

Lived experiences of religious moderation among multicultural muslim communities

Reizki Maharani*), Rizki Ramadhan, Khairul Amri

Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia

Article Info

Article history:

Received Feb 16th, 2024

Revised Oct 11th, 2024

Accepted Dec 30th, 2024

Keyword:

Islamic values
Multicultural community
Phenomenological study
Religious moderation
Social harmony

ABSTRACT

How do Muslim individuals in a multicultural Indonesian city actually experience religious moderation in the texture of daily life? This question, largely unaddressed by institutional and quantitative research, motivates the present phenomenological study. Drawing on the lived experiences of twenty purposively selected informants in Pekanbaru, Riau Province, this research investigates the subjective meanings, embodied practices, and communal dynamics through which religious moderation is enacted among multicultural Muslim communities. Data were generated through in-depth interviews, participatory observation across twelve field visits, and documentary review, and were analyzed through a phenomenological thematic procedure supported by NVivo 12. Bracketing of researcher assumptions was maintained throughout the analytical process to foreground informant meaning-making. Four essential themes emerged: the internalization of Islamic values (ukhuwwah, rahmah, wasath) as a generative moral horizon; moderation as an embodied and relational daily practice rather than doctrinal compliance; deliberative tolerance enacted through musyawarah and gotong royong; and collective moderation as the generative mechanism of community resilience. The study reveals that religious moderation in Pekanbaru is neither a top-down policy outcome nor an abstract theological virtue, but a self-sustaining communal habitus in which Islamic teaching, social practice, and affective belonging are inseparable. This finding advances a Pekanbaru Model of Religious Moderation, a conceptual framework in which input (Islamic values), process (lived practices), and outcome (social harmony) operate in a recursive generative cycle. The study contributes to phenomenological and Islamic moderation scholarship and holds implications for character education, community governance, and multicultural policy in urban Indonesia.



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Corresponding Author:

*) Reizki Maharani,

Email: Reizki.maharani@uin-suska.ac.id

Introduction

Pekanbaru, the capital of Riau Province, is not an easy city to live in if you believe that religious identity and social diversity are incompatible. Malay Muslim traditions share neighborhoods with Javanese, Minangkabau, Batak, Bugis, and Chinese communities, all navigating the same schools, markets, and mosques. Yet conflict, though not absent, is not the defining texture of social life here. Something else is. The question this study takes seriously is what that something else actually consists of from the inside: how do Muslim residents understand, feel, and practice moderation when they encounter difference each day, and what keeps that orientation alive across generations?

Indonesia's Islamic discourse has offered a compelling answer at the level of theology: wasathiyah, the Qur'anic imperative of balance and moderation, provides the normative grammar through which Muslim

communities are called to engage with plurality. Husain (2025) identifies *wasathiyah* as a theological imperative with direct social consequences, arguing that it functions as the normative-Islamic foundation enabling communities to navigate doctrinal difference without escalating into conflict. At the level of national policy, *moderasi beragama* has become an official framework institutionalized through ministerial programs, school curricula, and interreligious dialogue platforms (Rahmadi & Hamdan, 2023; Rivngatin, 2025). The theological and institutional scaffolding is well documented.

What is far less documented is how that scaffolding is inhabited. The extensive body of literature on religious moderation in Indonesia has been built predominantly through quantitative surveys, normative-theological reviews, and institutional case studies focused on *pesantren*, universities, or policy programs (Ridwanulloh et al., 2025; Amran et al., 2025; Zulkifli et al., 2023; Afifah et al., 2025). These contributions establish that moderation is valued, endorsed, and in many settings officially promoted. They do not, as a rule, tell us how it feels to practice it, what it means to an individual who chooses not to impose her views on a neighbor of a different ethnic background, or how young people come to carry a disposition of social openness rather than suspicion. The subjective, embodied, and intersubjective dimensions of moderation as a lived social practice remain, in the Indonesian scholarly literature, significantly underexplored.

This gap is not merely a methodological oversight; it is consequential for both theory and practice. If moderation is only understood at the institutional level, then its cultivation depends entirely on top-down programs. But if moderation is also, and perhaps primarily, a communally transmitted way of being in the world, then its durability depends on the informal social ecologies that sustain it: the neighborhood gathering, the youth cooperative activity, the quiet decision not to escalate a dispute. Understanding those ecologies requires close attention to lived experience (Qorib, 2022; Jamaludin et al., 2024; Kusumastuti & Khoiron, 2019; Abdussamad & Sik, 2021).

Pekanbaru constitutes an analytically productive site for this inquiry. As documented by Sulaiman et al. (2022), its rapid urbanization and demographic diversification over the past three decades have produced neighborhoods where moderation is not a theoretical disposition but a daily practical requirement. The city's multicultural character, marked by the regular interaction of at least five major ethnic-cultural communities within shared social space, creates conditions under which the phenomenological dimensions of moderation become distinctively visible. At the same time, Pekanbaru remains understudied as a site of grassroots religious moderation compared to more frequently researched cities such as Yogyakarta or Makassar, lending this study an additional dimension of geographic and contextual novelty.

Several scholars have begun to articulate what a more experientially grounded approach to moderation research might look like. Qorib (2022) offers a phenomenological study of moderation in Islamic boarding schools that demonstrates the value of attending to how theological values are internalized through daily practice. Jamaludin et al. (2024) similarly employ phenomenological methods to examine how Gen Z Muslim youth form moderate attitudes through internet use and social interaction. Idi and Priansyah (2023) call explicitly for sociologically grounded analyses of moderation that account for the diversity of actors and contexts involved. This study responds to those calls by extending phenomenological inquiry to the multicultural community level in urban Pekanbaru, engaging informants across a range of social positions, from religious leaders and educators to university students, youth, and members of the general public.

The novelty of this study is threefold. First, it investigates religious moderation as a community-level phenomenological phenomenon in a specific multicultural urban setting, rather than as an institutional or demographic category. Second, it integrates multiple social positions within a single analytical framework, enabling a socially representative rather than role-specific account of how moderation is lived and transmitted. Third, it advances an original conceptual framework, the Pekanbaru Model of Religious Moderation, that formalizes the generative cycle through which Islamic values, lived practices, and social outcomes are recursively connected. This framework extends existing theoretical accounts of moderation (Husain, 2025; Pahrudin et al., 2025; Daheri et al., 2023; Muchtar et al., 2022) by specifying the community-level mechanisms through which that cycle operates and self-sustains.

The study is guided by three research objectives: first, to explore the lived experiences of multicultural Muslim communities in practicing religious moderation in Pekanbaru; second, to understand the subjective meanings informants attach to those experiences; and third, to analyze how collective moderation practices generate community resilience and social harmony. The following sections detail the methodological design, present and discuss findings organized around four essential themes, and draw theoretical and practical conclusions from the phenomenological analysis.

Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is concerned with uncovering the essential structures of human experience as they appear in consciousness, aiming not to explain behavior from the outside but to describe what a phenomenon is like from the inside, for those who live it (Kusumastuti & Khoiron, 2019; Abdussamad & Sik, 2021). This orientation makes phenomenology particularly appropriate for investigating religious moderation as a lived social practice, since the research question is precisely about how moderation is experienced, felt, and given meaning by community members in their daily lives, rather than about how it is structured by institutions or measured across populations.

The study adopted Husserl's foundational phenomenological principles, including the practice of bracketing (*epoché*), through which the researcher systematically suspended prior theoretical assumptions, personal dispositions, and cultural familiarity with the research context to allow the essential structures of informants' experiences to emerge without interpretive imposition. Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the fieldwork and analytical phases to document and manage researcher subjectivity. This commitment to phenomenological rigor distinguishes the study from descriptive qualitative approaches that document practice without attending to the layer of subjective meaning and experience that phenomenological analysis foregrounds.

Research Setting and Population

The study was conducted in Pekanbaru, the capital city of Riau Province, Indonesia. Pekanbaru was selected as the research site on both substantive and analytical grounds. Substantively, the city exemplifies multicultural coexistence in the context of rapid urbanization, with a population drawn from Malay, Minangkabau, Javanese, Batak, Bugis, Acehnese, and Chinese-Indonesian communities sharing residential, economic, and religious spaces. This density of ethnic and cultural contact creates conditions in which religious moderation is not an abstract aspiration but a lived daily practice (Sulaiman et al., 2022). Analytically, Pekanbaru represents an understudied site compared to other Indonesian multicultural cities, and its particular socio-demographic configuration offers a distinctive window into community-level moderation dynamics.

The research population comprised approximately 300 Muslim residents living in multicultural neighborhoods across the city, representing diverse ethnic backgrounds, age groups, occupational roles, and levels of religious engagement. This population was identified through prior community mapping and preliminary field observations conducted before formal data collection began.

Sampling and Informants

Twenty key informants were selected through purposive sampling, a non-probabilistic technique that enables researchers to deliberately identify participants who possess direct, relevant experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Kusumastuti & Khoiron, 2019). In phenomenological research, the quality of experiential access is more central than statistical representativeness; the goal is depth of engagement with the phenomenon, not generalizability across a population. Inclusion criteria required informants to be: (1) practicing Muslim; (2) residing in a multicultural neighborhood in Pekanbaru; (3) actively engaged in community social and religious life; (4) possessing demonstrable direct experience of interethnic social interaction and religious moderation; and (5) willing to participate in in-depth interviews.

The final sample of twenty informants represented six social roles: religious leaders (n=4), community figures (n=4), Muslim youth (n=4), university students (n=4), educators (n=3), and members of the general public (n=3). Ethnic representation included Malay, Minangkabau, Javanese, Batak Muslim, Bugis, Chinese Muslim, and Acehnese backgrounds, reflecting the multicultural diversity of the research context. Table 1 presents the full informant profiles.

Table 1. Profile of Research Informants

Code	Role	Background	Age	Experience Focus
INF-01	Religious Leader	Malay Muslim	52	Interfaith dialogue, mosque activities

INF-02	Community Figure	Minangkabau	47	Neighborhood governance, social mediation
INF-03	Muslim Youth	Javanese	22	Youth organization, cultural exchange
INF-04	University Student	Batak Muslim	21	Campus multicultural interaction
INF-05	Educator	Malay Muslim	38	Character education, tolerance pedagogy
INF-06	General Public	Chinese Muslim	44	Daily multicultural coexistence
INF-07	Religious Leader	Minangkabau	58	Islamic teaching, peace advocacy
INF-08	University Student	Javanese	20	Social harmony, student community
INF-09	Muslim Youth	Malay Muslim	24	Youth social activities, community service
INF-10	Educator	Minangkabau	41	Islamic values in education
INF-11	Community Figure	Malay Muslim	50	Community solidarity, conflict resolution
INF-12	University Student	Bugis	22	Multicultural campus life
INF-13	General Public	Javanese	35	Everyday social harmony
INF-14	Religious Leader	Malay Muslim	61	Moderation preaching, intergroup relations
INF-15	Muslim Youth	Minangkabau	23	Youth dialogue, civic engagement
INF-16	Educator	Javanese	39	Islamic character education
INF-17	Community Figure	Batak Muslim	48	Deliberation culture, community resilience
INF-18	University Student	Malay Muslim	21	Social diversity, tolerance practice
INF-19	General Public	Acehnese	40	Everyday moderation, social peace
INF-20	Religious Leader	Minangkabau	55	Islamic brotherhood, social harmony

Note. INF = Informant. Ages and roles reflect data at time of interview.

Data Collection

Data were generated through three complementary methods: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentary review. In-depth interviews constituted the primary phenomenological instrument, providing the relational space through which informants could articulate the subjective texture of their experiences in their own words. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in a location chosen by the informant, a deliberate procedural choice intended to support comfort, candor, and ecological validity. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. An open-ended, semi-structured interview guide was used, organized around three experiential domains: the meaning of religious moderation in personal life, the experience of interethnic social interaction, and the role of community activities in sustaining social harmony.

Participatory observation across twelve field visits over three months complemented interview data by enabling the researcher to situate informants' narratives within the actual practices, spaces, and social dynamics of community life. Observation sites included community meetings (RT/RW), gotong royong activities, mosque gatherings, youth social events, and multicultural community celebrations. Detailed field notes were maintained using a structured protocol organized around five observation domains: cross-ethnic social interaction, religious

practice and expression, conflict management patterns, multicultural symbolic practices, and moderation discourse in public settings. Documentary review of twenty-three community guidelines, religious organizational materials, and local governmental documents on multicultural affairs provided additional contextual triangulation. Table 2 summarizes data collection procedures and Table 3 details field observation domains.

Table 2. Data Collection Techniques

Technique	Description	Instrument	Duration/Volume
In-depth Interview	Structured open-ended exploration of lived experiences of moderation	Interview guide (3 themes, 20 items)	60–90 min per informant
Participatory Observation	Direct observation of community social and religious activities	Field note protocol, checklist	12 field visits, 3 months
Documentary Review	Review of community guidelines, organizational records, local policy documents	Document analysis checklist	23 documents reviewed
Member Checking	Verification of preliminary findings with selected informants	Summary feedback sheet	6 informants re-engaged

Note. Data collection conducted from January to March 2024 in Pekanbaru, Riau.

Table 3. Field Observation Domains and Indicators

No.	Observation Domain	Observable Indicators	Contextual Notes
1	Community Social Interaction	Frequency of cross-ethnic communication; participation in shared social events; language and gesture of inclusion	Observed at RT/RW meetings, gotong royong activities
2	Religious Practice & Expression	Openness of religious expression; absence of exclusionary discourse; cooperative religious events	Observed at mosques, religious study circles
3	Conflict Management Patterns	Use of deliberation (musyawarah); presence of mediating figures; non-violent resolution	Noted during neighborhood dispute observations
4	Multicultural Symbolic Practices	Display of inclusive symbols; cross-cultural celebration participation; food sharing across ethnic groups	Observed at community celebrations and markets
5	Moderation Discourse in Public Space	Use of moderation language in speeches; visible materials; community leader rhetoric	Recorded at community meetings and Friday sermons

Note. Field observation conducted across five community sites in Pekanbaru over 12 field visits.

Data Analysis

Data analysis integrated two complementary procedures. At the organizing level, the Miles and Huberman (1994) interactive model guided the management of the dataset through iterative processes of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction involved the systematic selection and condensation of raw interview transcripts and observation notes, with attention to passages that bore on informants' subjective experiences of moderation. Thematic matrices were constructed to visualize relationships among emerging conceptual categories, and conclusions were drawn iteratively as patterns consolidated across data sources. NVivo 12 software supported the systematic organization and retrieval of codes, enabling efficient management of the full dataset across twenty interview transcripts, twelve field note sets, and twenty-three documents.

At the phenomenological level, analysis followed the six-phase procedure described by Braun and Clarke: familiarization with the data through repeated reading, generation of initial codes from significant experiential passages, searching for themes across coded data, reviewing themes for internal coherence and external distinctiveness, defining and naming themes to capture their essential character, and producing the interpretive report. Crucially, phenomenological interpretation was applied at each stage: the goal was not merely to catalogue what informants reported doing, but to articulate what those practices meant and felt like from within, and to identify the essential structures of experience that persisted across informant accounts. This interpretive layer is what distinguishes the analysis as genuinely phenomenological rather than descriptive-qualitative.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was established across four dimensions. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the research community over three months, peer debriefing with colleagues in Islamic education research, and member checking with six informants who reviewed and responded to preliminary thematic summaries. Transferability was addressed through thick description of the research context, participants, and analytical process, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to comparable multicultural settings. Dependability was documented through a systematic audit trail of methodological decisions, and confirmability was maintained through reflexive bracketing journals and triangulation across three data sources and six informant categories. All informants provided voluntary informed consent before participating. Anonymity was maintained through the use of codes (INF-01 through INF-20). Informants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and data were stored securely and used exclusively for academic research purposes. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the relevant institutional ethics board.

Results and Discussions

Phenomenological analysis of the interview transcripts, field observation notes, and documentary data produced four essential themes that together illuminate how religious moderation is lived, experienced, and sustained among multicultural Muslim communities in Pekanbaru. These themes are not merely categories of social behavior; they represent distinct experiential structures, each with its own affective character, moral texture, and social function. The four themes are: (1) Islamic values as the generative moral horizon of social harmony, (2) moderation as embodied and relational daily practice, (3) deliberative tolerance as the practical infrastructure of community life, and (4) collective moderation as the engine of community resilience. Table 4 presents the triangulation matrix across data sources, and Table 5 provides the thematic coding overview.

Table 4. Data Triangulation Matrix

Theme	Interview Data	Observation Data	Documentary Data
Islamic Values & Social Harmony	20/20 informants referenced ukhuwwah, rahmah, and wasath as foundational	Observed collective worship, cooperative gotong royong across ethnic groups	Community guidelines explicitly referencing Islamic principles of unity
Lived Moderation Practices	All informants described daily tolerance as embodied relational practice; no conflict incidents reported	Cross-ethnic social participation observed consistently across all 12 field visits	Local religious organization documents affirming moderation programs
Social Tolerance & Mutual Respect	19/20 informants identified musyawarah as key to conflict resolution; 20/20 described non-judgmental social orientation	Peaceful resolution of minor disputes through community mediation observed	Government-issued multicultural community development guidelines
Community Resilience	All informants expressed collective commitment to sustaining harmony and identified moderation as a shared communal value	Strong community solidarity observed during shared activities and celebrations	Documentation of community social programs supporting multicultural integration

Note. Triangulation confirms convergence of findings across all three data sources and six informant categories.

Table 5. Thematic Coding Overview

No.	Theme	Sub-Themes	Key Codes
1	Islamic Values as Generative Moral Horizon	Brotherhood (ukhuwwah); Compassion (rahmah); Balanced conduct (wasath)	persaudaraan; kasih sayang; damai; harmoni sosial; nilai agama
2	Moderation as Embodied Daily Practice	Moderation as social ease; Non-judgmental orientation; Inclusive identity	toleransi aktif; tidak menyalahkan; terbuka; kedamaian; penerimaan keberagaman
3	Deliberative Tolerance as Practical Infrastructure	Musyawah; Gotong royong; Cross-ethnic cooperation; Conflict avoidance	saling menghargai; kerjasama lintas budaya; musyawarah; inklusif
4	Collective Moderation and Community Resilience	Shared social values; Collective responsibility; Sustainable harmony; Affective belonging	kekeluargaan; solidaritas; ketahanan sosial; moderasi kolektif; keberlanjutan

Note. Themes generated through phenomenological thematic analysis of 20 informant interviews, 12 field observation sessions, and 23 documents.

Theme 1: Islamic Values as the Generative Moral Horizon of Social Harmony

The most consistently articulated experiential structure across all twenty informants concerns the way Islamic values function not as external rules but as an internalized moral horizon, a constitutive framework of orientation that shapes how community members perceive, respond to, and feel about their social world. The three values most frequently named are ukhuwwah (brotherhood), rahmah (compassion), and wasath (balance), and what is phenomenologically striking is that informants across all social roles, ethnic backgrounds, and age groups described these values not as something they consciously invoke when encountering difference, but as something they inhabit, a way of being social that feels natural rather than deliberate.

INF-01, a Malay Muslim religious leader of 52 years, expressed this most directly when asked about the quality of social relations in his neighborhood:

“Saya melihat masyarakat di lingkungan kami cukup mampu menjaga hubungan sosial dengan baik meskipun memiliki latar belakang yang berbeda. Dalam kegiatan keagamaan maupun kegiatan sosial, masyarakat saling membantu tanpa melihat asal daerah atau status sosial. Menurut saya, nilai Islam tentang persaudaraan sangat berpengaruh dalam membangun sikap saling menghormati.”

[“I observe that our community is quite capable of maintaining good social relationships despite having different backgrounds. In both religious and social activities, people help each other regardless of regional origin or social status. In my view, Islamic values of brotherhood are highly influential in cultivating mutual respect.”] (INF-01, Religious Leader)

What deserves attention here is the phenomenological register of INF-01’s account. He does not describe a formal program of tolerance education or a community policy of interethnic cooperation. He describes something he observes as natural and taken-for-granted: people helping each other, regardless of background. The Islamic value of brotherhood is offered as the explanatory horizon for that naturalized behavior, suggesting that the value has been sufficiently internalized to become invisible as a value, functioning instead as the unremarkable texture of everyday social life. This is precisely what Husain (2025) means when he argues that wasathiyah carries direct social consequences: the value does not merely instruct behavior from outside; it reshapes the social world from within.

INF-20, a Minangkabau religious leader, located compassion rather than brotherhood at the center of this moral horizon:

“Menurut saya, nilai Islam tentang kasih sayang dan persaudaraan menjadi dasar penting dalam menjaga harmoni sosial masyarakat.”

[“In my view, Islamic values of compassion and brotherhood constitute an essential foundation for sustaining social harmony in the community.”] (INF-20, Religious Leader)

The concept of *rahmah*, as understood in this community, operates not as individual piety but as a socially distributed orientation of care. Pahrudin et al. (2025) describe *rahmah* as a framework for peaceful coexistence in contemporary Islamic thought, and what the present study adds to that account is an experiential specification: *rahmah*, for these informants, is felt as a social responsibility toward the wellbeing of the community as a whole, not only toward co-religionists. This extension of Islamic compassion beyond doctrinal boundaries is central to what makes it a genuinely moderating force in multicultural settings.

Educators offered a pedagogical dimension of the same theme. INF-05 described how she experiences the connection between Islamic values and social life in Pekanbaru:

“Saya merasa kehidupan sosial di Pekanbaru cukup harmonis karena masyarakat memiliki kesadaran untuk menjaga kerukunan. Dalam dunia pendidikan, kami juga mengajarkan pentingnya toleransi dan menghormati orang lain.”

[“I feel that social life in Pekanbaru is quite harmonious because the community is conscious of maintaining social cohesion. In education, we also teach the importance of tolerance and respecting others.”] (INF-05, Educator)

The word “*merasakan*” (to feel) is significant here: INF-05 does not merely observe harmony; she experiences it affectively. This phenomenological register confirms that Islamic values, when operative as a shared moral horizon, generate not only behavioral patterns but emotional orientations: the social world feels harmonious because the community is oriented toward its harmony. Firdaus and Suwendi (2025) argue that Islamic character education plays a vital role in multicultural social harmony, and this study’s findings confirm that argument while specifying the mechanism: character education is effective insofar as it cultivates this internalized moral orientation rather than merely transmitting rules of conduct. INF-10 made the connection to interpersonal character explicit: “Islam mengajarkan akhlak yang baik sehingga masyarakat lebih menjaga sikap dalam kehidupan sosial” (Islam teaches good character (*akhlak*), which leads people to be more mindful of their conduct in social life), a formulation that locates the social function of Islamic values in the disposition of the individual self rather than in external enforcement. This aligns with Shobri’s (2025) analysis of religious moderation as expressed through service and daily conduct, and with Daheri et al.’s (2023) research identifying Islamic values of tolerance as social glue in Indonesia’s multireligious settings.

Theme 2: Moderation as Embodied and Relational Daily Practice

The second essential theme concerns what moderation actually looks and feels like from the inside of daily social life. Where the first theme addresses the moral horizon that orients social behavior, the second theme addresses the texture of social experience itself: the felt quality of openness, the practiced restraint from judgment, the social ease that characterizes encounters across difference. For the informants in this study, moderation is not experienced as the application of a principle to a situation; it is experienced as a way of being with others that has become habitual, natural, and, for many, pleasurable.

INF-03, a 22-year-old Javanese Muslim youth, described this dimension of lived moderation in terms of what he has learned through experience rather than instruction:

“Saya sering berinteraksi dengan teman-teman yang memiliki budaya dan kebiasaan berbeda. Dari situ saya belajar bahwa menghargai perbedaan adalah bagian penting dalam kehidupan sosial. Lingkungan kami cukup terbuka sehingga hubungan antar masyarakat terasa nyaman dan damai.”

[“I frequently interact with friends who have different cultures and customs. From that experience, I learn that respecting difference is an important part of social life. Our environment is quite open, making interpersonal relations feel comfortable and peaceful.”] (INF-03, Muslim Youth)

The phrase “*terasa nyaman dan damai*” (feels comfortable and peaceful) is phenomenologically significant: it identifies the affective outcome of lived moderation as a felt state of ease, not merely an achieved behavioral outcome. Jamaludin et al. (2024) identify everyday social interaction as the primary site for the formation of moderate religious attitudes among Gen Z Muslims, and what INF-03’s account adds is the phenomenological texture of that formation: it is experienced as a process of social learning, of coming to inhabit an open social world, rather than as instruction in a set of norms. The openness INF-03 describes is not merely personal; it is a feature of the social environment, a collectively maintained culture of moderation that enables individual disposition to develop without coercion.

INF-04, a 21-year-old Batak Muslim university student, offered a complementary account focused on what people do not do as a marker of moderation:

“Di kampus maupun lingkungan tempat tinggal, saya melihat masyarakat cukup menghargai perbedaan pendapat dan kebiasaan sosial. Hal itu membuat hubungan sosial terasa lebih harmonis karena masyarakat tidak mudah memaksakan pandangan masing-masing.”

["Both on campus and in my neighborhood, I observe that people quite readily respect differences in opinion and social habits. This makes social relationships feel more harmonious because people do not easily impose their own views on others."] (INF-04, University Student)

The restraint that INF-04 describes, specifically the community's practiced non-imposition of views, reflects the classical Islamic value of *ikhtilaf*, respectful disagreement, which moderation scholars have consistently identified as central to inter-community dialogue (Idi & Priansyah, 2023; Fikri & Warseto, 2024). What is distinctive in INF-04's phenomenological account is the connection between this restraint and the affective quality of social relations: because people do not impose, relationships "feel" harmonious. Restraint from imposition is not merely a social norm here; it is a condition of possibility for experienced harmony.

INF-14, a senior religious leader, gave the most distilled phenomenological formulation of this theme:

“Moderasi beragama menurut saya terlihat dari cara masyarakat menjaga hubungan sosial secara damai dan tidak mudah menyalahkan kelompok lain.”

["Religious moderation, in my view, is visible in the way the community maintains peaceful social relations and does not readily blame other groups."] (INF-14, Religious Leader)

The insight that moderation is visible in what people do not do, specifically that they refrain from blaming, excluding, or confronting, reveals the tacit, implicit dimension of lived moderation as a social practice. Khoerunisa and Yuliani (2025) observe that religious moderation in Indonesia's multicultural society frequently manifests through restraint as much as through positive engagement. The phenomenological contribution of this study is to specify the experiential significance of that restraint: it is not passive or effortless but is the product of ongoing moral commitment, described by informants as a conscious choice to prioritize social peace over the expression of disagreement. INF-09 situated this orientation within youth community culture: "Anak-anak muda di lingkungan kami cukup terbuka dalam bergaul. Kami sering bekerja sama dalam kegiatan sosial tanpa mempersoalkan perbedaan budaya maupun kebiasaan" (Young people in our community are quite open in socializing. We often cooperate in social activities without making an issue of cultural or habitual differences). This cooperative ease reflects what Ngarawula and Wahyudi (2024) describe as the inclusive community model, where shared social activities create zones of transcultural interaction, and it is experienced by young informants not as religious discipline but as social pleasure, a phenomenological finding with significant implications for the sustainability of moderate culture across generations.

Theme 3: Deliberative Tolerance as the Practical Infrastructure of Community Life

The third essential theme captures the specific social practices through which tolerance and mutual respect are enacted and reproduced in Pekanbaru's multicultural Muslim communities. These practices constitute what might be called the practical infrastructure of moderation: the concrete mechanisms through which an abstract orientation of openness is translated into stable social arrangements. Three practices stand out in the data as particularly central: *musyawarah* (deliberative consensus-building), *gotong royong* (cooperative communal work), and the cultivation of unconditional neighborly solidarity.

INF-17, a 48-year-old Batak Muslim community figure, located *musyawarah* at the heart of the community's capacity for peaceful conflict resolution:

“Masyarakat di sini memiliki budaya musyawarah sehingga masalah sosial biasanya diselesaikan secara baik dan damai.”

["The community here has a deliberation culture, so social problems are usually resolved well and peacefully."] (INF-17, Community Figure)

Musyawarah draws simultaneously on Javanese communal tradition and the Islamic principle of *shura* (consultation), and its effectiveness as a moderation mechanism lies precisely in this dual grounding: it is both culturally familiar and theologically legitimized. Ahmad et al. (2025) argue that cultural communication practices such as *musyawarah* are among the most effective mechanisms for strengthening religious moderation in multicultural communities because they provide structured space for the articulation and resolution of differences without the escalation that confrontational approaches risk. What the present study adds is the phenomenological dimension: informants experience *musyawarah* not as a procedural technique but as an expression of the community's deeper value of shared governance, the felt sense that decisions belong to everyone and that everyone's voice deserves space.

INF-11, a Malay Muslim community figure, described the affective underpinning of community solidarity that makes tolerance practices work:

“Masyarakat di lingkungan kami memiliki rasa kekeluargaan yang cukup kuat. Ketika ada masyarakat yang mengalami kesulitan, semua warga ikut membantu tanpa memandang latar belakang.”

["Our community has a strong sense of familial solidarity. When someone in the community is in difficulty, all residents help without regard to background."] (INF-11, Community Figure)

The unconditional character of this solidarity, helping “tanpa memandang latar belakang” (without regard to background), marks a significant phenomenological achievement. Fithriyah (2023) identifies this kind of unconditional mutual assistance as the installation of religious moderation values in everyday community life, but the experiential content of INF-11’s account goes further: it describes a community in which common humanity has become the operative social identity, superseding ethnic and cultural particularity without erasing it. This disposition is grounded explicitly in the Islamic value of tolong-menolong (mutual assistance), confirming that theological values and social practice are experienced as inseparable rather than as parallel domains.

INF-02, a Minangkabau community figure, described the deliberate moral priority that sustains inclusive participation:

“Di lingkungan tempat saya tinggal, masyarakat terbiasa bekerja sama dalam berbagai kegiatan sosial seperti gotong royong dan kegiatan kemasyarakatan lainnya. Walaupun masyarakat berasal dari latar budaya yang berbeda, hubungan sosial tetap terjaga karena masyarakat mengutamakan rasa saling menghargai.”

["In my neighborhood, people are accustomed to cooperating in various social activities such as communal work and community events. Although community members come from different cultural backgrounds, social relations are maintained because people prioritize mutual respect."] (INF-02, Community Figure)

The verb “mengutamakan” (to prioritize, to place first) is phenomenologically significant. Mutual respect is not described as an automatic social outcome or a cultural default; it is described as something the community chooses to place first, a deliberate moral priority that must be actively maintained. This aligns with Ginting et al.’s (2023) finding that social harmony in multicultural settings depends on the active cultivation of social capital, including norms of reciprocity and trust, rather than on the mere absence of conflict.

Members of the general public described the experiential quality of this infrastructure from the perspective of everyday emotional life. INF-06, a Chinese Muslim resident, articulated what living in a well-functioning multicultural community feels like:

“Saya merasa nyaman hidup di lingkungan yang beragam karena masyarakat di sini terbiasa hidup berdampingan secara damai. Ketika ada kegiatan sosial, semua masyarakat ikut terlibat tanpa membedakan latar belakang.”

["I feel comfortable living in a diverse environment because people here are accustomed to coexisting peacefully. In social activities, all community members participate without distinguishing backgrounds."] (INF-06, General Public)

The phenomenological category of comfort (“nyaman”), feeling at ease in diversity, is analytically significant because it identifies the affective dimension of lived tolerance. Ho (2017) argues that social harmony, as an educational and social goal, must be felt as well as practiced; when communities achieve this affective register of harmony, it becomes self-sustaining through positive reinforcement. Defriza et al. (2025) similarly observe that Islam’s contribution to multicultural social harmony is most tangible when it generates this felt sense of social ease and mutual belonging. INF-13 reinforced this from a security perspective: “Lingkungan kami cukup aman dan harmonis karena masyarakat menjaga sikap dan menghormati satu sama lain dalam kehidupan sehari-hari” (Our environment is quite safe and harmonious because community members maintain proper conduct and respect each other in daily life), connecting behavioral discipline (menjaga sikap) to felt safety (aman) in a way that frames tolerance as a practical security mechanism as much as a social virtue. Amina’s (2025) observation that multicultural education norms function as a strategy for strengthening moderation and community security finds direct experiential confirmation in this account.

Theme 4: Collective Moderation as the Engine of Community Resilience

The fourth essential theme concerns how the individual experiences and community practices described in the preceding three themes aggregate into a form of community resilience: a collectively maintained capacity to sustain harmony across the pressures of social diversity, demographic change, and generational transition.

This theme addresses not merely what the community is like at any given moment, but how it reproduces and renews itself over time.

INF-07, a 58-year-old Minangkabau religious leader, identified the theological source of this resilience:

"Menurut saya, keharmonisan masyarakat muncul karena adanya nilai agama yang mengajarkan perdamaian dan saling menghormati. Islam mengajarkan pentingnya menjaga hubungan baik dengan sesama manusia."

["In my view, community harmony arises from religious values that teach peace and mutual respect. Islam teaches the importance of maintaining good relations with all fellow human beings."] (INF-07, Religious Leader)

The verb "muncul" (to arise, to emerge) carries significant phenomenological weight: harmony is not described as constructed or enforced but as something that emerges organically from the community's religious orientation. This positions Islamic teaching not as one social factor among many but as the generative source of community resilience, a framing that resonates with Ab Rahman's (2025) argument that strengthening religious moderation is directly connected to promoting social cohesion and peaceful coexistence in multicultural societies.

INF-15 described how the community's resilience is transmitted through practice rather than declaration:

"Kami terbiasa berdiskusi dan bekerja sama dalam kegiatan sosial. Dari situ saya belajar pentingnya menghormati perbedaan agar hubungan tetap harmonis."

["We are accustomed to discussing and cooperating in social activities. From that, I learn the importance of respecting difference in order to keep relationships harmonious."] (INF-15, Muslim Youth)

The phrase "dari situ saya belajar" (from that I learn) confirms that the transmission of moderate values occurs primarily through participatory social experience rather than formal instruction. Siregar et al. (2025) identify this experiential approach as the multicultural dimension of Islamic education, arguing that moderation is built through active engagement with diversity rather than passive reception of doctrine. The phenomenological significance of INF-15's account is that this learning is experienced as emerging from the activity itself, from the doing of cooperation and discussion, rather than from explicit pedagogical intention. Moderation is reproduced through practice, not preached into existence.

INF-11 offered the most philosophically precise statement of what moderation means as a lived value:

"Makna moderasi adalah saling menghormati tanpa kehilangan identitas agama."

["The meaning of moderation is mutual respect without losing one's religious identity."] (INF-11, Community Figure)

This formulation, respect without loss of identity, encapsulates a central phenomenological insight of the study: that religious moderation, as lived by these community members, is not experienced as a compromise of religious commitment but as its fullest social expression. Sulaiman et al. (2022) argue that genuine moderation in multicultural societies requires precisely this balance, maintaining doctrinal integrity while embracing social openness, and the present findings confirm that Pekanbaru's Muslim communities have not merely endorsed this balance at the level of discourse but have internalized and embodied it at the level of identity and daily practice.

INF-19's account captures the phenomenological endpoint of collective moderation:

"Kehidupan sosial yang harmonis membuat masyarakat merasa nyaman tinggal di lingkungan multikultural."

["Harmonious social life makes community members feel comfortable living in a multicultural environment."] (INF-19, General Public)

The simplicity of this statement should not obscure its analytical significance. When moderation is collectively practiced and sustained over time, it transforms the affective character of the social environment: multicultural living is experienced not as a source of tension to be managed but as a source of comfort to be inhabited. Muchtar et al. (2022) describe this as the framework of life that religious moderation creates, a shared habitus of coexistence that enables individuals to thrive within, rather than despite, their differences. Hutabarat (2023) similarly identifies this kind of culturally embedded value cycle as essential for navigating diversity successfully in Indonesian society. INF-20's reiteration of the centrality of Islamic brotherhood and compassion across all four themes confirms that these values function as the engine of this generative cycle, not merely as its starting point. Zulkifli et al.'s (2023) analysis of moderation among Indonesian Muslim academics, which

identifies a constructed religious identity centered on balance, compassion, and social engagement, finds its community-level confirmation in these findings.

Conceptual Framework: The Pekanbaru Model of Religious Moderation

The four essential themes identified in this study converge on a coherent conceptual framework that specifies how religious moderation operates as a community-level social mechanism in Pekanbaru. The framework, schematized in Figure 1, has three structural components: input, process, and outcome, organized in a recursive generative cycle.

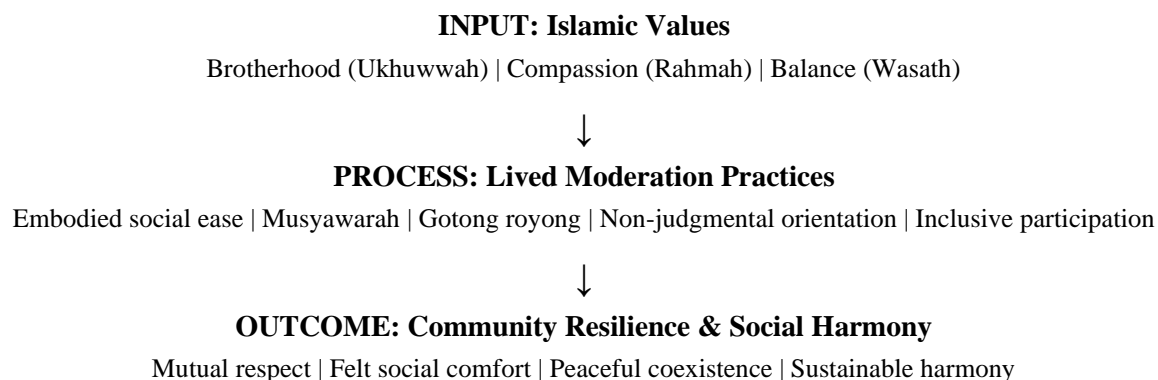


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: The Pekanbaru Model of Religious Moderation.

Note. Framework developed inductively from phenomenological thematic analysis of participant narratives and field observation data.

The recursive arrow in Figure 1 captures the self-sustaining character of this cycle: the outcome of social harmony reinforces the community's commitment to the Islamic values that generated it, so that the cycle renews itself across time. This recursive structure distinguishes the framework from linear models of religious influence on social behavior, and it reflects the phenomenological insight that community members do not experience moderation as something they apply to their social world, but as something that their social world, having been formed by moderation, continues to elicit from them.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that religious moderation within the multicultural Muslim community of Pekanbaru is not merely understood as a normative religious principle but is experienced as a lived social reality embedded in everyday interactions. The findings reveal that moderation emerges from the internalization of Islamic values such as brotherhood, compassion, mutual respect, and balance, which shape individual attitudes and collective behavior in diverse social settings. These values are translated into practical forms of coexistence through continuous engagement with people from different ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds. The study further shows that religious moderation is sustained through relational experiences characterized by feelings of comfort, trust, and social acceptance. Such experiences foster positive intergroup relationships and create an environment in which diversity is perceived as a source of strength rather than division. Community practices such as dialogue, deliberation, cooperation, and mutual assistance serve as important mechanisms through which moderation is enacted, reinforced, and transmitted across generations.

An important finding is that moderation functions as a self-reinforcing social process. Islamic values inspire moderate behaviors, moderate behaviors strengthen harmonious relationships, and harmonious relationships further reinforce the collective commitment to moderation. This dynamic cycle contributes to community resilience by enabling individuals and groups to manage differences constructively while maintaining social cohesion. The study highlights that religious moderation is best understood as a living culture rather than a formal doctrine. It is nurtured through everyday social participation, collective responsibility, and shared moral commitments. The Pekanbaru experience illustrates how multicultural communities can cultivate sustainable harmony by integrating religious values with inclusive social practices, thereby creating a resilient foundation for peaceful coexistence in an increasingly diverse society.

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