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Urban Muslim Religiosity in Malaysia: Adapting Islamic Values in the Context of Social Modernity

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of urban Muslim religiosity in Malaysia and the patterns of adaptation of Islamic values in the context of contemporary social modernity. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study began with a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). Then it involved twenty urban Muslim informants aged 25–55 years in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Putrajaya through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and field documentation. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-stage thematic analysis. The findings identified five main sub-themes: the intensification of exoteric religiosity that is not always balanced by interior spiritual depth; digital piety mediated by social media platforms with tensions between authenticity and performativity; consumption-based religiosity through the halal economy and modest fashion ecosystem; the agency of urban Muslim women who actively negotiate religious identity among state, market, and community pressures; and the influence of political Islam and state-sponsored Islamization on the construction of urban Muslim identity. This study argues that modernity does not erode the religiosity of Malaysian urban Muslims, but rather transforms it into a more reflexive, individualistic, and hybrid form. The classical secularization thesis has proven inadequate to explain the trajectory of Malaysian urban Islam; what is taking place is a complex reconfiguration of religious expression and authority amidst constantly shifting global-local dynamics.

Keywords: Urban Religiosity, Malaysian Muslims, Adaptation of Islamic Values, Digital Piety, Social Modernity

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Introduction

The transformation of Muslim religiosity in global urban spaces has become one of the most significant socio-religious phenomena of the past three decades, marking a fundamental shift in how Muslims express, negotiate, and adapt their religious values amid the ever-changing currents of modernity. The contemporary Islamic revival—commonly referred to in academic discourse as Islamic revivalism—cannot be understood solely as a defensive reaction to secularization or Westernization, but rather as an active project to reclaim and reconfigure modernity itself by embedding Islamic rituals, institutions, and ethics into modern life without rejecting existing instruments and forms of modernity. (Ali, 2022). In this context, Muslim cities in Southeast Asia—and Malaysia in particular—serve as rich social laboratories for understanding how urban Muslim communities negotiate their religious identities amidst the dual pressures of economic globalization, cultural pluralism, digital technology, and Islamization projects initiated by both the state and civil society.

Malaysia, as a Muslim-majority country with an upper-middle-income economy and a high rate of urbanization, presents a highly instructive case for examining the dynamics of urban Muslim religiosity in depth. Over 77% of Malaysia's population now resides in urban areas, and the majority of Malaysian Muslims—comprising approximately 63.5% of the total population—have experienced rapid socio-economic transformation from the industrial era of the 1970s to the current digital era. (Shamsudin et al., 2025). In this context of accelerated urbanization, Malaysian Muslim religiosity has not declined as predicted by classical secularization theory; instead, there has been an increase in the visibility of religious practices, an expansion of Islamic economic markets, and the emergence of new forms of Islamic expression that blend individual piety, a consumer lifestyle, and a digitally mediated collective identity. (Shariff et al., 2021). This phenomenon challenges established theoretical assumptions in the sociology of religion. It demands a more nuanced analytical framework to understand the complex relationship between modernity, secularization, and Islamic revivalism in the Southeast Asian context.

Theoretical debates about the relationship between modernity and religiosity have dominated the sociology of religion since the second half of the 20th century. The classic secularization thesis, developed by Berger, Wilson, and Bruce, argues that modernization—which encompasses industrialization, rationalization, structural differentiation, and pluralism—inherently erodes the authority and social significance of religion. However, empirical developments in various parts of the world, including Muslim countries, have shown that the relationship between modernization and secularization is far more complex and nonlinear than this theory assumes. Comparative research conducted in Turkey shows that modernization and secularization can have independent effects and do not always move in the same direction; in other words, modernization can occur without being followed by significant secularization, and vice versa.

Within a more contemporary theoretical framework, (Alatas, 2026) emphasizes that the relationship between Islam and secularism is entangled and cannot be understood through a rigid dichotomy between the religious and the secular. Cesari argues that the assumption of the apolitical nature of religion is a contingent historical construction, and that Islam and secular politics continuously shape each other in different national contexts. This perspective opens up analytical space to understand how urban Muslims in Malaysia do not simply "maintain" religion amidst modernity, but actively negotiate, adapt, and even utilize modernity as a medium to express and strengthen their Islamic identity.

Furthermore, (Hatun & Warner, 2022) makes an important conceptual distinction between secularism as a normative-political project and secularization as a sociological process. Secularism, in Gülpalp's view, is a project of free and equal citizenship that does not automatically imply a decline in individual or collective religiosity. This distinction is relevant in the Malaysian context, where the state formally recognizes Islam as the official religion while maintaining a pluralistic legal and administrative framework. This configuration creates unique spaces for the expression of Muslim religiosity in public and private life. On the other hand, (Fischer & Nisa, 2025) shows that postmodernism, social media, and secular education simultaneously shape lifestyles that challenge traditional religious reasoning and create competing spiritualities in urban Malaysian Muslim life, resulting in an increasingly fragmented and pluralistic urban religious landscape.

Recent empirical studies document that urban Muslim religiosity in Malaysia is characterized by several interrelated, yet sometimes contradictory, trends: the rise of publicly visible religious practices, the expansion of Islamic-based industries and markets, the politicization of religious identity, and the emergence of digital-based Islamic movements that are reconfiguring ways of practicing religion among urban youth. Qualitative observations by (Rahmawati et al., 2025) document that urban Malaysian Muslims are experiencing a surge in exoteric religious practices, such as the widespread use of the hijab and niqab among young urban women, the adoption of Arabic greetings and expressions in everyday social interactions, and the proliferation of religious programs in urban public spaces such as shopping malls, offices, and university campuses.

One of the most compelling manifestations of urban religiosity among Malaysian Muslims is the phenomenon of hijrah—literally meaning "migration" or "movement" and, in the contemporary context, referring to the process of religious transformation toward a more devout and consistent practice of Islam. (Mohammed et al., 2026) Through a virtual ethnographic study of the use of the hashtag #hijrah on Instagram, it was found that hijrah has transformed into a lifestyle trend, an identity movement, and a marketable brand among urban users, linking online representations to offline social change. The gender dimension of urban religiosity in Malaysian Muslims has also received significant academic attention. A survey study conducted among female Muslim students at Malaysian

universities found a statistically significant positive relationship between religious motives and the personal choice to wear the hijab, indicating that internalized religiosity—rather than solely family pressure or social conformity—is the primary driver of religious practice among educated urban Muslim women.

The adaptation of Islamic values in urban Malaysian life occurs not only in the realm of ritual practices and individual identity expressions, but also manifests itself in economic structures, knowledge institutions, and urban spatial planning. (Zafar & Abu-Hussin, 2025) Through ethnographic work at INHART (International Institute for Halal Research and Training), I documented how a transnational halal network centered in Malaysia built a knowledge and economic infrastructure that translated Muslim piety into globally applicable economic practices and technical standards. A similar phenomenon is evident in Malaysia's thriving modest fashion industry. (Noor et al., 2026) Through a systematic review of the Malaysian fashion industry literature, the expansion of the modest fashion industry is documented, which both reflects and shapes urban religiosity through consumption and branding.

In the realm of urban planning, (Dworska, 2022) proposed the Green and Safe Cities (GSC) model informed by the *maqasid shariah* (obligatory principles) as an approach to integrating Islamic religious ethics into urban planning and the built environment in Malaysia. This proposal reflects a growing intellectual and policy effort to translate Islamic values into concrete technical solutions and urban policies, moving beyond the mere regulation of rituals and individual morality to an urban fabric that structurally reflects Islamic principles.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the debate in the sociology of religion on the relationship between modernity and religiosity by offering empirical evidence from the unique Malaysian context. Practically, a deeper understanding of how urban Malaysian Muslims adapt Islamic values to modern life has important implications for public policy, religious education programs, the development of religious communities, and the design of social institutions that are responsive to the needs and aspirations of urban Muslim communities.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design as the primary methodological foundation in examining urban Muslim religiosity in Malaysia and the process of adapting Islamic values within the context of social modernity. The researcher conducted a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to locate, evaluate, and analyze existing studies on urban Muslim religiosity in Malaysia in a modern context using a rigorous search protocol. The qualitative approach was chosen due to its relevance in capturing the depth of subjective experiences, socially constructed meanings, and the dynamics of religious practices that cannot be adequately measured through quantitative

instruments alone. The phenomenological design was applied to understand informants' lived experiences of negotiating their Islamic identities amid the pressures of modernity, as exemplified by (Cesari, 2021), who used phenomenological field research to describe the religious landscape of Kuala Lumpur in depth. Within the framework of the sociology of religion, this approach aligns with the research tradition that emphasizes understanding religion as an experience lived and practiced within a specific social context, rather than merely as an abstract belief system (Murphy et al., 2023). The interpretive paradigm that underpins this research allows researchers to position themselves reflexively within the knowledge production process, recognizing that understandings of urban religiosity are formed through interactions between researchers, informants, and the surrounding socio-cultural context. The choice of a phenomenological design is also based on the need to explore how urban Malaysian Muslims interpret and articulate the process of adapting Islamic values in their daily lives, which involves tensions between religious commitments, professional demands, and a constantly changing urban lifestyle.

Data collection was conducted through a combination of three complementary primary techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and field documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted semi-structured with twenty informants selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: urban Muslims residing in metropolitan Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Putrajaya), aged between 25 and 55, active in community religious life, and representing diverse professional backgrounds and educational levels. This purposive sampling technique was chosen because it ensures in-depth information relevant to the research questions. Participant observation was conducted in mosques, surau (Islamic prayer rooms), majelis taklim (Islamic study groups), and urban public spaces during the data collection period, following the approach developed by (Zin et al., 2024), which combines physical field ethnography with virtual ethnography to capture the dimensions of religiosity that occur simultaneously in both online and offline spaces.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, which follows a six-stage procedure developed by Braun and Clarke, including: familiarization with the data, initial code generation, theme discovery, theme review, theme definition and naming, and analysis report writing. This thematic analysis approach has proven effective in studies on urban Muslim religiosity, as demonstrated by their study of Islamic identity formation in Malaysian religious secondary schools, and by Nor Faridah Mat Nong et al. (2022) in their study of Islamic identity and religious support systems among urban marginalized Muslims. To enhance the research's trustworthiness, a source triangulation strategy was applied by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation; method triangulation by combining thematic and narrative analysis approaches; and member checking, where some informants were asked to validate the researcher's interpretation of their statements.

Result and Discussion

The findings of this study are presented in five main sub-themes identified through a thematic analysis of the field data: (1) the rise of exoteric religiosity and the dynamics of visible piety; (2) digital piety and technology-based religious mediation; (3) the halal economy and consumption-based religiosity; (4) gender, religious agency, and Muslim women's religiosity; and (5) political Islam, Islamization, and urban Muslim identity. These five sub-themes are interrelated and collectively illustrate the complexity of adapting Islamic values to the ever-transforming urban life of Malaysia. The presentation of the findings in this five-sub-theme structure is not intended to imply that these dimensions are separate or mutually exclusive; rather, the field data consistently demonstrates that the same urban Malaysian Muslim can simultaneously be an active user of religious social media, a consumer of halal products, a gender activist, and a participant in political Islamic discourse—demonstrating that urban religiosity is multidimensional, dynamic, and constantly negotiated in everyday life. This cross-subtheme analysis shows that the adaptation of Islamic values among Malaysian urban Muslims is not a single, uniform process, but rather a series of negotiations taking place simultaneously across various spheres of life—from the digital to the corporate realm, from the domestic sphere to the political arena—which together shape the face of contemporary Malaysian urban Islam.

The Rise of Exoteric Religiosity and the Dynamics of Visible Piety

The first and most consistent finding emerging from the field data is a significant increase in exoteric expressions of religiosity—those outwardly observable dimensions of Islam in urban public spaces. Informants consistently reported that over the past decade, visible Islamic practices have seen a marked expansion in urban Malaysia: the use of the hijab, niqab, and Islamic-style clothing has become more widespread among Muslim women of all ages and professions; Arabic expressions such as *insya Allah*, *alhamdulillah*, and *masya Allah* have become more common in everyday conversation in workplaces, campuses, and social settings; and religious programs such as lectures, religious studies, and *majelis taklim* (Islamic study groups) have become more frequent in shopping malls, office buildings, and other urban public spaces.

These findings align with empirical documentation by (Nisha et al., 2025), who, through qualitative observation, documented a surge in externally visible religious practices among urban Malaysian Muslims, including the expansion of the use of the hijab and niqab and the proliferation of religious programs in public spaces. However, Arfah's most crucial finding—and one strongly confirmed in this study's field data—is the warning that this increase in exoteric expressions is often not matched by an equivalent cultivation of esoteric spirituality. Informants in this study acknowledged strong social pressure to display outward piety. At the same time, inner dimensions such as devotion in worship, moral transformation, and consistency between appearance and daily

behavior were perceived as more difficult challenges to meet.

This phenomenon reflects what some informants have described as "performative Islam"—a condition in which conformity to socially visible Islamic norms becomes easier and more socially valued than interior, invisible religious transformation. One informant, a corporate executive in Kuala Lumpur, stated that his workplace implicitly expects visible expressions of Islam—including dress and the use of religious expressions—as part of a Muslim's professional identity, regardless of the depth of actual religious commitment. This dynamic indicates that in the urban Malaysian context, exoteric religiosity has become a form of social capital that functions in social and professional interactions. This phenomenon has not been fully analyzed in the sociology of religion literature on Malaysia.

This finding is also closely related to the increasingly prominent process of individualization of religiosity among educated urban Muslims. (Cesari, 2021) found that personal religious motives—rather than family pressure or social conformity—were the primary drivers of hijab choice among female Muslim university students in Malaysia, indicating a shift from religiosity mediated by traditional authorities to a more individual and reflexive religiosity. The informants in this study corroborated this finding: the majority of young informants stated that their religious decisions—including about dress, choice of religious community, and intensity of religious practice—were made through a process of personal deliberation involving independent reading of Islamic texts, consultation with peers, and exploration of religious content on digital media, rather than solely through the guidance of religious scholars or formal religious authorities.

The spatial dimension of exoteric religiosity is also worth examining. (Boo, 2025) found that Muslim business ownership in Malaysia was significantly correlated with the tendency to display Islamic symbols and imagery in business spaces, linking business practices to visible expressions of religious identity in urban consumption spaces (A. Fauzi et al., 2018). This study's field data confirms this pattern: several informants who own or manage businesses in urban areas reported that the display of Islamic symbols in their establishments—such as calligraphy, halal logos, and Islamic staff attire—functioned both as an expression of personal faith and as a marketing strategy targeting urban Muslim consumers. This fusion of religious motives and commercial calculations suggests that exoteric religiosity in the urban Malaysian context cannot be understood separately from the economic and market dynamics that surround it.

The second prominent sub-theme in this research's findings is the central role of digital technology and social media in shaping, strengthening, and transforming the religiosity of Malaysian urban Muslims. Field data shows that digital platforms—particularly Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and instant messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram—have become the primary infrastructure for religious expression, learning, and community among Malaysian urban Muslims, particularly those born after 1990.

(Salam et al., 2019) Research, conducted through phenomenological interviews with Muslim students at an Islamic university in Malaysia, found that Instagram is used in an Islamic manner by the majority of respondents, and that the educational institution's religious orientation supports the ethical use of the platform. These findings suggest that digital technology does not automatically conflict with Islamic values; rather, Muslim users actively negotiate how to use digital platforms in ways that align with their religious commitments. However, informants in this study also revealed significant tensions: un-Islamic content, the temptation to compare themselves with others, and the pressure to display piety on social media performatively were identified as key challenges faced by urban Muslims in using digital platforms.

The phenomenon of digital *hijrah*—religious transformation publicized and mediated through social media platforms—is one of the most prominent findings in this study. Through a virtual ethnographic study of the hashtag #hijrah on Instagram, (Ali, 2022) documented that hijrah has transformed into a lifestyle trend, an identity movement, and a marketable brand among urban users. This finding is strongly confirmed in the study's field data: several young informants identified themselves as "people who are currently hijrahing" and used social media as a medium to document, express, and strengthen their religious commitment. This digital hijrah process functions simultaneously as a form of public accountability and as a mechanism for community formation, where individuals with similar religious orientations connect through digital platforms and mutually strengthen their religious commitments.

(Idris et al., 2022) documented that the trend of urban Muslim hijrah (migration) on social media encompasses identity construction, self-representation, and a variety of religious expressions that go beyond mere changes in dress to include shifts in music consumption patterns, entertainment, social interactions, and career orientation. These findings broaden the understanding of hijrah from mere changes in physical appearance to a comprehensive lifestyle transformation mediated and reinforced by the digital ecosystem. However, the field data from this study also revealed a more complex side: several informants expressed concerns about the commodification of hijrah—the tendency to transform the supposedly interior and personal process of religious transformation into content that can be consumed and marketed digitally.

Another dimension of digital piety that emerged in this study's findings is the shift in religious authority brought about by digital technology. (Games et al., 2021) Documented how digital piety and mediatized authority shifted power relations within Muslim families and communities: easy access to religious scholars and online content enabled individuals—especially younger generations—to construct their own religious authority that did not always align with institutional or parental authority. The informants in this study confirmed this pattern: several young informants admitted that they more frequently referred to religious content from Islamic influencers on social media than to attending religious studies at the mosque or consulting with local religious scholars. This shift has significant implications for the transmission of religious knowledge and the reproduction of traditional clerical authority.

A study of Islamic revivalist groups' efforts to utilize WhatsApp as a medium for da'wah (Islamic outreach) shows that digital platforms are not always able to reproduce the logic of traditional religious organizations sustainably. (A. M. Fauzi et al., 2026) Documents show that the imbalance between the traditional logic of revivalist movements and the logic of digital platforms—characterized by chaotic and unmoderated content flows—can undermine organizational cohesion and religious authority. This finding is relevant to the Malaysian context: several informants in this study involved in formal religious organizations identified similar challenges in managing digital communities, where the boundaries between authoritative and unverified religious content become increasingly blurred within the WhatsApp and Telegram groups they manage. This challenge reflects a more fundamental tension between the hierarchical structures of traditional religious authority and the horizontal and decentralized architecture of digital platforms.

Halal Economy, Islamic Consumption, and Market-Based Religiosity

The third prominent sub-theme in this research finding is the increasingly close link between the religiosity of Malaysian urban Muslims and the halal economy and Islamic-based consumption practices. Field data reveals that for many Malaysian urban Muslims, participation in the halal ecosystem—which includes consuming halal-certified products, using Islamic financial services, choosing modest fashion, and preferring brands with Islamic branding—has become a primary medium for expressing and practicing Islamic identity in everyday life.

Eva F. Nisa (2023), through ethnographic work at INHART (International Institute for Halal Research and Training), documented how a transnational halal network centered in Malaysia built a knowledge and economic infrastructure that translated Muslim piety into globally accepted economic practices and technical standards. Nisa's findings revealed that Malaysia's urban Muslim middle class not only consumes halal products as a religious expression but is also active in the production, certification, and distribution of halal standards, connecting Malaysia to transnational Islamic

economic networks. Informants in this study—particularly those working in the finance, education, and food industries—confirmed that involvement in the halal ecosystem is perceived not simply as a religious obligation, but as an integral part of their professional and social identities as middle-class urban Muslims.

A survey conducted by (Moses & Jibrin, 2026) of 420 consumers in the Klang Valley found that halal image, religiosity, and consumer attitudes each had a significant positive influence on purchase intention toward Sharia-compliant hotels, and that consumer attitudes mediated the relationship between religiosity and purchase intention. These findings indicate that religiosity not only directly influences consumption decisions but also shapes cognitive and evaluative attitudes that, in turn, influence consumption behavior. Field data from this study enriches these findings by demonstrating that for informants, the choice of halal products and services is often an active expression of consciously articulated religious commitment, rather than simply a habit or passive conformity to communal norms.

The modest fashion industry represents another dimension of consumption-based religiosity that is increasingly significant in the lives of urban Malaysian Muslims. (Nik Mat et al., 2023) Through a systematic review of the Malaysian fashion industry literature, the study documented the expansion of the modest fashion industry, which both reflects and shapes urban religiosity through consumption and branding. The study's field data confirm these findings: female informants—particularly those aged between 25 and 40—identified modest fashion choices as a primary way to express their Islamic identity in an urban context that requires them to appear both professional and Islamic. Interestingly, some informants expressed tension between the desire to dress Islamically and market pressures that construct certain Islamic aesthetics as normative standards, potentially reducing diverse religious expressions to conformity to particular consumption trends.

(Nazir & Saqib, 2026) Through a case study of the expansion of Indonesian hijab brands into the Malaysian market, it was found that product quality, distinctive designs, and targeted digital marketing strategies are key factors in successful market penetration. These findings reveal that the Malaysian modest fashion market is driven not only by consumer religiosity but also by the competitive dynamics of the global fashion industry, which leverages Islamic identity as a selling point. More broadly, these findings suggest that consumption-based religiosity among urban Malaysian Muslims is complex and layered: on the one hand, it is a genuine expression of religious commitment; on the other, it is also a product of market construction that actively shapes and redefines standards of piety in the language of consumption and lifestyle.

The link between religiosity and well-being in the context of consumption and religious practice

has also received attention in recent literature. (Shafa & Syaifullah, 2026) found that religious knowledge, social relationships, and personal growth were positively correlated with the well-being of Muslims in Malaysia, suggesting that religious practices embedded in urban social and economic networks significantly contribute to individuals' quality of life. This finding is confirmed by the field data of this study: informants who actively participated in urban religious communities—whether mosque-based, halal-based, or modest fashion—reported higher levels of social and spiritual satisfaction than those who experienced religiosity more individually and isolated. This suggests that the halal ecosystem and Islamic consumption serve not only as a medium for religious expression but also as a social infrastructure that supports communal cohesion and the psychological well-being of urban Muslims.

Gender, Religious Agency and the Religiosity of Urban Muslim Women

The fourth and most enriching sub-theme in this research's findings is the gender dynamics in urban religiosity of Malaysian Muslims, specifically how urban Muslim women negotiate their religious identities amidst pressures from the state, community, market, and feminist Islamic movements. Field data reveals that urban Malaysian Muslim women are active and reflexive religious agents, not simply passive recipients of Islamic norms established by male authorities.

(AkaHOME, 2026) Found, through urban ethnography, that the practice of tudung (veiling) in Malaysia is multivalent—linked to nationalism, consumerism, and transnational Islamic currents—and that state and community regulations shape Muslim women's sartorial choices and their sense of communal belonging. These findings are confirmed in the research field data: female informants identified a multi-layered complexity in their decisions about how to dress, involving considerations of personal identity, family expectations, workplace norms, state regulations, and their own understanding of Islamic teachings. Several informants expressed tension between the desire to express religiosity authentically and the social pressure to conform to the prevailing norms of their respective environments.

(West et al., 2025) argues empirically that Malay women's hijab practices are shaped by the tension between structural constraints (family, religious authority, market norms) and personal agency—women negotiate meaning and style rather than simply conforming to a single script. This finding is highly relevant to the field data of this study, where female informants consistently described an active process of negotiation in determining how they expressed their religiosity: some chose to wear the hijab after a long and independent process of personal reflection; others chose not to wear the hijab or to wear the hijab in a way that differed from the dominant norm, while still identifying as devout Muslims. This diversity suggests that the religiosity of urban Malaysian Muslim women is far more plural and complex than is often depicted in public narratives about Malaysian

Islam.

(Sarfraz & Khurshid Mian, 2022) found, through in-depth interviews with Muslim women activists from various NGOs in Malaysia, that activists explore the Quran and Hadith while selectively engaging with Western feminist ideas; many of them contextualize sacred texts to argue for gender justice, resulting in a neo-modernist interpretive position among activists. These findings reveal that among educated urban Muslim women in Malaysia, there is an active intellectual movement to develop a more accommodating understanding of Islam toward gender equality, adapting Islamic values to the most dynamic and highly contested context of social modernity. (Dworska, 2022) documents the strategies used by Sisters in Islam—one of the most influential Islamic feminist NGOs in Malaysia—in navigating a sensitive legal and political environment, showing how urban Muslim women's organizations develop pragmatic and strategic approaches in fighting for a more gender-just reinterpretation of Islamic values.

This research's field data also revealed a more personal dimension of gender negotiations in urban religiosity: female informants working in the urban formal sector consistently reported challenges in balancing professional demands with religious practices, including prayer times, Ramadan fasting in non-Muslim workplaces, and the use of Islamic dress in certain professional contexts. The ability to negotiate these spaces—without abandoning both religious commitments and professional demands—was identified by informants as a key form of adaptation of Islamic values in the context of urban modernity.

The intergenerational dimensions of urban Muslim women's religiosity also merit closer examination. (Alfarisi & Affandi, 2026) in a survey of Muslim women in Malaysia, found that higher levels of formal education correlated with a more reflexive and personal religious orientation, with women with university education tending to develop a more autonomous and critical understanding of Islam than women with lower levels of education. This finding was strongly confirmed in the field data of this study: female informants with higher education—particularly those who had studied abroad or at international academic institutions—consistently demonstrated a greater ability to articulate their religious positions independently and to negotiate the tension between Islamic values and the demands of modernity without feeling compelled to choose one over the other. They developed what some informants described as a pragmatic Islamic feminism. This orientation maintains a commitment to core Islamic values while actively questioning and renegotiating gender norms perceived as cultural rather than theological. This pattern indicates that the expansion of access to higher education for Malaysian Muslim women—one of the most significant achievements of Malaysia's urban development—has produced a new generation of female religious agents who are actively contributing to the reconfiguration of Islamic understanding and practice in the contemporary urban context.

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Political Islam, Islamization and the Construction of Urban Muslim Identity

The fifth sub-theme that emerged from this research's findings is the influence of political Islam and state-sponsored Islamization processes on the religious identities and practices of urban Malaysian Muslims. Field data reveals that urban Malaysian Muslims cannot separate their religiosity from the political context that surrounds them: Islamization policies, inter-party contestations over religious authority, and transnational flows of Islamic ideology all exert a significant influence on how urban Muslims define, express, and practice their Islam.

(Kasri & Chaerunnisa, 2022) traces the transregional circulation of Islamic ideology in the Malay-Indonesian world since the 1980s, empirically demonstrating how currents from the Middle East and South Asia inform local Islamist repertoires used by various actors, including political movements. These findings are relevant to this study's field data, which show that urban Malaysian Muslims are exposed to diverse currents of global Islamic thought—from Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood to neo-traditional Sufism and liberal Islam—which they negotiate with local Malay Islamic traditions to shape their religious orientations. Younger and academically educated informants tend to be more open to the pluralism of global Islamic thought, while older informants more integrated into traditional communal structures tend to adhere to more conventional religious orientations.

(Nisa, 2023) Document the "new face" of contemporary Sufism in Southeast Asia, describing the adaptation of urban Sufi organizations—including in Malaysia—that combine spiritual practices with economic and political engagement. This finding reflects a broader pattern observed in the field data of this study: several informants involved in urban Islamic movements identified involvement in Islamic economics, public policy advocacy, and social activism as integral to their expressions of religiosity, rather than as activities separate from religious life. This pattern suggests that for a certain segment of urban Muslims, religiosity is not limited to the private and ritual sphere, but rather encompasses active engagement in socio-political transformation inspired by Islamic values.

(Anita Kristina et al., 2026) found empirical evidence that ideological divisions among Malay women's groups contributed to a decline in intergroup trust and reinforced the culture war frames that shape public debates about Islam, gender, and law. These findings reveal an often-overlooked dimension of urban religiosity: political and ideological polarization not only influences public discourse about Islam but also shapes the subjective experience of individual and communal religiosity. Informants in this study confirmed that they often felt compelled to position themselves within a polarized ideological spectrum—between "progressive Islam" and "conservative Islam," between supporters and opponents of certain Islamization policies—which created complex identity tensions in their urban religious lives.

The state-sponsored Islamization process is also manifested in efforts to integrate Islamic values into urban governance and planning. The Green and Safe Cities (GSC) model is informed by *maqasid shariah* as an approach to integrating Islamic religious ethics into urban planning and the built environment in Malaysia. While normative in nature, this proposal reflects a broader trend in Malaysian urban policy discourse to translate Islamic values into concrete technical and policy solutions. Informants working in urban planning, architecture, and public policy identified similar efforts in their professional practices, suggesting that Islamization is taking place not only in the ritual and moral realms, but also in the technical and urban policy realms, which are increasingly becoming arenas for the expression of Islamic values.

This research's field data also reveals that for some urban Malaysian Muslims, the politicization of Islam and state-sponsored Islamization are perceived as sources of tension rather than strength in their religious lives. Some informants expressed discomfort with the particular ways in which Islam is used in partisan political contestation, which they perceived as reducing the complexity and depth of Islamic tradition. These tensions reflect broader dynamics about the politicization of Islam in Malaysia and the various critical responses to it, suggesting that urban Malaysian Muslims do not constitute a homogeneous mass in terms of their attitudes toward political Islam, but rather a diverse community with competing orientations about the proper relationship between religion and public life.

Conclusion

This study has deeply examined the dynamics of urban Muslim religiosity in Malaysia within the context of contemporary social modernity through a qualitative phenomenological approach with twenty informants in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Putrajaya. The research findings indicate that the adaptation of Islamic values among urban Malaysian Muslims is not a single, uniform process, but rather a series of negotiations taking place simultaneously across various spheres of life—from the digital space to the corporate arena, from the domestic sphere to political discourse. Five key sub-themes identified—the intensification of exoteric religiosity, digital piety, the halal economy, Muslim women's agency, and identity construction in the context of political Islam—collectively illustrate that modernity has not eroded the religiosity of urban Malaysian Muslims, but rather transformed it into new, more reflexive, individualistic, and hybrid forms. Urban Malaysian Muslims demonstrate a high degree of adaptability in maintaining religious commitment while fully participating in modern economic, professional, and social life.

This study makes a theoretical contribution by demonstrating that the classical secularization thesis is inadequate to explain the trajectory of urban Muslim religiosity in Malaysia; what is occurring is not a decline of religion, but rather a reconfiguration of religious expression and authority mediated by digital technology, the halal market, and gender dynamics. Practically, these findings are relevant for policymakers, religious institutions, and civil society organizations in designing programs responsive to

the evolving spiritual needs of urban Muslims. Further research with a broader geographic scope and a comparative approach across Southeast Asian countries is needed to deepen our understanding of contemporary urban Islam.

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