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Re-Imagining Indonesian Young Queer Faith Amidst Violence

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Abstract

Being a young person in Indonesia with multiple identities: sexual minority and religious minority has never been easy. Indonesia as a religious society, 'coming out' as a phenomenon was never a safe option for young LGBTQ+, due to negative tendencies based on religious teaching. Meanwhile, violence is an unpleasant social experience by young LGBTQ+ is undeniable. This research will examine a specific issue, namely violences towards young LGBTQ+ within religious communities. Furthermore, the complexity will be shown by analysis through religious backgrounds and practices which show the socio-religious characteristics. This research is conducted by using mix methods, a survey method which is processed quantitatively, and strengthened through a qualitative approach with focus group discussion.

Keywords: *Coming Out, LGBTQ+, Religiosity, Religious Community, Violences, Youth*

Introduction

Indonesia, with its diverse history and natural conditions, is a nation that comprises more than 400 tribes, 17.500 islands, 200 languages are spoken, 60 traditional religions and beliefs, although only six of them are officially recognized. Despite this diversity, Indonesian society has been united since the founding of the Republic, bringing together various traditions, culture, religions, beliefs, ethnics, tribes and languages within a secular social structure and political framework. Individuals are free to follow their respective religious convictions, values and norms in private.

However, the situation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer individuals (LGBTQ+) in Indonesia is characterized by discrimination, harassment, and other social distinctions. Queer term itself came to be used pejoratively against those with same-sex relationships in the late 19th century. By using the term “queer” (instead of LGBTQ+) to explain people who are not heterosexual or cisgender in this research is also part of mainstreaming the identity of queerness itself. Based on research conducted by the Wahid Foundation in 2016, LGBT is the most disliked group (26.1%). Although ‘being LGBT’ in Indonesia is not criminalized, expressing itself in public as LGBT person in societies will meet rejection and alienation because of opposing the dominant interpretation of religious values of Islam by the majority (UNDP, 2013).

The intersectionality issues between gender diversity and faith is not a new discourse in Indonesia. Tom Boellstroff in 2005 conducted an ethnographic study of gay Muslim individuals and outlined it in his article entitled “Between Religion and Desire: Being Muslim and Gay in Indonesia”. Boellstroff argues that gay and Muslim identities are incompatible with one another because they are incommensurable. Even though they do not have the same standard, Indonesian society cannot be separated from religion, both in terms of religious teaching (including practice of religious rituals) and religion as an identity. In certain degree it is normal that people in Indonesia are using their own personal religious conviction within public domain (cf. Hadiwitanto, 2016:146), so seemingly there is no solid distinction between private and public. Religion is salient to people’s identity individually and publicly. Unfortunately the narratives of the majority of Abrahamic religions (Islam and Christianity) as well as non-Abrahamic adherents by religious communities in Indonesia are still confined by binary and heteronormative construction narratives. Saiful Mujani Research & Consulting stated that Indonesian people agree (47.5%) and strongly agree (34%) with the opinion that gays and lesbians are prohibited by religion. Homophobic and transphobic views are further perpetuated by conservative religious leaders who reject the existence of LGBTQ+ individuals and limit their religious access.

There is increasing recognition of the fact that religion and religious communities may not be a safe place for LGTBQ+ individuals. These communities have lost their ability

to foster generalized trust and instead perpetuate suffering through denial and rejection. The religions here fail to resist temptations about the dominant culture through their doctrines and theology. The attitude towards dominant culture closes the opportunity of dialogue with minority and oppressed groups (cf. Heaney, 2019: 144ff). In the context of the queer community, it is possible that the religious community may become a supporter of hate rather than an opposing force.

The relationship between religion or religious communities and dominant culture is fraught with tension, particularly when it comes to the rejection of LGBTQ+ individuals. While religion and religious communities are considered vital both individuals and public life, their failure to resist dominant cultural pressures had led to denial and rejection of marginalized groups. This in turn has led to the religious community becoming supporters of hate towards LGBTQ+ individuals. Despite this, there remains a strong desire among LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly young people, to identify themselves as part of a religious community. This tension is particularly relevant when considering the potential influence of these experiences on the future of religions, religious communities, and humanity.

This research raises important questions regarding the identification of Indonesian young queers with religious communities, the extent of conflict between religions and young queers, the experience of violence faced by young queers within religious communities, and the effort of religious communities to respond to these tensions. Ultimately, this research aims to address how Indonesian young queers navigate their faith amidst these challenges. We breakdown the main problems more specifically in several research questions:

1. To what extent is religion still relevant to Indonesian young LGBTQ+ individuals?
2. Do Indonesian young LGBTQ+ experience violence within religious circles?
3. How can the characteristics of violence experienced within religious circles be understood through examining the correlation between violence experienced and the presence of religion and attitudes toward religion?

Methodology

This research adopts a phenomenological methodology, which examines mental phenomena or activities that are subjectively experienced by research subjects. The study focuses on the life experiences of these individuals, as these phenomena are integral to their everyday existence. According to Kahija (2017:20), the phenomenological approach is considered to be an “intersubjective” research, meaning that one person’s subjectivity

can be connected with the subjectivity of others. Kahija explained that understanding arises from the connection between the subjectivity of the researcher and the subjectivity of the participant. This connection facilitates a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied. In the context of phenomenology, the term “lived experience” is often used to describe the first-hand, direct experience of human life.

Regarding the collection of quantitative data through online surveys, the recommended method is simple random sampling, which involves withdrawing samples from a population or universe in such a way that each member of the population or universe has an equal chance of being selected (Kerlinger, 2006:188). Conversely, for qualitative research that employs purposive sampling, the sampling technique is based on self-assessment by the sample from a pre-selected population, depending on the established criteria aligned with the research topic. In this study, the criteria for selecting informants included individuals aged between 18-30 years old, belonging to diverse gender and sexuality identities, and coming from a range of faiths and beliefs. The research team approached focal points in Indramayu, Jombang and North Sumatra, who were asked to identify and collect informants willing to participate in the focus group discussions. To gather data, the current study utilized a mix-methods approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative methods. The quantitative method involved administering online surveys through google forms platform for one month, from September 27th to October 27th 2022, to a total 185 respondents. Further we processed only 156 respondents due to the validity issue. The qualitative method, on the other hand, utilized online focus groups discussion through the zoom platform for a total of three sessions with 27 informants taking part.

Quantitative data were analyzed statistically using SPSS with two methods, namely description analysis and bivariate correlation (Pearson). We operationalized the research questions into three main research variables, namely violences towards young LGBTQ+ within religious communities, the existence of religious community, and religious practices. Violence experienced is treated as a dependent variable.

Qualitative data were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method. In this approach, research subjects and focus group discussion participants are given the opportunity to interpret their own experiences while sharing their stories. Meanwhile, phenomenological researchers conducted interviews and created transcripts of the discussions. During the analysis of the transcripts, the researcher interprets the participants' interpretations. As Kahija (2017:47) explains, this approach entails a convergence of perspectives between researchers and participants, which is referred to as a “fusion of horizons” in the concept introduced by Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Empirical result

1. Religious Community as Self-Identification and Space of Faith

Tabel 1: Religious Affiliation

	Frequency	Percent
Islam	77	49.4
Protestant	29	18.6
Catholic	27	17.3
Buddhism	4	2.6
Hinduism	1	0.6
Atheism	2	1.3
Agnostic	9	5.8
Indigenous beliefs	3	1.9
Others	4	2.6
Total	156	

Table 1 shows the majority of respondents have affiliations with a particular religious group. The largest group is comprised of Muslim at 49.4%, followed by 18.6% Protestants and 17.3% Catholics. Among respondents who have affiliation with a particular religion, we can also see that 2 (1.3%) respondents identified as atheists. Nine individuals identified as agnostic and 4 respondents identified as “other”. Here, we can observe that the presence of religion is still a strong context that colors the presence of LGBTQ+ respondents who have identified themselves as part of this community.

Tabel 2: Did I grow up in a strong religious family/environment? (strong religious background)

	Frequency	Percent
No	14	9.0
Not sure	13	8.3
Yes	129	82.7
Total	156	

In Table 2 the prevalence of religion as a strong contextual factor for the existence of LGBTQ+ respondents can be explained by the fact that the majority of them originate from families with a strong religious background (82.7%). A small proportion of respondents (9%) indicated that they did not come from such families, while only 8.3% were uncertain about their families religious affiliations. This underscores the salience of religion as a characteristic feature of Indonesian society, and of Asian societies more broadly. Religion and religious communities constitute a critical component of the life paradigm and identity constructed by these societies.

Tabel 3: Do people in your religious community know your identity as LGBTQ+? (Perceived knowledge of other sexual identity)

	Frequency	Percent
No	81	51.9
Perhaps	55	35.3
Yes	20	12.8
Total	156	

Table 3 presents intriguing insights regarding the awareness of LGBTQ+ individuals about their sexual orientation among their friends from the religious community. Only 12.8% respondents who identify as LGBTQ+ reported that their friends from the religious community are aware of their existence. A significant proportion of respondents (51.9%) believed that their friends are unaware of their sexual orientation, while 35.3% were unsure if their friends knew about it. These findings suggest that LGBTQ+ individuals may not always feel comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation to their friends from religious communities. This reluctance to be open about their sexual

orientation in a religious context, which is a crucial aspect of their lives, indicates that LGBTQ+ individuals continue to face significant challenges in gaining acceptance in these communities.

Table 4: Over the past 5 years have there been any good practices by the religious community due to your faith development? (Best practices & progress within religious community)

	Frequency	Percent
None	59	37.8
Do not know	58	37.2
Yes	39	25.0
Total	156	

Table 4 reveals that 25% of the respondents agree that the religious community has recently adopted better practices that encourage LGBTQ+ individuals to understand faith. However, a significant proportion of respondents (37.8%) reported that the religious community does not have a positive outlook towards them and fails to assist them in understanding faith. Additionally, 37.2% of respondents were either unsure or did not know about the religious community’s perspective. These findings suggest that despite being a significant and influential context, the religious community has yet to become supportive for LGBTQ+ individuals to develop their faith-based beliefs and values.

Table 5: Am I still affiliated to the same religion as my childhood religion given by my parents? (Uphold religious background)

	Frequency	Percent
No	25	16
Yes	131	84
Total	156	

Table 5 presents the findings that the majority of respondents (84%) choose to maintain the religion they were brought up with by their parents, while only 16% refuse to do so. The results suggest that leaving or changing religions is not a common option, even if the religious community has not been supportive of LGBTQ+ identity.

Respondents seem to have a strong attachment to their religion, which they have inherited from their parents, and they continue to defend it. This finding is interesting since LGBTQ+ individuals have not always found religious communities helpful in supporting their faith and existence. Nonetheless, religion and religious community continue to be crucial attributes for the respondents, confirming the notion of strong communality in Indonesian society. This finding is particularly noteworthy as it highlights that individuals in Indonesian society, including those who identify as LGBTQ+, have a strong need for community to identify themselves, and religious community serves as a powerful choice.

Tabel 6: Are you actively involved in your religious community? (Practicing sacred rituals)

	Frequency	Percent
Not active	8	5.1
Seldom	23	14.7
Active	49	31.4
Very active	76	48.7
Total	156	

Table 6 provides additional evidence that supports the argument regarding the importance of the religious community to LGBTQ+ individuals in Indonesia. The table shows that a substantial proportion of respondents were actively involved in religious organization, with 31.4% choosing to be active and 48.7% indicating that they were very active. Only a small percentage of respondents (5.1%) reported that they were not involved in religious organization at all. These findings suggest that despite the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in religious communities, many still find value and meaning in their involvement in religious organizations. The high level of active involvement in religious organizations also indicates the important role that religious communities play in shaping identity and social networks of LGBTQ+ individuals in Indonesia.

Tabel 7: I am now more comfortable praying privately without going to the house of worship (Solitary worship/prayer)

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree	10	6.4
Disagree	31	19.9
Not sure	64	41.0
Agree	22	14.1
Strongly agree	29	18.6
Total	156	

The attitudes toward religion and religious communities are unequivocal, with the respondents having the need to live within their religious community, even though it has not met their faith development needs. However, this does not always mean that respondents feel comfortable carrying out activities together, particularly during worship. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many religious activities were carried out remotely, and the respondents responded positively to this. As table 7 shows, a significant proportion of respondents agreed or strongly agreed to worship individually, with 41% unsure if this was the right choice.

This represents an irony, as the respondent's desire to be within a religious community contradicts their preference to worship individually. The religious community, particularly in the context of worship, is not always a comfortable space for LGBTQ+ individuals, and this can create tension between their desire to be part of the religious community and their anxiety when engaging in religious activities. LGBTQ+ individuals realized that religious rituals are typically performed as a communal practice. One illustration of this is offered by Ira (pseudonym), a transgender Muslim individual from Jombang, who finds solace in solitary prayer but acknowledges that the majority of religious observances are conducted collectively, including Eid al-Fitr, Friday prayers and Taraweeh prayers. However, due to the external manifestation of gender identity, most trans women individuals (waria) are hesitant to participate in Friday prayers. Given that a significant proportion of respondents actively engage in religious activities, this irony and tension must be taken seriously.

Tabel 8: Are you currently joining a sexuality-based community?

	Frequency	Percent
No	85	54.5
Yes	71	45.5
Total	156	

Table 8 pertains to the willingness of respondents to join a community, such as an NGO or an groups/alliance, that is focused on issues related to sexuality. The respondents showed a relatively low level of enthusiasm, with 54.5% of them stating that they would not become a member of such a community. On the other hand, 45.5% of respondents indicated that they are members of a sexuality-based community. There are two possible explanations for this finding. First, religious communities cannot be easily replaced by sexuality-based communities, as the latter have not been a strong choice for the respondents. Second, sexuality-based communities can serve as an alternative for those who are seeking a sense of community and support.

These findings are complemented by qualitative data indicating that the first possibility is primarily experienced by individuals identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB), under the sexual orientation umbrella, who still have opportunity to engage in traditional religious spaces without having to disclose their sexual identity. While the second possibility is more prevalent among the majority of transgender groups. Transgender (waria) individuals tend to opt for the second possibility due to their visibility as the “other” (*yang lian*) within religious communities, which restrict their access to worship on the basis of their physical appearance. For instance, Ira (pseudonym), who was subjected to ridicule by her peers for her effeminate appearance and had her sandals confiscated when she tried to do Taraweeh prayer in Mosque by saying “ih banci kok Teraweh loh”. Ironically the religious teacher (*ustadz*) responded with a warning to Ira not to dress up as a transvestite on account of it being a grave sin. This underscores the notion that worship in Indonesia continues to be closely tied to material aspects, including physical appearance. Nevertheless, both options outlined above underscore the significance of community for LGBTQ+ individuals.

Tabel 9: Does the sexuality-based community help you deepen your faith? (Impact on faith development)

	Frequency	Percent
None	45	38.1
Perhaps	30	25.4
Yes	43	36.4
Missing	38	
Total	156	

Table 9 provides further insight into the attitudes of the respondents towards sexuality-based communities. It shows that 38.1% of respondents did not feel that such communities helped them build their faith, while 25.4% were unsure whether these communities had an impact on their faith development. However, 36.4% respondents felt that they experienced faith development when they were part of these alternative communities. The data suggest that respondents, as religious individuals, see the development of their faith as an important goal, which keeps them from leaving their religious community. However, feeling comfortable within the religious community remains an issue for LGBTQ+ individuals. Alternative communities outside the religious community seem to be starting to become an option if their needs regarding the growth of their faith are also met, although this still requires further research.

Tabel 10: During the past 5 years, have you ever experienced SOCIESC-based violence within a religious community? (violence towards young LGBTQ+)

	Frequency	Percent
Never	86	55.1
Do not know	21	13.5
Ever	49	31.4
Total	156	

Table 10 presents data on the experiences of SOGIESC-based violence in religious environments in the last 5 years. Although the majority of respondents (55.1%) reported not experiencing such violence, a significant proportion (31.4%) did report experiencing it. Moreover 13.5% respondents were unsure or did not know whether they had experienced such violence. This is concerning as it highlights the prevalence of violence against LGTBQ+ individuals in religious contexts, which only serves to reinforce the irony and tension felt by respondents who desire to be part of a religious community, but also face discrimination and violence within it.

The most frequent violence that young LGBTQ+ individuals encounter in religious communities is hate comment or hate speech. Boni (pseudonym), a 18 years old Muslim Transman lived in West Java shared his experience when the religious teacher (ustadz) during the regular recitation (*pengajian rutin*) use the mosque's microphone to explain the religious teachings, he referred Boni as a harbinger of the apocalypse (*pembawa kiamat*) and publicly ridiculed his physical appearance. Moreover the teacher mentioned the names of Boni's parents and urged them to educate Boni properly. The similar experience was also experienced by Mirna (pseudonym), 21 years old cisfemale bisexual from East Java who stated that her religious teachers sometimes engage in the act of mocking and spreading inaccurate information about the LGBTQ+ community during their preaching.

LGBTQ+ individuals also encounter limitations when attempting to access religious worship. Ana (pseudonym), a 22-year-old trans Catholic woman residing in West Java, is an example of this. She is restricted from singing the psalms during church service due to concerns that her transgender identity could potentially set a negative example for others within the congregation. This corresponds with the topic discussed in table 8 earlier.

The worst violence experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals where the perpetrator is their religious teacher. Anto, a 28-year-old gay Muslim from West Java, encountered sexual violence at the hand of religious leaders. Despite Anto's objection on the premise that the mosque was a sacred space, an ustadz instructed to engage in oral sex and persisted even after Anto had refused. This experience left Anto feeling devastated and underscores the types of sexual violence that young LGTBQ+ individuals may encounter in religious communities.

2. Characteristics of Violence Against LGBTQ+ in Religious Life

This part will show the results of the correlation test with Bivariate Pearson on violence experienced by LGTBQ+ individuals within religious circles and several social attributes, including family and friends, religious community, religious affiliation and

practices, and alternative communities. The significant coefficient values are marked with one or two stars.

Tabel 11: Social Setting of Violences towards Young LGBTQ+ within Religious Communities

	Violence Experienced
Religious community	
Discussion about sexuality	0.11
Attitude towards LGBTIQ+	0.03
Best practices & progress within religious community	-0.10
Perceived knowledge of other sexual identity	0,36**
Religious affiliation & practices	
Strong religious background	0.04
Uphold religious identity	-0.19*
Practicing sacred rituals	-0.20*
Member of religious organization	-0.06
Actively involved in religious organization	0.10
Solitary worship/prayer	0.24**
Alternative community	
Member of sexuality-based community	0.28**
Impact on faith development	0.08

Legend: ** p < .01; * p < .05

Table 11 shows the most significant correlation is evident between the experience of violence and the perceived knowledge of the respondent's sexuality identity ($r=0.36$). This implies that those who encounter violence within religious settings are likely to have friends from religious communities who are aware of their LGBTQ+ identity. This suggests that religious communities are increasingly recognized as problematic and unsafe spaces for the respondents. It also explains why respondents are hesitant to disclose their sexuality, even if they are part of the religious community they have chosen. For LGBTQ+ individuals, religious communities and issues of faith pose a problem, as they are consistently confronted with threats if they express themselves more openly. This highlights the fact that genuine friendship is not easily found in religious space.

In the light aforementioned situations, respondents encountered violence and rejection within a religious setting, which led them to seek out alternative communities. They transitioned from religious-based communities to sexuality-based communities, hoping to find a more inclusive and supportive environment that could also cater to their spiritual needs.

Table 11 highlights a second significant correlation between violence experience in religious settings and belonging to a sexuality-based community ($r=0.28$). This finding is alarming as it indicates that those who face violence within religious communities are more likely to turn towards sexuality-based communities as an alternative. To better understand this issue, qualitative data would be necessary. Nevertheless, these results illustrate the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ individuals within religious communities. It seems that religious communities are unable to accept the existence of pro-LGBTQ+ communities, which are often viewed as the opposite of religious communities and not seen as an alternative way to understand God's will and the meaning of life. Respondents who identify as LGBTQ+ not only lacked the space to express themselves freely but they were also compelled to remain silent, conceal their identity, and faced violence for their sexuality identity.

Another significant correlation is that respondents who experienced violence in religious settings tend to choose to worship individually ($r=0.24$). This indicates that they are beginning to consider avoiding gathering in religious communities. They require growth in faith and religious community, but they cannot do safely in crowded and open spaces. This tension may lead to reduced trust and even skepticism towards the religious community itself. Despite the fact that respondents in the previous descriptive analysis demonstrated an attitude of agreeing to uphold the religion and rituals taught by their families, the correlation analysis here shows a negative relationship. Those who experience violence in religious circles are those who are becoming less willing to defend the religion and rituals taught by their families. This becomes a tension and difficulty in the faith life of the respondents, as they are dealing with insecurity and violence in the

very religious environment they need. Meanwhile, the community, particularly the religious community, is where they build their self-identification. Losing a sense of security in religious communities leaves them in a state of solitude. As a result, they seek alternative communities to find a sense of belonging.

Discussion

Based on this research we can see that the existence and role of religion which is very salient in Indonesian society has not changed. Religion and religious communities provide value and meaning to people's lives, not only individually but also communally. This explains why religion is highly valued by many people in Indonesia, including young queers, and plays an integral part in their lives. Religious communities are seen as a place for them to identify themselves as an individual and also as a part of the larger community. In the context of the communality of Indonesian society, religion plays a strong public role. Society always involves religion in many aspects of their lives and reflects on experiences that encourage the emergence of religious values and spirituality in the public sphere (Hadiwitanto, 2016: 242, cf. Ammerman, 2013). Problems arise when there is tension between religious values that appear in the public sphere and the existence of different individuals. This tension can be overcome when religion does not stop reflecting on the traditions and experiences of encounters they face, including the existence of LGBTQ+.

The finding in this research shows that tensions occur because LGBTQ+ is not seen as the challenges of religious community to re-enter in reflection both in personal relational matters and in living the public space. Religious community failed to become a safe public space for young queers as a minority group. It is even worse when the religious community actually becomes a place and source of violence experienced by young queers and makes them even more excluded. 'Coming out' for LGBTQ+ people is perhaps one of the pinnacles of freedom because they can express themselves as authentic and open individuals in the public space and at the same time give hope to become part of a larger community. But this research shows that 'coming out' is becoming a threat and violence. Ammerman (2013: 273) shows us when religious communities only provide a single and structural definition of what spiritual belief and belonging is, then they cannot provide opportunities for redefinition and reflection on new beliefs and the concept of belonging. This is what causes rejection of young queers. Once again, religion and religious communities fail to become a space for building collective reflection in the midst of different societies. As a consequence, religion and the religious community have lost their trustworthiness in public space. We need religious communities that have a vision that are not only directed to organizations and institutions but to communities and lives.

Another interesting finding is the existence of sexuality-based communities as an alternative for the spiritual needs of young queers. It can justify that religious communities may no longer be chosen to provide interpretations of life. However the alternative does not automatically solve the problem. The results show that young queers are not very sure whether the sexuality-based community really is an alternative regarding their spiritual needs. We understand when religion is understood as a meaning system that offers values and meaning in life, a reliable religious authority is needed and provides opportunities for the process of doing theology (Hadiwianto, 2016: 246). This makes why the sexuality-based community as an alternative is not necessarily accepted as a solution to the spiritual need. Religious authority has traditionally referred to those who are ordained and/or those who are believed to hold teachings of the faith. As a consequence, it requires awareness among religious authority holders to really build a reflection and open vision that goes beyond structural and traditional issues.

Conclusion

The impact of violence towards Indonesian young LGBTQ+ individuals is significant and cannot be ignored, particularly in relation to their faith. Such violence has resulted in distinctive characteristics in the way that these individuals practice their faith. The faith of Indonesian young queers are shaped and grounded in experiences of violence and the rejection of their sexual identity. In a society that places a strong emphasis on community, the need for acceptance and a sense of belonging is crucial, especially for young LGBTQ+ individuals whose faith is communal and deeply rooted in their religious upbringing. However, existing religious communities and sexuality-based communities fail to provide a safe and accepting space for these individuals to express their faith. Further research is needed to explore alternative communities that can accommodate the spiritual needs of young LGBTQ+ individuals.

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