

PARASOCIAL PIETY AND RELIGIOUS HARMONY: AUTHORITY AND MEDIA LITERACY IN INDONESIAN DIGITAL DAKWAH

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Abstract

Indonesia's rapid digital expansion has transformed how Muslims access religious guidance, enabling digital preachers to build asymmetrical, emotionally significant bonds with millions of followers, a phenomenon this study conceptualizes as parasocial piety. In Indonesia's plural democratic society, where religious moderation (*moderasi beragama*) is a national policy priority, these parasocial dynamics carry consequential implications for social cohesion, interfaith discourse, and digital religious authority. This study explains the communicative mechanisms through which parasocial piety emerges in Indonesian digital *dakwah*, assesses its effects on religious moderation and social cohesion, and formulates an applied religious media literacy framework as an intervention response. Using an interpretive qualitative design with an integrative literature review, the article synthesizes peer-reviewed scholarship published mainly between 2021 and 2026, covering digital *dakwah*, parasocial interaction and relationship theory, Digital Islam, religious moderation, and digital religious literacy. Sources were selected through systematic screening following SALSA criteria, yielding a final corpus of 44 peer-reviewed journal articles. Findings identify five platform-conditioned mechanisms, including rhythmic presence, visual authority, and commodification of piety, that jointly produce mediated religious influence capable of both supporting and weakening religious moderation and inclusive discourse. The study contributes an original three-level ethical literacy framework for creators, audiences, and institutional ecosystems, with direct relevance to religious harmony policy in Indonesia's plural digital public sphere.

Keywords: Digital *dakwah*; Parasocial piety; Religious moderation; Digital religious literacy; Social cohesion

Abstrak

Ekspansi digital yang pesat di Indonesia telah mengubah cara umat Muslim mengakses bimbingan agama, memungkinkan dai digital membangun ikatan satu arah yang bermakna secara emosional dengan jutaan pengikut, fenomena yang dikonseptualisasikan dalam studi ini sebagai parasocial piety. Dalam masyarakat Indonesia yang plural dan demokratis, di mana moderasi beragama menjadi

prioritas kebijakan nasional, dinamika parasosial ini membawa implikasi serius terhadap kohesi sosial, wacana lintas agama, dan otoritas keagamaan digital. Studi ini menjelaskan mekanisme komunikatif kemunculan parasocial piety dalam dakwah digital Indonesia, mengkaji dampaknya terhadap moderasi beragama dan kohesi sosial, serta merumuskan kerangka literasi media keagamaan terapan sebagai respons intervensi. Dengan desain kualitatif interpretatif dan integrative literature review, artikel ini mensintesis karya ilmiah peer-reviewed yang dipublikasikan dominan antara 2021 hingga 2026, mengenai dakwah digital, teori interaksi dan relasi parasosial, Digital Islam, moderasi beragama, dan literasi digital keagamaan. Sumber dipilih melalui penyaringan sistematis berdasarkan kriteria SALSA, sehingga menghasilkan korpus akhir sebanyak 44 artikel jurnal peer-reviewed. Temuan mengidentifikasi lima mekanisme berbasis platform, termasuk kehadiran ritmis, otoritas visual, dan komodifikasi kesalehan, yang secara bersama menghasilkan pengaruh keagamaan termediasi yang dapat sekaligus mendukung dan melemahkan moderasi beragama serta wacana inklusif. Studi ini berkontribusi melalui kerangka literasi etis tiga level bagi kreator, audiens, dan ekosistem institusional, dengan relevansi langsung terhadap kebijakan kerukunan beragama dalam ruang publik digital plural Indonesia.

Kata kunci: *Dakwah digital; Parasocial piety; Moderasi beragama; Literasi digital keagamaan; Kohesi sosial*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is home to the world's largest Muslim population and is simultaneously one of the most ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse democratic societies on earth, with over 270 million citizens across 17,000 islands and more than 300 ethnic groups (Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023; Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023). This plural context makes the digital transformation of religious communication a matter of significant social consequence far beyond questions of individual piety or platform engagement metrics. Social media platforms, namely TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp, have rapidly become primary vehicles of dakwah, enabling digital da'i to reach vast audiences through short-form videos, livestreams, interactive storytelling, and algorithmic repetition that make religious guidance feel immediate, intimate, and personally relevant, as recurring figures whose sustained visibility creates psychological presence in followers' lives (Febrian, 2024; Hanung et al., 2025; Hatami et al., 2025; Ibad, 2025; Missier, 2025; Taufikurrahman & Setyowati, 2024). Unlike institutional religious channels that operate within established scholarly frameworks and communal accountability structures, digital platforms embed attention economies, visual aesthetics, and relational affordances that profoundly reshape what makes religious authority credible and persuasive in a plural democratic society. The consequences of this transformation extend beyond individual spiritual experience into the fabric of public life. In a society where religious authority has historically been anchored in pesantren networks, scholarly chains of transmission, and communal deliberative bodies such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, the rapid migration of religious guidance to algorithmically curated social media creates new asymmetries of influence that existing regulatory, educational, and institutional frameworks have not yet adequately addressed (Burhani, 2018; Ichwan et al., 2024; Zaid et al., 2022).

This transformation carries direct implications for Indonesia's national commitment to *moderasi beragama* (religious moderation), formally defined as a value orientation prioritizing balance, tolerance, and respect for diversity in religious practice and public life (Junaidi & Tanshzil, 2025). Digital spaces simultaneously present opportunities and risks for this moderation agenda: while digital dakwah can broaden access to inclusive and well-grounded religious guidance, it can also amplify narrow or exclusivist interpretations when driven by platform popularity logic rather than scholarly depth or communal deliberation (Hanipah et al., 2025; Ichwan et al., 2024; Rachman et al., 2025). The mediatization of religion, the process by which media logic increasingly shapes religious communication, organization, and meaning making, further embeds commercial and attentional incentives into the production of religious messages, creating structural tensions with the moderation values that Indonesia's plural society requires (AlMazaedh et al., 2026). What remains underexplored is the relational mechanism through which digital religious communication affects moderation, interfaith trust, and social cohesion specifically through the parasocial bonds between preachers and their followers.

A growing body of scholarship has addressed dimensions of this problem across separate fields, as synthesized in Table 1 below. Research on digital dakwah documents communication strategies, platform affordances, and youth spirituality but rarely connects these findings to moderation outcomes or plural society dynamics (Afidah et al., 2024; Febrianto et al., 2025; Taufikurrahman & Setyowati, 2024; Wahyuningsih et al., 2025). Parasocial relationship theory explains how audiences form one-sided bonds with media figures and how these bonds affect trust and behavior (Lou, 2022; Schramm et al., 2024; Sheng et al., 2025), but it has rarely been applied to religious authority in plural, democratic contexts. Digital Islam scholarship traces how religious authority is reimagined through aesthetics and platform fluency (Febrian, 2024; Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023; Zaid et al., 2022), while religious literacy research examines creator practices and audience vulnerabilities (Nafahatus et al., 2025; Rusadi & Syamsul, 2023; Sanityastuti et al., 2025). Studies on religious moderation and harmony exist (A'lan Tabaika & Roibin, 2025; Burhani, 2018; Hanung et al., 2025; Junaidi & Tanshzil, 2025; Rachman et al., 2025; Ridho et al., 2025), but they lack an integrated relational communication mechanism that connects parasocial dynamics to moderation and social cohesion outcomes. This fragmentation across disciplinary silos, communication studies, Islamic studies, and political sociology defines the central gap this article addresses and motivates its integrative methodological approach.

The central gap in existing scholarship is the absence of an integrated applied communication framework that explains how asymmetrical mediated bonds between digital da'i and followers generate specific forms of digitally mediated piety and how those relational dynamics affect religious moderation, interfaith discourse, and social cohesion in Indonesia's plural society. The concept of parasocial piety, proposed here as an original theoretical contribution, addresses this gap by connecting parasocial relationship theory, Digital Islam scholarship, and religious moderation theory into a single explanatory model. Unlike related constructs such as digital religiosity,

influencer religion, or mediated intimacy, parasocial piety specifically foregrounds the normative-moral dimension of parasocial bonds in religious life and their consequences for both individual epistemic autonomy and collective religious harmony in a plural democratic society. This conceptual move is necessary because existing frameworks digital religiosity, influencer religion, and mediated intimacy each capture a partial dimension of the phenomenon without integrating the normative and social-structural consequences that matter most for religious harmony in plural democratic societies. Parasocial piety, by contrast, is designed as an applied construct: it names both a psychological mechanism and a social risk, making it directly usable by researchers, policymakers, and media literacy educators working to strengthen religious moderation in Indonesia's increasingly mediatized public sphere (Junaidi & Tanszil, 2025; Rachman et al., 2025; Ridho et al., 2025).

To sharpen this distinction, four related but non-equivalent constructs warrant brief clarification. Digital religiosity broadly denotes the expression and practice of faith through digital tools and platforms, without specifying a relational mechanism linking audience and source (Zaid et al., 2022). Networked religion, as theorized by Campbell (2012), describes structural shifts in religious authority and community as they migrate onto networked platforms, emphasizing infrastructure and institutional change rather than the psychological bond between a specific figure and specific followers. Religious influencer research foregrounds the aesthetic and strategic self-presentation techniques, such as visual authority and curated intimacy, that individual figures use to build an audience (Febrian, 2024), but typically treat influence as a property of the creator rather than as a relationship co-produced with followers. Mediated intimacy captures the general affective closeness that any parasocial media relationship can generate, irrespective of content domain (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Stein et al., 2024). Parasocial piety differs from all four constructs by specifying the compound outcome that arises when accumulated parasocial bonds are directed at devotional and moral content: it names not merely that audiences feel close to a digital preacher, but that this closeness restructures how they evaluate religious truth claims, defer to authority, and engage across religious difference. In this sense, parasocial piety functions as an applied, harmony-relevant specification of these broader constructs rather than a redundant rebellion of any one of them.

This study addresses three research questions. First, through what communicative mechanisms and platform affordances does parasocial piety emerge in Indonesian digital dakwah? Second, how does parasocial piety affect religious moderation, inclusive religious literacy, and social cohesion in Indonesia's plural digital public sphere? Third, how can an operational framework for religious media literacy be formulated to address the applied communication dynamics shaped by parasocial piety? The article proceeds as follows: after presenting the theoretical framework and methodological design, it reports four major findings on the mechanisms and implications of parasocial piety, develops a discussion organized around religious moderation, digital interfaith discourse, social cohesion, and public religious literacy, offers policy recommendations directed at relevant institutional

actors, and concludes with theoretical and practical contributions relevant to scholars, policymakers, and religious communication practitioners.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Parasocial Interaction and Parasocial Relationship Theory

The concept of parasocial interaction (PSI) refers to the illusory sense of intimacy and face-to-face contact that audiences experience with media figures despite the absence of genuine reciprocity, a phenomenon extensively theorized and empirically reviewed across decades of communication scholarship (Dewanti et al., 2025; Schramm et al., 2024). Subsequent scholarship distinguished PSI as momentary feelings of interpersonal engagement during media exposure from parasocial relationship (PSR) as the durable affective bond formed through accumulated mediated contact over time (Sheng et al., 2025). In digital social media environments, interactive affordances such as comments, live acknowledgments, story reactions, and personalized responses intensify these processes by blurring the line between one-directional reception and active participation (Schramm et al., 2024; Stein et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024). Evidence from religious media contexts confirms that these accelerated parasocial bonds produce effects on trust and epistemic deference that differ qualitatively from traditional broadcast-era parasocial interaction, as religious social media users increasingly defer to and trust figures within bounded, identity-affirming communities, a pattern recently described as epistemic enclosure (Haq & Kwok, 2024). Digital self-presentation on platforms like TikTok and Instagram is structured around an imagined audience whose perceived expectations shape what content creators share and how they frame it (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Lou's (2022) concept of trans-parasocial relation further extends this framework by showing that followers collectively construct a figure's authority through commenting, sharing, tagging, and communal affirmation, making parasocial bonds socially expansive rather than purely personal. In religious digital communication, PSR consequently shapes not only emotional attachment but also moral epistemology, ritual behavior, and collective religious identity, with direct implications for the dynamics of plural society.

Religious Moderation, Digital Religion, and the Digital Public Sphere

Religious moderation, articulated in Indonesian national policy as *moderasi beragama* and in Islamic scholarly tradition as *wasatiyyah*, refers to a value stance characterized by balance, tolerance, and commitment to respectful coexistence in plural religious societies (Burhani, 2018; Junaidi & Tanshzil, 2025). In digital environments, moderation is challenged when platform affordances reward simplification, emotional intensity, and audience loyalty over nuanced contextual scholarship. The mediatization of religion, the process by which media logic reshapes religious organization, authority, and meaning, embeds commercial and attentional incentives into religious messaging that can gradually displace the deliberative epistemic norms on which moderation depends (AlMazaedh et al., 2026). This dynamic is consistent with Campbell's (2012) concept of networked religion, which identifies shifting authority as one of five structural traits distinguishing how religious

practice operates online: as religious community and discourse migrate to networked platforms, authority becomes less tied to institutional position and more dependent on relational visibility and audience engagement, a shift that parallels, and helps explain, the popularity-based legitimacy this article identifies as central to parasocial piety. Drawing on digital public sphere theory, a healthy digital religious public sphere requires epistemic accountability, plural participation, and open deliberation. When parasocial bonds substitute emotional proximity for deliberative engagement, they structurally undermine these conditions in ways that content regulation alone cannot address (AlMazaedh et al., 2026).

Social Cohesion, Plural Society, and Media Ethics

Social cohesion refers to the degree to which members of a society feel bound together through shared values, mutual trust, and civic belonging across differences of religion, ethnicity, and culture (AlMazaedh et al., 2026). In Indonesia's plural society, religious discourse in digital spaces directly affects intergroup trust, interfaith perception, and collective civic identity. The ethics of digital religious communication therefore extends beyond individual piety or platform compliance to encompass the communal consequences of how parasocial trust, image-based authority, and commodified piety circulate in shared digital environments. Media literacy, understood as the critical capacity to evaluate sources, contextualize claims, and recognize the relational dynamics that affect judgment, is a necessary condition for maintaining both epistemic autonomy and social cohesion in the digital religious public sphere (Arafah & Hasyim, 2023; Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022).

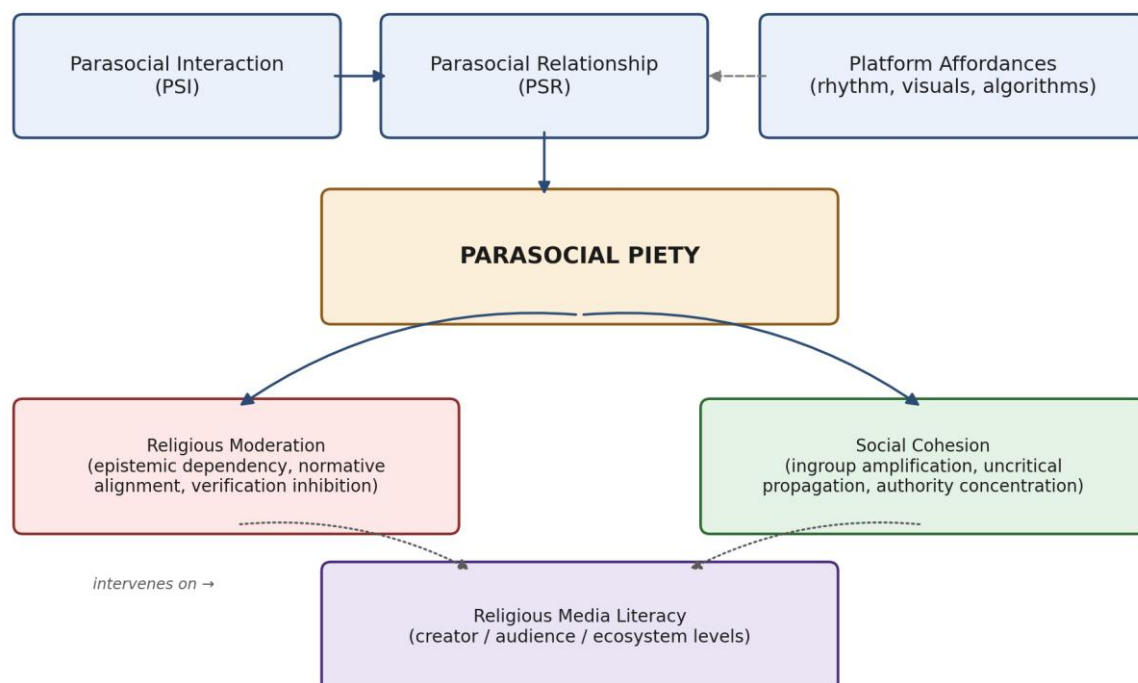


Figure 1. Conceptual Model Linking PSI, PSR, Parasocial Piety, Religious Moderation, and Social Cohesion

Source: Authors, 2026

METHOD

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative paradigm and employs an integrative literature review combined with thematic synthesis to develop an applied communication framework for analyzing parasocial piety. An integrative review is appropriate because the aim is not merely to summarize prior scholarship but to synthesize parallel strands of research, identify conceptual gaps, and formulate analytically grounded propositions with practical relevance for religious harmony in Indonesia's plural digital public sphere (Cho, 2022; Fain, 2024). The interpretive orientation is particularly well suited because parasocial piety is understood as a socially constructed communicative condition that emerges from interactions among platform affordances, preacher self-presentation, audience perception, authority structures, and literacy contexts. Accordingly, the research prioritizes conceptual integration, interpretive depth, and explanatory coherence over statistical generalization.

This study employed the SALSA (Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, Analysis) framework as a structured methodological approach to source identification, evaluation, and synthesis (Fain, 2024). Academic databases searched include Google Scholar, DOAJ, SINTA, and Scopus. Search queries combined the following keywords in English and Indonesian: "parasocial relationship," "parasocial interaction," "digital dakwah," "digital da'i," "Islamic influencer," "Digital Islam," "religious authority social media," "digital religious literacy," "literasi digital keagamaan," "moderasi beragama digital," "religious moderation Indonesia," "social cohesion religion Indonesia," "Islam commodification digital," and "religious influencer Indonesia." These combinations were designed to capture the intersection of parasocial communication, digital religion, religious moderation, and the dynamics of plural society.

Table 1.

Source Selection Procedure Based on SALSA Framework

Stage	Procedure	N (Sources)	Primary Exclusion Reasons
Search (initial identification)	Keyword search across Google Scholar, DOAJ, SINTA, Scopus (2021–2026)	N = 214	N/A
Deduplication	Removal of duplicate entries across databases	N = 187	Exact and near-duplicate records retrieved across multiple databases
Appraisal (title/abstract screening)	Screened for relevance to five thematic clusters; off topic excluded	Retained: 112 Excluded: 75	Off-topic sources; not linked to the five thematic clusters; non-

			religious social media studies
Synthesis (full-text eligibility)	Full text assessed for conceptual contribution, methodological clarity, and analytical depth	Eligible: 44 Excluded: 68	Insufficient conceptual or methodological depth; not peer-reviewed; conference abstracts without full text
Analysis (final corpus)	Sources meeting all inclusion criteria; all retained sources are peer-reviewed journal articles	N = 44 (44 journal articles)	N/A

Source: Authors, 2025

Sources were included if they: (1) were predominantly published between 2021 and 2026, with selective inclusion of seminal foundational works where no contemporary equivalent exists; (2) were directly relevant to at least one of the five thematic clusters identified in Table 1; (3) provided sufficiently clear conceptual arguments, methodological explanations, or empirical findings for synthesis; and (4) were accessible through academically credible platforms. Sources addressing religious moderation, social cohesion, or dynamics of plural society in digital religious communication were prioritized within *Harmoni's* editorial scope. Sources were excluded if they lacked substantive relevance to digital religion, parasociality, religious moderation, or media literacy, or if they did not provide sufficient analytical value for conceptual integration.

Data analysis was conducted through three stages of thematic synthesis: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In open coding, the study identified recurring concepts across the corpus, including intimacy cues, trust formation, visual authority, narrative self-disclosure, popularity-based legitimacy, commercialization, moderation risks, social cohesion effects, and institutional responses (for example, the open code “daily livestream greeting” captured recurring references to preachers naming followers during live sessions, and the open code “repentance narrative” captured recurring self-disclosure episodes describing personal moral struggle). In axial coding, these concepts were grouped into broader thematic categories: relational antecedents, parasocial piety mechanisms, moderation and cohesion implications, and literacy intervention factors. In selective coding, these categories were integrated into a coherent explanatory framework. Source triangulation was applied throughout, with major propositions drawn from multiple thematic clusters to ensure analytical robustness.

FINDING

The synthesis yields four major categories of findings. The first describes the communicative mechanisms through which parasocial piety emerges in digital

dakwah. The second and third address the implications of these mechanisms for religious moderation and social cohesion, respectively. The fourth documents the specific religious literacy vulnerabilities created by these dynamics.

Five Mechanisms of Parasocial Piety Formation in Digital Dakwah

The synthesis identifies five main mechanisms through which parasocial piety emerges in Indonesia's digital dakwah ecosystem. These mechanisms are not isolated variables but mutually reinforcing communicative processes that convert repeated media contact into emotional trust, normative influence, and visible performances of piety.

Table 2.

Five Mechanisms of Parasocial Piety Formation in Indonesian Digital Dakwah

Mechanism	Platform Affordances	Preacher Strategies	PSR Outcomes	Literacy and Moderation Risks	Implication for Religious Harmony
Micro-interactions & Presence Rhythm	Notifications, algorithms, repetitive formats	Daily posting, comment responses, interactive livestreaming	Perceived closeness, PSR interaction dimension	Uncritical consumption, religious echo chambers, reduced plural engagement	Concentrates followers' religious reference points around a single figure, narrowing the plural consultation that religious harmony requires.
Visual Authority Strategy	Stories, Reels, photo feeds	Close-up framing, closeness-distance duality, visual-textual contrast	Trust, managed admiration	Authority based on image rather than scholarly qualification	Shifts perceived legitimacy toward image rather than scholarly credential, weakening the deliberative basis of harmonious public

					religious discourse.
Narrative Self-Disclosure	Personal video formats, short stories	Repentance narratives, daily worship routines, everyday dilemmas	Similarity, identification	Acceptance of views without verification; normative alignment with preacher	Builds affective identification that can either humanize moderate teaching or normalize one figure's framing of interfaith and social issues.
Platformic Authority Transformation	Popularity algorithms, engagement metrics	Consistent presence, cross-influencer collaborations	Popularity-based legitimacy, single-source referencing	Lack of scholarly qualification evaluation; weakening of moderation norms	Erodes sanad-based accountability structures that historically anchored moderation, replacing them with popularity-based legitimacy.
Commodification of Piety	Platform monetization, live commerce, endorsements	Integration of messages and products, content standardization	Trust transferred to commercial recommendations	Hidden commercial bias, exploitation of PSR, commodification of religious harmony discourse	Risks converting religious harmony messaging into a monetized asset, obscuring commercial incentives behind trusted religious counsel.

Source: Authors, 2025

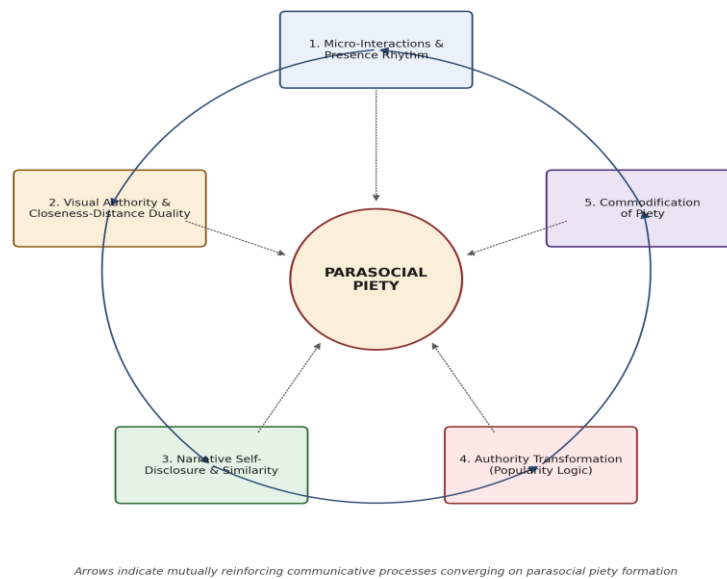


Figure 2. The Five Mutually Reinforcing Mechanisms of Parasocial Piety Formation

Source: Authors, 2025

Micro-Interactions and Presence Rhythm

The first mechanism is rhythmic digital presence reinforced by micro-interaction. When digital preachers post consistently, they appear in stories throughout the day, and host live sessions that make followers feel directly addressed, they generate a pattern of repeated mediated encounters that resemble everyday social familiarity (Febrianto et al., 2025; Taufikurrahman & Setyowati, 2024). Parasocial interaction becomes more likely under these conditions because each contact episode is not simply informational exposure but an affective event contributing incrementally to long-term relational attachment (Sheng et al., 2025). Selective responsiveness, namely naming a follower or answering a question during a livestream, momentarily makes the asymmetrical relationship feel reciprocal, substantially strengthening the closeness dimension of PSR (Dewanti et al., 2025). Algorithms deepen the process by rewarding prior engagement with greater exposure to the same figure, transforming occasional interest into patterned reliance and creating the relational concentration that is the foundation of parasocial piety (Famuji et al., 2025).

Visual Authority and the Closeness-Distance Duality

The second mechanism is the construction of visual authority through intimacy and selective distance. Indonesian religious influencers often rely on close-up framing, everyday settings, warm facial presentation, and informality to reduce symbolic distance and create the impression of relatability (Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018; Febrian, 2024). This closeness-distance duality is essential because exclusive ordinariness weakens reverence, while exclusive elevation weakens emotional accessibility. Successful digital da'i manage both simultaneously through approachable visual cues

combined with selective markers of authority such as serious captions, curated backgrounds, or religious symbols (Febrian, 2024). From an applied communication perspective, visual strategy serves as a mechanism for organizing trust rather than merely attention. Followers may begin to evaluate credibility based on image quality, emotional tone, and aesthetic coherence rather than substantive evidence or scholarly depth, thereby introducing a significant risk to the quality of moderate religious discourse.

Narrative Self-Disclosure and Similarity

The third mechanism is narrative self-disclosure. Digital preachers often share stories of repentance, moral struggle, family life, and personal growth that invite followers to identify with the figure emotionally and biographically (Afidah et al., 2024; Febrianto et al., 2025). This identification strengthens the similarity dimension of parasocial attachment because followers perceive the preacher as someone who has faced recognizable dilemmas and found meaningful religious answers (Dewanti et al., 2025). Narrative self-disclosure also functions as behavioral modeling: watching a preacher perform morning reflection, family study, or prayer discipline transforms the preacher into an embodied template for achievable piety in everyday life. This helps explain why emotionally resonant content often outperforms formal sermon formats among younger users, as the persuasive force lies not only in what is said but in how the message is woven into relatable narratives of aspiration and transformation.

Authority Transformation Through Popularity Logic

The fourth mechanism is the transformation of religious authority under the logic of platform popularity. In digital religious environments, the most visible figures are often those best adapted to platform speed, aesthetics, and engagement culture rather than those most rooted in traditional scholarly authority (Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023; Ichwan et al., 2024). Popularity functions as a proxy for legitimacy, especially when audiences face high information volume and low verification capacity (Rachman et al., 2025). The communicative consequence is figurative obedience: followers may treat the preacher as a primary or singular reference on matters that ideally require broader consultation, contextual interpretation, or comparison with alternative scholarly positions (Dewanti et al., 2025; Rusadi & Syamsul, 2023). As Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) show in the broader influencer context, perceived authenticity and visual intimacy can be more decisive for credibility judgments than actual expertise, a dynamic with heightened consequences in the normative-moral field of religious guidance.

Commodification of Piety

The fifth mechanism is commodification. Digital dakwah is embedded in monetized media systems where audience growth, endorsements, and product integration can become structural incentives in content production (A'lan Tabaika & Roibin, 2025; Raya, 2025). When parasocial bonds are already strong, commercial appeals may inherit the credibility of religious guidance: a follower who trusts the preacher's spiritual advice may also trust the preacher's product recommendation

without distinguishing moral authority from commercial persuasion (AlMazaedh et al., 2026; Raya, 2025). Commodification reinforces parasocial piety by stabilizing content production and deepening brand-like attachment, yet it weakens epistemic integrity when trust is redirected toward economic ends without transparency. This makes disclosure, source citation, and boundary-setting not optional ethical extras but core safeguards for the quality of religious discourse in plural democratic societies.

Parasocial Piety and Religious Moderation

The synthesis identifies three primary pathways through which parasocial piety creates structural risks for religious moderation in Indonesia's plural society. First, epistemic dependency: strong parasocial attachment encourages followers to rely on a single digital da'i as a primary source of religious guidance, reducing their engagement with the comparative and plural scholarly consultation that moderate religious interpretation requires (Ichwan et al., 2024; Rusadi & Syamsul, 2023). Second, normative alignment: parasocially bonded audiences are more likely to accept the preacher's interpretive positions, potentially including exclusivist or sectarian framings, because trust has been built through relational rather than scholarly criteria (Dewanti et al., 2025; Rachman et al., 2025). Third, verification inhibition: the emotional closeness of parasocial bonds reduces cognitive activation of critical evaluation habits, allowing content that would otherwise trigger source scrutiny to pass through affective trust instead (Dewanti et al., 2025; Hanifansyah et al., 2025).

Importantly, these risks are not deterministic. Digital dakwah delivered through strong parasocial bonds can also reinforce moderate values when the preacher is committed to inclusive, contextual, and plural religious communication (A'lan Tabaika & Roibin, 2025; Wahyuningsih et al., 2025). The dual character of parasocial piety, capable of amplifying moderate discourse while weakening critical engagement, means that its effects on religious moderation depend substantially on creators' ethics, institutional oversight, and audiences' literacy capacity. This dual character is precisely what makes an integrated framework addressing all three levels necessary.

Beyond individual epistemology, parasocial piety carries collective implications for social cohesion in Indonesia's plural society. Three patterns emerge from the synthesis. First, ingroup amplification: parasocial communities organized around shared admiration of a particular digital preacher can reinforce ingroup identity in ways that inadvertently harden perceived boundaries with other religious communities or interpretive traditions (Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023; Hanung et al., 2025). Second, uncritical propagation: when prominent preachers make statements about interfaith matters, socio-political events, or religious minorities, parasocially bonded followers tend to propagate these views through family and community networks without independent verification, multiplying the social reach of potentially divisive interpretations across plural social spaces (Arafah & Hasyim, 2023; Dewanti et al., 2025). Third, authority concentration: as platform logic concentrates attention around a small number of high-visibility figures, the diversity of religious reference points available in the communal religious landscape may narrow, reducing the plural

exposure that social cohesion in a multi-religious democratic society requires (Ichwan et al., 2024; Rachman et al., 2025).

Religious Literacy Vulnerabilities

The synthesis documents five specific literacy vulnerabilities intensified by parasocial piety dynamics, each with distinct implications for religious moderation and social cohesion. Table 4 presents these findings systematically.

Table 3.

Religious Literacy Vulnerabilities Created by Parasocial Piety

Literacy Risk	Mechanism	Key Evidence	Impact on Moderation and Social Cohesion
Reduced persuasion resistance	PSR trust transfer	Dewanti et al. (2025); Rusadi & Syamsul (2023).	Accelerates uncritical acceptance of exclusivist content; reduces moderation potential
Single-source dependency	Authority concentration via popularity	Ichwan et al. (2024); Rachman et al. (2025).	Narrows referential diversity; undermines plural society epistemic norms
Image-based authority	Visual intimacy strategy	Febrian (2024); Baulch & Pramiyanti (2018).	Disconnects authority from scholarly qualification; weakens deliberative religious discourse
Commercial trust transfer	Commodification of piety	Raya (2025); AlMazaedh et al. (2026).	Conflates spiritual and commercial legitimacy; exploits religious social cohesion for profit
Echo chamber formation	Algorithmic repetition and ingroup amplification	Hannan & Mursyidi (2023); Hanung et al. (2025).	Reduces exposure to plural interpretations; fragments religious public sphere

Source: Authors, 2025

DISCUSSION

Implications for Religious Moderation

The findings present a paradox for Indonesia's *moderasi beragama* agenda. Digital dakwah has expanded access to religious guidance and created new pathways for inclusive religious discourse to reach younger generations, yet the relational architecture of platform-based preaching systematically creates conditions that can weaken the epistemic habits on which genuine moderation depends. This article demonstrates that this is not primarily a problem of content, whether preachers explicitly advocate moderate positions, but of relational design: the communicative strategies that build parasocial intimacy simultaneously erode the comparative, plural, and critical engagement that moderate religious interpretation requires.

This finding extends Rachman et al. (2025) analysis of digital authority transformation by specifying the psychological mechanism linking platform popularity to epistemic dependency. It also connects Hannan & Mursyidi (2023)

structural account of authority fragmentation to the micro-dynamics of affective trust formation. Religious moderation programs in Indonesia's digital space must therefore address relational architecture, specifically how trust is built and how it affects critical evaluation, not merely content moderation. Emerging evidence from Indonesia's own digital dakwah ecosystem shows that multimodal strategies combining visual closeness, interactivity, and transparent religious framing can support rather than undermine moderation when designed with deliberate ethical intent Ridho et al. (2025).

This paradox becomes sharper when the five mechanisms identified in Finding 1 are read against the specific normative demands of *wasatiyyah*. *Wasatiyyah* does not merely require that a preacher avoid extremist content; it requires that the audience retain the interpretive freedom to weigh that preacher's view against others (Burhani, 2018; Junaidi & Tanshzil, 2025). Rhythmic presence and micro-interaction (Famuji et al., 2025) work directly against this requirement, not by introducing exclusivist doctrine but by making any single figure feel sufficient. A follower who receives daily, emotionally responsive contact from one *da'i* has progressively less practical incentive to seek a second opinion, regardless of how moderate that one *da'i*'s teaching may be. Moderation, in other words, can be content-compliant and structurally undermined at the same time, a distinction that existing Religion Ministries (Kementerian Agama) and monitoring frameworks are not well equipped to detect because they audit what is said rather than how singularly it is trusted.

A further complication concerns the asymmetry between moderate and exclusivist communicators in their capacity to exploit parasocial mechanisms. Visual authority strategies, narrative self-disclosure, and popularity-based legitimacy (Dewanti et al., 2025; Febrian, 2024; Rachman et al., 2025) are normatively neutral techniques: they intensify whatever message rides on them. Ridho et al. (2025) evidence that multimodal closeness can support moderation when paired with deliberate ethical intent demonstrates the mechanisms are not inherently corrosive, but it also implies an asymmetry of effort. Producing transparent, citation-rich, source-plural content while maintaining the rhythmic intimacy that sustains parasocial bonds is more demanding than producing emotionally resonant content alone, since plural referencing can interrupt the very sense of singular closeness that drives attachment (Schramm et al., 2024; Sheng et al., 2025). Under platform incentive structures that reward engagement velocity, the easier path is structurally favored, which suggests that voluntary ethical adoption among creators, while valuable, is unlikely to be sufficient without institutional incentives that make transparency and reach mutually reinforcing rather than competing goals.

Implications for Digital Interfaith Discourse and Plural Society

Parasocial piety has particular significance for Indonesia, a constitutionally plural society where the coexistence of diverse religious communities depends in part on the quality of intergroup religious communication. When digital religious authority becomes concentrated in a small number of high-parasocial-bond figures, the epistemic diversity of the Islamic public sphere narrows, potentially reducing the range of interpretations available to followers as they navigate interfaith matters.

Analysis of digital discourse patterns in Indonesia further shows that when parasocially trusted figures use language framing outgroups negatively, these framings circulate rapidly through bonded follower networks and can systematically narrow the space for inclusive religious dialogue (Hanipah et al., 2025). The trans-parasocial dimension identified by Lou (2022) is especially consequential in this context: followers do not simply receive content but publicly validate and amplify it through likes, shares, and community propagation, making individual parasocial trust a communally consequential phenomenon. The findings thus support the argument that digital religious communication policy in plural societies must attend to structural features of the media ecology, including authority concentration, algorithmic amplification, and relational trust dynamics, rather than focusing exclusively on individual content instances.

This communal amplification dynamic also reshapes how interfaith friction, once it appears, is processed and resolved. In offline religious institutions, contested statements typically pass through layers of communal deliberation, namely peer scholars, organizational hierarchies in Nahdlatul Ulama or Muhammadiyah, and local majelis taklim, before reaching wide audiences (Burhani, 2018; Nur Rifqah & Maksum, 2024). Trans-parasocial circulation compresses this process.

A single livestream comment or short-form clip can reach a parasocially bonded audience of millions within hours, with the propagating followers acting less as independent evaluators than as extensions of the original figure's perceived authority (Dewanti et al., 2025; Lou, 2022). The interfaith risk this creates is not necessarily that preachers intend to inflame intergroup tension, but that the infrastructure of parasocial trust removes the deliberative friction that previously slowed and moderated the spread of contentious framings, a structural feature platform content moderation, which screens individual posts rather than relational network dynamics, is poorly positioned to address (AlMazaedh et al., 2026).

At the same time, the same trans-parasocial infrastructure that narrows discourse can, under different conditions, widen it. Ridho et al. (2025) analysis of moderate da'wah on Indonesian YouTube channels indicates that when high-visibility figures deliberately model cross-referencing, interfaith courtesy, and contextual nuance, parasocial amplification carries those norms outward with the same velocity that otherwise spreads exclusivist framings. This suggests the policy lever is not to suppress parasocial reach, which is neither feasible nor, given its demonstrated capacity to broaden access to religious guidance, desirable, but to shift the population of high-reach figures toward those whose communicative practice already embodies plural engagement. This reframes digital religious harmony policy away from individual content moderation and toward a more structural question of which creators receive platform-amplified visibility in the first instance.

Implications for Social Cohesion

The findings indicate that parasocial piety functions as both a social cohesion factor and an individual religiosity factor. Chan et al. (2006) define social cohesion as requiring not only shared values but mutual trust across group boundaries, a condition that can be undermined when parasocial religious communities operate as

inward-facing emotional ecosystems with reduced engagement across interpretive differences. The ingroup amplification, uncritical propagation, and authority concentration patterns identified in Finding 3 represent structural pressures on social cohesion that existing moderation approaches focused on content removal or individual awareness campaigns do not address. Addressing these pressures requires intervention at the ecosystem level: institutional norms, platform policies, and educational frameworks that create structural incentives for plural religious reference-seeking and cross-community epistemic engagement. The cohesion risk identified here is distinct from, though related to, the religious moderation risk discussed above. Moderation concerns the interpretive content to which an individual is exposed; cohesion concerns the structure of trust between groups, regardless of the content of any single interpretation.

A parasocial community can, in principle, hold entirely moderate theological positions while still functioning as a closed cohesion unit if its members' primary religious reference point is a single figure whose audience rarely intersects, in any meaningful communicative sense, with audiences oriented around other figures or traditions (Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023; Hanung et al., 2025). This is consistent with broader findings on digital religion in platform societies, where algorithmic recommendation systems tend to consolidate audiences around high-engagement figures rather than distributing attention across a plural set of references, producing what AlMazaedh et al. (2026) describe as algorithmically reinforced publics whose internal cohesion increases as their connection to adjacent publics weakens. This distinction has practical consequences for intervention design.

Programs aimed at improving content moderation, such as flagging exclusivist statements, will not address audience fragmentation if the underlying parasocial architecture remains intact, since followers who disengage from one flagged figure typically migrate to another high-parasocial-bond figure rather than diversifying their reference set (Ichwan et al., 2024; Rachman et al., 2025). Effective cohesion-building interventions therefore need to operate directly on referential diversity, for instance by structuring religious education and digital literacy curricula around the practice of consulting multiple, demographically and interpretively varied digital *da'i* on the same question, rather than relying on individual figures, however moderate, to model plurality unprompted. This positions referential diversity training as a distinct intervention target, alongside rather than subsumed within content-based moderation programs.

Implications for Public Religious Literacy

The present findings challenge narrow conceptions of digital religious literacy as purely technical or procedural competence. The literature strongly suggests that people may know that verification matters and still fail to verify when a trusted figure feels morally safe, emotionally close, or communally affirmed (Ichwan et al., 2024; Rusadi & Syamsul, 2023; Sanityastuti et al., 2025). This study therefore proposes relational literacy as a necessary extension of digital literacy: the capacity to recognize how mediated closeness itself affects judgment, trust, and vulnerability to both misinformation and normative narrowing. Relational literacy is not anti-preacher but

pro-discernment, as it equips followers to maintain the epistemic autonomy that moderate, plural, and civically engaged religious practice requires (A'lan Tabaika & Roibin, 2025; Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022). This distinction matters because existing digital literacy curricula in Indonesian Islamic education, including those reviewed by Rusadi & Syamsul (2023), are predominantly built around source-checking skills: verifying a speaker's credentials, cross-referencing a claim, identifying manipulated media. These skills assume a verification decision is primarily cognitive. The present synthesis instead suggests that for parasocially bonded audiences, the decisive barrier to verification is often motivational rather than cognitive: the follower may possess adequate technical skill but lack the motivation to apply it precisely because applying it would mean treating a trusted figure with the same scrutiny as a stranger, an act that can feel like a betrayal of the relationship itself (Dewanti et al., 2025; Hanifansyah et al., 2025). Relational literacy curricula would therefore need to address this affective dimension directly, for example, by normalizing source-checking as an expression of care for a preacher's credibility rather than as suspicion of the preacher's integrity, and by reframing verification as relationally congruent rather than relationally threatening.

Comparison with Previous Studies

Compared with studies focused on the effectiveness of digital dakwah, this article offers a relational account of why certain formats produce lasting influence. Research shows that short videos, interactive sessions, and youth-relevant communication increase engagement, but the present analysis demonstrates that their impact depends partly on how they cultivate ongoing parasocial attachment rather than merely communicating information efficiently (Febrianto et al., 2025; Wahyuningsih et al., 2025). Effectiveness is therefore relational before it is simply metric. Compared with visual authority studies, this article adds a psychological explanation to aesthetic findings: Febrian (2024) account of close-up intimacy and controlled distance is extended by linking those strategies to specific PSR dimensions: closeness, trust, similarity, and interaction, and to their moderation implications. Compared with audience literacy studies, the present article argues that low verification is not only a skill gap but a trust-conditioned pattern: Rusadi & Syamsul (2023) documentation of weak cross-checking habits is explained here through the mechanism by which parasocial trust suppresses critical activation even among digitally competent users.

This article's account also departs in a specific way from Rachman et al. (2025) post-normal times analysis of digital authority transformation. Rachman et al. locate the driver of change in authority at the level of epistemic order, arguing that social media disrupts the traditional sanad-based transmission of religious knowledge by introducing competing, non-credentialed sources of legitimacy. That account explains why authority shifts but is comparatively silent on why audiences accept the shift, that is, why followers do not simply treat a non-credentialed figure as less trustworthy by default. The parasocial mechanism proposed here supplies that missing link: audiences accept popularity-based legitimacy not because they have abandoned the value of scholarly credentialing in the abstract, but because sustained parasocial

contact generates a felt sense of the figure's trustworthiness that operates independently of, and can override, credential-based evaluation (Dewanti et al., 2025; Rusadi & Syamsul, 2023). The two accounts are therefore complementary rather than competing: Rachman et al. explain the structural opportunity for authority transformation, while the present synthesis explains the psychological mechanism that makes audiences willing to ratify it.

A second point of critical departure concerns AlMazaedh et al. (2026) treatment of mediatization, which frames the embedding of commercial and attentional incentives into religious messaging as a largely institutional and platform-level process, namely how algorithmic publics are assembled and sustained. The present findings suggest this institutional account, while accurate at the system level, understates the degree to which individual audience members actively participate in sustaining commodification through trust transfer, as documented in Finding 1's discussion of commodification of piety (A'lan Tabaika & Roibin, 2025; Raya, 2025). Where AlMazaedh et al. (2026) position the audience as relatively passive recipients of an algorithmically structured environment, the parasocial piety framework positions the audience's own relational trust as an active, necessary input into the commercial logic, since commodification only functions as a credibility transfer mechanism if the underlying parasocial bond is already strong. This reframes commodification as a co-produced outcome of platform architecture and audience attachment rather than a platform-side phenomenon alone, with corresponding implications for where intervention should be targeted: audience-facing relational literacy becomes as important as platform-facing disclosure policy, not a secondary consideration.

Applied Communication Framework

The central applied contribution is a three-level ethical framework for religious media literacy, consisting of creator literacy, audience literacy, and ecosystem literacy, now explicitly extended to address the dimensions of religious harmony and social cohesion. Table 5 presents this framework.

Table 5.
Applied Ethical Framework for Religious Media Literacy and Harmony

Level	Actor	Core Principle	Key Practices	Harmony Contribution	Priority Actions
Creator	Digital da'i, religious account managers	Empowering communication	Source transparency, plural references, opinion vs. ruling distinction, commercial disclosure	Preserves epistemic plurality; supports inclusive religious discourse	Followers actively verify; diversify religious references; relational ethics training

Audience	Followers, digital religious content users	Independent epistemic evaluation	PSR literacy, separate affection from epistemology, cross-reference seeking	Strengthens individual moderation competence and plural-society literacy	Improved verification habits; no single-figure dependency; relational literacy curriculum
Ecosystem	Islamic organizations, educational institutions, digital platforms, Kemenag	Communal literacy norms for plural society	Relational literacy curriculum, creator awareness campaigns, transparency platform policies, moderation programs	Builds structural support for religious harmony and social cohesion	Higher creator transparency standards; moderation-aligned platform policies; interagency collaboration

Source: Authors, 2025

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that parasocial piety is a productive applied communication construct for understanding how asymmetrical mediated bonds between digital da'i and their followers shape religious behavior, authority, and discourse in Indonesia's plural digital public sphere. The synthesis identifies five mutually reinforcing mechanisms through which parasocial piety is produced (Figure 2), three pathways through which it can weaken religious moderation, namely epistemic dependency, normative alignment, and verification inhibition, and three pressures through which it can weaken social cohesion, namely ingroup amplification, uncritical propagation, and authority concentration. Because religious moderation is both a theological value and a national policy commitment in Indonesia's plural society, these dynamics extend beyond individual religious experience into the quality of collective religious discourse and the digital public sphere as a whole.

The theoretical contributions of this article are threefold. First, it extends parasocial relationship theory into the normative-moral field of religious life, showing that PSR structures moral epistemology and collective religious identity, not only preference and loyalty. Second, it enriches Digital Islam scholarship by specifying the relational mechanism, namely platform-native strategies translating into durable trust and epistemic dependency, that underlies authority transformation. Third, it integrates parasocial theory, Digital Islam, religious moderation theory, and media literacy into a single applied model, introducing relational literacy as a necessary dimension of digital religious competence. Practically, the three-level ethical

framework and institutional recommendations target the relational architecture of digital religious communication rather than content regulation alone.

This section outlines policy and practice recommendations directed at five key actors in Indonesia's digital religious ecosystem: all grounded in the study's three-level ethical framework. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kementerian Agama/Kemenag) is urged to embed digital relational literacy into the *moderasi beragama* program, develop ethical guidelines for *dakwah* communication, create a voluntary *da'i* credential system, and expand monitoring to track authority concentration and relational dependency, not just harmful content. Islamic educational institutions (UIN, IAIN, STAIN) are called upon to develop relational literacy curricula that cover PSI/PSR dynamics and cross-referencing skills, while producing accessible, moderate content and community engagement programs. Digital platforms are asked to introduce creator disclosure features, distinguish opinion from religious ruling, label sponsored content, and review algorithms that concentrate authority. Religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah should promote pluralistic reference-seeking and extend interfaith dialogue into digital spaces to counter ingroup amplification. Finally, madrasah teachers and *penyuluh agama* are positioned as frontline implementers who can teach relational literacy directly to communities and serve as local conduits for the proposed monitoring mechanism, with their high face-to-face trust making them a particularly effective multiplier for the other recommendations.

The principal limitation of this study is its reliance on secondary literature rather than primary empirical data from actual followers, content archives, or platform analytics. The five mechanisms and the theoretical framework are derived through interpretive synthesis and therefore require testing against primary data. Future research should test these propositions against primary data through longitudinal PSR surveys, comparative platform studies, and quasi-experimental literacy interventions, and should extend the framework cross-demographically within Indonesia and comparatively to other Muslim-majority plural societies, such as Malaysia, Pakistan, or Turkey, to assess its broader relevance to digital religious harmony as a global governance and communication ethics challenge.

AI DISCLOSURE

ChatGPT, an Artificial Intelligence (AI) tool, was used solely to assist with grammar checking and language refinement in this manuscript. The authors are fully responsible for the content, analysis, and conclusions of the study.

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