



Social Media and Religious Moderation: Countering Radicalism Among University Students

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed the way students access religious information and engage in public discourse, creating both opportunities and challenges in addressing digital radicalism. In this context, promoting religious moderation has become an important strategy for fostering tolerance and balanced perspectives among young people. However, empirical studies examining how social media influences students' attitudes toward religious moderation remain limited. This study aims to analyze the role of social media in shaping and strengthening religious moderation among university students. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research involved university students who actively use social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok. Data were collected through semi-structured online interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that social media plays a dual role: it facilitates exposure to diverse viewpoints that encourage openness, tolerance, and critical reflection, while simultaneously presenting challenges through the rapid circulation of provocative or extreme narratives. Students responded to these dynamics by developing digital literacy and critical filtering strategies to maintain balanced perspectives. This study contributes to the discourse on digital religion and education by highlighting how social media can function as a strategic platform for promoting religious moderation among university students in the digital era.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology and social media has changed the way people interact, access information, and shape public opinion, including among students. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube are no longer simply entertainment media, but also serve as spaces for the exchange of complex ideas and ideological narratives. On the one hand, social media makes it easy to obtain information. Through social media, users can communicate with each other, share, and exchange information in various forms, such as text, images, video, or audio ¹. However, on the other hand, One factor suspected of contributing to the rise of radicalism in Indonesia is religious education, where some materials are suspected of containing radical content ². In today's digital era, social media plays a significant role in shaping the mindsets and attitudes of society, including students, towards the values of religious moderation. Intelligent and moderate use of social media can foster dialogue, inclusive education, and strengthen tolerance and diversity, but it also risks spreading misinformation and reinforcing divisions ³.

In Indonesia, the discourse on religious moderation has gained increasing attention in response to the emergence of radical narratives that circulate widely in digital spaces. The accessibility and speed of information distribution through social media create opportunities for the spread of both constructive and destructive ideological content. While social media can facilitate dialogue, knowledge sharing, and inclusive engagement, it can also become a medium for misinformation, hate speech, and radical propaganda if not accompanied by adequate digital literacy. Previous studies have indicated that exposure to radical narratives in online environments may influence young people's perceptions and attitudes toward religious diversity and social coexistence.

Several scholars have examined the relationship between social media and radicalism, highlighting how digital platforms may amplify extremist narratives or ideological polarization among young users. Other studies have explored the influence of social media on students' social behavior, identity formation, and political engagement. However, most of these studies primarily focus on the negative impacts of social media, particularly in relation to the spread of radicalism, intolerance, and misinformation. Comparatively fewer studies investigate how social media can be constructively utilized to promote religious moderation, critical thinking, and tolerance among university students. This imbalance indicates a research gap in the current academic discourse, particularly regarding the positive role of digital platforms in fostering moderate and inclusive perspectives.

Several previous studies have examined radicalism in the digital era and the influence of social media on students' social lives. However, there are still limited studies specifically linking student social media use to the process of developing constructive moderation in thinking. Most studies tend to emphasize the negative impact of social media in strengthening radicalism or intolerance, while relatively few studies examining the positive use of social media to strengthen students' moderation in thinking. Understanding content strategies and digital interaction patterns that can foster critical

¹ Hadiqoh Asmuni and Vaesol Wahyu Eka Irawan, "The Role of Social Media in Shaping Religious Perceptions Among the Young Generation," *MOMENTUM: Journal of Social and Religious Studies* 14, no. 1 (2025): 90–99, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.58472/momentum.v14i1.201>.

² Agustin Sri Ningsih and Jumiarti Hurairah, "The Role of Islamic Education in Countering Radicalism Through Religious Moderation," *Al-Abshor: Journal of Islamic Religious Education* 1, no. 3 (2024): 310–21, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.71242/ve8f7345>.

³ (Rahmawanti, 2024)

and tolerant attitudes is crucial, given that students play a strategic role as agents of social change in building a culture of moderation on campus. These limitations are even more relevant given the still-low understanding and application of religious moderation in social media use, which leaves students vulnerable to the spread of radical ideologies and hoaxes ⁴.

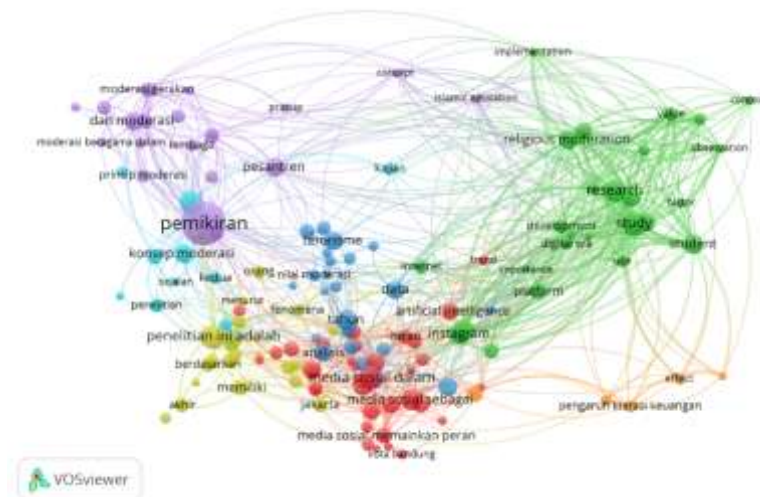


Figure 1. VOSviewer

Bibliometric mapping using VOSviewer further illustrates that existing research on radicalism and social media tends to concentrate on themes such as online extremism, digital propaganda, and ideological polarization. Meanwhile, studies that specifically examine the relationship between social media use and the development of religious moderation among students remain relatively limited. This finding highlights the need for further investigation into how digital interaction patterns, content strategies, and communication dynamics on social media can contribute to strengthening moderate attitudes in academic communities. By utilizing digital platforms, the message of moderation can be conveyed more widely and effectively⁵.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the role of social media in shaping and strengthening religious moderation among university students in the era of digital radicalism. Specifically, the research focuses on how digital interactions, content exposure, and communication dynamics on social media contribute to the development of tolerant, inclusive, and critical attitudes among students. In addition, the study also examines the challenges and opportunities associated with utilizing social media as a strategic platform to prevent the spread of radical ideologies in university environments. By addressing these issues, the study contributes to the broader discourse on digital media, religious moderation, and youth engagement in the contemporary information society.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the role of social media in shaping religious moderation among university students in the era of digital radicalism. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth understanding of students' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations related to their social media interactions and the ways these interactions influence their attitudes toward moderation and radical narratives in digital spaces. The participants in this study were university students who actively use social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, with the criteria that participants were active social media users, regularly accessed religious or socio-

⁴ (Rahmawati. 2023)

⁵ (Setia and Haq, 2023)

political content online, and were willing to share their experiences regarding digital interactions. A total of 10 students participated as informants in this study. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached, indicated by the repetition of similar responses and the absence of new significant information.

Data were collected through semi-structured online interviews conducted via the WhatsApp application. Interviews were carried out using text messages and voice notes depending on the preference of each participant. WhatsApp was selected because it is widely used among students and allows flexible communication regardless of time and location. The interview guide included questions related to students' patterns of social media use, their exposure to various religious narratives online, and their perceptions of moderation and radicalism in digital interactions. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis process involved several stages. First, all interview data, including text conversations and voice recordings, were transcribed and organized into a structured dataset. Second, the researchers conducted initial coding to identify meaningful statements related to students' experiences of social media use and religious moderation. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader categories to identify recurring themes. Fourth, the themes were interpreted to understand patterns of how social media contributes to shaping moderate attitudes and critical thinking among students. Finally, the findings were synthesized to produce an analytical explanation aligned with the research objectives.

To ensure data credibility and validity, this study applied several validation strategies. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing responses among different participants to identify consistent patterns of information. In addition, member checking was carried out by reconfirming selected interview results with participants to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected their perspectives. Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were carefully maintained. Participation was voluntary, participants' identities were kept confidential, and all data were used solely for academic purposes.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Social Media Use Among Students

Interview results show that social media has become an important part of students' lives. The most frequently used platforms are WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok. Social media is used for communication, entertainment, information seeking, and to support academic and non-academic activities. One student said: *"Instagram and TikTok."* (Student 1). Another student explained social media usage in more detail: *"The social media I often use is WhatsApp, if not WhatsApp, it's Instagram, those are the two applications I use most often: WhatsApp and Instagram."* (Student 2). In addition, social media is also used for various other needs: *"For various needs, such as seeking entertainment, obtaining education, and keeping up with the latest information. However, what I do most often when using social media is as a means of entertainment, such as scrolling through content that appears on the homepage. In addition, I also use social media to search for information that can support and become material for doing college assignments."* (Student 4).

The Influence of Social Media on Students' Ways of Thinking and Behaving

Students realize that social media has an influence on the way they think and behave. This influence can be positive or negative, depending on how students filter and respond to the information they receive. One student said: *"In my opinion, it has an influence, because from social media we often see*

many points of view... for example, negative content can make us follow bad things, but if we are wise, it actually broadens our insight." (Student 1). Another student added: "Social media does have an influence on thinking or behaving, making it easier but it can also make students lazy to think." (Student 2).

Social Media and Openness to Differences

Based on interviews, students admitted to having found social media content that made them more open and able to appreciate differences, whether differences in views, religion, or social background. One student shared his experience: "Once... so the story was that I was scrolling through IG and found content that contained differences in views, including religious matters. Then the content was explained in a way that made us calm, without cornering certain parties. So from there I felt more open, it turns out that differences in opinion are normal and don't always have to be a problem. In fact, from that we can learn to respect each other." (Student 1). Another student said: "The differences that make me more open, for example, is one where a circle of friends who have their main differences can respect each other and can remind each other. For example, the rules or prohibitions in their religion, namely they remind each other of their obligations, for example, and friendship is not limited by differences in religion or ethnicity." (Student 5)

Students' Understanding of Religious Moderation

Students define religious moderation as a middle-of-the-road attitude, not extreme, and still respecting differences in belief. One student said: "When I hear religious moderation, what immediately comes to mind is a middle-of-the-road attitude. I mean, practicing religion while adhering to one's beliefs, but also being able to respect differences and not forcing one's views on others." (Student 1). Another student added: "When I hear the word religious moderation, what comes to mind is how we act in balance in religion. Our attitude in respecting differences and being tolerant towards other religions." (Student 5).

The Importance of a Moderate Attitude for Students

Students believe that a moderate attitude is very important, especially in a campus environment with diverse backgrounds. One student stated: "It is very important, because it fosters character and respects differences." (Student 3). Another student said: "In my opinion, a moderate attitude is very important for students because in the lecture process, students interact with many people who have different backgrounds and ways of thinking. With a moderate attitude, students can respond to these differences more wisely and are not easily provoked by emotions, especially when discussing in class or working in groups. In addition, a moderate attitude helps students to be open and respect the opinions of others, thus creating a comfortable, conducive lecture atmosphere and supporting the smooth learning process on campus." (Student 4).

Social Media Content That Reflects a Moderate and Tolerant Attitude

Students admitted to encountering social media content that reflected a moderate and tolerant attitude, especially content delivered in a calm and non-judgmental manner. One student explained: "Yes. Of course, I often encounter content on social media that reflects a moderate or tolerant attitude, for example, content about respecting religious differences, friendships that do not discriminate between religions. So, they are friends with anyone without differentiating religion, that is one example of a moderate attitude in religion." (Student 5).

Students' Views on the Challenges of Moderation on Social Media

A fourth student stated that the main challenge in maintaining moderation on social media comes from the rapid flow of information and the abundance of provocative content that easily provokes emotions. This student believes that without awareness and self-control, students can easily get caught up in unproductive debates. The student explained :

"In my opinion, the biggest challenge for students in adopting a moderate attitude when using social media is the large number of differing opinions and the rapid spread of information. Provocative or extreme content often

appears, making it easy for students to get carried away by emotions or get caught up in arguments without thinking. Another significant challenge is maintaining consistency in their moderation, as this requires awareness and self-control every time they interact on social media. To address this, students need to carefully sort information, think before responding, and practice self-restraint to remain calm, rational, and wise, even when faced with differing opinions or provocative content.” (Student 4).

In addition, this student emphasized the importance of being able to sort information and restrain oneself in order to remain calm and rational when facing differences of opinion in the digital space.

Efforts to Promote Social Media as a Space for Moderation

Students believe that strengthening moderation of thought can begin with self-awareness on social media. Being selective in choosing content, not easily spreading information without clear veracity, and avoiding unconstructive debate are considered important initial steps. Furthermore, students believe that disseminating positive and educational content that emphasizes the values of tolerance and moderation can help create a healthier digital space. Social media is not only a source of challenges but can also be utilized as a means to strengthen moderation of thought among students.

Discussion

Based on research findings, social media occupies a very close position in students' lives and plays a role in shaping their ways of thinking, behaving, and interpreting differences within a diverse community. The use of social media makes the digital space a new arena for shaping students' social and religious perspectives. According to⁶ Many students use social media as a means of expressing their creativity through content such as writing, images, music, and videos. Social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram have become important platforms for students to express creative ideas, share information, and build digital portfolios. Social ⁷media has the power to disseminate various information and opinions on a large scale and in a short time, making it a key tool in shaping public opinion.

Students' understanding suggests that social media has a two-way influence. On the one hand, social media opens access to diverse perspectives, which can broaden horizons and foster openness. Students become more accustomed to viewing differences as normal and not necessarily emotionally charged. However, on the other hand, students also realized that without the ability to filter information, social media can actually shape reactive, emotional mindsets, and be easily influenced by negative content. This finding aligns with research ⁸showing that social media significantly influences students' religious moderation, both in broadening their perspectives on tolerance and potentially fostering reactive attitudes if not accompanied by adequate digital literacy skills. This is proven by the safe and peaceful conditions of students and the absence of any indications that students are affected by the influence of radicalism ⁹.

Students' experiences in encountering content that discusses differences in a calm and impartial manner also strengthens their open and tolerant attitudes. This type of content helps them realize that differences, including in beliefs and outlooks, are a natural part of social life. Therefore, it is very It is

⁶ Nasution (2025)

⁷ Hasan (2024)

⁸ Baedowi (2025)

⁹ (Ashoumi and Husna, 2023)

important for students to not only accept the information they encounter on social media, but also to seek out reliable sources and encourage constructive discussions.¹⁰

Students' understanding of religious moderation also developed from their experiences interacting in digital spaces. Moderation is understood as an attitude of being in the middle, adhering to personal beliefs, but not imposing views on others. Students indicated that moderation actually helped them live a more peaceful campus life and be open to dialogue. An understanding of religious moderation is important, with students understanding that religion teaches the values of tolerance, inclusivity, dialogue, justice, and nationalism¹¹. A rational understanding of theology helps students filter out distorted information, hoaxes, or provocations of faith that often contain extremist or radical teachings¹².

Students stated that a moderate attitude is seen as crucial because the campus environment is a meeting place for diverse backgrounds, thoughts, and values. A moderate attitude helps students manage differences more calmly, especially in academic discussions and social interactions. Students recognize that without this attitude, differences of opinion can easily escalate into conflict, both in the real world and on social media.¹³ They stated that providing students with a comprehensive understanding of the concept of religious moderation encourages an inclusive attitude toward religious and cultural differences, increases tolerance of diversity, and prevents exposure to radical ideologies or religious extremism.

Students recognize that the biggest challenge in adopting a moderate attitude on social media is the rapid spread of information and the multitude of conflicting opinions. This often triggers emotional reactions and encourages students to engage in unproductive debates. Research shows that students are striving to develop a selective attitude, such as not immediately sharing information, avoiding provocative content, and seeking to understand the context before responding to an issue. These efforts reflect a growing critical awareness in social media. According to¹⁴ The challenges of religious moderation include: (1) The role of social media; (2) The Tolerance Crisis; (3) Individualism; (4) Diverse information; and (5) Shifts in religious power. Religious moderation in the digital era presents challenges and opportunities that need to be considered¹⁵. However, the challenges faced by students in the digital world indicate the need for deeper digital literacy, especially in responding to religious content¹⁶. This is in line with¹⁷ the assertion that students can play an active role in building harmony on social media through religious moderation campaign strategies, such as spreading educational, dialogical content, and rejecting provocative narratives.

This discussion also emphasized that social media has great potential as a platform for strengthening moderation of thought when utilized positively. Students saw that social media can be a means of education, reflection, and healthy dialogue when filled with content relevant to their lives. With a more intimate, lighthearted, and contextual approach, the values of tolerance and moderation are more easily accepted and practiced by students.¹⁸ said the presence of social media is unavoidable, and must even be accepted as a new reality that requires an intelligent and strategic response. The

¹⁰ (Lomboc, Ramadhan and Ramajati 2024)

¹¹ (Patih, 2023)

¹² (AR, Fathur Rohman. 2025)

¹³ Kurniati (2025)

¹⁴ (Paujiah, 2024)

¹⁵ (Mubarok and Sunarto 2024)

¹⁶ (Yunita, Arifin, and Firdausi 2024)

¹⁷ Anwar (2024)

¹⁸ Hayyi (2025)

increasing development. With the use of mass media technology in conveying information and entertainment, humans will never be able to escape the influence of mass media. Every day, the human brain is always filled with information conveyed.¹⁹

This discussion demonstrates that moderating student thinking in the era of digital radicalism is inseparable from the role of social media as a space for interaction and meaning-making. Radicalism can emerge anywhere, at any time, and can influence anyone regardless of race, religion, or social status²⁰. Social media is not merely a source of threat, but also a strategic opportunity to foster moderate, tolerant, and critical thinking among students. Therefore, strengthening awareness, digital literacy, and reflective attitudes are key to ensuring social media functions as a space that supports the creation of moderate thinking among students.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on this research, social media has become a close and tangible part of students' lives, influencing how they think, behave, and interpret differences amidst diversity. Platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok serve not only as entertainment venues but also as a means of communication, information seeking, and support for academic and non-academic activities. Students' experiences demonstrate that social media can broaden their horizons, provide new perspectives, and encourage them to be more open and tolerant of differences. Content that emphasizes the value of religious moderation helps students recognize that differences are normal and can serve as a medium for social learning. Understanding religious moderation as a balanced attitude, respecting differences, and not imposing personal views is key to building harmonious interactions in a heterogeneous campus environment. Thus, social media is seen as a potential space for fostering dialogue, healthy social interactions, and critical thinking in the era of digital radicalism.

On the other hand, this study also highlights the challenges in utilizing social media positively. The rapid flow of information, provocative content, and conflicting opinions require students to be more selective, reflective, and critical. The ability to sort information, control emotional reactions, and choose constructive content is crucial for messages of moderation to be accepted and implemented. Social media, while presenting risks, also offers strategic opportunities for students to cultivate moderation, tolerance, and critical thinking. Positive use of digital platforms can create a vibrant space for education, reflection, and dialogue, where the values of religious moderation can be naturally accepted and applied in everyday life. Digital awareness, critical thinking, and self-reflection are key to ensuring that social media serves not only as a source of information but also as a space for shaping students' moderation in the era of radicalism.

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¹⁹ (Arsana, 2023)

²⁰ (Bando, 2025)

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