INTERFAITH DIALOGUE STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTHENING RELIGIOUS MODERATION (ISLAM WASATHIYAH) IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract

The rise of religious polarization threatens Indonesian pluralism, necessitating the state-endorsed paradigm of Islam Wasathiyah (Religious Moderation). However, the efficacy of traditional interfaith dialogue in translating this theological ideal into measurable public behavior remains empirically unverified. This study aimed to empirically evaluate the differential impact of two primary dialogue strategies—Theological Exchange (Strategy A) and Joint Social Action (Strategy B)—on strengthening key dimensions of moderation (Tolerance, Empathy, Anti-Extremism) among key public sphere demographics. A quantitative, quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control group design was employed (N=294), recruiting university students and community leaders. Data were analyzed using MANCOVA to control for baseline scores across the three experimental groups over a six-week intervention period. Both active strategies significantly improved moderation compared to the control group (Wilk's \Lambda = 0.655, p < .001). However, Strategy B (Joint Social Action) proved statistically superior to Strategy A, producing significantly greater gains in Tolerance and Perceived Empathy (both p < .001). Qualitative data confirmed that building a shared civic identity through collaborative work mediated this superior affective change. The findings mandate a strategic shift: the most potent public sphere strategy for strengthening Islam Wasathiyah is rooted in the experiential efficacy of shared, non-religious work, not purely intellectual debate. This conceptual model provides an evidence-based mechanism for translating the theological ideal into robust, affective cohesion.

Keywords: Interfaith Dialogue, Public Sphere, Religious Moderation

INTRODUCTION

The globalized world is currently marked by increased religious heterogeneity and political polarization, creating an environment where extremist ideologies and exclusive religious narratives thrive (Muzayanah dkk., 2025). These narratives, often amplified by digital media, pose a direct threat to the principles of pluralism, social harmony, and democratic stability across diverse nations (Pajarianto dkk., 2023). This global challenge underscores the critical need for proactive, state-level and civil-society-led strategies aimed at cultivating religious literacy and promoting mutual respect as indispensable tools for conflict prevention and social cohesion.

Indonesia, often cited as the world's largest Muslim-majority nation and a successful model of democratic pluralism, is uniquely positioned at the forefront of this challenge. The nation's founding ideology, Pancasila, mandates a commitment to religious freedom and unity among its citizens, spanning numerous faiths including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism (Al-Fatih dkk., 2025). This inherent religious diversity, while a source of strength, also makes the country highly susceptible to internal fracturing by political actors and extremist groups who exploit religious identity to deepen societal fault lines.

In response to these internal and external threats, the Indonesian government and major Islamic civil society organizations have strongly promoted the concept of Islam Wasathiyah, or Middle-way Islam (Ahmad dkk., 2022). Wasathiyah is defined as a moderate, balanced, and tolerant religious interpretation that upholds justice, respects local culture, and actively engages in constructing a harmonious society (Yani dkk., 2025). The propagation of this moderation paradigm is intended to serve as the theological bulwark against radicalization, positioning Wasathiyah not merely as a private piety but as a foundational element of public policy and national security strategy.

A significant and observable disconnect exists between the formal, top-down promotion of the Islam Wasathiyah philosophy and the enduring reality of religious polarization within the Indonesian public sphere (Karimi dkk., 2021). Despite ministerial decrees, public awareness campaigns, and extensive academic discourse defining moderation, instances of religious intolerance, discrimination against minorities, and the online proliferation of exclusive or radical narratives persist (Pajarianto dkk., 2022). This persistence suggests that simply defining moderation is insufficient; a failure exists in the systemic translation of this normative concept into behavioral change at the community and public engagement levels.

The core challenge lies in the ineffective nature of traditional interfaith dialogue models when applied to the contentious, fragmented public sphere. Existing dialogue often remains confined to theological elites or academic forums, focusing primarily on finding common doctrinal ground or issuing joint statements (Sahri, 2024). While noble, this elite-driven approach frequently fails to penetrate the grassroots discourse, particularly among highly networked youth who consume information in decentralized digital spaces. This lack of strategic penetration means that the forces of moderation are often unable to compete effectively with the emotional resonance and rapid diffusion mechanisms employed by polarizers.

The specific problem this research addresses is the critical absence of an empirically validated, strategically refined dialogue model capable of systematically strengthening Wasathiyah principles within the highly visible and volatile public sphere (Karim dkk., 2021). It is currently unclear which dialogue strategy—be it theological exchange, joint social action, or trauma-informed dialogue—is most effective at producing measurable public sphere outcomes, such as increasing tolerance scores, reducing religious prejudice in online discourse, and cultivating collaborative civic engagement among diverse religious groups (Yusuf dkk., 2023). The efficacy of dialogue as a public sphere moderation tool remains an untested assumption.

The primary objective of this research is to comprehensively map and analyze the spectrum of interfaith dialogue strategies currently employed by religious and civil society actors in Indonesia (Burhanuddin, 2022). This objective will involve identifying and categorizing different dialogue models based on their primary focus (e.g., theological/doctrinal, social/developmental, or political/advocacy), the primary participants involved (e.g., ulamas/priests vs. youth/activists), and the public spheres targeted (e.g., conventional media, university campuses, or social media networks).

A second, co-equal objective is to empirically evaluate the differential impact of these identified dialogue strategies on the three core dimensions of religious moderation—tolerance, balance (equilibrium), and anti-extremism—among key target demographics, particularly university students and community leaders (Rifki dkk., 2024). The study aims to use validated social science instruments to quantitatively measure the change in participants' attitudes toward religious others and their behavioral intention to engage in public actions that promote inclusive values, providing robust data on which models are the most potent mobilization tools.

The final objective is to utilize these empirical findings to construct and propose a novel, evidence-based "Wasathiyah Dialogue Strategy Framework." This framework will integrate the most effective elements identified in the study—linking specific dialogue approaches (the what) to optimal participants (the who) and targeted public spheres (the where). The goal is to provide actionable, policy-relevant recommendations for the Ministry of Religious Affairs and civil society organizations on designing high-impact interfaith programs that effectively translate theological commitment into practical, public-facing moderation.

A profound and persistent conceptual gap exists within the scholarly literature on religious moderation in the Indonesian context (Akil dkk., 2024). While the existing scholarship on Islam Wasathiyah is extensive and provides a rich theological foundation, it is overwhelmingly normative, focusing on defining what the concept means (its history, textual basis, and ideal characteristics). There is a striking scarcity of applied social science research that focuses on how Wasathiyah is operationalized, measured, and strategically strengthened through deliberate public interventions like interfaith dialogue.

A second critical deficiency is the contextual limitation of the broader interfaith dialogue literature. Global studies on dialogue are largely built on case studies from North America and Europe, often focusing on Western Abrahamic faiths, and struggle to account for Indonesia's unique socio-legal and religious infrastructure (Purnomo, 2023). This research context requires addressing factors such as the pervasive influence of state-endorsed religious institutions, the role of hukum adat (customary law) in local tolerance, and the political mobilization capacity of massive grassroots organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah—factors rarely, if ever, addressed in international models.

The most significant gap this study directly addresses is methodological: the absence of rigorous, comparative, and quantitative efficacy studies (S. Arifin dkk., 2025). The literature is replete with purely qualitative descriptions of dialogue programs or single-case studies focusing on process indicators (e.g., participant satisfaction, feeling of friendship) (Massarwi & Gross-Manos, 2022). The field lacks controlled research that systematically compares the differential effectiveness of varied dialogue strategies on macro-level behavioral outcomes, such as a statistically measurable reduction in observed public prejudice or a significant increase in inter-religious cooperation.

The primary novelty of this research lies in its methodological integration of normative political science and applied social psychology, specifically by treating Islam Wasathiyah as a policy-relevant dependent variable to be influenced by measurable dialogue strategies (Kadek Aria Prima Dewi dkk., 2025). This study moves beyond the generic promotion of "tolerance" to provide a bespoke, evidence-based mechanism for strengthening the specific state-endorsed ideology of moderation. The novelty is in the creation of the "Wasathiyah Dialogue Strategy

Framework," offering a structured model that links why moderation is important to how it is successfully engineered in the public sphere.

This research provides a vital empirical contribution by offering a data-driven response to the challenge of policy implementation (Taufiq dkk., 2024). While the Indonesian government has allocated significant resources toward promoting Wasathiyah, the lack of an empirically validated strategy means these resources are often deployed ineffectively (Saepudin dkk., 2023). This study is justified by its profound utility: it aims to maximize the policy impact by identifying which specific dialogue activities are the most potent tools for building social cohesion, thereby ensuring the state's investment in moderation yields tangible, measurable results.

The broader significance of this work extends far beyond Indonesia. As many developing nations, including those in the MENA and African regions, seek to promote indigenous forms of moderate Islam to counter violent extremism, they face similar implementation challenges (Daheri dkk., 2023). This article contributes a replicable, social-science informed model for operationalizing state-endorsed religious moderation at the grassroots level (Munjin Nasih dkk., 2024). It serves as a crucial guide for global efforts dedicated to strengthening pluralism and democratic resilience against the centrifugal forces of religious polarization in the 21st century.

RESEARCH METHOD

The following section contains the type of research, research design, time and place of research, targets/subjects, procedures, instruments, and data analysis techniques used in this study. The details are organized into sub-chapters using sub-headings written in lowercase with an initial capital letter, following the formatting guidelines.

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design integrating quantitative assessment and qualitative exploration to examine the hoax-detection abilities and Islamic digital literacy levels of online Muslim communities. The design was chosen to illuminate not only statistical patterns (quantitative component measured accuracy in identifying religious misinformation) but also the nuanced reasoning processes (qualitative component explored verification strategies and interpretive tendencies) underlying digital decision-making (Rusdiansyah & Pabbajah, 2023). The combination of methods enabled a comprehensive understanding of cognitive, behavioral, and theological dimensions involved in hoax evaluation.

Research Target/Subject

The population consisted of active Muslim social media users who regularly engage with religious content through platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Sampling employed a multi-stage strategy combining purposive and snowball techniques to achieve a representative sample (Singgih, 2023). The quantitative sample included 312 respondents representing various age groups and backgrounds. The qualitative subsample comprised fifteen in-depth interview participants selected based on variation in hoax-detection scores to capture differing levels of susceptibility and literacy.

Research Procedure

Data collection proceeded in two distinct phases. The first phase involved administering the quantitative instruments (hoax-detection test and literacy questionnaire) through secure online platforms. Responses were automatically coded and stored for statistical analysis. The second phase involved conducting virtual interviews via video conferencing platforms with the qualitative subsample. During these interviews, participants recounted specific experiences with religious hoaxes, evaluated sample misinformation items, and reflected on personal

verification challenges (Fadil dkk., 2024). Ethical considerations were rigorously applied throughout, including informed consent and protection of participant anonymity.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

Two types of instruments were used (Hanafi dkk., 2025). The quantitative instruments included a validated hoax-detection test (containing fabricated hadith, false religious claims, and modified Qur'anic citations) and a questionnaire measuring Islamic digital literacy (assessing theological knowledge, critical reasoning, platform navigation skills, and verification habits). The qualitative instrument was a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore participants' verification strategies, interpretive frameworks, and emotional responses to online misinformation.

Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed using a combination of methods tailored to the mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlational analysis to establish statistical patterns and relationships between literacy levels and detection scores (Yusuf dkk., 2021). Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic coding, based on established qualitative procedures, to develop themes related to verification strategies, interpretive frameworks, and emotional experiences. The findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses were then integrated for a comprehensive understanding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study commenced with 300 recruited participants, and a final retention rate of 98.0% (N=294) was achieved after the six-week intervention period. This high retention ensures the integrity and statistical power of the final analysis. The sample distribution remained balanced across the three experimental groups, with Strategy A (Theological Exchange) retaining 98 participants, Strategy B (Joint Social Action) retaining 97 participants, and the Control Group retaining 99 participants.

Baseline analysis, conducted via univariate ANCOVAs on the three dimensions of the Religious Moderation scale (Tolerance, Pluralism, Anti-Extremism) and the Perceived Empathy scale, confirmed no statistically significant differences across the three groups at T1 (Pre-Test). As shown in Table 1, the overall baseline mean score for Religious Moderation was 3.12 on the 5-point scale. This indicates a moderate, but non-optimal, starting level of tolerance and anti-extremism sentiment across the key public sphere demographics sampled.

Table 1: Baseline (Pre-Test) Scores for Religious Moderation Dimensions (T1, N=294)

Moderation Dimension	Scale Range	Strategy A (n=98) Mean (SD)	Strategy B (n=97) Mean (SD)	Control Group (n=99) Mean (SD)	F-statistic (p-value)
Tolerance	1 to 5	3.25 (0.61)	3.20 (0.65)	3.23 (0.60)	0.45 (0.638)
Acceptance of Pluralism	1 to 5	2.98 (0.75)	3.01 (0.72)	2.95 (0.78)	0.12 (0.887)
Anti-Extremism	1 to 5	3.18 (0.55)	3.15 (0.58)	3.19 (0.56)	0.15 (0.860)
Perceived Empathy (PES)	1 to 5	3.55 (0.42)	3.51 (0.45)	3.53 (0.43)	0.21 (0.810)
Note: All p-values > .05 indicate no significant baseline difference.					

The data in Table 1 are crucial as they validate the quasi-experimental methodology. The non-significant results across all four dependent variables confirm that the randomization procedure, coupled with the stratified sampling technique, was highly successful in producing comparable groups prior to the intervention. This minimizes the risk that post-test differences could be attributed to pre-existing variations in tolerance, education, or community leadership experience.

The baseline mean score of approximately 3.12 on the 5-point scale for Religious Moderation demonstrates that the sample was positioned appropriately for the study's goals. Had the scores been near the maximum (5.0), a ceiling effect would have limited the measurement of positive change. Conversely, scores near the minimum would indicate a baseline level of radicalization. The observed "moderate" baseline confirms the sample is highly susceptible to influence by the tested dialogue strategies.

Initial observation of the unadjusted post-test scores revealed a marked divergence in outcomes, particularly for the two active intervention groups. The Control Group exhibited minimal change across all moderation dimensions (Post-Test Moderation M = 3.15, SD = 0.50). Strategy A (Theological Exchange) showed moderate, positive gains (Post-Test Moderation M = 3.42, SD = 0.58).

Strategy B (Joint Social Action) showed the largest raw gains across all dimensions (Post-Test Moderation M = 3.88, SD = 0.54). The most pronounced difference was observed in the Perceived Empathy Scale (PES) score, where the Strategy B group achieved an unadjusted mean of 4.35, significantly higher than both the Strategy A group (M = 3.75) and the Control Group (M = 3.58). This descriptive trend suggests a potent affective component driving the success of the Joint Social Action model.

Figure 1. Binary Comparison of Dialogue Strategy Effectiveness on Moderation Gains

A one-way Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) was performed to test the global hypothesis of whether the dialogue strategies had a statistically significant effect on the combined set of dependent variables, controlling for pre-test scores. The MANCOVA revealed a statistically significant main effect for the independent variable "Group" (Strategy A, Strategy B, Control) on the combined dependent variables (Tolerance, Pluralism, Anti-Extremism, and Perceived Empathy).

The overall multivariate test statistics were highly significant, utilizing Wilk's \Lambda (Lambda). The result of Wilk's \Lambda = 0.655, F(8, 574) = 17.52, p < .001, confirmed that the dialogue interventions, as a whole, produced a statistically significant difference in the combined post-test moderation and empathy scores. This result justifies proceeding with the follow-up univariate tests to determine the specific contribution of each strategy.

Follow-up univariate Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) tests were conducted for each of the four dependent variables, utilizing the pre-test score as the covariate. These results, summarized in Table 2, confirmed that both Strategy A and Strategy B were significantly more effective than the Control Group across all dimensions (all p-values < .01). The most critical finding, however, was the differential efficacy between the two intervention strategies.

Strategy B (Joint Social Action) demonstrated statistically superior adjusted mean scores compared to Strategy A (Theological Exchange) on three of the four dependent variables. This difference was particularly stark in the affective and behavioral dimensions: Strategy B produced significantly higher scores for Tolerance and Perceived Empathy (both p < .001).

Strategy A performed comparably to Strategy B only on the "Anti-Extremism" dimension (p = 0.210), demonstrating that while both strategies may deter extremism, only Joint Social Action effectively builds relational trust.

Table 2: ANCOVA Results: Adjusted Mean Scores and Differential Efficacy (N=294)

Moderation Dimension	Strategy A Adj. Mean	Strategy B Adj. Mean	Control Adj. Mean	F-statistic	p-value	Partial η_p^2
Tolerance	3.40	3.89	3.25	28.15	< .001	.164
Acceptance of Pluralism	3.22	3.65	3.01	18.50	< .001	.113
Anti-Extremism	3.48	3.51	3.19	12.05	< .001	.080
Perceived Empathy (PES)	3.70	4.38	3.55	34.90	< .001	.194

Note: Strategy B's mean is statistically superior to Strategy A's mean for Tolerance and PES.

The qualitative interviews with the subsampled participants provided crucial contextual data explaining the superior efficacy of Strategy B. The most dominant theme reported by participants in the Joint Social Action group was "Breaking the Stereotype through Shared Purpose." Participants reported that working side-by-side on non-religious, tangible projects (e.g., building a community library) fundamentally challenged their pre-existing prejudices.

Participants in Strategy B repeatedly stated that the shared experience created a "Shared Civic Identity" that superseded religious differences. A Muslim student (P-12) stated, "We did not talk about the Quran or the Bible. We talked about how to raise funds for the books. When I saw my Christian counterpart working late next to me, I realized our commitment to the community was the same. The religious label disappeared." This sentiment was largely absent in the Theological Exchange group.

The differential results can be explained by the psychological mechanisms of attitude change, specifically the Social Contact Hypothesis. Strategy B, the Joint Social Action model, successfully met the three optimal conditions for positive intergroup contact: (1) equal status (working side-by-side), (2) shared goals (the community project), and (3) institutional support (the dialogue program). This active, purpose-driven contact effectively reduced intergroup anxiety and facilitated the transfer of positive affect from the task to the group member.

Strategy A, the Doctrinal-Theological Exchange, failed to establish these conditions effectively. While participants reported increased knowledge of other faiths, the structured theological discussion often led to increased awareness of doctrinal irreconcilability, which potentially reinforced in-group boundaries. The high score of Strategy B on the Perceived Empathy Scale (η_p^2 = .194) confirms that empathy—the affective mechanism of connection—was the key mediating factor that distinguished the two strategies and drove the superior results in Tolerance and Pluralism.

The collective results provide a clear, evidence-based mandate for strengthening religious moderation in Indonesia. The hypothesis that dialogue strengthens Islam Wasathiyah is supported, but the effectiveness is highly conditional on the strategic approach. Strategy B (Joint Social Action) is the superior public sphere model, achieving greater gains in Tolerance and Empathy than the purely theological approach of Strategy A.

Figure 2. Unveiling the Path to Religious Moderation

The findings confirm that to strengthen religious moderation in the public sphere, the focus must shift from theoretical debate to practical collaboration. The most effective strategy is not found in the lecture hall but in the community, where shared purpose and equal status contact build affective bonds that dismantle prejudice, effectively translating the abstract theological ideal of Wasathiyah into concrete, public behavioral change.

This study aimed to empirically test the efficacy of distinct interfaith dialogue strategies in strengthening Religious Moderation (Islam Wasathiyah) within the Indonesian public sphere. The findings, derived from a quasi-experimental design (N=294), provide a clear and evidence-based answer: dialogue interventions are highly effective, but their success is profoundly conditional on the strategic approach taken. The overall MANCOVA confirmed that both active strategies were significantly superior to the Control Group in promoting moderation and empathy (Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.655$, $p < .001$).

The core finding is the differential efficacy established between the two intervention groups. Strategy B, the Joint Social Action model, demonstrated statistically superior adjusted mean scores across the critical affective and relational dimensions of moderation. This approach was more effective than Strategy A, the purely Theological Exchange model, in building both Tolerance ($\eta_p^2 = .164$) and Perceived Empathy ($\eta_p^2 = .194$), which are the psychological foundations of social cohesion.

Strategy A (Theological Exchange) was not ineffective. It performed comparably to Strategy B in promoting Anti-Extremism ($p = 0.210$), suggesting that providing formal knowledge and discussion about religious texts and shared history is sufficient to deter fundamentalist or radical viewpoints. However, the purely intellectual approach failed to translate this doctrinal knowledge into the sustained, positive affective change required to increase genuine acceptance of religious pluralism in the public sphere.

The qualitative data provided the mechanistic explanation for these quantitative differences. Participants in the Joint Social Action group (Strategy B) consistently reported that

working together on non-religious, tangible projects resulted in a "Breaking the Stereotype through Shared Purpose" that transcended religious identity. This phenomenon of building a "Shared Civic Identity" was the key factor that fueled the superior results in Tolerance and Empathy scores.

These findings offer powerful empirical support for the Social Contact Hypothesis, one of the most widely studied theories in social psychology. The success of Strategy B (Joint Social Action) is directly attributable to the fact that its design successfully met the four optimal conditions for positive intergroup contact: equal status, shared goals, institutional support, and cooperation. Our study extends this theory by validating its efficacy specifically within the complex, non-Western context of Indonesian interfaith relations.

The research critically contrasts with the strong theological focus of traditional Islam Wasathiyah scholarship. While the theological literature emphasizes doctrinal correctness, our data indicates that theological knowledge alone (Strategy A) has a limited impact on reducing interpersonal prejudice (Tolerance). This implies that policymakers attempting to strengthen moderation cannot rely solely on the ulama or religious elites. The field must incorporate insights from applied social psychology, prioritizing methodologies that foster experiential, affective contact over purely intellectual engagement.

This study directly addresses the "methodological gap" in the interfaith dialogue literature. Prior research has often relied on anecdotal evidence or measures of superficial engagement (e.g., participant satisfaction). Our use of a quasi-experimental design and validated social science scales allows us to conclusively state that active, non-theological cooperation (Strategy B) is a statistically more potent public sphere strategy than passive, intellectual conversation (Strategy A) for building relational trust.

The comparable effectiveness of both strategies on the Anti-Extremism dimension is an interesting result, aligning with global research on narrative counter-messaging. This suggests that the process of de-radicalization or deterrence primarily relies on the cognitive process of introducing counter-narratives—which both strategies did effectively—whereas the process of integration (Tolerance/Empathy) requires the affective mechanism of shared experience.

The significant disparity in efficacy between the two strategies signifies a critical mandate for change in how religious moderation programs are funded and implemented in Indonesia. The persistence of the theological-exchange model (Strategy A) in many institutions signifies a failure to recognize the nature of prejudice, which is often affective and emotional, not merely intellectual. The results signal that the fight against religious intolerance requires emotional labor and shared work, not just theological debate.

The superior efficacy of Strategy B (Joint Social Action) signifies the profound potential of utilizing a "Shared Civic Identity" as a unifying force. Participants' reports that "the religious label disappeared" during shared work signifies that national or local civic allegiance—a common commitment to Indonesia or the local community—is a more potent and neutral contact point for building trust than focusing on the inherent differences between religious doctrines. This is a critical insight for strengthening national identity through religious pluralism.

The exceptionally high score on the Perceived Empathy Scale ($\eta_p^2 = .194$) for the social action group signifies that empathy is the key psychological mediator that successfully translates dialogue into public moderation. Empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, serves as the affective engine that breaks down in-group/out-group boundaries. This result signifies that any strategy aimed at strengthening Islam Wasathiyah must consciously integrate activities designed to elevate affective connection and mutual vulnerability.

The high statistical power and strong effect sizes achieved in this study signify that strengthening religious moderation is not an intractable, multi-generational challenge. It is a highly achievable, short-term goal when the correct, evidence-based strategy is employed

(Ainissyifa, 2025). The findings provide a signal that the abstract concept of Wasathiyah can, and should, be translated into a functional public policy tool capable of producing measurable, positive social change.

The most immediate and critical implication is for the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs and civil society funding bodies. This research provides a definitive evidence base, implying that resources must be strategically shifted away from purely theological, lecture-based dialogue toward collaborative, community-focused projects (Wardi dkk., 2023). This is not a call to abolish theological discussion, but to prioritize action-based dialogue as the superior mobilization strategy for public sphere outcomes.

The findings have profound implications for curriculum development within universities and religious schools (Naim dkk., 2022). Educational institutions should integrate mandatory "Interfaith Service Learning" modules into their curricula. The data imply that students who work alongside others on non-religious, real-world problems will develop measurably higher levels of tolerance and empathy than students who only study other faiths in a classroom setting.

A powerful implication exists for public communication and advocacy efforts. The data strongly suggest that public messaging campaigns aimed at promoting moderation should pivot from theological arguments (e.g., "Islam teaches moderation") to civic arguments (e.g., "Moderation is essential for our shared community progress"). Utilizing the shared identity of "Indonesian Citizen" or "Community Member" is implied to be a more effective frame for challenging prejudice than utilizing religious commonality.

For civil society organizations, the results imply a need for strategic realignment of program design. Organizations seeking to strengthen Wasathiyah must adopt the core components of the Social Contact Hypothesis (Astuti dkk., 2025). This involves intentionally designing programs that guarantee equal status between participants, focus on shared, supra-ordinate goals, and have high institutional backing to ensure success. These elements are the implied, non-negotiable keys to building genuine social cohesion.

The quantitative superiority of the Joint Social Action strategy is a direct consequence of its ability to create cognitive reframing. Prejudice is maintained by stereotypes, which are sustained when contact is superficial or non-existent. Strategy B worked because the necessity of completing a community project required deep, sustained, and interdependent cooperation (Ibda dkk., 2024). This active process forced participants to encounter the individual character traits (competence, commitment, kindness) of the "other," directly contradicting the negative group stereotype they held.

The finding that Strategy A (Theological Exchange) failed to generate comparable empathy is explained by the nature of intellectual disagreement. While the theological discussions increased knowledge, they often highlighted profound, structural differences in doctrine. In the absence of a strong affective bond, focusing on these irreconcilable differences likely activated "in-group/out-group" categorization, inadvertently reinforcing boundaries, making high levels of tolerance and pluralism difficult to achieve.

The high scores on the Perceived Empathy Scale (PES) for Strategy B are the reason for the gains in Tolerance (Ma`arif dkk., 2025). The core mechanism is emotional: empathy (the affective bond) mediates the relationship between contact (the dialogue) and tolerance (the behavioral outcome). Strategy B generated this empathy because working towards a shared goal created shared stress, shared laughter, and shared success, which are the fundamental conditions that build mutual vulnerability and relational trust.

The results, ultimately, are a consequence of fundamental social psychology (Siregar dkk., 2025). Human beings are most likely to build trust and overcome prejudice when they are engaged in shared, collective work under conditions of equality, particularly when that work is non-ideological. The success of Joint Social Action demonstrates that the most potent tool for

strengthening Islam Wasathiyah is not a theological argument about what to believe, but a collaborative task about what to do together.

This study's quasi-experimental design, while controlled for baseline differences with MANCOVA, utilized non-random assignment of individuals into groups within a limited set of three cities (Takdir, 2025). The short, six-week intervention duration is a further limitation, as the study cannot conclude whether the observed attitudinal gains are sustained over a long period or whether they successfully transfer to real-world behavioral changes outside the experimental setting.

A second critical limitation is the study's reliance on self-reported attitudinal scales (Likert scales) to measure the core dependent variables (Tolerance, Anti-Extremism). While necessary, these measures are subject to social desirability bias, where participants may over-report socially acceptable attitudes (Surada dkk., 2025). The study did not include objective behavioral measures, such as observational analysis of participant interactions in a non-structured setting.

The most urgent and logical direction for future research is a large-scale, longitudinal, and behavioral study. Future studies must track these cohorts (or a new, randomized cohort) over a minimum 12-month period to measure retention of attitudes (Bisri & Saumantri, 2024). Crucially, future research must incorporate objective behavioral outcome measures, such as monitoring changes in online hate speech participation or observed participation in interfaith civic forums to verify the translation of attitude change into tangible public sphere behavior.

Future research should also move toward a granular analysis of dialogue fidelity and cultural context (Z. Arifin dkk., 2025). A comparative study should be conducted on the effectiveness of different types of Joint Social Action (e.g., low-risk environmental vs. high-risk political advocacy) to understand which civic themes generate the strongest identity fusion. Finally, the findings mandate immediate implementation science research, testing the feasibility and scalability of the "Wasathiyah Dialogue Strategy Framework" in high-conflict, low-resource settings.

CONCLUSION

This study's most significant and distinct finding is the empirical verification of the differential efficacy of dialogue strategies. The quasi-experimental data conclusively demonstrate that the Joint Social Action model (Strategy B) is statistically superior to the Theological Exchange model (Strategy A) in strengthening the affective dimensions of Religious Moderation. This quantitative advantage was particularly pronounced in Tolerance and Perceived Empathy (both $p < .001$), confirming that the most potent public sphere strategy for promoting Islam Wasathiyah is rooted in the experiential efficacy of shared, non-religious work, rather than intellectual debate, although both strategies were equally effective at promoting Anti-Extremism.

The primary contribution of this research is conceptual, providing a novel, evidence-based "Wasathiyah Dialogue Strategy Framework" that synthesizes normative political goals with applied social psychology. This study refines the global interfaith dialogue literature by providing the first rigorous, quantitative validation of the Social Contact Hypothesis in the complex socio-religious context of Indonesia. This contribution moves beyond the descriptive analysis prevalent in Islam Wasathiyah scholarship to offer a measurable, scalable, and policy-relevant mechanism for translating the theological ideal of moderation into a functional strategy for building genuine affective cohesion and a robust Shared Civic Identity.

This study's quasi-experimental design and short, six-week intervention duration constitute its primary limitations, as the reliance on self-reported attitudinal scales is susceptible to social desirability bias and provides no data on the long-term retention of these positive attitudes. Future research must, therefore, pivot to a longitudinal design, tracking these

cohorts over a minimum of 12 months to verify the durability of the attitudinal change. Crucially, subsequent studies should incorporate objective behavioral outcome measures, such as monitoring changes in online discourse or observed participation in interfaith civic forums, to confirm the translation of attitudinal gains into measurable public sphere moderation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.
Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.
Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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