

Operationalising Islamic Moderation in Digital Communication: Ethical Pathways to Counter Social Polarisation in Indonesia

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Abstract

Social polarization in Indonesia's digital age is increasingly shaped by the fragmentation of micro-identities and the algorithmic dynamics of social media platforms. However, existing studies tend to emphasize technological or political factors while underexploring the ethical-religious dimensions that can counter such polarization. In particular, the role of moderate Islamic values as a normative and communicative framework for digital interactions remains under-theorized and under-examined empirically. To address this gap, this study investigates how Islamic principles of moderation (wasatiyyah) can be operationalized in digital communication practices to reduce polarization and strengthen social cohesion. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth structured interviews with 18 participants, including Islamic religious leaders, sociologists, and active social media users, selected based on their engagement with online religious and social discourse. These interviews were complemented by a systematic content analysis of 120 social media posts and discussions across major platforms, which were analyzed using thematic coding to identify patterns of ethical expression, interaction styles, and conflict framing. The findings demonstrate three analytical contributions. First, the digital articulation of Islamic values such as ukhuwah (social solidarity), adab (ethical behavior), and tawasuth (politeness) serves as a counter-discursive mechanism that disrupts polarizing narratives by reframing disagreements in moral and relational terms, rather than identity-based antagonisms. Second, these values shape inclusive communication practices such as dialogical engagement, self-restraint in judgment, and recognition of differences that reduce symbolic exclusion and soften ideological boundaries in online interactions. Third, the integration of moderate Islamic ethics with digital modernity produces a form of moral resilience that enhances social cohesion by balancing religious norms with the participatory logic of digital media.

Keywords

Islamic Values, Digital Modernity, Social Polarization, Cohesion, Inclusivity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The development of the digital era has brought significant changes to the patterns of social interaction in Indonesian society, particularly through social media, which accelerates the flow of information and forms the fragmentation of social identities. This phenomenon contributes to



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increased social polarization, where individuals and groups are increasingly trapped in echo chambers that reinforce aligned views and marginalize divergent perspectives (Saveski et al. 2022). In the context of Indonesia, which is religiously, ethnically and culturally plural, these conditions not only hinder social cohesion, but also trigger inter-group tensions that are increasingly difficult to manage (Alvarez-Galvez, Cruz, and Troyano 2023). This polarization is exacerbated by the rise of hatred, hoaxes, and the politicization of identity in the digital space, which systematically deepens the social divide (Wakefield 2023; Danaditya, Ng, and Carley 2022).

Several previous studies have examined polarization primarily from the perspectives of politics, social psychology, and digital media dynamics. Heltzel and Laurin (Heltzel and Laurin 2020) describe political polarization as a cycle of identity reinforcement that has the potential to reach saturation point, while Lees and Cikara (Lees and Cikara 2021) emphasize the importance of correcting public perceptions of the level of polarization to reduce conflict. Levin, Milner, and Perrings (Levin, Milner, and Perrings 2021) even expanding the analysis of polarization as a multidimensional phenomenon affecting national stability and global cooperation. Despite making important contributions, most of these studies are rooted in Western contexts and focus on political or algorithmic factors, with relatively little attention to the ethical-religious dimension as a source of values in responding to polarization, particularly in the context of non-Western religious societies such as Indonesia.

It is in this context that significant theoretical and empirical gaps emerge. The existing literature has not adequately explained how religious values, particularly Islam, as the majority religion in Indonesia, can function not merely as prescriptive moral norms, but as an ethical-communicative framework that can be operationalized in the digital space. Yet, moderate Islamic principles such as ukhuwah (social solidarity), 'adl (justice), tasamuh (tolerance), and tawasuth (moderation) have the conceptual potential to shape more inclusive and dialogical digital communication practices. The lack of studies linking these values to theories of digital ethics and social cohesion means that the integration of Islam and digital modernity is often understood normatively, rather than analytically.

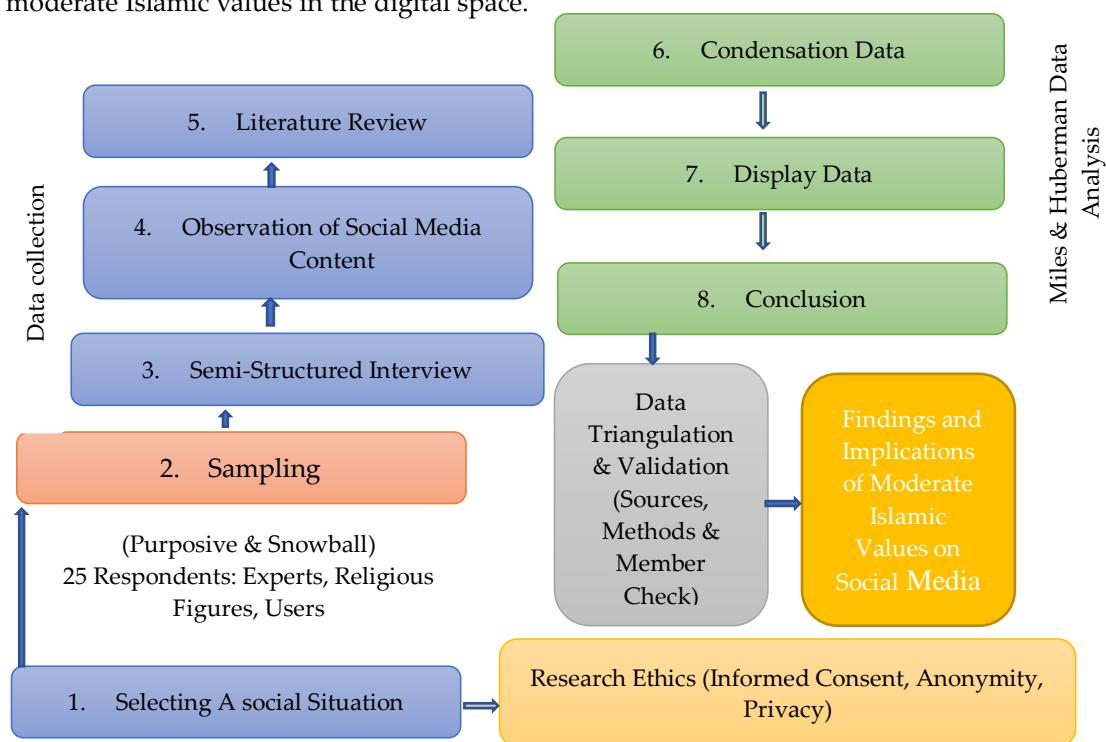
Based on this gap, this study is based on an epistemological framework that combines the perspectives of digital ethics and religious moderation to understand polarization as a moral-communicative issue, not merely a technological or political one. This study aims to analyze how moderate Islamic values can be internalized and practiced in digital interactions as a strategy to reduce polarization and strengthen social cohesion in Indonesia. Thus, this study seeks not only to explain the phenomenon but also to build a conceptual understanding of the role of religion in shaping social resilience in the digital era. Through this approach, the research is expected to contribute to the development of digital polarization studies by including the religious dimension as a relevant analytical variable, as well as enriching the discourse on Islamic moderation in the context of contemporary Indonesian digital society.

2. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method with a case study approach (Huberman and Jhonny 2014, 13) to understand the implications of social media on the phenomenon of polarization in Indonesia. "Cases" in this study are defined as the practices of public interaction and discourse on Indonesian social media that demonstrate patterns of polarization based on religious, social, and political identities within a one-year observation period. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-

depth exploration of the social interactions, experiences, and perspectives of individuals and groups that influence social divisions in the digital space (Sugiyono 2016; Creswell 2018). Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, involving approximately 25 respondents consisting of social psychology experts, religious figures from various organizations, and active social media users aged 18–55 years from various regions. Data were collected through three main techniques: (1) semi-structured interviews, which were recorded and transcribed to obtain participants' views on polarization and the value of moderation; (2) observation of social media content, by analyzing approximately 200–300 posts from platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok over a one-year period; and (3) a literature review of literature and digital documents relevant to moderate Islamic values (*tasamuh*, *tawasut*, and *inclusivity*).

This study adhered to research ethics by obtaining informed consent from participants, maintaining anonymity, and protecting personal data. Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman model, which includes three stages: data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The analysis process was conducted through thematic coding (Miles and Huberman, A 1994, 23). The study included open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify key themes such as polarization narratives, sectarian framing, and moderate Islamic values on social media. Data validity was strengthened through triangulation of sources and methods, member checking, and researcher reflection. With this approach, the study is expected to comprehensively describe the dynamics of polarization and the potential for internalization of moderate Islamic values in the digital space.



3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

Table 1. The Implications of Social Media on Polarization in Indonesia

No.	Main Theme	Description of Findings	Data source	Implications for Social Polarization
1.	Narratives of Political Polarization on Social Media	Highly polarizing content was found, especially in the lead-up to elections; users tended to form exclusive groups with narratives that attacked each other.	Twitter, Facebook, TikTok content observation (2023–2024)	Increasing digital segregation and reinforcing group bias.
2.	The Role of Religious Figures in the Digital Space	Some religious figures use social media for moderate preaching, but others unknowingly reinforce intolerant narratives.	Interviews with figures from various mass organizations and observations of public accounts.	Religious figures have a major influence in shaping digital public opinion.
3.	User Emotional Response	Users experience “collective emotions” as a result of exposure to provocative content, which reduces empathy for groups with differing views.	Interviews with active social media users.	Negative emotions accelerate the process of social polarization.
4.	Religious Moderation in the Digital World	Moderate Islamic values such as <i>Tasamuh</i> , <i>Tawasut</i> , and <i>Ta'adut</i> have emerged in digital campaigns by youth communities and certain religious institutions.	Literature review and analysis of moderation campaign uploads	Has the potential to be a counter-narrative to extreme polarization.
5.	Media Framing and Algorithms	Social media algorithms amplify content that generates high engagement, including controversial content.	Digital content analysis & communication expert interviews	Pushing users into an “echo chamber” and narrowing the dialogue space.
6.	Digital Counter-Narrative Strategy	Digital literacy efforts based on Islamic boarding schools and moderate Islamic communities are starting to emerge, but their reach is still limited.	Interviews with digital experts and activists	There is great potential to expand the reach of religious moderation if facilitated by public policy.
7.	Internalization of Moderate Islamic Values	Researchers found indications of the integration of <i>tasamuh</i> , <i>tawasut</i> , and <i>inclusiveness</i> values in several educational content and inter-community dialogues.	Literature review and observation of YouTube & Instagram platforms	It can be a foundation for building digital peace and religious literacy across groups.

DISCUSSION

Islamic Values as a Foundation for Strengthening Social Cohesion

Research findings indicate that moderate Islamic values, particularly ukhuwah Islamiyah (Islamic brotherhood), ukhuwah basyariyah (community brotherhood), and adab (civilized manners), do not operate as static moral principles, but rather as ethical-communicative frameworks that are contextually negotiated in everyday digital practices. Analysis of interviews and social media content indicates that these values influence how individuals interpret differences, respond to conflict, and build cross-identity relationships in polarized online spaces.

First, Islamic brotherhood functions primarily as a mechanism for reframing the internal identity of Muslims amidst digital fragmentation. Rather than reinforcing group exclusivity, some respondents interpret Islamic brotherhood as an ethical foundation for managing theological and political differences among Muslims. One religious figure explained that differences in school of thought or political affiliation are *"no longer positioned as a threat to faith, but rather as a test of maturity in attitude."* (Wawancara, Tokoh Agama A, 2024). These findings suggest that Islamic brotherhood works as a form of intra-group moderation that suppresses the escalation of internal conflict, in line with social identity theory which emphasizes the importance of redefining group boundaries to reduce antagonism (Bensaid and Machouche 2019; Al-Zamzami 2022; Halomoan, Moeis, and Yakubu 2023). In the digital context, this value appears to reduce the tendency for othering among Muslim groups themselves, which often becomes a gateway to broader polarization.

Second, ukhuwah basyariyah emerged as the most significant value in bridging differences across religions and social identities. Unlike ukhuwah Islamiyah, which operates at the internal group level, ukhuwah basyariyah operates as a universal moral logic that shifts the orientation of interactions from particular identities to shared humanity. Several respondents described reflective changes in their digital behavior, such as consciously avoiding or rejecting provocative content that denigrates other groups. Respondent M's statement that *"all humans have equal dignity before God"* reflects the internalization of this value as a moral filter in the consumption and production of digital content. Theoretically, these findings can be read through the lens of digital ethics and communicative rationality, where ukhuwah basyariyah serves as a normative basis for cross-identity dialogue and recognition of others as equal moral subjects (Grine et al. 2013; Palawa et al. 2025; Simamora and Farid 2024). Thus, this value not only encourages passive tolerance, but also shapes selective and reflective practices in interacting in digital spaces. Third, the value of adab (civility) occupies a central position as a regulatory mechanism for communication behavior on social media. Unlike the two values of ukhuwah (brotherhood), which focus on relational orientation, adab operates at the practical level, regulating how individuals speak, respond, and restrain themselves. Thematic analysis shows that respondents understand adab as a set of concrete principles, such as caution in disseminating information, emotional control, and rejection of hate speech and hoaxes. In this context, adab functions as an "ethical brake" against the algorithmic logic of social media, which tends to amplify provocative and emotional content. These findings broaden the discussion on digital ethics by demonstrating that religious values can act as a source of self-discipline (self-regulation) that balances expressive impulses in online spaces (Syahrudin and Roni 2025; Fahrudin and Khoirul Malik 2025).

Synthetically, these three values do not operate in isolation, but rather complement each other, forming a multi-layered ethical structure. Ukuhuhah Islamiyah strengthens internal cohesion, ukhuwah basyariyah opens up a space for universal inclusivity, and adab ensures the continuation of civilized and non-destructive interactions. The dynamic interaction of these three demonstrates that

Islamic values function as a contextual mechanism in reducing polarization—not by eliminating differences, but by managing them through moral orientation, self-reflection, and social responsibility.

Compared with previous studies that emphasize digital moderation from a secular or psychological perspective, this finding offers a contextual contribution by demonstrating how Islamic values can be operationalized in digital communication practices in multireligious societies. Thus, this study confirms that the integration of Islamic values in the digital space is not merely a normative ideal, but rather an actively negotiated social process with the potential to strengthen social cohesion amidst the polarization of the digital era.

Digital Modernity and Social Polarization in the Indonesian Context

Modernity is a structural context that shapes contemporary patterns of social polarization, but its influence does not operate linearly or uniformly. The findings of this study indicate that in the Indonesian context, modernity—particularly through digitalization, rationalization, and globalization—creates an ambivalent space that simultaneously expands opportunities for social interaction and deepens identity fragmentation. The polarization that emerges in the digital space cannot be understood solely as a result of technology, but rather as the result of the interaction between changing values, political-economic dynamics, and the communication practices of digital society.

Empirically, interviews with social media users and religious figures show that digital modernity accelerates the formation of fluid yet exclusive micro-identities. Social media algorithms reinforce the instrumental rationality of efficiency, visibility, and rapid affiliation, encouraging individuals to group together based on shared political, religious, or ideological views. In this situation, polarization is reflected not only in differences in attitudes but also in how individuals interpret the "other" as a symbolic threat. This finding aligns with Dalton's, but in the Indonesian context, such polarization is intertwined with identity politics based on religion and morality, making its impact more sensitive to social cohesion (Dalton 2006).

Modernity also brings economic and structural dimensions that reinforce polarization. Several respondents linked the rise in social tensions in the digital space to economic inequality, job insecurity, and symbolic competition in the post-industrial era. This situation reinforces the argument that polarization is not isolated but rooted in broader social transformations (Crankshaw and Borel-Saladin 2014). However, unlike the Western context which often emphasizes deindustrialization, in Indonesia digital polarization is more mediated by rapid urbanization, the digital access gap, and the politicization of religion in online public spaces.

The relationship between modernity and polarization in this study is not intended as a causal measurement, but rather as a conceptual representation that shows how aspects of modernity rationalization, globalization, individualism, and technology interact and produce a dual effect. Empirical data shows that rationality and globalization do open access to information and expand social networks, but without a strong ethical framework, they also accelerate the spread of polaristic narratives and symbolic conflict. In other words, modernity functions as an amplifier, not the sole cause of polarization. Furthermore, the findings of this study demonstrate that digital modernity is driving a shift in values from communal to excessive individual expression. Several informants expressed that social media encourages "*freedom without ethical restraint*," where self-expression often overrides social responsibility. This strengthens the argument that modern individualism, when unbalanced by collective values, contributes to the erosion of social trust and increased online conflict

(Praet et al. 2022). However, this study also found that modernity is not always destructive; it provides space for the articulation of alternative values, including moderate Islamic values that seek to bridge differences.

It is in this context that the integration of moderate Islamic values becomes analytically significant. Research findings indicate that the values of brotherhood, adab, and tawasuth function as corrective mechanisms against the negative impacts of digital modernity. These values do not reject modernity, but rather negotiate it, combining digital rationality with relational ethics. This suggests that polarization is not an inevitable consequence of modernity, but rather a phenomenon that is highly dependent on the value frameworks that guide social practices in the digital space. Thus, this discussion emphasizes that modernity in the Indonesian context must be understood as a dialectical process: it creates both progress and social vulnerability. Polarization arises when technological and value transformations outpace society's ability to build a collective ethical framework. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that strengthening social cohesion in the modern era is not sufficient through technology regulation or digital literacy alone, but requires the integration of moral values, in this case moderate Islamic values, as a source of public ethics in a polarized digital space.

Integrating Islamic Values and Modernity: An Ethical Negotiation Process in the Indonesian Digital Context

The findings of this study indicate that the integration of Islamic values and modernity does not occur as a linear or harmonious process, but rather as a contextual and multi-layered practice of ethical negotiation. Modernity is understood by social actors, particularly religious figures, educators, and social media users, not as something to be rejected, but as a social reality that needs to be addressed through the framework of Islamic values (Taufik 2020). This perspective is in line with the view that the contemporary Islamic revival represents more of an attempt to reorient modernity through Islamic principles, rather than a total rejection of modern social change (Husna and Thohir 2020).

In education, the integration of Islamic values and modernity is reflected in efforts to reconcile religious knowledge with modern science. Several informants believe that the dichotomy between religious education and general education is no longer relevant in the digital age, as both play an important role in shaping students' critical thinking and moral character. However, this integration occurs selectively and is not without tension, particularly when values of efficiency, global standardization, and academic competition clash with the goals of Islamic education, which emphasize the formation of morals and social responsibility. This finding supports Haque et al.'s argument that the integration of Islamic education and science is an epistemological process that requires value alignment, not simply a merging of curricula (Haque et al. 2016).

At the level of subjectivity and mental health, this study found that modernity is also negotiated through the adaptation of psychological approaches aligned with Islamic beliefs. Several respondents emphasized the importance of a psychological approach that focuses not only on cognitive and behavioral aspects but also recognizes the spiritual dimension as a source of meaning and resilience. This aligns with efforts to develop Islamic psychology, adapting Western models to make them relevant to the Muslim religious context (Rambe et al. 2023). These findings suggest that the integration of Islam and modernity at the individual level takes place through a process of value selection that gives religious legitimacy to certain modern practices.

In the economic realm, this integration is evident in the growing interest in Islamic economic practices as a response to the ethical crisis in the modern economic system. Some informants view Islamic economics as a moral alternative to exploitative economic practices, although in its digital practice, this integration is often pragmatic and symbolic. This indicates a tension between normative Islamic ideals such as justice and social welfare and the logic of the modern market, which is oriented towards efficiency and profit. These findings reinforce the critique that the integration of Islam and modernity in the economic sphere requires ongoing ethical reflection to avoid becoming trapped in merely symbolic formalization (Abdul-Jabbar and Makki 2024).

Overall, this research demonstrates that the integration of Islamic values and modernity in the Indonesian context occurs through mechanisms of adaptation, negotiation, and hybridization of values. This process is not uniform but is influenced by the social position, digital experience, and religious orientation of the actors involved. These findings enrich the study of modernity from an Islamic perspective by demonstrating that religion does not exist outside of modernity but rather interacts dynamically within it as a source of moral critique, an ethical support, and a space for value compromise (Khussainova et al. 2024). Thus, the integration of Islamic values and modernity revealed in this study is not merely a normative claim or theoretical reflection, but a social practice rooted in the empirical experiences of Muslim actors in Indonesia. This approach asserts that social resilience and moral cohesion in the digital age depend heavily on society's ability to reformulate the relationship between faith, technology, and modern life in a reflective and contextual manner.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examines social polarization in Indonesia's digital environment by analyzing how moderate Islamic values function within contemporary online interactions. Rather than treating Islamic ethics as universally effective solutions, the findings show that values such as ukhuwah Islamiyah, ukhuwah basyariyah, and adab operate as context-dependent moral resources that shape how individuals interpret difference, manage disagreement, and engage with opposing viewpoints in digital spaces. Their effectiveness in mitigating polarization depends on social actors, interpretive authority, and platform dynamics, rather than on moral ideals alone. Theoretically, this research contributes to studies on digital polarization and social cohesion by integrating Islamic ethical reasoning into discussions of digital ethics and identity formation. It extends predominantly Western-centered polarization literature by demonstrating how religious moral frameworks interact with algorithm-driven communication, micro-identities, and contested narratives in a non-Western, Muslim-majority context. Importantly, the study shows that Islamic values are not positioned in opposition to modernity but are selectively adapted and negotiated within it, producing hybrid ethical practices in online discourse. Empirically, the findings reveal variations in how participants understand and apply Islamic values, highlighting tensions between ethical aspirations and the realities of political competition, emotional expression, and symbolic power in social media. This variation underscores that Islamic ethics in digital spaces are dynamic and contested, rather than static or uniformly applied.

From a practical perspective, the study suggests that addressing digital polarization in Indonesia requires more than technical regulation or content moderation. Ethical digital literacy initiatives grounded in culturally resonant moral frameworks may foster more reflective and dialogical engagement. However, such efforts must remain sensitive to plural interpretations of Islamic values and avoid instrumentalizing religion as a simplified solution to structurally complex

social problems. This study is limited by its qualitative scope and case study design, which restrict broader generalization. Future research could employ comparative or mixed-method approaches and further explore platform-specific mechanisms shaping ethical engagement. Overall, this research offers a nuanced understanding of how moderate Islamic values function as adaptable ethical resources in navigating polarization within Indonesia's digital modernity.

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