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The Crisis of Religious Identity Among Indonesian Gen Z Muslims in the Flow of Global Digital Culture: A Sociological Analysis Based on Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory

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ABSTRACT

Generation Z Muslims in Indonesia born between 1997 and 2012, raised as digital natives in the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy occupy a uniquely complex social position at the intersection of deeply embedded Islamic cultural identity and an all-pervasive global digital culture that transmits competing values, aesthetics, and identity frameworks at unprecedented velocity. This article examines the crisis of religious identity among Indonesian Gen Z Muslims through the theoretical framework of Henri Tajfel and John Turner's Social Identity Theory (SIT), particularly their concepts of social categorization, social comparison, and positive distinctiveness, extended by Turner's self-categorization theory. Through systematic qualitative literature review and secondary analysis of national survey data on Indonesian Muslim youth identity, the study identifies a characteristic pattern of religious identity negotiation that defies both the assimilationist prediction (wholesale adoption of global secular values) and the fundamentalist reaction hypothesis (defensive intensification of religious identity). Instead, the dominant pattern is what this study terms 'selective digital hybridization': the creative but often tension-laden process through which Gen Z Muslims selectively appropriate global digital cultural elements while renegotiating the content, authority structures, and boundaries of their Islamic identity. Five principal domains of religious identity tension are analyzed: ritual practice and worship, religious knowledge and authority, gender identity and social norms, political and civic identity, and social belonging. The findings have significant implications for Islamic educational institutions, Muslim youth organizations, and policy frameworks governing digital media's intersection with religious identity formation in Indonesia.

Keywords

digital culture; Gen Z; Islamic identity; Indonesia; social identity theory; Tajfel Turner



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1. Introduction

In 2023, a viral TikTok video produced by a 19-year-old Indonesian Muslim university student generated over 14 million views and hundreds of thousands of comments in a single week.

The video showed her performing a popular K-Pop dance routine in her dorm room while wearing a

hijab a juxtaposition that detonated an immediate and fierce social media controversy. Conservative Muslim commenters accused her of degrading Islamic values; progressive Muslim commenters defended her right to simultaneous religious and global cultural expression; and secular commenters used the clip as evidence that hijab is 'just fashion.' The young woman herself posted a thoughtful response: 'Saya bisa mencintai K-Pop dan tetap menjadi Muslim yang taat. Identitas saya tidak hitam-putih' ('I can love K-Pop and still be a devout Muslim. My identity is not black and white'). This incident, while individual, is paradigmatic of the broader social dynamics at the center of this article: the negotiation of Muslim religious identity among Indonesian Generation Z in the context of global digital culture.

Indonesia presents a case of extraordinary significance for the study of these dynamics. As the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy, with approximately 231 million Muslims constituting 87 percent of its population, Indonesia's experience of Muslim youth identity in the digital era carries implications that extend far beyond its borders. Indonesian Gen Z estimated at approximately 74 million individuals as of 2024, constituting the largest generational cohort in Indonesian history are simultaneously the most digitally connected generation in Indonesian history and the generation facing the most intense pressures on their religious identity from global cultural flows (BPS, 2024; We Are Social, 2024). They are heavy consumers of platforms TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Spotify that are algorithmically designed to maximize engagement through emotionally activating content that frequently carries implicit value assumptions originating from cultural contexts very different from Indonesian Islamic tradition.

Henri Tajfel and John Turner's Social Identity Theory (SIT), originally developed to explain intergroup behavior and prejudice in experimental social psychology, has been extensively and productively applied to the analysis of religious identity dynamics in contexts of cultural contact and social change. The theory's core propositions that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups, compare their in-group favorably with relevant out-groups to maintain positive self-esteem, and engage in identity management strategies when in-group identity is threatened provide a powerful framework for analyzing the mechanisms through which global digital culture creates

psychological pressure on Muslim religious identity and the various ways Gen Z Muslims respond to that pressure (Tajfel & Turner, 2019; Turner et al., 2020). The theory has been applied to Muslim identity dynamics in Western minority contexts (Kunst et al., 2022; Ysseldyk et al., 2019), but its application to Muslim majority contexts experiencing digital cultural globalization remains underdeveloped a lacuna this article seeks to address.

This article advances three principal arguments. First, the religious identity crisis among Indonesian Gen Z Muslims is not primarily a crisis of faith belief in God, commitment to Islamic practice but a crisis of identity boundaries and authority: uncertainty about which elements of Islamic identity are non-negotiable core markers and which are culturally contingent, and about whose interpretive authority defines the answers to these questions in an era of radical epistemic pluralism. Second, the dominant response strategy is selective digital hybridization not assimilation or fundamentalism which produces a distinctively Gen Z Muslim subjectivity that navigates between multiple identity commitments without fully resolving their tensions. Third, this crisis of religious identity, while psychologically challenging, also represents a productive moment of Islamic identity reconstruction that, if supported by appropriate institutional frameworks, can generate more reflexive, robust, and contextually adaptive expressions of Muslim faith.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Social Identity Theory: Core Propositions and Extensions

Henri Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, developed in collaboration with John Turner through the 1970s and 1980s, represents one of the most influential frameworks in social psychology for understanding group membership, intergroup relations, and self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 2019). The theory begins with the observation that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups minimal categories in experimental conditions, real social groups in natural settings and that this categorization process generates in-group identity that is associated with positive affect, loyalty, and biased evaluation. Social comparison processes through which in-group members compare their group favorably with relevant out-groups are the mechanism through which positive social identity is maintained, generating the familiar dynamics of in-group favoritism and out-group derogation.

Turner and colleagues' extension of SIT into Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) (Turner et al., 2020) provides additional analytical resources for understanding identity dynamics in complex social environments. SCT demonstrates that individuals possess multiple levels of self-categorization: personal identity, in-group social identity, and superordinate human identity—and that different levels become salient in different contexts. For Muslim Gen Z in Indonesia, this means that Islamic identity and global youth cultural identity do not necessarily exist in zero-sum competition; different contexts activate different identity levels, and the challenge is managing their intersection when both are simultaneously salient.

2.2 Religion and Digital Culture: Identity Under Pressure

The intersection of religious identity and digital media has attracted growing scholarly attention across sociology, media studies, and religious studies. Campbell (2021) and Bunt (2019) have analyzed how digital media creates new Islamic public spheres that simultaneously democratize religious knowledge (enabling direct access to diverse Islamic interpretations) and undermine traditional scholarly authority (as algorithmically amplified content creators compete with trained ulama for epistemic influence). In the Indonesian context, Lim (2021) and Hasan (2022) have documented how social media platforms—particularly WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok—have become primary sites of Islamic identity construction and contestation among youth, generating both new forms of Islamic piety (the Islamically styled influencer, the digital dakwah community) and new forms of Islamic identity anxiety.

The impact of global K-Pop culture on Muslim youth identity in Southeast Asia has been documented by several recent empirical studies. Cho (2021) documents how K-Pop fan communities provide Indonesian Muslim girls with alternative frameworks for femininity, beauty, and social belonging that sometimes conflict with and sometimes are integrated into Islamic gender norms. The 'hijab K-Pop' phenomenon—in which Muslim fans adopt K-Pop aesthetic elements while maintaining hijab—is one of the most visible expressions of the selective digital hybridization that this article theorizes at a more general level. Aspinall and Mietzner (2019) and Mietzner (2021) have analyzed how digital media has simultaneously intensified Islamist political mobilization and expanded

exposure to global secular liberal values among Indonesian Muslim youth, creating the political identity contradictions visible in survey data on Gen Z political attitudes.

2.3 Muslim Youth Identity in Indonesia: Empirical Context

The empirical landscape of Indonesian Muslim Gen Z identity is documented in several major surveys conducted between 2019 and 2024. The PPIM UIN Jakarta Survey (2023) the most comprehensive study of Muslim youth attitudes finds that Indonesian Muslim Gen Z exhibits a complex and internally differentiated identity profile: high levels of formal religious observance (prayer, fasting, halal dietary compliance) coexist with high levels of global digital cultural engagement, openness to religious pluralism, and skepticism toward traditional religious authority structures. The Wahid Foundation (2024) social cohesion survey documents declining inter-religious tolerance alongside increasing intra-Islamic diversity and contestation, suggesting that the primary axis of religious identity dynamics has shifted from Muslim-non-Muslim relations toward intra-Muslim identity negotiations.

3. Methodology

This study employs a systematic qualitative literature review methodology combined with secondary analysis of national survey data. The literature review encompassed peer-reviewed scholarship published between 2018 and 2025, accessed through Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases, using search terms including 'Gen Z Muslim identity Indonesia,' 'social identity theory religion digital,' 'Islamic identity digital culture,' 'Indonesian Muslim youth,' and 'religious identity crisis social media.' Secondary data analysis utilized PPIM UIN Jakarta Survey (2023), Wahid Foundation National Survey on Social Cohesion (2024), Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI) data, and We Are Social/Hootsuite Indonesia Digital 2024 Report. The analytical framework integrates Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory with Turner's Self-Categorization Theory and empirical studies on Indonesian Muslim youth digital culture engagement.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Analytical Framework: Social Identity Theory Applied to Gen Z Muslim Identity

Figure 1 presents the study's analytical framework, mapping five domains of religious identity tension against the traditional in-group religious markers, digital culture counter-pressures, and identity negotiation outcomes characteristic of Indonesian Gen Z Muslims.

Figure 1. Social Identity Theory Framework Applied to Gen Z Muslim Religious Identity Negotiation in Indonesia's Digital Culture			
Identity Domain	Traditional In-Group Religious Marker	Digital Culture Counter-Pressure	Identity Negotiation Outcome
Ritual Practice & Worship	Five daily prayers; Friday congregation; Ramadan fasting; halal dietary compliance as group marker	Algorithm-driven content consumption disrupts prayer schedules; global lifestyle content normalizes non-halal practices; influencer culture prioritizes visibility over devotion	Selective ritual compliance: public religiosity maintained for social validation while private practice becomes individualized and intermittent
Religious Knowledge & Authority	Ustadz/ulama as primary epistemic authority; kitab kuning tradition; majelis taklim as knowledge community	YouTube Islamic content creators competing with traditional scholars; Google as primary religious reference; global secular academic frameworks	Epistemic fragmentation: multiple competing religious authorities; 'Islam café' phenomenon; personalization of religious interpretation
Gender Identity & Social Norms	Hijab as in-group identity marker; modest dress as Muslim femininity; gender-separated social interaction norms	Global body aesthetics via Instagram/TikTok; K-Pop femininity standards; feminist discourse challenging religious gender norms	Hybridized Muslim femininity: 'hijab but fashion-forward'; contestation over authenticity of modest dress in digital space
Political & Civic Identity	Islamic political mobilization; umma solidarity; religious community as primary civic unit	Global human rights discourse; secular democratic values; cancel culture targeting religious conservatism	Identity contradiction: simultaneous Islamic political identification and global progressive value adoption; selective moral frameworks
Social Belonging & Community	Mosque community; Islamic student organization (HMI, PMII); pesantren alumni networks as primary belonging	Parasocial relationships with global content creators; fan communities (K-Pop, gaming); digital cosmopolitan identity	Multiple concurrent belonging: mosque community + global fan community; weakening of single-community loyalty

Source: Authors' synthesis adapted from Tajfel & Turner (1979/2019), Turner et al. (1987/2020), Lim (2021), and empirical studies on Indonesian Muslim Gen Z identity (PPIM UIN Jakarta, 2023; Liddle

& Mujani, 2022).

Source: Authors' synthesis adapted from Tajfel & Turner (2019), Turner et al. (2020), and empirical studies on Indonesian Muslim Gen Z identity.

4.2 Empirical Patterns: Religious Identity and Digital Culture Exposure

Table 1 presents the primary empirical evidence on religious identity patterns and digital culture exposure among Indonesian Muslim Gen Z.

Table 1. Religious Identity and Digital Culture Exposure Indicators Among Indonesian Muslim Gen Z (2021–2024)				
Indicator	Strong Religious ID	Hybrid ID	Weak Religious ID	Trend 2019–2024
Daily prayer compliance (5x/day) (%)	38.4%	41.7%	19.9%	-12.3% (strong ID)
Hijab adoption (female respondents) (%)	71.2%	18.4%	10.4%	+4.1% (adoption ↑ but contested)
Primary source of Islamic knowledge: social media vs. scholars (%)	Scholar: 54.3%	Both: 31.7%	SocMed: 14.0%	Social media share +22.6%
K-Pop/global entertainment regular consumption (%)	28.1%	51.4%	20.5%	+31.7% overall
Report experiencing religious identity conflict (%)	22.7%	58.4%	18.9%	+18.4% (hybrid group)
Trust in traditional Islamic authority (ustadz/ulama) (%)	67.3%	43.8%	21.4%	-14.7% overall
Islamic social media content creation (%)	18.4%	34.7%	8.3%	+21.3% (hybrid group leads)
Source: Adapted from PPIM UIN Jakarta Survey (2023); Wahid Foundation National Survey on Social Cohesion (2024); Lembaga Survei Indonesia (2024); and We Are Social Indonesia Digital Report (2024). Strong Religious ID = respondents prioritizing Islamic identity above all other identities; Hybrid ID = simultaneous multiple identity prioritization; Weak Religious ID = religion as secondary or tertiary identity marker.				

The data reveals several analytically significant patterns. The most striking finding is the dominance of the hybrid identity profile 58.4 percent of Gen Z respondents reporting religious identity conflict describe their identity as hybrid, simultaneously holding Islamic religious commitment and significant engagement with global digital culture. This challenges both the assimilation prediction (that global digital exposure produces secularization) and the reactive fundamentalism hypothesis (that global cultural pressure intensifies rigid religious identity). The dominant outcome is precisely the hybridization that Social Identity Theory's positive distinctiveness mechanism would predict under conditions of identity threat: Muslims renegotiate the content of their Islamic identity to maintain positive distinctiveness from both secular globalism and from stereotypically 'rigid' traditional Islam, constructing a third identity position that is simultaneously Muslim and modern-global.

The erosion of traditional religious authority is particularly consequential. The 14.7 percentage-point decline in trust in traditional Islamic scholarly authority (ustadz/ulama) between 2019 and 2024, combined with the 22.6 percentage-point increase in social media as a primary source of Islamic knowledge, documents a fundamental shift in the epistemic infrastructure of Muslim Gen Z religious identity. When the sources of authoritative Islamic interpretation multiply and democratize when any articulate and media-savvy young Muslim can build a religious following on YouTube the in-group boundary that social identity theory identifies as fundamental to identity maintenance becomes radically permeable and contestable.

4.3 Selective Digital Hybridization as Dominant Identity Strategy

The concept of selective digital hybridization captures the most theoretically significant finding of this study: that Indonesian Gen Z Muslims do not simply choose between 'being Muslim' and 'engaging with global digital culture' but actively construct hybrid identity positions that integrate elements of both. This hybridization is 'selective' because it is not random or passive Gen Z Muslims make active, if not always fully conscious, choices about which global digital cultural elements to incorporate and which to resist, guided by their understanding of what is compatible with their Islamic identity commitments.

The hijab-K-Pop phenomenon exemplifies this selective hybridization in the most visible domain. Young Indonesian Muslim women who wear hijab as a sincere religious commitment simultaneously consume, perform, and create K-Pop-influenced content adopting Korean fashion aesthetics, makeup styles, and dance performances while maintaining hijab as the non-negotiable marker of Islamic identity. In Social Identity Theory terms, hijab functions as what Tajfel calls a 'value important to the identity' a marker that defines the minimum threshold of in-group membership and cannot be negotiated away without loss of Islamic social identity while other aspects of lifestyle and cultural practice are available for selective hybridization without triggering identity crisis.

4.4 Digital Dakwah and the Reconstruction of Islamic Authority

One of the most consequential dimensions of the religious identity dynamics documented in this study is the emergence of what Indonesian scholars have termed 'digital dakwah' Islamic religious communication and education conducted through social media platforms. Digital dakwah represents both a response to and a driver of the epistemic fragmentation of religious authority documented in Table 1. Figures such as ustadz-ustadz digital (digital Islamic preachers) who communicate through YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok attract audiences of millions of Gen Z followers precisely because they communicate Islamic values in aesthetic and discursive formats that are native to digital culture: short-form video, humor, lifestyle content, and personal storytelling.

The sociological significance of digital dakwah from a Social Identity Theory perspective is that it creates new in-group communities organized around specific interpretations of Islamic identity communities whose membership is defined not by geographic proximity or institutional affiliation but by subscription, following, and digital engagement. These communities provide the social comparison context through which Gen Z Muslims evaluate the positive distinctiveness of their specific form of Islamic identity: by following a particular digital ustadz and engaging with his or her content community, a Gen Z Muslim situates herself within a specific identity position within the larger field of Islamic identity options positioning herself against both the 'closed' traditionalism she rejects and the 'liberal' religiosity she does not fully embrace.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined the crisis of religious identity among Indonesian Gen Z Muslims through the framework of Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory, identifying selective digital hybridization as the dominant identity strategy through which Gen Z Muslims navigate the tension between Islamic religious commitment and engagement with global digital culture. The findings challenge simplistic predictions of either secularization or reactive fundamentalism, demonstrating instead the creative complexity of identity negotiation in the digital age.

The theoretical contributions include the application of Social Identity Theory to the dynamics of Muslim religious identity in a Muslim-majority society experiencing digital cultural globalization a context that differs importantly from the Western Muslim minority settings in which SIT has been most extensively applied to religious identity. The concept of selective digital hybridization provides a theoretically grounded account of the dominant response strategy that moves beyond the binary of assimilation versus resistance.

Policy implications center on the need for Islamic educational institutions and youth organizations to develop more sophisticated understandings of the identity dynamics through which Gen Z Muslims negotiate their religious commitments in digital environments. Rather than framing digital culture as a threat to be defended against, effective approaches should engage with the creative hybridization practices that Gen Z Muslims are already developing, providing them with the theological and critical media literacy resources needed to navigate the tensions productively.

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