DIGITAL DOUBT AND GENDERED MORAL POLICING: SOCIAL MEDIA'S ROLE IN MALAY ATHEIST IDENTITY FORMATION AND ITS THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

The perception of atheism as a Western concept faces new challenges as it emerges more visibly in Malaysia's Malay Muslim-majority society, creating notable socio-cultural impacts. This research examines how online platforms catalyse deconversion, shape atheist worldviews, and reconfigure theological discourse. Using a qualitative case-study design, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with six self-identified Malay atheist millennials recruited through purposive snowball sampling, complemented by document analysis and digital ethnography of social media discourse; pseudonyms, encrypted storage and informed consent were used to safeguard anonymity Participants frequently linked their religious disengagement to family dynamics, social pressures, negative experiences with religious institutions, gendered enforcement and digitally

mediated exposure to sceptical communities and content. Participants articulated their views in ways that demonstrate rational scepticism and support intellectual freedom. In contrast, participants perceive state and religious institutions as focusing on containment rather than engagement, thereby failing to address root causes. Overall, the research offers a novelty in linking Malay-Muslim socio-legal constraints with digital-mediated atheist identity formation and in specifying the ʿaqidah-level implications of "digital doubt" for how certainty, doubt and religious knowledge are justified in contemporary Malaysia.

Keywords: Atheism; Malay communities; Socio-cultural impact; Islamic identity; social media.

Khulasah

Pandangan terhadap ateisme sebagai suatu bentuk pemikiran yang berakar dari Barat menghadapi cabaran baru apabila fenomena ini mula muncul dalam kalangan masyarakat Melayu yang majoritinya beragama Islam di Malaysia. Kajian ini meneliti bagaimana platform dalam talian menjadi pemangkin dekonversi, membentuk dunia pemikiran ateis dan menyusun semula wacana teologi. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, data dikumpul melalui temu bual separa berstruktur ateis Melayu, disokong oleh analisis kandungan dokumen dan pemerhatian terhadap perbincangan dalam media sosial. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa kecenderungan kepada ateisme dipengaruhi oleh latar belakang keluarga, tekanan sosial, kekecewaan terhadap institusi agama, pengalaman peribadi yang traumatik serta pengaruh media digital. Pemikiran ateis Melayu dipengaruhi rasionalisme, penolakan terhadap autoriti agama, serta penekanan terhadap kebebasan intelektual dan keadilan gender. Walau bagaimanapun, respons masyarakat dan institusi bersifat defensif dan lebih menekankan kawalan serta pencegahan, bukannya pendekatan dialogis atau inklusif. Kajian ini

menyumbang kepada pandangan baharu mengenai ateisme dalam konteks bukan Barat, serta mencadangkan perubahan dalam pendidikan dan dasar awam untuk menangani isu ini secara lebih holistik dan konstruktif.

Kata kunci: Ateisme; Masyarakat Melayu; Identiti Islam; Kesan sosio-budaya; Media sosial.

Introduction

Religion stands as a fundamental component of Malaysia's national consciousness and serves to shape individual identity while simultaneously guiding legal frameworks, cultural norms, and social systems. The Malaysian nation, distinguished by its religious and ethnic diversity, has worked for years to manage the relationship between its multi-faith population and Islam as the state religion for the Malay majority.[1] Notably, the strong position of Islam in society stems from constitutional mandates and a societal worldview that binds Malay identity with Muslim religious practice.[2] The societal dynamic extends beyond rituals and festivals to influence education systems, legal structures, and daily social behaviours.[3] Although the Federal Constitution ensures religious freedom, its practical application usually confines this freedom to the existing Islamic paradigm. Consequently, this creates a complex

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[1] Mohd Haidhar Kamarzaman et al., "Religious Practices among Malaysias Diverse Society," *International Journal of Advanced Research* 12(1) (2024), 680-686, https://doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/18170.

[2] Ng Jia Ying, Siti Aishah Hassan, and Dzilal Abdul Aziz, "A Counselor's Cultural Identity: Implications from a Multicultural Counseling Perspective in Malaysia," *Asian Social Science* 17(11) (2021), 18, https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v17n11p18.

[3] Solihah Yahya Zikri et al., "Islam in the Malay History and Culture: Its Impacts on the Malay Culture, Language & Literature," *International Journal of Modern Education* 5(17) (2023), 244-256, https://doi.org/10.35631/IJMOE.517020.

balancing act between government policies and individual and communal religious needs.[4]

The last few years have seen growing discussions about religious identity and expression among Malaysians, driven by globalisation, technological advances, and shifts in generational outlooks.[5] This study approaches these developments through an identity-formation lens, informed by digital religion studies and the sociology of belief, in which identity is understood as constructed, narrated, and negotiated within specific social environments, including online publics. Accordingly, atheist identity in this study refers to an emergent and negotiated social identity, expressed through self-labelling, boundary-making and community affiliation/disaffiliation, rather than a fixed worldview or a permanent endpoint. Deconversion is understood as a process of religious disengagement that may involve cognitive doubt, moral conflict, emotional rupture and institutional distrust and may culminate in nonbelief, agnosticism, or nonpractice.[6] Building on these definitions, the paper uses the term digital doubt to describe how platform affordances (for example, anonymity, virality, algorithmic curation and peer reinforcement) mediate the circulation of sceptical narratives and provide interpretive resources that normalise questioning and sustain disengagement.

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[4] Syaza Shukri, "Islamist Civilizationism in Malaysia," *Religions* 14(2) (2023), 209, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020209.

[5] Setiyawan Gunardi, Mualimin Mochammad Sahid, and Nur Mohammad Hadi Zahalan, "Konsep Harmoni yang Dinamik dalam Kehidupan Beragama di Malaysia Melalui Pendekatan Maqasid Syariah," *'Abqari Journal* 23(2) (2020), 157-177, https://doi.org/10.33102/abqari.vol23no2.358.

[6] Lorans Hassan Al Zuabi et. al, " :ظاهرة تغيير الديانة في الأرخبيل الماليزي الخبرات النفسية والاجتماعية: The Phenomenon of Changing Religion in Malaysian Peninsula: The Socio-Psychological Experiences," *Malaysian Journal of Syariah and Law* 7(2) (2019), 79-90. https://doi.org/10.33102/mjsl.v7i2.175.

These dynamics intersect directly with Islamic theological discourse, including the concept of *fitrah*, the innate disposition toward truth and faith, commonly anchored in the Qur'anic verse:

> "So set your face toward the religion, inclining to truth— the innate nature (*fitrah*) upon which Allah has created [all] people".[7]

This verse indicates that digital platforms significantly influence Malay users by immersing Malay millennials in alternative online epistemic communities and algorithmically curated content (e.g., scientific cosmologies, secular moral philosophies, deconversion narratives). Furthermore, this exposure prompts an empirical reassessment of *fitrah* and fosters the emergence of a secular-rational identity, a process further enabled by the anonymity of digital forums, which permits unfettered critique of culturally conditioned predispositions.[8]

Note that digital platforms enable novel access to secular and atheistic discussions, circumventing traditional religious authorities.[9] Recent developments in Malaysia have revealed the emergence of an atheist movement within its Malay Muslim-majority population, catalysed mainly by social media platforms that assemble groups such as Warung Atheist and Atheist Republic Kuala Lumpur.[10]

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[7] The Qur'an, Surah al-Rum 30:30.

[8] Syed Imad Alatas, "Malaysian Muslimah Activists' Modes of Thought: Rereading Islamic and Alternative Sources of Knowledge," *Kajian Malaysia* 41(1) (2023), 133-152, https://doi.org/10.21315/km2023.41.1.7.

[9] Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin and Nadhrah Azrun, "Digital Media and Religious Sentiments in Malaysia: Critical Discourse Analysis of Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party and Democratic Action Party Cyberspace Campaigns in the 15th General Election," *Religions* 15(8) (2024), 920, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15080920.

[10] Hashim Ahmad, "Ateisme di Malaysia: Suatu Analisis Terhadap Penghujahan" (Master's thesis, Universiti Sultan Azlan Shah, 2019), 12-13.

Although the phenomenon remains confined to a small cohort, it has prompted urgent inquiries into the factors precipitating religious disengagement and its ramifications for Malay socio-cultural norms. Ashaari and Sabri's qualitative analysis of the Warung Atheist Facebook community demonstrates that Malay founders deploy rational critiques of theism to contest core Islamic doctrines, often resulting in familial and communal tensions.[11] In addition, high-profile commentary by then-Deputy Minister Dr. Asyraf Wajdi in 2017 highlighted the active online engagement of Malay atheists, prompting regulatory interventions by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission. [12] In turn, the Federal Territory Mufti's Office instituted a dedicated unit to monitor and counsel apostates toward reaffirmation of Islamic belief.[13]

Nevertheless, between 2014 and 2016, a total of 171 formal apostasy applications were recorded. Afifah's 2021 survey data indicated a consistent annual increase in the proportion of Malay individuals rejecting theism, suggesting that existing containment measures have been insufficient. [14] Moreover, Faizuddin and colleagues

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[11] Muhamad Faisal Ashaari and Siti Hanisah Sabri, "Perbincangan Berkaitan Agama dan Ketuhanan dalam Facebook 'Warung Atheist' dari Perspektif Logik dan Emosi," *Abqari Journal: Journal of Islamic Social Sciences and Humanities* 18(1) (2018): 65-79, https://doi.org/10.33102/abqari.vol15no1.28.

[12] Amin Ridzuan Ishak, "Siasat Gerakan Ateis dalam Kalangan Orang Islam," *Berita Harian Online*, August 6, 2017, https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2017/08/309408/siasat-gerakan-ateis-dalam-kalangan-orang-islam.

[13] Azeana Wati Mat Isa, "Ateis Melayu Makin Ramai," *Utusan Malaysia*, July 21, 2018, https://www.utusan.com.my/nasional/2018/07/ateis-melayu-makin-ramai/.

[14] Nur Afifah Abdul Razak, "The Daʿwah Methods Used by Selected Islamic Organisations in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur Countering

cautioned that the sustained growth of atheist discourse poses potential socio-political tensions in Malaysia, where Islam is constitutionally enshrined as the state religion and deeply intertwined with national identity.[15] In essence, the expansion of belief landscapes now connects Malay youth and urban populations with alternative worldviews, creating new societal.

Concurrently, online spaces enable people to research diverse beliefs and address their doubts, as anonymity and greater information availability remove the offline constraints that would otherwise suppress such inquiries.[16] This study's discussion of theological implications specifically concerns *'aqidah* (Islamic creed), focusing on how digital doubt influences the balance between yaqin (certainty) and *shakk* (doubt) in personal belief paths. It also considers the standards of epistemic justification applied to faith, especially the relative importance of *waḥy/naql* (revelation and transmitted authority) versus *'aql* (reason) and empirical evidence. Additionally, it examines how core doctrines, such as *tawhid,* the authority of prophethood and revelation, and belief in *al-ghayb* (the unseen), are affirmed or challenged.

Literature Review

Atheism scholarship traces its origins to ancient Greek naturalism, where philosophers such as Democritus and Epicurus proposed explanations of the universe without the supernatural, a tradition further developed in the Enlightenment era by notable figures. This is supported by

Atheism" (Master's thesis, International Islamic University Malaysia, 2021), 40-41.

[15] Ahmad F. Ramli et al., "Understanding the Atheism Phenomenon through the Lived Experiences of Muslims: An Overview of Malaysian Atheists," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 78(1) (2022), 1-8, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7640.

[16] Silvia Baldassarre, "Cyberterrorism and Religious Fundamentalism: New Challenges for Europe in the Age of Universal Internet Access," *Religions* 14(4) (2023), 458, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040458.

Hume and Kant, who prioritized empirical reason in the verification of belief and knowledge.[17] It is this intellectual tradition that informs early twenty-first-century criticisms of New Atheism, championed by Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens, which combine scientific skepticism with secular humanism. Nonetheless, others contend that such polemics overlook the communal and cultural roles of religions.[18] The sociological theory of secularization, exemplified by Berger's model of differentiation, pluralization, and individualization, accounts for the decline in Western institutional religiosity.

However, empirical work demonstrates that strong filial or individualized spirituality persists, with secular trajectories that vary inconsistently across contexts.[19] Among Islamic thinkers, al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah defended theism by insisting that reason (*'aql*) parallels revelation (*wahy*) and that *fitrah* has the disposition to incline the human being toward God, in corrective

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[17] Syed Hamid Farooq Bukhari, Muhammad Abid, and Salman Arif, "Atheism in the Muslim World: Classical Approach through Medieval Islamic Intellectual and Philosophical Traditions," *Journal of Religious and Social Studies* 3(2) (2024), 95-114, https://doi.org/10.53583/jrss06.06.2023.

[18] Muhammad Ghifari, "Islamization of Knowledge Base Education in Islamic Boarding School to Face the Challenges of Western Civilization in 21st Century," *Progresiva : Jurnal Pemikiran Dan Pendidikan Islam* 10(1) (2021), 51-61, https://doi.org/10.22219/progresiva.v10i1.17960; Umi Afifah, "Rationalism in Philosophical Studies," *Journal of Innovation in Teaching and Instructional Media* 4(1) (2023), 47-58, https://doi.org/10.52690/jitim.v4i1.730; Joseph O. Baker and Buster G. Smith, "Atheist Stigma in Religious Societies: An International Perspective," *Social Compass* 69(2) (2022): 267-285.

[19] Jorge Botelho Moniz, "Secularization in Europe: Causes, Consequences, and Cultural Diversity," *Religions* 14(3) (2023): 423, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030423; Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967).

counterbalance to pure rationalism.[20] Since the Malaysian Constitution defines Malays as Muslims, rejecting Islam is perceived as both a spiritual and ethnic transgression.[21] Accordingly, this legal-religious construct reinforces social pressures against apostasy and disbelief. Malay atheists face unique challenges as they navigate religious expectations in public while harboring private non-belief, a phenomenon termed "dual identity navigation."[22]

Religious rituals are often performed publicly to avoid family and societal ostracism, while internal doubts remain hidden.[23] Notably, apostasy laws in many Malaysian states compound these difficulties, criminalising public declarations of atheism and subjecting individuals to potential legal consequences.[24] In line with this, digital platforms have emerged as key spaces for Malay atheists to express their views and build support networks. Through platforms like Facebook and Reddit, they can interact anonymously, share experiences, and access global secular

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[20] İbrahim Halil Erdoğan and Sema Eryücel, "The Concept of Divine Revelation According to Ibn Sînâ and al-Ghazālī: A Comparative Analysis," *Religions* 15(11) (2024), 1383, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15111383; Husein Aziz, "Epistemology of the Integration of Religion and Science Qur'anic Perspective," *Tribakti: Jurnal Pemikiran Keislaman* 33(2) (2022), 239-264, https://doi.org/10.33367/tribakti.v33i2.2833.

[21] Zanariah Noor and Nazirah Lee, "Preserving Child's Faith in Malaysian Law: A Maqasidic Approach," *Ulumuna* 27(1) (2023): 1-32, https://doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v27i1.606.

[22] Ahmad F. Ramli et al., "Understanding the Atheism Phenomenon through the Lived Experiences of Muslims," 1-8.

[23] Timo Duile and Prince Kennex Aldama, "Seeing through the Lens of Atheism: Plural Societies, Religion, and Harmony Ideology in Southeast Asia," *Secularism and Nonreligion* 13 (2024), 1-11, https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.173.

[24] Nazihah Rusli and Firdaus Khairi Abdul Kadir, "The Challenges Encountered by Mualaf after Conversion to Islam: A Study on the Apostasy (Murtad) Cases in Malaysia," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 12(8) (2022): 538-544, https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i8/14050.

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communities.[25] Research asserted that urban and younger
Malays are more likely to engage with these platforms and
exhibit scepticism toward traditional religious authorities.[26]
Meanwhile, current research on digital religion emphasised
communal action and pluralisation procedures. However, it
refrains from applying Berger's framework of
differentiation-pluralisation-individualisation to classical
Islamic concepts (*fitrah*, *'aql–wahy*) to account for how
peer-sanctioned deconversion narratives and
algorithmically curated contents transform an innate
disposition toward the divine into a secular-rational
category.[27]

Such research fails to explore in detail the mechanisms
by which digital interaction converts a theologically
informed disposition into a culturally disputed mode of
cognition among Malay millennials. The paper's novelty
lies in linking Malay-Muslim socio-legal constraints to
digital-mediated atheist identity formation and in
specifying the *'aqidah* implications of "digital doubt" for
the justification of certainty, doubt and religious knowledge
in contemporary Malaysia.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, instrumental case study
approach to examine how digital environments mediate
deconversion trajectories and the formation of atheist
identity among Malays in Malaysia. In this research, the

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[25] Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin and Nadhrah Azrun, "Digital Media and
Religious Sentiments in Malaysia." 920.

[26] Jen Sern Tham and Kay Chern Wong, "Exploring the Link between
Facebook Intensity and Online Political Participation: A Study on
Malaysian Youth," *International Journal of Academic Research in
Business and Social Sciences* 13(6) (2023), 1180-1197,
https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i6/17273.

[27] Shoaib Ul Haq and Ray Yiu Keung Kwok, "Encountering 'the Other'
in Religious Social Media: A Cross-Cultural Analysis," *Social Media
+ Society* 10(4) (2024), 1-16,
https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241303363.

"case" is delimited as digital-mediated atheism among self-identified Malay atheist millennials, analysed through participants narrated religious journeys and the online discursive settings in which doubt and non-belief are explored. The case is socially bound by the Malay-Muslim context, in which Malay identity is normatively tied to Islam. Secondly, demographically, among participants aged 23–35, and digitally, through the online platforms and communities where participants encounter, discuss, or circulate atheist narratives. This method allows for a deep, contextualised understanding of complex and sensitive social phenomena.[28] It is especially suited to marginalised or hidden populations, such as atheists in a Muslim-majority society, where confidentiality and ethical sensitivity are paramount.[29]

This study employed purposive snowball sampling to recruit six self-identified Malay atheist millennials. In particular, a sample size of n = 6 was justified based on thematic saturation.[30] Correspondingly, interviews continued until no new themes emerged from successive transcripts, indicating that additional data would likely yield diminishing returns in analytic depth.

Participants were initially identified through community contacts and subsequently referred peers who

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[28] Syamsul Kurniawan and Muhammad Miftah, "Malay Culture-Based Character Education Model for Elementary School-Aged Children in Urban Malay-Muslim Family in Pontianak," *Elementary: Islamic Teacher Journal* 9(1) (2021), 15, https://doi.org/10.21043/elementary.v9i1.9997.

[29] Nur Amali Aminnuddin, "The Religious Struggle Framework: Religious Experience from Struggle to Transformation," *Islamic Guidance and Counseling Journal* 5(1) (2022), 15-29, https://doi.org/10.25217/igcj.v5i1.2099.

[30] Muhammad Naeem, Wilson Ozuem, Kerry Howell, and Silvia Ranfagni, "Demystification and Actualisation of Data Saturation in Qualitative Research Through Thematic Analysis," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 23 (2024), 1-17, https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241229777.

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met the inclusion criteria (Malay ethnicity, aged 23 to 35,
self-reported atheism, active social-media engagement).
Concurrently, interviews were conducted in either Malay or
English, according to participant preference, and all
recordings were securely stored on encrypted drives.[31] Note
that data collection primarily involved semi-structured
interviews, either face-to-face or via secure digital
platforms. Specifically, interview protocols began with
background inquiries and gradually addressed participants'
religious journeys, experiences with institutions, and
identity negotiation strategies.[32]

Anonymity was ensured by using pseudonyms and
encrypting transcripts. Supplementary data were collected
through digital ethnography, including analyses of online
forums, social media pages, and discussions among Malay
atheists. This allowed triangulation of personal narratives
with broader discursive patterns visible in digital spaces.[33]
Subsequently, thematic analysis was conducted using a
combination of inductive and deductive coding. The
research team iteratively reviewed the data to identify core
themes, including institutional response, personal freedom,
and philosophical reasoning. Techniques such as member
checking, reflexive journaling, and negative case analysis
were employed to enhance validity.[34] Snowball sampling

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[31] Stephanie DeVane-Johnson et al., "A Qualitative Study of Social,
Cultural, and Historical Influences on African American Women's
Infant-Feeding Practices," *The Journal of Perinatal Education* 27(2)
(2018): 71-85, https://doi.org/10.1891/1058-1243.27.2.71.

[32] Clyde Anieldath Missier, "A Qualitative Study of Digital Religious
Influence: Perspectives from Christian, Hindu, and Muslim Gen Y and
Gen Z in Mumbai, India," *Religions* 16(1) (2025), 73,
https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16010073.

[33] Achmad Muhibbin Zuhri and Jauharoti Alfin, "Online-Offline in
Religion; Observing Islamic Learning Patterns in Online Media,"
Tribakti: Jurnal Pemikiran Keislaman 33(2) (2022), 223-238,
https://doi.org/10.33367/tribakti.v33i2.2720.

[34] Jennifer Fereday and Eimear Muir-Cochrane, "Demonstrating Rigor
Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and

may introduce sampling bias, including an increased likelihood of overrepresenting participants who are more digitally connected or more willing to disclose nonbelief. To mitigate these limitations, the study prioritised triangulation across interviews and digital ethnography and maintained reflexive practices to monitor researcher assumptions during interpretation.

All participants provided informed consent, were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time, and the study prioritised participant well-being and cultural respect throughout data collection and reporting, given the sensitivity of researching atheism in Malaysia. Additionally, all participants provided informed consent. They were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Given the sensitivity of atheism in Malaysia, the research prioritised participants' well-being and cultural respect throughout data collection and reporting.[35]

In addition to interviews, this study analysed documents to identify recurring factors associated with atheism and religious disengagement. These factors were interpreted through the lens of Islamic ʿaqidah discourse, emphasising how participants' critiques and narratives address, *yaqīn–shakk* (certainty or doubt), epistemic justification in belief (*waḥy/naql* and scholarly authority versus ʿaql and empirical reasoning), and challenges to core doctrines, especially tauhid, prophethood, revelation, and belief in *al-ghayb*. This method highlights the study's theological contribution by connecting these "factors" to core debates in the creed.

Deductive Coding and Theme Development," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5(1) (2006), 80-92, https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500107.

[35] Timo Duile and Prince Kennex Aldama, "Seeing through the Lens of Atheism," 1-11.

Discussion and Findings

This section explores the development of atheist beliefs among Malay populations and assesses their effects on Malaysia's religious and social structures. Accordingly, the data draws from interview narratives and digital ethnographic observations to provide grounded insights.

Respondents' Demographic Profile

This research used Table 1 to present demographic information about each of the six Malay atheist participants. The study's participants were selected through snowball sampling, which ensured representation from diverse regions and socio-educational backgrounds, providing comprehensive insights into Malaysian atheism.

Table 1. Respondent Demographics and Backgrounds

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Place of Birth	Current Residence	Occupation	Highest Education
1	Farhan	32	Male	Selangor	Kuala Lumpur	Software Engineer	Bachelor's Degree
2	Aina	28	Female	Selangor	Shah Alam	Marketing Manager	Master's Degree
3	Amirul	35	Male	Penang	Penang	Lecturer	PhD (in progress)
4	Siti	30	Female	Negeri Sembilan	Seremban	Civil Servant	Bachelor's Degree
5	Hafiz	26	Male	Selangor	Subang Jaya	Graphic Designer	Diploma
6	Dayang	33	Female	Sarawak	Kuching	NGO Coordinator	Master's Degree

The table outlines those participants consist of young adults with balanced gender representation and work in various occupations. The survey participants include fifty percent from Selangor, which is Malaysia's most developed and urban state, and the remaining half come from Penang, Negeri Sembilan, and Sarawak. Consequently, the study revealed that atheistic views are prevalent throughout

Malaysia, including East Malaysia, and not just in major cities.[36] The educational spectrum among respondents from diplomas up to doctoral studies indicates that atheism transcends socioeconomic boundaries, reaching both highly educated and professionally varied Malaysians.

Urbanization, access to higher education, and exposure to pluralistic worldviews were cited as core drivers of belief transformation.[37] Farhan, for example, referenced cosmopolitan networks and secular thought exposure in his career as shaping his identity. In contrast, Siti and Dayang emphasized community norms and familial expectations in shaping a dual-identity approach to religious practice.[38]

The study's inclusion of participants from both Peninsular and East Malaysia, along with diverse professional and educational backgrounds, demonstrates the complex and multifaceted nature of atheism among Malays. Educational influence also played a significant role, as respondents with backgrounds in philosophy, science, and humanities expressed a stronger inclination toward empirical reasoning and skepticism of religious authority.[39]

Respondent data asserted regional differences, and educational backgrounds highlighted vital elements shaping the development of atheistic beliefs. Researchers frequently identify urbanisation, along with higher

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[36] Dorcas Yarn Pooi Lam et al., "Religiosity and the Perception of Interreligious Threats: The Suppressing Effect of Negative Emotions towards God," *Religions* 14(3) (2023), 366, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030366.

[37] Mohd Haidhar Kamarzaman et al., "Religious Practices among Malaysias Diverse Society," 680-686.

[38] Farah Hasan, "Muslim Instagram: Eternal Youthfulness and Cultivating Deen," *Religions* 13(7) (2022), 658, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070658.

[39] Norsaleha Mohd Salleh et al., "The Unbelief Thinking among Muslim Youth in Malaysia," *American Journal of Applied Sciences* 13(2) (2016), 163-170, https://doi.org/10.3844/ajassp.2016.163.170.

education access and pluralistic environments, as the main drivers for critical analysis and religious dogma questioning. [40] Note that participants from Selangor and Kuala Lumpur reported that cosmopolitan environments allowed them to connect with multiple viewpoints and worldwide beliefs. This aligns with recent research on urban secularisation and identity shifts in Southeast Asia.[41] The multicultural work environment and digital international networks that Farhan experienced as a Kuala Lumpur software engineer led him to question rigid religious beliefs and embrace secular humanist principles.

Participants from rural regions, such as Siti from Negeri Sembilan and Dayang from Sarawak, focused on the conflict between societal communal norms and individual belief systems. Siti acknowledged she maintains religious rituals to prevent being shunned by her family and community, but explained her personal belief system changed following adverse experiences with religious leaders and scientific education. The evidence presented that religious minorities and apostates in Malaysia navigate dual identities.[42] Through her work in an Non-governmental organization in Kuching, Dayang demonstrated how community service and interactions with diverse faiths can transform people's beliefs, proving atheistic identities can develop in conservative religious areas under specific

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[40] Sergio Pérez and Frédérique Vallières, "How Do Religious People Become Atheists? Applying a Grounded Theory Approach to Propose a Model of Deconversion," *Secularism and Nonreligion* 8 (2019): 3, https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.108.

[41] Nazihah Rusli and Firdaus Khairi Abdul Kadir, "The Challenges Encountered by Mualaf after Conversion to Islam," 538-544.

[42] Azlan Shah Nabees Khan and Mohd Al Adib Samuri, "Unilateral Conversion of Minors to Islam: Legal Discourse and Muslim Converts' Narrative on Custody and Religious Rights in Malaysia," *Kajian Malaysia* 40(1) (2022), 59-81, https://doi.org/10.21315/km2022.40.1.4.

conditions.[43] In other words, participants' current beliefs were significantly shaped by their family background and childhood religious experiences according to interview narratives. Meanwhile, Aina from Shah Alam explained how her religious practices became rituals without deep personal belief, which eventually caused her to question and become disillusioned during her adult years.

Participants such as Hafiz reported experiencing harsh religious teachings that led them to slowly abandon their religious beliefs. Recent research has confirmed early studies indicating that religious teaching in Malay families is diminishing due to the influences of modernization, family conflicts, and parental ambivalence.[44] Furthermore, the research data demonstrates that regional and educational factors, along with family dynamics, play a role in shaping beliefs. The most significant drivers toward atheism in Malaysia are personal autonomy experiences, trauma encounters, and exposure to alternative philosophical ideas.[45]

Factors Contributing to Atheism

The comparisons below are shown as contrasts between different ways of knowing, not as moral judgments. They aim to clarify how participants' stories of doubt and non-belief reveal specific epistemic perspectives and how these perspectives differ from typical Islamic ʿaqidah discussions. The goal is not to judge the positions morally but to explain how related concepts are invoked and

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[43] Ahmad F. Ramli et al., "Understanding the Atheism Phenomenon through the Lived Experiences of Muslims," 1-8.

[44] Nur Amali Aminnuddin, "The Religious Struggle Framework: Religious Experience from Struggle to Transformation," *Islamic Guidance and Counseling Journal* 5(1) (2022), 15-29, https://doi.org/10.25217/igcj.v5i1.2099.

[45] Charles Ganaprakasam et al., "Reason to Believe: Religiosity, Resilience, and Self-Efficacy among Malaysian Indian Adolescent," *Muallim Journal of Social Science and Humanities* 4(4) (2020), 17-30, https://doi.org/10.33306/mjssh/93.

reinterpreted in participants' stories. Accordingly, the combination of triangulated interview data with digital discourse analysis provides a detailed view of their interaction within Malaysia's distinctive socio-religious environment. Table 2 summarises the core factors reported by each study participant.

Table 2. Factors Contributing to Atheism – Respondent Insights

Pseudonym	Key Factor	Summary of Factor	Direct Respondent Insight
Farhan	Familial Influences	Growing up with an inconsistent religious background and lack of meaningful engagement	"During my childhood years, I experienced religion as a duty instead of something that held true significance."
Aina	Social Media Exposure	Exposure to global secular and atheistic narratives through online social networks	"On Facebook, I connected with people who shared my thoughts, which gave me a sense of liberation."
Amirul	Disillusionment with Institutions	Frustration with rigid and controlling religious authorities	"The mosque functioned as a place that maintained control over us rather than providing guidance."
Siti	Gendered Enforcement and Feminist Readings of Religious Control in Malaysia	Punitive responses to doubt and questioning that discourage exploration	"Being punished when I asked questions pushed me towards further isolation."

Pseudonym	Key Factor	Summary of Factor	Direct Respondent Insight
Hafiz	Critical Intellectual Engagement	Engagement with philosophical and scientific knowledge leading to re-evaluation of prior beliefs	"After I began studying philosophy, I began to challenge everything I had learned before."
Dayang	Familial Influences	Religious enforcement by family members creating conflict with personal autonomy	"I experienced religious pressure from my family because religion did not resonate with me on a personal level."

Familial Influences

Familial influences create the foundational context where individuals begin to form or detach from their religious identities. Respondents, including Farhan and Dayang, observed that their family's religious practices functioned more as routine tasks or obligations rather than activities with emotional significance or room for critical examination. Consistent with this, recent studies demonstrate that diminished religious transmission is mainly caused by modernisation or family conflicts. This results in a decrease in religious attachment and increased acceptance of secular views.[46]

Prioritising ritual at home over meaningful conversation can lead to scepticism among young people who experience different viewpoints in their external environments.

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[46] Joshua Conrad Jackson et al., "Exposure to Automation Explains Religious Declines," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 120(34) (2023), e2304748120, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2304748120.

From the Islamic standpoint, the Prophet Muḥammad's ḥadīth, as recorded in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim no. 6926, asserted that every child is born upon the *fitrah*, or primordial disposition, and that it is the family through its educational practices that ultimately shapes the child's moral and intellectual trajectory. In the discourse of critical thinking (*fikr naqḍī*), this ḥadīth highlights the formative power of early upbringing. When parents nurture virtues and cultivate sound reasoning, their children develop a discerning, ethically grounded mindset.

Conversely, exposure to error or vice predisposes them toward flawed judgment. Thus, within the Islamic framework, truly critical thought extends beyond the isolated exercise of the ʿaql upon sensory data. It involves a holistic process in which sound familial instruction and Quranic guidance jointly anchor the mind in both moral rectitude and epistemic integrity. While the family plays a central role in shaping a child's ability to think critically and morally, it is also anchored in spiritual guidance, especially from the Quran. In the context of modernisation and family conflict, enforcing religious practices on children at an early age without proper guidance can hinder their understanding and sincere practice of Islam.

Disillusionment with Institutions

The growing disenchantment with religious institutions also became a key factor influencing this trend. For example, Amirul's experience of the mosque functioning as a controlling entity stands as a representative of wider criticisms facing institutional religion throughout Malaysia. In addition, recent studies have demonstrated that strict religious organizations often drive individuals away as they seek more compassionate and personalized spiritual

experiences.[47] According to Rosli,[48] various initiatives have been undertaken by religious institutions to safeguard the faith of Muslims in Malaysia, including the provision of counseling programs and religious study classes for the Muslim community. Nevertheless, there remains a segment of the Muslim population who continue to adhere to views that deviate from true Islamic teachings. For instance, Rosli's analysis demonstrates that religious institutions offer a range of solutions to help them return to the authentic Islamic creed.

Social Media Exposure

Social media exposure emerged as a recurring context in which participants encountered alternative worldviews and supportive peer publics. For several respondents, online spaces provided access to secular arguments, deconversion narratives and communities that normalised questioning while reducing the social costs of expressing doubt. In participants' accounts, credibility was often tied to empirical verification, internal coherence, and personal autonomy, with peer affirmation functioning as a form of validation.[49]

This epistemic orientation can be contrasted descriptively with Islamic ʿaqidah discourse, where verification and critical scrutiny are also emphasised, but typically within a moral and communal framework that links knowledge-seeking to ethical restraint and accountability. For example, Qur'anic guidance on verifying information is commonly interpreted as

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[47] Nazihah Rusli and Firdaus Khairi Abdul Kadir, "The Challenges Encountered by Mualaf after Conversion to Islam," 538-544.

[48] Fahmy A Rosli, "Murtad: JAKIM beri Tumpuan Usaha Perkukuhkan Akidah, Pegangan Umat Islam," *Berita Harian Online*, March 23, 2023,
https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2023/03/1080665/murtad-jakim-beri-tumpuan-usaha-perkukuhkan-akidah-pegangan-umat.

[49] Shoaib Ul Haq and Ray Yiu Keung Kwok, "Encountering 'the Other' in Religious Social Media: A Cross-Cultural Analysis," 1-16.

embedding epistemic care within justice and responsibility. In the discourse observed in atheist-leaning forums, verification was more frequently framed as a general norm of scepticism directed toward contested claims, including religious ones. This contrast helps explain how similar practices, for example, "checking" and "questioning", may be grounded in different justificatory horizons.[50]

The process facilitates the normalisation of atheistic thinking while simultaneously encouraging individuals to express their beliefs even when they remain anonymous. This normalisation impulse closely mirrors the Quranic injunction:

> "O you who believe! If a scandal or news comes to you… verify it, lest you harm a people in ignorance."[51]

Both the Quran and atheist forums uphold critical scrutiny to guard against misinformation. Notably, the Quranic injunction embeds verification within a moral framework of restraint, justice, and communal harmony.[52] Conversely, atheist groups often pursue epistemic vigilance often to challenge religious claims, overlooking the ethical virtues that scripture associates with the quest for knowledge.[53]

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[50] Umair Munir Hashmi, Radzuwan Ab Rashid, and Rabia Munir, "On the Psychology of Argument: A Structural Analysis of Former Muslims' Postings within Malaysian Social Media," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021), 740558, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.740558.

[51] The Qur'an, Surah al-Hujurat 49:6.

[52] Shoaib Ahmed Malik, "Science as Divine Signs: Al-Sanūsī's Framework of Legal (Sharʿī), Nomic (ʿādī), and Rational (ʿaqlī) Judgements," *Religions* 16(5) (2025), 549, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16050549.

[53] Nur A. Febriani, "Adult Religious Morality Development from the Quranic Perspective: Strategies to Overcome Islamophobia and Christianophobia," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 78(4) (2022), 7398, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i4.7398.

Gendered Enforcement and Feminist Readings of Religious Control in Malaysia

Siti's personal history featured traumatic events with religious authorities, which became significant when she described punishments for her doubts. Malaysian feminist and women's rights advocacy, particularly Islamic feminist–oriented groups, offer a supportive interpretive frame for this experience by arguing that state-backed "moral governance" can slide into gendered social control, where shame-based enforcement (e.g., raids, public exposure, and punitive spectacles) polices dignity rather than nurturing faith. For example, Sisters in Islam (SIS) has consistently criticised moral policing and public punishments as degrading and counterproductive, warning that such actions increase humiliation and stigma instead of promoting rehabilitation or compassionate guidance.[54]

Under this feminist perspective, Siti's experience is not viewed as an isolated psychological incident but as a result of coercive religious governance that transforms doubt into deviance. It views discipline as evidence of piety, encouraging silence, secrecy, or eventual rupture rather than genuine religious reflection [55]. According to international studies, enforced religious practices that use fear or coercion may lead to psychological disturbances alongside a rejection of faith over time.[56] Islamic theology considers male–female differences as part of *khalq*

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[54] Zuraidah Binti Kamaruddin, Saidatolakma Binti Yunus, and Adibah Binti Abdul Rahim, "The Status of Women and Their Rights Based on the Understanding of Sisters in Islam; An Analysis from an Islamic Perspective," *Al-Shajarah: Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization* (ISTAC) 23(2) (2018), 447-467.

[55] Sarah Perry, "Religious/Spiritual Abuse, Meaning-Making, and Posttraumatic Growth," *Religions* 15(7) (2024), 824, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15070824.

[56] Angelito Malicse, "The Systemic Causes of Emergent Religious Dogma and Its Violation of the Three Universal Laws of Nature," *Phil Archive*, 2025, https://philarchive.org/rec/MALTSC-8.

(creation) and fiṭrah (primordial disposition), which serve moral and family roles. In this view, gender distinctions are not inherently oppressive; they can be ethically organised through *taklīf* (moral responsibility), ʿ*adl* (justice), *raḥmah* (mercy), and family duties.[57] Feminists dispute the idea that sex differences mainly support political dominance (' patriarchy"), highlighting fiṭrah-based moral anthropology and role-related responsibilities that are separate from power struggles.[58] The Islamic theological framework regards revelation-based ethics as fundamental; sex differences are held to have moral significance and can be justly arranged with mercy, responsibility and mutual rights. Misuses occur from wrong application (*ẓulm*), not from the concept of difference itself.

Some respondents also cite personal hardship, family conflict, and institutional coercion as turning points in their deconversion. This stance stands in stark contrast to the Prophetic teaching that, "No fatigue, nor disease, nor sorrow, nor sadness, nor hurt, nor distress befalls a Muslim, but that Allah expiates some of his sins for that."[59] Simultaneously, the Quran frames suffering as a divine trial, a manifestation of mercy, and a means by which sins are forgiven.[60] Despite this, in the digital atheistic discourse, this redemptive dimension of suffering is typically omitted. Instead, pain is framed solely in material

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[57] M. A. Ahmad, "Feminisme Islami: Suatu Kritikan Terhadap Faham Keadilan Musawah: Islamic Feminism: A Critique of Musawah's Conception of Justice," *Afkar: Jurnal Akidah Dan Pemikiran Islam* 24(1) (2022), 1-32, https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.vol24no1.1

[58] H. Shalahuddin and M. F. Hamat, "Telaah Kritis Terhadap Dekonstruksi Bahasa Gender Dalam Pengajian Islam," *Afkar: Jurnal Akidah Dan Pemikiran Islam* 14(1) (2013), 1-32, https://ejournal.um.edu.my/index.php/afkar/article/view/5749.

[59] Al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim,* no. 2575.

[60] Qurān 2: 155-156.

or psychological terms, reinforcing a secular narrative that dismisses any transcendent purpose or mercy in hardship.[61]

Critical Intellectual Engagement
Respondents, including Hafīz, often reported their engagement with philosophy and science as a significant turning point in their journey of belief. When respondents were exposed to scientific reasoning and philosophical analysis, they began to question inherited beliefs and pursued evidence-based answers to existential questions.[62] Educated urban Malaysians experience intellectual emancipation and secular worldview adoption through university education, independent reading, and online resources, according to research findings.[63]

Critical thinking in Malay entails a synthesis of the thinking process, where one does not take things at face value, but rather weighs the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the former beforehand.[64] Critical thinking in English involves a synthesis of 'critical' (involving adverse or censorious judgments, skilled in criticism) and 'thinking' (to form an idea or opinion; to reflect or imagine).[65] Its corresponding Arabic, *al-fikr al-naqdi*, involves *fikr/tafkir* (to think, reflect) and *naqdi* (to examine, criticize). Across the languages, the term reflects a rational process of

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[61] Youssef Al Hariri, Walid Magdy, and Maria K. Wolters, "Atheists versus Theists: Religious Polarisation in Arab Online Communities," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 5(CSCW2) (2021), 1-28, https://doi.org/10.1145/3479505.

[62] Jesse L. Preston, Thomas J. Coleman, and Faith Shin, "Spirituality of Science: Implications for Meaning, Well-Being, and Learning," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 51(4) (2025): 632-643, https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672231191356.

[63] *Kamus Dewan*, 4th ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2007).

[64] *New Oxford American Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[65] Rūḥī Baʿlabakkī, *al-Mawrid: A Arabic-English Dictionary*, 13th ed. (Beirut: Dar El-Ilm Lil-Malayen, 2002).

weighing information weaknesses versus strengths rather than taking the former at face value. Western empirical investigations suggest that religious belief may be inversely related to the ability to think critically, with the argument that religious individuals tend to accept metaphysical claims at face value without empirical support, while non-believers require observable support.[66]

Islamic scholarship, on the other hand, positions debate in the direction of debates in Quranic and Sunnah, with an emphasis on the thoughtful exercise of *ijtihād* alongside, rather than above, revelation. Muslim thinkers of the early period, such as al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd, and Ibn Khaldūn developed rational processes that defined Islamic and Western thought. Meanwhile, eighteenth-century Islamic modernists (and others, such as Syed Syeikh Ahmad al-Hādī, Harun Nasution, Iwad al-Qarni, and Yusuf al-Qaradāwī) further promoted the *fikr naqdī* thinking in the tradition of *ijtihād*, uniting tradition with rational thought. [67] Islamic scholarship and critical thinking are exercised through the faculty of reason (*ʿaql*) in the evaluation of information, always, however, within the revelation of the Quran. It insists that even if the intellect tests evidence, the exercise must be in such a manner as not to stray away from the divine message.

Western critical thinking, by contrast, privileges sensory data and logical deduction even when these

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[66] Mohammad Abdelhamid Salem Qatawneh and Yaser Ahmed Salem Rababah, "Reflections of Faith ('Aqidah) on Arts: A Comparative Analytical Study on Islamic and Western Arts," *Afkar: Jurnal Akidah Dan Pemikiran Islam* 23(1) (2021): 251-278, https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.vol23no1.7

[67] Noraini Junoh and Ahmad Mohamad, "Conceptualising Critical Thinking in Islamic Education: A Case Study," *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 16 (2020), 45-62.

approaches appear to override scriptural authority.[68] The Islamic paradigm thus affirms that true discernment arises from a dialectic between sensory-empirical investigation and unwavering deference to the Quran as the ultimate standard of truth. In addition, research demonstrates that atheism in Malaysia emerges from diverse influences, including analytical insights from Western critical thinking, and experiences combined with societal structural changes. This extends beyond a mere uniform phenomenon limited to urban areas.[69] The profound consequences for national identity and community cohesion, and interfaith relations emerge from Malaysia's constitutional definition of Malayness along with the intertwined nature of ethnicity and religion. [70] Through its data-driven approach and consideration of context, this analysis establishes a fundamental understanding of how religious identity evolves in modern Malaysia.

To operationalize these insights, policymakers and religious leaders should first delineate the factors that lead Malays to become atheists, recognizing both their internal coherence and their points of convergence with Islamic intellectual traditions.[71] Notably, these matters are essential prior to formulating interventions that effectively address the concerns of individuals navigating faith-related

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[68] Nisar Mohammad Ahmad, "Definisi Melayu dalam Perlembagaan Malaysia dan Kesannya Terhadap Kefahaman dan Amalan Ajaran Islam di Malaysia: The Definition of Malay on Malaysian Constitution and Its Effect towards Islamic Understanding and Practice in Malaysia," *Sains Insani* 5(2) (2020): 9-16, https://doi.org/10.33102/sainsinsani.vol5no2.174.

[69] Solihah Yahya Zikri et al., "Islam in the Malay History and Culture." 244-256.

[70] Muhamad Faisal Ashaari and Siti Hanisah Sabri, "Perbincangan Berkaitan Agama dan Ketuhanan dalam Facebook 'Warung Atheist' dari Perspektif Logik dan Emosi," 65-79.

[71] Dorcas Yarn Pooi Lam et al., "Religiosity and the Perception of Interreligious Threats," 366.

uncertainties within Malaysia's evolving socio-cultural context.

The Role of Social Media in The Formation of Malay Atheist Identity and Its Theological Implications

The digital media arena serves as a crucial battleground presenting both potential risks and opportunities for Malay atheists. The respondents explained that online platforms from Facebook groups to private messaging apps create essential spaces for users to explore identity and find support while discussing secular or atheistic concepts. The digital world offers greater anonymity and global network access compared to physical spaces, which are heavily controlled and monitored, allowing individuals to gain validation and build communities. Note that the movement towards digital spaces for expression becomes crucial in Malaysia since offline disbelief statements face strong social rejection and potential legal repercussions. [72] Correspondingly, the digital realm serves as both a protective space and a driving force, offering resources and relationships that would be highly challenging to find offline.

In this sense, social media platforms functioned not only as spaces of expression but also as environments where participants encountered interpretive resources that shaped how creed-related concepts were understood. Anonymity and low-cost participation allowed experimentation with identity claims without immediate social consequences, while ongoing interaction supplied affective and cognitive reinforcement that participants described as limited in offline settings. Participants' narratives also showed that several Islamic theological terms, such as *fitrah* (innate disposition), hidayah (divine

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[72] Nurul Syahiidah Fuad, Nozira Salleh, and Indriaty Ismail, "Gejala Ateis Melayu dan Hubungannya dengan Ideologi Liberalisme," *Al-Hikmah* 15(1) (2023), 47-65.

guidance), taklif (moral accountability) and *ṣabr* (patience), were often reframed through rational-secular vocabularies drawn from their online reading and peer discussions. In these accounts, *fitrah* was sometimes interpreted as social conditioning or cognitive bias; hidayah as self-directed inquiry and learning; taklif as responsibility defined primarily in interpersonal or ethical terms; and *sabr* as psychological resilience. Rather than treating these as theological errors, the analysis reads them as indicators of a shift in epistemic justification, from revelation-centred meanings to autonomy-centred and empirically oriented interpretations.[73] This is despite the Quran, which assures that "with hardship comes ease." [74] Building on this, anonymity lowers the social cost of public disbelief. Users can experiment with non-belief without immediate familial or legal repercussions, while constant peer affirmation supplies the emotional scaffolding that offline environments often deny. In effect, social media extends beyond facilitating the expression of atheism. It actively recontextualises core Islamic epistemic categories and embeds them within a secular discourse that redefines moral and existential meaning for a digitally connected generation.[75]

Moreover, while online forums prize critical scrutiny and human-centred reasoning, the Qur'an reminds believers that accurate guidance (*hidayah*) is ultimately anchored in divine revelation: "And who is better in speech than one who invites to Allah..?"[76]

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[73] Shoaib Ul Haq and Ray Yiu Keung Kwok, "Encountering 'the Other' in Religious Social Media: A Cross-Cultural Analysis," 1-16.

[74] The Qur'ān, Surah al-Sharh 94:5-6.

[75] Małgorzata Łysiak, Beata Zarzycka, and Małgorzata Puchalska-Wasyl, "Deconversion Processes in Adolescence - The Role of Parental and Peer Factors," *Religions* 11(12) (2020), 664, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11120664.

[76] The Qur'ān, Surah Fussilat 41:33.

This verse frames discourse not merely as an intellectual exchange but as a worshipful practice that integrates cognition, devotion, and social reform. By contrast, the conversational norms prevailing in Malay atheist social-media circles bracket the transcendent telos altogether, privileging empirical verification, individual autonomy, and secular moral reasoning. Although such forums excel at rational critique, their human-centred orientation recasts "good speech" as speech that maximises logical coherence or personal authenticity, decoupling ethics from divine accountability.

Overall, the findings point to different criteria for discursive legitimacy operating across these epistemic settings. In many participants' accounts, "good" or credible discourse was evaluated by reference to argumentative consistency, evidentiary standards aligned with empirical reasoning, and the pursuit of authenticity and autonomy. In mainstream *'aqidah* discourse, by contrast, credible speech is commonly framed through the integration of cognition with revelation-centred accountability and communal ethical aims. This divergence is analytically functional because it clarifies that contestation is not limited to particular doctrines or rulings; it also concerns the standards by which truth claims and moral authority are judged.[77]

Recommendations

The rise of atheism within Malay communities stems from intricate personal, social, and institutional elements, which makes a comprehensive and inclusive strategy vital to constructively address the issue. Educational and religious institutions must prioritize creating environments that promote empathy and dialogue. Furthermore, school and

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[77] Wardah Alkatiri, "Loss of Tawhidi Worldview in Islamic World," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 14(1-2) (2021), 53-120, https://doi.org/10.1558/cis.20053.

Kauthar Razali, et al., "Digital Doubt and Gendered Moral Policing: Social
Media's Role in Malay Atheist Identity Formation and Its Theological
Implications," *Afkar* Vol. 27 No. 2 (2025): 381-426

university curricula that incorporate critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and open discussions of faith and belief diversity provide young people with the necessary tools to explore existential questions in supportive settings.[78] Correspondingly, Islamic teachings should be taught through reflective engagement for genuine understanding rather than through rote learning and doctrinal enforcement. These educational changes have demonstrated their ability to reinforce religious identity among dedicated individuals while also alleviating feelings of alienation for those who encounter doubts or disagreements.[79] Moreover, religious teachers and community leaders need professional development programs that incorporate compassionate communication training along with crisis counselling and belief psychology education to effectively interact with people throughout their spiritual journeys.[80]

The reform of education and religious practices requires community support systems that provide secure environments for people questioning their faith without judgment. For instance, the creation of peer support circles along with counselling services and open discussion forums may involve mental health experts and civil society groups. Notably, it can provide essential support for people facing social isolation and mental health issues stemming from religious doubt and nonconformity.[81] In essence, atheism in

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[78] Ayman Agbaria, "Education for Religion: An Islamic Perspective," *Religions* 15(3) (2024), 309, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15030309.

[79] Handan Yalvaç Arıcı, "The Future of Religious Education: The Role and Contributions of Youth Theology," *Religions* 16(4) (2025), 454, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16040454.

[80] M. Wildan Yahya and Munawar Rahmat, "Building Moderate Islamic Thoughts in Indonesian Students through Dialogue-Argumentative Methods," *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 10(3) (2021), 288, https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2021-0084.

[81] Artur Steiner et al., "Online Mental Health Forums and Rural Resilience: Mixed Methods Study and Logic Model," *JMIR Mental Health* 10 (2023), e47459, https://doi.org/10.2196/47459.

Malay society can be diminished through community resources that maintain confidentiality and respect individual autonomy while being easily accessible.

Community-based programs aim to foster connections between atheists and religious adherents by cultivating mutual respect and empathy through storytelling, open dialogue, and collective problem-solving. [82] These initiatives, which incorporate doubt into the universal human experience alongside pluralistic values, can reduce the current societal divides and exclusion that we witness. Moreover, policymakers, along with institutional leaders, need to utilise digital platforms for both surveillance and as constructive spaces that facilitate engagement, educational development, and capacity building. The Malaysian government, in collaboration with religious organisations, should support online platforms that enable evidence-based public conversations about religious beliefs and existential questions.[83] In particular, online platforms should provide scientifically accurate data, emphasise both the rational and spiritual aspects of Islam, and promote civil discourse rather than resort to censorship or confrontational tactics. Meanwhile, key stakeholders, including government bodies, religious leaders, mental health professionals, and educators, must collaborate to create policies and digital content that address the fundamental issues. This ultimately leads to disillusionment and promotes resilience across diverse worldviews.[84]

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[82] Komang Ariyanto, "Social Conflict among Religious Groups in the Perspective of Sociology of Religion," *Jurnal Humaya: Jurnal Hukum, Humaniora, Masyarakat, dan Budaya* 3(2) (2023): 213-226, https://doi.org/10.33830/humaya.v3i2.6625.

[83] Nurul Syahiidah Fuad, Nozira Salleh, and Indriaty Ismail, "Gejala Ateis Melayu dan Hubungannya dengan Ideologi Liberalisme," 47-65.

[84] Nur Atikah Ahmad et al., "The 4th Wave Evolution of Digital Citizenship Concept? Proposing Digital Citizenship Concept for

Conclusion and Implications

Research into Malay atheism in Malaysia demonstrates how individual beliefs intersect with cultural identity and social expectations in a predominantly Muslim society. Notably, the development of atheism extends beyond individual belief systems and is deeply influenced by the wider socio-cultural and political landscape. Accordingly, research through qualitative interviews and thematic analysis identifies familial upbringing, disillusionment with religious institutions, and the impact of digital media and secular philosophies as elements driving non-belief among Malays. In addition, the psychological and emotional challenges faced by individuals who outwardly adhere to Islamic norms while harboring internal dissent are exacerbated by these factors. The combination of Malay ethnicity with Islamic beliefs results in a social environment where atheism faces discrimination and forces individuals into secretiveness while increasing their marginalization. This is similar to patterns observed in other conservative religious communities.[85]

At the same time, institutional measures have mainly concentrated on monitoring activities, strict enforcement, and public campaigns to uphold Islamic values. However, these methods fail to address the complex nature of personal skepticism and philosophical exploration.

Punitive policies increase social divisions and worsen psychological distress and isolation while cultivating underground discussions among non-believers.[86] Through an in-depth analysis of the social context and the role of social media, this study reveals that Malay atheists,

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Malaysia Context," *International Journal of Human Resource Studies* 11(4S) (2021), 56, https://doi.org/10.5296/ijhrs.v11i4S.19231.

[85] Syaza Shukri, "Islamist Civilizationism in Malaysia," 209.

[86] Chusnul Chotimah, Saifuddin Zuhri Qudsy, and Mirna Yusuf, "Superficial Implementation of Religious Moderation in Islamic Educational Management," *Cogent Education* 12(1) (2025), 2442235, https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2442235.

particularly among youth and young adults, are increasingly assertive in expressing their identities and beliefs. This is despite facing significant social pressures and strict syariah legal frameworks. In line with this, the findings highlight organized efforts by segments of the Malay atheist community to disseminate their worldview and establish their movements via social media platforms. This also highlights the crucial role of social media as both a vehicle for ideological dissemination and a tool for community cohesion. Furthermore, the study indicates that atheist thought is gaining traction among highly educated and younger demographics. These developments provide a critical lens for examining the challenges facing the Muslim community in Malaysia, particularly in the context of digitalization and globalization.

The findings from this study present notable implications for policymakers, educators, religious leaders, and mental health professionals. They must urgently shift from surveillance-based discipline methods toward approaches that emphasize empathy and open intellectual discussions. In other words, the integration of critical thinking and emotional literacy within educational and religious syllabi enables people to explore existential questions through healthy reflective processes. [87] Additionally, collaborative community support programs that bring together religious institutions with mental health experts and civil society networks successfully diminish stigma and enhance both inclusion and resilience among people addressing faith-related difficulties.[88]

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[87] Akhmad Fitriansyah Mandala Putra and Suyadi Suyadi, "The Concept of Neuroscience-Based Inclusive Islamic Education for Millennial Generation: A Literature Review," *Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Islam* 10(1) (2022), 41, https://doi.org/10.36667/jppi.v10i1.933.

[88] Sara Ali et al., "Role of Mosque Communities in Supporting Muslims with Mental Illness: Results of CBPR-Oriented Focus Groups in the Bay Area, California," *Psychiatric Quarterly* 93(4) (2022), 985-1001, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11126-022-10002-x.

The conceptual framework developed in this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Malay atheist thought. The findings enrich the existing body of literature on atheism and atheist movements within the Islamic world and establish a solid foundation for future theological inquiry into atheistic ideologies within contemporary Muslim societies. Notably, the study offers both theoretical contributions and practical insights, serving as a valuable resource for policymakers, educators, and the broader public in addressing and understanding the phenomenon of atheism among the Malay community in Malaysia. Overall, the development of a new model for interpreting Malay, which represents an atheist perspective, denotes a significant advancement. This offers a meaningful contribution to the comprehension and management of this phenomenon within Malaysia's legal and socio-cultural context.

Acknowledgement

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