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Communicative Dissonance Management Among Religious Young Adults in Nightlife Contexts

Irmawati Oktavianingtyas *, Nydia Fairley

Universitas Presiden, Jl. Ki Hajar Dewantara, Bekasi 17530, Indonesia
* Corresponding Author Email: oktavianingtyas.irmawati@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how religious young adults experience value-behavior inconsistency when engaging in nightlife drinking and clubbing, and how they communicatively managed the resulting tension. Cognitive dissonance theory and accounts theory served as complementary analytic frameworks, positioning dissonance reduction as both a psychological and an inherently communicative process. A qualitative design was employed, with semi-structured interviews conducted with eight college students aged 18 to 19 years at an Indonesian university, comprising four male and four female participants from Muslim and Christian backgrounds. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings revealed that participants consistently positioned religion as a foundational moral framework within which nightlife participation was interpreted as inconsistent with religious expectations. Dissonance was experienced primarily as post-behavioral emotional and identity-based discomfort, intensifying after leaving nightlife settings rather than during participation. Participants employed two broad communicative account-making patterns to manage dissonance, namely justification accounts involving boundary-setting and moral reframing, and apology and conciliation accounts involving repentance, prayer, and compensatory religious practices oriented toward the divine and the reflexive moral self. Dissonance reduction operated as ongoing communicative regulation rather than a single resolution.

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1. Introduction

Religion continues to serve as a central source of moral guidance, identity, and behavioral boundaries for millions of people worldwide. At the demographic level, religious affiliation remains a structuring force in social life even as the composition of religious and non-religious populations shifts across world regions (Hackett et al., 2025). For many individuals, religious identity is not merely a matter of private belief but a publicly visible marker that shapes how they evaluate themselves and how they expect to be evaluated by others. This dynamic is especially pronounced in societies where religion is deeply embedded in cultural and familial structures, such as Indonesia, where constitutional recognition of religion and strong social religiosity create a normative environment in which faith commitments carry significant interpersonal consequences (Booker & Johnson, 2022; Muhibbin et

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al., 2024). Within such contexts, the moral expectations attached to religious identity extend beyond formal doctrine into everyday behavioral standards, including how young people are expected to conduct themselves in social and recreational settings.

Yet religious identity does not operate in isolation from competing social demands. Emerging adulthood, defined as the developmental period roughly spanning ages 18 to 25, is widely characterized by heightened identity exploration, self-focus, instability, and sensitivity to peer norms as individuals navigate the transition between adolescence and full adult commitments (Arnett, 2000). During this period, peer culture, social belonging, and experimentation with lifestyle choices often carry significant psychological weight, sometimes temporarily overriding the moral frameworks cultivated through religious upbringing (Booker & Johnson, 2022; Jia et al., 2021). One prominent arena in which this tension becomes socially visible is nightlife participation, particularly activities such as drinking alcohol and clubbing, which have grown increasingly common among college-age young adults in urban Indonesian settings (Fahrul, 2023). Nightlife environments are themselves contexts associated with elevated levels of substance use and related behavioral risks (Buttram et al., 2023; Glavak-Tkalić et al., 2025) and drinking in these settings has been empirically linked to heightened likelihood of further risk-taking behaviors, including sexual activity with new partners (Button et al., 2025; Hone et al., 2023). For religious young adults embedded in these environments, the stakes of engaging in such behaviors extend beyond personal conduct to the coherence of a religious self-concept that is publicly claimed and socially monitored.

Existing empirical research consistently documents that religiosity functions as a protective factor against alcohol use among adolescents and young adults, with higher religious commitment generally associated with lower rates of alcohol consumption and related substance use (Chagas et al., 2023; Muhibbin et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2020). However, this protective pattern is neither universal nor unconditional. The relationship between religious salience and alcohol-related behavior varies depending on how religiosity is operationalized, whether through belief, practice, or identity salience dimensions, and on the denominational and cultural context in which it is studied (Pearce et al., 2017; Votaw et al., 2024). Critically, a visible portion of religious young adults continue to engage in nightlife drinking and clubbing while maintaining active religious identification and, in some cases, continuing religious practices. This coexistence of religious commitment and nightlife participation is a phenomenon that aggregate statistical findings cannot fully address. The relevant question is not only whether religiosity predicts lower alcohol use at the population level, but how individual religious young adults who do engage in nightlife behavior interpret, navigate, and communicate the resulting inconsistency between their values and their actions. This gap represents the core problem this study addresses.

Understanding this phenomenon requires two complementary theoretical frameworks: one that explains the psychological experience of value-behavior inconsistency, and one that explains how that experience is managed through communication. Conceptually, dissonance shifts from a purely psychological state to a communicative phenomenon at the moment when the individual is required to render the inconsistency intelligible, either to others or to the self as a reflexive moral audience. While the felt discomfort of dissonance is an internal cognitive-affective experience, its management almost invariably takes a linguistic and narrative form, since individuals reduce discomfort by constructing explanations, reframings, and accounts that organize the inconsistency into a coherent self-narrative. In this sense, dissonance becomes communicative when it is articulated, justified, excused, or repaired through discourse, whether in interpersonal interaction or in internal moral reasoning expressed in language. The first framework is cognitive dissonance theory, originally proposed by (Festinger, 1957), which holds that individuals experience psychological discomfort, referred to as the cognitive dissonance state, when they simultaneously hold cognitions — including beliefs, values, self-perceptions, and knowledge of behaviors — that are mutually inconsistent. This discomfort is motivationally significant, driving individuals to reduce or resolve the perceived inconsistency through various strategies including behavior change, attitude change, addition of justificatory cognitions, or trivialization of the conflicting element (Bran & Vaidis, 2020). Contemporary scholarship has refined understanding of the dissonance state as an affective-

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motivational experience, demonstrating that its intensity is shaped by the self-relevance of the cognitions involved and that reduction strategies can be understood as forms of emotion regulation operating in response to a perceived threat to self-integrity (Aubert-Teillaud et al., 2023; Bran & Vaidis, 2020; Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2020). In the context of religious young adults who engage in nightlife, religious moral standards represent salient cognitions that can be experienced as inconsistent with drinking and clubbing behaviors, creating the conditions for a dissonance state that motivates psychological and behavioral adjustment.

However, managing cognitive dissonance is not solely an internal psychological process. It is also fundamentally a communicative act. When individuals engage in behaviors that conflict with their stated values or social identities, they are socially expected to produce accounts, that is, verbal explanations, justifications, or excuses offered to social audiences, including the self, to render the behavior intelligible and to protect a valued social identity (Scott & Lyman, 1968). Accounts theory, developed in communication and sociology, identifies two primary categories of accounts: excuses, in which the individual acknowledges that a behavior is problematic but reduces personal responsibility, and justifications, in which the individual accepts responsibility but reframes the behavior as acceptable under specific conditions (McLaughun et al., 1983; Scott & Lyman, 1968). Communication scholars have further demonstrated that the selection of account strategies is shaped by the nature of the interpersonal relationship, the severity of the perceived violation, the degree of expressed guilt, and the anticipated response of the social audience (McLaughun et al., 1983). This communicative dimension is directly relevant to the present study because the strategies religious young adults use to manage value-behavior inconsistency, including setting behavioral limits, morally reframing nightlife participation, engaging in repentance, or gradually reducing behavior, are not merely internal cognitive adjustments but communicative acts through which individuals construct and maintain coherent self-narratives across competing religious and peer-oriented social contexts. Prior research confirms that identity-relevant discrepancies involving religious standards generate both psychological discomfort and active meaning-making efforts, including expressions of guilt, shame, and hypocrisy, that are enacted in social and interpersonal settings (Martinez & Lewis, 2023; Zarzycka et al., 2024) In the present study, the accounts examined are not direct exchanges with external social audiences but reflexive self-narratives produced in the interview context, in which participants oriented their accounts toward the divine and the moral self as the audiences invoked in their own discourse.

The existing literature thus presents a significant gap. The majority of research on religiosity and nightlife or alcohol-related behavior employs quantitative designs oriented toward measuring prevalence and establishing protective associations. For example, large-scale quantitative work by Russell et al. (2020) and Chagas et al. (2023) has established that religiosity correlates with reduced alcohol consumption, while studies such as Votaw et al. (2024) and Pearce et al. (2017) have examined how different dimensions of religiosity differentially predict substance-related outcomes. While these studies illuminate the protective association between religiosity and behavior at the population level, they do not address how individuals subjectively interpret and discursively negotiate the moments when their behavior departs from religious standards. Similarly, qualitative work on religion and risk behavior has tended to focus on identity formation or moral reasoning in general, rather than on the specific communicative resources, namely accounts, justifications, and narrative repair strategies, through which religious young adults manage value-behavior inconsistency in real time

Comparatively little attention has been paid to how religious young adults subjectively experience value-behavior inconsistency, and less still to how they communicatively manage it through narratives of justification, moral repair, and self-regulation. This gap is particularly salient in non-Western contexts such as Indonesia, where the intersection of strong religious social norms and growing urban nightlife culture creates distinctive conditions for identity tension among emerging adults. Addressing this gap requires attention to how individuals use language, narrative, and accounting strategies to maintain a coherent religious identity under conditions of behavioral inconsistency.

It is important to note that participants in this study come from different religious backgrounds, including Islam and Christianity. Doctrinally, these traditions differ in how they frame alcohol use and nightlife participation. Islamic teachings generally prohibit alcohol consumption outright as haram, while Christian denominations vary in their positions, ranging from abstinence to moderation. Despite these doctrinal differences, both traditions share a common structural feature relevant to this study, namely that they provide internalized moral standards against which nightlife behavior can be evaluated as inconsistent. The focus of this study is not on comparing religious traditions or their specific doctrinal positions, but on the shared psychological and communicative process of cognitive dissonance and its management that emerges when individuals whose religious identity is salient engage in behaviors they themselves perceive as inconsistent with their religious values. Grouping participants is therefore analytically justified at the level of process, not doctrine

This study addresses this gap by examining how religious young adults at an Indonesian university experience and communicatively manage value-behavior inconsistency arising from nightlife drinking and clubbing participation. Using cognitive dissonance theory and accounts theory as complementary frameworks, the study focuses on two central questions, namely how participants describe the felt conflict between their religious commitments and nightlife behavior, and how they construct and deploy communicative accounts, including justifications, moral reframing, and compensatory practices, to manage the resulting tension. The contribution of this research is twofold. Theoretically, it integrates accounts theory as a communicative complement to cognitive dissonance theory, demonstrating that dissonance reduction operates not only as a psychological process but as an inherently communicative one in which individuals actively construct self-justifying narratives. Practically, it provides grounded insight into identity communication among religiously committed emerging adults navigating competing normative pressures in an Indonesian urban context, contributing to the growing body of qualitative scholarship on religion, identity, and behavior in non-Western settings.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine how religious young adults experience and communicatively manage value-behavior inconsistency arising from nightlife drinking and clubbing participation. A qualitative approach was selected because the study's central concerns, namely subjective experience of moral tension, identity-related discomfort, and the communicative strategies through which individuals narrate and justify inconsistent behavior, are inherently meaning-centered phenomena that cannot be adequately addressed through quantitative measurement of prevalence or statistical association (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to capturing the interpretive and narrative dimensions of lived experience, allowing participants to articulate the complexity of their moral positions and the specific ways they construct accounts of their behavior in their own terms (Byrne, 2022).

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews with eight college students aged 18 to 19 years enrolled at President University, Indonesia. The sample comprised four male and four female participants, reflecting equal gender representation. Participants were recruited using purposive criterion-based sampling, a strategy appropriate when the aim is to ensure that all participants have direct, relevant experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Ruslin et al., 2022). Three inclusion criteria were applied: first, self-identification with a religion; second, ongoing religious commitment evidenced by the personal importance of faith and active engagement in religious practices such as worship or prayer; and third, self-reported participation in nightlife drinking and clubbing within the recent period. These criteria ensured that all participants inhabited the condition of interest, specifically the coexistence of salient religious identity and active nightlife participation, which constitutes the structural prerequisite for value-behavior inconsistency as theorized within cognitive dissonance theory (Bran & Vaidis, 2020; Festinger, 1957). The religious backgrounds of participants were mixed, including both Muslim and Christian affiliations, reflecting the multi-faith composition of the student population at the research site.

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Of the eight participants, four identified as Muslim, namely P1, P2, P7, and P8, and four identified as Christian, namely P3, P4, P5, and P6. The sample therefore reflected an equal distribution across both gender and religious affiliation, with all participants aged between 18 and 19 years. The demographic profile of each participant, together with the participant codes used throughout the Results and Discussion, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Religious Affiliation
P1	Female	19	Muslim
P2	Female	19	Muslim
P3	Male	19	Christian
P4	Male	18	Christian
P5	Female	19	Christian
P6	Female	19	Christian
P7	Male	18	Muslim
P8	Male	19	Muslim

Religious commitment was operationalized using two indicators drawn from multidimensional models of religiosity, namely the personal importance of faith as a self-concept anchor (religious salience) and active engagement in religious practices such as worship, prayer, or ritual participation (religious practice). This operationalization is consistent with established multidimensional frameworks in religiosity research, which distinguish between belief, salience, and behavioral practice as analytically separable dimensions (Pearce et al., 2017; Votaw et al., 2024). While self-report measures carry inherent limitations, self-reported religious salience and practice have been widely validated as meaningful indicators of religious commitment in qualitative and survey-based research alike (Russell et al., 2020). Participants were included only when both conditions were simultaneously present, ensuring that religiosity was not merely nominal but functionally operative as a moral reference point in their self-concept

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide developed to address two central areas aligned with the study's research questions: participants' experiences of tension or conflict arising from perceived value-behavior inconsistency, and the strategies they employed to manage or reduce that tension. Interview prompts explored the role of religion in participants' daily lives and self-concept, how participants understood nightlife drinking and clubbing in relation to their religious expectations and moral standards, their emotional and cognitive experiences before, during, and after nightlife participation, and the specific accounts, justifications, or compensatory actions they deployed to manage internal conflict and maintain a coherent sense of self. This structure was informed by accounts theory, which directs analytical attention toward the verbal and narrative resources individuals use to explain conduct that departs from normative expectations (McLaughun et al., 1983; Scott & Lyman, 1968).

It is important to clarify that the accounts analyzed in this study are narrative accounts produced within the interview context itself. Rather than reporting actual communicative exchanges with external audiences such as family members, peers, or religious communities, participants produced reflexive narratives in response to interview prompts. These narratives are treated as self-directed accounts through which participants constructed moral meaning and managed identity coherence. This approach is consistent with accounts theory, which recognizes that accounts can be directed not only toward external social audiences but also toward the self as a moral audience (McLaughun et al., 1983; Scott & Lyman, 1968). All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and all identifying information was anonymized in the transcripts and throughout the analysis to protect confidentiality.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase framework established by Braun and Clarke (2021), comprising familiarization with the data, generation of initial

codes, construction of themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the analytic account. Thematic analysis was selected because it offers a flexible yet rigorous method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterned meanings across qualitative data sets, and is well-suited to theory-informed analysis in which an existing conceptual framework guides interpretation without constraining emergent findings (Byrne, 2022). Cognitive dissonance theory and accounts theory served jointly as the analytic lens guiding interpretation. Codes were generated by labeling meaning-bearing segments related to religious identity and moral standards, perceptions of inconsistency or conflict between religious values and nightlife behavior, emotional and identity-related responses including guilt, shame, and feelings of hypocrisy or self-inconsistency, and the communicative strategies participants used to reduce or manage the resulting tension. Coded segments were subsequently grouped into broader thematic patterns that captured both the phenomenological character of dissonance as experienced by participants and the communicative mechanisms through which it was managed. Analytic reflexivity was maintained throughout, with the researcher attending to how theoretical commitments shaped interpretive choices and ensuring that thematic constructions remained grounded in participants' own accounts.

3. Results and Discussion

Participants consistently positioned religion as central to their identity and as a primary framework for evaluating everyday conduct. Several accounts foregrounded religion as a life foundation and source of behavioral direction: "*Religion and its practices are so important as my guide in life*" (P2), "*Religion is our foundation in life*" (P3), and "*Religion is number one… it influences me to act based on God's choice*" (P6). These statements indicate that religion functions not merely as institutional affiliation but as a salient identity marker that actively informs participants' moral standards and behavioral boundaries. This finding aligns with contemporary scholarship on religious identity development in emerging adulthood, which demonstrates that religious commitment, when internalized as personally important rather than externally imposed, becomes constitutive of self-definition and shapes how individuals evaluate their own conduct (Booker & Johnson, 2022; Jia et al., 2021).

Within the same accounts, nightlife drinking and clubbing were described in ways that signaled moral incompatibility with religious expectations. Participants framed these activities using explicit religious prohibitions and broader value-based judgments. Participant P2 described nightlife drinking as "*haram or strictly prohibited*," while P3 stated that "*drunkenness and worldly lusts are strictly prohibited in the Bible.*" Similarly, P4 and P5 referenced scripture to reinforce their moral evaluation: "*Isaiah 5:22, Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine and champions at mixing drinks.*" Participant P6 extended the moral framing beyond doctrine to behavioral consequences: "*Nightlife is unacceptable because it leads to unhealthy behaviors that are not aligned to religious values.*" Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that participants held relatively stable moral interpretations in which nightlife drinking and clubbing were constructed as inconsistent with their religious standards. In cognitive dissonance terms, these moral-religious cognitions represent the first element of a dissonance condition: salient beliefs and values whose content stands in perceived contradiction to the behavior of nightlife participation (Bran & Vaidis, 2020; Festinger, 1957). The consistency with which participants articulated these moral positions also indicates the degree to which religious identity served as an evaluative standard against which behavior was measured, making the potential for identity-relevant dissonance especially pronounced (Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2020; S. A. Hardy & Taylor, 2024).

A recurring pattern across participants' narratives was that the strongest discomfort did not occur during the nightlife event itself but emerged afterward, typically when participants became sober, returned home, or re-entered contexts in which religious norms were more salient. Several participants reported that nightlife participation felt enjoyable in the moment but was followed by regret, guilt, or identity disturbance. P3 explained, *"It was fun during the party, but I regretted it the next day, I felt the inner conflict and discomfort."* P4 stated, "*I was not afraid of God while at the place, but I regretted it after I got home, felt guilty, ashamed, like a hypocrite.*" P5 conveyed a comparable temporal

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sequence: "*It was fun when I did it, but I felt guilty after I got sober.*" P6 connected discomfort directly to moral awareness: "*Of course I feel uncomfortable because I know what I did was wrong.*"

These accounts reveal that dissonance was experienced not only as diffuse moral discomfort but as identity-based tension in which participants evaluated themselves against the religious standards they publicly endorsed. The self-description of feeling "*like a hypocrite*" (P4) is particularly significant because it frames the inconsistency as a threat to self-concept rather than merely a behavioral lapse, which is precisely the condition under which cognitive dissonance theory predicts the strongest motivational pressure for reduction (Bran & Vaidis, 2020; Mulder & van Dijk, 2020). Research on guilt and remorse following alcohol consumption confirms that such post-behavioral emotional responses are common and are frequently linked to identity-relevant evaluations rather than purely behavioral assessments (Cox et al., 2026).

The temporal pattern observed here, in which dissonance intensifies upon leaving the nightlife context and returning to religious evaluative frames, also suggests that dissonance is episodic and context-dependent rather than continuous, consistent with contemporary formulations of the dissonance state as an affective-motivational response shaped by the salience of relevant cognitions in a given moment (Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2020; Strachan et al., 2025). From the perspective of accounts theory, this temporal structure is also communicatively meaningful: it is precisely in the reflective, post-behavioral moment that individuals feel the social and psychological pressure to produce accounts — explanations and justifications — that render their behavior intelligible to themselves and to others (McLaughun et al., 1983; Scott & Lyman, 1968).

3.1. Dissonance Reduction as Communicative Account-Making

3.1.1. Justification Accounts: Boundary-Setting and Moral Reframing

Participants' narratives indicated that nightlife participation did not uniformly lead to behavioral cessation. Instead, many participants adopted strategies that reduced dissonance sufficiently to allow continued engagement, a pattern consistent with the understanding of dissonance reduction as an ongoing regulation process rather than a single, final resolution. The thematic analysis identified five distinct themes that cluster into two broad communicative account-making patterns. The first pattern, justification accounts, encompasses two themes (boundary-setting and moral reframing) through which participants repositioned nightlife participation as conditionally acceptable. The second pattern, apology and conciliation accounts, encompasses three themes (repentance and prayer, religious withdrawal, and incremental reduction) through which participants restored moral self-consistency after the behavior had occurred. Table 1 summarizes the five themes, their grouping into the two account-making patterns, the corresponding Scott and Lyman (1968) account types, the dissonance reduction functions they perform, and representative participant quotations.

Table 2. Themes, Communicative Account-Making Patterns, Account Types, Dissonance Reduction Functions, and Representative Quotations

Pattern	Theme	Account Type (Scott & Lyman, 1968)	Dissonance Reduction Function	Example Quote
Justification accounts	Boundary-setting: Self-imposed behavioral limits on nightlife participation	Justification	Adds supportive cognitions; reframes behavior as conditionally acceptable, shifting it from prohibited to "controlled participation"	"I still limit myself when I go to the club, I won't make out or drink too much." (P1); "As long as I do not get drunk and stay on decent behavior." (P8)
Justification accounts	Moral reframing: Redefining participation as acceptable under moderation	Justification	Reduces perceived magnitude of inconsistency by constructing a moral safeguard narrative around self-control	"It is okay as long as I am not addicted." (P3); "As long as I am aware of my limits." (P7)

Apology and conciliation accounts	Repentance and prayer: Post-behavioral religious practices to restore moral balance	Apology / conciliation	Reaffirms religious identity after violation; restores self-consistency by signaling continued moral commitment to self and divine audience	"I confess my sins, ask God for forgiveness." (P3); "I pray to reduce my guilt and promise to not do it again." (P5)
Apology and conciliation accounts	Religious withdrawal: Increasing religious participation and reducing nightlife involvement	Apology / conciliation	Behavioral change as moral repair; reperforms religious identity to the self through compensatory action	"I stayed away and spent more time in the mosque than engaging in nightlife." (P2); "I pray and ask for comfort from God." (P6)
Apology and conciliation accounts	Incremental reduction: Gradual decrease in nightlife behavior as harm minimization	Conciliation	Constructs an "improvement" narrative as ongoing dissonance regulation; self-discipline as a morally workable account rather than categorical abstinence	"If today I took 3 shots, next time, I will only take 2." (P8)

3.1.2. Justification Accounts: Boundary-Setting and Moral Reframing

The first and most prevalent strategy involved redefining nightlife behavior as conditionally acceptable through the construction of self-imposed behavioral limits. Participants used language of control, moderation, and boundaries to reframe participation as morally manageable. P1 stated, "*But I still limit myself when I go to the club, I won't make out or drink too much.*" P3 similarly emphasized control over escalation: "*It is okay as long as I am not addicted.*" P7 expressed a comparable position: "*As long as I am aware of my limits.*" P8 framed permissibility in terms of behavioral restraint: "*As long as I do not get drunk and stay on decent behavior.*"

In accounts theory terms, these statements function as justification accounts: the participants accept that nightlife drinking and clubbing may be morally questionable in principle but deny that their specific version of participation falls within the condemned category, effectively redefining their behavior as outside the scope of the prohibition (Scott & Lyman, 1968). The discursive move is significant: rather than excusing the behavior by reducing personal responsibility, participants construct a bounded version of nightlife participation that can be narrated as responsible, restrained, and therefore compatible with a religious self-concept. In cognitive dissonance terms, this strategy operates by adding supportive cognitions — "*I am in control,*" "*I am not going too far*" — that reduce the perceived magnitude of inconsistency between religious identity and nightlife behavior (Bran & Vaidis, 2022; Festinger, 1957).The moral meaning of the act is partially shifted from the category of prohibited behavior to a negotiated category of controlled participation, allowing the two cognitions to coexist with reduced discomfort. This pattern is consistent with broader research on moral rationalization, which demonstrates that individuals actively construct cognitive frameworks that preserve a positive moral self-image while maintaining behaviors that would otherwise threaten it (Dong et al., 2019; Mulder & van Dijk, 2020).

3.1.3. Apology and Conciliation Accounts: Moral Repair and Spiritual Compensation

The second pattern involved post-behavioral practices oriented toward restoring moral balance and reaffirming religious identity following nightlife participation. These practices ranged from prayer and formal confession to behavioral withdrawal and incremental reduction. P2 described withdrawal and religious re-engagement: "*I stayed away and spent more time in the mosque than engaging in nightlife.*" P3 narrated a repentance response: "*I confess my sins, ask God for forgiveness.*" P5 reported: "*I pray to reduce my guilt and promise to not do it again.*" P6 similarly described turning to

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religion for emotional regulation: "*I pray and ask for comfort from God.*" P8 articulated an incremental reduction strategy: "*If today I took 3 shots, next time, I will only take 2.*"

In accounts theory terms, these practices function as apology and conciliation accounts directed at the morally significant audiences that participant themselves invoked in their narratives, namely God and the self as a religiously committed person. It is important to note that the data do not contain evidence of participants directly accounting for their behavior to a religious community as an external audience; the moral audiences appearing in participant accounts are limited to the divine and the reflexive self. The religious community thus functions in this study as an implied normative reference point that shapes participants' moral standards rather than as a documented interlocutor in their account-making. Unlike justification accounts, which reframe the behavior as acceptable, apology accounts acknowledge that the behavior was inconsistent with one's standards and seek to restore moral standing through compensatory action. The communicative significance of these practices lies in their dual function: they simultaneously address the psychological discomfort generated by dissonance and perform a private reaffirmation of religious identity, signaling to the self and to the divine audience that the core religious commitment remains intact despite the behavioral lapse.Research on religious identity development confirms that such compensatory religious practices are a common and culturally legitimate mechanism for managing moral inconsistency in contexts where religious standards remain personally salient (W. Hardy et al., 2022; Jia et al., 2021). The account of incremental reduction offered by P8 is particularly notable in that it represents a harm-minimization framing, in which moral repair is pursued through gradual self-discipline rather than categorical abstinence, suggesting that the communicative construction of "improvement" itself functions as a dissonance-reducing account.

3.2. Discussion

Before elaborating on the findings, it is necessary to acknowledge the religious diversity within the sample. Participants identified with either Islam or Christianity, which are traditions that differ in their doctrinal treatment of alcohol and nightlife. Muslim participants explicitly referenced Islamic prohibitions through the concept of haram, while Christian participants drew on biblical passages to construct moral evaluations of drinking behavior. Despite these doctrinal differences, the dissonance process itself, namely the experience of tension between religious identity and nightlife participation and the subsequent reduction strategies employed, followed structurally similar patterns across both groups. This convergence suggests that what drives dissonance in this context is not the specific doctrinal content of a given religion, but the salience of religious identity as a moral reference point. Future research with larger samples should examine whether doctrinal differences produce meaningfully different dissonance experiences or reduction strategies

The findings of this study, interpreted through the dual lens of cognitive dissonance theory and accounts theory, reveal that value-behavior inconsistency in religious young adults who engage in nightlife is neither a simple binary conflict between belief and behavior nor a straightforward failure of religious commitment. Rather, it is a complex, ongoing negotiation enacted through both psychological and communicative processes across social contexts that carry competing normative demands. A first key finding is that the inconsistency experienced by participants is best understood as an identity-relevant conflict rather than a propositional contradiction. Religion was described not merely as a set of rules but as a foundational self-definitional framework, making deviations from its standards consequential at the level of identity rather than simply at the level of rule compliance. Within cognitive dissonance theory, inconsistency becomes most psychologically threatening when it implicates the self-concept (Bran & Vaidis, 2020; Festinger, 1957), and the accounts in this study demonstrate precisely this dynamic. Participants did not describe themselves as indifferent to the inconsistency; they described themselves as troubled by it in ways that threatened their sense of who they are. This finding contributes to scholarship on religious identity among emerging adults in Indonesia, where the social visibility of religious identity creates conditions in which behavioral inconsistency carries not only personal but also interpersonal stakes (Jamaluddin et al., 2024; Muhibbin et al., 2024).

A second finding concerns the temporal structure of dissonance. The consistent pattern in which discomfort intensified after the nightlife episode rather than during it suggests that dissonance is context-sensitive and episodic, emerging most forcefully when individuals shift from peer-oriented nightlife contexts back into evaluative frames in which religious standards are more cognitively salient. This refinement of the standard dissonance model is supported by contemporary theoretical developments that understand the dissonance state as arising from the detection of inconsistency in a specific cognitive context (Aubert-Teillaud et al., 2023; Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2020) and it has practical implications for understanding how social environments modulate the experience of moral conflict among religious young adults (S. A. Hardy & Taylor, 2024; Strachan et al., 2025).

A third and most theoretically distinctive finding is that the strategies through which participants managed their dissonance were simultaneously psychological and communicative. Both justification accounts and apology accounts operated as forms of meaning-work through which participants constructed self-narratives that could hold together competing claims of religious identity and social participation in nightlife. The communicative dimension of this process, specifically the production of accounts directed at the divine audience and the reflexive moral self, is what accounts theory adds to the cognitive dissonance framework: it broadens the unit of analysis from the individual mind alone to the discursive construction of self-accounts directed at morally significant audiences. This integration offers a more complete picture of how religious young adults sustain workable self-narratives under conditions of normative conflict, demonstrating that dissonance reduction is not only a matter of internal cognitive restructuring but of communicative meaning-making practice that orients participants toward morally significant audiences. This finding aligns with and extends prior work on moral rationalization and identity-protective cognition (Dong et al., 2019; Mulder & van Dijk, 2020), while situating these processes within the specifically communicative and reflexive context of moral self-accounting in which they are enacted.

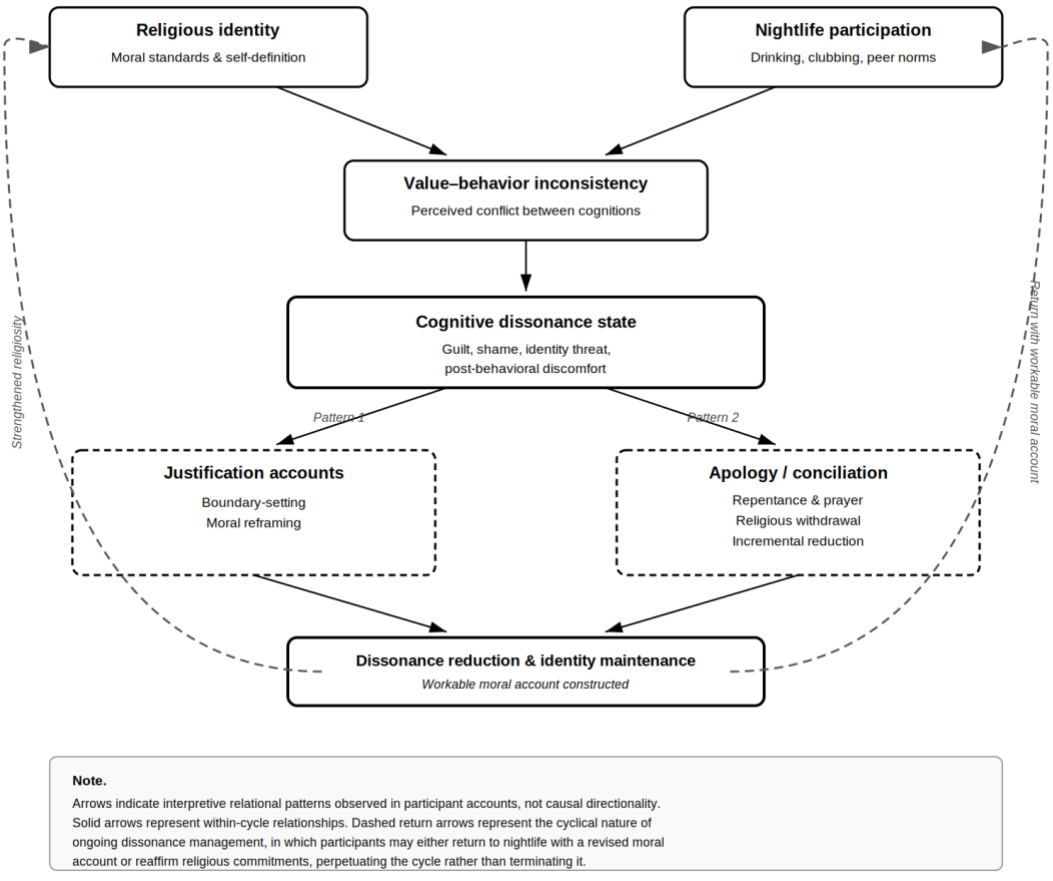


Fig. 1. Interpretive model of communicative dissonance management among religious young adults

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4. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how religious young adults experience value-behavior inconsistency when engaging in nightlife drinking and clubbing, and how they communicatively manage the resulting tension through accounts directed at the divine and the reflexive moral self. As anticipated in the Introduction, cognitive dissonance theory and accounts theory together proved effective as complementary frameworks for capturing both the psychological and communicative dimensions of this phenomenon, demonstrating compatibility between the conceptual expectations articulated at the outset and the patterns identified in the Results and Discussion.

The findings demonstrate that religious young adults who participate in nightlife while maintaining religious commitments experience cognitive dissonance primarily as post-behavioral guilt, shame, and identity-based discomfort that intensifies upon returning to evaluative contexts in which religious standards are more cognitively salient. Rather than leading to behavioral cessation, this dissonance is actively managed through two broad communicative account-making patterns. Justification accounts, encompassing boundary-setting and moral reframing, reposition nightlife participation as conditionally acceptable. Apology and conciliation accounts, encompassing repentance and prayer, religious withdrawal, and incremental reduction, restore moral self-consistency after the behavior has occurred. Together, these five themes operate as ongoing communicative regulation, enabling participants to sustain a workable religious identity across competing social contexts.

The contribution of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it integrates accounts theory as a communicative complement to cognitive dissonance theory, repositioning dissonance reduction as an inherently communicative meaning-making practice in which individuals construct self-justifying narratives oriented toward morally significant audiences. Practically, it offers grounded insight into identity communication among religiously committed emerging adults navigating competing normative pressures in an Indonesian urban context, contributing to the growing body of qualitative scholarship on religion, identity, and behavior in non-Western settings.

Building on these findings, future research may extend the present study in several productive directions. Larger and more demographically diverse samples could explore whether doctrinal differences between Islamic and Christian traditions, or between denominations within them, produce distinctive dissonance experiences or account-making strategies. Naturalistic methods such as ethnographic observation or analysis of social media discourse could further illuminate how religious young adults produce accounts to external audiences such as peers, family, or religious communities in real-time interaction. Longitudinal designs could also investigate how dissonance experiences and reduction strategies evolve over time as young adults move into later stages of religious identity development.

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