



Trends in Religious Education through Digital Media: A Study of Students' Perceptions of Religious Moderation

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Abstract

The development of digital media has given rise to a new trend in religious education: technoreligion, or technology-based religious practice. This study aims to map students' perceptions of religious moderation through online religious education via websites and religious content they access. This is a qualitative study employing a netnographic approach, focusing on the observation of subjects within the online environment. Data collection techniques included questionnaires, online observation, interviews, and documentation. Meanwhile, the analysis utilized coding, pattern identification, and interpretation of research findings. The results indicate that students at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid are able to identify online websites that promote moderate religious understanding. The online websites used as references for religious learning include NU Online, Suaramuhamadiyah.id, Bincangsyariah.com, and Islami.co. Meanwhile, the content most frequently accessed in the study of religion relates to the History of Islamic Culture. Students' perceptions regarding religious moderation are closely tied to the religious content they frequently access on digital media.

Abstrak

Perkembangan media digital telah menjadi tren baru dalam belajar agama, yaitu *teknoreligi* atau beragama berbasis teknologi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memetakan persepsi moderasi beragama mahasiswa melalui belajar agama secara online dari website dan konten keagamaan yang diakses. Penelitian ini merupakan jenis penelitian kualitatif dengan pendekatan netnografi dengan fokus pada pengamatan dan observasi subjek di lingkungan internet. Teknik pengumpulan data melibatkan kuesioner, observasi online, wawancara, dan dokumentasi. Sementara teknik analisis menggunakan coding, identifikasi pola dan interpretasi temuan penelitian. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid mampu mengidentifikasi website online yang memberikan pemahaman moderat. Website online yang digunakan sebagai referensi pembelajaran agama berupa NU Online, Suaramuhamadiyah.id, Bincangsyariah.com, dan Islami.co. Sedangkan konten yang paling sering diakses dalam mempelajari agama adalah terkait dengan Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam. Presepsi mahasiswa terkait moderasi beragama, tidak terlepas dari konten keagamaan yang sering mereka akses di media digital.

INTRODUCTION

Advances in digital technology have brought significant changes to the field of religious education. The use of digital media to access religious content is becoming increasingly widespread, in line with growing internet accessibility (Berger & Golan, 2024). According to data, Indonesia ranks among the top five countries globally in internet usage, with 210 million users. Out of a total population of 273 million, Indonesia has an internet user penetration rate of 77.02%, dominated by Generation Z, particularly students, making them the group with the highest level of internet activity (Haryanto, 2022). The development of digital media as a medium for da'wah has created a new concept: technoreligion, or technology-based religiosity (Siregar et al., 2020). Technoreligion, with its many variations including websites has expanded religious learning resources for Muslims through the emergence of websites as da'wah platforms.

College students, as one of the primary user groups of digital technology, engage with various social media platforms, including Islamic websites. Islamic websites represent a form of creativity and innovation among da'wah practitioners in utilizing digital spaces, further strengthening the role of digital media as a tool for da'wah. The phenomenon of cyber da'wah, manifested through sites such as www.eramuslim.com, www.rumaysho.com, and www.nuonline.com, demonstrates the implementation of the internet as a tool for promoting good and forbidding evil among Indonesian Muslims.

The implementation of religious outreach through websites demonstrates that technological advancements are transforming the way modern society lives, including in matters of religion. A study conducted by a professor of the sociology of religion at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati shows that 58% of young people prefer to study religion through digital platforms. The ease of access provided by technology is shaping religious practices, such as reading the Quran through smartphone apps or attending religious lectures via platforms like YouTube and TikTok.

Learning about religion via online media also raises issues, including misunderstandings resulting from not learning directly from a teacher, which can lead to religious understanding and practices that tend toward absolutism (Hadiyanto et al., 2017). The rise in cases of violence and the spread of religious hate speech on social media indicates that learning religion through digital media can have negative consequences, especially if not accompanied by maturity and an understanding of religious moderation (Muslih et al., 2023).

The issue of religious moderation among Generation Z, particularly among college students, has become a hot topic. As a religious higher education institution under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid has a strategic mandate to prepare students with a moderate understanding and practice of religion. The trend toward religious moderation is a necessity for Generation Z, as millennials are active users of social media a public domain used to access various information, including religious education (Effendi et al., 2022). UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid comprises

more than 13,000 students from diverse backgrounds, creating an environment that could be potentially dangerous if religious digital literacy is not taught effectively.

This study builds upon several previous studies with similar themes specifically regarding digital media and religious behavior conducted by Suci, whose research revealed that the trend of learning about religion through social media is dominated by YouTube at 87%, Instagram and websites at 30.8%, and Facebook at 15.4% (Febriani & Desrani, 2021). Subsequent research conducted by Farthurrahman indicates that digital da'wah has been chosen as one solution to enhance understanding of religious moderation, thereby bringing a fresh perspective to the world of da'wah (Rumata et al., 2021). Effectiveness and ease of access are the primary reasons for the prevalence of da'wah through digital platforms. Research related to trends in religious learning on digital media is based on the premise that the formation of moderate attitudes, particularly among Generation Z, is inseparable from the religious content they consume. Generation Z, being familiar with various digital media and social media, can more easily access religious information instantly.

In line with this trend toward digitalization, it is important to understand how students perceive and interpret religious moderation in the context of religious learning through digital media. Therefore, a study of Generation Z's religious learning activities via digital media is necessary to understand their perceptions regarding inclusive religious understanding and practice. This study aims to map the websites students frequently access for religious learning, the religious content most frequently accessed, and students' perceptions of religious moderation based on the content accessed via digital media.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study falls under the category of qualitative netnography, an approach that focuses observation on subjects within the realm of the internet. According to Kozinet, netnographic studies can make the most of large datasets sourced from and manifested through data shared on the internet (Tadulako, 2020). This study employs netnography or virtual ethnography as a method to examine the complex cultural practices of online or networked groups. In this approach, attention is directed toward broad abstract concepts, such as social meanings and practices, relationships, language, and systems of signs. Although situated within an online context, these online communities can form and manifest cultures, beliefs, values, and customs that shape the behavior of specific groups. This is explained by Kozinets in a book authored by Christianty Juditha (Juditha, 2018). The netnography approach was chosen because the subjects to be observed are situated within the internet sphere, and through this approach, the researcher seeks to uncover students' perceptions resulting from learning religion via digital media.

There are two sources of data in this study: primary and secondary data. Primary data consists of internet search histories, frequently accessed religious learning content, and the perceptions of students at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman. Meanwhile, secondary data

sources include books, journals, and relevant literature, both online and offline. The subjects of this study are students at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid. Data collection in this study was conducted using questionnaires, observation, interviews, and documentation. Data analysis in this study employed thematic analysis through the following process: 1) data coding, where the researcher breaks down raw data into smaller units, such as sentences or paragraphs, which are then coded based on themes or categories; 2) identifying patterns, where these codes are analyzed to uncover patterns or relationships among various data elements; 3) interpreting findings, in which the researcher relates these patterns to the social context of religious moderation to generate meaningful insights (Eriyanto, 2021).

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

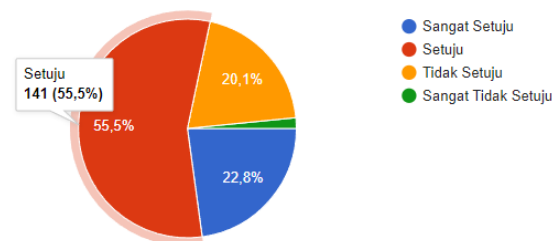
Websites Frequently Visited by Students to Study Islam

Based on data collected by the researchers regarding the websites students frequently visit to study religion, NU Online and Suara Muhammadiyah received the highest percentages as the websites most frequently visited by students, specifically, 55.5% (approximately 141 respondents) agreed and 22.8% (approximately 58 respondents) strongly agreed that they more frequently access NU Online and Suara Muhammadiyah as websites for studying religion compared to other websites.

Figure 1. Websites frequently visited by students

Saya lebih sering mengakses Nu Online dan Suara Muhammadiyah.

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Source: Researcher's data

The selection of these two websites as the most frequently visited sites for searching for and studying religious content is due to the fact that NU Online and Suara Muhammadiyah are consistently up-to-date and provide comprehensive coverage of fundamental religious topics, and frequently offer responses to current news stories from a religious perspective. The content published on NU Online and Suara Muhammadiyah also tends to be engaging and avoids harsh language, and they rarely feature content that contains or discusses practical politics or identity politics (Irwan, 2021).

On the other hand, these two sites are also moderate and represent the views of religious scholars, as revealed by an informant:

“Their sources are more reliable. Both organizations also have the largest followings in Indonesia.

Therefore, the religious discussions they present are more credible.” (AN)

“Because NU Online and Suara Muhammadiyah are led by a kyai, and the content on NU Online and Suara Muhammadiyah is consistent with what is found in the religious texts; furthermore, what is presented on NU Online and Suara Muhammadiyah reflects the perspectives of the ulama and kyai.” (ZA)

However, it cannot be denied that the choice of NU Online and Suara Muhammadiyah is due to the fact that the majority of students at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid are affiliated with NU and Muhammadiyah, which makes them more likely to trust these two websites over others, as most of them have backgrounds in these two Islamic organizations. Another reason why NU Online and Suaramuhammadiyah are frequently chosen by students as sites for religious study is that both rank among the 100 most popular Islamic websites in Indonesia (Syakir, 2020).

There are also two other websites that are favorites among students at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid for studying Islam: Bincangsyariah.com and Islami.co. With a combined 38.2% of the vote, these two sites rank third and fourth among the most popular websites for accessing religious information. The reason students chose Bincangsyariah.com and Islami.co is that these two sites are among the 100 most popular Islamic sites, ranking second and third (RedaksiIB, 2020). Furthermore, both sites are moderate, as evidenced by their fulfillment of four indicators of religious moderation and their absence of radical content. As stated by Widhianingsih in Muhammad Yoga’s research, the Bincangsyariah.com website serves as an alternative media platform that delves deeply into Islamic heritage to disseminate the call for moderate Islam (Firdaus, 2023). Meanwhile, regarding Islami.co, in a study conducted by Silmi on “Narratives of Moderate Islam in the Post-Truth Era,” it was explained that the Islami.co website is a platform with an elite-oriented structure concerning the reporting of moderate Islam (Firdaus, 2023).

However, it cannot be denied that some students at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid still access websites that contain violent content and have a history of being blocked by the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology; among these sites are Hidayatullah.com, Suaraislam.id, Erasmuslim.com, and VOA-Islam. These four websites were previously involved in cases that led to their blocking by the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology due to containing content related to issues of ethnicity, religion, and race (SARA) and radical movements. This was explained in an official report published on the Kominfo website titled “BNPT Asks Kominfo to Block 22 Radical Websites”; the article stated that the four websites contained radical-leaning content. Ismail Cawidu, head of the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology’s information and public relations center, explained in the article that the Ministry requested Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to block these websites because the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) found that they were sites promoting radical ideology and acting as sympathizers of radicalism (Kominfo, 2015).

Amid the ever-increasing flow of information in today's digital age, platforms such as NU Online, Suara Muhammadiyah, Bincangsyariah.com, and Islami.co have become vital sources providing inclusive and moderate religious content. In the context of technological advancements and globalization, access to information has become remarkably easy; however, a significant challenge has emerged in the form of the proliferation of invalid or extremist information. These platforms serve as a counterbalance, offering content that is not only in-depth and reliable but also promotes the values of tolerance, diversity, and peace. The information presented covers various aspects of religious life relevant to contemporary issues, ranging from Islamic law and culture to practical guides for worship in line with the spirit of moderation. With an inclusive approach, these websites have successfully reached diverse audiences, helping the public understand religious teachings in a contextual and open-minded way. As the world faces the challenges of radicalism and disinformation, the existence of NU Online, Suara Muhammadiyah, Bincangsyariah.com, and Islami.co has become increasingly vital as reliable sources of enlightenment and learning.

The selection of websites by students for religious study online serves as a representative example of how religious understanding is conveyed through the internet, which can subsequently give rise to religious phenomena or expressions; This aligns with Campbell's assertion that technoreligion or the tendency to access religious content via digital media is an evolving phenomenon in the technological age, necessitating the development of theoretical and methodological approaches to understand how technology shapes religious phenomena or expressions (Campbell, 2020). In agreement with this, Echchaibi and Hoover explain that exploring religious information on the Internet gives rise to religious expressions used to shape new social and cultural contexts (Echchaibi, 2018). Based on this theory, it is evident that learning about religion through websites a practice known as technoreligion can influence students' religious behavior, including their understanding of religious moderation.

History of Islamic Culture: Religious Studies Frequently Accessed via the Website

The History of Islamic Culture is the most frequently accessed subject or course by students, compared to the study of the Quran and Hadith, followed by Fiqh and Worship, and lastly, Aqidah and Ethics. This finding reflects a high level of interest among students in the historical and cultural aspects of Islam, which may be due to the relevance and wealth of information that can be connected to various contexts of modern life. The History of Islamic Culture not only offers insights into the development of Islamic civilization across various eras and regions but also provides a deeper understanding of the contributions of the Muslim community in various fields of science, art, and socio-politics

Islamic Cultural History received 68.1% of "agree" responses and 15% of "strongly agree" responses from students, making the Islamic Cultural History content the most-visited site by students at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid.

One respondent, UA, from the Faculty of Islamic Economics and Business, Sharia Banking Program, explained the reason for studying history from the website:

“The history of Islamic culture is a subject I explore more often because it helps me understand the historical roots and development of my religion.” (UA)

Meanwhile, EL from the Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Education, Department of Islamic Education, stated;

“I was introduced to the subject of Islamic cultural history in 9th grade at MTS, but I had a hard time grasping the material, especially since it covered Islamic history from a time long before we were born. So, whenever there’s material I don’t understand or SKI questions I find difficult to answer, I look them up online like that.” (EL)

The choice of Islamic Cultural History as content frequently accessed by students is due to the fact that Islamic Cultural History aids in understanding the development and dynamics of religious studies; this is because every academic discipline is inseparable from historical analysis. Additionally, students prefer and frequently access materials related to the study of the History of Islamic Culture via the internet because access to the material is easier and the scope of the material is much broader compared to books, which, when discussing history, can span many pages and be less efficient; on the other hand, learning history can be monotonous. Siti Nasuha explains that there is a perception that the field of Islamic Cultural History (SKI) is merely about memorization whether it be the sequence of events, dates, or the names of Islamic historical figures. This vast scope of material leads to boredom among students when studying Islamic Cultural History (Nasuha, 2019). This is what drives students to seek other reference sources to study Islamic Cultural History, thereby enhancing their understanding. Based on this, it is clear that the selection of Islamic Cultural History as content frequently accessed on the internet is due to the ease of accessing a wide range of information, which in turn stimulates students’ motivation to learn.

The study of Islamic Cultural History by students can also foster a moderate character. This is because Islamic Cultural History, which contains many lessons and values of Islamic cultural wisdom, is designed so that students can recognize, internalize, and understand the historical roots of Islam, which are used to shape attitudes, instill Islamic character, and foster honesty, fairness, tolerance, solidarity, discipline, responsibility, and consistency (Rusydi, 2021). Historical elements showcasing the practice of religious moderation can be found in the story of the Constitution of Medina, a historical document drafted by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to govern the highly diverse society of Medina comprising various tribes and religions at that time. The Constitution of Medina, also known as the Medina Charter, is one of the earliest and most significant examples of the application of principles of moderation and tolerance in religious and social life. This charter not only regulated relations among Muslims but also between Muslims and the Jewish community and other tribes residing in Medina. Through this charter, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) established equal

rights and obligations for all residents of Medina, regardless of their religious or tribal backgrounds.

The principles enshrined in the Constitution of Medina emphasize the importance of unity, justice, and mutual respect. Each group was granted the freedom to practice their beliefs and traditions, while committing to maintaining collective peace and security. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) succeeded in creating a harmonious and peaceful society through an inclusive approach that accommodated diversity. This is a valuable legacy that can be applied in the context of building a pluralistic and peaceful society in today's era of globalization.

The Walisongo also exemplified the spirit of religious moderation, demonstrating a form of da'wah that was accommodating of local culture and free from violence, thereby making Islam easily accepted by the Indonesian people. The Walisongo, renowned in the history of Islam's spread across the Indonesian archipelago, employed a harmonious and inclusive approach in disseminating Islamic teachings. They understood that to achieve widespread acceptance, the approach to da'wah must align with existing local values and traditions (Anggraeni et al., 2019). One example of this approach is Sunan Kalijaga, who is known for his creative and accommodating methods of preaching. Sunan Kalijaga utilized local arts and culture such as wayang kulit, gamelan, and woodcarving to convey Islamic messages. Through wayang stories rich in moral values and Islamic teachings, Sunan Kalijaga successfully captured the attention of the Javanese people, who deeply loved this performing art. Thus, Islamic values could be absorbed naturally without coercion, and the community felt that Islam did not erase their culture but rather enriched it and gave it new meaning. Another example is Sunan Kudus, who, in constructing the Kudus Tower Mosque, employed an architectural style that blended Hindu-Buddhist cultural elements with Islamic design. By using red bricks and distinctive ornamentation, Sunan Kudus demonstrated that Islam could coexist harmoniously with local culture. Furthermore, Sunan Kudus also taught the community not to slaughter cows animals considered sacred by Hindus as a form of respect and tolerance toward the local community's beliefs. This action demonstrated respect for local traditions and fostered mutual respect among different communities.

The Walisongo's approach, characterized by tolerance and accommodation of local culture, demonstrates that Islam can be spread through peaceful and wise means. They avoided the use of violence and coercion, instead choosing to embrace local culture and teach Islam through methods that were acceptable and understandable to the community. This not only made Islam easily accepted but also fostered harmony and unity within a diverse society.

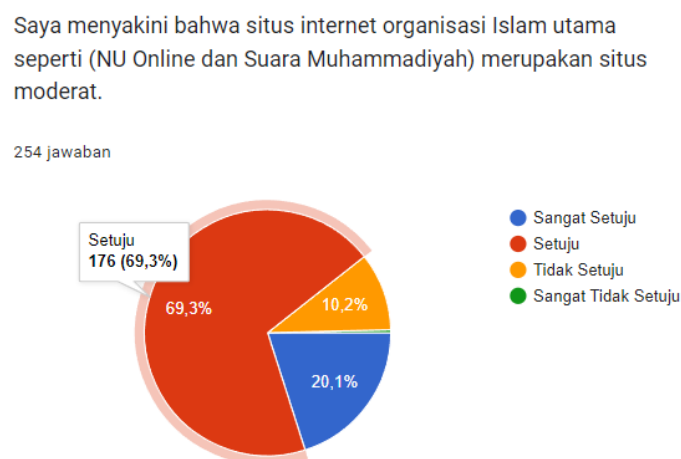
College Students' Perceptions of Religious Moderation Based on the Media Content They Access

In this digital age, the media plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' views and attitudes, including regarding religious matters (Wahid, 2024). As a young generation that

actively accesses information via the internet, students exhibit certain tendencies in selecting their sources of religious information. Perception is a process by which an individual selects and interprets the information they encounter, processing it to create a meaningful mental image (Kottler, 1997). It is these mental images that ultimately shape human attitudes or behavioral patterns. In the process of forming students' perceptions of religious moderation, they can be influenced by the consumption of religious content published by mass media such as the internet (Yunita, 2022). Therefore, students must choose the right websites for learning about religion, because the new messages received after accessing religious content on Islamic websites will become the cognitive foundation for the formation of students' views in responding to certain issues.

The research findings indicate that students tend to access content provided by media outlets known for their moderate and inclusive approach. Platforms such as NU Online, Suaramuhammadiyah, Bincangsyariah.com, and Islami.co are the top choices because their content provides moderate religious information, promotes tolerance, and emphasizes values of togetherness. As indicated by the questionnaire results.

Figure 2. NU Online and Suara Muhammadiyah as moderate websites.



Source: Researcher's Data

Students who frequently access these websites tend to have a more open and inclusive perception of diversity. They are more accepting of differences and more likely to support interfaith dialogue and cross-community cooperation. The content they consume helps foster a balanced understanding of Islamic teachings, which focuses not only on ritualistic aspects but also on universal values such as justice, peace, and humanity.

For example, articles on NU Online often discuss social and humanitarian issues from a moderate Islamic perspective, encouraging readers to think critically and consider various viewpoints. Suaramuhammadiyah provides analyses and reviews that invite readers to understand Islam in a modern context without neglecting tradition and foundational teachings. Bincangsyariah.com and Islami.co present in-depth discussions on fiqh, ethics, and the history of Islamic culture, which enrich students' perspectives and teach the

importance of tolerance and respect for differences. One informant explained the reason for choosing Bincangsyariah.com and Islami.co as sources for religious study:

“In my opinion, the websites bincangsyariah and islami.co are moderate because they provide religious information with an objective, non-extremist approach and respect diverse viewpoints.”
(UC)

The perceptions formed by students after studying religion online indicate that they understand the indicators of religious moderation; however, in practice, confusion persists among students, as many of them simply search for religious content on websites without considering the background of those religious sites. This is a matter of concern because most religious websites no longer focus on religious issues but instead feature content containing political elements. These political issues are used to attack the government; even the president is not spared from hoaxes published on non-moderate websites.

It cannot be denied that there are also students who access media with a more conservative or even extreme approach, which can influence their perception of religious moderation. These sites often present views that are more rigid and less tolerant of differences. Students exposed to such content may show a tendency to think more exclusively and be less accepting of pluralism.

In this context, digital education and literacy are of paramount importance. Universities and educational institutions need to facilitate access to credible and moderate information sources, as well as teach students to think critically about the content they consume. This includes fostering discussions and dialogue about the importance of religious moderation, as well as providing insights on how to identify and avoid invalid or extremist information. Students’ perceptions of religious moderation are heavily influenced by the media content they access. Ensuring access to and engagement with media that promotes the values of moderation, tolerance, and inclusivity is a crucial step in shaping a young generation that is broad-minded and prepared to live in a diverse society.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study reveal that students at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan are active users of technology, even when accessing religious information. Tech-religion has become a defining characteristic of Generation Z students in their approach to learning about religion, including through websites. The research findings reveal that: First, students at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid study religious content through the websites NU Online, Suaramuhammadiyah, Bincangsyariah.com, and Islami.co; this is closely tied to the students’ backgrounds, as many are affiliated with NU and Muhammadiyah and view these sites as moderate. Second, the content most frequently accessed by students in their online religious studies is the History of Islamic Culture, driven by a sense of boredom stemming from the volume, monotony, and repetitiveness of the course material on the History of Islamic Culture. Third, the

perceptions formed by students through online religious learning via these moderate websites tend to be more open and inclusive toward diversity.

This study has the limitation of only mapping students' perceptions through the websites and content they frequently access when studying religion online, and the study's subjects are currently limited to students at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan. Future research should expand the focus from mapping perceptions to analyzing the influence or relationship between the intensity of religious learning via digital media and students' level of religious moderation, and should broaden the research sample by involving students from various universities using diverse digital platforms.

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