

# SYMBOLS, IDENTITY, AND MODERATION: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGIOUS CULTURAL BRANDING BY RELIGIOUS LEADERS

**Irwandi**

UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia

Email: [irwandi@uinsgd.ac.id](mailto:irwandi@uinsgd.ac.id)

## Abstract

This study explores the sociological meaning of religious cultural branding as practiced by religious leaders in the effort to foster religious moderation. Utilizing a qualitative approach rooted in the sociology of religion, the research examines how symbols, rituals, narratives, and visual representations are employed by religious figures to construct collective religious identities that emphasize tolerance, inclusivity, and peaceful coexistence. The study draws on theories of symbolic interactionism and identity construction to analyze how branding strategies are not merely tools of communication but also mechanisms of social influence and identity formation within religious communities. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with religious leaders, observation of public religious events, and content analysis of religious media. The findings suggest that religious cultural branding serves as both a symbolic and strategic medium for reinforcing moderate religious values, countering extremism, and negotiating religious authority in a pluralistic society. This study highlights the increasingly important role of religious leaders not only as spiritual guides but also as cultural communicators and agents of social cohesion.

**Keywords:** *Religious Cultural Branding, Religious Leaders, Religious Moderation, Identity Construction, Sociology of Religion.*

## A. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary societies, religious leaders are no longer confined to spiritual guidance alone, they also act as cultural entrepreneurs who use symbols to construct, transmit, and sustain collective identity. As globalization and digital culture intensify the competition for attention and authority in the public sphere, religious figures increasingly engage in strategic symbolic practices that function as religious cultural branding. Through clothing, speech, rituals, and digital aesthetics, these leaders seek not only to convey religious messages but also to position themselves and their institutions within broader narratives of identity, nationalism, and moral legitimacy (Einstein, 2008).

Religious cultural branding refers to the deliberate use of cultural and symbolic expressions by religious actors to build a distinct and recognizable identity that resonates with followers and the broader public. It reflects how religion is mediated and performed in the modern world, shaped by market logic, political considerations, and the demand for relevance in diverse societies. Berger (1967) emphasizes that symbols serve as mediators of meaning in religion, providing coherence to the lived experience of faith while also reflecting deeper social structures. Moreover, Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic capital helps explain how these symbols confer legitimacy and authority, often reinforcing hierarchical structures and group boundaries.

Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, offers a dynamic context for examining this phenomenon. In particular, West Java (*Jawa Barat*) presents a compelling case due to its unique socio-religious landscape. Despite its deep-rooted Islamic heritage and vibrant cultural traditions, West Java has been repeatedly cited in national surveys, such as those by

the Setara Institute (2021) and the Wahid Foundation (2018), as one of the provinces with the lowest levels of religious tolerance. The 2021 Setara Institute report, for example, ranked West Java among the bottom regions in terms of tolerance indicators, including freedom of worship, religious expression, and intergroup relations.

These findings raise important questions: Why does a region with a rich history of moderate Islam and cultural pluralism appear increasingly intolerant? Could symbolic practices by religious elites contribute to reinforcing identity-based exclusivism, or might they also serve as tools for promoting religious moderation (*wasathiyyah*) and social cohesion?

This study seeks to explore these questions through a sociological lens, analyzing how religious leaders in West Java engage in symbolic cultural branding to construct religious identity and promote messages of moderation. By focusing on the intersection of symbols, identity, and religious authority, this research examines both the potential and the pitfalls of symbolic power in shaping collective consciousness in a socially diverse and politically contested space.

Despite a growing body of literature on religious communication, identity politics, and symbolic interactionism in Islamic contexts, few studies have holistically examined how religious leaders strategically use cultural branding to navigate between exclusivist identity formation and the promotion of religious moderation, particularly in regions facing increasing polarization. Most existing research, such as those by Hoesterey (2016) on celebrity preachers in Indonesia or by Mudzhar (2020) on Islamic communication and political discourse, focus either on theological messages or media strategies without fully integrating the sociological dimensions of symbolic power, public perception, and identity consolidation within contested local contexts.

This study fills that gap by offering a sociological analysis of religious cultural branding practices among Islamic leaders in West Java, a province that paradoxically combines rich Islamic traditions with persistent challenges in religious tolerance (Setara Institute, 2021). Unlike previous studies that treat branding as a one-way process of religious commodification (Einstein, 2008; Husein, 2021), this research emphasizes the dialectical relationship between symbols, followers, and sociopolitical environments. It investigates how branding can function both as an instrument of identity assertion and as a potential medium for advancing *wasathiyyah* (Islamic moderation) in plural societies.

The novelty of this study lies in its empirical grounding in West Java's complex socioreligious setting, an underexplored site in the international discourse, and its analytical integration of symbolic interactionism, Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, and the sociology of religious authority. By critically juxtaposing symbolic practices with tolerance indicators and community responses, this study moves beyond the binary between "radical" and "moderate" Islam and offers a more nuanced understanding of religious influence in an era of digital visibility, identity politics, and contested pluralism.

In contrast to international studies focused primarily on Middle Eastern or Western Muslim contexts (Roy, 2010; Mandaville, 2021), this research highlights the Southeast Asian experience, particularly how Indonesian religious actors navigate the balance between traditional legitimacy and modern branding imperatives. Furthermore, in the national scholarly discourse, most recent works still under-theorize the symbolic power embedded in religious leadership and its potential for either reinforcing or disrupting the public space of tolerance.

Therefore, this research contributes both theoretically by expanding the framework of religious cultural branding in sociological terms, and practically, by informing discourse on how moderate Islamic narratives can be effectively cultivated through cultural and symbolic engagement.

## B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Symbols hold profound significance in shaping collective and individual religious identities. According to Geertz (1973), religion as a cultural system manifests itself through symbols that communicate complex worldviews and ethical structures. These symbols, ranging from clothing, architecture, to ritual practices form the backbone of religious branding by leaders who seek to represent and reinforce community identity.

In Islamic contexts, Asad (2009) argues that religious symbols do not operate in a vacuum but are embedded in power relations and discursive traditions. The headscarf, mosque ornamentation, or even phrases like “*Rahmatan lil Alamin*” can become identity markers, especially when mediated by religious leaders seeking to unify or differentiate followers.

Religious cultural branding refers to the strategic use of religious narratives, symbols, and public personas by religious leaders to shape public perception and influence community behavior. This concept intersects with sociological theories of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), where meaning is negotiated through interaction and reinforced through repeated social performance.

Einstein (2008), in her study on religion and media, illustrates how televangelists and Muslim preachers alike engage in branding practices by curating their image, language, and ritual performance to appeal to specific audiences. In Indonesia, Wahid (2018) highlights how *da'i* (preachers) on social media craft a brand that is simultaneously spiritual and relatable, often incorporating lifestyle elements to appeal to young audiences.

The concept of religious moderation (*wasathiyah*) has gained significant academic attention, especially in plural societies. Mubarok & Rustam (2018), Khoiri (2019), and Syam & Nawawi (2019) asserts that religious moderation in Indonesia is not only a theological position but a socio-political necessity to maintain harmony in a multicultural state. Religious leaders, therefore, act as intermediaries, translating moderate interpretations through symbols, sermons, and behavior.

In a comparative perspective, Mandaville (2014) points out that moderate religious branding can serve as both a counter-narrative to radicalism and a means of political legitimation. This dual function is evident in the branding efforts by Islamic organizations in Indonesia, such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, which promote moderate Islam through media campaigns and grassroots *da'wah* (Hasyim, 2020).

West Java is a significant site for this research due to its complex socio-religious dynamics. According to Setara Institute (2022), West Java ranks among the provinces with the lowest tolerance index in Indonesia. This makes it a critical location to examine how religious leaders use cultural symbols not only for identity formation but also to promote religious moderation amid rising conservatism.

Few studies have examined this intersection in localized contexts. Previous works by Latif (2020) and Muttaqin (2021) focus on religious tolerance at the institutional level, but little research has explored how individual religious leaders actively perform symbolic branding as a tool for moderation and social identity construction.

While prior research has discussed religious branding (Einstein, 2008; Wahid, 2018) and religious moderation (Azra, 2017; Hasyim, 2020), there is a lack of integrative analysis that explores how these practices intersect with symbolic interactionism in areas with contested religious tolerance like West Java. This study fills that gap by offering a sociological investigation of the performative role of religious leaders in branding moderate Islam through symbols and public discourse in a region labeled as "intolerant".

## C. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research approach within the framework of a constructivist paradigm, which is well-suited for exploring the meanings and interpretations

embedded in cultural and religious symbolism. In the constructivist view, reality is socially constructed and negotiated through interactions, symbols, and discourse (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, this research aims to interpret how religious actors, specifically Islamic preachers and scholars, construct, deploy, and reproduce meanings surrounding religious symbols, identity, and moderation in everyday religious practice. The qualitative approach also enables a deep understanding of context-bound phenomena, allowing for the exploration of lived experiences and social meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To address the research objectives, the study employed a case study design, focusing on selected religious leaders in West Java who are actively involved in promoting moderate Islam through various means, including public preaching (*tabligh akbar*), religious study groups (*pengajian*), and digital content dissemination. West Java was purposefully chosen as the research site due to its socio-political complexity and significance in the national religious landscape. According to Setara Institute (2022), West Java ranks among the provinces with the lowest levels of religious tolerance in Indonesia. This makes it an ideal sociological setting for exploring the symbolic construction of religious identity and moderation in an environment where tensions between pluralism and conservatism remain salient.

The data collection process involved three complementary techniques to ensure a robust and triangulated understanding of the research topic: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document/media analysis. First, a total of twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including religious scholars (*ulama*), Islamic organizational leaders, and lay community members. These informants were selected through purposive sampling, based on their proximity to or interaction with the religious leaders being studied. The semi-structured format allowed for consistency in questioning while also offering the flexibility to explore emerging themes such as symbolic representation, authority construction, and the role of moderation in religious discourse. Informants shared insights about their experiences attending religious events, engaging with digital sermons, and observing the personal styles and communicative strategies of the religious figures. Second, participant observation was undertaken during public religious events, including large-scale sermons, Islamic study circles, and gatherings held in *pesantren* and mosques. The researcher immersed themselves in these environments to observe how religious symbolism was enacted through dress codes, architectural arrangements, banners, chants, and body language. These symbols were examined not only for their surface meaning but also for their performative and identity-forming functions. Observations were systematically recorded in a field journal and later cross-referenced with interview data to enhance contextual understanding. Third, the research included a document and media analysis of relevant textual and visual materials, especially digital content circulated through platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook. These online materials included video recordings of sermons, religious posters, pamphlets, hashtags, and infographics, all of which served as tools for religious branding. This analysis helped to identify dominant narratives, recurring motifs, and communicative patterns used by religious leaders to shape their public image and promote particular religious values, especially moderation (*wasathiyyah*).

Thematic analysis, as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to analyze the data. The process began with the transcription and close reading of all collected materials, followed by systematic coding of relevant data segments. Codes were then grouped into categories and abstracted into broader themes such as “symbolic moderation”, “branding through appearance”, and “performing religious authority”. These themes were not only descriptive but also interpretative, allowing the researcher to unpack the deeper sociocultural meanings embedded in religious performances and communications. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, several validation strategies were applied. Data triangulation was used by comparing insights from interviews, observations, and media analysis (Patton, 2002). Member

checking was conducted by sharing initial findings with selected informants to verify accuracy and resonance. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the research process to reflect on the researcher's positionality, biases, and interpretations, in line with the recommendations of Finlay (2002) for reflexive qualitative research.

Overall, this methodological framework provided the flexibility and depth necessary to capture the symbolic complexity and sociological significance of religious cultural branding in West Java. It enabled the researcher to analyze not only the overt symbols used by religious leaders but also the nuanced, embodied practices that contribute to shaping Islamic identity and discourses of moderation in a pluralistic yet contested religious landscape.

## **D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Symbolic Branding and the Construction of Religious Identity**

This study finds that religious leaders in West Java deliberately employ cultural and religious symbols as tools for shaping and reinforcing Islamic identity. These symbols are not selected arbitrarily; instead, they are carefully curated to evoke a sense of moral authority, authenticity, and communal belonging. This aligns with Clifford Geertz's (1973) concept of cultural performance, where symbols serve as a medium through which meaning and legitimacy are communicated within religious life.

Attire such as *gamis* (long robes), *sorban* (headscarves), and *jubah* (traditional cloaks) were frequently worn by preachers to visually embody piety and Islamic orthodoxy. The consistent use of Arabic calligraphy on event banners, the recitation of *salawat*, and stage designs adorned with Qur'anic verses further reflect an orchestrated aesthetic aimed at associating religious leaders with an "authentic" Islamic identity. A study by Hamid & Yusof (2021) supports this observation, arguing that clothing and visual symbols act as markers of moral and religious legitimacy in Muslim-majority societies.

In West Java, where contestations between conservative and moderate Islamic ideologies are historically embedded (Azra, 2017), such symbolism becomes a critical tool for positioning leaders ideologically and emotionally within the religious spectrum. Rather than overt doctrinal pronouncements, these symbols allow religious figures to communicate their stance on religiosity in a socially accepted manner.

Symbolic branding also functions as a boundary-making tool that separates "moderate Islam" from more rigid or radical interpretations. Azra (2017) emphasized that the public display of Islamic identity through performance, such as dress and event ritualization, has a dual function: it asserts religious authority while simultaneously delineating ideological boundaries.

In West Java, this becomes increasingly salient due to ongoing social and political tensions regarding pluralism, intolerance, and conservatism. Symbols such as the "Islam Nusantara" narrative, batik-wearing preachers, and the inclusion of local languages during sermons serve to situate religious moderation within the cultural framework of Indonesian nationalism and local identity. As noted by Fealy and White (2019), integrating local cultural elements into Islamic discourse helps counteract exclusivist interpretations while promoting unity in religious diversity.

In addition to offline religious spaces, symbolic branding extends to digital platforms. Social media, particularly YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok has emerged as a powerful space for disseminating symbolic narratives. Religious leaders actively curate their digital presence using hashtags like #IslamRahmatanLilAlamin and visual aesthetics such as calming color palettes and Arabic-themed typography. These strategies appeal to younger audiences and create what Campbell & Tsuria (2021) refer to as "co-branded religiosity," where followers also participate in shaping and validating the religious figure's symbolic capital through likes, shares, and comments.

Recent Indonesian studies (Ramadhani et al., 2022) indicate that the digital branding of religious messages significantly impacts how young Muslims negotiate between piety, modernity, and national identity. In this sense, symbols are not static, they are dynamically reinterpreted within digital networks and transformed into shared religious identity markers.

While symbolic branding offers a powerful tool for moderating religious messages, the study also highlights variations in public reception. In urban middle-class environments, symbols of moderation, such as interfaith slogans or nationalist imagery are generally welcomed. However, in more conservative rural communities, such symbols may be viewed with skepticism or seen as deviating from traditional norms.

Koprda (2016) argues that consistent and culturally grounded symbols can build long-term trust among audiences and prevent backlash from conservative segments. The leaders examined in this study showed a strategic balance between modern moderation and cultural authenticity, which allowed them to appeal to multiple audiences simultaneously.

**Table 1 Common Symbolic Elements Observed**

Symbolic Element	Description	Function
Arabic Calligraphy	Textual and visual designs used on banners and media	Legitimacy and religious authenticity
Middle Eastern Attire	Robes, turbans, and headscarves worn by preachers	Identity performance and authority
Local Language/Batik	Use of Sundanese language and traditional clothing	Cultural proximity and inclusivity
Digital Hashtags	e.g., #IslamNusantara, #IslamModerate	Digital branding and youth engagement
Religious Music ( <i>Nasyid</i> )	Played during events or online sermons	Emotional resonance and communal ties

This study emphasizes that symbolic branding is not merely a matter of appearance, but a performative strategy aimed at social legitimacy and identity negotiation. The performative use of symbols supports the idea that Islamic identity in Indonesia, particularly in West Java, is not monolithic but continuously shaped through interaction between tradition, local culture, and modernity.

Moreover, by analyzing both visual symbols and audience engagement, this research contributes to an understanding of how religious moderation is promoted in societies facing rising polarization. These findings extend the work of Haenfler (2020), who suggests that branding in moral or religious movements must be both context-sensitive and emotionally resonant to maintain traction.

## 2. Digital Platforms as a Tool for Symbolic Propagation

The rapid integration of digital platforms into religious life has dramatically reshaped how religious leaders construct and disseminate symbolic narratives. In the context of West Java, Indonesia, where religious expressions are highly visible and often contested, platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook have become powerful tools for religious branding. These platforms not only allow religious figures to reach vast and diverse audiences but also serve as digital stages for performative acts of identity, authority, and moderation.

Religious leaders in this study were found to employ carefully curated visual content to communicate religious symbolism aligned with their theological orientation. Hashtags such as #IslamRahmatanLilAlamin, #ModerateMuslim, or #UlamaMillennial, along with imagery of Arabic calligraphy, soft-tone filters, and background music such as *salawat* or *nasheed*, become part of an aesthetic strategy that projects moderation, religiosity, and authenticity. As Campbell & Tsuria (2021) explain, this phenomenon reflects the rise of *digital religion*, where sacred symbols are not merely replicated but recontextualized within digital environments.

These platforms allow symbols to be dynamically interpreted, often giving rise to new forms of engagement, co-creation, and hybrid identity construction among users.

In particular, religious influencers with moderate views appear to consciously avoid exclusivist or polarizing content. Instead, they opt for inclusive narratives that blend religious values with nationalist elements such as the red-and-white Indonesian flag, Pancasila ideology, and Sundanese cultural features like greetings (*sampurasun*), traditional clothing, or batik-patterned visuals. These stylistic decisions are neither arbitrary nor apolitical. Rather, they signal a deliberate effort to localize Islam in ways that affirm pluralism and national unity, echoing Hefner's (2023) concept of a "civic pluralist" Islamic identity an identity that integrates religious conviction with democratic and multicultural values.

A closer examination of digital sermons and Instagram reels posted by moderate preachers shows that the mise-en-scène is meticulously crafted: the background features national symbols, the captions are often bilingual (Arabic–Bahasa Indonesia or Sundanese), and the messaging emphasizes harmony, tolerance, and anti-radicalism. These elements represent what Meyer (2009) terms *aesthetic formation*, where symbolic visuality helps shape collective religious sensibilities.

Moreover, the role of followers and digital audiences should not be underestimated. Many religious leaders in West Java receive robust support from their followers who actively like, share, remix, or comment on symbolic content turning passive consumption into participatory co-production. This aligns with Cheong et al. (2022) who argue that in digital religion, identity is increasingly negotiated between content creators and audiences, forming what they term *relational authority*. In this model, legitimacy is earned not only through religious scholarship but also through digital charisma and audience engagement.

Interestingly, digital symbolic branding also acts as a defense mechanism against extremist narratives. Some content analyzed in this study included symbolic "corrections" to fundamentalist imagery. For example, moderate leaders use similar Islamic motifs (e.g., *tawhid*, hijab, Arabic typography) but reframe them in peaceful, civic-minded contexts—creating symbolic counter-narratives. This is particularly relevant in West Java, where according to the Setara Institute (2022), intolerance and hardline groups have exerted influence over the public discourse. The ability of moderate leaders to reclaim symbols and imbue them with inclusive meanings reflects a strategic cultural resistance.

It is also important to note that these digital strategies are not universally successful. Religious leaders who adopt moderate symbolic language often face online backlash from more conservative or radical groups, who accuse them of diluting Islam or being politically compromised. This tension illustrates the contested nature of religious semiotics in Indonesia's digital public sphere (Lim, 2019). Hence, symbolic branding on social media becomes both a means of outreach and a terrain of ideological contestation.

Lastly, the study suggests that symbolic propagation via digital platforms enhances accessibility and relevance, particularly among urban Muslim youth. As religious authority becomes increasingly mediated by digital fluency, the symbolic capital of a religious figure is measured not only by their traditional credentials but also by their ability to "speak the language" of digital natives. This represents a generational shift in how religiosity is experienced and performed, moving from the mosque (*masjid*) to the mobile screen.

### **3. The Role of Symbols in Promoting Religious Moderation**

The symbolic construction of moderation plays a critical role in how religious leaders in West Java communicate their theological and social positions to broader audiences. Rather than relying solely on doctrinal arguments or textual exposition, moderate clerics increasingly deploy visual and rhetorical symbols that evoke values such as tolerance (*tasamuh*), balance (*tawazun*), justice (*'adl*), and contextual understanding (*fahm al-waqi'*). The prominence of

phrases such as *Wasathiyah Islam* (Middle Path Islam), visual depictions of interfaith cooperation, and national unity motifs like the Garuda symbol or the red-and-white flag, illustrates how moderation is being *aesthetically and semiotically framed*.

This symbolic strategy resonates with Koprda (2016) assertion that “religious moderation demands symbolic consistency” meaning that the imagery, slogans, and public performances by religious figures must coherently communicate Islam as a peaceful, democratic, and contextually adaptable faith. In the West Java context, this consistency is particularly important given the region’s complex socio-religious landscape, which includes both progressive urban centers and more conservative rural strongholds.

For example, during public sermons (*tabligh akbar*) or digital broadcasts, moderate preachers are often seen quoting inclusive national figures such as Gus Dur (Abdurrahman Wahid) or using slogans like *Islam Nusantara* and *Islam Rahmatan lil ‘Alamin* (Islam as a Mercy to the Worlds). These choices are not merely rhetorical; they serve as counter-symbols to the exclusivist, literalist language employed by hardline groups. This practice supports Geertz’s (1973) theory that religious symbols function not only as markers of belief but also as cultural scripts that help organize collective meaning-making within communities.

Moreover, moderate religious leaders often reframe *jihad* as civic engagement, promote *ukhuwah wathaniyah* (national brotherhood) alongside *ukhuwah Islamiyah*, and publicly celebrate religious holidays of other communities to embody interreligious harmony. These symbolic acts build what Kloos & van Bruinessen (2020) term “vernacular pluralism”, localized expressions of religious tolerance embedded within national and cultural identities.

However, this study also found that the reception of moderation-themed symbols is uneven across different demographic and geographic segments. In urban areas such as Bandung or Bekasi, younger and more educated audiences tend to engage positively with the aesthetics of moderate Islam. Instagram posts or YouTube sermons that feature culturally nuanced expressions of Islam (e.g., wearing batik, speaking Sundanese, or supporting women's rights) often garner high engagement and positive feedback. In contrast, in more rural or conservatively Islamic areas such as Ciamis or Tasikmalaya, the symbolic framing of moderation is frequently met with skepticism or rejection. Here, the expectation remains that religious authority must conform closely to textual orthodoxy and the ulama hierarchy, leaving little room for symbolic innovation.

This fragmented reception aligns with Fealy and White (2019), who emphasize that Islamic branding in Indonesia, especially when aimed at promoting moderation—must navigate “highly localized religious ecologies.” In their view, national religious narratives can be undermined or reinterpreted at the local level, particularly when the local religious authority structure sees moderate symbols as foreign, elitist, or politically motivated.

An interview with a community member in Cianjur, for instance, revealed discomfort with the use of nationalistic symbols like the red-and-white flag during religious sermons, which he interpreted as a sign of “state interference in religious matters”. This underscores how the same symbols that convey moderation in one context can evoke suspicion or resistance in another, depending on local perceptions of authenticity, power, and religious legitimacy.

Additionally, it is worth noting that symbolic moderation is often deployed defensively as a response to accusations of liberalism or secularism. In one observed *pengajian* event, a prominent cleric included traditional *salawat* and Qur'anic recitations at the beginning and end of his session, explicitly to “preempt accusations of watering down Islam.” This reflects Bunt’s (2018) observation that moderate Muslim figures in Southeast Asia must constantly negotiate a balance between maintaining scriptural legitimacy and offering a modern, pluralist religious image.

To visualize the variation in reception, Table 2 below summarizes the symbolic strategies employed by moderate clerics and their audience responses based on urban versus rural contexts:

**Table 2 Audience Reception of Religious Moderation Symbols Across Urban and Rural Contexts in West Java**

Symbolic Element	Urban Audience Reception	Rural Audience Reception
<i>Wasathiyah Islam</i> rhetoric	Positive, widely shared	Neutral to skeptical
Nationalist symbols (e.g., Garuda)	Seen as inclusive	Seen as politicized
Use of Sundanese greetings in sermons	Appreciated as local touch	Considered informal or casual
Collaboration with interfaith leaders	Valued for pluralism	Viewed with suspicion
Digital media presence (Instagram, etc.)	Seen as modern and engaging	Sometimes considered un-Islamic

As shown above, while symbolic branding can serve as a powerful tool for conveying messages of moderation, its effectiveness is highly contingent upon contextual sensitivity and community-specific values. The nuanced use of these symbols, balancing orthodoxy and innovation, becomes essential in avoiding both backlash and symbolic miscommunication.

#### 4. Public Perception and Symbolic Reception

Understanding how audiences interpret religious symbols is essential to evaluating the effectiveness of symbolic branding efforts by religious leaders. This study found that symbolic messaging, particularly those aimed at promoting moderation, does not operate in a vacuum; rather, it is mediated by personal experiences, socio-cultural contexts, and perceptions of authenticity. Data gathered through in-depth interviews and participant observation revealed a spectrum of interpretations, ranging from strong appreciation to skepticism and even rejection.

Many respondents in urban settings positively received the moderate and inclusive symbolism used by religious leaders. They viewed such representations, such as the use of local cultural attire, phrases like "*Islam Rahmatan Lil Alamin*" (Islam as a mercy to all), and visual cues promoting harmony as refreshing alternatives to the rigid and sometimes divisive rhetoric of more conservative clerics. This finding aligns with Heryanto (2020), who argues that in the digital and pluralistic public sphere, religious messages are often consumed not only for their theological content but also for their aesthetic appeal and social resonance.

However, this optimistic reception was not universal. Several respondents viewed symbolic moderation as a superficial strategy, a form of political branding rather than genuine religious transformation. For them, religious leaders who used polished social media content, high-production videos, or aesthetically curated religious gatherings were often seen as *performing* moderation rather than embodying it. This critique mirrors the concerns raised by Slama and Jones (2022), who discuss the rise of "religious influencers" in Indonesia and the tension between performative piety and substantive engagement with religious values.

Furthermore, the study uncovered a significant *symbolic gap* based on socio-economic and geographic differences. While moderate symbolism was appreciated in metropolitan centers like Bandung or Bekasi, it encountered resistance in more conservative and rural areas such as parts of Garut or Tasikmalaya. In these regions, audiences favored preachers who maintained traditional dress codes, Quranic recitations, and classical Arabic expressions over those who embraced visual modernity and nationalist narratives. This divide points to what Fealy and White (2019) call "symbolic stratification," where access to and preference for symbolic cues are shaped by class, education, and exposure to cosmopolitan culture.

Such symbolic stratification often leads to the perception that moderate clerics are disconnected from the *umat bawah* (grassroots Muslim community). Respondents frequently contrasted urban religious figures, perceived as polished, elite, and media-savvy, with rural clerics regarded as authentic, humble, and grounded in daily community life. This perception highlights the importance of *symbolic authenticity*, a concept emphasized by Meyer (2024), who argue that symbols lose their persuasive power when they are perceived as fabricated or disconnected from lived religiosity.

Moreover, audience interpretation is not merely passive. Many participants expressed active engagement with symbolic content, especially on digital platforms. Some followers reposted, reshaped, or challenged religious messages in comment sections, turning symbolic communication into a dialogic process. This supports Campbell & Tsuria's (2021) findings that digital religion fosters fragmented, participatory engagement, where authority is negotiated rather than imposed.

However, this interactive dynamic also exposes symbolic messaging to the risk of being co-opted or misunderstood. A few respondents believed that moderate symbols were being weaponized to silence more critical or conservative voices. In this context, symbolic moderation was not seen as inclusive, but as politically sanitized and selectively tolerant, highlighting the contested nature of symbolic communication in Indonesia's polarized religious landscape (Azra, 2020).

In sum, while symbolic branding can be an effective tool for shaping religious identity and promoting moderation, its success heavily depends on audience perceptions of authenticity, class proximity, and social relevance. If symbolic representations are perceived as artificial or imposed from above, they risk alienating the very communities they intend to reach. This underscores the need for religious leaders and policymakers to tailor symbolic messaging in ways that are context-sensitive, grounded in local realities, and dialogically open to grassroots interpretations.

## **5. The Dialectic Between Identity Politics and Religious Branding**

This study finds that the symbolic strategies deployed by religious leaders in West Java are deeply entangled with broader dynamics of identity politics. Rather than existing in a value-neutral or purely spiritual domain, religious branding is shown to operate within a politicized arena where narratives of nationalism, religious pluralism, and public morality intersect and sometimes clash. This dialectical relationship complicates the meaning and reception of religious moderation as performed by Islamic figures in both physical and digital spaces.

Many religious leaders in West Java who advocate for *wasathiyah* (moderate Islam) are perceived by their audiences as being closely aligned with state-sponsored initiatives, particularly those promoted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs or supported by ruling coalitions. While such alignment can lend institutional legitimacy, it also raises questions about the authenticity and autonomy of the message being conveyed. As Mandaville (2020) warns, "state-endorsed moderation risks becoming performative if not rooted in genuine grassroots transformation." This tension was echoed in interviews with both clerics and community members, many of whom expressed ambivalence about the sincerity of moderate symbolism when it appeared too closely tied to political or bureaucratic agendas.

This is not merely a theoretical concern. In practice, the data revealed a pattern of selective endorsement and criticism. Religious figures who integrated nationalist symbols, such as the red-and-white Indonesian flag, quotes from President Soekarno, or references to *Pancasila* into their sermons were often celebrated by civil institutions but received cautiously by more conservative religious communities. These communities, especially in rural or pesantren-based settings, frequently interpreted such gestures as signs of co-optation by secular or liberal political forces. This resonates with Feener's (2021) analysis of Islamic authority in

Southeast Asia, where he argues that legitimacy is “not only a matter of knowledge or charisma but is increasingly determined by a figure’s perceived distance from or closeness to political power.”

Indeed, the struggle for symbolic independence among moderate Islamic leaders mirrors broader dynamics observed in Indonesian civil society, where non-governmental actors must continuously navigate a landscape marked by polarization and suspicion. Religious branding, in this context, becomes a delicate balancing act: religious leaders must incorporate modern and inclusive imagery to remain relevant to younger, urban audiences, while simultaneously retaining the theological orthodoxy and cultural roots necessary to connect with traditionalist bases. As Arifianto (2020) notes in his study of post-reformist Islamic movements, the capacity to “speak multiple symbolic languages” those of the state, of the people, and of scripture is increasingly what determines a cleric’s cultural authority and influence.

Moreover, the digital realm amplifies the visibility and scrutiny of these symbolic performances. Online sermons, Instagram reels, and YouTube lectures become spaces where every gesture from a quote about tolerance to the use of Sundanese greetings can be interpreted as either a form of sincere outreach or as politically expedient messaging. This phenomenon illustrates Zaid et al. (2022) and Muthohirin (2025) notion of “platformed piety,” in which religious authority is co-constructed through algorithmic exposure and public commentary, thereby blurring the boundaries between authentic spirituality and symbolic marketing.

Despite these challenges, some leaders in the study managed to develop nuanced symbolic repertoires that resist binary classification. For example, one popular West Java *ustadz* combined Sundanese cultural references, moderate Islamic teachings, and critiques of both right-wing extremism and state bureaucracy in his content. Such hybridity, while not universally accepted, appealed to younger, more media-literate audiences who valued authenticity over ideological purity. This supports the argument of Meyer (2024) that “symbolic resonance” in contemporary religious discourse is contingent on flexibility, context sensitivity, and the ability to speak across identity boundaries.

In conclusion, religious branding in West Java functions not just as a communication strategy but as a contested site of identity negotiation. Religious leaders must traverse the fault lines between theology, culture, and politics while managing expectations from both state actors and grassroots communities. The dialectic between authenticity and alignment, between independence and endorsement, defines the symbolic landscape of religious moderation in today’s Indonesia. Far from being a settled discourse, religious branding is revealed to be an ongoing, reflexive practice shaped by the interplay of symbolic capital, political proximity, and audience interpretation.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that religious leaders in West Java actively construct religious identity and promote moderation through the strategic use of cultural and symbolic branding, both in physical and digital religious spaces. These symbols, including clothing, speech, media content, and event aesthetics, are used not merely for ritual purposes but as tools to influence social behavior and public discourse.

The novelty of this research lies in its sociological integration of symbolic interactionism with religious branding in a regional context marked by perceived intolerance. Unlike previous studies that often focus on theological content or institutional authority, this study highlights how symbols are tactically deployed to mediate religious meaning, reinforce moderation, and negotiate public legitimacy in a plural society.

Further research should explore the reception of symbolic religious branding among different demographic groups, including youth and non-Muslim communities. Comparative

studies across regions or countries could offer deeper insights into how symbolic strategies are localized and adapted to varying cultural and political landscapes.

## REFERENCES

- Arifianto, A. R. (2020). Rising Islamism and the struggle for Islamic authority in post-reformasi Indonesia. *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and-National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 8(1), 37-50.
- Asad, T. (2009). The idea of an anthropology of Islam. *Qui parle*, 17(2), 1-30.
- Azra, A. (2017). *Islam Nusantara dan Tantangan Islam Global*. Jakarta: Kompas Media Nusantara.
- Azra, A. (2020). *Islam Nusantara: Relasi Islam dan Kebangsaan dalam Sejarah Indonesia*. Jakarta: Kompas Media Nusantara.
- Berger, P. L. (1967). *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. University of California Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–258). New York: Greenwood.
- Bunt, G. R. (2018). *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority*. UNC Press Books.
- Campbell, H. A., & Tsuria, R. (2021). *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*. London: Routledge.
- Cheong, P. H., Fischer-Nielsen, P., Gelfgren, S., & Ess, C. (2022). *Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture: Perspectives, Practices, and Futures*. Peter Lang.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. SAGE Publications.
- Einstein, M. (2008). *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age*. New York: Routledge.
- Fealy, G., & White, S. (2019). *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*. Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute.
- Feener, R. M. (2021). *Muslim Legal Thought in Modern Indonesia: Authority, Institutions and Practice*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108857533>
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books.
- Hamid, A., & Yusof, M. F. M. (2021). Islamic dress codes as markers of identity and piety: A qualitative study of Muslim youth in Malaysia. *Journal of Islamic Marketing*, 12(9), 1802–1821. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIMA-07-2020-0205>
- Hasyim, S. (2020). Promoting Moderate Islam through Education: The Case of Nahdlatul Ulama. *Studia Islamika*, 27(3), 543–571.
- Haenfler, R. (2020). *Subcultures: The Basics*. Routledge.
- Hefner, R. W. (2023). *Islam and citizenship in Indonesia: democracy and the quest for an inclusive public ethics*. Routledge.
- Heryanto, A. (2020). *Identity and Pleasure: The Politics of Indonesian Screen Culture*. NUS Press.
- Hoesterey, J. B. (2016). *Rebranding Islam: Piety, Prosperity, and a Self-Help Guru*. Stanford University Press.
- Husein, F. (2021). Religious Branding and Political Legitimacy in Indonesia: A Case Study of Islamic Organizations on Social Media. *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, 11(1), 69–92. <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v11i1.69-92>

- Khoiri, A. (2019). Moderasi Islam dan Akulturasi Budaya; Revitalisasi Kemajuan Peradaban Islam Nusantara. *Islamadina: Jurnal pemikiran islam*, 20(1), 1-17.
- Kloos, D., & van Bruinessen, M. (2020). *Islam and the State in Indonesia*. Leiden University Press.
- Koprda, T. (2016). Visual communication of socially oriented events with religious themes. *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 12(2), 223-233.
- Latif, Y. (2020). *Negara Paripurna: Historisitas, Rasionalitas, dan Aktualitas Pancasila*. Jakarta: Gramedia.
- Lim, M. (2019). Archipelago Islam 2.0: The digital turn and religious power in Indonesia. *Contemporary Islam*, 13(3), 247–265. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-019-00368-7>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Mandaville, P. (2014). *Islam and Politics*. Routledge.
- Mandaville, P. (2014). *Global Political Islam*. Routledge.
- Mandaville, P. (2020). Rethinking Political Islam and the Politics of Religious Moderation. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 18(4), 43–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2020.1840816>
- Meyer, B. (2009). *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Meyer, V. (2024). Grave matters: ambiguity, modernism, and the quest for moderate Islam in Indonesia. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 92(1), 160-179.
- Mubarak, A. A., & Rustam, D. G. (2018). Islam Nusantara: Moderasi Islam di Indonesia. *Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities*, 3(2), 153-168.
- Mudzhar, M. A. (2020). Dakwah dan Komunikasi Politik di Era Digital. *Jurnal Komunikasi Islam*, 10(2), 159–176. <https://doi.org/10.15642/jki.2020.10.2.159-176>
- Muthohirin, N. (2025). Faith in the Digital Age: The Rise of Islamic Fundamentalism and the Plurality of Young Muslims' Piety on Social Media. *Islamica: Jurnal Studi Keislaman*, 19(2), 199-233.
- Muttaqin, M. (2021). Religious Tolerance and Pluralism in Indonesia: A Critical Study. *Jurnal Sosiologi Reflektif*, 15(2), 223–242.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. SAGE Publications.
- Ramadhani, R., Fauzi, A., & Munandar, M. I. (2022). Youth Engagement and Islamic Digital Content on Instagram: Case Study of Ustadz Popular Content. *Jurnal Komunikasi Islam*, 12(1), 15–29. <https://doi.org/10.15642/jki.2022.12.1.15-29>
- Roy, O. (2010). *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways*. Oxford University Press.
- Setara Institute. (2021). *Indeks Kota Toleran (IKT) 2021*. Jakarta: Setara Institute.
- Setara Institute. (2022). *Indeks Kota Toleran (IKT) 2022*. Jakarta: Setara Institute.
- Slama, M., & Jones, T. (2022). Preaching, Popular Culture and Piety: The Rise of Islamic Influencers in Indonesia. *Contemporary Islam*, 16, 275–295. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-021-00463-0>
- Syam, N., & Nawawi, N. (2019). Islam Nusantara berkemajuan sebagai basis moderasi Islam di Indonesia. *ISLAMICA: Jurnal Studi Keislaman*, 13(2), 236-255.
- Wahid, A. (2018). Da'i Selebriti dan Komodifikasi Agama di Media Sosial. *Komunika: Jurnal Dakwah dan Komunikasi*, 12(1), 25–41.
- Wahid Foundation. (2018). *Survey Nasional: Potensi Intoleransi Sosial-Keagamaan di Kalangan Muslim Indonesia*. Jakarta: Wahid Foundation.
- Zaid, B., Fedtke, J., Shin, D. D., El Kadoussi, A., & Ibrahine, M. (2022). Digital Islam and Muslim millennials: How social media influencers reimagine religious authority and Islamic practices. *Religions*, 13(4), 335.