The Grey Area of Religiosity: How Indonesian Young Muslims Negotiate Their Identity Amidst Extremism, Moderatism, and Popular Culture

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Abstrak

Artikel ini mengeksplorasi dinamika keberagamaan generasi muda Muslim Indonesia di tengah kontestasi ideologis antara ekstremisme dan moderatisme yang terus berlangsung secara dialektis. Artikel ini disusun melalui kajian pustaka terhadap literatur ilmiah, konten digital, dan representasi budaya populer, lalu dianalisis secara kritis-deskriptif. Temuan menunjukkan adanya 'wilayah abu-abu' dalam ekspresi religius anak muda, yang mencerminkan posisi ambivalen, gamang, dan adaptif sebagai bagian dari masa transisi psikososial mereka. Alih-alih berpihak pada kutub ekstrem atau moderat secara mutlak, anak muda justru membentuk ekspresi keberagamaan yang cair, kontekstual, dan sering kali kontradiktif. Budaya populer dan media digital menjadi arena utama dalam proses negosiasi identitas religius mereka, dengan algoritma digital turut membentuk pengalaman spiritual secara sistemik dan kompleks sebagai sebuah kondisi yang dapat dikategorikan sebagai *wicked problem*. Dalam konteks kajian *youth culture*, fenomena ini memperlihatkan pencarian bentuk baru kesalehan yang berbaur dengan nilai-nilai modernitas. Keunikan penelitian ini terletak pada pengenalan konsep "wilayah abu-abu keberagamaan" sebagai kategori analitis baru dalam studi Islam kontemporer serta integrasi budaya populer dan teknologi digital dalam memahami religiositas generasi muda Muslim.

Kata Kunci: Wilayah abu-abu keberagamaan; anak muda muslim; ekstrimisme; moderatism; budaya populer.

Abstract

This article explores the religious dynamics of the Indonesian young Muslim generation amidst the ongoing dialectical ideological contestation between extremism and moderatism. The article is a literature review of scholarly archive, digital content, and popular culture representations, and then critically analysed. The findings suggest a 'grey area' in Indonesian young Muslims'

religious expression; reflecting ambivalent, ambiguous and adaptive performance as part of their psychosocial transition. Instead of totally embracing either the extreme or moderate poles, Indonesian young Muslims construct a fluid, contextualised and often contradictory religiosity. Popular culture and digital media become the main arena in the process of negotiating their religious identity, with digital algorithms helping to systemically shape spiritual experiences as a complex condition that can be categorised as a wicked problem. In the context of youth culture studies, this phenomenon shows the search for new forms of piety that blend with the values of modernity. The uniqueness (novelty) of this research lies in the concept of 'grey areas of religiosity' as a new analytical category in contemporary Islamic studies as well as the integration of popular culture and digital technology in understanding the religiosity of Muslim youth, particularly in Indonesia.

Keywords: grey area of religiosity; ambiguity; young muslims; extremism; moderatism; popular culture.

Introduction

In the scholarly map of contemporary Islamic studies, a new dynamic has recently emerged that shows the tendency of academic research to become more diverse, reflective and cross-disciplinary. This phenomenon is reflected in the number of scholars, including academics from Indonesia, who examine various aspects of recent religious developments. These studies include the emergence of new religious authorities (Kailani, 2019), scholars' views on the concept of the nation-state (Burdah et al., 2019; Hasan et al., 2019), the trend of hijrah among young Muslims (Qomaruzzaman & Busro, 2021; Sunesti et al., 2018; Triana et al., 2021; Widhana, 2019), and the proliferation of religious expression (Fealy & White, 2008), particularly in the digital space (Díez Bosch et al., 2017; Waliyuddin, 2019). In addition, a number of studies have also highlighted the growth of religious social movements (Wiktorowicz, 2012; Yukich & Braunstein, 2014) and the growing interest in Islamic literature among the millennial generation (Hasan et al., 2018). These phenomena mark that religious expressions and discourses are no longer monopolised by formal institutions, but spread through new actors and increasingly wide-reaching digital channels.
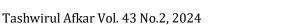
Post-1998 socio-political conditions have also enriched the contestation of religious discourse in Indonesia. Along with the strengthening of democratisation, there is also a large current in socio-religious dynamics that leads to conservatism (Van Bruinessen, 2013), even in some cases escalating

into some forms of radicalism (Azra, 2002; Bruinessen, 2002; Turmudi & Sihbudi, 2005) and religious extremism (Bamualim, 2018; Ikhwan & Kailani, 2021; Kailani & Ikhwan, 2021). However, at the same time, there is also a counter-wave that promotes the values of pluralism, cosmopolitanism and religious moderation. These two poles continue to challenge, negotiate and influence each other in the social and intellectual space of Indonesian society, especially among the younger generation who are strategic actors in the discourse. In the midst of this shift, it is important to question the position of Indonesian young Muslims as agents in between these two major currents (extremism and moderatism).

The results of the PPIM UIN Jakarta survey in October 2017 reinforce the urgency of this study. There are 2,181 respondents from 34 provinces consisting of teachers, students, and university students, 37.71% stated that jihad means war (*qitāl*) (Saputra, 2018). This finding raises concerns about the strengthening of extreme views among the younger generation. However, a deeper reality shows that the flow of extreme religious ideology has not fully dominated. Moderate narratives still have room for representation. This indicates a complex and dynamic push-pull process, which if not seriously examined, has the potential to cause 'fractures' in the religious behaviour of Indonesian young Muslim generation (Fahrurrozi, 2016; Hasan, 2018; Hasan et al., 2018; Lukens-Bull, 2005).

The religious behaviour of young people basically cannot be simplified into an extremist versus moderate dichotomy, because in reality it is strongly influenced by a complex configuration of social factors. The interweaving of influences such as family environment, education, globalisation, digital media, identity politics, and modernisation contribute to forming a pluralistic and multifaceted religiosity. Psychologically, the adolescent developmental phase, which is characterised by identity search, cognitive openness (David & Tony, 2007), anxiety and uncertainty, also shapes their responses to various religious discourses. This complexity makes their religious expressions not always ideological, but rather the result of a process of negotiation, identity formation, and adaptation to the conditions of the times. Therefore, it is important to study this phenomenon in depth, in order to understand not only the direction of young people's religious movements, but also the future potential of the religiousity of Indonesian society at large.

The study of young Muslims and religiosity has become a concern in various socio-religious studies. In general, previous research can be grouped into three main themes. First, the theme of religious authority and changes in Islamic discourse shows that post-Reformation 1998, there was a significant fragmentation of religious authority. Fealy and White and Bruinessen highlight the emergence of new religious authorities, including conservative and radical groups that reshaped the landscape of Islamic discourse in Indonesia (Fealy & White, 2008). Zuhri also asserts that political openness and globalisation have created spaces for contestation of authority (Zuhri, 2022). However, these studies have not specifically examined the position of young people as active subjects in this contestation. A second aspect of young people's religiosity is revealed by studies that emphasize their religious expressions in the digital sphere. Pam Nilan and Carles Feixa put forward the concept of networked society, which explains network-based religiosity (Nilan & Feixa, 2006). Zahara et.al and Zamzamy examine the phenomenon of digital hijrah among Indonesian Muslim women (Zahara et al., 2020; Zamzamy, 2019), while Ayu maps the digitalisation strategy of da'wah from Salafi and moderate groups (Ayu, 2020). Although relevant, these studies focus more on the media and performative aspects without fully linking them to the ideological tensions between extremism and moderatism. Third, a number of studies address the negotiation of identity between piety and modernity among Muslim youth. Parker and Nilan show the idiosyncratic and irreducible character of the religious expressions of Indonesian youth (Parker & Nilan, 2013). Asef Bayat, through the concept of youthfulness, explains how Middle Eastern youth claim their religious space (Bayat, 2010). Sunesti et.al and Misbah examine the practice of 'branding piety' in Indonesia's urban Muslim population (Sunesti et al., 2018). Despite enriching the understanding of religious identity, these studies have not explored the position of Indonesian young Muslims in the tension between two conflicting ideological currents.

Thus, there is a void in the academic literature that fully discusses how Indonesian young Muslims negotiate their religious identity in the midst of two currents of extremism and moderatism. Not many studies have revealed the 'grey areas' in young people's religious behaviour that emerge from the dialectic between the two. This complexity is exacerbated by the presence of new media and its algorithms that form a digital religious ecosystem. This gap

is the main reason for the urgency of this research, as an effort to fill the knowledge gap that has not been adequately explored in the existing literature.

This research aims to fill the void of studies that have not specifically examined the position of Indonesian young Muslims in the midst of the discourse battle between extremism and moderatism in the contemporary religious landscape. Unlike previous studies that focus more on single expressions such as hijrah, salafism, or youth culture in general, this research will describe the dynamics of ideological and cultural negotiations that occur in the younger generation in response to the two opposing currents. Specifically, it will discuss the grey areas in young people's religious behaviour, born out of the reciprocal dialectic between religious conservatism and cosmopolitanism, and how digital mediation and local socio-cultural contexts shape their religious expressions. As such, this research contributes to expanding the understanding of the complexity of young people's religiosity and offers a new perspective on the formation of their religious identity in the digital era and globalisation.

Based on the dynamics of religious discourse contestation between extremism and moderatism, it can be assumed that the religious expressions of Indonesian young Muslims do not fully side with either pole absolutely, but rather tend to form a "grey area" that is the result of social, cognitive and cultural dialectics. The initial hypothesis in this study states that exposure to digital media and global information flows contributes significantly to shaping the ambivalent religious patterns of the younger generation, combining elements of piety with modernity values. In this context, the main variables examined are the influence of digital media algorithms, young people's social experiences (including education, family environment, and socialisation), and value orientations (such as tolerance and exclusivism). As such, this study proposes that the complexity of young people's religious expressions is a product of negotiations between traditional heritage, modernisation and contemporary mediatic structures. This assumption is supported by the studies of Asef Bayat, Pam Nilan, as well as survey data such as that conducted by PPIM UIN Jakarta, which shows a symptom of ambivalence in the religious perceptions of the younger generation (Bayat, 2010; Nilan, 2017b; Saputra, 2018).

This research method uses a qualitative approach (Sugiyono, 2012) through a literature study to examine how the religious expressions of Indonesian young Muslims are formed in the midst of extremism and moderatism. The main focus of the research is on various sources of text and cultural representations that reflect the religious attitudes and behaviour of the younger generation, such as scientific journal articles, books, research reports, and community documentation. This method was chosen because it is suitable for understanding phenomena that are socio-cultural in nature and cannot be measured numerically. Data was collected by reading and analysing in depth various relevant and current literature materials, then examined to find the main themes that illustrate the dynamics of young people's religious attitudes. The results of the reading were critically analysed to capture general trends as well as specific patterns that emerged, especially in describing the grey area between pious values, modernity and popular lifestyles.

Results and Discussion

Cultural Hybridity and Ambiguity in Young People's Identity

The younger generation psychologically experiences a stage of development that Elizabeth B. Hurlock (Hurlock, 2012) describes as a stormy and stressful phase, which in German is referred to as "*sturm und drang*". In this phase they experience various life challenges as well as the search for identity to become an adult. One of the significant processes experienced by young people, in R. Larson's terminology, is the "restructuring of consciousness" (Larson, 1984). They climb a psychological ladder characterised by a transitional process from entropy (a condition of consciousness that has not been neatly organised or is still chaotic) to negentropy (a state of consciousness that has been well arranged) (S. W. Sarwono, 2016). In Gordon Allport's elaboration, there are three special phases in youth: the first, extension of the self (self-expansion); the second, self objectification (the ability to assess itself in a more objective way); the third, unifying philosophy of life (absorbing and integrating a philosophy of life) (W. S. Sarwono, 2010). These three gradual processes in turn help to weave patterns of cognition, viewpoints, and behavioural decisions.

When it comes to young people's attitudes and views, they are often in a position of ambivalence, uncertainty and doubt because they are naturally

psychologically on a transitional bridge. A concrete example of this can be examined in PPIM's findings, where today's young people, especially Gen Z, are "a confused generation". Their religious beliefs and "intolerant opinions" and "radical thoughts" are quite high, but at the same time, their "intolerant actions" and "radical acts" are low (Syafruddin et al., 2018). Such an ambiguous pattern agrees with the existence of a dynamic phase of cognitive opening, although in consistency it still does not appear to be consistent. A number of internal circumstances that cause it, among others, are the tendency of young people's realistic character coupled with the need for security and stability (Dwidienawati & Gandasari, 2018).

Their passion when surveyed regarding religiosity, the results show that they have a realistic view, although when verified, their actions lack aspects of intolerance and radical elements. This suggests that young people do not want to involve themselves outside of a sense of security and tranquillity. The life motivations of young people, in general, are relatively similar, such as working hard, getting a good profession, accumulating money, being able to buy the things they want, and living a happy life (Nilan, 2017a). Moving on from here, if highlighted through a global perspective, young people in the current era at certain moments are indeed surrounded by a sense of uncertainty, anxiety about tomorrow, and various insecurities which make young people's mindsets closer to fulfilling basic needs or survival. Supported by digital technology infrastructure, the tendency of young Indonesians to be more fluid, if communicating to the point, reluctant to bother (representation of instant culture or simplicity) (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), and at the same time, experiencing ambiguity in determining attitudes.

This ambiguity can be found in various expressions of young people ranging from lifestyles, mixed interaction patterns, ways of communication, and expressions as well as their religious opinions. Especially for Gen Z who have become residents of the digital world (netizens), they are seen as having a different personality style from their predecessors. Yasraf Amir Piliang has observed a symptom of being "alone in a crowd" (solitary) in the latest young people. Cyber culture, in Yasraf's eyes, progressively or slowly, contributes to shaping the tendency of narcissism or *egophilia* beyond their love for their society or *sociophilia* (Piliang, 2017b). Perhaps this seemingly pessimistic narrative can be observed in the trend on social media, where many issues of self-love and the like have emerged. Although there are levels that must be

strictly separated between self-love and egophilia, it can be an early predictor of Yasraf's argument.

While a contrasting and different review can be read from Don Tapscott's elaboration. There are at least eight distinctive aspects of the current generation that distinguish them from the baby boomer generation. The first is freedom, the second is customisation, the third is scrutiny, which indicates the disposition of attention to detail so that the current generation is engaged in visual communication design or creative decoration services both online and offline. The fourth one is integrity; the fifth is collaboration which has become prevalent in this digital era, and the sixth is entertainment, which shows that fun is always important to young people. Seventh, speed is reflected in various online transactions, instant culture, and interaction processes that greatly cut time and fold space (with the existence of new media). Lastly, innovation (Tapscott, 2009). Tapscott sees an optimistic side that can be expected in today's young people who are involved in digital spaces and more often play the role of initiators, creators, and are collaborative.

In a similar narrative, Timothy Leary himself articulates that today's generation is more inclined to accept the concept of *kubernetes* and tends to reject the idea of *gubernetes* (Leary, 1994). Young people today are relatively more likely to choose freedom, self-navigation, celebrating the freedom of life, or in a more familiar phrase called "standing on your own feet" (*berdikari*). Meanwhile, the concept of *gubernetes*, which means directing, controlling, managing, structural governance, is not suitable for their lifestyle. This is in line with the phase of self-identity experimentation in young people. They go through a process that opens up the potential for the formation of a dynamic, multiple, albeit unstable self. Palfrey and Gasrey formulate the phenomenon as "multiplicity of self" (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). It is an attempt by young people to develop multiple selves so that they can express themselves according to the different contexts in which they exist.

The series of elaborations on young people are in principle interconnected with the ongoing global constellation. The movement of time since globalisation, the digital world, and the various historical elements that unite societies into a large network in the modern century all contribute to knitting the sociological mosaic in a particular society. Cultural crossover,

multilateral relations between countries, industrial boom, political-economic atmosphere, and international trade all contribute to the risk of mixing and clashing. Assimilation, negotiation, amalgamation, segregation and polarisation are the paradoxical logical consequences of contemporary phenomena.

In the field of socio-cultural science, this is commonly discussed in the domain of multicultural, intercultural, cosmopolitanism studies and cross-civilisation studies. One accentuation point that is often examined today is "cultural fusion" (Thomas, 1995) or also widely called "cultural hybridity". The process, called hybridisation, is an active cultural operation between local and global factors, hegemonic components and sub-alterns, centres and edges, but on the other hand it is also positioned as a process of cultural transactions that reflect how global culture has been assimilated and permeated in certain localities in various areas of the world (Nilan & Feixa, 2006). The process of integration can be observed in various forms, such as music, fashion, lifestyle, architecture, and also in the socio-religious affairs of young people in Indonesia. This, in Maruta Herding's description, is a natural consequence that occurs as a result of mondial intersubjective relations (world wide scale) and reaches various regions (Herding, 2013).

It is not surprising, then, to find expressions of young Muslims in Indonesia that blend the values of piety, local cultural manners, with the lifestyles and consumption patterns of contemporary modern currents. An obvious example can be found in the phenomenon of Muslim women who wear multi-coloured hijab with innovative and fashionable designs (Hidayat, 2012). Such a religious panorama is also the result of the fusion of various elements, from the value of piety in Islam, local culture, and modern contemporary fashion, which then gives birth to a new face that is distinctive so that it requires discernment with different benchmarks and perspectives. So, when observing the tendencies of Indonesian young Muslims today, reinforced by the inevitability of the times called cultural hybridity, the effort to read the phenomenon of "discourse war" between the two opposing poles must also include the connection.

Between Extremism and Moderatism: Pop-Culture as a Meeting Spot

As a common understanding, here the description of extremism is certainly not limited to violent-extremism alone, but also includes other

variants of ideological gradations (spectrum) that lead to acts of violence, one of which is radicalism (Porta & LaFree, 2012). If traced historically, the study of horizontal religious conflicts throughout human civilisation, John R. Hall considers that it has occurred long before entering the current third millennium era. The debate over discourse and ideology of competing cultures and collective physical clashes in the socio-religious landscape has long been an inherent part of the dynamics of the times (Juergensmeyer et al., 2013). So the current phenomenon of extremism that often highlights acts of violence in the name of religion has actually been going on for a long time in history. Nowadays, the complexity is more sophisticated with the vehicle of documentation, news media, cyberspace and various types of media that disseminate a series of events that will have an impact on psychosocial as well as reaping responses from the public.

Reflecting on this, an international discussion on violence was held by the United Nations after the 9/11 tragedy which included many experts from a number of countries (Jacobsen, 2017). The points agreed to be the roots of violence in the forum include poverty, disease or epidemic attacks, lack of hope, illiteracy, social inequality, marginalisation and exclusion, political pressure, violation of basic rights, group disappointment, hunger, cultural rejection, uncertainty of life orientation, and frustration. This explanation shows that the problem of extremism itself is not within the scope of just two or three fields such as social, religious, and educational for example. It is even more complex and intertwined with other multidomains and intricately intertwined.

This complexity demands analytical judgement when observing, for example, suicide bombings, partisan jihadist groups, and prisoners among Indonesian youth. A case study documented in the form of a documentary film entitled *Jihad Selfie* (Ismail, 2016), for example, captures two young Indonesians (Akbar and Wildan) who were moved to join ISIS. An astonishing motive is that some of them joined because they wanted to look masculine by carrying weapons and waging jihad (Samosir, 2016). From this fact, it can be found that in addition to the pull factor, the internal drive (push factor) in young people also contributes greatly to their participation in the extremist group movement. Moreover, it is related to masculine conceptions, narcissistic passions, and almost no ideological aspects. This was the case when the eccentric news reported by VICE media about young Taliban troops

in Afghanistan, the majority of whom were still in their teens to twenties, were photographed having a holiday at Qargha Lake in Kabul (Champion, 2021). They were even caught taking selfies while still carrying weapons, enjoying their leisure time, wearing fashionable clothes, and enjoying the post-Taliban occupation tourist atmosphere of the Afghan government. There is a fun aspect to the coverage, and as young people, fun is a necessity for them.

On the opposite side of the extremist group, Indonesian young Muslims are also encouraged to respond by narrating inclusive, moderate and tolerant religious values. Counter-culture efforts from young people have emerged through many community platforms and communication media in cyberspace. Countering violent extremism initiatives are widespreading like mushroom everywhere, especially after the active role of the press, government, and educational institutions that echo the discourse of religious moderation. In the light of my own thesis research, this kind of community movement represents at least three main triggers: collective consciousness, the imagination of a common enemy (as a result of the hyper-reality that has been thrust upon us), and youth claims (Waliyuddin, 2021). Nationally, there are many communities working in this field, ranging from BNPT's Ambassadors of Peace (*Duta Damai*), Wahid Foundation, PeaceGen, Gerakan Islam Cinta (GIC), Young Interfaith Peacemaker Community (YIPC), Forum for Interfaith Harmony (FKUB), Sekodi or School of Peace, Srikandi Lintas Iman, Jari Lima, Jakatarub, and small communities and circles that pay attention to issues of peace and religious moderation.

From these two poles of 'correspondence' that are at odds with each other, engage in discursive clashes, contradictory concepts of justice, and various other differences, the common point lies in their ability to perceive, consume, and enjoy pop-culture. These two camps, despite their opposing views and attitudes, secretly agree on one thing in common: *fun*. Although *fun* can be very subjective, one of the things that gives them fun is through pop-culture, whether in the fields of music, film, fashion, ways of communication in online media and the like.

Despite arguing over religious understanding, most Indonesian young Muslims from both the extremism and moderatism camps are equally able to enjoy modern music regardless of genre. To mention a concrete illustration,

from the extremist Muslim women's side and the moderate Muslim women's side, although both disagree on the conception and meaning of religious doctrines, they can secretly enjoy Korean dramas and K-Pop music in their respective homes. On the men's side, the two opposing camps are in fact enjoying campursari dangdut music and watching *One Piece* anime together. This portrait, in the most minimal level, suggests that even though they are separated by extremism and moderatism, they are bridged by popular culture that has spread in the community.

Indonesian Young Muslims in the Grey Area of Religiosity: Between Inconsistency and Adaptation

Looking at the current demographic map of Indonesia, it cannot be denied that the younger generation plays a vital role in the formation of social identity and the future direction at national scale. Based on the latest statistics, of Indonesia's total population of 270.20 million, 53.81 per cent are young people. This number includes generation Y or millennials for around 25.87%, and generation Z dominates with 27.94% (BPS, 2021). This means that more than half of Indonesia's population are young people. There are more than a hundred million. Most of them are Muslims, so then young Muslims are a significant group in reading the dynamics of religion and the direction of the nation's social future.

The importance of further examining the religious character of Indonesian young Muslims is not only based on their large numbers, but also on the social and psychological dynamics that accompany them. Changes in behaviour, mindset and religious perspectives in this circle often do not follow rigid and established ideological lines as assumed by many people. Instead of being monolithic, this younger generation shows a tendency towards ambivalence and incongruence between religious opinions, beliefs and actions. This incongruence does not necessarily reflect value inconsistency in a negative way, but can also be interpreted as a form of adaptation to the rapidly changing and complex social environment.

In social reality, Indonesian young Muslims now live in a religious atmosphere that is not singular. They grow up in a trajectory of attraction between the discourses of extremism and moderatism, traditionalism and modernism, even between narcissistic tendencies and altruism. But interestingly, in the midst of the tension between the poles of the discourse,

a new space of contestation and negotiation emerges that can be called "a grey area". This is not just a transition zone, but a space where two extremes can meet without producing a sharp clash. In this context, popular culture is one of the main channels that allows this meeting to occur naturally and peacefully.

Popular culture plays a major role as an arena for self-actualisation for today's Muslim youth. In the midst of the swift flow of information and the flood of discourse from various digital channels, they are not only passive consumers, but also active agents in shaping new meanings of their religiosity. They become part of a networked society that lives in a digitally connected social atmosphere. In this context, Jean Baudrillard uses the term "implosion", which describes a situation when humans no longer physically expand the world, but instead experience an explosion of information that merges into the space of the self intensively (Piliang, 2017a).

This implosion phenomenon has an impact on the psychosocial condition of young Muslims who often feel confused, anxious, and vacillating in determining life attitudes, including in religious matters. In many cases, their maturity in thought and spirituality have not yet been fully formed. This makes them vulnerable to the influence of radicalism with a shallow understanding; while at the same time, opening up opportunities for counter-narratives that are not yet fully established or comprehensive.

For example, many young Muslims who previously had no in-depth knowledge of Islam suddenly experience a surge of interest in religious issues, even with an extreme spirit of jihad. However, this enthusiasm is often not accompanied by a strong and complete theological foundation. On the other hand, there are also young people who are trying to develop moderate counter-narratives. However, they are often still coloured by methodological confusion, and do not yet have a systematic perspective. This is where it appears that their seemingly inconsistent behaviour is actually more accurately read as an adaptive response to the complex realities of the times.

This kind of condition requires researchers, educators, and policy makers not to rush to label the Muslim youth or young Muslims as inconsistent or religiously shallow. Instead, there needs to be a more in-depth effort in reformulating the approach to the study of "Muslim youth culture" in Indonesia. The approach must consider the sociocultural context and the

dynamics of information technology that greatly influence the way of thinking and behaviour of today's young generation. Their religious culture cannot be equated with the previous generation or with Muslim youth in other countries, because it has unique contours and backgrounds.

In addition, this grey area in young people's religious attitudes needs to be interpreted as a fertile field for academic exploration. It is precisely in these spaces that lies the potential for dialogue, integration, and innovation in a more inclusive and contextual way of religion. This grey area can be a meeting point between normative Islamic values and universal human values that develop in modern society. In other words, this grey area does not signify a value vacuum, but instead is an important arena of cultural experimentation for the future of Indonesia and the religiosity of its citizen. Through drawing map of the religious patterns and psychosocial conditions of Indonesian young Muslim generation, the direction of future social and religious development can be more accurately designed. The younger generation is not only the inheritor of the future, but also the main actor in creating the future itself. Therefore, understanding the nature of their thoughts and spirituality, including their grey areas, is an important step in shaping a nation (nation-building) that is peaceful, tolerant and adaptive to the changing times.

Discussion

This research reveals the religious dynamics of Indonesian young Muslims who are in a complex psychosocial and cultural condition. The findings show that young people, especially Gen Z, experience an ambiguity of their identity due to the intersection of Islamic values, local culture, and the influence of globalisation and digital technology. They do not show absolute consistency between religious opinions, beliefs and actions, but this is more accurately understood as an adaptive response to the times. Amidst the push and pull of the discourses of extremism and moderatism, they occupy a 'grey area' of religiosity that is not merely transitional, but a space of productive contestation and negotiation. Popular culture becomes a meeting spot across ideological poles and becomes a medium for self-actualisation of the younger generation. This finding confirms that the religiosity of Indonesian young Muslims (and Muslim youth in general) is dynamic, pluralistic and contextual, and requires a more flexible and cross-disciplinary approach to understanding it fully.

The high dynamics of Indonesian young Muslims religiosity in this study can be explained as a result of complex interactions between psychosocial factors, local culture, and the influence of digital globalisation. The ambiguity experienced by young people, especially Gen Z, arises because they are in the midst of competing value streams, on the one hand Islamic values and local traditions inherited from families and communities, and on the other hand global values brought by digital media and popular culture. Inconsistency between religious opinions, beliefs and actions is not an indication of weakness of faith, but rather a form of adaptation to the plurality of values and the demands of the times. The "grey area" they occupy reflects the ideological contestation space between extremism and moderatism, which opens up opportunities for a more reflective and flexible negotiation of identity. Popular culture serves as a bridge because it can accommodate both religious symbols and expressions of individual freedom. Therefore, the relationship between these concepts, between identity, values, media, and expression space, is the basis for understanding that youth religiosity is dynamic, pluralistic, and contextual, thus demanding a cross-disciplinary approach that is sensitive to social change.

The results of this study are in line with previous findings showing that young people's religiosity tends to be fluid and contextualised. For example, studies by Supandi, Mahmud, Basri and Azzahra found that Indonesian young Muslims show a tendency towards unorthodox religiosity, where their religious expressions are influenced by popular culture and social media (Azzahra, 2024; Basri, 2023; Mahmud, 2024; Supandi, 2025). Similarly, studies by Zuhri, Rustandi, Ilham and Saumantri et.al highlighted a shift from doctrine-based patterns of religiosity towards more reflective and personalised ones, especially among Gen Z (Ilham, 2022; Rustandi, 2020; Saumantri et al., 2023; Zuhri, 2021). However, in contrast to previous studies that tend to emphasise aspects of deviation or deconstruction of traditional religiosity, this research actually places the dynamics as "a form of adaptive response" to the complexity of the times, not as a form of weakening faith.

This research also makes a novelty contribution by emphasising the importance of seeing the "grey area" of young people's religiosity not only as a transitional space, but as a productive arena of contestation and negotiation of identity. In addition, this study integrates psychosocial and cultural analyses more explicitly in explaining the ambiguous identity experienced by

young Muslims, which has not been studied in depth in previous studies. Thus, the cross-disciplinary approach used in this research offers a more holistic perspective to understand the religiosity of Indonesian young Muslims in the digital era and globalisation.

The results of this research contain significant social and ideological meanings in understanding the religious landscape of Indonesian young Muslims, especially Gen Z. Amidst the complexity of psychosocial conditions, local cultural influences and digital globalisation, it appears that their religiosity is not static or normative, but rather reflects an active and dynamic process of identity search. Inconsistency between religious opinions, beliefs and actions is not a sign of weak religiosity, but a reflection of their efforts to negotiate competing values. Ideologically, their position in the "grey area" between extremism and moderatism indicates the formation of a new space of contestation in religious expression, which actually enriches the treasures of Islamic religiosity in Indonesia.

Socially, popular culture functions as an alternative space that accommodates religious expression as well as freedom of individual identity, showing that digital media is not only a channel of information, but also an arena for the formation of new religious meanings. The historical implication is that this phenomenon reflects a shift in the religious paradigm from doctrinal and institutional forms to a more fluid, personal and contextual model. Thus, this research contributes to the broadening of understanding of Indonesian Muslim religiosity by emphasising the importance of a cross-disciplinary approach that is sensitive to social, cultural and technological changes in framing the religiosity of today's youth.

The results of this study have significant implications for the understanding of the religious expression of the younger generation of Indonesian Muslims in the contemporary socio-cultural context. Functionally, these findings open up new space for a more inclusive, flexible and contextualised approach to religious education and religious policy. The ambiguity of identity experienced by Gen Z can be used as a starting point to build a religious discourse that is more reflective, open to dialogue, and relevant to their life experiences. Popular culture, although often considered banal, turns out to function as an effective medium to convey Islamic values in a format that is more acceptable to the "digital generation". However, there

are also some limits in this portrait. Inconsistencies between opinions, beliefs and actions can blur the line between 'authentic' religious awareness and mere pragmatic tendencies. The 'grey' space of religiosity, if not guarded with a critical approach, has the potential to be exploited by extreme discourses that wrap themselves in popular packaging. In addition, without proper mentoring, openness to various values can lead to deeper identity confusion. Therefore, this research encourages the importance of developing a religious education strategy that is not only normative, but also dialogical and interdisciplinary, to navigate this religious dynamic in a constructive direction.

Based on the research findings on the religious dynamics of Indonesian young Muslims, policies and strategic actions are needed that are able to respond to the complex, dynamic and contextual conditions of Gen Z's religious identity. First, educational and religious institutions need to develop more inclusive, dialogical and contextual religious learning curricula and methods, which not only emphasise dogma, but also reflective skills and the ability to negotiate multiple identity. Second, the government and religious organisations need to encourage spaces for creative expression, such as popular culture forums and digital media, as educative and participatory tools that allow young people to authentically and constructively express their religiosity. Third, training and mentoring is needed for educators and young preachers so that they are able to bridge Islamic values with the challenges of digital modernity without being exclusive or judgemental. Fourth, religious moderation policies that have been initiated by the state need to be contextualised specifically into the digital lives of young people, through multi-stakeholder collaboration between the state, civil society and social media platforms. Thus, the policy response to this phenomenon must be cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary, in order to support the growth of healthy, tolerant and adaptive religiosity among the younger generation.

Based on the findings regarding the dynamics of Indonesian young Muslims religiosity in the grey area between inconsistency and adaptation to the times, holistic and contextual policy measures are needed. First, the government and educational institutions need to develop a religious curriculum that is more responsive to the social and psychological realities of young people, with an interdisciplinary approach that integrates religious education, digital literacy, and strengthening the values of tolerance and

nationality. Secondly, relevant ministries need to collaborate with communities and youth organisations to organise participatory and non-doctrinal religious guidance programmes, in order to create a safe dialogue space for young people's religious expressions. Third, there needs to be policy support for the production and distribution of moderate and contextualised religious digital content, through cooperation between the government, religious influencers and digital creative industry players. Fourth, research institutions and universities are expected to actively conduct mapping and longitudinal studies on the development of young people's religious identity, in order to provide accurate data for the formulation of long-term policies in the fields of education, religion and youth. With these actions, the grey area of young people's religiosity is no longer seen as a problem, but as an opportunity to shape the peaceful, open and contextual face of Indonesian Islam in the future.

Conclusion

This research reveals that the religious expressions of Indonesian young Muslims represent a complex dynamic that cannot be explained through conventional approaches that focus on motives, devian behaviour, or resistance to social structures. Instead, their religious expressions reflect a process of searching for spiritual stance that takes place in a transitional space between tradition and modernity, between moderatism and extremism, and between religious values and popular culture. Young people appear with religious practices that are not always ideologically consistent, but instead show a creative synthesis between normative piety, local cultural heritage, and contemporary lifestyles of pleasure and consumption. In this context, their religious expressions cannot be classified in black and white, but are more accurately understood as a form of adaptation and symbolic negotiation of the diversity of religious discourses—as part of cultural evolution—that fight each other in the public sphere. This finding confirms the need for a more transdisciplinary methodological and conceptual approach to reading the phenomenon of young people's religiosity as a whole, namely by combining the perspectives of religion, culture, transitional sociology, and the dynamics of digital media as a new space for the formation of religious meaning.

The significant contribution of this research to the development of contemporary Islamic studies lies in the depiction of grey area of religiousity among younger generation of Indonesian Muslims. The concept of grey area of religiousity can be employed as a new analytical category that explains the position of young people in the middle of the tug-of-war between extremism and moderatism. This concept offers a new framework for understanding youth religiosity not in a binary (moderate-extreme) way, but rather as a dynamic and contextualised process of identity negotiation. In addition, this research introduces the mediation variables of popular culture and the influence of digital algorithms as important factors in shaping the religious expressions of today's youth, two variables that have not been systematically studied in the study of religiosity. In terms of approach, this research also integrates psychosocial and cultural analyses with a critical-reflective literature study method, thus providing an interdisciplinary approach model that can be used in similar research. Thus, this research not only enriches theories about youth religiosity, but also opens up new questions about how digital media, popular culture and psychosocial conditions shape the face of Islam in the era of globalisation.

Although this research has succeeded in revealing the dynamics of Indonesian Muslim youth religiosity in the context of contestation of extremism and moderatism and the presence of popular culture as a space for negotiating identity, there are a number of limitations that need to be recognised. Firstly, the approach used is entirely qualitative with a literature study method, so the findings rely heavily on the interpretation of available secondary sources. This limits the research's ability to capture empirical dynamics directly from the experiences of the research subjects, especially in the aspects of affection and daily religious practices. Secondly, time and access limitations mean that this research has not included an even representation of all demographic layers of Muslim youth in Indonesia, such as differences in geographical areas, social class, or educational background. Therefore, future research is recommended to adopt a mixed methods approach and conduct more in-depth field studies in order to capture the diversity of religious practices empirically and contextually. A longitudinal approach can also be used to see changes in young people's religious expressions in a sustainable manner over a period of time.

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