



The Dynamics of Religious Moderation in Al-Makmur Islamic Boarding School: Gaps Between Curriculum, Culture, and Students' Religious Practices in the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

The digital era has shifted religious authority among santri from a pesantren-centered structure to a more open and fragmented sphere. However, previous studies have largely framed religious moderation as a normative concept and have paid limited attention to its practical dynamics within the interaction of curriculum, pesantren culture, and digital media. This study aims to explore the dynamics of religious moderation implementation at Al-Makmur Tungkar Islamic Boarding School. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and analysed inductively using an interactive model. The findings indicate that the implementation of religious moderation is complex and non-linear. The internalization of moderation values within the curriculum remains predominantly cognitive, while pesantren culture serves as a strong yet no longer absolute arena for value transmission. Furthermore, digital media has generated a phenomenon of dual authority that contributes to fragmentation between religious values, pesantren culture, and santri's religious practices. This study concludes that religious moderation constitutes a dynamic and negotiated social practice in the digital era.

1. Introduction

The development of the digital era has brought fundamental changes to the ways in which young people, including *santri* (Islamic boarding school students), access, understand, and practice religious teachings. The widespread availability of religious content through social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram has led to a shift in religious authority, whereby *santri* no longer rely exclusively on *kiai* (Islamic scholars) as their primary source of religious guidance. Instead, they increasingly refer to religious figures in digital spaces who represent diverse backgrounds, methodologies, and ideological orientations. This condition has contributed to the emergence of increasingly complex spectra of religious understanding, including the potential development of

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exclusivist attitudes, textualist interpretations, and less tolerant responses toward differences (Campbell, 2020; Saeed, 2018).

Within the context of Islamic education in Indonesia, religious moderation has become an important agenda for maintaining social harmony in a pluralistic society. Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), as institutions of Islamic education, play a strategic role in cultivating the values of *wasathiyah* (moderation), such as tolerance (*tasamuh*), balance (*tawazun*), and justice (*i'tidal*). Normatively, these values have been integrated into both the curriculum and traditions of *pesantren*. However, contemporary challenges extend beyond merely teaching these values to ensuring that they are genuinely internalized and reflected in the religious practices of *santri* amid the increasingly uncontrolled flow of digital information (Hadi et al., 2024; Hefner, 2021).

Pondok Pesantren Al-Makmur Tungkar, established on 22 Dzulqaidah 1413 H, corresponding to May 25, 1992, under the auspices of the Al-Makmur Tungkar Foundation, is one of the Islamic educational institutions that emerged from, by, and for the local community. Founded through the initiative of the late Al-Ustadz Yarman Nur, alongside religious leaders, traditional community leaders, and residents of Nagari Tungkar, the *pesantren* has demonstrated a strong commitment to promoting Islamic education and *dakwah* (Islamic outreach). Over time, the institution has contributed to producing Muslim generations who actively participate in society and has been officially registered with the Ministry of Religious Affairs of West Sumatra Province. Nevertheless, in the context of ongoing social and digital transformations, the *pesantren* also faces new challenges in maintaining and transmitting religious values in ways that remain relevant to contemporary realities (Zainal & Sidik, 2024).

Field observations reveal significant dynamics in the lives of *santri*, particularly concerning interaction patterns, media consumption, and religious discussions. According to Mulyati, an Arabic language teacher at MTs Al-Makmur Tungkar (personal communication, March 30, 2026), *santri* not only engage within the structured environment of the *pesantren* but also actively utilize social media as an additional source of religious knowledge. Such media usage often occurs beyond the institution's direct supervision, thereby creating opportunities for the circulation of religious narratives that may not always align with the moderation-oriented approaches promoted by the *pesantren* (Rahman et al., 2026).

Furthermore, variations have been observed in how *santri* respond to differences, both in religious discussions and everyday social interactions. Some *santri* exhibit openness and tolerance consistent with the values of religious moderation, whereas others tend to adopt more rigid and textual approaches, particularly when drawing upon decontextualized digital content. These differences are evident in discussions concerning schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*madhhab*), religious rituals, and responses to religious issues circulating on social media, reflecting the plurality of religious understandings among *santri* (Musyahid & Kolis, 2023).

Direct observations also indicate notable shifts in the dynamics of religious discussions within the *pesantren* environment. *Santri* no longer rely solely on explanations provided by *kiai* or *ustaz*; rather, they increasingly introduce references obtained from digital media. In certain circumstances, this phenomenon enriches their religious perspectives. In others, however, it generates confusion, unstructured debates, and even the potential for conflicts in religious understanding. Campbell (2020) and Saeed (2018) argue that such conditions signify tensions between the traditional religious authority embodied by *pesantren* and emerging forms of authority in digital spaces.

Beyond these changes in discussion patterns, field observations also highlight a major issue: the growing discrepancy between the values of religious moderation formally taught in the *pesantren* curriculum and the actual religious practices of *santri* in their daily lives. This gap is influenced not only by curricular factors but also by the *pesantren*'s hidden curriculum and the interactions of *santri*

with the digital environment. In some situations, the values of moderation appear strongly embedded within classroom instruction and formal institutional activities, yet they are not consistently reflected in social practices or responses to contemporary religious issues. This finding suggests that the implementation of religious moderation within pesantren is not a linear process but rather a complex dynamic shaped by multiple internal and external factors (Hadi et al., 2024; Hefner, 2021).

Several studies have examined religious moderation within Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) (Athoillah et al., 2024; Sagirah et al., 2024), as well as the challenges of promoting religious moderation in digital spaces (Mandala et al., 2024; Ramadhan et al., 2023). Recent research has also highlighted the ongoing negotiation of religious authority between traditional pesantren structures and digital media among *santri* (Shodiqin et al., 2025). However, these studies have not specifically explored how the interaction between the formal curriculum, pesantren culture as a *hidden curriculum*, and the religious practices of *santri* shapes the dynamics of religious moderation in the digital era. Therefore, a research gap remains regarding how religious moderation is internalized, negotiated, and enacted in the daily lives of *santri* amid the changing landscape of religious authority.

Against this backdrop, the present study does not seek to measure the level of religious moderation among *santri*. Instead, it aims to uncover, explore, and understand the dynamics of religious moderation implementation at Pondok Pesantren Al-Makmur Tungkar, particularly regarding the interplay between curriculum, pesantren culture, and the religious practices of *santri* in the digital era. This approach is expected to provide deeper insights into how moderation values are internalized, negotiated, and enacted within the everyday realities of *santri* life.

In line with these objectives, the complex, contextual, and dynamic nature of the phenomenon makes a qualitative approach particularly appropriate. Through this approach, the study seeks to explore the meanings, experiences, and processes underlying the practice of religious moderation within the setting of Pondok Pesantren Al-Makmur Tungkar in a comprehensive and in-depth manner (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2014).

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Approach and Design

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine in depth the dynamics of religious moderation implementation at Pondok Pesantren Al-Makmur Tungkar, located in Lima Puluh Kota Regency. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study sought to understand socio-religious phenomena holistically, contextually, and comprehensively, particularly regarding how the values of religious moderation are internalized, negotiated, and practiced by *santri* in their daily lives.

A case study design was adopted because the research focused on a single setting as a bounded system with distinctive characteristics in terms of curriculum, pesantren culture, and the social dynamics of *santri* in responding to the influences of the digital era (Yin, 2018). Through this approach, the researchers were able to comprehensively explore the interactions among formal aspects (curriculum), non-formal aspects (pesantren culture), and the religious practices of *santri* within their real-life context.

2.2 Research Site and Duration

This study was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Al-Makmur Tungkar, located in Lima Puluh Kota Regency, West Sumatra, Indonesia. The selection of the research site was based on several considerations:

1. The pesantren is an Islamic educational institution actively engaged in fostering the religious development of *santri*.
2. The institution exhibits noteworthy socio-religious dynamics related to the implementation of religious moderation.
3. Preliminary observations indicated variations in *santri*'s religious understanding and practices, influenced by the interaction between pesantren-based education and exposure to digital media.

2.3 Research Participants and Informants

Research participants were selected using purposive sampling, whereby informants were chosen based on specific considerations relevant to the focus of the study (Patton, 2015). The informants included:

- a. The head of the pesantren, who serves as the primary authority in determining educational directions and religious values;
- b. *Ustaz* and *ustazah* (teachers), who are responsible for integrating religious moderation values into the learning process;
- c. *Santri*, who constitute the primary subjects experiencing and practicing religious moderation values in their daily lives;
- d. Administrators and management staff involved in policy-making and the administration of the educational system.

The number of informants was not predetermined. Instead, data collection followed the principle of data saturation, meaning that it ceased when no new significant information emerged from the field.

2.4 Data Collection Techniques

To obtain comprehensive and in-depth data, this study employed triangulation through the following methods:

2.4.1. In-Depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with informants to explore:

- a. their understanding of religious moderation;
- b. the implementation of moderation values in the learning process;
- c. the role of pesantren culture in shaping religious attitudes; and
- d. the influence of digital media on the perspectives and religious practices of *santri*.

Interviews were conducted flexibly and repeatedly as necessary to obtain rich and accurate data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

2.4.2. Participant Observation

The researchers conducted direct observations of various activities within the pesantren, including:

- a. classroom learning processes;
- b. religious activities such as congregational prayers, religious studies, and discussions;
- c. social interactions among *santri*; and
- d. *santri*'s use of digital media.

These observations aimed to capture actual behaviors and the dynamics of religious moderation implementation within the everyday lives of *santri* (Spradley, 2016).

2.4.3. Document Analysis

The documents analyzed in this study included:

- a. curricula and instructional syllabi;
- b. classical Islamic texts and teaching materials used in the pesantren;
- c. pesantren regulations and codes of conduct; and
- d. records of religious activities.

Document analysis was employed to understand how the values of religious moderation were formally formulated and represented within the pesantren educational system (Bowen, 2009).

2.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted interactively and continuously by following the model proposed by (Miles et al., 2014), which consists of three stages:

- a. Data Condensation
Data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation were selected, simplified, and focused in accordance with the objectives of the study.
- b. Data Display
The data were organized into descriptive narratives and thematic categories to facilitate the analysis of relationships among emerging themes.
- c. Conclusion Drawing and Verification
The researchers interpreted the data to identify patterns, meanings, and the dynamics of religious moderation implementation within the pesantren.

The analysis was conducted inductively, allowing the research findings to emerge directly from the empirical data collected in the field.

2.6 Trustworthiness of the Data

The trustworthiness of the data was ensured by applying the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely:

- a. Credibility, achieved through source and methodological triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement in the field;
- b. Transferability, established by providing rich and detailed descriptions of the research context;
- c. Dependability, maintained through systematic documentation of the research process; and
- d. Confirmability, ensured by demonstrating that the findings were grounded in empirical data that could be traced and verified.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles in qualitative research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The identities of the informants were kept confidential, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. Furthermore, the researchers respected the norms, values, and cultural practices prevailing at Pondok Pesantren Al-Makmur Tungkar throughout the research process.

3. Results

Based on in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document analysis conducted at Pondok Pesantren Al-Makmur Tungkar, this study revealed that the implementation of religious moderation occurs through complex, non-linear, and heterogeneous dynamics. These dynamics are reflected in the relationships, which are not always harmonious, among the formal curriculum, pesantren culture, and the religious practices of *santri*, all of which are increasingly influenced by the penetration of digital media. Thematically, the findings of this study can be classified into four major patterns, as follows.

3.1 *The Internalization of Religious Moderation within the Curriculum Remains Normative and Cognitive*

Formally, the values of religious moderation have been integrated into the learning process, particularly through subjects such as *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *aqidah akhlak* (Islamic creed and ethics), and the study of *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic texts). Values such as tolerance (*tasamuh*), balance (*tawazun*), and justice (*i'tidal*) are taught as integral components of the curriculum structure. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that the process of internalizing these values remains largely confined to the cognitive domain and has not been fully transformed into attitudinal dispositions reflected in the religious practices of *santri*. Religious moderation is understood more as normative knowledge than as a deeply embedded habitus shaping everyday behavior. As expressed by one of the *ustaz*:

“Santri understand the concept of moderation, but in practice, not all of them are able to apply it when dealing with differences.”

This statement reflects a gap between conceptual understanding and practical actualization, suggesting that the curriculum's success in transmitting values has not necessarily translated into profound processes of internalization.

3.2 *Pesantren Culture as a Powerful Yet No Longer Absolute Space for Internalization*

The culture of Pondok Pesantren Al-Makmur Tungkar plays a significant role in shaping the religious orientations of *santri* through the exemplary conduct of *kiai*, the practice of deliberation (*musyawarah*), and collective life that emphasizes togetherness and balance. In this context, religious moderation is not merely taught but lived through everyday social practices as part of the hidden curriculum. The findings demonstrate that the internalization of moderation values occurs more effectively through cultural practices than through formal instruction. As one *santri* explained:

“We learn more from our teachers' attitudes and everyday life than from the materials taught in the classroom.”

However, the dominance of pesantren culture in shaping the religious authority of *santri* is no longer absolute. The growing penetration of external sources of knowledge, particularly those accessed through digital media, has shifted the position of pesantren culture from being the sole reference point in constructing *santri*'s religious understanding.

3.3 *Digital Media as a Space for the Production of Alternative Religious Authority*

The findings indicate that digital media have evolved into spaces for both the production and dissemination of new forms of religious authority among *santri*. Nearly all informants reported using

platforms such as YouTube and TikTok as alternative sources for understanding religious teachings. Digital media function not merely as complementary resources but also as arenas for contesting religious discourses, bringing together diverse perspectives, methodologies, and ideological orientations.

However, the content consumed by *santri* does not always align with the values of moderation promoted within the pesantren. As one *santri* stated:

“Sometimes the religious lectures on social media differ from what is taught in the pesantren, so we have to choose for ourselves.”

This phenomenon indicates the emergence of a process of individualization in religious authority, whereby *santri* no longer depend entirely on traditional authorities but increasingly engage in independent selection and interpretation. While this condition broadens religious perspectives, it also has the potential to generate confusion, fragmented understandings, and tendencies toward decontextualized textual interpretations.

3.4 The Fragmentation of Religious Moderation: Gaps between Curriculum, Culture, and Practice

The most significant finding of this study is the existence of fragmentation in the implementation of religious moderation, reflected in the discrepancies among the values taught through the formal curriculum, the values embodied in pesantren culture, and the actual religious practices of *santri* in their daily lives. This fragmentation is evident in the varying responses of *santri* to differences, the dynamics of religious discussions that do not always reflect moderate attitudes, and worship practices influenced by external references beyond the pesantren context.

Some *santri* demonstrate inclusive and tolerant tendencies, whereas others exhibit more exclusive and textual orientations. These findings indicate that the implementation of religious moderation does not occur uniformly; rather, it is socially constructed through the complex interaction of individual experiences, the pesantren's social environment, and exposure to digital religious discourses.

Therefore, religious moderation within the pesantren context cannot be understood as a static entity. Instead, it should be viewed as a dynamic social practice that is continuously negotiated in response to changing social and digital realities.

4. Conclusions

This study revealed that the implementation of religious moderation at Pondok Pesantren Al-Makmur Tungkar does not occur in a linear or uniform manner. Rather, it unfolds within complex, contextual, and negotiative dynamics. These dynamics are shaped by the interaction among the formal curriculum, pesantren culture as a form of hidden curriculum, and the increasingly influential role of digital media in the lives of *santri*. The findings indicate that the internalization of religious moderation within the curriculum remains predominantly situated in the cognitive domain and has not yet been fully transformed into consistent religious practices in everyday life. Meanwhile, pesantren culture has been shown to play a significant role in fostering moderate attitudes through exemplary leadership and social practices; however, its influence is no longer absolute due to *santri*'s expanding access to diverse sources of knowledge in digital spaces.

Furthermore, the presence of digital media has given rise to the phenomenon of dual authority, in which *santri* find themselves navigating between the traditional religious authority of the pesantren and emerging forms of authority in digital environments. This condition contributes to variations in the ways *santri* understand and practice religious teachings, while simultaneously creating the potential for differences and even fragmentation in religious attitudes and behaviors.

Accordingly, the principal contribution of this study lies in its assertion that religious moderation within pesantren should not be understood as a static normative concept, but rather as a dynamic social practice that continuously undergoes negotiation in response to changing social conditions. The findings also highlight the existence of a gap between the values formally taught, the cultural norms cultivated within the pesantren, and the religious practices enacted by *santri*.

From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches the scholarship on religious moderation by adopting a contextual-sociological approach that conceptualizes religious practice as the outcome of interactions among multiple social structures and sources of knowledge. Practically, the findings underscore the importance of strengthening the integration between the formal curriculum and social practices, enhancing *santri*'s religious digital literacy, and revitalizing the roles of *kiai* and *ustaz* as mediators who guide *santri* in navigating the complexities of religious information in the digital era. This study also opens avenues for future research to explore more adaptive and integrative models for implementing religious moderation, particularly in response to the challenges posed by digitalization and the transformation of religious authority among younger Muslim generations.

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