

Religious Moderation Under the Pressure of Algorithmic Polarization Among Young Muslims Generations in Indonesia

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Submitted : Mei 9, 2026

Accepted : June 28, 2026

Published : June 30, 2026

ABSTRACT

Although studies on digital religion and social media have grown substantially, research that specifically integrates algorithmic polarization with religious moderation practices among Indonesian Muslim youth remains limited. This study examines how algorithmic polarization on social media shapes the practice, understanding, and internalization of religious moderation among young Muslim generations in Indonesia. Using a qualitative netnographic approach developed by Kozinets, data were collected through digital observation, semi-structured interviews with 20 informants comprising young Muslims, Islamic content creators, and digital community members, as well as content documentation across TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and X. The findings reveal five interconnected dynamics: the decentralization of religious authority toward digital content creators driven by engagement metrics; the formation of religious echo chambers through behavior-based recommendation systems; the structural marginalization of moderate narratives within attention-driven platform logics; the emergence of digital religious literacy as a form of resistance against polarization; and the fluid yet algorithmically constrained negotiation of religious identity among young Muslims. While informants with stronger digital literacy demonstrate greater capacity to verify sources and contextualize religious messages, those with lower literacy remain vulnerable to fragmented and unverified content. The study concludes that religious moderation in the digital era is a sociotechnical phenomenon shaped by platform architecture, algorithmic mechanisms, and user literacy, requiring integrated religious, digital, and algorithmic literacies. These findings contribute theoretically to discourses on digital religion, algorithmic culture, and the mediatization of Islam, while offering practical implications for religious education and digital literacy policy in Muslim-majority societies.

Keywords: religious moderation; algorithmic polarization; echo chamber; digital religious literacy



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Introduction

The Ministry of Religious Affairs continues to expand literacy and strengthen religious moderation through diversity based initiatives on digital platforms

(Syahputra, 2024). In the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Muslims are expected to develop systems that are relevant to the advancement of science and technology (Pardianto & A'la, 2023). Over the past two decades, digital technological development has fundamentally transformed patterns of social interaction, knowledge production, and religious identity construction among the younger generation. Contemporary young believers live in an increasingly mobile world, in which their beliefs and practices are closely intertwined with such normalcy (Mattes & Novak, 2025).

In Indonesia, as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, this transformation has significantly influenced how young Muslim generations understand, internalize, and express religious values, including the concept of religious moderation. The widespread presence of social media in the digital landscape has profoundly shaped and reconfigured religious practices, while highlighting the continuously evolving relationship between technology and spirituality (Rohmawati et al., 2024). Religious moderation, which has long served as a key pillar in maintaining social harmony and diversity in Indonesia, is now facing new challenges emerging from the dynamics of digital space.

Social media has increasingly become the primary arena where Indonesian Muslim youth construct, negotiate, and express their religious identities (Soedjiwo et al., 2025). One of the most critical phenomena in the digital landscape is the presence of social media algorithms that systematically curate information based on user preferences. These platforms function as assemblages integrating actors, artefacts, and practices across geographies, thereby reconfiguring transnational religious connectivity beyond traditional origin destination dichotomies (Kazira & Pasura, 2026). These algorithms operate by reinforcing content aligned with users' initial preferences, thereby creating what is known as an "echo chamber." The Like, Share, and Follow features function as feedback mechanisms that train algorithms to continuously reinforce user biases (Gunawan, 2026). In the religious context, such mechanisms may narrow individual perspectives and strengthen ideological biases, ultimately encouraging polarization in religious understanding. Young Muslim generations, as active users of digital media, are particularly vulnerable to this influence.

Algorithmic polarization does not only affect information preferences but also shapes more exclusive and dichotomous worldviews regarding religious issues. Values of moderation such as tolerance, balance, and openness to differences risk being eroded by exposure to content that is extreme, provocative, or overly simplistic. Social media is inherently reciprocal, shaped by dynamic interactions among users, including creators and audiences (Hotait & Sayed, 2025). In many cases, controversial or conflict-laden content becomes more easily viral due to algorithmic logic prioritizing engagement over substantive quality. Religious moderation that is transformed in digital media functions as a filter

against divisive content (Mandala et al., 2024), since it requires a comprehensive understanding of religious issues (Bustanur et al., 2022). With increasing reliance on social media as a source of religious information, individuals are also more likely to trust unverified or misleading information (H & Nur, 2024). This condition creates structural pressure on the internalization of religious moderation among young generations.

On the other hand, Indonesian Muslim youth occupy a unique position. They are not only consumers of information but also active producers of religious content across various digital platforms. Various factors, including globalization, ethnicity, social media, and religious belief, interact in shaping youth identities (Japheth et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies confirm that religious identity representation on social media is closely linked to social pressures embedded in digital culture (Achfandhy & Rohmatulloh, 2024). In response, the Ministry of Religious Affairs observes that moderate and responsible behavior is necessary to prevent the misuse of digital technologies by implementing behavioral moderation in society (Arifin & Aulia, 2023). Thus, digital space can be utilized to disseminate Islamic narratives that are moderate, inclusive, and rahmatan lil 'alamin. However, without adequate digital and religious literacy, young people may fall into the reproduction of narrow or even radical narratives.

Existing studies on religious moderation have largely focused on normative approaches, state policies, or institutional practices. Meanwhile, research that specifically connects religious moderation with algorithmic mechanisms in digital ecosystems remains limited, particularly in the context of Indonesian Muslim youth. Understanding the relationship between technology, algorithms, and religious construction is therefore crucial for developing relevant strategies of moderation in the digital era. Although studies on religious moderation, digital religion, and social media algorithms have highlighted the role of technology in shaping information behavior, an important gap remains in integrating these three perspectives. Most studies have not specifically examined how algorithmic polarization in social media affects the practice, understanding, and internalization of religious moderation among Indonesian Muslim youth, who simultaneously act as consumers and producers of religious content in a highly personalized and polarized digital space.

Based on this background, this study is important to examine how religious moderation is practiced, negotiated, and constrained within the context of algorithmic polarization. Focusing on Indonesian Muslim youth is expected to provide an empirical understanding of contemporary religious dynamics while offering conceptual contributions to the development of religious moderation studies in the digital era. Thus, this research has not only academic relevance but also practical implications for designing more effective policy interventions, education, and digital literacy strategies.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a netnographic research design (netnography) as developed by Kozinets, which is used as the primary method to understand religious practices and interactions within digital spaces based on social media (Kozinets, 2019). Netnography is selected because the research object is embedded in a digital environment, particularly social media, where the interaction, production, and consumption of religious content occur intensively and are strongly curated by algorithmic systems. According to Moleong in Sukmana et al netnography is an adaptation of ethnography applied to digital contexts or online communication (Sukmana et al., 2025). Data in this netnographic study are collected through digital interaction observation, social media content analysis, and tracing algorithmic footprints such as content recommendations, comments, likes, shares, and patterns of religious content distribution across various social media platforms.

The scope of the study focuses on social media platforms widely used by young Muslim generations in Indonesia, namely Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (Twitter). These platforms are selected because they represent the primary arenas for the distribution and consumption of religious content in the digital era. The analysis is directed toward Islamic content related to religious moderation, including viral religious narratives, controversial discourses, and content indicating ideological polarization tendencies.

The research subjects consist of Indonesian Muslim youth aged 17–30 years who actively use social media as a source of religious knowledge, Islamic content creators, and Islamic digital communities. The study involved 20 informants consisting of 15 young Indonesian Muslims, 3 Islamic content creators, and 2 members of Islamic digital communities. Participants are selected using purposive sampling based on criteria such as intensity of social media use, exposure to religious content, and involvement in the production or dissemination of digital content. Snowball sampling is also employed to expand the informant network in accordance with field data needs.

Data collection is conducted through three main techniques: netnographic observation, in-depth interviews, and digital documentation. Netnographic observation is carried out by examining user interaction patterns on social media, including content recommendations, trending topics, and user activities such as likes, comments, shares, and follows in digital religious spaces, which according to Eriyanto dan Asri are part of interaction observation in social media-based digital communities (Eriyanto & Asri, 2021). In-depth interviews are conducted in a semi-structured manner to explore informants' experiences in accessing religious information, perceptions of religious moderation, and the impact of exposure to diverse content, which according to Moleong is used to explore the subjective meanings of informants' experiences in depth (Moleong, 2018). Meanwhile, digital

documentation is used to collect data such as viral religious content, hashtags, public comments, and content distribution traces across social media platforms, where according to Sugiyono documentation is a data collection technique through various forms of documents in qualitative research (Sugiyono, 2017).

The collected data are analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The analysis process begins with data reduction to filter relevant information, followed by coding to identify initial themes such as religious echo chambers, polarization of Islamic interpretation, digital religious literacy, and practices of religious moderation in digital spaces. Thematic analysis is a process through which researchers identify, analyze, and report data in the form of themes or interpretative conclusions (Najmah et al., 2023). Subsequently, major themes are developed to examine the relationship between social media algorithms and the construction of religious moderation, which are then critically interpreted using theoretical frameworks of digital religion, algorithmic culture, social media polarization, and the concept of religious moderation within the Indonesian context.

Data validity is ensured through triangulation of sources, methods, and time, and strengthened by member checking to confirm the alignment between researchers' interpretations and participants' experiences. In addition, thick description is applied to enrich the social and digital context of the analysis. From an ethical standpoint, the researcher maintains informant anonymity, uses publicly available data responsibly, and avoids any dissemination of information that may lead to stigmatization of particular groups.

With this methodological approach, the study is expected to produce a conceptual mapping of the relationship between algorithmic polarization and religious moderation practices among Indonesian Muslim youth, while also contributing both academically and practically to the development of digital religious literacy in the platform society era.

Results and Discussion

Transformation of Religious Authority in Digital Space

The findings of this study indicate that social media has significantly transformed patterns of religious authority among young Muslim generations in Indonesia. Informants tend to acquire religious knowledge not primarily from formal institutions such as Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), religious study circles (*majelis taklim*), or local religious leaders, but rather from Islamic content creators on TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and X. This phenomenon reflects a decentralization of religious authority, where legitimacy is no longer determined solely by scholarly expertise, but increasingly shaped by digital popularity, follower counts, engagement metrics, and the ability to construct visually and emotionally compelling narratives. In this regard, Knoblauch (2009) platforms can

be understood as important spaces within contemporary popular and youth culture, where processes of knowledge production, reception, and reinterpretation of cultural forms actively take place (Malli., 2021).

Young Muslim generations tend to prefer religious content that is brief, practical, and communicative rather than in-depth and complex theological explanations. As stated by Heidi Campbell, digital religion does not merely refer to religion as practiced and expressed online, but also highlights how digital media and spaces simultaneously shape and are shaped by religious practices (Evolvi, 2022). In this context, social media algorithms play a crucial role in determining which actors gain visibility in the digital public sphere. Content that is emotional, controversial, and provocative tends to be more frequently recommended by algorithmic systems due to its high engagement potential. Accordingly, Al-Zaman explains that the growth of Islamic content may also be influenced by the increasing number of social media users (Al-Zaman, 2022).

This condition creates significant challenges for moderate religious authority. Narratives of religious moderation, which are generally argumentative, reflective, and dialogical in nature, often lose popularity compared to content that is dichotomous, simplistic, and identity-polarizing. These findings suggest that digital transformation does not merely change the medium of da'wah (religious preaching), but also reshapes the structure of religious legitimacy among young Muslim generations in Indonesia.

Algorithmic Polarization and the Formation of Religious Echo Chambers

The study finds that social media algorithms construct echo chambers that reinforce users' ideological preferences in consuming religious content. Informants reported that after repeatedly liking, sharing, or watching specific types of content, digital platforms automatically and continuously recommend similar content. This experience indicates that algorithmic systems operate consistently in shaping increasingly narrow patterns of information exposure, resulting in users being more frequently exposed to homogeneous religious viewpoints while encountering alternative perspectives less often.

These findings are particularly evident in informants' experiences on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, which heavily rely on behavior-based recommendation systems. In this context, algorithms do not merely filter information, but actively shape what users see, watch, and access based on their digital interaction histories. In line with this, Auxier et al argue that although digital environments have negative implications, personalization and the narrowing of information flows can also help users manage the overwhelming volume of available information (Auxier & Vitak, 2019)

This phenomenon intensifies polarization in religious understanding. Users who initially demonstrate conservative tendencies are continuously directed toward conservative content, while those with more moderate orientations are

placed within different informational ecosystems. Accordingly, algorithms function as automated curation mechanisms that indirectly produce ideological segregation in digital space. In this regard, Jakiyudin states that social media content can contain both positive and negative information. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen religious moderation literacy in social media contexts. This literacy reflects the Qur'anic injunction in Q.S. Al-'Alaq verses 1–5, which commands humans to pursue knowledge (Jakiyudin, 2023)

In practice, this religious echo chamber produces dichotomous tendencies in perceiving differences. Informants frequently used labels such as “true Islam,” “deviant,” “liberal,” or “less Islamic” in digital interactions, including comment sections, response videos, and online discussions. This polarization is further reinforced by algorithmic culture, which prioritizes high-engagement content, making conflictual or emotional narratives more visible than reflective and moderate ones. Similarly, Zabieno et al emphasize that social media algorithms enable users to consume information aligned with their preferences and beliefs, while continuously reinforcing them through repeated content recommendations (Zabieno et al., 2025).

Overall, these findings demonstrate that algorithmic polarization is not only related to information distribution, but also significantly shapes the construction of socio-religious identities among young generations. Social media indirectly constructs symbolic boundaries between “our group” and “their group,” thereby narrowing the space for moderation, dialogue, and tolerance in digital religious discourse.

Religious Moderation Amid Competition in Digital Narratives

The findings of this study reveal that religious moderation in digital spaces occupies a highly competitive position and tends to be marginalized within the social media ecosystem. Content that embodies values of moderation generally receives lower engagement compared to content that is sensational, conflict-driven, or contains controversial elements. Informants in this study noted that videos with harsh narratives, religious debates, or criticism of specific groups are more likely to go viral than content emphasizing dialogue, tolerance, and balance.

In practice, this is evident from the dominance of short-form content that highlights polemics or fragmented religious sermons, which more easily trigger emotional responses from audiences. This condition indicates that digital space is not entirely neutral, but is strongly shaped by patterns of attention distribution (attention economy) constructed by platform algorithms. In line with this, Saumantri states that there is a wide range of content that may trigger conflict; therefore, the most appropriate solution to mitigate and filter information circulating on social media is strengthening religious moderation literacy (Saumantri, 2023).

This phenomenon is closely related to the economic logic of digital platforms, which prioritize user attention. Social media algorithms are designed to maximize user engagement duration; as a result, content that provokes emotional reactions such as anger, debate, or controversy is more likely to be prioritized in distribution. Within this context, religious moderation faces structural pressure, as its values calmness, argumentation, and reflection are often misaligned with algorithmic virality mechanisms driven by high engagement metrics.

Nevertheless, the study also finds adaptive strategies among some moderate Muslim content creators in responding to this situation. They increasingly employ communication strategies aligned with digital media characteristics, such as attractive visual design, short storytelling formats, the use of popular language, and concise message packaging while still maintaining the substance of religious moderation. This reflects an ongoing negotiation between theological substance and the formal demands of digital platforms. In line with this, Rohman argues that social media can serve as an effective medium for disseminating religious moderation aligned with the Qur'an and Islamic teachings (Rohman, 2023). These findings indicate that although religious moderation faces algorithmic pressure and intense narrative competition, it still holds potential to develop if it is able to adapt to digital communication culture without losing its inclusive Islamic values.

Thus, religious moderation in the digital era cannot be understood merely as a normative discourse, but must also be viewed as a form of digital communication practice that requires content distribution strategies, message visualization skills, and algorithmic literacy in order to remain competitive within the digital narrative ecosystem.

Digital Religious Literacy as a Form of Resistance

The study shows that digital religious literacy plays a crucial role in responding to algorithmic polarization on social media. Informants with strong abilities in information verification, an understanding of how algorithms operate, and more extensive religious learning experiences tend to be less susceptible to extreme or provocative content. In field practice, this is reflected in some informants' ability to cross-check the sources of sermons, compare video excerpts from different accounts, and avoid immediately sharing viral religious content without understanding its full context. Robbi dan Syafi'uddin argue that this crisis is not merely about the ability to read religious texts, but more fundamentally concerns how Muslims understand, verify, and interpret Islamic values amid an uncontrolled information overflow (Mahud, 2025).

In contrast, informants with low digital literacy are more vulnerable to accepting fragmented sermons, video clips, or viral narratives without source verification. In several cases, they re-share religious information simply because it aligns with personal or group beliefs. This demonstrates that social media algorithms operate effectively when users lack critical skills in filtering

information. Harisi et al state that the practical implication is that healthy digital da'wah cannot rely solely on preachers or platforms; it also requires audiences capable of verifying sources, comparing interpretations, and distinguishing between attention grabbing visibility and doctrinal credibility (Harisi et al., 2026)

The findings further indicate that digital religious literacy is not limited to technical skills in using social media, but also includes the ability to understand context, compare sources, and develop openness toward diverse religious interpretations. Therefore, strengthening religious moderation in the digital era requires an integrated approach combining media literacy, algorithmic literacy, and religious literacy simultaneously. Hidayat dan Nurkholis Nuri note that this shift not only expands transnational reach, but also transforms communication methods into more interactive and dialogical forms through comments, direct messages, and Q&A sessions (Hidayat & Nuri, 2023)

In this context, educational institutions, religious organizations, and governments play a strategic role in fostering critical awareness among young generations regarding the mechanisms of social media algorithms. Such efforts are essential to ensure that young Muslim users are not merely passive consumers of technology, but are also capable of constructing a healthier, more inclusive, and more moderate digital space.

Religious Identity Negotiation among Young Muslim Generations

The findings of this study indicate that young Muslim generations in Indonesia are not merely passive victims of algorithmic polarization, but also actively negotiate their religious identities within digital spaces. In the field, this is evident in informants' ability to move across various digital da'wah communities, follow multiple religious sources, and integrate religious practices with digital popular culture such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube trends. This condition demonstrates that religious identity is no longer singular and static, but rather flexible depending on the context of digital interaction they engage in.

This phenomenon illustrates that the religious identity of young generations is fluid, dynamic, and continuously negotiated through everyday digital interactions. Social media is not only a space for consuming religious information, but also a stage for identity performativity, where individuals construct their religious image through posts, comments, hashtags, and affiliations with online communities. In this context, Evolvi states that personalization of religious content on social media shows that algorithms tend to promote content that triggers strong emotional responses, whether in the form of spiritual inspiration or anger toward other groups (Rohman & Al-Athiriyah, 2025).

However, this process of identity negotiation is not entirely free, as it remains under algorithmic pressure that encourages homogenization of user preferences. The more intensely a person interacts with certain types of content or groups, the more the algorithm narrows exposure to alternative perspectives. In practice, this

leads to a shift whereby initially open identity negotiation processes may gradually evolve into more exclusive and segmented identity formations.

These findings confirm that religious moderation in the digital era is not solely a matter of theological doctrine, but is also strongly influenced by technological structures that govern how religious narratives are produced, distributed, and consumed in digital spaces. Therefore, future approaches to religious moderation must seriously consider digital technological dimensions and algorithmic culture as inseparable components of the socio-religious life of young Muslim generations in Indonesia.

Theoretical and Social Implications of Religious Moderation in the Algorithmic Era

This study demonstrates that the relationship between religion and digital technology is multidimensional and mutually constitutive. Social media algorithms do not operate in a neutral manner; rather, they actively shape users' epistemic orientations, interaction patterns, and the construction of religious identity within digital spaces. In practice, this is evident in how users' reception of religious information is strongly influenced by recommendation systems, resulting in differentiated religious experiences across individuals. In this context, religious moderation faces new challenges in the form of digital structures that tend to reinforce polarization, information segmentation, and limited access to diverse perspectives.

Theoretically, this study expands the discourse on religious moderation by integrating perspectives from digital religion, algorithmic culture, and social media polarization. Accordingly, religious moderation can no longer be understood solely within the framework of formal institutions or state policies, but must also be analyzed through the operational mechanisms of digital platforms that regulate information flows, content visibility, and the logic of religious narrative distribution. In this regard, Zuhri dan Juni Wati Sri Riski argue that the mediatization of religion produces dual implications for Generation Z's religious practices. On the one hand, social media expands access to religious knowledge and encourages active youth engagement in religious discourse (S. I. Zuhri & Riski, 2026).

On the other hand, this increased accessibility is accompanied by challenges in the form of information overload that is not always verified and is often shaped by platform algorithmic logics. Socially, this study emphasizes the importance of strengthening a digital ecosystem that supports the dissemination of religious moderation values more effectively. This is highlighted by Zuhri et al, who state that although social media facilitates broader access to religious information, Generation Z often struggles to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate information, which may lead to fragmented or superficial religious understanding (S. Zuhri et al., 2024).

Therefore, stronger collaboration is required among governments, educational institutions, religious leaders, digital communities, and social media platforms to create a more healthy, inclusive, and responsible digital space. In addition, strengthening algorithmic literacy has become increasingly urgent to ensure that young Muslim generations are not only capable of using digital technologies, but also understand how these technologies shape their perceptions of religion, difference, and broader social life.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that religious moderation among young Muslim generations in Indonesia is increasingly under strong pressure due to algorithmic polarization dynamics within the social media ecosystem. Algorithmic curation systems based on user preferences and interactions have constructed echo chambers that reinforce ideological homogeneity while narrowing the diversity of religious information exposure. This condition contributes to the strengthening of religious knowledge segregation and the weakening of inclusive spaces for dialogue. Consequently, core values of religious moderation such as tolerance, balance, and openness to differences face structural challenges derived from platform logics oriented toward attention and engagement.

The findings further show that young Muslim generations are not merely passive consumers, but also active agents in the production and dissemination of religious narratives in digital spaces. However, their processes of religious identity negotiation remain strongly influenced by algorithms that tend to direct users toward ideologically similar content. As a result, religious identity becomes increasingly fluid, yet simultaneously more vulnerable to polarization.

In this context, digital religious literacy proves to be an important form of resistance. Individuals with higher levels of digital literacy are better able to verify information, understand religious contexts more comprehensively, and compare multiple sources of knowledge. Conversely, low digital literacy increases vulnerability to unverified and fragmented religious information.

Overall, religious moderation in the digital era cannot be understood solely as a normative concept, but must also be recognized as a socio-technical phenomenon shaped by platform architecture, algorithmic mechanisms, and patterns of digital interaction culture. This study is limited by restricted access to internal algorithmic mechanisms and its focus on social media spaces and Indonesian Muslim youth. Therefore, future research is recommended to employ more diverse approaches such as mixed methods, broaden the contextual scope, and further explore algorithmic literacy to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of religious moderation dynamics in the digital era.

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