Evolving Dynamics of Moderate Islamic Discourse on Indonesian Social Media

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Abstract

Social media not only creates a new public sphere for the expression of religious activities but also serves as a contested arena for religious discourse. In Indonesia, one of the key discourses under contention is moderate Islamic discourse. This article addresses two primary questions: First, what forms does contested moderate Islamic discourse take on social media, and what strategies are employed in these contests?. Second, what factors contribute to the emergence of these contestations surrounding moderate Islamic discourse on social media?. Using Fairclough's critical discourse analysis as a theoretical framework, this research explores qualitative data gathered through the observation of YouTube videos. The findings indicate that the contestation of moderate Islamic discourse on YouTube occurs not only between traditional and new religious authorities, as is often assumed, but also among traditional religious authorities themselves. These groups compete to articulate the true and ideal meaning of moderate Islam. The contestation is driven by a combination of ideological, economic, political, and socio-cultural factors that influence the digital sphere in Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

The era of digital Islam not only creates new public spaces to express religious activities, but also becomes a space for contestation of religious discourse (Mandaville, 1999). Social media, for example, has transformed into a space for competition over the interpretation of the Qur'an between exclusive and inclusive Islamic groups (Fikriyati & Fawaid, 2020). The digital space has indeed opened up space for the democratization of religious authority, such as gender equality in the interpretation of religious texts on social media, but it has also become a challenge for traditional religious authorities (Lukman, 2018). This challenge often gives rise to a contestation of religious discourses between traditional religious authorities and new religious authorities. However, over time, this has also emerged new face of contestation within the same camp. One notable instance is among traditional religious authorities themselves. One of the religious discourses contested within the traditional religious authority circles is the religious moderation discourse. This contestation arises from the desire to define the ideal meaning of religious moderation itself.

The study of moderate Islamic discourse has been widely studied in various countries. Rutherford (Rutherford, 2006), Somer (Somer, 2007), Nakhleh (Nakhleh, 2009), and Achilov (Achilov & Sen, 2017) shows a trend in the relationship between moderate Islamic discourse and political issues. In Indonesia, researches on moderate Islamic discourse in the last ten years have also been done. Putra (Putra & Sukabdi, 2014), Zuhdi (Zuhdi, 2018), Subandi (Subandi et al., 2020) and Alama (Alama, 2020) emphasizes the concept of moderate Islam as a narrative counter to the discourse of fundamentalism, radicalism and extremism. The second tendency, as shown in the articles of Syarif (Syarif, 2020), Nasir (Nasir & Rijal, 2021), Anshori (Anshori et al., 2021) and Kanafi (Kanafi et al., 2021), focuses on searching for the ideal pattern for implementing moderate

Islam in Indonesia. Several scholars also specifically study the concept of contestation and the issue of moderate Islam. Andriasanti shows the contestation between Indonesia and Malaysia in showing their identity as countries supporting moderate Islam. Asrori examines the contestation between moderate Islamic and transnational Islam organizations. However, this research still focuses on real-world public spaces.

For studies in the digital space, Schmidt shows how digital users attempt to use popular memes of several traditional religious authority figures to stem radical Islamic narratives on social media (Schmidt, 2018). Meanwhile, Akmaliah researches the religious authority of moderate mass organizations in the digital space compared to extremist groups (Akmaliah, 2020). Wildan, using sociolinguistic approach, examines the contestation among fundamental, moderate and liberal groups on Facebook (Wildan, 2017). Khisbiyah and Thoyibi show the contestation of Islamic discourse on the websites of mainstream Islamic organizations in Indonesia (Khisbiyah, 2019). Almost in line with the research above, Hidayatullah and Abdullah also investigate the contestation of *wasathiyyah* and *kaffah* Islamic ideologies in online media (Hidayatullah & Abdullah, 2020). Even though they have studied the contestation of Islamic ideology and moderate Islamic discourse with extremist groups on social media, the articles above emphasize aspects of the conflict between fundamentalist and inclusive groups. Moderate Islamic discourse itself as an arena of centestation has not been widely studied. For this reason, this article specifically positions the concept of moderate Islam as an arena of contesting groups.

This article answers two main questions. First, what are the forms and strategies for contesting moderate Islamic discourse on social media? Second, why is moderate Islamic discourse contested on social media? This article describes the epistemological construction and dynamics between contesting parties in moderate Islamic discourse on social media. The author also analyzes the motives, ideologies and factors that cause the emergence of contestation. This specifically uses virtual data from the YouTube social media platform. YouTube has become a new space that is used to record, share, display, or mediatize moderate Islamic discourse without boundaries of space and time (Van House & Churchill, 2008). On the other hand, YouTube users in Indonesia have reached 139 million users, as well as becoming a media website the most visited social media as of February 2022 (Kemp, 2022). Thus, this platform has an important role in constructing certain Islamic discourses for today's digital society.

The debate surrounding moderate Islamic discourse extends beyond the divide between fundamentalist and inclusive groups; it also involves traditional scholars who are striving to articulate the concept of moderate Islam. This contestation has transitioned from the physical public sphere to the digital realm of social media, leading to a redefinition of religious authority in this new context. Notably, YouTube has emerged as an ideological tool for constructing a widely accepted definition of Islam. This article explores the extent of the contestation over moderate Islamic discourse on YouTube and its ramifications for the evolution of Islamic thought in Indonesia during this age of digital Islam.

METHODS

This article focuses on analyzing the contestation of moderate Islamic discourse by using virtual data as primary sources. The data is videos about moderate Islamic narratives on YouTube. Data search was carried out using a search engine on the www.youtube.com page with the help of TubeBuddy software (https://www.tubebuddy.com) to get a more accurate video population. Primary data was obtained by using the keyword "moderate Islam" in the search column. Apart from that, secondary data as support was obtained by using two other keywords in the video search, namely "Islam wasathiyah" and "religious moderation". The virtual data is focused on videos uploaded by several channels, both for and against the narrative of moderate Islam.

Data collection techniques include documentation and observation (Creswell, 2014). Primary data collection was carried out by investigating the video population by searching for the main keyword, namely /moderate Islam/. After that, researchers use two secondary keywords in the

search, namely /Islam wasathiyah/ and /religious moderation/. Initial search results show that the number of videos related to these keywords is /moderate Islam/ 26 videos, /religious moderation/ 30 videos, and /Islam wasathiyah/ 50 videos. The scope of the results was then narrowed again based on the categories of groups contesting from parties who were pro, but had different views.

To carry out data reduction, researchers use document analysis techniques which can also be used for internet electronic material, namely skimming, reading, and interpretation. The skimming process is carried out by quickly observing moderate Islamic videos to determine videos that are directly related to the research material object. The reading process was carried out by carefully observing the results of the selected videos to capture narratives of contestation of moderate Islamic discourse. The interpretation process is carried out by interpreting narratives related to categories in the space for moderate Islamic discourse. These three processes are used to select videos before entering the in-depth data analysis process.

The data analysis process uses content, thematic, and critical discourse analysis. Content analysis is used to organize information into categories of forms, processes and contestation strategies carried out in moderate Islamic discourse. Thematic analysis is used to identify patterns of small themes that emerge when observing data related to moderate Islamic contestation. Because this research involves object in the form of discourse, the analysis technique also involves critical discourse analysis. For Fairclough, discourse and social change are always linked. Discourse is a social practice so there is a dialectical relationship between discursive practice, identity and social relations. According to Fairclough, this analysis looks at three dimensions, namely micro or text analysis, meso or analysis of discursive practices, and macro or socio-cultural analysis. These three dimensions are used to view virtual data on moderate Islamic discourse. First, descriptive analysis with (micro) linguistic tools (Fairclough, 1992). The object is moderate Islamic narratives conveyed by both contesting parties.The aim is to see patterns in conveying the narrative. Second, interpretive (meso) analysis (Fairclough, 2003) to reveal the content of ideological elements, interests and motivations in the narrative of moderate Islam. The object is the sources used to explain the pro- and contra- of the term moderate Islam from religious text sources, as well as other sources. Third, explanatory (macro) analysis (Fairclough, 2012) by looking at the sociocultural context that underlies the contestation of moderate Islamic discourse. The object is the social background context that appears in the moderate Islamic narrative because the production of discourse as text is always based on the social context in which the text is produced and distributed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Contesting Representation, Relation, and Identity of Moderate Islam

Contestation, according to Wiener, means: (1) social practice by challenging norms and refusing to apply them, and (2) critical mode with critical involvement in a discourse about principles, rules, and values (Wiener, 2017). From this definition, the contestation meant in this article is a form of critical thinking on the principles, rules and values of moderate Islam that have been advocated so far, as well as looking at justification and opposition from groups competing in the arena of moderate Islamic discourse. Through moderate Islamic discourse, the contesting groups try to strengthen their identity and are oriented toward social change (Agar et al., 1990).

In textual or micro-analysis, there are three things to be revealed: representation, relationships, and identity. Representation takes the form of diction of words, sentences, and paragraphs related to individuals, groups, and society related to moderate Islamic discourse (Fairclough, 1992). The first pattern of representation is related to the intention behind the way the two groups define the concepts of moderate Islam and religious moderation. In the video "Religious Moderation" of NU Online channel, the speaker conveys the definition of religious moderation as, "...we are in the middle, not leaning to the right neither leaning to the left...". He then legitimizes it by the phrase *ummatan wasaṭan* of Surah Al-Baqarah verse 143 (Online, 2021). Moderate is also interpreted as being considerate of both fellow Muslims and non-Muslims. The Indonesian Ministry of Religion's YouTube channel also displays a video with the title "Moderasi Beragama–Eps 1:

"Religion is...". This video shows the actor, LHS, who was Minister of Religion at that time. This video is decorated with scenic images and music and shows a compilation of places of worship and worship activities of various religions in Indonesia. This is to represent that religious moderation is respecting religious diversity (Setinawati et al., 2025). LHS emphasizes, *"Religion is spreading peace, spreading love, anytime, anywhere, to anyone"*. This narrative illustrates that moderation means respecting adherents of other religions. In the video, LHS uses a *peci* 'cap' and *sarung* as a representation of traditional Islam (RI, 2018). Apart from that, the definition of religious moderation is also associated with other keywords, such as */tasāmuḥ/, /tawassuṭ/, and /tawāzun/* (Online, 2019b).

Figure 1. The First Group of Traditional Religious Authorities Contesting

For another contesting group, such as BY's video uploaded by the Al-Bahjah TV channel, moderation is defined as, *"A movement to reduce violence or extremism or cruelty, If that is the meaning, we agree..."*. In his view, if this is a movement to stop violence over religion, this concept is acceptable (Al-Bahjah TV, 2021). HFZ also begins by describing, *"...moderates are people who accept pluralism, feminism, gender equality, democracy, and humanism..."*. He understands that moderate is a Western word and therefore refuses to assosiate it with *waşaṭiyyah* word, *"I don't think it can be translated with Islam waşaṭiyyah because it is like leftist Islam, liberal Islam"* (AQL Islamic Center, 2021). He argues that religious moderation as part of the government program, *"Religious moderation is a government project...and is an SOP for educational institutions"*. HFZ understands moderation is *"... our attitude as Muslims is not to disturb other religions, not to attack, not to destroy. However, we cannot say that moderation is respectful, because one religion may not respect other religions..."*(Islamic Center, 2021) This means, for HFZ, moderation does not interfere with other religions, but must not accept the truth of other religions. He also criticizes moderation that adheres to a nihilism view of truth which is influenced by the views of relativism and post-modernism (Jun, 2014). This group intends to give the impression that there has been a deviation in the concept of moderate Islam and that this concept is not rooted in Islam itself.

Figure 2. The Second Group of Traditional Religious Authorities Contesting

Second, representation is related to how both parties depict other parties (Loshitzky, 1997). The first tries to label right groups, such as extremism, fundamentalism, and radicalism, with a negative image. The actor uses the sentence, *"Leaning to the right is a religious understanding that is too radical, too extreme... An understanding that is too exclusive".* On the other hand, they also described leaning to the left as being too liberal. Another video provides a narrative that a right Islamic groups are associated with rejection of local traditions, *"... the selebrition of the Prophet's birthday is heresy, tahlilan together is heresy, pilgrimage to the graves is heretics"* or with ideological terms, *"They likes to call others by infidels".* In another video of the Indonesian Ministry of Religion channel, the actor gives another group with the extreme label, *"Extreme in the sense that he exaggerates in claiming truth in religious interpretation"* (RI, 2021a). However, in another video of the Indonesian Ministry of Religion channel, the right group is narrated in a more neutral way, *"When people wear cingkrang (tight trousers), oh, they are (accused) of being radical, people wear veils, oh, that's radical. We must not be careless. It could be an authentic religious expression".* From this, it can be seen that there is a different tendency between the NU Online YouTube channel and the Indonesian Ministry of Religion in depicting the right group.

On the other party, the speaker agrees with the concept of moderation as a movement to minimize violence in the name of religion. However, he views that the steps so far taken by those promoting and implementing moderation have not been appropriate, *"...those calling for the moderation are not intelligent enough. They are cutting others. They want to make peace outside with people of different religions, but causing damage within the religion. Those who are calling for moderation of this religion are actually tearing Islam apart"* (Al-Bahjah TV, 2021). Another speaker says, *"People who are not tolerant of other religions are just a few people. Those are individuals. Don't then condemn all Muslims as radicals, finally, regulations will be lowered for all Muslims..."* (Islamic Center, 2021). This statement is part of the speaker's criticism towards the government's religious moderation program.

The second group uses the phrases /dishonest people/, /modernist/, /critical/, /tolerant/, /communist/, /humanism/, /post-modernism/, /relativism/, and /loyal to religion outside, but messing with own religion/ is a criticism to the first group which is considered too inclusive towards adherents of other religions. The target of this criticism is aimed, among other things, at people who voice liberal Islam. Apart from that, the use of the phrase, /The one who is wrong, the one who orders it, the one who invites gatherings to talk about religious moderation/ is implicitly a form of criticism of government policies regarding the government's religious moderation programs (Al-Bahjah TV, 2021). The video uploaded by the AQL Islamic Center YouTube channel featured speaker HFZ with the video title Deviations in Religious Moderation. The speaker emphasized that

moderation also has political interests and moderation is not related to *wasaṭiyyah* (Islamic Center, 2021).

The third representation is how the two parties depict the social, economic, political, cultural, and religious conditions (Keleş et al., 2024) of Indonesian society. The first party, as in the Indonesian Ministry of Religion's video, represents the diverse social conditions of Indonesian society. The speaker tries to build the argument that religious moderation does not come from the government, but from society, *"Religious moderation actually comes from society, not from the state, not from the government. Indonesian people are known for not being excessive in their religion. So, to become a common property, the Indonesian Ministry of Religion is promoting a religious moderation program to organize the very diverse religious life in Indonesia"* (RI, 2021a). The speaker wants to illustrate that religious moderation has become a value that resides amid public. Another speaker on the Indonesian Ministry of Religion's podcast, KA, also describes the pluralism of Indonesian society, *"The most fundamental issue in our country, Indonesia, which is very diverse is the issue of harmony...and religious moderation is very relevant to overcome these problems and challenges"* (Kemenag-RI, 2021). Thus, in this first party's view, the social and cultural conditions of society strongly support this concept of moderation (Sender et al., 2023).

The second aspect of micro-analysis is relationship. If representation emphasizes how individuals, groups, or events are depicted in moderate Islamic discourse, relationship analysis emphasizes how actors or speakers and the people behind digital media are interconnected and displayed in the text. This also looks at how the speakers and actors narrate their relationship in the narrative and texts displayed in the video (Loshitzky, 1997). The actors or figures who speak must be seen in the context of their relationship with moderate Islamic discourse, certain groups, religious organizations, society, and government agencies, as well as their ideal views regarding the concept of moderation that should be implemented.

In this case, the first group explains the relationship between the concept of religious moderation and government programs, *"Religious moderation has been included in the national medium-term development plan for 2020-2024. All ministry and institutional programs will be characterized by religious moderation"* (RI, 2021a). The actor tries to explain his relationship as part of the Ministry of Religion which carries the religious moderation program. Apart from relations with the government, the actor narrates the relationship between the concept of moderation and the existence of local culture, traditions, and pluralistic society in Indonesia. He also explains that his relationship is to respect adherents of local beliefs and religions. He also explains the relationship between the concept of moderation and the context of the relationship between religion and the state, *"Religious moderation must also be understood in the context of the relationship between religion and the state. Indonesia is not a country that bases its ideology on one religion. It's not an Islamic state"* (RI, 2021a). More firmly, the actor explains the relationship between the concept of moderation and the role of the state that the state has a role in regulating religious affairs in the public sphere, *"When religion is in the public sphere, the state must be present to provide facilities and provide space...the state accommodates religion"* (Kemenag-RI, 2021). The actor as a representative of the Ministry of Religion firmly identifies that Indonesian ministry of religion is a ministry for all religions (RI, 2021a).

The second group, as in Al-Bahjah TV's video, shows the audience's relationship with the concept of religious moderation which is considered to limit da'wah activities. It means that the audience in the video expresses objections to the government regarding its religious moderation program. Apart from that, the uploaded video shows the hierarchical relationship between the questioner or audience and the *kiai* or resource persons in a recitation. This hierarchy can be seen from the audience sitting below and the *kiai* sitting in chairs with turbans, robes and several books in front of him. The media tries to portray that the *kiai* has religious authority to answer questions related to religious moderation from the audience (Al-Bahjah TV, 2022).

The third aspect of textual or micro-analysis is identity (Keleş et al., 2024). This aspect looks at how actors and speakers display and narrate their identity, as well as how they identify

themselves with the issue of moderate Islam (Misbah & Setyaningrum, 2022). In the first group, for example, the video uploaded by the Indonesian Ministry of Religion's YouTube channel features OF as a speaker. In the video, he identifies himself as chair of the Ministry of Religion's Religious Moderation Working Group and Expert Staff of the Ministry of Religion for Information and Communication Management (RI, 2021a). From this, it can be seen that the actor builds narratives that he is as part of the government and the religious moderation program is part of official government policy which is continued by Indonesian Ministry of Religion. He identifies himself as a person who rejects violence in the name of religion, extremism, radicalism, and fundamentalism in religion. Nationalist identity is also demonstrated when an informant, KA, emphasizes, *"...in the context of nation and state, we have the same constitution...in sociological law...we are the same as citizens. Living together in a country called the Indonesian nation"* (Kemenag-RI, 2021).

As for the second group, even though the speaker identifies himself as a follower of *ahl sunnah wa al-jamā'ah*, he still insists on taking a firm stance on the issue of Muslim beliefs with non-Muslim believers. He says, *"If what we miss is peace and tolerance, it doesn't mean we have to lose our identity, lose our characteristics. You are Nasrasians with your beliefs, Muslim believers with strong beliefs. The real wasaṭiyyah cannot go off wasaṭiyyah or middle. If you are wasaṭiyyah, don't deviate"* (Al-Bahjah TV, 2021). The speaker criticizes tolerance which considers all religions to be correct. Another speaker identifies himself as a Muslim who must be in the middle (Online, 2021). The speaker emphasizes that the player of moderation must be a smart person (Al-Bahjah TV, 2021). On this side too, HFZ identifies himself as someone who does not agree with religious moderation which is understood in *tasahhul* terms or without limitations (Islamic Center, 2021).

Discourse Practice on Moderate Islam in YouTube

When engaging in textual or micro-analysis at the interpretive level, it is essential to explore the deeper processes of discourse that are generated and received by the audience (Fairclough, 1992). This type of analysis emphasizes discourse production, focusing on the professionals involved—particularly individuals with diverse educational backgrounds and varying political and economic perspectives that shape their ideological inclinations. In this context, social media functions as a platform where all members of society can openly share their ideas and opinions (Kiramba et al., 2023). Therefore, this subsection will investigate two primary aspects: the production of texts by the media and its contributors, as well as the consumption of these texts by the audience or digital community.

The backgrounds of various actors and figures—including their education, profession, ideological orientation, affiliations with mass organizations, and roles in politics and economics—significantly influence the interests that shape discourse production. Among those discussing the concept of moderate Islam on platforms like YouTube are several Islamic figures and preachers, one of whom is referred to as OF. He represents the first category and serves as a professor at an Islamic university in Indonesia. OF has received his education at multiple Islamic boarding schools, known as *pesantren*, in Java and is recognized as a member of the traditional Islamic scholarly community (Hew, 2024).

The second group, even though they have different views regarding the concept of moderate Islam, can also be included as traditional authorities because they have educational backgrounds in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) and Islamic higher education institutions. BY, for example, was at an Islamic boarding school and had a formal religious education. He then founded a *pesantren* in Cirebon, West Java, Indonesia. His YouTube channel has more than 4.73 million subscribers and his videos have been viewed more than 615 million times. Another figure is HFZ. He is an Indonesian Muslim cleric, academic, lecturer and scholar. He has studied formally at *pesantren* and Islamic universities. In the typology of Islamic thought, these two figures are included in the category of traditional authorities because they have educational backgrounds in Islamic boarding schools and/or Islamic higher education institutions. However, some of his views are often at odds with liberal Islamic ideas which are also promoted by several figures who have

traditional religious authority (Taufik, 2024). Not only are they opposites to the first group, they also often criticize figures considered to be proponents of the ideas of liberalism and religious tolerance.

In discourse production, the media uses certain strategies to convey moderate Islamic discourse. The first party, for example, is the Indonesian Ministry of Religion. Indonesian Ministry of Religion's YouTube channel uploads several videos related to religious moderation, in the form of podcasts (Gann et al., 2024), short films, figure interviews, book launches, figure colloquiums, moderation photo competitions, talk shows, and digital comics (Schüßler et al., 2024). NU Online channel also displays various videos about moderate Islam, such as lectures, discussion forums, and footage of da'wah on TV. The video on the theme of religious moderation on the Indonesian Ministry of Religion channel, for example, is displayed in a podcast style to follow current trends on social media. It uses an official channel called "Kemenag RI" (Indonesian Ministry of Religion) channel. The video is entitled *"What, Why, and How to Moderate Religion? Kemenag Podcast"*. The speaker in this video is OF, a professor and currently serving as expert staff of Indonesian Minister of Religion for Communication and Information Management as well as spokesperson for Indonesian Ministry of Religion (RI, 2021b). On this first party, the process of producing moderate Islamic discourse also uses legitimacy with the narrative of the Prophet's life, *"Muhammad became a person who gave others a peaceful and cool atmosphere"* (Online, 2019a). Actors and people behind the media realize that the concept of moderate Islam is a new discourse that still causes polemics and is often considered a Western product. For that, they need the legitimacy of a higher authority. The use of narratives of the Prophet's life is a strategy to gain legitimacy from the highest religious authority in the Islamic tradition.

From the second party, in producing a discourse on the concept of moderate Islam which should be understood differently from *wasaṭiyyah* Islam, HFZ quotes several views of Muslim scholars and *mufassir* (exegesis scholars) to legitimize his opinion, such as Ṡa'labi, Sayyid Quṭb, and Rāsyid Riḍā. On the one hand, HFZ also quotes Western scholars to support his argument regarding the meaning of *wasaṭiyyah* that Islam does not adhere to capitalist ideology, *"If you read Max Weber's book, there is an analysis that Protestantism in its next development is capitalism. Islam will not be like that because it is different from capitalism"* (AQL Islamic Center, 2021).

Two examples of videos on two different YouTube channels above use authority and symbolic strategies. The strategy for the authority aspect is by citing religious authority in the Islamic tradition, both from the history of the Prophet's life and exegesis books. If the first party tries to explore the legitimacy of the highest authority in Islam to neutralize liberal and Western labels, the second party uses legitimacy from the Western scholars to support the concept and definition of *wasaṭiyyah* that is echoed. Furthermore, the authority legitimation strategy is also carried out by presenting a speaker with the title of professor and writing the speaker's full academic degree in the video title (Patel et al., 2023). As for the symbolic strategy, because YouTube media has both audio and visual advantages, the thumbnail used is a photo of the speaker, and the font and color of the title in the video are displayed in more contrast to attract YouTube users to click on the video (Lydon et al., 2024).

Another strategy that the media and the people behind the media use is the choice of actors or speakers. Two videos on the NU Online channel about religious moderation feature two young *ustaz* (Islamic preacher) figures. One of the young *ustaz* does not wear a *peci* (cap) as typical of *santri* or *kiai* (traditional authority) (Online, 2019b). This can be understood as a media strategy to adapt to the millennial audience or digital generation. In another video, NU Online shows a female figure discussing moderate Islam (Online, 2019a). This step is an effort to give the impression that the concept of moderate Islam is also accepted by women.

The relationship between producers and media structures can be seen from the ideology of the religious mass organizations of the two contesting parties (Klingvall & Heinat, 2022). One of the mass organizations that promotes moderate Islam is NU. Its official YouTube channel, NU Online, for example, uploads a video entitled "Religious Moderation". In addition to YouTube channels

associated with religious organizations, this video also features a collaboration with the government. The description indicates that it was produced in partnership with the Research and Development and Training Agency of the Indonesian Ministry of Religion, emphasizing the Ministry's role as a representation of the state.

On the other hand, HFZ's video titled "Deviations in Religious Moderation" was uploaded by the AQL Islamic Center channel. This video showcases a seminar conducted via Zoom, organized by the Indonesian Young Intellectual and Ulama Council (MIUMI TV) and MINHAJ Islamic Center. This illustrates how the two parties are influenced by their differing ideologies, as well as the underlying beliefs that shape their respective media platforms. Moreover, the educational backgrounds of the Islamic boarding schools (Sauri et al., 2022) affiliated with these two entities differ significantly. The first is defined by traditional Islamic boarding school education linked to NU mass organizations, while the second is rooted in a modern Islamic boarding school framework (Hanafi et al., 2021).

The aspect of discourse consumption is seen from the digital community who are the targets of moderate Islamic discourse on social media. Their acceptance and response, one of them, can be seen from the activity in the comments column of YouTube videos. Contestations between producers and consumers from different parties can be seen in the comments column of YouTube videos. A producer and supporters from another party carry out a discourse counter in the video comment column. In this way, the comments column becomes part of an arena of discourse contestation that cannot be denied. The special features in the comments column make the pro- and contra-discourse more colorful, such as when a commenter disagrees with the speaker's ideas in the video. In the video uploaded by the Indonesian Ministry of Religion channel, for example, someone gives a counter comment, "*Religious moderation prevents shariah from being implemented thoroughly. This is a capitalist ideology which seeks to separate matters of life from religion*". This comment is then replied to by another account, *"Well, religious moderation is also originally part of Islam"* (RI, 2021a). This shows that the comments column is part of the arena for contesting moderate Islamic discourse. Additionally, some accounts tag other accounts deemed to have authority, to gain support. Digital society or users of social media as a social arena have different responses. Supporters of the first party see moderate Islam as a good concept because it respects other religions and is not extreme. On the other hand, supporters of the second party tend to see the concept of moderate Islam and religious moderation as an attempt by the government to regulate and control religious practices (Klingvall & Heinat, 2022). This second party also sees that this concept is inseparable from Western influence in the pejorative sense.

Factors of Contesting the Moderate Islamic Discourse

Analysis of socio-cultural practices sees that moderate Islamic discourse on social media cannot be separated from the influence of external factors at two levels, namely situational and institutional levels (Gashi et al., 2024). The situational level looks at the typical situation when a text appears and the institutional level includes the economic, political, and socio-cultural background that surrounds the emergence of a text (Fairclough, 1992). In this way, analysis of socio-cultural practices looks at discourse from a macro perspective because it looks at the external conditions that shape discourse.

The situational level attempts to analyze the text by looking at the situation and conditions when the text appears, including the typical situations that exist. This stage sees the text change according to the situation surrounding it. In this case, moderate Islamic discourse is seen as a text that emerges due to the influence of the situation surrounding it. The emergence of issues of violence against religions, acts of terror, extremism, fundamentalism and the discourse of the caliphate in Indonesia have triggered the emergence of the idea of moderate Islam (Bloom & Daymon, 2018). This idea is extended to religious moderation which is not limited to Islam alone, but across all religions. Even though the argument given is that this moderation targets the right (fundamentalist) and left (liberal) extremes at the same time, right-extreme factors, such as violence

in the name of religion, are one of the main issues that encourage the idea of religious moderation compared to the left extreme. The target of religious moderation discourse is extreme attitudes (RI, 2021a).

The situation in the digital world is specifically noticed by KA stating that the textual understanding of religious literature is massif on social media, *"That (textual understanding) is what dominates social media today, and is widely accessed by millennials"* (Kemenag-RI, 2021). The emergence of the ideas of fundamentalism, extremism, the concept of the caliphate, and acts of terror are not only in the real world but also have spread widely in digital public spaces, especially social media (Jabareen, 2015). Therefore, actors who produce moderate Islamic discourse are also increasingly using digital media to counter these ideas. Thus, the massive number of moderate Islamic discourse videos on YouTube is also inseparable from the large number of videos on YouTube uploaded by parties from Islamic extremists.

Furthermore, the emergence of contestation in moderate Islamic discourse itself cannot be separated from the struggle for authority in interpreting the phrase *ummatan wasaṭan* in the Qur'an. The word "*wasaṭiyyah*" then becomes a keyword that is often used to legitimize the idea of moderate Islam (Pribadi, 2019). The second party criticizes the first party for seeing, in their view, the practice of religious moderation as going too far. The phenomenon of the massive promotion of moderate Islam and religious moderation is considered by the first party to have a hidden agenda. The labels of communism, liberalism, humanism, and nihilism given to the first party are a sign that the memory of the religious liberalism narrative (Hacohen, 2008)that once enlivened Islamic discourse in Indonesia has become a trigger for the emergence of counters from the second party.

Other evidence of the contestation can be seen from various social media accounts that build contra-narratives against the term moderate Islam. The YouTube channel "NU Online", for example, uploads a video entitled "Moderate Islam, Kaffah Islam". The speaker for this video is an *ustāẓah* (women preacher) who builds an argument for the importance of moderate Islam in resolving various socio-religious problems in Indonesia (Online, 2019a). On the contrary, the "Media Muslimah Center" channel in several videos displays negative diction titles to attract the attention of social media users, such as "Is Moderate Islam Dangerous?" In this video, the speaker, an *ustazah*, explains that moderate Islam is a product of the West to destroy Islam and is related to capitalist ideology and secularism (Center, 2020). Those who support the concept of moderate Islam often use the legitimacy of the phrase "*ummah wasaṭ*" in Surah Al-Baqarah verse 143. On the other hand, the rejection of this concept also uses this verse and argues that the ideal is the concept of *wasaṭiyah* Islam (Pribadi, 2019). Both parties have an understanding of what is meant by the phrase *ummah wasaṭ*.

Another situational aspect is the power practice of producers to marginalize certain groups by producing discourse (Loshitzky, 1997). Discourse and social structure influence each other. In this case, the discourse of moderate Islam and religious moderation, whether consciously or not, is part of the power tools used by actors to maintain their power. Moderate Islamic discourse controls other discourses from other parties in power circles. By forming discourse, it can perpetuate power. Moderate Islamic discourse has a passive role as a recorder of social processes and an active role as an element causing social change. The institutional level includes the social, cultural, economic, and political conditions that underlie the emergence of a moderate Islamic discourse (Kanafi et al., 2021). Analysis at this level also looks at the influence of organizations and external forces in the discourse production process. These factors can be ideological, economic, political, and socio-cultural.

The ideological factor in analyzing socio-cultural practices is to look at how texts are produced and the influence of factors outside themselves (Loshitzky, 1997). Moderate Islamic discourse cannot be separated from the dominant power in society to spread this ideology to society. The discourse of moderate Islam and religious moderation is supported by certain groups who have the power and dominant ideology of their time. In this case, the first party has power because it has a strong relationship with the government, both structurally and culturally. However,

ideologically, the discourse of moderate Islam does not fully represent the ideology of diversity within the traditional religious authority of the mainstream *ahlusunnah waljamaah*. The limited scope of the meaning of moderate Islam is unable to accommodate various ideological interests. Therefore, it gives rise to a contestation to interpret the term "*ummatan wasaṭiyyah*".

The economic factor is related to the capital interest of media. The production of discourse on social media cannot be separated from economic interests (Fairclough, 2003), such as advertising which helps sustain the media, funding for digital literacy programs from the government, and adsense from the large number of YouTube viewers so that the media must present interesting videos and respond to current issues. One of the current issues is the moderate Islamic discourse (Loshitzky, 1997). This economic interest has forced the emergence of competition between YouTube channels as a popular digital media for producing videos with actual themes and presented with a more attractive appearance.

The next factor is political interest. State institutions determine the extent to which discourse and media play a role. The discourse on religious moderation, for example, clearly shows that the state must be present to manage and control religion in the public space (Nasir & Rijal, 2021). The entry of the Indonesian Ministry of Religion into YouTube arena in marketing the idea of religious moderation is a form of extension of the state's interest in controlling various ideologies that threaten state institutions. Political forces that exist in society, such as mainstream religious organizations, community groups, and educational institutions, become tools to perpetuate the government's political interests. These elements become partisan to support political ideas and power (Loshitzky, 1997). In the end, certain religious discourses become dominant tools for controlling other groups. The last is the sociocultural factor. Social changes, dominant values in society, and societal culture influence the production of discourse. Society enters a new world that is different from the previous world. The digital space creates social change and values in society (Putra & Sukabdi, 2014). Community culture is changing to digital culture. These changes in social and public space have spurred the emergence of contestation for social identity in the digital space. Digital media has become a tool for fighting over social identity. The digital era has led various parties to compete for space, including in moderate Islamic discourse. The parties involved in this discourse contestation are trying to attract the attention of digital natives. The concept of moderate Islam and religious moderation promoted by the Indonesian Ministry of Religion is a momentum for various parties to participate in enlivening the dynamics of Islamic discourse so that it continues to have a dynamic space in the digital public space.

CONCLUSION

This research have shown that there is contestation among the traditional Islamic group (traditional religious authority) in defining moderate Islam on the YouTube platform. The moderate Islamic narrative becomes a contested text. The contesting parties are from among the traditional Islamic authorities themselves. Both parties give rise to contestations over authenticity, ideology, identity, and authority. Authenticity is related to the true and ideal meaning of *wasaṭiyyah* (middle) as the legitimacy of the concept of moderate Islam. Ideology relates to self-identification with the understanding of *ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamā'ah*. Identity relates to the correct definition of Muslim. However, there are differences in interpreting moderate identity. Indonesian Ministry of Religion emphasizes the meaning of moderation to accept religious diversity, while NU figures emphasize the meaning of moderation as the antithesis of extremist attitudes. On the one hand, certain figures from traditional Islamic groups criticize moderate Islam as understood by the Indonesian Ministry of Religion which is considered too inclusive. The authority is related to the capability to become a reference for the community in understanding the values of *wasaṭiyyah* and moderate Islam.

The production process of moderate Islamic discourse cannot be separated from external factors, such as the influence of ideological, political, economic, and socio-cultural contexts. This research also has shown that contestation of moderate Islamic discourse has an influence on the dynamics of Islamic discourse on Indonesian social media. Theoretically, this research contributes

to developing a map of contestation showing that contestation does not have to come from absolutely opposing parties, but can also occur within the same party. This contestation can occur in defining the ideal meaning of a concept that is mutually accepted, but with different meanings. Thus, this research will provide a theoretical contribution related to the development of the concept of contestation in the digital sphere. This also suggests further research focusing on the responses of audiences in the digital space regarding the contestation of religious moderation, to identify the effect of the contestation towards the religious perceptions of digital natives.

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