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RELIGIOUS MODERATION AND SOCIAL HARMONY IN INDONESIA: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW AND THEMATIC SYNTHESIS, 2020–2026

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Abstract: Religious moderation has become a strategic framework for managing diversity in Indonesia; however, empirical evidence explaining how moderation values are translated into social harmony remains fragmented across educational, community, institutional, cultural, and digital settings. This study synthesizes the implementation pathways, social mechanisms, enabling and inhibiting conditions, and outcomes of religious moderation in Indonesia. A systematic literature review was conducted in accordance with PRISMA 2020 and followed by thematic synthesis. Bibliographic records published between 2020 and 2026 were retrieved through Publish or Perish as an interface to Scopus, Google Scholar, Crossref, and Semantic Scholar. Of 1,600 initial records, 49 empirical studies were retained after deduplication, relevance screening, full-text eligibility assessment, and quality appraisal. Local wisdom and cultural practices were the most frequently identified implementation pathway (67.3%), followed by education and value internalisation (61.2%) and institutional or leadership facilitation (51.0%). Tolerance was the most frequently reported outcome (65.3%), followed by reduced radicalism or intolerance (44.9%) and social or religious harmony (36.7%). The synthesis indicates that religious moderation does not automatically generate social harmony; rather, its effects emerge when normative values are translated into recurring social practices through institutions, local culture, education, interfaith engagement, and inclusive communication. The study proposes an integrative, context-sensitive model for strengthening religious moderation policy and practice in Indonesia.
Keywords: religious moderation; social harmony; tolerance; social cohesion; local wisdom

Abstrak: *Moderasi beragama telah menjadi kerangka strategis dalam mengelola keberagaman di Indonesia. Namun, bukti empiris yang menjelaskan bagaimana nilai-nilai moderasi diterjemahkan menjadi keharmonisan sosial masih tersebar dalam berbagai konteks pendidikan, komunitas, kelembagaan, budaya, dan ruang digital. Penelitian ini bertujuan menyintesis jalur implementasi, mekanisme sosial, faktor pendukung dan penghambat, serta hasil dari implementasi moderasi beragama di Indonesia. Penelitian menggunakan metode systematic literature review yang dilaksanakan sesuai dengan PRISMA 2020 dan dilanjutkan dengan sintesis tematik. Rekaman bibliografis yang diterbitkan pada periode 2020–2026 diperoleh melalui Publish or Perish sebagai antarmuka penelusuran terhadap Scopus, Google Scholar, Crossref, dan Semantic Scholar. Dari 1.600 rekaman awal, sebanyak 49 studi empiris dipertahankan setelah melalui proses deduplikasi, penyaringan relevansi, penilaian kelayakan teks lengkap, dan penilaian kualitas. Kearifan lokal dan praktik budaya merupakan jalur implementasi yang paling sering ditemukan (67,3%), diikuti pendidikan dan internalisasi nilai (61,2%), serta fasilitasi kelembagaan atau kepemimpinan (51,0%). Toleransi merupakan hasil yang paling sering dilaporkan (65,3%), diikuti penurunan radikalisme atau intoleransi (44,9%) dan keharmonisan sosial atau keagamaan (36,7%). Hasil sintesis menunjukkan bahwa moderasi beragama tidak secara otomatis menghasilkan keharmonisan sosial. Dampaknya muncul ketika nilai-nilai normatif diterjemahkan menjadi praktik sosial yang dilakukan secara*

berulang melalui institusi, budaya lokal, pendidikan, keterlibatan lintas agama, dan komunikasi inklusif. Penelitian ini mengusulkan model integratif yang sensitif terhadap konteks untuk memperkuat kebijakan dan praktik moderasi beragama di Indonesia.
Kata kunci: *moderasi beragama; keharmonisan sosial; toleransi; kohesi sosial; kearifan lokal*

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a religiously and culturally plural society in which everyday social life is shaped by encounters among religions, ethnic groups, languages, traditions, and local identities. This diversity constitutes an important source of social capital, yet it can also create vulnerabilities when difference is politicised, accompanied by exclusivist attitudes, or exploited through polarising narratives. In this context, religious moderation has increasingly been promoted as a framework for sustaining inclusive citizenship, preventing violence, and strengthening peaceful coexistence without diluting religious commitment.

Academic attention to religious moderation has expanded markedly since 2020. The literature has moved beyond normative conceptualisation toward empirical examinations of education, local culture, interfaith relations, deradicalisation, leadership, institutional practice, and digital communication. Recent bibliometric work also indicates a rapid expansion of research on religious moderation in Indonesia, with recurring clusters around education, culture, tolerance, radicalism, and social harmony (Zaluchu et al., 2025). This development demonstrates the maturity of the field, but it also raises a more demanding question: not merely whether religious moderation matters, but how it becomes socially consequential across different contexts.

Empirical studies suggest that the pathways are diverse. In Tana Toraja, local wisdom, kinship relations, traditional leadership, and socio-religious activities provide arenas in which moderation and tolerance are enacted in everyday life (Pajarianto et al., 2022). In other multireligious communities, togetherness, acceptance of difference, mutual respect, family relations, cultural traditions, and sustained communication help support moderate social relations (Daheri, 2023). Educational institutions, Religious Harmony Forums (FKUB), pesantren, youth communities, and digital platforms likewise operate as distinct but intersecting arenas in which religious moderation is taught, negotiated, and practised.

Nevertheless, the relationship between religious moderation and social harmony should not be assumed to be direct or uniform. Kustati et al. (2023), for example, found no statistically significant direct effect of religious moderation on radical behaviour in the model tested among secondary-school students in Padang. Other studies indicate that tolerance develops through value internalisation, mentoring, interfaith engagement, inclusive leadership, religious literacy, and repeated social interaction. These differences suggest that religious moderation is better understood as a process whose outcomes depend on

intervening mechanisms and contextual conditions rather than as a single explanatory variable with automatic effects.

The central research gap, therefore, lies in the lack of an integrated synthesis of Indonesian empirical evidence concerning implementation pathways, social mechanisms, enabling and inhibiting conditions, and the outcomes associated with religious moderation. Previous studies have generally examined specific communities, institutions, educational settings, or policy interventions, while bibliometric reviews have mapped publication trends and thematic clusters. What remains underdeveloped is an evidence-based explanation of how moderation values are converted into social practices and how those practices are associated with tolerance, interfaith relations, social cohesion, and broader social harmony.

This study addresses that gap by synthesising empirical studies published between 2020 and 2026. It aims to: (1) map the characteristics of empirical studies on religious moderation in Indonesia; (2) identify the dominant forms of implementation; (3) explain the social mechanisms linking implementation to tolerance, interfaith relations, cohesion, and harmony; (4) identify supporting and inhibiting conditions; and (5) propose an integrative conceptual model grounded in the reviewed evidence. Accordingly, the study asks five research questions: What characterises the empirical literature? What implementation pathways are most prominent? What mechanisms connect moderation practices to social outcomes? What factors enable or constrain implementation? And what conceptual model best represents the relationships identified across the evidence base?

RESEARCH METHODS

Review design. This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) and reported the study-selection process with reference to PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021). Because the included literature was dominated by qualitative and mixed-methods research, the findings were synthesised using thematic synthesis. The analytical procedure moved from coding primary findings to descriptive themes and, subsequently, to higher-order analytical themes, drawing on the principles of Thomas and Harden (2008) and Braun and Clarke (2006).

Data sources and search strategy. The bibliographic search was updated on 23 August 2026. Publish or Perish (PoP) was used as a retrieval interface for Scopus, Google Scholar, Crossref, and Semantic Scholar. The principal query combined ("religious moderation" OR "moderasi beragama") AND (Indonesia OR Indonesian) with terms referring to relevant social outcomes, including "social harmony", "social cohesion", tolerance, "religious tolerance", "interfaith relations", "interreligious relations", "peaceful coexistence", and conflict. A complementary query combined the same core terms with implementation-related keywords such as education, local wisdom, leadership, community, institution, practice, and digital. The publication period was restricted to 2020–2026.

Eligibility criteria. Studies were included when they: (1) were published between 2020 and 2026; (2) focused on Indonesia or reported Indonesian data that could be distinguished from other national contexts; (3) were empirical journal articles using

qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods designs; (4) treated religious moderation as a substantive concept; and (5) reported a relevant social process or outcome, such as tolerance, social or religious harmony, social cohesion, interfaith relations, reduced intolerance, or peaceful coexistence. Conceptual papers, literature reviews, editorials, non-empirical normative analyses, and studies with insufficiently relevant social outcomes were excluded from the analytical corpus.

Screening and quality appraisal. The five PoP exports produced 1,600 records. After removing 261 duplicates, 1,339 unique records remained, of which 1,306 fell within the 2020–2026 period. Rules-assisted relevance prioritisation was used to identify 76 highly relevant records on the basis of title and abstract combinations covering Indonesia, religious moderation, social outcomes, and empirical design. Twenty-one records were excluded at the title-and-abstract stage, leaving 55 reports for full-text eligibility assessment. Six were subsequently excluded: one for geographical ineligibility, four for non-empirical design, and one for the absence of a sufficiently relevant social outcome. The final analytical corpus comprised 49 empirical studies. Each included study was appraised across six dimensions—clarity of objectives, methodological appropriateness, clarity of sample or data, transparency of analysis, correspondence between evidence and conclusions, and relevance to the research questions—using a 0–2 score per criterion (maximum = 12). Scores of 10–12 were classified as high quality, 8–9 as moderate quality, and ≤7 as low/uncertain.

Data extraction and synthesis. Data were extracted on author and year, location, setting, research design, implementation form, mechanisms, barriers, outcomes, DOI, quality score, and verification status. Because a single study could contribute to more than one setting, implementation pathway, mechanism, barrier, or outcome, the relevant categories were multi-coded; consequently, percentages for these categories are descriptive frequencies and do not sum to 100%. Thematic synthesis proceeded from study-level findings to initial codes, descriptive categories, and six analytical themes that

were compared across community, educational, institutional, family, pesantren, and digital settings.

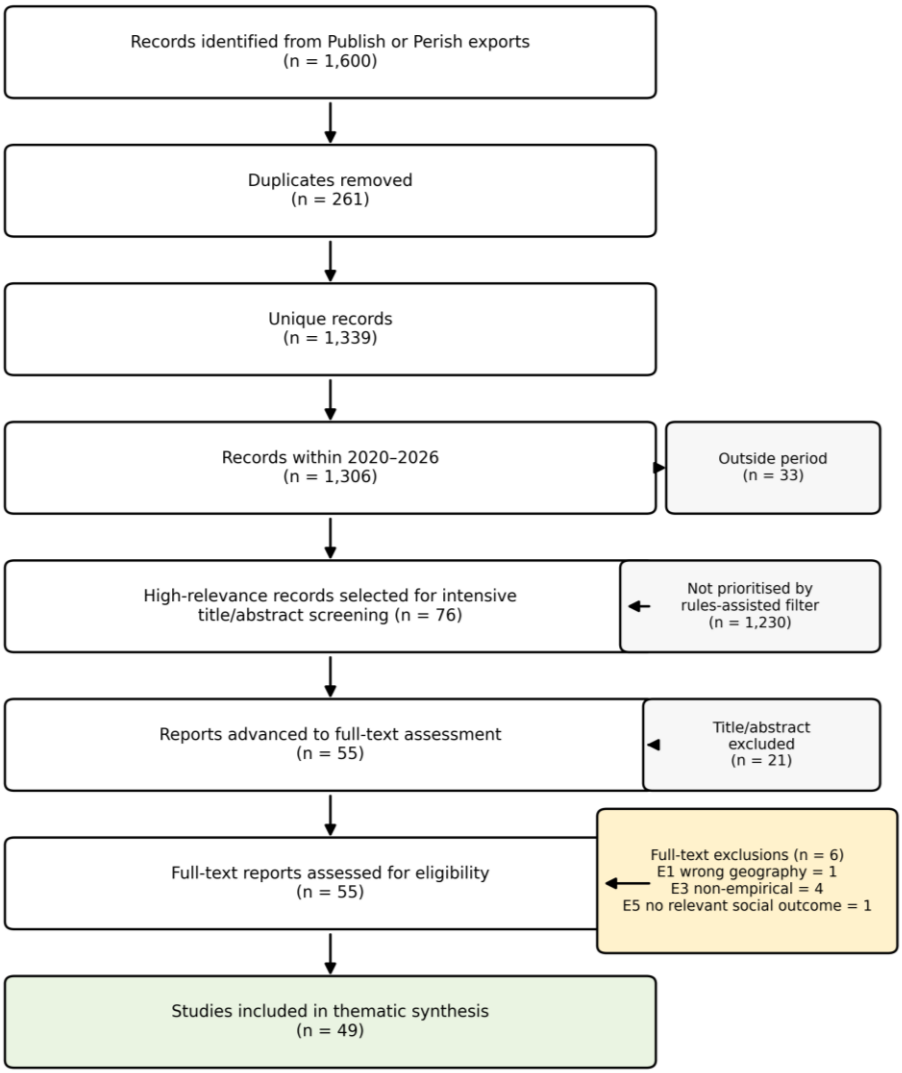


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

Note. The flow reflects the actual PoP-derived review workflow. A rules-assisted relevance filter was used to prioritise 76 of 1.306 records for intensive screening

Source: Authors' synthesis based on Publish or Perish exports and PRISMA 2020 reporting principles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of the empirical corpus

The final corpus comprised 49 empirical studies. Thirty-two studies (65.3%) were classified as high quality, eight (16.3%) as moderate quality, and nine (18.4%) as low/uncertain. Publication activity was concentrated between 2023 and 2025, with 15 studies published in 2023, 11 in 2024, and 10 in 2025. Methodologically, qualitative designs predominated (33 studies; 67.3%), followed by mixed methods (8; 16.3%) and quantitative designs (3; 6.1%); five studies (10.2%) did not provide sufficiently clear methodological information in the metadata available for coding.

Table 1. Characteristics of the 49 Included Empirical Studies

Dimension	Category	n	%
Method	Qualitative	33	67.3
Method	Mixed methods	8	16.3
Method	Quantitative	3	6.1
Method	Not reported/unclear	5	10.2
Setting*	Community/village	33	67.3
Setting*	School	11	22.4
Setting*	Higher education	10	20.4
Setting*	Digital/online	10	20.4
Setting*	Family/household	6	12.2
Setting*	Religious institution/interfaith forum	5	10.2
Setting*	Pesantren	4	8.2

**Multi-coded setting; percentages do not sum to 100%.*

Community and village settings were the most frequently examined contexts (33 studies; 67.3%), indicating that religious moderation is primarily studied as a lived social practice embedded in everyday relationships. Schools and higher-education institutions formed the second major cluster of settings, while digital and online environments have emerged as an increasingly important arena. The geographic distribution was diverse, including Semarang, Salatiga, Flores, Medan, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Malang, Tana Toraja, Madiun, Padang Pariaman, and other locations; however, a substantial share of records did not consistently report a specific location in the bibliographic metadata.

Implementation pathways, mechanisms, barriers, and outcomes

Five major implementation pathways were identified. Local wisdom and cultural practices appeared in 33 studies (67.3%), education and value internalisation in 30 studies (61.2%), institutional or leadership facilitation in 25 studies (51.0%), interfaith dialogue or contact in 16 studies (32.7%), and digital moderation or communication in 16 studies (32.7%). These categories are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the evidence suggests that effective implementation often involves combinations of cultural resources, institutional support, educational processes, and opportunities for sustained interaction across religious boundaries.

Table 2. Main Implementation Pathways, Mechanisms, Barriers, and Outcomes

Domain	Category	n	% of 49
Implementation	Local wisdom/cultural practice	33	67.3
Implementation	Education/value internalisation	30	61.2
Implementation	Institutional/leadership facilitation	25	51.0
Implementation	Interfaith dialogue/contact	16	32.7
Implementation	Digital moderation/communication	16	32.7
Mechanism	Local wisdom/shared identity	33	67.3
Mechanism	Leadership/institutional facilitation	23	46.9
Mechanism	Inclusive communication	14	28.6
Mechanism	Intergroup/interfaith contact	14	28.6
Mechanism	Value internalisation	12	24.5
Barrier	Radicalism/extremism	22	44.9
Barrier	Intolerance/exclusivism	13	26.5
Barrier	Identity politics/conflict	8	16.3
Outcome	Tolerance	32	65.3
Outcome	Reduced radicalism/intolerance	22	44.9
Outcome	Social/religious harmony	18	36.7
Outcome	Interfaith relations	13	26.5
Outcome	Peace/non-violence	11	22.4
Outcome	Social cohesion	6	12.2

Note. Categories are multi-coded; percentages represent descriptive frequencies rather than effect sizes.

At the mechanism level, local wisdom and shared identity constituted the most prevalent pattern (33 studies; 67.3%), followed by leadership or institutional facilitation (23; 46.9%), inclusive communication and intergroup/interfaith contact (14 each; 28.6%), and value internalisation (12; 24.5%). These findings suggest that religious moderation acquires social significance through processes that embed normative commitments in shared identities, routine interaction, institutional arrangements, and communication practices. In other words, moderation is not merely a cognitive orientation; it becomes socially relevant when individuals and groups repeatedly encounter, recognise, and cooperate with those who differ from them.

The importance of intergroup contact is consistent with established social-psychological theory. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) demonstrated through meta-analysis that intergroup contact is generally associated with lower prejudice, while subsequent work showed that reduced intergroup anxiety, greater empathy, and perspective taking help explain how such contact produces

attitudinal change (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). The Indonesian studies reviewed here extend this logic into religiously diverse settings, where community rituals, family ties, interfaith programmes, collaborative activities, and institutional forums provide repeated opportunities for constructive contact.

Education emerged as the second strongest implementation pathway. The reviewed evidence indicates that social effects are not generated by knowledge transfer alone, but by the habituation of moderation values through mentoring, role modelling, contextual learning, organisational activities, and direct experience with diversity. Supriadi et al. (2023), for example, found that a mentoring-based tutorial programme strengthened religiosity and tolerance through qualified mentors, a wasathiyyah-oriented curriculum, inclusive communities, and continuous evaluation. Pajarianto (2025) further showed that religious literacy can mediate the relationship between a broader religious-moderation ecosystem and youth tolerance, highlighting the importance of interpretive competence rather than exposure to moderation discourse alone.

Institutions and leadership also functioned as enabling structures. Religious Harmony Forums, schools, pesantren, religious organisations, and local governments created rules, dialogue spaces, resources, and behavioural models through which moderation could be institutionalised. Hidayanti and Ali (2023) reported that the Salatiga FKUB used social services, public outreach, study visits, cross-agency involvement, and religious-tourism initiatives to develop religious moderation, although shortages of human resources and funding constrained implementation. Likewise, studies of inclusive school leadership and religious organisations indicate that leaders matter not simply as symbolic figures, but as actors who organise opportunities for cooperation and reduce the institutional costs of intergroup engagement.

Digital space has become a distinct arena of religious moderation. Setia and Haq (2023) found that Harakatuna.com used online media to develop counter-narratives to radicalism and violent ideology, while other studies of Generation Z show that social media can also function as a space for negotiating identity, empathy, and religious difference. This dual character is important: digital environments can intensify polarisation and misinformation, yet they can also broaden access to moderate religious narratives, interfaith learning, and inclusive forms of public communication.

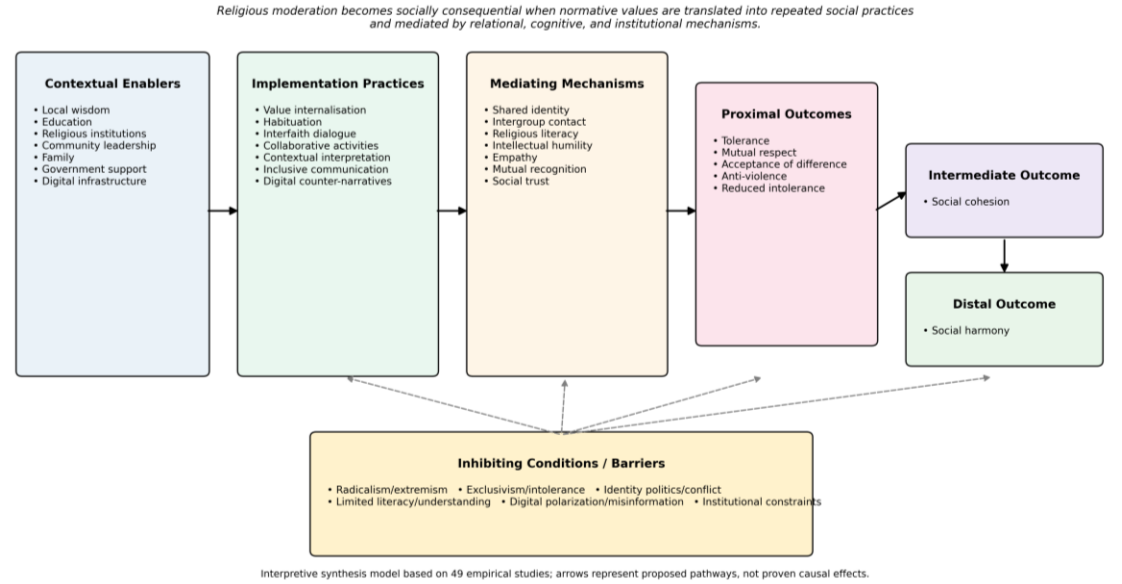
Thematic synthesis: from moderation values to social harmony

The thematic synthesis produced six analytical themes: (1) moderation as lived cultural practice; (2) education as an infrastructure of internalisation; (3) institutions and leadership as enabling structures; (4) intergroup contact as a social mechanism; (5) digital moderation as an expanding arena; and (6) tolerance, cohesion, and harmony as a staged outcome pathway. The first theme emphasises that moderation is frequently embedded in everyday traditions and shared cultural routines rather than introduced solely through formal policy. The second and third themes show how educational and institutional environments convert abstract values into repeated practices. The fourth and fifth themes

identify social contact and digital communication as mechanisms and arenas through which difference is negotiated. The sixth theme suggests that tolerance is more commonly reported than social cohesion or social harmony, indicating that the literature more often captures proximal than distal outcomes.

These findings strengthen the argument that moderation knowledge is not equivalent to moderation practice. The non-significant direct association reported by Kustati et al. (2023) contrasts with studies in which interfaith engagement, value internalisation, religious literacy, or institutional facilitation were associated with more tolerant outcomes. Taken together, the evidence is more consistent with a mediated and context-dependent pathway than with a simple direct-effect model. Accordingly, the proposed synthesis treats tolerance and mutual recognition as proximal outcomes, social cohesion as an intermediate social outcome, and social harmony as a broader distal condition that is more likely to emerge when moderate values are sustained through social practice and institutional support.

Figure 2. Integrative Religious Moderation–Social Harmony Model



Source: Authors' thematic synthesis of 49 empirical studies. Arrows represent interpretive pathways identified across the evidence base and should not be read as established causal effects.

Theoretical and policy implications

Theoretically, this review proposes that religious moderation should be conceptualised as a relational and process-based construct. Moderation may begin as a normative orientation, but its social consequences depend on how that orientation is translated into practice and mediated through shared identity, intergroup contact, religious literacy, inclusive communication, social learning, and institutional facilitation. This perspective helps distinguish three analytical levels that are often conflated in the literature: moderation as a value orientation, moderation as a set of social practices, and moderation as a pathway toward social outcomes.

Practically, religious-moderation programmes should move beyond one-off seminars, slogans, or socialisation activities. Interventions are more likely to be

meaningful when they create repeated interaction, collaborative experience, institutional support, and reflective learning. Schools and universities can develop interfaith or diversity-based collaborative projects; pesantren can integrate moderation into everyday pedagogical and organisational routines; local communities can mobilise inclusive cultural traditions; and interfaith forums can shift from consultation alone toward sustained programmes that generate cooperation and social trust.

At the policy level, the evidence argues against a uniform implementation model. Local context strongly shapes how moderation is practised and which mechanisms are available. National policy can provide common values, safeguards, and evaluative indicators, but programme design should leave meaningful space for local actors, youth organisations, religious leaders, educational institutions, and culturally embedded practices. Policy evaluation should also extend beyond activity counts to assess substantive outcomes such as tolerance, interfaith trust, social cohesion, and the durability of peaceful relations.

Limitations

This review has several limitations. First, Publish or Perish was used as a retrieval interface across multiple sources, and the resulting metadata were not always uniform. Second, rules-assisted relevance prioritisation was used to focus intensive screening on 76 records from the 1,306 records published during 2020–2026; although this improved screening efficiency, it may have introduced sensitivity to terminology used in titles and abstracts. Third, several studies did not provide complete information on location, method, mechanisms, or barriers in the accessible metadata, and these fields were therefore retained as not reported or unclear rather than inferred. Fourth, the corpus was dominated by qualitative studies, so coding frequencies should not be interpreted as effect sizes or causal estimates. Fifth, nine studies were classified as low/uncertain quality and were retained conservatively for contextual breadth; their findings were not used as the sole basis for analytical propositions. Finally, the review was restricted to Indonesian and English-language publications addressing Indonesia, which limits generalisability beyond the national context.

CONCLUSIONS

The systematic review of 49 empirical studies shows that religious moderation in Indonesia acquires social significance when it is translated into repeated practices embedded in culture, education, institutions, leadership, interfaith dialogue, family life, and digital communication. Local wisdom and cultural practices were the most frequently identified implementation pathway, while tolerance was the most commonly reported outcome. Across the evidence base, the relationship between moderation and harmony was not uniformly direct. Instead, the synthesis indicates a staged pathway in which moderation values are converted into social practices and operate through mechanisms such as shared identity, intergroup contact, value internalisation, inclusive

communication, religious literacy, and institutional facilitation. These mechanisms are associated first with tolerance, mutual recognition, and reduced intolerance, and, under supportive conditions, with broader social cohesion and social harmony. The study therefore contributes an integrative model that reframes religious moderation as a relational process rather than a stand-alone attitudinal variable. For policy and practice, the central implication is clear: strengthening religious moderation requires not only disseminating moderate ideas, but also building social environments in which those ideas can be experienced, practised, and sustained across lines of difference.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

[Parwito] conceptualisation, data curation, screening, analysis, and writing—original draft; [Zulkarnain Dali] methodology, validation, and writing—review and editing; [Nurlaili] supervision, interpretation, and final approval.

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