




RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Adolescent religiosity and pre-marital sexual behavior: The mediating role of pre-marital sexual attitude

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 Mira Sekar Arumi<sup>1</sup>,  Nova Faradilla<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, Universitas Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya, The Special Capital Region of Jakarta, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Department of Psychology, Universitas Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya, The Special Capital Region of Jakarta, Indonesia

## Corresponding Author:

Mira Sekar Arumi (email: [mira.sekar@dsn.ubharajaya.ac.id](mailto:mira.sekar@dsn.ubharajaya.ac.id))

## ABSTRACT

Pre-marital sex before marriage in adolescents is a severe problem associated with increased transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, having more than one partner, and early pregnancy. Even though Indonesia is considered a society with high religious values, free-sex behavior is considered increasingly concerning. This study investigates the relationship between religiosity and attitudes toward pre-marital sexual behavior with pre-marital sexual behavior in adolescents. Respondents of this study were 200 adolescents aged 10-19 years old, selected through a purposive sampling technique, with criteria: have religion, not married, and currently dating. Data were analyzed using a linear regression method. The results showed that pre-marital sexual attitude fully mediates the effect between religiosity and pre-marital sexual behavior. The present study findings contribute to pre-marital sexual research by explaining that religiosity does not decrease pre-marital sexual behavior if the person is permissive or has a supportive attitude towards it. With this outcome, it is expected that the relevant parties will focus more on changing adolescents' thoughts, attitudes, and perspectives regarding pre-marital sexual behavior and not only rely on religious teachings as the only framework for preventing pre-marital sexual behavior.

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## INTRODUCTION

Adolescents are known for their proclivity to take risks without considering the long-term consequences of their actions (Hidayangsih et al., 2011). One of the things they want to try is pre-marital sex. Pre-marital sexual behavior is defined as sexual behavior that occurs before or after marriage. Teenagers in a love relationship are likelier to engage in pre-marital sexual behavior (Aritonang, 2015). According to Rahma's (2018) research, 15% to 20% of Indonesian teenagers had pre-marital sex, resulting in approximately 2.3 million abortions. This research is supported by Demographic and Health Surveys data (2017), which found 1.7 million cases of unexpected pregnancy each year, including the birth of babies to teenage girls under 24.

Continuous sexual activity prior to marriage can increase the risk of teenage pregnancy and the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases. Unplanned pregnancies in adolescent girls can result in

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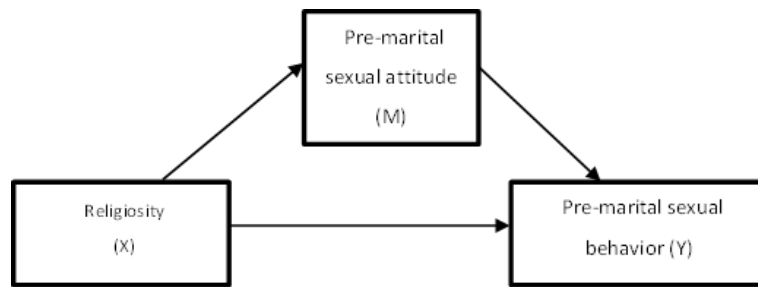
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abortions and teen marriages. Both will impact the teenager's future, the fetus he carries, and his family (Penhollow et al., 2005). Having pre-marital sexual relations is unquestionably against religious and social values and norms. No single religion permits this sexual behavior because religion becomes a frame of reference for behavior in an individual's life. Behavior must be consistent with the religious beliefs he or she adheres to. Thus, one of the factors influencing pre-marital sexual behavior is religiosity, specifically adolescents' knowledge and understanding of the concept of religiosity. Religion provides a moral framework, allowing a person to compare his actions (Desmita, 2006).

According to previous research, the results of pre-marital sex experiences lead to guilt towards God and guilt for having denied God's and parents' trust (Rakhmawati, 2021). Meanwhile, Rosidah (2012) discovered that a devoutly religious person would internalize positive religious values. So that if the values embedded in them are positive, they will be able to respect themselves and not act in ways that are harmful to themselves as well as contrary to their ethical, moral, and religious values, such as pre-marital sexual behavior (Andisti & Ritandiyono, 2008).

Several studies discussing the relationship between religiosity and pre-marital sex behavior have been conducted several times but have not yielded consistent results. Several studies have concluded that religiosity negatively correlates with pre-marital sexual behavior (Chotimah et al., 2015; Hasani & Yusuf, 2020; Mulyawati & Sukmasari, 2018; Rosalina & Agustin, 2018), while other studies have provided results showing that there is no relationship between religiosity and pre-marital sexual behavior (Firmiana et al., 2014; Maria et al., 2021; Suyuti et al., 2021). The inconsistency of research results regarding the relationship between religiosity and pre-marital sexual behavior raises suspicions that there are intervening variables that influence or mediate the relationship between the two variables.

Thornton and Camburn's research (1989) tried to link religious participation with adolescent sexual attitudes and behavior, proving that adolescents who participate actively in religious activities regularly and respect religious values have attitudes that are not permissive and inexperienced in sexual relations. Sheeran et al. (1993) also examined the possibility of sexual attitudes as a mediating variable between religiosity and actual sexual behavior. They found that religiosity was unrelated to actual sexual behavior when measured with the sexual attitude variable. Other research shows that religiosity is related to pre-marital sexual attitudes (Gyimah et al., 2013; Lefkowitz et al., 2004; McMillen et al., 2011; Pluhar et al., 1998) and pre-marital sexual attitudes with pre-marital sexual behavior (Chen et al., 2016; Earle & Perricone, 1986; Jose, 2013; Wong, 2012). The results of these studies form the basis for the assumption in this study that pre-marital sexual attitude mediates the relationship between religiosity and pre-marital sexual behavior. The authors hypothesize that (H1) Religiosity will harm pre-marital sexual behavior, (H2) Religiosity will harm pre-marital sexual attitude, (H3) pre-marital sexual attitude will have a positive effect on pre-marital sexual behavior, and (H4) pre-marital sexual attitude mediates the effect of religiosity on pre-marital sexual behavior (see Figure 1). Adolescents with high religiosity are thought to have a negative attitude toward pre-marital sex and are reluctant to have sexual intercourse before marriage. Conversely, adolescents with low religiosity tend to be more permissive and have a positive attitude towards pre-marital sexual behavior, so they do not mind doing this behavior with their partners. Thus, in addition to confirming the link between religiosity and pre-marital sexual behavior, this research is also expected to explain the phenomenon of pre-marital sexual behavior among adolescents in Bekasi who are considered religious.



**Figure 1.** Research Model

## METHOD

A quantitative correlational study with a cross-sectional research design was used to conduct this study. Correlational research examines the relationship between two or more variables. Religion (X) is the independent variable, pre-marital sexual behavior attitude (M) is the mediator variable, and pre-marital sexual behavior is the dependent variable (Y). The sample in this study was 200 people living in the city of Bekasi. Purposive sampling was used, and the following conditions were met: (1) Youth between the ages of 15 and 24; (2) have religion; (3) not married; and (4) dating.

The religiosity scale, consisting of 24 items, was used as a data collection tool. Based on the religiosity dimension proposed by Glock and Stark (Ancok et al., 2000), it resulted in items such as “I DO believe in God’s existence.” The attitude scale is based on attitude aspects by Azwar (2013), which consists of 26 items, such as “In my opinion, masturbating has health benefits.” Meanwhile, the pre-marital sexual behavior scale based on Sarwono et al. (2018) consisted of 26 items, including “I frequently have sex with my lover.” Based on the analysis using Cronbach’s alpha, it is known that these three scales have met the internal consistency standards as described in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Reliability of the scale

Scale	Cronbach’s Alpha	N Item	Result
Religiosity	.914	24	Reliable
Pre-Marital Sexual Attitude	.902	26	Reliable
Pre-Marital Sexual Behavior	.899	26	Reliable

Fundamental assumption analysis shows that the data in this study have a normal distribution and are linear. In addition to the normality and linearity tests, it is necessary to carry out multicollinearity and heteroscedasticity tests to meet the requirements of the classical assumptions of reference tests so that a regression model can produce the correct estimating parameter values. Since all conditions are met, the path analysis model can be carried out further.

## RESULT

Table 2 shows the participants’ demographic information, including gender and age. According to the results of the research subject categorization test (see Tables 3), there were 166 participants (83%) with a high level of religiosity, 34 (17%) with a moderate level of religiosity, and 0 (0%) with low-level religiosity. The participants were also categorized by 104 (52%) with a high level of sexual behavior, 56 (28%) with a moderate level of sexual behavior, and 40 (20%) with a low level of sexual behavior. In terms of pre-marital sexual attitude, 104 participants (52%) had a highly favorable toward pre-marital sexual behavior. In contrast, 55 (27.5%) had a moderately favorable attitude toward pre-marital sexual behavior, and 41 (20,5%) had a low favorable toward pre-marital sexual behavior.

**Table 2.** The demographic of participants (n=200)

Category	n (%)
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	102
Female	98
<b>Religion</b>	
Islam	159
Catholic	17
Protestant	24
<b>Age (years old)</b>	
10 – 12	23
13 – 15	90
16 – 19	87

**Table 3.** Variable Categorizations

Variable	Range	Frequency
<b>Religiosity</b>		
Low	< 44	0 (0%)
Moderate	44 - 76	34 (17%)
High	> 76	166 (83%)
<b>Pre-Marital Attitude</b>		
Low	< 43	41 (20,5%)
Moderate	43 - 69	55 (27,5%)
High	> 69	104 (52%)
<b>Pre-Marital Behavior</b>		
Low	< 43	40 (20%)
Moderate	43 - 69	56 (28%)
High	> 69	104 (52%)

The correlation analysis in Table 4. shows a significant correlation between every variable in this research. Adolescents with a high level of religiosity tend to have less permissive pre-marital sexual attitudes ( $r = -.439, p < .05$ ) and behavior ( $r = -.428, p < .05$ ). Moreover, a more positive attitude towards pre-marital sexual behavior tends to follow by higher pre-marital sexual behavior ( $r = .895, p < .05$ ).

**Table 4.** Means, standard deviations, and correlation among variables

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	1	2	3
Religiosity	83,54	8,451	1		
Pre-Marital Sexual attitude	64,70	18,015	-0,439**	1	
Pre-Marital Sexual behavior	66,08	21,758	-0,428**	0,895**	1

**Table 5.** Regression analysis result

Effect	Estimate	SE	95% CI		p	Result
			LL	UL		
Religiosity - Pre-marital Sexual Attitude	-.936	.136	-1.2048	-.668	<.001	Significant
Pre-Marital Sexual Attitude - Pre-marital Sexual Behavior	1.058	.042	.974	1.142	<.001	Significant
Religiosity - Pre-marital Sexual Behavior (total)	-1.103	.165	-1.429	-.777	<.01	Significant
Religiosity - Pre-marital Sexual Behavior (direct)	-.112	.091	-.291	.067	.217	Not Significant
Religiosity - Pre-marital Sexual attitude - Pre-marital sexual behavior (indirect)	-.385	-	-.485	-.284	-	Significant (does not contain zero)

## DISCUSSION

This study contributes to the existing literature not only by confirming that religiosity has a negative correlation with pre-marital sexual behavior but also by uncovering new mechanisms from religiosity to pre-marital sexual behavior through the mediation of pre-marital sexual attitude. Religion

influences the development of sexual behavior. This research result is consistent with the prior study, which indicates that religiosity is one of the elements influencing sexual behavior formation. Adolescents with low religiosity tend to have high confidence in their sexual behaviors. This statement is consistent with Rosalina and Handayani (2018) finding a tangible link between religion and sexual activity. Their research also suggests that people who are inclined to a deep religiosity have less sexual desired. In contrast, if a person does not have high religiosity, his sexual conduct will be more intense. Not only Rosalina and Handayani's study but this study's findings are also consistent with the study by Mulyawati & Sukmasari (2018), conducted on SMK students in Sukabumi, which discovered a substantial association between religion and pre-marital sexual activity. Religion forms a set of morals and specific beliefs in oneself. Someone who lives his religion well tends to behave according to the norm. Someone with a high level of religiosity will always try to internalize religious teachings in everyday behavior.

Meanwhile, this study also proved that religiosity influences pre-marital sexual attitudes. Within each faith, highly embedded members are more likely to follow official doctrines and use religion as a reference group (Gyimah et al., 2013). Cochran & Beeghley (1991) have argued that religiosity is the mechanism through which members of religious groups operate as reference groups. For instance, members who attend religious service more often will be more likely to be exposed to doctrinal prohibitions and have certain shared norms and values with other devout members. Presumably, such individuals may become more exposed to teachings on sexual immorality. Through continuous reinforcement of religious teaching, such members form primary groups, which provide norms and role expectations for each other.

It has become common knowledge that attitude has a strong relationship with behavior. This research proves this assumption, which shows that pre-marital sexual attitudes substantially affect pre-marital sexual behavior. This result is consistent with Jose's (2013) findings on Filipino adolescents. These expected results show that although adolescents may hold different values concerning sexuality, their attitudes about sex are related to behavior. Sexual experience increased with more positive attitudes toward sexuality (Huerta-Franco & Malacara, 1999; Werner-Wilson, 1998). Moreover, investigations into the effects of human sexuality generally support the assertion that sexual experience has a reciprocal relationship with sexual attitudes (Tobin, 1993). More significant average positive affect was associated with oral sex, and permissive attitudes toward sex were associated with more positive affect concerning the experience of penetrative sex (Dalton & Galambos, 2009).

Lastly, this research shows that pre-marital sexual attitude fully mediates the relationship between religiosity and pre-marital sexual behavior. These findings provide some evidence that no matter how high the religiosity level adolescent have if they have a favorable attitude toward pre-marital sexual behavior, they most likely will no longer use their religious values as a basis for consideration and will engage in pre-marital sexual activity. The results strengthened with categorization data which show that most participants perceived themselves as a highly religious individual but also showed favorable attitudes towards pre-marital sex and also engaged in pre-marital behavior. Therefore, we can assume that no matter how high adolescent religiosity is, they will engage in pre-marital behavior due to their favorable attitude towards it. These research results are consistent and strengthen previous studies by Thornton and Camburn (1989) and Sheeran et al. (1993) proposing and proving that religiosity affects pre-marital sexual activity through their attitude. Furthermore, Sheeran et al. also argued that a religious upbringing might influence sexual behavior, but that may not happen if their reported attitudes toward sexuality are not aligned with the values transmitted by the religion. These findings show that while the level of sexual conduct in adolescents is commonly discussed from a religious

standpoint, it is proven that the attitude of adolescents toward pre-marital sexual behavior has a more significant influence on adolescents' pre-marital sexual behavior.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research demonstrates a significant and negatively significant association between religiosity and sexual conduct in teenagers in Bekasi, which implies that the greater the level of religiosity, the higher the pre-marital sexual attitude and behavior of adolescents, as well as the opposite. Based on this study, the authors can demonstrate that the attitude variable towards pre-marital sexual behavior plays an essential role in the pre-marital sexual behavior of adolescents in Bekasi. Religiosity alone does not prevent adolescents from engaging in pre-marital sexual behavior. However, attitudes toward sexual behavior can determine whether or not the teenager will engage in pre-marital sex sexual behavior.

As a practical recommendation, not only adolescence are encouraged to deepen their knowledge of religion in order to sort out which are positive and negative behaviors in association in the current era, but they also to be given information about the dangers and risks that may occur with pre-marital sex activity, such as unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), early parenthood, which then expected will alter their favorable attitude towards pre-marital sexual behavior.

## **DECLARATION**

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### **Author contribution statement**

Mira Sekar Arumi composed the research background, analysis data, and translation and contributed as the correspondent author. Nova Faradilla helped with the literature review and data collection.

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### **Declaration of interest's statement**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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No additional information is available for this paper.

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