

# MERGING RELIGIOSITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA: INDONESIAN MILLENNIAL YOUTH'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPTS OF *JIHAD* AND RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

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**Abstract:** This study qualitatively sought to investigate Indonesian millennial youth's understanding of the concepts of *jihad* and religious tolerance based on what they have learned from social media. Twenty students from a university in Bengkulu, Indonesia, were purposely engaged as the participants. The data were garnered from interviews, documentation, and focus group discussions. After learning Islamic materials through social media, the findings revealed that Indonesian millennial youth tended to interpret various points regarding *jihad* and religious tolerance using their cognitive sectorial ego. They consumed raw materials with their inability to comprehend those materials. Consequently, they were easily provoked to blame the diverse emerging perspectives in light of resistance to accept other views excluded from the Islamic teachings they watched in social media. This condition inferred that Indonesian millennials' understanding of *jihad* and religious tolerance as they learned from social media was considered low.

**Abstrak:** Penelitian kualitatif ini berusaha untuk menyelidiki pemahaman pemuda milenial Indonesia tentang konsep *jihad* dan toleransi beragama berdasarkan apa yang mereka pelajari dari media sosial. Sebanyak 20 mahasiswa perguruan tinggi dari sebuah universitas di Bengkulu, Indonesia, diikutsertakan sebagai partisipan. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, dokumentasi, dan focus group discussion. Temuan mengungkapkan bahwa setelah mempelajari materi agama Islam melalui media

sosial, remaja milenial Indonesia cenderung memaknai berbagai hal terkait *jihad* dan toleransi beragama dengan menggunakan ego sektoral kognitif individu mereka sendiri. Mereka mengkonsumsi materi secara mentah dengan ketidakmampuan mereka untuk memahami materi tersebut. Akibatnya, mereka mudah terprovokasi untuk menyalahkan beragam perspektif yang muncul karena adanya penolakan untuk menerima pandangan, kecuali sejalan dengan ajaran Islam yang mereka tonton di media sosial. Kondisi ini menunjukkan bahwa pemahaman generasi muda Indonesia tentang *jihad* dan toleransi beragama dari media sosial dinilai masih rendah.

**Keywords:** millennial; social media; *jihad*; religious tolerance

## INTRODUCTION

In the era of revolution 4.0, besides exchanging information about food, fun, and fashion, social media also plays a role as a forum for disseminating religious information. Social media can directly inform the public about anything that happens in the world without complicated processes, as familiar professionals do.<sup>1</sup> With social media, the public nowadays become not only the users of content but also the creators. The contents created by the public are indeed mere moderate and sometimes disqualified, but the power cannot be underestimated. The contents of social media can control real lives. Asur and Huberman have ever proven how social media content can predict the way people live in real life.<sup>2</sup> Religions and social media were born in different eras. Still, it does not mean that they cannot be mingled with each other. Verschoor-Kirss argued that it is wrong to say if religions and technology cannot interact with each other. In general, technology can enhance individual religious theories and practices through the expansion and the creation of digital religious communities.<sup>3</sup>

If merged, religions and social media will become a new power that cannot be limited by space and time. In this regard, religious messages are mediated by digital and social media, and the messages are quickly delivered and received by people. Viewing this condition, Bajan and Campbell mention that media have been used by many Christian churches in the United States because of their potentials as the platforms of efficient dissemination and their capabilities

<sup>1</sup> Van der Laan, J. M., "How the Internet Shapes Religious Life, or the Medium Is Itself the Message." *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 29, no. 4, (2009): 272–277.

<sup>2</sup> Asur, S., and Huberman, B. A., "Predicting the Future with Social Media. the 2010 IEEE/WIC/ACM International Conference on Web Intelligence and Intelligent Agent Technology, 1, (2010): 492–499.

<sup>3</sup> Yusniza Kamaruzaman et al., "Religion, Markets, and Digital Media: Seeking Halal Food in the U.S.," *Journal of Macromarketing* 36, no. 4 (2016): 400–411.

to reach a significant number of people in a relatively easy way.<sup>4</sup> Chukwuma opined that social media platforms continuously affect people's understanding of religions in many of the world's parts.<sup>5</sup> Many religious leaders and organizations have admitted that social media is an effective platform to reach and influence people. On the other hand, religious seekers also use social media platforms to enrich their religious knowledge. Today, more people learn about religions from social media.

When religious messages are spread through social media, albeit not limited to space and time, the processes have limitations. One of the limitations is the plausibility that religious messages will be made and conveyed by anonyms having no religious knowledge credibility or by credible parties that make efforts to provoke people to accept some religious perspectives for the sake of particular agendas those parties undertake. The condition has happened most often given that today radical groups have taken control of the stream of social media. Specific themes they pose are to indoctrinate people. The themes as regards *jihad* and religious tolerance are the most popular ones. The two themes are sensitive and potentially have fatal impacts on people if mistakenly interpreted. Religious conflicts will occur if the understanding of religious tolerance is obscured. The effort to intrigue people has been continuously made through social media.

Since the last few years, the phenomenon of global *jihad* has risen.<sup>6</sup> Azani and Koblentz-Stenzler mapped the developing trends of new converts to Islam who were integrated into global *jihad* organizations.<sup>7</sup> According to them, converts are a critical element in terrorist infrastructure globally, especially in the West. Global *jihad* organizations have identified the potential of new converts (knowledge of local culture, difficulties in infrastructure, economy, and technology). Terrorists invest efforts in every possible arena (real and virtual) to recruit them to perpetrate terrorist activities. Azam and Ferrero call these converts individuals who have a weak ideological basis that does not even exist.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Adam Bajan and Heidi A. Campbell, "Online Media and Religion in America," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2018, 452.

<sup>5</sup> Okechukwu Chukwuma, "Communicating for the Advancement of Religious Knowledge through the Social Media," *International Journal of Multimedia, Image Processing and Pattern Recognition* 1, no. 2 (2018): 1–6.

<sup>6</sup> Idi Warsah, "Jihad and Radicalism: Epistemology of Islamic Education at Pesantren Al-Furqan in Musi Rawas District," *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura*, 2020, 1–18; Idi Warsah et al., "The Impact of Collaborative Learning on Learners' Critical Thinking Skills," *International Journal of Instruction* 14, no. 2 (2021): 443–60.

<sup>7</sup> Eitan Azani and Liram Koblentz-Stenzler, "Muslim Converts Who Turn to Global Jihad: Radicalization Characteristics and Countermeasures," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 0, no. 0 (2019): 1–27.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Paul Azam and Mario Ferrero, "Jihad against Palestinians? The Herostratos Syndrome and the Paradox of Targeting European Jews," *Defence and Peace Economics* 30, no.

These individuals are capable of mass murder because of the concept they have. This phenomenon is referred to as Jean Herostratos' syndrome. New converts in this context are almost identical to millennial characters that are entirely instantaneous and do not yet have a strong foundation of ideology. Thus, they tend to be influenced by the doctrines in which they cannot filter the truth.

The study conducted by Klausen revealed that social media had played a pivotal role in *jihadists'* operational strategies in Syria and Iraq. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have been used to encourage communication. The contents distributed by unscrupulous rebels on Twitter can give illusory authenticity. This way is done as a strategy to attract generations accustomed to learning many things using cellphones.<sup>9</sup> Al-Rawi also said that YouTube had been a social media actively used by ISIS followers and sympathizers to promote groups and recruit others.<sup>10</sup> The recruitment aims to indoctrinate their version of the *jihad* concept to attract young people's attention. Golan and Martin scrutinized how religious institutions seek to frame the world's perception through communication mediated by live streaming on social media. As a result, three aspects of purpose are found: to get young people close to the gospel, build affinity for the Holy Land, and maintain a constant transcendental presence.

Today, the phenomenon regarding Indonesian people, especially young generations that learn Islam from social media, becomes a new fact that cannot be avoided. On the other side, social media are considered less appropriate to be used to learn religion. Learning Islam directly with the so-called *ustadz*, *kiyai*, or *buya* competent will be better because they have detailed contexts and transparent knowledge sources. On the other hand, learning Islam from social media has limitations from both texts and contexts. Two conflicting sides<sup>11</sup> as the preceding naturally end up with a question: how is the millennial youth's understanding of the concepts of *jihad* and religious tolerance acquired from social media? The present study seeks to explain the depth of Indonesian millennial youth's understanding of *jihad* after learning the concepts of *jihad* and religious tolerance from social media. The level of deep understanding as such is the realm that prior studies have not touched.

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6 (2019): 687–705.no. 6 (2019)

<sup>9</sup> Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 1 (2015): 1–22.

<sup>10</sup> Ahmed Al-Rawi, "Video Games, Terrorism, and ISIS's Jihad 3.0," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 4 (2018): 740–60.

<sup>11</sup> Idi Warsah, "Forgiveness Viewed from Positive Psychology and Islam," *Islamic Guidance and Counseling Journal* 3, no. 2 (2020): 2614–1566.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The present study applied a qualitative method to investigate tertiary students' understanding of *jihad* and religious tolerance concepts based on online learning independently for 30 days from 15th August to 15th September 2020. In detail, the orientation of this study was split into three research questions: Whom are the Muslim scholars regarded as the sources in learning the concepts of *jihad* and religious tolerance online? What are the media utilized to learn the concepts of *jihad* and religious tolerance online? How is tertiary students' understanding of the concepts of *jihad* and religious tolerance that they learn online? Twenty tertiary students from one of the universities in Bengkulu, Indonesia, were purposively engaged as the participants in the present study. On average, they aged 19 years old.

The data *vis-a-vis* tertiary students' understanding of the concepts of *jihad* and religious tolerance were garnered from interviews, documentation, and focus group discussion. After the participants learned various concepts of *jihad* and religious tolerance online from various social media they chose, they were further interviewed. For the sake of reaching the data's credibility, the researchers also made a particular thread on social media to discuss *jihad* and religious tolerance and to allow participants to argue in the column of comments. The participants' arguments were subsequently documented. In addition, the participants were also involved in a focus group discussion to gain more data. The data's credibility was subsequently pursued by comparing the data obtained from the techniques mentioned earlier and re-interviewing the participants so that the bias amid the data could be reduced.

The data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's model of data analysis.<sup>12</sup> The processes of data analysis subsumed data collection, data condensation, data display, and concluding. As explained previously, the data collection was undertaken using in-depth interviews, documentation, and focus group discussions. After pursuing the data, data condensation was further carried out by classifying the data according to three levels of understanding as proposed by Winkel.<sup>13</sup> Specifically, Winkel divided three levels of understanding. The first level is low understanding. It refers to an ability to only absorb raw information without being consolidated by other abilities such as analyzing, taking into account contexts, and elaborating information in detail. The second level is moderate understanding, which refers to connecting between one set of information or relating some graphics to the related events, differentiating

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<sup>12</sup> Mathew B. Miles, A. Micheal Huberman, and Johnny Saldana, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (California: Sage Publications, Inc., 2014)..

<sup>13</sup> W. S Winkel, *Psikologi Pengajaran* (Jakarta: PT. Gramedia Widia Sarana Indonesia, 1983).

between good and bad and between primary and supporting points. The third level is high understanding, wherein it refers to an ability to analyze in-depth abstract points beyond what is written, to be able to make a prediction based on the definitions and the explained conditions in the form of ideas or symbols, and to draw a conclusion in tandem with paying attention to some implications and consequences. Furthermore, the data were presented in the form of tables followed by relevant elaborations. At the last stage, the data were concluded.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### The Muslim Scholars Considered as the Sources of Online Learning

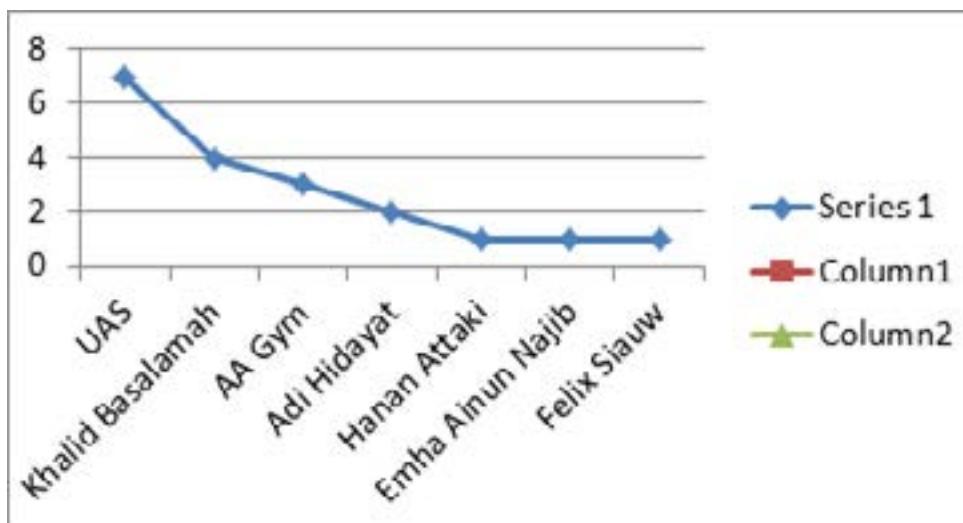
Upon the results of this study, there were 7 Muslim scholars considered as good sources of online learning about the concepts of *jihad* and religious tolerance undertaken by the participants. The related data can be viewed in table 1 below.

**Table 1. The Muslim Scholars Regarded as Good Sources to Learn the Concepts of *Jihad* and Religious Tolerance Online**

No	Participants	Age	Muslim scholars
1	Participant 1	19	Abdul Somad
2	Participant 2	19	Abdul Somad
3	Participant 3	19	Abdul Somad
4	Participant 4	19	Abdul Somad
5	Participant 5	19	Abdul Somad
6	Participant 6	19	Abdul Somad
7	Participant 7	19	Abdul Somad
8	Participant 8	19	Khalid Basalamah
9	Participant 9	19	Khalid Basalamah
10	Participant 10	19	Khalid Basalamah
11	Participant 11	19	Khalid Basalamah
12	Participant 12	19	AA Gym
13	Participant 13	19	AA Gym
14	Participant 14	19	AA Gym
15	Participant 15	19	Adi Hidayat
16	Participant 16	19	Adi Hidayat
17	Participant 17	19	Firanda Andirja
18	Participant 18	19	Emha Ainun Najib
19	Participant 19	19	Felix Siauw
20	Participant 20	19	Hanan Attaki

Anchored in the data presented in table 1, the Muslim scholars trusted to be good sources of learning about *jihad* and religious tolerance online by Abdul Somad, Khalid Basalamah, Aa Gym, Adi Hidayat, Firanda Andirja, Emha Ainun Najib, Felix Siauw, and Hanan Attaki. Of the Muslim scholars, one trusted the most was Abdul Somad (see figure 1 below). The reason beyond the participants' interests in these seven Muslim scholars was because the da'wah's materials they conveyed in social media were almost similar. Their interests drove them to view more deeply the account profiles of those Muslim scholars and finally decided to be their followers. The participants' reason definitely could not be accepted academically in light of merely taking account of the popularity aspect in social media. To be popular does not mean credible to explain religious materials, especially for sensitive themes such as *jihad* and religious tolerance.

**Figure 1. Muslim Scholars Popular in Social Media**



This part of the findings is relevant to Chukwuma's argumentation, stating that social media platforms continuously affect people's understanding of religions in many of the world parts. In terms of the dissemination of religious messages, social media indeed seem adequate. However, the clerical credibility of religious scholars who disseminate religious teachings cannot always be identified.<sup>14</sup> It is pretty detrimental to the trustworthiness of religious messages distributed through social media. Also, the people who only learn religious content through social media are likely to acquire narrow religious understanding. Weak ideological bases will lead to misinterpretations which could be the beginning of the emergence of

<sup>14</sup> Kikue Hamayotsu, "The Limits of Civil Society in Democratic Indonesia: Media Freedom and Religious Intolerance," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 4 (2013): 658–77.

religious intolerance.<sup>15</sup> For example, during observation, as affected by learning religion merely from social media, one student said the following:

In my opinion, saying Merry Christmas is not a kind of tolerance. It has gone over the essence of tolerance, and it makes Muslims regarded as imitating the followers of another religion. It is considered disbelief.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Types of Media Utilized to Learn the Concepts of *Jihad* and Religious Tolerance Online**

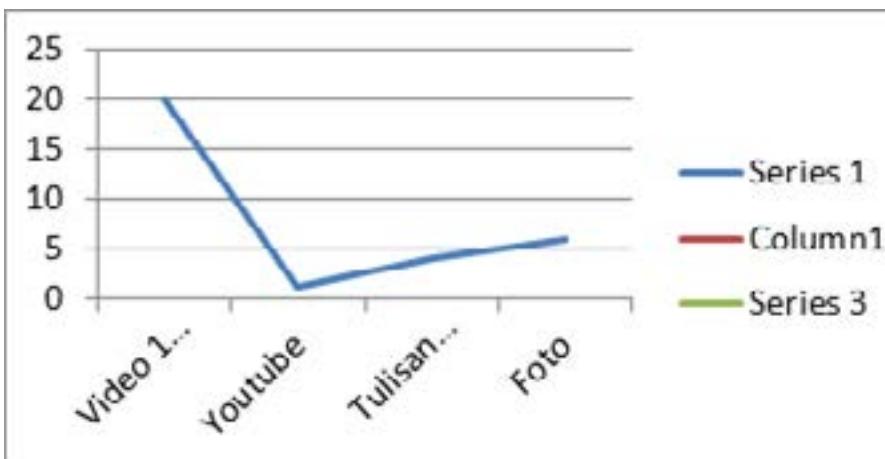
The participants chose four media types, namely audiovisuals (videos with one-minute duration), YouTube videos, captions, and photos. Audiovisuals became the most predominant medium, and others were YouTube videos, captions, and photos in sequential order (see figure 2 below). If discerned, the most preferred medium was videos with a one-minute duration. Such videos, of course, have limited duration and content. It is also very often that other people have already cut one-minute videos. This condition finally obscures the originality of the religious material texts and contexts. The participants' reason was that that medium was exciting and straightforward. The participants were less interested in the audiovisual contents ranging from 30-60 minutes, such as those available on YouTube on account of too long duration and boring. After scrutinizing, the participants could only understand *jihad* and religious tolerance at the surface level instead of in-depth. They made efforts to interpret Quran verses, hadiths, and the concepts of jihad and tolerance using their versions. The participants only relied on their mere understanding acquired from social media. The famous Muslim scholars delivered the materials without any other effort to learn the basic concepts and prior grand depiction. Hence, it is worried that the participants will be resistant to accepting different perspectives exposed to them. It is aligned with Christina, Fanuel, and Stella. She found that those learning religious teachings from social media tend to acquire limited understanding.<sup>17</sup> Their religious understanding is acquired merely by utilizing the following Instagram accounts of popular Muslim scholars, looking for religious materials through watching religious teachings on YouTube and reading some captions concerning religious videos.

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<sup>15</sup> Azam and Ferrero, "Jihad against Palestinians? The Herostratos Syndrome and the Paradox of Targeting European Jews."

<sup>16</sup> Retrieved from FGD

<sup>17</sup> Christinah Dlamini, Fanwell Ncube, and Stella Muchemwa, "The Use of Social Media Technology in Universities: A Case of Solusi University, Zimbabwe," *Journal of Media and Communication Studies* 7 (July 31, 2015): 101–11.

**Figure 2. Types of Media Used for Online Learning**

The data became more evident after the data were verified by those gained from interviews and focus group discussion than before. The participants tended to be easily provoked and blame diverse perspectives on *jihad* and religious tolerance. The researchers assumed that two points consolidated this case. First, the participants only considered the popularity of the Muslim scholars without seeking the extent of their credibility. Second, the one-minute video they preferred had an impact on their understanding of *jihad* and tolerance.

#### **Tertiary Student's Understanding of the Concepts of *Jihad* and Religious Tolerance based on What They Learn Online**

In the focus group discussion, the researchers found out that the participants likely responded recklessly to the themes associated with *jihad* and religious tolerance. They concluded judging without deep consideration. Those who learned online from Abdul Shomad, Felix Siauw, and Khalid Basalamah were inclined to be different (though they were recklessly the same) from those learning online from AA Gym, Adi Hidayat, Hanan Ataki, and Emha Ainun Najib.

The researchers posed an issue if a Muslim said "Merry Christmas" to Christians in this case. The participants then came up with different perspectives and argued against one another. Each claimed that their perspective was the most acceptable one. Various participants' responses depicted this condition. For instance, participant 1 said,

In my opinion, saying Merry Christmas is not a kind of tolerance. It has gone over the essence of tolerance, and it makes Muslims regarded as imitating the followers of another religion. It is considered disbelief.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Idi Warsah, Amelia Avisa, and Anrial, "Pola Komunikasi Antar Umat Beragama Masyarakat Desa Sindang Jaya, Rejang Lebong, Bengkulu," *Ar-Risalah: Media Keislaman, Pendidikan Dan Hukum Islam* 18, no. 2 (2020): 1–25.

In the same vein, participant 19 responded, “don’t let our tolerance be too far over.” Different from others, Participant 18 strictly claimed, “Saying Merry Christmas is okay insofar as our belief in Allah SWT is steadily strong and uncontaminated. We need to honor one another”.<sup>19</sup> Continuously, against other perspectives contrary to his, he said, “If this is the kind of religious tolerance you hold in your mindset, our country will be devastated by intolerant people like you.”

The above participants showed an impression that they were almost provoked to judge others to have been disbelief in the context of saying Merry Christmas to Christians. In fact, behind such an issue lie various broad contexts. It could stem from a cause that they chose online Islamic teaching materials from a range of Muslim scholars they preferred. They tended to be fanatical about the teachings of certain Muslim scholars.

In the context of *jihad*, the researchers posed an issue that triggered the participants’ critical arguments. It was of importance since the meaning of *jihad* tended to be misinterpreted. During observation, participant 11 said,

If necessary, *jihad* must be carried out amid certain societies, such as red-light districts, nightclub areas, and places decorated with Christmas attributes. The places as such need to be attacked physically. That is how I view *jihad*.<sup>20</sup>

The other perspective was from participant 9, who said, “*Jihad* means to fight against the tyranny of disbelief people, non-Muslims.” In addition, participant 14 said as follows.

We cannot narrow the meaning of *jihad*. If discerned as you said and if interpreted textually, the impact will be harmful to us. Indonesia will even be laden with conflicts and wars that never end.<sup>21</sup>

However, a sort of peaceful perspective was told by participant 20, “*Jihad* means to be brave to help others, and not to scream out takbir and then hurt oneself and others merely. That is not *jihad*”.<sup>22</sup>

Resting upon the levels of understanding as proposed by Winkel, the participants’ understandings were only at the level of being able to absorb raw information without being consolidated by the abilities to analyze, take account of contexts, and elaborate further in-depth.<sup>23</sup> Thus, they became so vulnerable to being provoked to fight against their interlocutors who had diverse perspectives. The participants also had not been able to connect a range of graphics and the

<sup>19</sup> Warsah, Avisa, and Anrial.

<sup>20</sup> Warsah, Avisa, and Anrial.

<sup>21</sup> Warsah, Avisa, and Anrial.

<sup>22</sup> Warsah, Avisa, and Anrial.

<sup>23</sup> Winkel, *Psikologi Pengajaran*.

related events. They were also not yet capable of scrutinizing the differences between right and wrong and between main points and supporting ones because of their inability to elaborate the materials in detail. The participants were also unable yet to be wise while communicating with others with diverse perspectives. The discussion ends up with more significant conflicts.

This part of findings, exhibiting a high plausibility of narrow religious understanding due to mere reliance on social media as the means of religious learning, imply that religious teachers or lecturers and the government need to help millennial youth deal with social media-driven religious intolerance. Learning from a previous study, since religions are an aspect of culture,<sup>24</sup> the essence of tolerance can be increased by applying multicultural education.<sup>25</sup> With the system of multicultural education, students will be intervened by the essence of cultural diversity. In such a way, students will increase their awareness of different religious understanding as part of the deep culture. Multicultural education will pave the way for students to increase their intercultural sensitivity<sup>26</sup> and their intercultural competence. Multicultural education will teach students to be mature in selecting, analyzing, and cross-checking religious input as part of the cultural input from social media. Thus, they will learn and acquire religious input from social media, which is credible due to their competencies of sorting the religious input *per se*.

## CONCLUSION

The present study indicates that after learning Islamic materials through social media, Indonesian millennial youth tend to interpret various information regarding *jihad* and religious tolerance using their cognitive sectorial ego. They consume the given raw information using their inability to dig into the contents comprehensively. Hence, they are easily provoked by different information because they cannot accept various teachings from what they have learned from their chosen online sources. The preceding means that millennial youth's understanding of *jihad* and religious tolerance from social media are categorized as low understanding.

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<sup>24</sup> Ronald Wardhaugh, *an Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Blackwell Textbooks in Linguistics, 5th ed. (USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Tracey Yani Harjatanaya and Chang-yau Hoon, "Politics of Multicultural Education in Post-Suharto Indonesia: A Study of the Chinese Minority," *Compare*, 2018, 1–18.

<sup>26</sup> Guo-Ming Chen and William J. Starosta, "The Development and Validation of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale," *Human Communication* 3, no. 1 (2000): 3–14.

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