

A WASATIYYAH FRAMEWORK FOR MUSLIM YOUTH RESILIENCE AND IDENTITY FORMATION: THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS

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Abstract: *Current academic research involving youth and Islamic studies has increasingly highlighted a significant gap between established teaching methods and real-life experiences of Muslim youth in an increasingly globalized and digital environment. While increasing interest, a conceptual gap remains in the integration of traditional Islamic epistemology with the construction of contemporary youth identity. This paper proposes a conceptual framework based on the theoretical principles of wasatiyyah (moderation), social identity theory and critical pedagogy. Youth in this paper are positioned as active participants in the understanding and practice of Islamic knowledge. The main argument suggests that a wasatiyyah-oriented approach can harmonies disagreements between traditional and contemporary values by promoting a balanced, contextually aware relationship with Islamic teachings. This paper conceptually synthesizes Islamic intellectual frameworks with current social theory to propose a dynamic model of youth engagement that surpasses traditional boundaries between conservatism and liberalism. It additionally condemns current pedagogical paradigms that disregard adolescent perspectives and neglect the complex nature of digital religiosity. By emphasizing dialogical and interactive learning processes, the framework redefines Islamic studies as a fundamental field for ethical and intellectual advancement. This study's significance is in its capacity to influence curriculum creation, youth policy, and religious discourse in both Muslim-majority and minority issues. It provides an instruction approach for scholars and practitioners aiming to develop resilient, critically engaged Muslim youth adept at navigating diverse societal cultures.*

Keyword: *Critical Pedagogy, Identity, Islamic Movements, Muslim Youth, Social Identity*

Introduction

Muslim youth now engage Islamic knowledge through a complex field of religious institutions, families, peers, universities, online platforms, and transnational networks. Globalisation and digital communication have widened access to religious ideas while also decentralising authority and exposing young people to competing interpretations. In both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority societies, young Muslims encounter multiple and sometimes conflicting sources of religious authority, including traditional religious institutions, online platforms, and transnational discourses. This changing environment has greatly affected how Islamic studies are accessed, processed, and assimilated (Bunt, 2018; Roy, 2004).

Classical methods of Islamic education have traditionally focused on transferring authoritative knowledge. These functions remain important, but they may not sufficiently address youth agency, fragmented sources of authority, digital religiosity, or the ethical dilemmas of plural societies (Halstead, 2004; Sahin, 2018). However, contemporary realities require more discourse-based, context-sensitive approaches that align with youth experiences. Moreover, current educational frameworks generally stick to didactic principles, with minimal focus on adolescent agency, critical engagement, and the ramifications of digital religious belief (Bunt, 2018). This gap requires re-evaluating how an Islamic ethical principle can organise identity processes and pedagogical participation within the institutions that actually work with youth.

This paper addresses that gap in two important ways. From a theoretical perspective, it contributes to current discussions by incorporating *wasatiyyah* as both a normative and analytical framework alongside social identity theory and critical pedagogy, providing more comprehensive insight into youth involvement. In practical terms, the framework provides educators, policymakers, and Muslim movements with a conceptual foundation for developing interventions that are grounded in Islamic intellectual traditions while remaining responsive to contemporary challenges. ABIM is examined as an illustrative case because its organisational discourse and program showed how a locally grounded understanding of *wasatiyyah* can translate into youth leadership, civic responsibility, and interreligious engagement.

The narrative literature review method was used in this article to select the appropriate articles for review. This approach begins with a theoretical and contextual description of the current state of the topic or theme pertaining to integrating traditional Islamic epistemology with the construction of contemporary youth identity using a *wasatiyyah*-oriented approach. There is no limitation or list that has been used to retrieve suitable articles during the database search. This article critically analyses literature from books, reports, seminar papers, and journal articles published in print or electronic formats. This paper advances the argument that a *wasatiyyah*-based framework can resolve the conflicts between tradition and modernity by encouraging balanced, reflective and participatory learning methods. It does this by drawing on these theoretical underpinnings. The ultimate objective of this paper is to reinterpret youth involvement in Islamic studies as a dynamic process of knowledge co-construction, ethical formation, and identity negotiation in an increasingly pluralistic world.

Literature Review

Islamic education plays a key role in shaping Muslim youth identity by cultivating moral, spiritual, and intellectual values. At the First World Conference on Muslim Education, held in Makkah in 1977, Al-Attas proposed *ta'dīb*, or the cultivation of *adab*, as the most appropriate concept for articulating the meaning and purpose of education in Islam (In'ami et al., 2025). From his perspective, Islamic education is not merely intended to produce obedient citizens or

economically productive workers. Its primary purpose is to cultivate the good human being, one who possesses adab and embodies morality, justice, and a proper recognition of responsibilities towards God, oneself, and society (Al-Attas, 2001). Accordingly, the formation of responsible citizens should be understood as cultivating morally and spiritually upright individuals, rather than as the ultimate purpose of Islamic education.

Recent studies suggest that Islamic education integrates belief (*iman*), practice (*amal*), and social ethics rather than simply transmitting information (Hamzah & Jusoh, 2025). Nonetheless, this literature often adopts a normative stance, assuming a direct relationship between education and identity formation. By contrast, empirical data indicate a gap between young people's lived experiences and formal religious instruction, particularly in pluralistic and globalised contexts (Gaya & Ahmad, 2024). Although scholars such as Halstead (2004) argue that Islamic education is inherently comprehensive, combining intellectual and moral development, this approach has been criticised for neglecting the complexity of modern society. The literature frequently overlooks how young people's identities are negotiated and fractured, thereby underestimating the impact of external factors such as peer culture, the media, and international ideologies.

A growing body of research emphasises how digital technologies and globalisation have reshaped young people's religious beliefs. The decentralisation of religious authority brought about by the rise of "digital Islam" enables young people to engage selectively with a range of Islamic interpretations (Bunt, 2018). This aligns with studies showing that young Muslims increasingly use online platforms to navigate Islamic knowledge, often challenging established hierarchies of authority (Mohamad, 2023). However, current models typically cast digital religiosity as either a neutral distribution tool or a threat to conservatism. These rigid interpretations do not adequately capture young people as active interpreters who negotiate meaning across diverse intellectual sources. Furthermore, theoretical integration remains lacking in explaining how young people reconcile these influences with Islamic knowledge, even though globalisation is commonly portrayed as a disruptive force importing secular and materialist ideas (Roy, 2004; Esposito, 2011). This includes the emergence of artificial intelligence, which is increasingly contributing to the decline of critical thinking in Islamic education (Bakar, 2025).

Social identity theory explains how self-understanding emerges through categorisation, identification, comparison, and belonging (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It is particularly useful for explaining why Muslim youth organisations can provide recognition, solidarity, and collective purpose. It offers a helpful perspective for comprehending the collective aspects of Muslim identity, especially in minority or diasporic contexts. Nevertheless, its application in Islamic studies remains constrained by secular epistemological assumptions that often overlook the ethical and metaphysical dimensions of Islamic philosophy. Critical pedagogy offers a complementary account of learning as dialogue, reflection, and participation rather than passive reception (Freire, 1970). Within Islamic education, its value lies in recognising young people as morally responsible interpreters while retaining serious engagement with revelation and scholarly tradition (Saada & Magadlah, 2021; Sahin, 2018).

Islamic intellectual tradition widely recognises *wasatiyyah* as a principle of moderation, balance, and justice that guides moral and social behaviour (Ramadan, 2009). However, studies of Islamic education and Muslim youth often discuss *wasatiyyah* as a moral ideal without explaining how it influences knowledge, identity, and action. Although recent research

highlights its educational importance, the role of Muslim movements in putting *wasatiyyah* into practice remains underexplored (Sutrisno et al., 2024). This paper therefore places *wasatiyyah* at the centre of a framework connecting identity formation, pedagogy, and organisational practice.

Across these thematic strands, several inconsistencies emerge. First, modern social theories and classical Islamic epistemology remain divided, leading to parallel rather than integrated assessments. Second, the literature frequently presents young Muslims as passive recipients rather than active creators of meaning, failing to fully recognise youth initiative. Third, despite the widespread recognition of digital changes, little is known about their epistemological ramifications. A conceptual framework that integrates modern theoretical approaches with Islamic intellectual traditions is therefore obviously needed. To close this gap, this paper proposes a *wasatiyyah*-based framework that incorporates critical pedagogy and social identity theory into an Islamic epistemological paradigm. Beyond addressing the shortcomings of current models, this framework offers a broader perspective on youth participation as a dynamic process of balancing, negotiation, and meaning-making amid modernity.

Theoretical And Conceptual Framework

The integrated theoretical framework presented in this paper places youth involvement in Islamic studies at the centre of modern social theory and Islamic epistemology. The framework is based on three major theoretical pillars which is critical pedagogy, social identity theory and *wasatiyyah* (moderation). Each provides alternative perspectives on how Muslim youth interact with Islamic knowledge in contemporary settings, negotiate identity and create meaning.

The framework's normative and epistemological foundation is *wasatiyyah*. It has its foundations in Islamic intellectual tradition and places a high value on ethical moderation, contextualization and balance in both thought and behavior (Ramadan, 2009). The term Wasatiyyah originates from the Arabic word wasat, which conveys the meanings of justice, moderation, balance and being situated between two opposing extremes. It also reflects fairness and equity. According to Ibn Manzur in his renowned Arabic dictionary Lisan al-Arab, the term wastu refers to something positioned in the middle or between two points. Meanwhile, when expressed as wasat, the term carries three principal meanings: the middle path, the best or most chosen, and justice. ((Ibn Manzur, 1955–1956)

Wasathiyyah, also associated with moderation or al-tawazun (balance), is one of Islam's most fundamental characteristics. According to Al-Qaradawi, wasathiyyah is a balance between two opposing paths or directions, in which neither path affects the other, and each ignores the other. (Al-Qaradawi, 1989). *Wasatiyyah* offers a dynamic lens through which youth can resolve conflicts between tradition and modernity, rather than the strict dichotomy between conservatism and liberalism. *Wasatiyyah* can also help counter religious extremism by promoting moderation, balance, and social harmony within Muslim society (Al-Qaradawi, 1989).

In the context of social identity theory, youths create their religious identities through connection, classification and social comparison. It emphasises the importance of group dynamics and belonging in forming Islamic identity, especially in diverse cultures (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, this framework is expanded here by adding ethical and spiritual aspects that are frequently lacking in secular applications. The process of participation is informed by critical pedagogy, which emphasises dialogical, participatory and reflexive

learning processes. It presents youths as active participants in the co-construction of meaning and questions the hierarchical transfer of knowledge (Freire, 1970). This is particularly relevant in addressing the limitations of conventional pedagogic approaches in Islamic education (Halstead, 2004).

Wasatiyyah promotes balanced participation by moderating how young people understand and navigate a variety of knowledge sources. The extent to which Islamic beliefs are internalised is influenced by social identity processes, which mediate the relationship between participation and identity outcomes. Critical pedagogy deepens cognitive and ethical development by enhancing participatory involvement. Furthermore, the strength of those connections is moderated by increased awareness of both opportunities and problems in digital contexts. This framework goes beyond disconnected assessments and provides a comprehensive model of youth participation by combining Islamic and modern academic viewpoints. It addresses current theoretical and practical constraints in the discipline by rethinking Islamic studies as a field of negotiation, balance, and co-construction.



Figure 1: Wasatiyyah Framework for Muslim Youth Resilience and Identity Formation
Source : Developed by author

According to the suggested model, youth engagement is a dynamic process shaped by three interconnected constructs: pedagogical engagement that is guided by critical pedagogy; identity formation informed by social identity processes; and epistemic orientation (influenced by *wasatiyyah*). Globalisation and digital religiosity, functioning as moderating variables, interact with these constructs (Bunt, 2018; Roy, 2004).

Islamic Movements as Mediating Institutions

Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, or Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) illustrates how an Islamic movement may translate moderation into organisational practice. Since its establishment in 1971, ABIM has articulated an approach grounded in local realities and frequently described through *Manhaj Malizi*, or a Malaysian method of change. This orientation seeks to communicate Islamic principles without disregarding Malaysia's cultural plurality and historical context (Mohd Shahrar, 2007). *Manhaj Malizi* was an effective strategy for ABIM to get its Islamic message across to Malay Muslims in Malaysia without introducing something radically different or at the expense of local cultures and traditions (Fadzil, 2020).

Mohd Samsudin & Raja Md Arif (2021) explain that ABIM promotes peaceful coexistence through interfaith engagement. ABIM demonstrates its commitment to *wasatiyyah* by participating in interreligious dialogue and humanitarian cooperation through platforms such as the Friendship Group for Inter-Religious Service (FGIS) and the Jawatankuasa Mempromosikan Persefahaman dan Keharmonian Antara Penganut Agama (JKMPKA). The aspiration of *wasatiyyah* within contemporary ABIM leadership is evident in successive official speeches and declarations by its contemporary leaders, particularly Mohamad Raimi Ab Rahim and Muhammad Faisal Abdul Aziz. Their intellectual orientation and leadership approach reflect ABIM's continued commitment towards moderation, social harmony, intellectual engagement and inclusive nation-building within the Malaysian context.

Under the leadership of Mohamad Raimi Ab Rahim (2015–2018), ABIM promoted Al-Islam Rahmatan lil-'Alamin and *wasatiyyah* as responses to extremism, social fragmentation, and religious misunderstanding. Raimi argued that religious extremism (*irhab*) and radicalism should be addressed by strengthening the authentic *manhaj* of *wasatiyyah*, which emphasises justice, balance, and peaceful coexistence. He also highlighted the importance of interfaith dialogue, humanitarian engagement, and intellectual openness in addressing contemporary social challenges (Ab Rahim, 2016, 2017). Raimi further argued that a *wasatiyyah*-based approach is essential for addressing religious extremism among youth. He rejected both extremist interpretations of jihad and liberal interpretations that remove jihad entirely from Islamic understanding. This position reflects ABIM's effort to present *wasatiyyah* as a middle path that addresses radicalism while preserving authentic Islamic principles, particularly among youth (Ab Rahim, 2019).

Muhammad Faisal Abdul Aziz, who replaced Raimi as the 10th ABIM President, further expanded the organisation's moderate understanding of da'wah aspiration by promoting cosmopolitanism as a catalyst for Islamic civilizational thought. He subsequently developed this orientation through the concept of Muslim cosmopolitanism. He argued that a strong Islamic identity enables Muslims to engage confidently with other traditions and contribute to inclusive nation-building (Abdul Aziz, 2020). This approach reflects the aspiration to promote inter-civilisational dialogue, mutual respect, and social harmony while preserving the authenticity of Islamic teachings. (Abdul Aziz, 2021).

He further connected this cosmopolitan orientation with civilisational dialogue and collective social reform (Abdul Aziz, 2022). Initiatives such as Islam–Buddhist dialogue and ecological engagement illustrate the movement from abstract moderation to shared intellectual and civic practice. These programmes reflected ABIM's commitment to promoting *Wasatiyyah* through constructive dialogue, mutual respect, and peaceful engagement among different civilisations and religious traditions (ABIM, 2022).

The ABIM case illustrates how the *wasatiyyah* framework operates at the institutional level. Through *Manhaj Malizi*, leadership development, dialogue, humanitarian service, and public advocacy, ABIM promotes belonging and active learning among Muslim youth. These practices can strengthen youth resilience in addressing modern challenges while maintaining their religious identity.

Discussion

By integrating *wasatiyyah* with social identity theory and critical pedagogy, this paper reconceptualises youth engagement in Islamic studies. The framework makes four important theoretical contributions to the literature. First, it emphasises *wasatiyyah* as an analytical construct that can resolve conflicts between tradition and modernity, rather than merely a conventional ethical ideal. A handful of studies have operationalised balance as a key philosophical lens for comprehending young involvement, despite earlier research acknowledging its significance in Islamic philosophy (Ramadan, 2009). This study bridges traditional Islamic epistemology and modern social theory by integrating *wasatiyyah* into a broader theoretical framework. This extends educational accounts that emphasise Islamic moral formation (Halstead, 2004, 2007) by specifying how balance and justice can guide engagement with competing authorities and digital information.

Second, by incorporating spiritual and ethical elements often lacking in secular frameworks, social identity theory expands current approaches to Muslim youth identity. Thus, identity formation is reinterpreted as a social and moral process shaped by ethical principles and a sense of collective belonging (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Halstead, 2004). Social identity theory explains the value of belonging, but a *wasatiyyah* orientation supplies ethical criteria by which collective identities can be assessed. Compared with approaches that focus mainly on identity maintenance in schools or minority settings (Raihani, 2012; Zine, 2008), the model highlights the movement as a bridge between education, community life, and civic action.

Third, critical pedagogy promotes a participatory approach that recognises youth as active co-constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients of instruction (Freire, 1970). Within Islamic education, this approach does not require rejecting inherited knowledge or scholarly authority. Instead, authority is exercised through explanation, ethical example, dialogue, and opportunities for responsible questioning. This integration provides a more reflective and context-sensitive approach to Islamic education while challenging the assumption that Islamic educational values and learner agency are necessarily incompatible (Saada & Magadlah, 2021; Sahin, 2018). In practical terms, the framework encourages Islamic movements, policymakers, and educators to develop curricula that move beyond memorisation and incorporate dialogical and reflective learning based on the lived experiences of Muslim youth.

Given the increasing impact of internet platforms on religious knowledge and authority, it is especially important to incorporate digital literacy into religious education (Bunt, 2018). To ensure that institutional approaches to Islamic education are responsive to various sociocultural settings, the framework also recommends that policy initiatives prioritise youth agency and inclusivity. Additionally, the focus on *wasatiyyah* offers a useful normative framework for opposing ideological extremism and division in favour of a fair and moral interaction with religious teachings.

Fourth, Islamic movements add a mechanism missing from many conceptual models. They can institutionalise moderation through sustained mentoring, leadership succession, service, and engagement with difference. ABIM's locally grounded and cosmopolitan discourses show how this mediation may occur, although organisational ideals should not be automatically equated with members' experiences or programme outcomes. The framework has practical implications. Islamic movements should design programmes that connect textual study with ethical deliberation, digital source evaluation, community service, and interreligious or intercultural encounters. Educators can treat youth as co-constructors of understanding while

maintaining clear epistemic standards. Policymakers can support youth organisations as partners in resilience and civic education without reducing them to instruments of state messaging. Evaluation should examine changes in reasoning, empathy, belonging, and civic responsibility rather than relying only on attendance or content recall.

The suggested framework's adaptability and integration are its strongest points. It avoids the fragmentation that characterises much of the current literature by integrating multiple theoretical perspectives. It is especially pertinent when discussing the intricacies of globalisation and digital religiosity, given its emphasis on contextualisation and balance (Roy, 2004). Furthermore, the framework's emphasis on youth empowerment is consistent with recent developments in educational theory that prioritise learner-centred methods.

However, there are a few limitations to be aware of. The framework remains theoretically grounded but has not been empirically tested, as it is a conceptual study. To confirm the suggested links and assess how they can be utilised in other institutional and cultural contexts, further study is required. Although *wasatiyyah* offers a strong conceptual basis, different scholarly traditions may interpret it differently, which could limit its generalisability. While original, the blending of Islamic and secular ideologies may also create epistemological conflicts that require further critical analysis. The current research critically exposes the shortcomings of binary paradigms that present modernity and tradition as mutually exclusive. Rather, it shows that youth participation in Islamic studies is a dynamic, negotiated process influenced by a variety of interrelated factors.

Conclusion

This paper has developed a *wasatiyyah*-based framework for understanding Muslim youth resilience and identity formation in pluralistic and digital contexts. By integrating *wasatiyyah*, social identity theory, and critical pedagogy, the framework connects Islamic ethical principles with collective belonging, youth agency, and participatory learning. Its main contribution is to position Islamic movements as mediating institutions that translate these principles into educational programmes, leadership development, social engagement, and civic participation.

The discussion of ABIM illustrates how this framework may operate in practice. Through *Manhaj Malizi*, leadership formation, interreligious dialogue, humanitarian service, and public advocacy, ABIM demonstrates how an Islamic movement can promote a locally grounded understanding of moderation. These practices may strengthen Muslim youth resilience by helping them respond to contemporary challenges while maintaining their religious identity and participating constructively in a plural society.

However, this study is conceptual and does not empirically measure the framework's effectiveness. Future research should examine its application across different Muslim movements and sociocultural settings through interviews, comparative case studies, programme evaluations, and longitudinal research. Such studies could determine how *wasatiyyah*-oriented programmes influence youth identity, ethical judgement, digital literacy, and civic engagement. Overall, the framework provides a foundation for Islamic movements, educators, and policymakers seeking to develop Muslim youth who are resilient, ethically grounded, socially responsible, and critically engaged.

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