia, this phenomenon is clearly visible through the increasing religious activity on digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. Religious figures, religious institutions, and lay individuals actively produce and disseminate religious content in various forms—from online lectures, short preaching videos, to theological discussions. This phenomenon reflects the emergence of a new space for religious expression that is more open and participatory.



On the other hand, the Indonesian government has been promoting the concept of religious moderation as a strategic approach to maintaining harmony, avoiding extremism, and strengthening national values amidst religious diversity (Haitomi et al., 2022). Religious moderation contains the principles of balance, tolerance, inclusiveness, and rejection of violence. In this context, social media should be a strategic means to spread moderate values to the wider community, especially the digitally active younger generation.

A number of previous studies have discussed the relationship between social media and religious expression. For example, research by (Hanif, 2024) shows that digital media plays an important role in shaping contemporary religious discourse. Meanwhile, studies in Indonesia such as those conducted by (Habibah, 2024) highlight the role of social media in strengthening the religious identity of the younger generation. However, studies that specifically combine the political dimensions of moderation and religious expression in social media spaces are still relatively limited.

The novelty of this research lies in its approach that combines analysis of social media as a medium, politics of moderation as an ideological framework, and religious expression as a form of identity articulation. Thus, this research offers an interdisciplinary perspective that has not been widely discussed in previous studies. Understanding these dynamics is very important considering the high use of social media in Indonesia and the increasingly complex interaction between religion and politics in the digital space. However, the algorithmic and attention-based character of social media also creates serious challenges. Provocative or extreme religious narratives tend to go viral more easily than educational or moderate content (Ningrum, 2025). The polarization of religious discourse is also inevitable, where social media strengthens echo chambers and reduces the quality of dialogue between groups. In this context, a critical question arises: to what extent can social media truly be a constructive space for politics of moderation and religious expression?

The urgency of this research is reinforced by the fact that social media often becomes a field of discourse conflict between moderate and extremist groups. In this condition, a comprehensive mapping and understanding is needed regarding how the narrative of moderate politics can be developed through social media and how religious expression can be directed towards the values of tolerance and peace. The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of social media as a new space that allows the emergence of moderate politics and constructive religious expression. This study also aims to identify effective religious communication strategies in responding to the challenges of the digital age, while providing recommendations for religious actors, policy makers, and the general public in utilizing social media to strengthen social cohesion and harmony between religious communities.

This study also aims to explore the function of social media as a new space for moderate politics and religious expression. The focus is on the forms of religious content that develop on social media, the strategies used by moderate religious actors, and the challenges they face in voicing the values of tolerance and diversity. This paper is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions in understanding the dynamics of religion in the digital era, especially in the context of strengthening religious moderation in Indonesia.

2. METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a focus on content analysis and digital discourse studies to understand how social media is used as a political space for moderation and religious expression. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to examine the meaning behind the texts, symbols, and narratives that appear in religious digital interactions. The data sources in this study come from the most commonly used social media platforms in Indonesia, namely YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. These platforms were chosen because they have a large user base and are the main channels for disseminating digital religious content.



The analyzed content includes:

- Dawah videos from religious figures and digital dawah communities
- Posts or captions from accounts of religious figures who have significant influence
- Public discussions that appear in comments, threads, or live streaming features, which represent dialog between users regarding religious issues and tolerance.

Data were collected through digital observation techniques, specifically using the netnography method (RAHMA, n.d.), which is the systematic observation of the behavior and interactions of digital communities. Researchers searched for popular hashtags, religious accounts, as well as video content and comments relevant to the topic of religious moderation and religious expression. The content found was then documented and archived, either through screenshots, permanent links, or transcriptions of video narratives for further analysis. Categorization of religious expression, Content was classified based on its religious expression characteristics into three main categories, Moderate: reflects tolerance, diversity, dialogue, and rejection of violence, Conservative: is normative, exclusive, but does not attack other groups, Extreme: contains hate speech, calls for violence, or discrimination against other groups. Narrative and discourse analysis, used to explore the narrative structure and ideologies that shape the content. This analysis includes mapping actors, dominant themes, and power relations or biases that arise in digital interactions related to religious issues and political moderationhives.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Secularization theory has long been a key framework for understanding the relationship between religion and modernity. However, the traditional view that modernity will automatically relegate religion to the private sphere has been widely criticized by sociologists such as José Casanova, Peter L. Berger, and Grace Davie. They argue that religion has not only survived but also re-asserted its influence in the public sphere, albeit in a different form (Al Abdu et al., 2024). José Casanova offers a more complex understanding of secularization by distinguishing it into three main meanings. First, secularization as the decline of religion, which is not necessarily universal. Casanova asserts that the decline of religious practices is not an inevitable law of history, but rather depends on religion's response to modernity (Knoblauch et al., 2012).

Mapping Digital Religious Platforms and Actors

1. Characteristics of Social Platforms

Platforms such as YouTube are widely used to disseminate long-form religious content in the form of traditional lectures, panel discussions, or in-depth book reviews. YouTube channels such as Ustadz Abdul Somad Official, Gus Baha Official, and Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar are examples of religious figures who utilize this platform to build their religious authority in the digital space. They target audiences seeking more comprehensive explanations of religious and social issues (Khoiri et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, according to Kadri & Fachruddin (2024), TikTok primarily features religious expressions in short, visual, and entertaining formats. This platform is popular among the younger generation due to its speed in delivering information and flexibility in combining religious messages with entertaining elements such as music and memes. Accounts like @pemudahijrah and @ustadzabdulsomad actively convey religious messages through short videos that are easy to share and widely accepted by the public. In contrast, According to (Kasir & Awali, 2024), Instagram is used as an effective visual medium for sharing short quotes, religious infographics, and daily religious reminders. Accounts like @nusantara.bertaqwa and @negerisangpendakwah regularly post content that combines religious messages with visually appealing graphic designs. Instagram also supports the creation of personal brand images for religious figures through features like Stories, Reels, and



communicative captions.

On the other hand, Twitter/X has become a more ideological and argumentative space. Religious discourse on this platform often takes the form of open debates, even sparking polarization of public opinion, especially on sensitive issues such as migration, identity politics, or interfaith tolerance. The open and real-time nature of Twitter enables rapid opinion formation while also opening up intense narrative contestation. As for Facebook, despite experiencing a decline in young users, it remains active among local religious communities. Closed or public discussion groups on Facebook serve as a place to share information about da'wah, study schedules, and internal debates among community members. In many regions, Facebook remains the primary channel for maintaining community cohesion and expanding regionally-based da'wah networks or religious organizations.

2. Religious Leaders and Digital Da'wah Communities

Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar is known for promoting moderate, tolerant Islam and reaching out to younger generations through humor and logic. He is active on YouTube and Instagram.

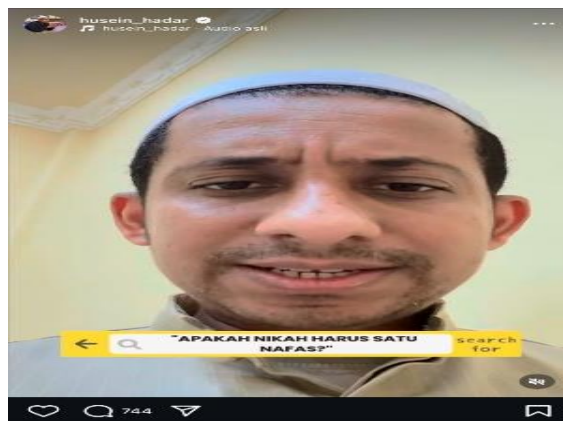


Figure 1. Content of Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar

Ustadz Abdul Somad (UAS) has a large following on various platforms. His preaching style is conservative with a textual nuance.



Figure 2. Content of Dakwah UAS

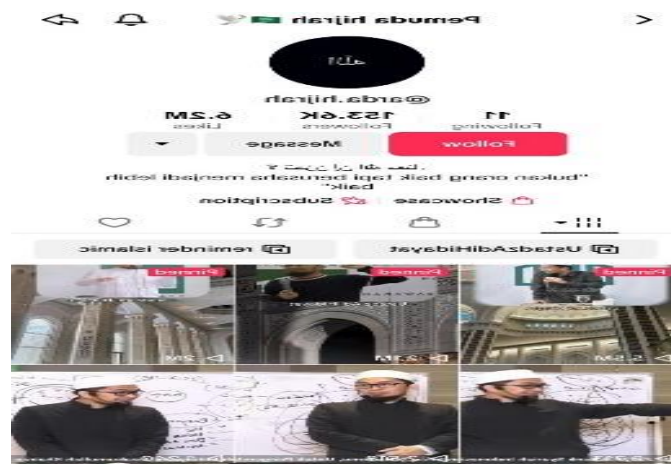


Gus Baha, through his Gus Baha Official channel, presents a deep and wise interpretation of Islamic boarding school teachings, which are widely shared on TikTok and YouTube Shorts.



Figure 3. Content of Gus Baha on Tiktok

The @pemudahijrah community (Instagram & TikTok) tends to promote the spirit of hijrah and conservatism, but remains within the bounds of peaceful discourse.



Figuer 4. Account Tiktok Pemuda Hijrah

Social Media as a Space for Political Moderation

Social media today is not only a medium for communication and personal expression, but has also developed into a significant political space, including in voicing the values of religious moderation. The political narrative of moderation is actively shaped and disseminated by religious leaders and digital da'wah communities through various strategies and channels, one of which is the use of hashtags as markers of ideology and movement (Salim et al., 2023). Hashtags such as #IslamRahmatanLilAlamin, #ModerasiBeragama, and #IslamDamai frequently appear in the da'wah content shared by figures like Habib Husein Ja'far and Gus Baha'. These hashtags not only reflect their positions within the digital religious spectrum but also serve as a means to foster collective awareness about the importance of tolerance and diversity in religious life. Additionally, interfaith discussions presented in the NU Online Podcast on YouTube reinforce the narrative of moderation by featuring speakers from various religious and cultural backgrounds, demonstrating that da'wah can be conducted through a dialogical and collaborative approach.



In conveying messages of moderation, moderate religious figures use communication strategies that are tailored to the characteristics of social media and their audience. Habib Husein Ja'far, for example, uses an edutainment approach—a combination of education and entertainment—in conveying his religious messages. His light, humorous style and use of popular language make his content easily accessible to young people who dominate platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Meanwhile, Gus Baha tends to deliver sermons in a classic, lengthy, and in-depth style, but his content is often edited by his followers into short clips that are then redistributed via TikTok and Twitter. This redistribution expands the reach of his preaching and makes it relevant amid changing patterns of digital information consumption.

However, the narrative of moderation brought by these figures is not always received positively. They often face challenges in the form of resistance from conservative groups who view the moderate approach as an attempt to liberalize religion. Figures such as Habib Husein Ja'far are often labeled “liberal,” “secular,” or even “corrupting sharia” by those who disagree with their inclusive and open views. Content addressing issues of tolerance, such as discussions about celebrating Christmas with non-Muslims, sparks lengthy debates in comment sections, particularly on TikTok, which has become an open battlefield for ideological narratives among users. This shows that social media is not a neutral space, but rather an ideological battleground where narratives of moderation must compete with other, more hardline and exclusive discourses (As'ad et al., 2022).

The Role of Social Media in Building or Threatening Moderation

Social media plays an ambivalent role in the context of political moderation and religious expression. On the one hand, digital platforms have become spaces that contribute positively to the dissemination of moderate and inclusive religious values. Social media opens up spaces for intergroup preaching, facilitates young people's access to a relaxed and contextual understanding of Islam, and encourages creative innovation in conveying religious messages. This approach enables values such as tolerance, diversity, and peace to be communicated in a relevant and easily understandable language (Aulia & Arifin, 2023).

One concrete example of this positive contribution can be seen in the success of Habib Husein Ja'far through his YouTube channel and TikTok account. He delivers his preaching in a relaxed format, combining education and entertainment (edutainment), such as in the podcast series “Agama dan Kopi”* (Religion and Coffee), which features casual discussions about Islam and daily life. In one episode discussing “Can Muslims Say Merry Christmas?”, Husein presents a moderate perspective with evidence and arguments that are easily understood by the general audience, while also opening up space for interfaith dialogue. This episode went viral and was widely shared on platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels by his followers, organically expanding the reach of the discourse on moderation.

However, social media also poses serious risks to the sustainability of the narrative of religious moderation. One of the main challenges is the logic of algorithms applied by platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, which tend to amplify content with high emotional engagement potential. Provocative, confrontational, or extreme content is more likely to appear on users' timelines because it is considered more appealing from an algorithmic perspective. This creates a situation where messages of hatred or intolerance have a greater chance of spreading widely, even compared to constructive and peaceful religious content.

A real-life example in Indonesia is the TikTok video by Habib Husein Ja'far explaining the rules regarding Christmas greetings, which sparked controversy in the comments section. Despite being presented in a peaceful tone with rational arguments, the video was flooded with comments from conservative groups accusing him of being a “liberal,” “secular,” and even “undermining Islamic law.” Even counter-videos emerged from several conservative religious accounts, which edited clips of Habib Husein's statements and framed them in a biased manner to create a negative impression. Such



narrative wars demonstrate how social media, while opening spaces for dialogue, can also become arenas of polarization when moderate narratives are pitted against rigid and exclusive conservative ideologies.

Another phenomenon can be observed in the case of the spread of short lecture videos taken from the Gus Baha Official channel. Some excerpts from Gus Baha's lectures containing messages of tolerance, such as the importance of understanding other religions or criticism of violence in the name of religion, were heavily edited by his followers and re-uploaded to TikTok. However, some of this content also received negative responses from users who rejected the moderate approach, even spreading it with the framing that Gus Baha was "too soft" or "not brave enough to enforce Sharia law." This pattern shows how algorithms and ideological bubbles work to create echo chambers that reinforce each group's views, intensify polarization, and hinder the creation of a truly inclusive digital space.

Implications of Findings for Moderate Politics and Religious Diversity in Indonesia

The findings of this study indicate that social media has great potential as a strategic instrument in supporting the national agenda of Religious Moderation in Indonesia. If managed and utilized wisely, social media can serve not only as a channel for religious communication but also as a tool for fostering interfaith understanding, promoting tolerance, and mitigating religious extremism. The moderate narratives developed by figures such as Habib Husein Ja'far, Gus Baha, and other digital da'wah communities show that the digital space can be used to convey peaceful, inclusive, and contextual religious messages to Indonesia's diverse society.

However, to maximize this potential, more structured collaboration is needed among various stakeholders, including the Ministry of Religion (Kemenag), religious leaders, digital communities, and social media platform providers. One important step is to collaborate on regulating content distribution algorithms so that they prioritize educational and constructive values rather than solely emotional engagement. This collaboration is crucial to ensure that peaceful religious narratives receive proportional space amid the onslaught of provocative content that often goes viral instantly.

Additionally, religious digital literacy must be significantly enhanced so that the public, particularly the younger generation, can develop critical thinking skills to filter the religious information they consume online. This literacy education includes the ability to recognize manipulative narratives, distinguish between moderate and extreme discourse, and cultivate awareness that not all viral content reflects theological truth or Islamic values that are *rahmatan lil alamin* (a blessing for all creation). In this context, digital training for religious leaders, religious teachers, and religious activists is also an urgent priority that cannot be postponed, to ensure that religious moderation is not just a slogan but becomes a tangible practice in Indonesia's digital space.

Discourse Analysis and Power Relations in Digital Religious Expression

Religious discourse on social media shows pretty sharp ideological differences between moderate, conservative, and extreme groups. Moderate religious narratives tend to be built with an emotional and compassionate approach, like encouraging people to understand differences, build empathy between communities, and stay away from violence and hate. In contrast, conservative and extremist narratives often use religious arguments in a textual and literal manner, relying on religious legal authority and tending to be exclusive in their approach to other groups. This creates a clear ideological boundary between inclusive and exclusive religious approaches in the digital space.

In the context of power relations, digital religious actors build authority not only through religious knowledge, but also through the number of followers, the popularity of content, and their ability to shape public opinion. The phenomenon of "cult of popularity" makes certain religious figures more influential in determining the direction of religious discourse, even exceeding the role of formal



institutions. On the other hand, comment sections and interactive features on social media enable the emergence of counter-narratives from the audience, both supporting and opposing the narratives presented. This interaction creates a dynamic two-way discussion space but also opens the possibility of polarization and ideological clashes within the digital community. Thus, power relations in digital religious expression are not one-sided, but are formed through complex interactions between actors and audiences in an ever-evolving social media ecosystem

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that social media has become a significant new space for shaping and disseminating religious narratives and political moderation in Indonesia. Platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter (X), and Facebook serve not only as media for spreading religious teachings but also as arenas for ideological and political identity contests. Each platform has unique characteristics that influence the form and style of religious expression, ranging from lengthy sermons to short, entertaining religious clips.

Moderate religious figures such as Habib Husein Ja'far and Gus Baha have creatively utilized social media to build narratives of Islam that are peaceful, tolerant, and inclusive. Their strategy of combining educational and entertaining approaches has proven effective in reaching a wide audience, particularly the younger generation. However, this narrative of moderation is not without challenges, including backlash from conservative and extremist groups, as well as polarization exacerbated by social media algorithms that tend to highlight emotional and provocative content.

In general, social media can be a highly effective tool in supporting the national strategy of Religious Moderation if supported by cross-sectoral collaboration, including the government, religious leaders, digital communities, and technology platforms. On the other hand, without adequate religious digital literacy, the public is vulnerable to disinformation and intolerant narratives. Therefore, systematic efforts are needed to strengthen the public's critical capacity to understand and respond to religious discourse in the digital space.

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