



Research Article

Interpreting Moderate Islam in Indonesian Digital Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Islami.co and IBTimes.id

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Abstract

The rapid growth of digital media has reshaped Islamic discourse in Indonesia, becoming a key space for promoting and contesting narratives such as Moderate Islamic understanding (*wasathiyah*). This study uses a qualitative approach to analyse how Islamic digital platforms, *Islami.co* and *IBTimes.id*, construct and disseminate moderate Islamic discourse through Quranic interpretation and narrative strategies. The study uses Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine four selected articles interpreting key verses like *QS Al-Baqarah* 2:143 and *QS Al-Imran* 3:104. Findings reveal that while both platforms promote inclusive and anti-extremist views, they differ in theological framing and sociocultural orientation. *Islami.co* emphasizes classical exegesis with contextual storytelling, portraying moderation as moral balance and personal piety. Meanwhile, *IBTimes.id* frames moderation in civic and political terms, linking it to national unity and global diplomacy. Both platforms sacralize Pancasila by linking it with Quranic principles, reinforcing narratives aligned with national identity. Their digital strategies, such as content structuring and SEO optimisation, often align with the perspectives of dominant Islamic institutions like NU and Muhammadiyah. Despite youth involvement, both platforms tend to reproduce existing institutional norms. This study reveals that theological interpretations and broader socio-political dynamics and communication practices shape moderate Islamic moderation understanding in digital media and affirms how scripture, politics, and media converge in shaping contemporary Islamic identities in Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

The development of information technology has significantly transformed patterns of Islamic preaching (*da'wa*) and the dissemination of Islamic teachings, particularly in Indonesia. Digital media now serves as a new strategic space enabling the articulation of Islamic understandings more dynamically and extensively. In the digital era, Islamic preaching through digital media holds significant advantages over traditional methods. The internet and social media allow a broader reach across geographical and temporal boundaries. Additionally, digital platforms enable interactivity, for instance, audiences can provide direct feedback, pose questions, or critique, making dakwah more dialogical and responsive to modern societal needs. However, challenges like information authenticity and accuracy require vigilance to ensure messages remain authoritative and prevent misunderstandings (Hamlan, 2019). In the Indoseian context, the high internet penetration especially among

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urban communities positions digital media as a potent tool for disseminating moderate Islamic understanding. Religious preacher (*ulama* or *da'i*), writers, content creators, and Islamic institutions must develop effective strategies to propagate moderate ideas by leveraging digital platforms' unique features and audience preferences, especially among youth. Synergy among scholars (*ulama*), academics, and the government is essential to foster a healthy digital preaching ecosystem, including robust content regulation to curb deviant teachings.

In this context, the narrative of moderate Islam or Islam *wasathiyah* becomes critically important as a counterbalance to extremist and radical ideologies, which also exploit digital platforms as primary channels for spreading their doctrines. Moderate Islam emphasizes justice, balance, and tolerance values, aligning with Indonesia's pluralistic socio-political landscape (Aziz, 2018). In the Indonesian context, several digital Islamic media have existed. Among those, Islami.co and IBTimes.id are prominent online-based Islamic media platforms championing moderate values, which are representatives affiliated with the two religious organisations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. Those Media were initiated by youth activists rooted in the NU and Muhammadiyah circle tradition. Specifically, Islami.co was founded by Savic Ali, who currently serves as the Central Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU) leader, while IBTimes.ID was founded by Azaki Khoirudin, who currently serves as Secretary of the Cadre and Human Resources Development Council of Muhammadiyah Central Leadership. Those media consistently publish Islamic content, including interpretative articles on Quranic verses highlighting principles of justice and balance, such as Surah Ali Imran (2): 143, which discusses the concept of *ummatan wasathan* (a moderate and balanced community), as well as prioritize content linking Islamic values to national socio-political contexts, offering perspectives contextualized for Indonesian readers. Both platforms bridge religious texts with social realities, shaping Islam's inclusive and peaceful image (Muzayanah et al., 2023).

Based on the background above, this article seeks to comprehensively explore how Islami.co and IBTimes.id construct and disseminate Islamic moderation through three interconnected dimensions: *first*, by examining their distinctive interpretations of moderate Quranic verses such as *ummatan wasathan* (Ali Imran [2]: 143) and how these textual engagements reflect theological positioning; *second*, by analyzing the discourse approaches employed, whether theological, socio-political, or cultural, to frame moderation as an inclusive and contextually relevant Islamic paradigm; and *third*, by investigating how the curated content of both media platforms actively shapes public perceptions of *wasathiyah Islam* within Indonesia's digitally saturated religious landscape, reinforcing or challenging prevailing narratives of tolerance, nationalism, and religious identity.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method, which focuses on language as social practice inseparable from underlying social contexts and ideologies. Fairclough views discourse as a process connecting text with production and consumption practices as well as broader sociocultural contexts, so his analysis consists of three main dimensions: text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice (Eriyanto, 2001; Fairclough, 2013). This approach allows researchers to reveal how language in Islamic digital media represents and produces the meaning of moderate Islam, and how media ideology and interests influence the construction of this discourse.

The primary data for this research consists of four articles purposively selected from two Islamic digital media platforms, Islami.co and IBTimes.id. In this case, the article takes some published articles from both medias. Those are "*Tafsir Surat al-Baqarah Ayat 143: Menjadi Umat yang Moderat*" (Exegesis of Al-Baqarah Verse 143: Becoming a Moderate Community) (Wildan Imaduddin, 2020a) and "*Tafsir Surat Ali Imran Ayat 104: Cara dan Implementasi Menjadi Umat yang Moderat*" (Exegesis of Ali Imran Verse 104: Methods and Implementation of Becoming a Moderate Community) (Wildan Imaduddin, 2020b) from Islami.com. Meanwhile, the articles entitled "*Moderasi Beragama Seharusnya Dinamis, Bukan Statis!*" (Religious Moderation Should Be Dynamic, Not Static!) (Fahrul Anam, 2023) and "*Mungkinkah Internasionalisasi Moderasi Islam ala Indonesia?*" (Can Indonesian-Style Islamic Moderation Be Internationalized?) (Muhammad Ali, 2022) were chosen. These articles were selected based on content relevance that explicitly discusses the concept of Islamic moderation.

In terms of analysis, it was conducted through three stages according to Fairclough's model. *First*, the text description analyses narrative structure, lexical choices, and the intertextuality of Quranic verses used in the articles. This stage aims to understand how the text is linguistically and rhetorically constructed to convey

messages of Islamic moderation. *Second*, interpretation examines the relationship between text and the social context where the text was produced, including Indonesian socio-political dynamics that influence article content and message delivery style. This interpretation also considers how readers or audiences might consume and interpret these messages (Hamlan, 2019.) *Third*, the explanation focuses on tracing the impact of ideology and media interests in shaping moderate Islamic discourse and how media production practices influence the representation and distribution of preaching messages in the digital realm.

This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how Islamic digital media conveys information and reproduces and negotiates the meaning of moderate Islam within broader social contexts. Thus, this research can contribute significantly to studying digital preaching communication and contemporary Islamic discourse in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Representation of Moderate Islam in Digital Media Exegesis

Digital media has emerged as the primary medium in the contemporary transformation of Islamic preaching (*da'wa*) and religious interpretation. As platforms grounded in progressive Islamic values, Islami.co and IBTimes.id construct discourses of moderate Islam through distinct approaches, both converging toward reinforcing *wasathiyah* narratives characterised by inclusivity, contextual relevance, and non-violence. In its article “Exegesis of Al-Baqarah Verse 143: Becoming a Moderate Community,” Islami.co emphasises that the concept of *ummatah wasathan* (QS Al-Baqarah [2]:143) represents a foundational principle embodying justice, balance, and Muslims’ openness to diversity. The term “*wasath*” is interpreted as a median position and a universal justice essential for building an inclusive and harmonious civilization. The article cites Quraish Shihab’s assertion that a “middle community” exemplifies fairness, rejects extremism (whether “left” or “right”), and serves as a moral exemplar among nations (Wildan Imaduddin, 2020). Conversely, in “Exegesis of Ali Imran Verse 104: Methods and Implementation of Becoming a Moderate Community,” Islami.co associates moderation with the mission of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding evil) in a constructive rather than coercive manner. Here, moderation signifies Muslims’ capacity to advocate righteousness and prevent vice through civil, non-impositional means. This interpretation draws from classical theological exegeses (e.g., Al-Thabari, Al-Qurthubi) yet employs accessible language for general audiences. Furthermore, Islami.co frames moderate Islam via a theological-educational approach, integrating classical exegetical traditions with contextual digital communication. Islamic values are presented as solutions to intolerance, but seldom engage directly with socio-political dimensions.

On the other hand, IBTimes.id foregrounds the construction of moderate Islam from a socio-political perspective. Its article “Religious Moderation Should Be Dynamic, Not Static!” underscores the imperative to transcend moderation as normative rhetoric, advocating instead for adaptive practices responsive to social change and contemporary challenges. The author contends that religious moderation must remain dynamic to avoid constraining expressions of religiosity. Furthermore, the article “Can Indonesian-Style Islamic Moderation Be Internationalized?” advances the proposition that Indonesia’s model of moderate Islam, rooted in local culture, Islamic mass organizations, and national values, holds potential as a global paradigm. It posits that core moderating values (e.g., tolerance, deliberation, social justice) should be channelled through cultural diplomacy and international education. IBTimes.ID reveal this perspective nationalist-religious discourse, positioning moderate Islam not solely as a theological doctrine but as a strategic instrument in socio-political development. Both media advance moderate Islamic narratives but diverge in emphasis and conceptual framing. Islami.co prioritizes scriptural exegesis and Islamic spirituality communicated through popular discourse, whereas IBTimes.id emphasizes socio-national reflection and culturally oriented preaching agendas with stronger political undertones. In discursive terms, Islami.co centres on internal religious discourse, intra-Muslim dialogue using established religious language, while IBTimes.id shifts discourse toward public reasoning, integrating Islam into spheres of social interaction, public policy, and cultural diplomacy. This divergence illustrates how digital media disseminates religious teachings and actively shapes communal hermeneutics and cognitive frameworks regarding Islam and nationhood.

The narrative of moderate Islam in digital media however does not emerge automatically as a mere continuation of classical textual traditions. Instead, it results from active construction, heavily influenced by symbolic, aesthetic, and communicative practices that respond to contemporary social dynamics. Fakhruroji

and Rustandi (2020) emphasize that digital media are not simply neutral channels for religious messages, but interpretive agents that actively shape meaning through editorial choices, narrative framing, and the use of specific iconography (Fakhrurroji & Rustandi, 2020). Other studies reinforce these findings. For instance, Firmansyah et.al. (2025) demonstrates that collaboration among artists, religious scholars, and academics in digital spaces produces Islamic symbols that are more communicative and relevant to contemporary audiences. These symbols strengthen religious messages and build inclusive and peaceful narratives that are readily accepted by the wider public (Firmansyah et al., 2025). Visualization and storytelling that highlight the values of tolerance and peace are key strategies in constructing the image of moderate Islam in the digital sphere.

Furthermore, Bisht and Parihar (2023) highlight how digital media, particularly news platforms, employ various narrative frames such as human interest, morality, and conflict to shape public perceptions of religion. These framing choices significantly determine how audiences understand and receive religious messages. Digital activism, visual narratives, and emotional communication strategies reinforce collective identities while presenting challenges such as polarization and misinformation (Bisht & Parihar, 2023). On the other hand, media algorithms and user interactivity are also crucial factors in shaping and distributing religious understanding. The prophetic approach to diversity, which emphasizes inclusivity and respect for differences, becomes a crucial foundation for building social harmony in the digital era. These values are then adapted and repackaged in various forms of digital content, allowing the message of moderate Islam to be received and understood by younger generations and the global community.

The construction of moderate Islamic narratives in digital media results from complex mediatization, editorial framing, and visual communication strategies, all of which are deeply influenced by contemporary social, cultural, and technological dynamics. Digital media is not only a space for preaching but also a social laboratory where religious meanings are continuously negotiated and renewed to remain relevant to the needs of the times.

Discursive Strategies and the Ideology of Moderate Islam in the Digital Public Sphere

The interpretation of moderate Islam in digital media such as Islami.co and IBTimes.id cannot be divorced from social contexts, production practices, and linguistic structures. These three aspects form the core framework of Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis model, which positions text as a product of social, ideological, and power-laden processes (Fairclough, 2013). In this light, both media's exegesis of moderate Quranic verses reflects theological understanding, power relations, and ideological construction.

Through Fairclough's tripartite framework, text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice, the construction of moderate Islam in these platforms reveals complex struggles over meaning within Indonesia's digital space. At the textual level, their linguistic strategies forge an ideological semantic web that binds *wasathiyah* (moderation) to an authentic Islamic identity. According to Muliana, the prolific reproduction of key terms like *rahmatan lil'alam* (mercy to all creation) which aligns with "Pancasila," concept as the national ideology, coupled with intertextual practices, such as linking Pancasila's Unity Principle (Sila Persatuan) to QS Al-Hujurat: 13, serves as a theological legitimization mechanism for nationalist narratives (Muliana, 2022). This pattern transcends mere description; it constructs a symbolic reality where moderation is presented as Islam's inseparable essence.

In textual execution, Islami.co favours a narrative, educative, and populist style. Lexical choices like "balanced community," "just," *rahmatan lil'alam*, and "witness to humanity" in its exegeses of QS Al-Baqarah 143 and QS Al-Imran 104 demonstrate efforts to cultivate a contextual and inclusive Islamic identity (Wildan Imaduddin, 2020a, 2020b). This approach targets broader audiences, particularly youth seeking humanistic Islamic narratives aligned with social realities. Conversely, IBTimes.id frames moderate Islam within conceptual and political contexts. Articles like Religious Moderation Should Be Dynamic, Not Static! Advance narratives tying Islamic moderation to strategic roles in preserving national unity (NKRI) and promoting Indonesian "tolerant Islam" as a global model (Fahrul Anam, 2023; Muhammad Ali, 2022). Its formal, reflective language targets intellectuals, policymakers, and readers invested in Islamic-political dynamics.

At the level of discursive practice, analysis reveals how moderated content undergoes commodification within digital market logic. Optimization of keywords like "religious moderation" on IBTimes.id and rubrication such as "Culture" at Islami.co exemplifies the transformation of religious discourse into algorithmically competitive commodities. However, discursive fragmentation, marked by scarce backlinks among moderate

sites, weakens their counter-hegemonic capacity. (Fanshoby et al., 2024). In consumption patterns, search-driven engagement such as audiences accessing content via specific queries, not algorithmic recommendations reflects discursive access inequalities and explains why emotionally charged radical content spreads more efficiently through social media echo chambers (Nurman, 2019). Both media exhibit distinct ideological orientations in production and distribution. Islami.co, According to Tohari and Mujlipah, intentionally promotes moderate Islamic values as an alternative religious narrative against digital fundamentalism and conservatism. Its editorial process selects ideas and language emphasising social harmony, cultural diversity, and inclusivity, positioning itself as a counter-space to exclusivist scripturalist discourse (Tohari & Mujlipah, 2024). Meanwhile, IBTimes.id is a forum integrating Islamic thought with Indonesian socio-political realities. Terms like “national transformation,” “global contribution,” and “Indonesian narrative” signal its role in linking moderate Islam to public policy interests and cultural diplomacy, reconstructing Muslim agency in geopolitical and global cultural spheres.

Within sociocultural practice, moderate discourse is a tool for NU and Muhammadiyah’s (the two biggest Islamic organization) cultural hegemony. Claims to being “mainstream moderate Islam” (Muliana, 2022) reinforce their traditional authority in digital spaces while demonstrating established institutions’ adaptation to maintain dominance. This hegemony operates reciprocally with the state: as the government mobilises moderation narratives for national stability (Presidential Regulation No. 58 of 2023, 2023; The Minister of Religious Affairs Regulation (PMA) Number 3 of 2024, 2024) mass organisations (*ormas*) leverage state support to expand discursive influence (Fairclough, 2013; Muliana, 2022). In this context, digital media becomes a site of resistance against transnational groups, exemplified by Islam.co’s deconstruction of chaliphate rhetoric (Nurman, 2019). Both platforms exist amid Indonesia’s intensifying ideological and digital contestations. As online consumption of religious information rises, Muslim youth increasingly treat digital media as primary references for understanding Islam (Halim et al., 2015), underscoring the platforms’ significance as producers of Islamic discourse, shaping digital publics’ cognition and religious practice.

On the other hand, digital spaces are not insulated from conflict. Research by Zulfikar, Apriyanti, and Halimatussadiyah shows that despite aesthetically crafted inclusive religious language, resistance persists from groups condemning moderate narratives as compromises of “pure” Islamic teachings (Zulfikar et al., 2023). In Faircloughian terms, this constitutes ideological contestation, where texts become arenas for clashing meanings between dominant and counter-discourses. These findings expose a fundamental paradox; while digital spaces democratize participation (e.g., involving young pesantren students in Islami. co’s content production), they reproduce traditional authority hierarchies simultaneously. NU and Muhammadiyah, dominant in religious discourse since the colonial era, consolidate hegemony through digital infrastructure (Muliana, 2022). Furthermore, reliance on technical expertise (e.g., SEO) creates new exclusion for grassroots moderate groups lacking digital literacy, exacerbating discursive inequities (Fanshoby et al., 2024)

Fairclough’s model reveals Islamic moderation in digital media not as a neutral dissemination of peaceful values, but as a hegemonic battleground where established actors like NU and Muhammadiyah reproduce authority through discursive strategy. The success of sites like Islami.co and IBTimes.id stems not from digital meritocracy alone, but from pre-digital capital accumulation: historical legitimacy, organizational networks, and state recognition as religious authorities (Bourdieu, 2018; Muliana, 2022). The migration of discursive space to digital platforms transforms mechanisms of power: strategic selection of Quranic verses (e.g., QS Al-Baqarah 143), Pancasila-Islam value alignment, and content rubrication (e.g., “Culture” sections) become instruments of subtle hegemony that convert locality into symbolic capital (Fanshoby et al., 2024; Gramsci, 1971). Thus, moderate contents are not neutral religious interpretations but political projects executed through linguistic engineering (e.g., lexical oppositions like *rahmatan lil’alamin* vs. chaliphate) and narrative hierarchies privileging organisational elites (Fairclough, 2013). Digital moderation constitutes an adaptive strategy for old powers to endure through language, affirming Fairclough’s thesis that discursive transformation remains inextricable from historical power relations. In essence, applying Fairclough’s model demonstrates that moderate Islam in the digital era transcends neutral representation of religious doctrine; it is a social-ideological construct shaped by discursive actors in dynamic public spheres, where texts operate as subtle vehicles of power and hegemony through curated narratives, diction, and interpretive framing of selected Quranic verses.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, this study finds that: *first*, regarding interpretations of moderate Quranic verses like *ummatan wasathan* (QS 2:143) and theological positioning, Islami.co and IBTimes.id demonstrate distinct hermeneutical emphases while sharing a core commitment to *wasathiyah*. Islami.co interprets *wasath* primarily as universal justice and moral exemplarity, grounding its theological positioning in classical exegesis to promote an inclusive Islamic identity focused on spiritual balance and anti-extremism. On the other hand, IBTimes.id anchors its theological positioning in socio-political agency, linking *ummatan wasathan* directly to nation-building and global diplomacy. Both platforms strategically reinterpret scripture to reject rigid textualism, framing moderation as a dynamic divine mandate essential for contemporary Muslim life. However, their theological visions diverge between personal piety (Islami.co) and collective civic action (IBTimes.id). *Second*, analysis of discourse approaches reveals fundamental differences in framing moderation. Islami.co employs a predominantly theological-educational approach, utilising accessible language and narrative storytelling to translate classical exegesis into popular discourse. It focuses on intra-community dialogue and spiritual values, deliberately avoiding overt politicisation and emphasising concepts like non-coercive *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*. IBTimes.id, in contrast, adopts a robust socio-political-cultural approach. It leverages public reasoning and formal discourse to explicitly position moderation as instrumental for national unity (NKRI), policy relevance, and Indonesia's global soft power, tying Islamic values to strategic socio-political goals like cultural diplomacy. While both converge on inclusivity and non-violence, their framing scopes differ significantly, communal identity formation versus active civic engagement.

Third, the curated content of both platforms actively shapes public perceptions of *wasathiyah* Islam within Indonesia's digital landscape, simultaneously reinforcing and challenging dominant narratives. They reinforce state-aligned narratives of tolerance and nationalism through intertextual strategies, 'sacralizing' Pancasila by linking it to Quranic verses (e.g., QS Al-Hujurat:13) and positioning moderate Islam as synonymous with authentic Indonesian identity. They actively challenge transnational extremist ideologies like deconstructing chaliphate rhetoric, promoting "Indonesian Islam". However, this construction also exposes paradoxes: while amplifying youth voices, both platforms tend to reproduce existing institutional norms favouring NU and Muhammadiyah as the mainstream of moderate Islam representation, marginalizing perspectives of 'others' through editorial selection and technical gatekeeping (e.g., SEO dependence). Consequently, audiences encounter *wasathiyah* as both a spiritual ethos (Islami.co) and a civic duty (IBTimes.id), yet face counter-narratives condemning moderation as theological compromise, revealing the contested nature of religious identity formation online.

However, these digital platforms construct moderate Islam as an ideological project mediated by power dynamics. Their divergent interpretations and discourse approaches reflect strategic adaptations of pre-digital capital (historical authority, state ties, organizational networks) to secure algorithmic visibility and influence. Fairclough's model confirms that their texts, through lexical choices, verse selection, and narrative framing, are not neutral theological expositions but instruments of cultural hegemony. Digital *wasathiyah* emerges as a site where scripture, nationalism, and commodification converge, enabling established religious institutions (NU, Muhammadiyah) to maintain authority and shape Indonesia's religious landscape in the digital age.

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