



Public Perception of Religious Moderation on Twitter: The Case of Kicking Offerings on Mount Semeru, Lumajang

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the construction of public opinion and perception regarding religious moderation in the context of Mount Semeru incident, Lumajang, Indonesia, (2022). This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing perception theory and virtual ethnographic analysis to examine Twitter users' responses to a viral video depicting individuals disrupting traditional offerings at Mount Semeru, also investigates how Twitter as a social media platform influences public perception of religious moderation. The findings reveal three distinct response categories: opposition, support, and moderation, which contributed to digital conflicts. To minimize digital conflicts, especially intolerant responses on social media, there is a need to strengthen religious moderation on social media through education content grounded in Islamic scriptures (Quran and Hadith), Indonesian state ideology (Pancasila), and collaboration with religious authorities via digital media formats. The research demonstrates the significant role of social media in shaping public perceptions of religious tolerance in contemporary Indonesia.

Keywords: *Lumajang, Public Perception, Religious Moderation, Social Media, Virtual Ethnography*

Introduction

In contemporary society, the digital revolution, particularly the emergence and evolution of social media platforms, has fundamentally transformed the sharing of information, expression of opinions, and civic participation. This transformation has democratized public discourse, enabling unprecedented levels of societal engagement across geographical and social boundaries (Ross et al., 2019; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). The significance of this digital transformation

is particularly evident in Indonesia, where social media penetration has reached 139 million users, representing 49.9% of the national population (Kemp, 2024). This substantial digital presence reflects a global trend where social media platforms have become integral to daily communication, information consumption, and public discourse formation (Hartmann et al., 2024).

In this digital landscape, the role of social media metrics in shaping public opinion has become increasingly sophisticated. Research has shown that social media engagement indicators serve as powerful social endorsements capable of influencing public opinion (Ross et al., 2019). Recent studies have revealed that these digital endorsements have evolved beyond simple metrics to include complex interaction patterns that significantly influence user behavior and opinion formation. This evolution has created the "digital public sphere" (Eisenegger & Schäfer, 2023), where platform-specific metrics and engagement patterns increasingly mediate traditional methods of consensus-building and sometimes lead to the emergence of echo chambers (Hartmann et al., 2024).

In addition, in the digital era, social media consists of a number of social networks that facilitate social interaction. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, 2012, and 2024), social media can be defined as a set of internet-based applications that build on Web 2.0 ideologies and technologies and enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Social media can include blogs and micro-blogs (such as Twitter), content communities (such as YouTube), social networking sites (such as Facebook and Instagram), virtual gaming worlds (such as World of Warcraft), and virtual social worlds (such as Second Life). This significantly influences the structure of society and showcases the triumph of the digital revolution, particularly the 'social media revolution' (Hrynyshyn, 2017; Nisa, 2018).

Social media's role in shaping religious perception has become increasingly prominent, especially in the context of religious moderation. The intersection of social media and religious discourse has gained significant importance, with digital platforms emerging as significant spaces that not only transform religious experiences (Cunningham, 2019). In the Indonesian context, these relations also build and challenge religious narratives (Riyan Hidayat & El-Feyza, 2022; Wibowo & Hidayati, 2023). As defined by recent scholarship, religious moderation refers to an approach emphasizing values of tolerance, peace, and respect for differences in religious life (Hefni, 2020; Junaedi, 2019; Salendra, 2021; Tabroni et al., 2024)

Furthermore, social media is not only a platform for sharing information (el Ishaq, 2021; Yuliawati & Asri, 2024), but also the main means to campaign for

the values of religious moderation in an increasingly digitally connected society (Arif et al., 2024; Daud & Bafadhal, 2023; Febriani & Ritonga, 2022; Marwantika, 2022; Mustaghfiroh, 2022; Nuha, 2024; Setia & Haq, 2023). However, research has identified a worrying trend in the digital religious realm. PPIM's investigation on Twitter found the dominance of conservative religious narratives (Halimatusa'diyah, 2020; Kirana, D., & Garadian, 2020). The emergence of digital media as the platform of choice for building religious narratives has led to the deliberate juxtaposition of religious doctrines (Campbell, 2020), which contributes to increasing intolerance and radicalism in society (Bisri et al., 2024; Gani et al., 2024; Salendra, 2021).

In early 2022, a video of an offering-kicking incident on Mount Semeru in Lumajang became a trending topic on Twitter, igniting a debate on religious practices and religious moderation. "Jarang sekali disadari bahwa inilah yang justru mengundang murka Allah, hingga Allah menurunkan azabnya. Allahu Akbar!" said the perpetrator. Social media spread these reactions, reflecting the construction and understanding of narratives about religious moderation. Different parties assessed the incident from different perspectives, with some seeing it as part of a legitimate tradition, while others viewed it as a form of extremism or an act contrary to the principles of religious moderation. One could argue that social media significantly shapes an individual's religious perception. Some parties have suggested that social media may have become a significant influence on religious communities, especially if it has become a guiding force in people's daily lives without a critical perspective (Nurudin, 2018; Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020).

A significant gap in current research lies in understanding how trending topics on social media platforms influence and shape public perception of religious moderation. While existing studies have examined social media's role in spreading religious moderation values, there is limited research on how specific incidents and their subsequent social media discourse impact public understanding of religious moderation. While previous research has examined religious moderation on social media, particularly focusing on its role in shaping millennial perceptions (Febriani & Ritonga, 2022) and as a platform for promoting moderate religious values (Marwantika, 2022; Setia & Haq, 2023), there remains a crucial gap in understanding how trending topics on social media influence public perception of religious moderation. Yuliawati and Asri (2022) recommend qualitative reconstruction of these trending topics to gain a holistic understanding of online conversations and identify the construction and spread of misinformation or biased narratives.

This study addresses this gap by examining a case study of the 2022 Mount Semeru offerings incident, which sparked significant debate on religious practices and moderation on Twitter. Twitter is a useful application as an information-gathering tool (Elliot T. Panek, Yioryos Nardis, 2013) and provides unlimited access to various sources. According to Wasim Ahmed (2021), Twitter has released a new product line, the “academic research product line,” which allows academic researchers to comprehensively access a complete archive of historical public tweets for free. We used the Twitter platform in this research to understand the social dynamics and explore how different groups discuss or respond to the incident.

This research employs virtual ethnography to explore the entity (user) of internet users (Kaur-Gill, S., Dutta, 2017), while also applying perception theory (Harisah, A., & Masiming, 2008) from 23 March to 29 July 2022. The study aims to investigate the construction of public responses to this incident and the influence of social media on the public's perception of religious moderation. The study's innovative approach combines digital discourse analysis with traditional ethnographic methods, including interviews with religious and community leaders, both national and local, in Lumajang, East Java Province, Indonesia.

The research contributes to the growing body of literature on digital religious discourse by providing a comprehensive analysis of how social media platforms influence public perception of religious moderation. By examining the interplay between online discourse and real-world religious practices, this study offers valuable insights into the dynamics of religious moderation in the digital age and suggests potential approaches for promoting inclusive religious dialogue in online spaces.

Through this analysis, the study aims to comprehend not only the construction of public responses to religious incidents on social media but also the effective utilization of these platforms to foster religious moderation and interfaith understanding in an increasingly digitalized society. This research is particularly timely given the growing influence of social media in shaping religious discourse and the urgent need to address rising religious intolerance in digital.

Public Responses of Kicking Offerings in Lumajang

Based on the public responses of twitter users (Tweeps) regarding the kicking of offerings in Lumajang, there are 3 (three) trends response, namely against, support, and moderate. Groups that against the action emphasized the importance of maintaining religious tolerance and the freedom of communities

to practice faith traditions. A religious attitude that is friendly to local traditions and culture is a necessity in Indonesia, which is a pluralistic nation-state (ethnicity, race, customs, culture, language, and religion). The following Tweets against and condemning the kicking were read, for example from the account @Setiawan3833 who wrote,

"Janganlah berlaku sombong dengan tidak menghormati kearifan lokal, adat dan budaya lainnya. Masyarakat Summersari, Lumajang habis mengadakan acara sedekah desa dan ruwatan untuk memohon keselamatan dari bencana tapi diperlakukan seperti ini. Masyarakat Lumajang masih heterogen. Banyak penganut kepercayaan. Bahkan di Summersari Pronojiwo banyak penganut Hindu".

A similar view was expressed by the @cholilnafis account. He tweeted, *"Soal sesajen itu bisa karena keyakinan bisa karena budaya. Tapi apapun alasannya tak dibenarkan merendahkan keyakinan atau budaya orang lain. Saya menyesalkan perilaku menendang sesajen di gunung itu atas nama apapun. Sebab dakwah itu mengajak dengan hikmah bukan menginjak dan merendahkan."* @cholilnafis' tweet was shared by many tweeps.

Among the many comments that agree with @cholilnafis, there are also comments that lead to supporting the action of kicking the offerings, such as the account @AhmadMuhtar_98 who tweeted,

"Ini sih menurut saya, silakan disalahkan. Kalo yang naruh sajen itu orang Islam, gak apa-apa ditendang, karena itu salah satu kesyirikan, no debat. Tapi kalo yang naruh orang Hindu, ya gak boleh ditendang, karena itu keyakinan mereka."

A similar view was given by the account @Ahmadwafqi who wrote, *"Biasanya yang merasa terganggu mestinya para dedemit karena sasajen itu untuk dedemit kenapa manusia ikut marah pak Yai? Setahu kami Islam menerima budaya yang tidak mengarah pada kesyirikan sehingga ada istilah "العادة محكمة" sasajen yang kita kenal itu rata-rata mengarah kepada syirik. Tolong pak Yai dibuka dan jelaskan sasajen seperti apa yang tidak mengarah kepada kesyirikan? Jangan sampai kesyirikan ditutupi dengan istilah Budaya (kearifan lokal). Kasihan masyarakat Awam pak Yai. نحن نحكم بالجواهر Bimbinglah kami Pak Yai."*

The @PramonoDwi7 account also gave a similar view. He wrote, *"Tapi dengan alasan apapun tak dibenarkan syirik dalam Islam. Jangan dengan alasan budaya melestarikan kesyirikan, dakwah itu harus tegas ga cuma retorika-retorika manis tapi sebenarnya bertentangan dengan contoh Nabi. Sesajen itu berlangsung lama sejak dulu, berarti ada kegagalan MUI dalam mendakwahkan tauhid jika pelakunya beragama Islam."*

For its supporters, kicking the offerings is the right thing to do, especially if the offerings belong to Muslims, kicking the offerings is an effort to remind fellow Muslims that offerings are rituals that are not taught by Islam and are a practice of shirk (associating partners with Allah SWT). Moderates, while agreeing with the position of offerings as an act of shirk, rejected the anarchist

approach of the protesters. Mutual respect for the beliefs of followers of different religions needs to be maintained in order to create inter-religious harmony.

"Betul, dakwah itu merangkul bukan memukul, memberi nasehat bukan menghujat melaknat, menjadi madu untuk obat bukan jadi racun bikin sekarat, mempererat persaudaraan bukan mempesekat persaudaraan, mengasihi bukan membenci," wrote the account @sugeng_widodo33.

A similar response was given by the @herry_zudianto account, *"Amar ma'ruf nahi mungkar harus dijalankan dengan "Bener dan Pener" sebagai implementasi konsep Islam yang rahmatan lil alamin."* And account @rizkimoh1 supporting @cholimnafis' view said,

"Setuju, perbedaan itu rahmat tapi jangan dibenturkan, menurut saya kalau boleh jalankan apa yang sudah ada di dalam Quran dan hormati mereka yang berbeda. Sampaikan kalam Islam boleh, tapi merendahkan seperti kejadian kemarin rasanya tidak elok,"

Support for the action of the perpetrator kicking the offerings was also given by @dapitdong.

"Sesajen dalam Islam itu jatuhnya syirik. Nah, peristiwa yang terjadi di Lumajang itu harus juga melihat sisi ini. Kalo sesajen itu dilakukan oleh Muslim, bisa dinilai orang tersebut sedang memperingatkan/berdakwah. Lain kalo dilakukan oleh non-muslim, boleh saja dituntut tidak menghormati," tweeted @dapitdong on January 9, 2022.

In the context of Lumajang, @dapitdong saw that the kicking of the offerings was more of an effort to remind each other among Muslims. If the offerings belonged to Hindu-Buddhists, the kicking would be wrong because it means that the perpetrators do not respect the beliefs of other religions. But it becomes a different matter when the offerings belong to Muslims as well.

Lukman Hakim Saifudin, the 2014-2019 Minister of Religious Affairs, also responded to the kicking offerings in Lumajang. Through his twitter account @lukmansaifuddin he wrote,

"Mari hentikan cerca pada pemuda pelempar sesajen itu. Semoga tindakannya yang melampaui batas yang tak hargai keyakinan orang lain itu lebih akibat keterbatasan wawasan dan pengetahuan. Mari ayomi mereka yang berlebihan untuk kembali moderat dalam beragama,"

Based on interviews with Lukman Hakim Saifuddin (June 2022) stated that several cases of intolerance such as the kicking and destruction of offerings in Lumajang prove that there is still a group of people who have limited knowledge of the substance of religion and the nature of culture who do not understand the condition of religious people in Indonesia which is very diverse. According to him, Indonesia has abundant cultural wealth while religion is something that cannot be separated from society. Therefore, it is necessary to position religion and culture in Indonesia according to their respective functions.

Regarding issues related to religion and culture, Saifuddin (interview on June 2022) stated that Indonesia as a nation that has close ties with religious values, regardless of ethnicity. So it can be concluded that our society is very religious, and what is characteristic is that religion and culture become an inseparable unity in the understanding of Indonesian society in general, which is not shared by other nations. This is because the way of religion in Indonesia makes culture a container or place where religious values are implemented. So, religion and culture are two different entities, but for Indonesia, they cannot be separated. Religion needs culture as a place of actualisation, culture also needs religion as a spirit. This means that a culture has religious values because Indonesian society is a religious society. Therefore, both will always need each other.

Responding to the case of the kicking and destruction of offerings, Saifuddin (interview June 2022) stated that social media has contributed to the tendency of black and white religious practices in the current era of globalization. Various information, especially religious information, is easily accessed and absorbed by the public, which in many cases greatly affects the style of diversity in Indonesia, tends to be black and white. The black and white approach in the context of religion and culture, should not be recognized and even contrasts with what applies throughout the journey of Islam in Indonesia which is very accommodating to tradition and culture.

In responding to the issue of the kicking of offerings, some twitter users included memes in their tweets. Referring to Denisova (2019) analysis, memes are highly effective in internet communication and have not only cultural, but also social and political implications. Memes are also significantly capable of affirming self-representation and identity; promoting alternative opinions or trending interpretations; and being a subversive and resistant force in relation to professional media, propaganda, and even traditional and digital political campaigns (Denisova, 2019). Responses to the case of the kicking of the offerings were also made through the use of historical documents. This is an effort to give people an understanding of the position of offerings in the development of Islam in Indonesia. Some Tweeps, for example, posted the decision of the 5th NU Congress in 1930 which forbade the practice of customs by referring to the books *Futuh al-Ilahiyah* and *Ihya Ulum al-Din*.

The Construction of Public Perception on Religious Moderation on Twitter

Based on the analysis of Tweeps' comments on the kicking of offerings in Lumajang, it appears that there is a division of perception around the actions of

the perpetrators. The number of Tweeps who support the act of kicking the offerings indicates that there is still a gap between religious understanding and the attitudes, and social behavior of social media users. The case of kicking offerings is an anomaly of the essence of religion, which is actually present to strengthen and affirm the commitment of peace-building, fostering good social attitudes and behavior, such as being tolerant, inclusive, respectful, appreciative, and helpful to one another. Instead of conflict, religion through its teachings always encourages its adherents to dedicate their lives to maintaining peace.

Referring to the essence of religious teachings, a peaceful life based on a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect is an ideal condition that must be maintained, including in cyberspace. No religious believer is allowed to have thoughts and especially take actions that lead to intolerance. Every religion does not want any behavior that causes uproar that leads to conflict. In the context of Islam, many verses teach the importance of maintaining peace (QS. Ali 'Imran [3]: 103; Q.S. An-Nisaa [4]: 90, 114; QS. Al Anfal [8]: 61; Al Hujurat [49]: 9, 13. Every Muslim is taught to always protect others to remain in the order of peace. The act of kicking offerings undermines the spirit of tolerance between people that should be maintained. Thus, the support for the kicking action on twitter social media shows that there is still a gap between religious understanding and the attitudes and social behavior of some people, especially in relation to the practice of religion, belief, and constitution.

From a psychological point of view, the action of kicking offerings can be placed in a religious condition called state, a person's mental, emotional and cognitive condition at a certain time. The state will affect a person's thought process. When in a calm state (positive state) thinking will become clearer, many solutions and alternatives will emerge, many neglected angles will be thought of, many things can be understood much better. Conversely, when a person is in a negative state, many things escape thought; being shallow in thinking and often wrong in logic. In this negative state, everyone tends to hold more negativity; thinking narrowly instead of seeing the potential and opportunities that can be optimized (Syahid, 2022).

Related to the action of kicking offerings, the state is achieved after someone struggles to achieve certain things. In this case, everyone will not feel satisfied and wants to continue to achieve the highest level. The problem of interpretation from the perpetrator of the kicking action is due to the lack of religious literacy. Ideally, everyone should be able to see the panorama and spectrum of interpretation diversity, not just a single interpretation. The gap between religious understanding and the attitudes, behaviours, and perceptions

of social media users is due to the strengthening of a single interpretation from some people who do not see the spectrum of diversity.

Several factors contributed to the trigger. First, the emergence of Islamist group actions that launched a brain washing agenda to ordinary people who lacked a religious knowledge base. The brain washing process is a method often used by religious fundamentalist groups for certain interests and most often creates an intolerant attitude that lacks respect for diversity. The infiltration of Islamic thoughts that lead to exclusive attitudes has so far strengthened with the development of digital technology, and this is a real challenge that is happening today. Second, limited religious understanding due to lack of deepening of the verses of the Qur'an and Hadith. The process of learning quickly on social media without referring to authoritative sources is a widespread phenomenon. Debates on social media about a religious issue are often not based on authoritative references, especially referring directly to verses of the Qur'an and Hadith, but only based on data and information that cannot be ascertained. This in turn shapes people's perceptions of religious issues, including the case of the kicking of offerings in Lumajang (Fathurahman 2022; Nafis 2022; Hanif 2022).

Third, the development of transnational Islamic movements. In general, transnational Islam is a movement that refers to transnational religious ideology, especially from the Middle East, which is deliberately imported from outside and developed in Indonesia through organizations such as: Majelis Mujahidin, Jaulah, Ikhawanul Muslimin, Al-Qaeda and Hizbut Tahrir. In the tradition of Western scholarship and press, the ideology of transnational movements refers to a view that seeks to see Islam as an ideology that must not only be applied in the political sphere, but also in all dimensions of public life (Roy 2004; Bubalo and Fealy 2005). The dissemination of transnational movements in Indonesia is very visible in various publications spread across the internet. Through several online media, the transmission of religious thought is quite effective. The publication and translation of Salafi books and thoughts from the Muslim Brotherhood, which are then disseminated online, are also factors that contribute to the formation of public perceptions of social media users. Responses and comments on an issue, such as the kicking and destruction of offerings, are reinforced through the reading of books that are freely distributed online.

In the case of Lumajang, most of the religious and community leaders in Lumajang saw that the actions of the perpetrators were also influenced by the strengthening of transnational movements that always preach a variety of intolerant thoughts and are less friendly to local traditions. Limited religious knowledge coupled with a lack of understanding of the position of the diversity

of cultural treasures in Indonesia is the main basis for the emergence of public perceptions of social media users, and this is used by Islamist groups to advance their interests, especially in the process of strengthening the ideologization of understanding of Islam that tends to be intolerant (Nafis 2022; Hanif 2022; Thoriqul Haq 2022).

In conclusion, the difference in perception of Twitter (now X) users regarding the offering case in Lumajang needs to be a concern so that it does not lead to the emergence of hate speech and mutual insults that trigger social conflict in the digital world.

Besides, the use of counter-narrative material on social media will encourage strengthening religious moderation among young groups (Daud & Bafadhal, 2023). In addition, social media provides a space for various parties to dialogue, and helps communities overcome the challenges of radicalization in cyberspace by Digital literacy (Nuha, 2024).

For this reason, it is necessary to strengthen the campaign for religious moderation on social media which focuses on efforts to respect local wisdom traditions, through the following strategies: strengthening the role of students and preachers/influencers who are competent in the field of religion as ambassadors of peace and harmony, such as: Cak Nun, Gus Baha, Gus Idham, Ust. Abdul Somad, Ust Adi Hidayat, Habib Ja'far, and several other names. The characteristics of their polite preaching that have been accepted by society are important capital in efforts to spread religious ideas that respect local wisdom traditions. This is an important starting point in strengthening religious moderation on social media.

Another strategy is to increase religious content based on the Quran, Hadith, contemporary Islamic jurisprudence, Pancasila values, and national insight. Various parties can launch this mission by focusing on producing content that teaches peace in various elements of life by involving parties with similar motivations. Instead of containing hate speech, the content that needs to be produced and distributed on social media is content that is useful for society, increases faith, knowledge, and intelligence, and inspires others to do *amar ma' ruf nahi munkar*, including to respect differences in tradition.

In this case, strengthening the role of the Islamic boarding school community can be considered as another strategy. The involvement of Islamic boarding schools in initiating pilot projects for preaching on social media in various models and platforms needs to be encouraged. The prerequisites needed include: supporting facilities and infrastructure, such as: cameras, podcast rooms, PC editor; training for students to be professional as a team of creators,

editors, cameramen, public relations teams, including strengthening the capacity for more elegant and diplomatic public communication.

Conclusion

The emergence of public perceptions that lack respect for local traditions, as seen in the case of the throwing of offerings in Lumajang, stems from the problem of unfinished paradigms or perspectives, especially related to how they position the ritual tradition of offerings as an act of shirk, an act of worshipping God other than the existing God, so that it needs to be responded to with strict action. What is overlooked is the fact that these traditions are the rights of other people protected by the law and the constitution that gives them the right to practice the religion and rituals they believe in.

The divided responses on social media twitter regarding the case of the kicking of offerings in Lumajang show a portrait of people's perceptions of the relationship between religion and culture. Some people place religion in a position that is detached from culture, while others are in the opposite position, where religion can dialogue with culture. The different perceptions of the relationship between religion and culture on social media in the Lumajang case triggered friction between internet users. If the pattern of people's actions and behavior on social media leads to conflict, then it becomes a challenge for the government that needs to be responded to immediately. So, strengthening the religious moderation program is not enough if it only focuses on what happens in the real world but also needs to target what happens in cyberspace.

Departing from the various problems that have emerged, this research offers several recommendations, especially to the government to strengthen several things. *First*, institutional synergy to strengthen the religious moderation movement in cyberspace. *Second*, mainstreaming, developing and strengthening the issue of harmonizing religion and culture through the curriculum. *Third*, the preparation of references that can be executed into activities or action plans to strengthen religious moderation, especially in strengthening relations between religion and culture (e.g. grand design or national action plan for strengthening religious moderation). This reference is needed primarily as a guide and control point for the movement to strengthen religious moderation in cyberspace.

Ultimately, strengthening religious moderation through social media is a strategic way to create a society that is oriented towards internalizing religious values in everyday life, and has an awareness to appreciate religious diversity and moderate interpretations of religious teachings.

This research recognizes limitations. The singular emphasis on Twitter as a data source may inadequately encompass the wider range of public conversation present on other significant social media platforms, potentially overlooking vital viewpoints expressed on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. The swift advancement of digital religious discourse poses significant obstacles in identifying enduring trends and patterns in narratives of religious moderation.

To address these issues, future research could undertake several initiatives, including: incorporating additional social media platforms in the analysis to obtain a comprehensive understanding of online religious discourse; conducting longitudinal studies to examine the evolvement of religious moderation narratives over time; evaluating the efficacy of various intervention strategies for fostering religious moderation online; and investigating the impact of algorithmic content distribution on religious narratives. These study opportunities may improve our comprehension of the discussion of religious moderation in digital environments and assist in formulating evidence-based initiatives to promote tolerance in Indonesia's diverse culture.

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