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Laughing through difference: Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia's digital culture — humour, platform affordances, and the negotiation of religious difference

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Laughing Through Difference:

Islamic-Inspired Memes in Indonesia's Digital Culture—Humour,
Platform Affordances, and the Negotiation of Religious Difference

Fitri Murfianti



Laughing Through Difference:

Islamic-Inspired Memes in Indonesia's Digital Culture—Humour,
Platform Affordances, and the Negotiation of Religious Difference

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There was a time when pursuing a PhD felt like something far beyond my reach. After completing my undergraduate studies in Bandung, I began my academic career as a lecturer at Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta in 2005. A few years later, while continuing to teach, I pursued a Master's degree at Universitas Airlangga in Surabaya and completed it in 2010. At that point, I did not know whether I would ever have the opportunity to continue my studies at the doctoral level.

More than a decade passed before I finally arrived in Leiden. Looking back, this dissertation is not simply the product of my years as a PhD candidate, but also of many years spent teaching, conducting research, and continuing to learn. Along the way, there were moments when things moved forward smoothly and moments when they did not. Receiving an LPDP scholarship after several years of trying was one of the turning points that made this PhD possible.

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Memes, simple, flexible, and easily replicable, have become one of the most effective tools for Indonesians to comment on religion, politics, and everyday life. In the country's digital culture, humour often serves as a soft entry point for navigating sensitive themes while keeping interactions light and socially comfortable.

Ahead of *Eid al-Adha*,¹ for example, social media feeds overflowed with playful memes about animals anticipating their ritual fate. One widely shared meme shows a goat attempting to disguise itself as a tiger, hoping to escape the sacrificial queue. Another depicts a pig greeting a cow with “Happy Eid al-Adha, bro,” prompting the cow to retort, “Wait until Chinese New Year.” These lighthearted exchanges work because they draw on shared cultural knowledge: everyone understands the ritual context, which makes the animals’ naïve strategies both absurd and endearing. Through such *receh* (silly) humour, Indonesian users turn a solemn religious moment into something relatable, communal, and unexpectedly amusing.

¹ Eid al-Adha, or the Feast of Sacrifice, holds profound significance for Muslims. It commemorates the story of the Prophet Ibrahim, who demonstrated his unwavering obedience to Allah by being willing to sacrifice his son, only to be replaced by a lamb. On this day, Muslims can perform a symbolic act of sacrifice by slaughtering an animal such as a goat, cow, or sheep, and the meat is shared with family, neighbours, and those in need. Beyond the act of worship, Eid al-Adha is a time for strengthening relationships and reflecting on the importance of caring for others (Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Surabaya (UNUSA), 2024), <https://unusa.ac.id/2024/06/17/makna-idul-adha-pengingat-dari-keserakahan-dan-egoisme/>, accessed 19 August 2024



Figure 1.1. Examples of memes circulated on social media

Source: www.idntimes.com (IDN Times, n.d.)

Translation of on-image text:

- Goat: “Bro, kalo ada yang nanyain gue, bilang gue ini harimau ya.” → “Bro, if anyone asks about me, tell them I’m a tiger, okay?”
- Pig: “Met Idul Adha bro...” → “Happy Eid al-Adha, bro...”
- Cow: “Babi lu... tunggu ntar Imlek...” → “Pig... wait until Chinese New Year...”

This friendly banter showcases how Indonesian netizens use humour to comment on religious traditions, poke fun at cultural norms, and navigate the intersections between everyday life and ritual practice.

The tone can shift when humour intersects with theological and political commentary. A viral meme that circulated widely on Twitter (now “X”) in April 2024 illustrates this shift.² Using characters from the anime *Naruto*³ the meme stages a sword fight between “Qunut” (representing Nahdlatul Ulama/NU) and “Tidak Qunut” (representing Muhammadiyah), a playful reference to one of the most recognisable ritual differences between the two organisations.⁴ The choice of using *Naruto* characters is not incidental. Indonesian netizens often borrow fictional worlds, such as *Konoha* or even *Wakanda* from *Black Panther*, as playful metaphors for social and political realities at home. These references have become

² On 24 July 2023, Twitter's logo changed to a white "X" on a black (Tempo.co, 2023).

<https://www.tempo.co/sains/kaleidoskop-2023-perubahan-nama-twitter-menjadi-x-ambisi-elon-musk-405674>, accessed 17 January 2025. However, in this study, the name "Twitter" was retained because the study was conducted before the name change.

³ *Naruto* is a popular Japanese animated series about the ninja world. One of its main settings is a fictional village called Konoha (or Konohagakure). It is used by Indonesian netizens as a satirical nickname for Indonesia, usually to comment on social or political issues (Fallahnda, 2024) (<https://tirto.id/apa-itu-konoha-dan-wakanda-sering-jadi-sebutan-indonesia>), accessed 30 July 2024.

⁴ *Qunut* is a supplicatory prayer recited during the *Subuh* (dawn) prayer in the Shāfi‘i tradition commonly followed by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Muhammadiyah generally does not perform *qunut* in the regular *Subuh* prayer, making it one of the most recognisable differences between the two organisations

part of local digital humour, allowing people to comment on national issues through the safety, absurdity of imagined places, and distance of popular culture.



Figure 1.2. Example of a satirical meme

Source: dok.Medsos X, tvoenews.com/religi/231550-netizen-satire-muhammadiyah-dan-nu-soal-tambang-ramai-sebut-kaya-klan-senju-dan-uchiha-di-serial-naruto-konohagakuat

Translation of on-image text:

- “TDK QUNUT” → “No Qunut”
- “QUNUT” → “Qunut”
- “NAMBANG” → “Mining”

This meme conveyed more than theological satire. It appeared amid heated debate over the government’s decision to grant mining concessions to major religious organisations, including NU and Muhammadiyah. The background label “Nambang” (mining) encapsulates the irony: despite frequently emphasised ritual differences, both organisations ultimately converged in accepting mining permits, albeit for different internal considerations. The meme compresses this contradiction into a single visual composition, placing ritual rivalry in the foreground while signalling economic alignment in the background.

For NU, participation in mining was framed as a strategy to ensure organisational sustainability. Following internal deliberation, Muhammadiyah likewise agreed to engage in mining activities, justifying the decision through the logic of *dakwah ekonomi* (economic outreach).⁵ By juxtaposing doctrinal distinction with shared

⁵ Da’wah refers to the act of conveying and teaching Islamic values. In contemporary settings, it extends beyond face-to-face preaching and includes digital platforms. As Nisa (2018) notes, da’wah increasingly adapts to media technologies and becomes tied to digital commodification, where religious content can also generate economic value. “Dakwah ekonomi” in Muhammadiyah’s context links religious outreach with economic empowerment to sustain organisational activities.

economic engagement, the meme foregrounds a broader tension within Indonesia's religious landscape, where theological differences coexist with pragmatic institutional alliances shaped by state policy.

This story transcends a simple moment of poking fun. It reveals Indonesia's complex and sometimes contradictory relationship between religion and sociopolitical interests. Through memes like this, the online sphere, where Indonesians interact, share ideas, and engage in cultural and political discourse, provides a forum where these contradictions might be investigated, ridiculed, and even accepted in a way that invites thought, laughter, and common ground.

From lighthearted jokes about prayer rituals to more cutting satire about institutional alliances and the ethical dilemmas of mining, these memes show how important Islamic-inspired humour on social media influences conversations on faith and its role in modern life. First, the circulation of such memes demonstrates how seemingly playful digital content can spill over beyond online spaces, informing wider public debates about religion, morality, and authority. Second, these memes are not produced and consumed only by “very online” users but have become a widely recognised mode of expression through which religious ideas, differences, and critiques are articulated. This study investigates these dynamics, examining how memes function as cultural agents that actively mediate religious difference and social norms in Indonesia.

In the age of digital communication, memes have emerged as a unique and powerful manifestation of internet language that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. Throughout this dissertation, the term “digital age” refers to the period from the early 2000s onward, when internet access expanded rapidly in Indonesia and social media platforms became central to public communication, including discussions of religion and everyday life.

Memes are a form of spreadable media that evolve through the remixing and iteration of pre-existing materials (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015), driven by the widespread communication of the digital age (Jenkins et al., 2013; A. Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). The phenomenon of memes has sparked significant scholarly interest, particularly in relation to their role in constructing collective identities and shaping new forms of digital interaction (Gal et al., 2016; Varis & Blommaert, 2015). Among these growing interests, scholars have begun to explore how memes intersect with religious expression, identity formation, and cultural negotiation in diverse socio-religious contexts. In Indonesia, a majority Muslim society, what I refer to as Islamic-inspired memes are not limited to memes that display explicit Islamic symbols. Rather, they include digital expressions that evoke, negotiate, or provoke discussion around Islamic values, moral boundaries, and religious sensibilities as they circulate within a Muslim-majority public. This definition is central to the analysis developed in this dissertation and will be elaborated further in the following section.

These memes have evolved beyond digital fads, becoming essential tools for articulating religious identity and expressing cultural principles valued by various Muslim communities (Imron, 2019; Nisa, 2018b, 2018a; Slama, 2017). As both a source of entertainment and a powerful tool for sharing beliefs, memes challenge social norms and spark debates about religion and everyday life (Bellar et al., 2013).

Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok play a central role in shaping the way these memes are created, shared, and interpreted. They enable various forms of expression (Kimmons et al., 2017), debate (Masood & Skoric, 2023), while also shaping how religious identity and cultural values are interpreted and contested in mediated environments (Almobarraz, 2016; Mishol-Shauli & Golan, 2019; Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019). This phenomenon is particularly evident in Indonesia, as the largest Muslim majority country, where a significant internet user population and high levels of online activity contribute to a dynamic digital landscape (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2024). The rise of Islamic-themed memes, often humorous in nature, reflects how religious teachings and symbols are adapted into formats that resonate with the diverse audiences using social media platforms in Indonesia. While Martin Slama (2018) does not focus on memes specifically, his analysis of how Indonesian Muslims, particularly the urban middle class, engage with digital media to perform and negotiate their religiosity offers valuable context. His observations on how many Indonesians practice a form of “digital piety” help illuminate the cultural and technological conditions that enable the circulation and interpretation of Islamic-inspired memes. Social media has become a fertile ground for playful, performative, and sometimes contested expressions of Islam in the digital age.

Islamic-inspired memes have circulated widely on Indonesian social media since at least the early 2010s, particularly through Facebook pages and groups, and have become increasingly visible with the rise of platform-based meme cultures on Twitter and TikTok. While such memes appear throughout the year as part of everyday digital interaction, their circulation intensifies during specific moments of the Islamic calendar. During the holy month of Ramadan, for example, memes spread especially widely on TikTok, highlighting how religious values enter and shape public discourse through humour, cultural exchange, and interaction across faiths. In this sense, Islamic-inspired memes both permeate everyday social media use and peak during ritual moments that invite heightened reflection, participation, and public visibility.

These dynamics unfold within Indonesia’s religiously plural social landscape. As home to the world’s most populous Muslim community, alongside significant Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and Confucian minorities, Indonesia provides a context in which memes related to Islam are shaped not only by shared religious references but also by inter-group sensitivities.

While many Islamic-inspired memes circulate as light-hearted expressions of everyday religiosity, more satirical iterations, such as the meme referencing the historic Borobudur temple complex discussed in Chapter 5, reveal the limits of humour when it moves beyond intra-group play. Such cases prompt broader debates about expressive freedom and the delicate balance between humour and respect in a plural society striving for inter-group harmony.

Each social media platform, such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, shapes conversations around Islamic-inspired memes in different ways.⁶ These differences are not neutral; they reflect how platform owners steer user activity through design choices, algorithmic filtering, and the economic logic behind their services (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Such structures influence which memes travel widely, and which fade in the background, affecting how users encounter Islamic-inspired humour, and which themes rise to prominence. These dynamics also foreground questions of responsibility and governance, particularly concerning how platforms respond when religiously sensitive humour escalates into public controversy.

Visual styles, hashtag cultures, and short textual cues also determine how Islamic-themed memes circulate and how they are interpreted. A meme may spread quickly on TikTok due to its remix-friendly format, while on Twitter it moves through short quips and rapid reposts. These conditions shape how Indonesians engage with the material, what they find amusing, what sparks debate, and what becomes a point of critique. Understanding how each platform organises circulation and interaction offers a clearer view of the broader dynamics behind the spread and reception of Islamic-inspired memes.

Problem Statement

The popularity of Islamic-inspired memes on social media is directly tied to two key developments: the impact of digital platforms on contemporary expressions of faith and belief, and the transformation of pre-digital cultural forms into fresh digital formats. This examination aims to address a pivotal question: How do Islamic-inspired memes, rooted in pre-Internet traditions including proverbs, folklore, and narrative forms found in *wayang*, and later adapted to modern digital spaces, contribute to the negotiation of religious difference, cultural practices, and social norms in Indonesia?

Indonesia is an important context for examining these questions. The country has one of the most active social media populations globally, and these platforms shape everyday religious and cultural engagement (Nisa, 2018a, 2018b). Scholars

⁶ “Platform” in this thesis refers to digital services, such as websites or social media applications, where users interact with material and with one another. The term is used simply to describe the environments in which Islamic-inspired memes circulate

working on Muslim digital publics in Southeast Asia further show how Indonesia's online sphere is both highly active and closely connected to religious discussion and public debate, making it a productive setting for understanding how digital practices intersect with questions of sensitivity, freedom of expression, and social cohesion (Lim, 2017; Slama, 2018; Slama & Barendregt, 2018). As digital platforms increasingly become sites where cultural traditions are reworked and reinterpreted, recognising these shifts become essential for tracing the wider implications of technology for community life and religious practice.

This urgency is heightened by Indonesia's rapidly expanding digital ecosystem and its position as the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation. The swift growth of social networking sites has reshaped how religion is expressed and debated online, often raising concerns over religious sensitivity, limits of expression, and the maintenance of social harmony within a diverse society.

To approach these issues, I draw on Geertz (1973)'s understanding of culture as webs of shared meaning to position memes within wider symbolic fields, while recognising that memes are contemporary digital artefacts that operate very differently from the cultural forms he examined. I also rely on anthropological perspectives that view cultural expressions as active sites of negotiation and struggle, spaces where power, interpretation, and identity are continually worked out (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Hall, 1997). From this perspective, memes are not passive reflections of society but agents that shape religious discourse, sensibilities, and forms of digital belonging.

In this study, "technology" refers to the digital infrastructures, platform architectures, and algorithmic systems that structure online interaction. User behaviour, by contrast, refers to how individuals navigate, adapt to, or resist these technological conditions. Memes serve as an entry point for exploring the interplay between digital infrastructures, religious practice, and sociocultural negotiation in contemporary Indonesia.

Accordingly, several specific questions will be further analysed in this study:

1. What meme-like forms have helped Indonesians navigate religious and cultural issues over time, and how have these forms evolved in response to cultural and technological changes?
2. How do different platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, create affordances for producing, distributing and consuming Islamic-inspired memes, and who are the key actors involved in these processes?
3. How do TikTok memes facilitate sociocultural interactions and encourage playful citizenship amidst religious and cultural diversity in Indonesia?
4. What is the impact of the circulation of satirical memes on navigating religious sensitivities and shaping broader public discourse in Indonesia?

Research Objectives

This study aims to examine how Islamic-inspired memes have evolved from pre-Internet traditions, such as proverbs, folklore, and *wayang* narratives, to contemporary digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. These early cultural forms laid the foundation for today's digital expressions, where memes continually reinterpret and convey religious and cultural messages within a rapidly shifting media landscape. The research further analyses how the affordances of various digital platforms shape the creation and distribution of Islamic-inspired memes and explores their role in fostering social and cultural interactions in Indonesia's diverse religious context. Finally, it seeks to understand how satirical memes influence religious sensitivity and public discourse, offering insight into the broader implications of humour and digital culture in shaping contemporary Islamic expression.

Significance of the Study

This study presents a fresh perspective on the interplay between religion, culture, and technology in the digital age, particularly within the Indonesian context. An in-depth study of Islamic-inspired memes reveals that they are not merely entertainment, but a reflection of religious identity and social dynamics in the digital space. By utilising humour, satire, and creativity, these memes open up a light yet distinct space for dialogue to discuss differences in religious practices, religious sensitivity, and broader social issues.

In the context of Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world and home to sizeable minority religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, religious sensitivity is often a complex topic. This study demonstrates how memes can serve as a tool to bridge differences, ease tensions, or even spark public debate about freedom of expression. By examining examples of memes, ranging from humorous to political and controversial, this study highlights the dynamics of the much-needed and much-discussed balance between humour and respect for fellow citizens and religious values in a pluralistic society. Particularly in discussing satirical memes like the Borobudur Stupa meme (see Chapter 5), which emphasises the intersection of humour, sensitivity, and religious depiction, the presence of minority religious settings, such as Buddhism, is crucially relevant. Furthermore, this study highlights the role and responsibility of various digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, each with their own characteristics in spreading and shaping perceptions of memes.

The findings of this study are expected to be beneficial for various parties: for policymakers to help them understand the dynamics of freedom of expression and maintain social harmony; for academics to stimulate more studies on the role of religion and religious sensitivities in the digital world; and for the general public to be more sensitive in navigating humour in religious and cultural life, with

greater awareness of its potential impact. This raises a broader issue often discussed in secular societies: Should individuals be mindful of others' sensitivities, or does the ideal of individual freedom allow everyone to express themselves freely? While this study does not definitively answer such challenging questions, it highlights the risks associated with controversy and uncivil public discourse, particularly in digital environments where misunderstandings can quickly escalate and civility often gives way to antagonism (Coe et al., 2014; Lim, 2017; Papacharissi, 2004).

Given these risks, platforms operating in Indonesia could benefit from more context-sensitive moderation practices. Approaches such as involving local administrators or language-aware moderation tools would be better equipped to detect expressions that carry specific cultural or religious weight, including insults or terms that may seem ordinary but escalate tensions quickly. While this study does not offer a full policy framework, it underscores the importance of moderation systems that recognise Indonesia's linguistic, cultural, and religious particularities.

Thus, this study not only records ongoing digital dynamics but also offers an in-depth reflection on how we, as a society, continue to negotiate differences and shared values amidst rapid technological change.

Methodology

This research employs a digital ethnography approach (Hine, 2015; Kozinets, 2020), involving immersive observation and interaction within meme communities across Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. Memes are treated here not as static artefacts but as socially embedded practices, best understood through their circulation, reception, and reinterpretation across platforms. Rather than relying solely on content analysis, this method involves tracing meme creators on and offline, engaging with user comments, and observing how digital religious expressions take shape on these platforms, how they move across users, and how people respond to them within different platform ecologies. This multi-sited strategy enables a nuanced understanding of how memes shape and are shaped by online religious discourse.

The following methodological sections elaborate on this approach through four interrelated components: the thematic and platform-specific focus of the study, the data collection and query design across platforms, the layered analytical strategies combining discourse, content, and sentiment analysis, and the multi-method fieldwork involving interviews and contextual exploration. Together, these components form the methodological foundation of this dissertation.

Research Focus and Platform Justification

This research focuses on Islamic-inspired memes on social media platforms, particularly Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. These platforms are popular in Indonesia, along with Instagram and YouTube (Dahono, 2021). The three were selected due to their distinct socio-technical and cultural affordances that shape the production, circulation, and reception of religious content, particularly Islamic-inspired memes.

Compared to other platforms, Facebook remains one of Indonesia's most prominent social media sites, boasting a sizeable and diverse user base that encompasses both young and older users. This platform offers community-oriented features that enable the intense exchange of Islamic-inspired memes and foster the growth of religious debate groups. These affordances help memes become a valuable tool for communication, religious debate, and religious education. Twitter, in contrast, is known for its fast-paced dissemination of memes and other trending content, ranging from verified information to misinformation. Its character limitations and vernacular use of hashtags support the rapid and viral spread of Islamic-inspired memes. Meanwhile, TikTok has gained traction among younger Indonesians through its short-form video format and algorithmically curated feed, which promotes creative expression through audiovisual remixing.

TikTok's remix-friendly tools resonate particularly with younger users, who often communicate through audiovisual cues and playful imitation. These participatory features support rapid experimentation and make it easy to adapt existing formats into new jokes or commentaries, a form of creativity widely recognised in youth digital cultures (Abidin, 2020; Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

While Instagram and YouTube play an important role in Indonesia's digital religious sphere, particularly through forms of visual piety, da'wah performance, and curated religious self-presentation (Nisa, 2018a; Schmidt, 2017), they fall outside the analytical scope of this study. Their dominant content cultures emphasise polished aesthetics, influencer-driven authority (Cotter, 2019), and long-form or monetised production (Burgess & Green, 2018). These tendencies differ from the fast, conversational, and highly participatory meme ecologies found on Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, where humour, remixing, and everyday banter move more freely. The focus of this study is therefore directed at platforms whose interactional rhythms and affordances align more closely with the memetic practices under examination. While early meme cultures are often associated with image boards such as 4chan and forum-based platforms like Reddit, these spaces are less relevant to the Indonesian context examined in this study. Their user bases are comparatively limited in Indonesia, and they do not function as primary sites for the circulation and negotiation of religious humour within everyday Muslim digital life.

As discussed in Chapter 3, this thesis investigates how each platform's unique features provide different affordances for producing and distributing Islamic-inspired memes. Inspired by Helmond and Bucher (2018)'s insight, it investigates how platform-specific elements, such as algorithmic timelines and content moderation policies, shape the production, dissemination, and reception of religious speech in Indonesia's digital terrain. For example, Twitter's real-time interaction feature enables quick connections with satirical memes, such as the Borobudur Stupa meme. TikTok's algorithmic content discovery helps Ramadan-themed memes gain more exposure. Taking these conveniences into account is crucial to understanding why and how people engage with Islamic-inspired memes on digital media such as Facebook, Twitter, or TikTok. This research also pays close attention to platform vernaculars, the distinctive ways users communicate and joke on each platform, such as the playful use of hashtags on TikTok or the sharp, satirical humour that circulates rapidly on Twitter. By analysing these platform-specific dynamics, the study seeks to understand how digital environments shape the ways in which religious messages are negotiated, contested, and reimagined in contemporary Indonesia.

Query Design and Data Collection Strategy

In determining the corpus for this research, I adjusted the data collection criteria to reflect the distinctive affordances and user dynamics of each platform. Since different social media sites have unique architectures and patterns of engagement, the research design needed to account for these variations. The concept of "query design," introduced by Richard Rogers in his seminal work on digital methods, is very relevant in this regard. Rogers explains that query design is a strategy for designing data searches in digital environments by considering the unique characteristics of each platform, such as algorithms, structures, and user interaction patterns (Rogers, 2017). In the context of this study, query design involves adjusting the data collection criteria for each platform to help surface Islamic-inspired memes circulating there.

I searched Facebook specifically for accounts emphasising Islamic-inspired memes using keywords, including meme, *da'wah* (proselytising), and Islam. From there, I chose five Facebook user accounts, including the pioneer of the Islamic meme community and those with the largest and most active follower bases, prioritising those who have been leaders in the evolution of Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia. These are *Meme Comic Santri*, *Meme dan Rage Muslim Indonesia*, *Meme Dakwah Islam Indonesia*, *Meme Dakwah Islam Halal (Indonesia)*, and *Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman*. This approach guarantees that the corpus captures active communities and notable voices on the platform.

Twitter data collection focuses on prominent *garis lucu* (funny lines) accounts rather than relying on hashtag-based searches. I have based this decision on several methodological and contextual considerations. First, hashtags on Twitter are frequently used in an inconsistent, ironic, and strategic ways. Many viral tweets

do not contain hashtags at all, while others may use popular hashtags that are only loosely related to the actual content, a practice sometimes referred to as *hashtag hijacking*. As noted by Bruns and Moe (2014) and Highfield (2016), hashtags on Twitter may not accurately reflect thematic coherence or discursive intention.

Unlike TikTok, where trends are highly dynamic and primarily spread through hashtags, Twitter's discursive culture tends to revolve around recognisable user accounts, such as *Garis Lucu* and other satirical accounts. These accounts serve not only as consistent sources of religious and interfaith humour but also as influential actors within Indonesia's digital public sphere. Their sustained content production provides a curated and contextually grounded corpus for analysis, in contrast to the often fragmented and thematically inconsistent nature of hashtag-based searches.

In this study, however, only the NU *Garis Lucu* account was selected as a primary data source, due to its clear focus on Islamic-themed content and consistent engagement with religious humour. The analysis centred on selected meme-based tweets and their comment sections, where interactions often reflected broader interfaith responses. Other “*garis lucu*” accounts (e.g., @MuhammadiyahGL, @KatolikG, @GHIHindu, @BuddhisGL) also circulate humorous content, but their engagements with religious topics are episodic rather than sustained. Their humour tends to address social identity, institutional concerns, or cross-community solidarity, rather than doctrinal play or ritual satire. For this reason, they were included only when their engagements directly responded to NU *Garis Lucu*'s posts or explicitly touched on Islamic themes. Rather than quantifying likes or retweets, the study focused on identifying discursive patterns in the comment threads, such as agreement, satire, critique, or reinterpretation, which reveal how users engage with religious humour and interfaith topics in digital space.

This approach positions NU *Garis Lucu* not merely as a data source but as a central node in ongoing negotiations of digital religious discourse. Its humour, interfaith interactions, and playful framing of theological differences allow it to function as an entry point for understanding broader conversational dynamics. This study draws on insights from Amal and Hoesterey, who show how such accounts can shape interfaith dialogue and influence public interpretations of religious issues in Indonesia's online sphere (Amal, 2022; Hoesterey, 2021, 2022).

For the analysis of the Borobudur Stupa meme, data collection focused on the period surrounding its initial circulation and subsequent amplification. The meme first appeared in early June 2022 and gained wider public attention after being reposted by a prominent public figure on 10 June 2022. To capture both the immediate reactions and the broader unfolding of the debate, relevant tweets and comment threads were collected from 7 June to 30 June 2022.

While Twitter allows close observation of real-time exchanges and interfaith negotiation, TikTok offers a different vantage point for tracing how religious humour circulates through audiovisual creativity and algorithmic visibility. Given TikTok's affordance for short, creative video content, I focus on examples using #Ramadan2024. Leaver and Highfield point out that hashtags create thematic clusters that direct content research and analysis, helping to organise and understand memetic media (Leaver & Highfield, 2018). While no platform is entirely free from strategic or misleading hashtag use, TikTok hashtags, unlike those on Twitter, are more directly tied to content categorisation and visibility through the platform's algorithmic structure. Creators frequently used hashtags such as #Ramadhan2024 to label videos that explicitly reference Ramadan themes, making them a relatively reliable entry point for identifying relevant meme content.

This hashtag was selected because it represents a concentrated supply of user-generated content, especially related to the holy month of Ramadan. During this time, TikTok users actively post creative videos that express various facets of religious traditions, cultural manifestations, and group events. Based on the data extraction process from TikTok, using the platform's search interface and manually documenting metadata such as video ID, author name, upload time, and engagement metrics, 4,176 videos related to the #Ramadan2024 were found on the platform from 9 March 2024 to 10 April 2024, posted from an Indonesian location. Specifically, I concentrated on memetic TikTok videos addressing the well-known discrepancy between NU and Muhammadiyah in deciding the beginning of Ramadan. With over 1,000 likes, comments, and shares indicating their popularity and relevance, I included videos that are widely imitated and attract notable user interaction.

By applying these different strategies to every platform, this research ensures that the data acquired reflects the variety and richness of how Islamic-inspired memes spread and interact in various social media contexts. To provide a clearer picture, the following table summarises the entry points, selection criteria, and final results of the data collection process for each platform used in this study:

Table 1.1. Data Collection Approach Based on Digital Platforms

Platform	Entry Point	Criteria Selection	Final Result
Facebook	Account /Pages	Keywords: <i>Meme, Dakwah, Islam</i> Focus on pioneering accounts and accounts with active communities and significant influence.	5 selection accounts: <i>Meme Comic Santri, Meme dan Rage Muslim Indonesia, Meme Dakwah Islam Indonesia, Meme Dakwah Islam Halal (Indonesia), and Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman</i>
Twitter	Garis Lucu Account	Focus on interfaith-based humor. Based on the studies of Amal (2022) and Hoesterey (2021)	Primary data from NU Garis Lucu account, with selected memes addressing interfaith themes. Observations focused on audience responses within comment threads, including reactions from other “garis lucu” accounts (e.g., Muhammadiyah, Katholik, Hindu, Buddha).
TikTok	Hashtags: #Ramadan2024	Videos relevant to the NU and Muhammadiyah debate, $\geq 1,000$ interactions.	4,176 videos were found, focusing on popular and frequently copied ones.

Source: Author’s design based on platform-specific data collection strategies

Analytical Strategy: Integrating Discourse, Content, and Sentiment Analysis

This study adopts a multi-layered qualitative approach grounded in digital ethnography, which provides the broader framework for tracing platform cultures and user interactions across Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. Within this ethnographic orientation, the analysis combines qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis as complementary interpretive approaches, supported by comparative cross-platform analysis and ethnographic observation. This analytical strategy enables a close reading of both the visual-textual features and the shifting conversational dynamics through which memes acquire meaning in different digital contexts.

Qualitative content analysis was used to identify recurring themes, visual motifs, narrative patterns, and religious symbols across the corpus of Islamic-inspired memes (Krippendorff, 2019). These recurring patterns subsequently informed the discourse analysis, which examined how they acquired meaning within broader social, cultural, religious, and political contexts.

The recurring themes, visual motifs, and narrative patterns identified through qualitative content analysis were subsequently interpreted through discourse analysis, which serves as the primary interpretive approach for examining how memes construct, negotiate, and circulate meanings within broader social, cultural, religious, and political contexts. It provides an interpretive lens for understanding how visual representations, language, humour, user interactions, media discourse, and wider public debates shape the meanings attached to Islamic-inspired memes. This approach is particularly valuable for analysing satirical materials such as the Borobudur Stupa meme, where meanings emerge not only from the meme itself but also from its circulation, reception, and broader sociocultural context. Rather than treating memes as isolated digital artefacts, discourse analysis situates them within ongoing negotiations over religion, humour, identity, freedom of expression, and public controversy in contemporary Indonesia.

To complement the broader ethnographic and interpretive analysis, this thesis also employs automated sentiment analysis for the Borobudur Stupa case study (Haqqi et al., 2022; Rieger & Klimmt, 2019). Because the Borobudur Stupa meme generated a substantial volume of public comments, sentiment analysis was applied specifically to this case as an analytical entry point for identifying dominant patterns of public responses. These patterns subsequently informed a more detailed qualitative interpretation through discourse analysis and interview data. Following Liu's (2012) conceptualisation, sentiment analysis involves identifying and classifying opinions expressed in text as positive, negative, or neutral. In this study, it provides an overview of dominant affective tendencies in user comments before these patterns are examined more closely through contextual interpretation and interview evidence. Rather than replacing qualitative interpretation, sentiment analysis functions as a way of orienting attention, highlighting dominant tones and recurring affective patterns that guide subsequent contextual analysis. In this sense, computational analysis supports, rather than overrides, the interpretive work at the core of this study (Boy, 2021; Nelson, 2020).

To achieve greater accuracy and relevance, the analysis integrates Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools specifically designed for the Indonesian language, such as IndoBERT (Koto et al., 2020).⁷ These tools help identify broad

⁷ IndoBERT is a language model explicitly trained on Indonesian texts. Unlike multilingual models, it captures linguistic features unique to Indonesian, such as affixation, reduplication,

patterns of emotional expression in social media texts, providing an overview of dominant affective tendencies in user interactions. The dataset, which was collected from Twitter, focuses on comments directly addressing the viral Borobudur Stupa meme. By concentrating on these responses, the analysis captures the public's initial reactions to the meme, which are then examined more closely through contextual and qualitative interpretation.

The integration of sentiment analysis and qualitative discourse interpretation shows how digital publics express and reshape religious meaning within Indonesia's online environment. It also highlights how TikTok's and Twitter's ranking systems influence which memes gain attention, while users still adapt, reinterpret, or push back against these algorithmic cues. This interaction between platform-driven visibility and user agency helps explain how contemporary religious discussions unfold through memetic media.

In line with Nissenbaum's (2010) principle of *contextual integrity*, all digital traces, such as meme texts, comments, and reactions, are interpreted with sensitivity to the specific social, cultural, and platform-based contexts in which they emerge. This ensures that the layered meanings embedded in seemingly mundane or humorous expressions are not detached from their original setting.

Multi-Method Fieldwork and Interview Strategy

This section outlines how the research was carried out in practice, focusing on sustained platform observation and interviews that complemented the analytical strategies discussed above.

Social media observation in this study involved following everyday activity around Islamic-inspired memes across Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, with particular attention to comments, sharing, and reactions to the memes. I documented comment threads, sharing patterns, and the small cues that signal how users position themselves, whether through laughter, irritation, moral judgement, or casual agreement. I traced how posts travelled, what kinds of responses they attracted, and how conversations shifted as a meme moved between audiences and platform spaces. While the broader observation period spans 2021 to 2023, I also zoomed in on moments of intensified circulation, periods when a meme suddenly became harder to ignore and interaction spiked, so that I could capture not only the initial reactions, but also the afterlife of the discussion as it unfolded and settled.

In these focused windows, I paid attention to recurring motifs, forms of imitation and remixing, and the ways users pulled memes into wider debates, sometimes

flexible sentence structure, and the use of informal particles and slang, making it more accurate for analysing Indonesian digital discourse (Koto et al., 2020).

staying playful, sometimes turning sharp. These observations provide the contextual backbone for the close readings and interview materials discussed in later chapters.

I conducted a comparative analysis of Facebook and Twitter to understand how platform affordances influence the dissemination of memes. This methodology contrasted the attributes of the two platforms, including their algorithms and platform-specific mechanisms that shape how quickly and extensively content proliferates, as well as how users interact with it (see Jenkins et al., 2013; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; Shifman, 2013). These distinctions were identified through a combination of direct observation, interviews, and engagement with existing scholarship. Given the study's emphasis on narratives, interaction patterns, and unfolding discussions, a manual and interpretive approach was considered more appropriate than purely quantitative measures, allowing closer attention to social and cultural nuance.

On Facebook, I observed how the algorithm prioritised certain content contingent on the volume of interactions such as likes, comments, and shares, often exposing humorous or satirical material to a broader audience through communities or community pages. Meanwhile, on Twitter, my analysis focused on prominent *garis lucu* (humorous) accounts rather than hashtag-based searches. From these accounts, I traced how a meme circulated by observing retweets, quote tweets, and cross-account interactions. This approach allowed me to follow how humorous posts that touched on religious or political themes triggered conversations across different user groups. I examined how other *garis lucu* accounts responded, how the meme moved beyond the original account's followers, and how discussions unfolded in the replies. Through this process, I identified Twitter's open network structure, where content spreads rapidly through retweets and cross-account visibility, as a distinct platform affordance that shapes the viral dynamics of Islamic-inspired memes.

This cross-platform observational work involves systematic data collection, such as monitoring meme content over a certain period of time, recording engagement levels, and tracking relevant comments. In addition, I read and analysed user comments directly to understand how they respond to the content. This included examining the tone of the messages, whether humorous, critical, ironic, or supportive, to interpret not just the message itself but the underlying sentiment and cultural cues embedded in users' expressions. This analysis showed that tone varied across platforms in ways shaped by their underlying structures. Facebook's community-driven spaces produced more normative commentary, whereas Twitter's open network amplified sharper, satirical responses.

I conducted in-depth interviews to explore the complexity of participants' thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of certain memes (Seidman, 2019). These interviews were conducted between July 2022 and December 2023. The selection

process followed a purposeful sampling approach to ensure a diverse representation of perspectives. I interviewed 10 meme creators on Facebook and TikTok who actively produce Islam-inspired memes, 30 active social media users who engage with these memes through likes, comments, and shares, and professionals in digital communication and religion, including individuals who manage social media presences for Nahdlatul Ulama, administrators of Islam-inspired meme communities on Facebook and Twitter (such as *@NUgaris Lucu*, *@Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman*, and *@Meme Comic Santri*).

To reflect Indonesia's broad digital and cultural landscape, the sample also included participants from both Java and other regions such as North Sumatra, where creators like Bang Fir Art are actively engaged in online meme production. This inclusion ensured that the study captured variations in digital religious expression across different socio-geographical contexts.

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours and were conducted both face-to-face and online via platforms such as Zoom, WhatsApp, and direct messages on Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. This approach was chosen due to the geographical spread of the informants and their preference for digital communication. While face-to-face interviews provided richer contextual cues and a more personal rapport, screen-based interviews offered greater accessibility and convenience, allowing participants to engage from their own environments. The semi-structured format enabled flexibility and encouraged in-depth discussions about their motivations, interpretations, and views on Islamic-inspired memes.

In addition, the fieldwork conversations also shed light on how memes operate in social and religious settings, from their makers to their audiences. Through its ethnographic orientation, the study draws on users' own accounts and interactions to show how memes become part of contemporary religious and cultural expression.

This combination of observation, close reading, and interview-based data makes it possible to trace both the production logic of Islamic-inspired memes and their affective reception. Memes are approached here not only as circulating objects, but as points of encounter where religious authority, digital piety, and everyday humour are negotiated in practice.

Beyond the patterns of interaction observed across platforms, the interpretive process also presents specific challenges, particularly when analysing humour across languages. Many memes rely on wordplay, tone, or culturally specific references that do not translate neatly into English. In the analysis, I therefore prioritise the original Indonesian phrasing and provide contextual explanations rather than attempting literal translations that might flatten the humour or alter its affective force. This approach acknowledges that part of a meme's meaning

lies not only in its text but in its rhythm, timing, and social connotations, which are often lost when converted into another language.

A second methodological consideration concerns the technological context in which these memes were produced. It is important to clarify that although some memes in this study were created using basic editing tools or mobile applications, such as photo filters, text overlays, or simple compositional adjustments, these tools differ significantly from the generative AI and deepfake technologies that have recently become mainstream. The content analysed in this thesis remains rooted in user-driven manipulation and platform-based remix practices rather than AI-generated imagery or synthetic media. Acknowledging this distinction helps situate the data within a pre-generative-AI media environment without conflating earlier editing practices with contemporary forms of automated content production.

After outlining the methodological approach, the next section provides a brief review of relevant scholarship to situate this study within existing work on digital religion and memetic culture in Indonesia. This review highlights the main debates that inform the analysis and clarifies how this thesis contributes to current discussions.

Literature Review

Previous Studies on Digital Media and Religious Expression

The widespread use of the Internet by followers of various religious traditions has sparked significant scholarly interest in exploring the connection between digital media and religion (Barendregt, 2012; Beta, 2014, 2019; Campbell, 2010, 2019; Cantoni & Zyga, 2007; Cheong & Poon, 2009; Nisa, 2018a; Rashi & McCombs, 2015; Slama, 2018; Taylor, 2003). Studies show how religious communities interact with and adapt to digital platforms. The intersection of religion and digital media has become a progressively important area of research. Campbell and Cheong have even coined the term "digital religion" (Campbell, 2019; Cheong et al., 2021), which refers to religious practices and beliefs being mediated through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.

Alongside these developments, scholars have also begun to ask how religious authority is reshaped in the context of mediatization, a process through which media logics begin to influence other social fields, including religion. As discussed by Lundby (2009), mediatization involves more than the use of media to communicate religion; it transforms the social conditions under which religious authority is performed and recognized. Scholars such as Hjarvard (2011) and Lövheim and Lynch (2011) have highlighted how digital media not only transmit religious content, but actively reconfigure religious practices, institutions, and the

role of religious leaders. This shift raises questions about who holds legitimacy in digital religious spaces, and how that legitimacy is gained or challenged.

Meyer and Moors (2005) have also drawn attention to the visual, sensory and material dimensions of religious mediation, showing that religious meaning is not only communicated through language but also embodied and visual, a point highly relevant to meme culture. Together, these perspectives enrich the understanding of how digital platforms are not passive containers of religious life, but active arenas where religious authority, aesthetics, and identity are continuously negotiated.

In the Indonesian context, Jones & Slama (2017) have shown how digital platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, have developed into a pivotal arena for religious identities to evolve and be negotiated. They asserted that online environments enable religious groups to connect, debate, and organise, as well as offer a means of expression. This resonates with Weintraub's earlier observations, where he shows how Islamic values were embedded into widespread media forms, particularly music, shaping novel modes of public spirituality in Indonesia (Weintraub, 2011). Schmidt (2017) extends this broader conversation on Islamic popular culture by examining how Islamic symbols circulate through fashion, music, and visual popular culture, including their increasing presence in digital media spaces, reflecting how Indonesian Muslims navigate their religiosity within contemporary media landscapes.

A different but relevant strand of scholarship comes from Eva Nisa, who introduces the concept of “lucrative *da'wah*” to explain how digital platforms, especially Instagram, enable the merging of Islamic preaching with personal branding and commercial activity (Nisa, 2018a). Her work shows how creators of Islamic content take advantage of social media's interactive and graphic features to reach a wider audience, and simultaneously, it helps them profit from their materials. This raises a significant issue regarding whether Islamic-inspired memes, which are part of digital religion, are similarly profitable. Platforms like TikTok, with their creator fund (which financially rewards high-performing content), sponsored collaborations, and live-gifting features, increasingly turn religious symbols into entertaining and potentially profitable content, not only for creators who monetise their visibility, but also for the platform itself, which benefits from high engagement and increased user activity.⁸ While this dissertation does not focus on monetisation as a primary outcome, Nisa's concept is useful for highlighting how religious expression on digital platforms is increasingly shaped by attention economies and platform incentives. This raises the question of whether Islamic-inspired memes, even when framed as humour

⁸ Monetisation on TikTok includes the Creator Fund (based on video views and engagement), brand sponsorships, live streaming gifts (convertible into cash), and affiliate marketing through links in profiles or video descriptions

or everyday commentary, are also drawn into similar logics of visibility, circulation, and value.

Studies on how digital media shape religious identities in Indonesia have examined how platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok facilitate religious expression, activity, and community building. With TikTok emerging as a vital venue for multimedia-driven religious expression, primarily through Ramadan-themed content, some scholars underline the rising use of these platforms for *da'wah* (Hikmawati & Farida, 2021; Kushardiyanti et al., 2021; Muthia et al., 2024). Existing studies have also noted the rise of religious content creators who strategically use platform affordances to engage audiences and cultivate visibility, reshaping modes of religious interaction online (Abidin, 2020; Campbell, 2019; Nisa, 2018a).

Apart from these contributions, understanding of how Islamic-inspired memes, especially those derived from what I define as pre-Internet traditions,⁹ form and reflect religious identities and cultural practices in Indonesia remains crucial. Although academics such as Slama and Nisa offer insightful analyses of digital religious expressions, their work primarily focuses on particular platforms or settings, such as Instagram posts (Nisa, 2018a; Slama, 2017). This research builds upon this foundation by examining how meme-like forms, both pre-Internet and modern, have evolved and how they impact the way Muslims in Indonesia connect with their faith in a polymedia digital environment.

Moreover, the platform-specific character of meme production and distribution calls for closer examination. Recent scholarship has noted that digital media have become important arenas for negotiating religious authority and religious knowledge in Indonesia (Pabbajah et al., 2021). In this context, satirical meme templates often operate as a form of bottom-up commentary, allowing users to express disappointment, scepticism, or ethical concern without engaging in direct confrontation. Such practices highlight how memes operate as accessible cultural tools for negotiating authority, legitimacy, and moral accountability in digital religious spaces. Rather than targeting institutional religion as such, these memes often address perceived inconsistencies between religious discourse and everyday conduct, revealing how humour becomes a socially acceptable mode of critique.

Within this broader understanding of digital media as arenas of religious negotiation, the satirical nature of Islamic-inspired memes can be framed in relation to questions of religious sensitivity and the boundaries of freedom of expression in Indonesia. While memes can function as tools of critical reflection and social commentary, their circulation across different platforms may also

⁹ “Pre-internet traditions” refer to the cultural and religious practices that shaped meme-like expressions before the rise of digital platforms, such as in the Indonesian case, proverbs, folktales, and *wayang* (shadow puppetry). For a detailed discussion, see Chapter 2.

intensify existing tensions. By examining how memes move and are interpreted on Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, this study explores how digital artefacts participate in shaping religious difference, public debate, and moral negotiation.

Michael Buehler & Dani Muhtada (2016) analyse how local Islamist actors were able to reshape religious and legal practices through decentralised political processes. While their discussion does not focus on media or digital culture, it offers a useful reminder that transformations of religious authority in Indonesia have often emerged from below, rather than solely through formal institutions.

In contrast, this study shifts attention to memes as everyday, informal, and digitally mediated practices through which religious ideas are negotiated. Rather than organised political movements, memes operate through humour, circulation, and imitation, enabling forms of engagement that are less overt but nonetheless influential in shaping religious dialogue.

Although earlier studies provide valuable insights into the intersection of religion and digital media, much of this work has been shaped by mediatization debates that examine how media formats reconfigure religious institutions, authority, and practice. While this perspective is closely aligned with my own interest in media as a transformative force, relatively little attention has been paid to memes as cultural objects in their own right. This dissertation addresses this gap by examining Islamic-inspired memes as everyday cultural agents that connect pre-digital traditions with contemporary platformed practices.

Against this backdrop, this research focuses on Islamic-inspired memes as cultural and religious expressions through which users navigate religious sensitivities and controversies in online spaces. Unlike previous works that examine digital religious practices more broadly, such as Nisa's discussion of lucrative da'wah or Slama's analysis of '*nge-charge hati*' or online religious counselling,¹⁰ this study looks explicitly at how and why memes function as a medium for negotiating religious and cultural differences. By foregrounding humour, repetition, and visual shorthand, this study highlights how religious meanings are actively negotiated in digital life.

What sets this research apart is my examination of how meme-like forms, often rooted in pre-Internet traditions, have evolved and found new life on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, as well as the reasons why people

¹⁰ Slama examines how middle-class Muslim women in Indonesia use social media to seek spiritual and emotional guidance from religious teachers through messaging applications such as BlackBerry Messenger and WhatsApp. The term "*nge-charge hati*" describes recharging the spirit or emotional state through online religious interactions. Slama shows that this practice is integral to the relationship between Islamic preachers and their followers, where social media is a primary means of communication and effective support (Slama, 2017).

produce and consume such memes. While earlier studies often concentrate on content creation or the broader use of digital platforms, my work focuses on the unique dynamics of how these memes are created, shared, and received, providing a closer look at the specific affordances each platform offers in this process and within the Indonesian Muslim community.

Additionally, by focusing on a few controversial memes, such as the Borobudur Stupa meme (Chapter 5), this research highlights the delicate balance between religious sensitivities and the boundaries of freedom of expression. While previous research may have discussed Islamic activism or media representation, my study explores how memes serve as subtle yet powerful tools that challenge societal norms and spark conversations about religion in a playful yet deeply significant way.

As Islamic-inspired memes become more prominent in digital spaces, particularly in Indonesia, their function as cultural artefacts influences public debate on religious identity, societal values, cultural practices, and entertainment values. These memes serve as a means of interaction between Islamic groups and their viewers, as they offer a unique blend of humour and engagement with more profound religious and social themes. However, to understand how memes shape religious conversations, this study first defines what I mean by memes, and more specifically, religious and Islamic-inspired memes, and investigate how they operate dynamically within Indonesian digital culture. Establishing an explicit understanding of memes as visual and cultural practices will help us better comprehend their role in religious expression and the evolution of digital religious communication. The following section will discuss these definitions, providing a framework for understanding the cultural and religious relevance of memes in the digital era.

Defining Memes, Religious Memes and Islamic-inspired Memes

The meaning of the term "meme" has changed drastically since Richard Dawkins first used it to characterise how ideas proliferate and replicate within culture (Dawkins, 1976). Memes today are seen as "highly visual and emotive forms of communication that employ popular culture images with succinct messages to communicate often humorous way" (Bellar et al., 2013, p.4). Limor Shifman (2014) further conceptualises internet memes as a participatory digital vernacular, a shared expressive mode grounded in replication, variation, and user engagement. She argues that the humor in memes typically draws on three mechanisms: playfulness, incongruity, and superiority. Playfulness encourages users to join in and remix; incongruity arises when surprising or mismatched elements create comic effect; and superiority evokes laughter at the expense of others, often tied to social or political critique (Shifman, 2013b). Rather than treating memes as trivial images, this perspective emphasises their role as a potent form of cultural commentary, one that reflects, amplifies, and sometimes

challenges the social tensions and everyday concerns circulating within a community.

Limor Shifman defines memes as digital items that share content, form, and stance, which users create, circulate, and transform across the Internet (Shifman, 2013a). The content refers to a meme's message or main idea, often drawing on familiar ideologies or cultural narratives. Form refers to the visual structure of the meme, which can range from a simple image to a complex multimedia creation. Stance is the position that the meme's creator takes, whether humorous, critical, or supportive, regarding the represented subject. In this sense, memes function as a cultural shorthand means for people to interact with others in digital environments and rapidly communicate complex concepts (Aguilar et al., 2017).

Recognising that memes are dynamic practices that support communication, debate, and cultural reflection, rather than static visual objects, help situate them as cultural artefacts. As Shifman points out, successful memes usually depend on familiar images or symbols from popular media or digital culture so that viewers may interact with the material rapidly (Shifman, 2013a). In religious settings, memes often combine stereotypes and generally accepted ideas about particular groups to address contentious issues using humour. For instance, Bellar et al. define "religious-oriented internet memes" as combining religious themes or traditions into their images and text, bridging digital culture with religious expression (Bellar et al., 2013).

In this thesis, I define Islamic-inspired memes as digital expressions that either contain explicit Islamic references or trigger public reflection, commentary, or debate related to Islam, including issues of religious sensitivity, piety, or moral boundaries. This definition covers not only memes that use Islamic symbols directly but also those whose circulation provokes discussions shaped by Islamic norms or by the broader Muslim-majority context of Indonesia.

These memes circulate through practices of sharing, imitation, modification, and response, combining their textual and visual elements with the interactive behaviour that grows around them. Rather than treating memes as static images, I approach them as forms of digital cultural production whose meaning emerges through user engagement (A. Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018; Shifman, 2013b; Wagener, 2021).¹¹ Seen this way, memes do not simply represent Islamic ideas; they participate in shaping how such ideas are talked about in Indonesia's fast-moving digital environment.

¹¹ Memes are not merely passive or decorative images; they can actively shape identities, norms, and values through their replication and circulation. As Nissenbaum & Shifman suggest, memes operate as cultural agents that participate in social and cultural change, even though they lack human consciousness; their impact is nonetheless significant within digital discourse (A. Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018; Shifman, 2013b).

One must take religious change into account if one is to value memes in religious settings properly. Through replication and dissemination, religious practices and ideas often evolve over time. Oral traditions, books, and ceremonies have long been the means of expression for this; in the digital era, the Internet has sped these developments. As digital artefacts, memes rapidly and accurately copy ideas, supporting the continuous evolution of religious expression (Blackmore, 2000). Memes enable the expression of religious ideas in engaging and readily accessible forms, making them particularly potent in Indonesia, where digital participation and public discourse on religion are rapidly increasing.

As Susan Brenner (1996) has argued in her study of veiling practices in Java, religious symbols play a significant role in shaping cultural life and provoking public debate. It shows that religious symbols are not merely private expressions of piety but deeply embedded in wider cultural politics. For example, her work explores how the adoption or rejection of the *jilbab* (veil) among women in Yogyakarta sparked public conversation about modernity, morality, and Islamic identity in post-authoritarian Indonesia. Such symbols, Brenner argues, become “nodes of contestation,” sites where competing ideas about gender, power, and authenticity are negotiated and made visible in the public sphere.

Although her research predates the rise of digital media, it provides a useful lens for understanding how religious symbols, like those found in memes, continue to provoke negotiation and debate in public life. In a similar vein, today’s digital memes often operate as symbolic battlegrounds where religious ideas and identities are re-articulated, contested, or affirmed, particularly in a media-saturated landscape where visual culture plays a central role. In this context, they function as tools for rewriting and reframing religious narratives in playful, critical, or provocative ways across Indonesia’s digital platforms.

Apart from *dawah*, Islamic-inspired memes find use in Indonesia for other purposes ranging from political campaigning to humour and entertainment. While many social media accounts post Islamic memes for soft *dakwah*¹² (Denny, 2005; Thaib, 2021), using positive language or motivational quotes, others participate in satire, critique, or playful commentary on present religious and social issues. The multifaceted nature of memes allows them to be a flexible tool with various

¹² Soft *da'wah* is the delivery of Islamic *da'wah* through social media. In this case, 'soft' is not related to the material or message of the *da'wah*, but rather to the packaging, which is more concise and simpler, utilizing cute speech, anime-like characters, and pastel colours. In virtual spaces of social media platforms that remain active without time limits, *da'wah* messages are disseminated and can be accessed at any time and from anywhere by their users. The opposite is called hard *da'wah*, whose implementation is tied to a specific context, moment, and theme (Thaib, 2021). While *soft da'wah* refers to *da'wah* that is packaged in a light, aesthetic, and emotionally appealing manner (e.g., pastel colors, anime-style visuals), *lucrative da'wah* (Nisa, 2018a) emphasises the blending of religious messaging with digital entrepreneurship and branding strategies. Both share visual softness, but *lucrative da'wah* is also driven by economic motives.

purposes and interpretations, depending on the context. Using these platforms, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, social media users customise their memes to particular groups and genres of interaction (Madianou, 2015).

While this section establishes the working definitions of memes, religious memes, and Islamic-inspired memes as they are used throughout the empirical chapters, a more extended theoretical discussion of memes as cultural replicators and agents of cultural evolution is developed in Chapter 2. There, I engage with memetic theory and anthropological debates to situate memes within longer trajectories of cultural transmission.

As Islamic-inspired memes continue to proliferate across social media in Indonesia, their role in shaping religious expression, humour, and public debate becomes increasingly visible. Understanding how these memes operate requires attention to Indonesia's religious landscape, where diverse Islamic traditions interact with local and global influences. The following section therefore outlines the broader religious diversity of Indonesia, with particular attention to the positions of major Islamic groups that shape the contexts in which these memes are produced, circulated, and interpreted.

Indonesia's Diverse Islamic Landscape and the Positions of Various Islamic Groups

Indonesia, as a country with a Muslim majority, has a vibrant and diverse religious landscape. More than 80% of Indonesia's population adheres to Islam, while the rest consists of Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians, and followers of indigenous religions. Islam, as the majority religion, plays a strategic role in shaping national identity and social diversity in Indonesia. As Heryanto (2015) expressed, Islam is a pillar maintained and becomes a driving force in determining power limits and reshaping the concept of Indonesianness. Islam is often likened to a "*Kartu As* (Ace card)", which can direct the course of a country with extraordinary ethnic, cultural, tribal, and religious wealth (Amal, 2022). This metaphor reflects how Islam, beyond being the majority religion, plays a central role in shaping public discourse, political power, and the contested imagination of Indonesianness.

It is important to recognize that Indonesian Islam encompasses a wide spectrum of interpretations and practices rather than representing a single homogeneous entity. The religious expressions of Muslims in Indonesia are diverse, dynamic, and influenced by various schools of thought. *Ablus Sunnah wal Jamaah* (Sunni) and *Shia* are some of the most well-known schools.¹³ In regard to organisations,

¹³ Among the Sunni themselves, some adhere to Syafii, Hambali, Maliki, and Hanafi regarding fiqh. Theologically, some are oriented towards Ash'ariyah and Maturidiyyah, while others are Mu'tazilah, Jabariyah, Qadariyah, and others (Makdisi, 1979).

there are variations between traditionalist groups, such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and modernist groups, including Muhammadiyah, Al-Irsyad, and others. At the student level, there are organisations such as PMII and IPNU, which are affiliated with NU, and HMI and IMM, which are more closely aligned with Muhammadiyah. This shows the connection between Islamic organisations and different Islamic traditions in Indonesia.¹⁴ In addition, women's organisations such as Muslimat, Fatayat, and Aisyiyah also play a role in forming religious forums among Muslim women (Rinaldo, 2013) and often can also be linked to some of the larger mass organisations.

In studying Islamic thought, Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia offer various approaches, ranging from formalistic perspectives that emphasise the literal application of Islamic law and rituals, to transformational approaches that view Islam as a dynamic force for social change and contextual interpretation, and from idealistic to realistic (Anwar, 1995). In addition, in terms of ideology and political movements, the spectrum of Islam in Indonesia is broad, ranging from traditional, political and conservative Islam to radical or extremist groups. On the other hand, there are also moderate, progressive, and even liberal Islamic groups (Tim Peneliti Puslitbang Kehidupan Keagamaan, 2007; van Bruinessen, 2013).

One way to categorise variations is through traditionalists and modernists, reflected in Indonesia's largest Islamic organisations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. While simplifying complex realities, this division has emerged as a prominent feature in current affairs. Traditionalists primarily prioritise jurisprudence and emulate past scholars' rulings, questioning independent legal reasoning. On the other hand, modernists emphasise rational thought and progress, adopting foreign educational and organisational systems that do not contradict tenets.

The distinction between “traditionalist” and “modernist” streams in Indonesian Islam, terms first articulated by Deliar Noer (1973) in his study of the 1940s reform movements, continues to influence how scholars interpret organisations such as NU and Muhammadiyah today. Although Noer's work refers to an earlier

¹⁴ PMII: *Pergerakan Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia* (Indonesian Islamic Student Movement), Is a student organisation affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) that focuses on students' intellectual, spiritual, and social development based on Ahlul-sunnah Wal Jama'ah's teachings. IPNU: *Ikatan Pelajar Nahdlatul Ulama* (Nahdlatul Ulama Student Association), a student organisation affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), aims to foster students in Islamic values and build national character. HMI: *Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam* (Islamic Student Association). HMI is an independent Islamic student organisation that is not directly affiliated with a particular religious organisation. Many of its members come from Muhammadiyah circles. HMI focuses on students' intellectual development and role in society. IMM: *Ikatan Mahasiswa Muhammadiyah* (Muhammadiyah Student Association), a student organization directly affiliated with Muhammadiyah, to foster students in the religious, intellectual, and social fields through Muhammadiyah values.

historical moment, the conceptual distinction remains useful for explaining how these groups frame authority, religious practice, and social reform in contemporary Indonesia. According to Noer, Muhammadiyah modernists drew inspiration from Egyptian reformers such as Muhammad Abduh. Their reformist agenda emerged in response to what they perceived as the stagnation of Islamic thought and the persistence of syncretic local practices that, in their view, diverged from the purity of Islam. In contrast, traditionalist groups such as NU focused more on preserving local Islamic traditions and scholarly authority. Noer explains that traditionalists primarily prioritise Islamic law (*fiqh*), emphasise the importance of *taqlid* (following the opinions of previous scholars), and tend to question *ijtihad* (independent interpretation of Islamic law). In contrast, modernists emphasise the importance of rational thought and progress and accept Western educational and organisational methods as long as they do not conflict with Islamic teachings.

The traditionalist–modernist distinction, however, is far from rigid. A traditionalist figure may take liberal positions in certain domains, for example, NU leaders often promote pluralism and interfaith cooperation, while a modernist actor may adopt conservative views, such as Muhammadiyah’s firm rejection of local ritual practices. These variations show that religious orientations shift across contexts, shaped by locality, generation, and historical moment. In the digital sphere, this traditionalist–modernist contrast resurfaces through meme culture. Memes about the difference in performing *Qunut*, for instance, portray NU as the group that reads *Qunut Subuh* and Muhammadiyah as the group that does not. These memes extend beyond playful ritual jokes; they capture how users internalise and visualise methodological differences. NU’s grounding in pesantren-based jurisprudence and Muhammadiyah’s emphasis on purification, textualism, and rational reform. Similar patterns appear in memes about the determination of 1 Ramadan or 1 Syawal, where NU is represented as following *rukyat* and classical *fiqh* traditions, while Muhammadiyah is associated with modern *hisab* calculations. Through humour and exaggeration, these memes make the traditionalist–modernist dichotomy legible and relatable to wider digital publics.

Geertz’s categories of *santri*, *priyayi*, and *abangan* captured the historical diversity of Islamic expression in Java, but they offer limited explanatory power for regions beyond Java. This underscores the need to view Indonesian Islam as a mosaic of overlapping traditions rather than a fixed dualism between modernists and traditionalists. As several scholars have noted, Java has long been at the center of Indonesia’s Islamic culture, shaped by a convergence of pre-Islamic traditions, Hindu-Buddhist legacies, and mystical Javanese beliefs (Beatty, 1999; Geertz, 1960; Woodward, 1989). However, other regions exhibit distinct approaches to classification and demonstration of religious adherence. Within this diversity, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah emerge as paramount organisations, historically molding discourse through traditional and progressive representations

of Islam. Within this mosaic, NU and Muhammadiyah remain the most influential organisations, and their differences routinely surface in the circulation of Islamic-inspired memes. These memes not only echo doctrinal distinctions but also provide a window into how digital publics negotiate identity, humour, and intra-Muslim diversity. While such dynamics may not fully represent offline communities or older generations, they reveal broader patterns in Indonesia's digital religiosity.

Additionally, Islamic groups in Indonesia experience growing impacts from global and local currents as well as political and ideological movements. For example, organisations like the *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI, Islamic Defenders Front) have become known for advocating Sharia law's application and adopting a more aggressive stance on moral and religious issues, as seen later in the examination of Habib Rizieq. Formed in 1998, FPI has positioned itself as a defender of Islamic values through frequent involvement in demonstrations or guidance of action campaigns against perceived societal moral transgressions, as discussed by van Bruinessen (van Bruinessen, 2013).

FPI has been a vocal advocate of a rigorous interpretation of Islam, but its methods, which have occasionally included violence and intimidation, have also generated significant debate. Their place in Indonesian society is multifarious; some see FPI as a defender of Islamic morality, while others see them as a destabilising factor, especially in a nation that upholds social harmony and religious tolerance (Hadiz, 2016). Officially, FPI was disbanded in 2020, upon the Indonesian government citing worries about their activities and radicalising of sections of the population (Fealy & White, 2021). This action reflects Indonesia's careful balance in preserving its diverse religious environment, where the need to limit extremism coexists with the preservation of religious freedom.

This study, however, is primarily based on the variety among Indonesia's Islamic population, in practice, mostly NU and Muhammadiyah, as there is a direct relationship with the creation and acceptance of Islamic-inspired memes. Knowing the range of religious interpretations and movements, from mainstream to radical, from progressive to conservative, helps expose the several layers of meaning often buried in these digital works. This variety affects not only who interacts with these memes but also how one understands and responds to them. Although discussing the actors involved in producing and consuming Islamic-inspired memes at this stage might be tempting, a deeper exploration of the specific individuals, groups, and communities will be addressed in a later chapter.

Understanding Indonesia's diverse Islamic landscape is crucial for making sense of how Islamic-inspired memes emerge, circulate, spark debate, build bridges, and precipitate conflict. The country's varied religious interpretations and organisational traditions form the social and cultural backdrop against which digital expressions develop and acquire meaning. In this context, memes do not

stand alone; they draw from existing tensions, humour, and patterns of religious engagement that already shape public life.

To analyse how these dynamics unfold online, this study employs a set of theoretical tools that can account for the different platforms, audiences, and formats involved. The next section outlines these key concepts and explains how they are used throughout the analysis, paying particular attention to the distinct affordances and interactional cultures of Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. Through this approach, the study shows how Islamic-inspired memes participate in ongoing negotiations of religious identity and social discourse in contemporary Indonesia.

Theoretical Perspectives on Islamic-inspired Memes

Understanding the dynamics of Islamic-inspired memes requires a theoretical approach that draws from more than one perspective. No single framework is sufficient, because these memes operate simultaneously on several levels: they rely on humour, circulate through platform-specific infrastructures, and engage with long-standing religious debates. Each theoretical lens captures a different dimension of this process. Taken together, they make it possible to analyse memes not only as entertainment but also as creative tools through which users express, negotiate, and reframe religious issues in the digital age.

Dynamics of Digital Platforms: Affordances, Agency, Algorithms, and Spreadable Media

Gibson first introduced the concept of affordance (Gibson, 1979) and it was later applied to digital media by Hutchby (2001). The concept may serve as a foundation for understanding how platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok shape user interactions with content. In this study, affordances are understood as the possibilities for action that platforms make available—but also the constraints they impose. Social media systems such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok do not merely offer features; they structure what users *can* and *cannot* do, shaping the contours of participation, visibility, and expression.

Affordances in these platforms include functions such as sharing, remixing, commenting, or stitching videos. Yet each of these comes with built-in limits: algorithmic filtering that privileges some content over others, moderation policies that silence specific forms of expression, and technical architectures that make certain interactions easy while rendering others nearly impossible. Rather than seeing users as freely choosing from a neutral set of options, this perspective acknowledges that platform design, economic incentives, and algorithmic governance actively channel user behaviour. Within this space of possibility and constraint, users exercise agency, adapting, resisting, or playing with the

affordances available to them. Memes, as a form of digital expression, emerge from this tension: they depend on the creative freedoms platforms enable, yet are continually shaped by the structural limits and normative pressures embedded in the platforms themselves.

Treem and Leonardi (2012) define affordances in social media as the possibilities for action that emerge from the relationship between platform features and user practices, such as enabling visibility, ongoing engagement, and user connections. For instance, Facebook's sharing tools afford the potential for wide content dissemination across user networks, while TikTok's "For You Page" (FYP)¹⁵ algorithm affords unexpected content exposure and viral participation through short videos. These affordances are not simply built-in features but depend on how users engage with them to enable certain types of interaction, communication, and trend-making.

A more practice-oriented view of affordances comes from Costa (2018), who argues that affordances are not fixed properties of a platform but emerge through everyday user interpretation and negotiation. In her ethnographic research, she shows that users selectively adopt, avoid, or repurpose platform features, adjusting privacy settings, curating digital identities, and strategically engaging with visibility tools based on their social context. This understanding is essential for analysing how Muslim communities in Indonesia appropriate platform features when creating and circulating Islamic-inspired memes. It emphasises that affordances only become meaningful through practice, providing a natural transition to the question of user agency.

At the same time, these user practices unfold within environments that are never neutral. Platforms actively configure the conditions under which affordances can be taken up. While technical elements shape how an online platform operates, economic and political structures are equally influential. Gillespie (2010) shows that technology companies often present themselves as neutral infrastructure, even as they exercise substantial control over what content circulates. Building on this, Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck (2019) introduce the concept of platformization, which describes how platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok function not merely as communication tools but as actors that organise, regulate, and monetise social and cultural activities. This is closely linked to the idea of the 'platform society' (van Dijck et al., 2018), where platform logics

¹⁵ TikTok's main feed is the For You Page (FYP), a recommendation feed that displays videos based on a user's interaction history, such as likes, comments, watch duration, and accounts followed. Rather than relying on manual search, the FYP functions as the platform's primary mechanism for content discovery, meaning that users can encounter a wide range of material, including religious or educational videos, even if they do not actively look for it.

increasingly shape communication, cultural production, public values, and civic life.

My study engages with both concepts to contextualise how platforms operate as powerful mediators of religious communication in Indonesia. I examine how algorithmic systems, moderation rules, and economic incentives influence the circulation of Islamic-inspired memes and shape public discourse. While these frameworks are not the central theoretical lens of the study, they provide an essential backdrop for understanding how digital infrastructures structure religious expression and interaction.

I draw on the work of Bucher and Helmond who discuss how affordances in social media platforms are not fixed entities but instead constantly evolve in response to technical changes and platform policies (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). They highlight that affordances in social media operate at three main levels: users, platforms, and technology developers. In other words, affordances determine how users interact with content and are conditioned by the platform's internal policies and the commercial interests of technology companies.

In the context of Islamic-inspired memes, understanding affordances is relevant. How social media affordances facilitate memes' production, spread, and reception depends on how platforms regulate content visibility, manage user participation, and adapt their algorithmic rules. For example, changes in privacy policies or updates to recommendation systems on TikTok and Twitter can affect how Islamic-inspired memes are disseminated and received by the public. This was especially visible on TikTok during Ramadan 2024, where videos using the hashtag #Ramadan2024, including jokes about rukyat and hisab, were repeatedly surfaced to users' For You Pages, even when posted by small creators. The rapid appearance of these videos illustrates how TikTok's engagement-driven recommendation system can amplify religious humour beyond the creator's immediate network.

Affordance, however, does not work alone. Here, the concept of agency is crucial. Agency refers to the freedom and capacity to act, interpret, and prioritise certain possibilities within a given environment. Following Hutchby (2001), affordances provide structured possibilities for action, but do not determine how they are taken up. Users may adopt, ignore, or creatively repurpose them according to their own goals.

At the same time, this study understands agency as distributed rather than located solely in human actors. While users exercise agency in producing and circulating memes, memes themselves operate as cultural agents insofar as they shape attention, frame interpretation, and invite particular forms of response. Their agency does not lie in intention, but in their capacity to mediate meaning, affect, and social interaction through circulation.

In this sense, agency emerges through the interaction between users, memetic forms, and platform affordances. Social media users do not simply receive affordances passively but engage with memetic content that actively participates in structuring digital religious discourse.

However, this user agency never operates in a vacuum. What users can do with platform affordances is constantly shaped, filtered, and sometimes restricted by algorithmic systems that determine which content becomes visible or buried. In other words, algorithms do not eliminate agency, but they narrow or amplify the possibilities available to users.

As recommendation systems have become more sophisticated, algorithms processes increasingly influence the affordances that shape what appears on users' timelines. TikTok, for example, uses algorithms to select relevant content for users, creating affordances based on individual preferences and interaction patterns. According to Bucher (2018), algorithms act like "hidden guides" that offer choices and subtly direct the user experience. Users remain free to engage, ignore, or remix content, but their experiences are structured by algorithmic logics that operate largely beyond their immediate awareness.

For this reason, algorithms are approached here not merely as technical tools, but as socio-cultural actors embedded within broader systems of meaning and practice. Scholars such as Seaver (2017) advocate for understanding algorithms through an ethnographic lens, treating them as embedded within cultural systems rather than opaque code alone. Likewise, Christin (2020) introduces approaches such as algorithmic comparison and triangulation to grasp how algorithmic design and logic influence the visibility and circulation of content, including religious memes. In this study, such perspectives are used not to dissect algorithms directly, but to support a broader understanding of how Islamic-inspired memes circulate within curated and selective digital environments.

Seen from this perspective, the circulation of memes is best understood through the lens of spreadable media. While platform design and algorithms influence visibility, the movement of content ultimately depends on users' active participation in sharing, commenting, and remixing. Agency thus emerges through the interplay between platform infrastructures, memetic forms, and everyday user practices, rather than residing exclusively in any single element.

Viral media refers to content that circulates quickly and broadly, often in ways that exceed the creator's intention or control. Its defining features are speed and scale: content "goes viral" when many users share it within a short period, regardless of whether they actively reshape it. In viral circulation, audiences function mainly as amplifiers.

Spreadable media, by contrast, emphasises the agency of audiences. Rather than relying on rapid, automatic diffusion, spreadable media travels because users *choose* to share, adapt, caption, remix, or reframe the content (Jenkins et al., 2013). Circulation here is participatory, audiences shape the meaning and direction of the content through the platform's affordances, sharing, commenting, retweeting, duetting, stitching.

This distinction is essential for understanding meme culture in Indonesia. Viral memes may travel far, but spreadable memes evolve through user participation. Islamic-inspired memes, especially those depicting NU versus Muhammadiyah differences, circulate not only because they are humorous but because users actively reinterpret them. A meme about *Qunut* or the determination of *1 Ramadan* does not merely "go viral." It becomes *spreadable* when users add new captions, remix formats, or create regional variations while retaining a shared cultural reference. This collaborative reinterpretation is what turns these memes into ongoing conversations about religious practice rather than one-off viral jokes.

This distinction prepares the ground for Wiggins and Bowers' argument that memes embody the participatory nature of digital culture (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Memes (as cultural products) are non-static, they are in the process of constant remixing, transformation, and redistribution. Such a property of memes in digital spaces also makes them a quintessential instance of spreadable media; that is, each iteration or adaptation that becomes facilitated by users drives the content further and farther in reach and influence. According to Jenkins et al. (2013), audience involvement is a key element of spreadable media, where users play an active role in generating, reshaping, and distributing content based on their own interests and social networks.

Taken together, these concepts help explain how Islamic-inspired memes move across Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. Platform affordances shape what users can do; algorithms influence what becomes visible; and user agency determines which content is shared, remixed, or reinterpreted. Spreadable media highlights the participatory circulation that turns memes into ongoing conversations rather than one-off viral events. In combination, these dynamics reveal how platform infrastructures and user practices jointly structure the life of Islamic-inspired memes. This approach underlines the central argument of this section: that Islamic-inspired memes are not merely cultural artefacts, but socio-technical practices shaped through the interplay of design, participation, and algorithmic governance.

Through these concepts, I examine the second research question in Chapter 3: How do different platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, shape the way Islamic-inspired memes are created, spread, and received by the Muslim community in Indonesia, and who are the critical actors involved in this process?

Playful Citizenship and Memes in Digital Platforms

Platforms like TikTok have reshaped religious expression in the digital era, providing spaces where people can negotiate their religious identities in flexible and interactive ways. Glas et al. (2019) introduced the concept of playful citizenship to describe forms of civic and cultural engagement that rely on humour, creativity, and participatory media practices. Rather than emphasising confrontation or formal modes of expression, playful citizenship highlights how play, irony, and remix can function as modes of engagement that lower social stakes and invite broader participation.

Although Glas et al. (2019) do not focus specifically on religious context, their framework is useful for understanding how playful forms of participation operate in digital environments more broadly. In this study, I extend the concept of playful citizenship to religious settings, showing how humour, memes, and audiovisual play enable users to comment on religious differences and practice without escalating conflict. In the Indonesian Muslim context, for example, TikTok users combine *Qur'an recitations* alongside popular audio or make humorous comparisons between NU and Muhammadiyah traditions, offering critique or commentary in a lighthearted, culturally resonant manner.

Recent studies show how memetic content on TikTok enables social dialogue through dialogic and creative video replication (Cervi & Divon, 2023; Zhao & Abidin, 2023). Using visual and sound elements in playful citizenship on TikTok helps to communicate complex cultural and religious messages in a subtle and powerful manner. Playful citizenship operates to help us understand how people negotiate identities in a country with great religious diversity, such as Indonesia, in which Muslims use the social media platform TikTok. Viewed through the lens of playful citizenship, playfully satirical memetic video content on TikTok addresses the theological dichotomy between Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, two of Indonesia's largest Islamic organisations, in a lighthearted and conducive manner. By discussing issues like the beginning of Ramadan or the differences in prayer practices through lighthearted memes, TikTok users enact a culture of interaction across groups that spans divides but does not erase, nor systematically engage with the content of theological conversations. By employing humour in these videos, they illustrate how the act of playful citizenship can influence and transform religious discourse into something more collective, accessible, and enjoyable.

This concept also aligns with Huizinga's foundational view in *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga, 1955), in which play is understood as a core element of culture and a medium for social reflection, albeit one that is largely set apart from everyday life. By contrast, Sicart emphasises that play is not merely a separate sphere of entertainment but a way of strategy for navigating and reimagining social and cultural practices in everyday life (Sicart, 2014).

TikTok offers affordances for remixing and redistributing content dynamically through features such as duets, stitching, and interactive video effects, enabling users to engage with religious ideas in improvisational and playful ways. These features allow users to interact, respond, and adapt religious content, developing culture and social spaces together, contributing to a shared digital culture in which the practice of religion is not merely debated but also reimaged through humour, creativity, and everyday participation.

In the context of Ramadan-themed memes, these memetic transformations demonstrate how memes evolve beyond simple entertainment to become cultural tools that foster community building and dialogue. Instead of pursuing social or political change, as is often associated with playful activism (Zhao & Abidin, 2023), playful citizenship thus focuses on identity work and social cohesion. The algorithmic architecture of TikTok fosters this kind of engagement by exposing users to content beyond their immediate networks, encouraging more cross-group interaction among different Islamic communities. This enables a non-confrontational negotiation of religious identity, whereby differences are not seen as a source of discord but as an opportunity for collective musing. A more detailed analysis of how TikTok's algorithm enables non-confrontational negotiation of religious identity and cross-group engagement is presented in Chapter 4.

TikTok and other digital platforms create playful digital spaces for religious expression, encouraging the view of religious identity not as fixed but as something continuously negotiated through digital engagement. Playful citizenship on TikTok, in sum, helps create a participatory environment where religious practices are explored and celebrated in ways that deepen social cohesion and open exploration to the hows and whys of religious diversity. What becomes visible here is the emergence of informal, everyday ways in which users negotiate and make sense of religious differences through humour, memes, and light experimentation with format and style. These dynamics support inclusive forms of religious discourse and sustained cross-group interaction. This is particularly evident in Chapter 4, where Ramadan-themed TikTok videos stimulate social and cultural interaction amid Indonesia's religious diversity. Through these memetic videos, creators engage in subtle yet impactful ways, addressing the third research question: How do memetic videos on TikTok foster social and cultural interactions, encouraging playful citizenship amidst religious and cultural diversity in Indonesia, with Ramadan-themed content as a case study?

Incongruity and Benign Violation Theories: Understanding Humor and Satire

In Chapter 5, I explore how incongruity and benign violation theories help explain the role of humour in digital spaces, particularly when engaging with sensitive religious themes. For example, the viral Borobudur Stupa meme offers insight into how digital humour can push certain boundaries, sparking debates around freedom of expression and religious sensitivity.

Incongruity Theory explains that humour arises from the mismatch between expectation and reality.¹⁶ Scholars including Attardo, Chłopicki, and Forabosco (2024) investigate how incongruity generates amusing texts by disrupting anticipated patterns, where unexpected resolutions trigger amusement. Yus (2021) also emphasises how memes use "incongruity-resolution strategies," setting up expectations and delivering unexpected visual or textual twists. This modern style of comedy fits very well with how online memes employ juxtaposition to captivate viewers in a playful yet powerful manner.

Benign violation theory by McGraw and Warren (2010) offers another perspective, suggesting that humour occurs when a violation of social norms is perceived as non-threatening to some but offensive to others. In Indonesia's diverse religious landscape, treatment of religious symbols through memes can blur the line between harmless humour and cultural insensitivity, thus illustrating how one group may find humour in something others deem highly offensive. Together, these theories help to address the fourth research question: What is the impact of circulating satirical memes on religious sensitivity and public discourse in Indonesia?

Together, these theories provide a focused lens for understanding the reception of Islamic-inspired memes across digital platforms. Rather than explaining humour in general, they help illuminate how religiously sensitive content becomes contested, why audiences respond differently, and how norms around respect and offence are negotiated online.

In Chapter 5, I further develop these theories in relation to mediated publicness and audience reception, using the Borobudur Stupa meme as a central case and to address the fourth research question on how the circulation of satirical memes navigates religious sensitivities and shapes broader public discourse in Indonesia.

¹⁶ The foundational ideas of incongruity theory can be traced back to the works of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who proposed that humour arises from the sudden transformation of expectations into nothing. Kant's early conceptualisation of incongruity provided the groundwork for modern interpretations, demonstrating that the theory's relevance transcends time and continues to evolve in digital contexts.

Structure of Dissertation

This study approaches memes as part of everyday digital practice in Indonesia, showing how they operate in two intertwined ways. As cultural products, they draw from and reflect the social and religious contexts of their time. Yet they also function as social agents: they engage viewers, trigger discussion, mobilise participation, and influence public opinion. This dual capacity, reflective and performative, helps illuminate how memes mediate the relationship between technology, religion, and society in Indonesia's digital landscape.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The introduction chapter presented the background, rationale, and scope of the study. It has outlined the central research question, central concepts such as memes as cultural commodities and social actors, and the broader context of religious expression in Indonesian online communities. This chapter has also positioned the study within existing scholarship and explained the methodological and theoretical approaches that inform the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2: From Oral Traditions to TikTok: The Evolution of Meme-like Forms and Religious Expression in Indonesia

This chapter traces the historical trajectory of Islamic-inspired memes, from pre-Internet cultural expressions, such as oral traditions and religious symbols, to the rise of meme culture in the digital era. By focusing on various platforms, from IRC and Facebook to TikTok, this chapter helps establish the evolving role of digital symbols, visual or textual elements that convey cultural, religious, or social meanings, and memes in shaping religious identity. This historical context forms the groundwork for understanding contemporary Islamic-inspired memes.

Chapter 3: Digital Divergence: Exploring the Local Dynamics of Islamic-inspired Memes on Two Global Platforms

After tracing the historical evolution of meme practices, this chapter turns to the platform-specific dynamics that shape how Islamic-inspired memes circulate on Facebook and Twitter. It examines how each platform's affordance influences the creation, distribution, and reception of memes in distinct ways. This chapter focuses on the local dynamics of two major global platforms: Facebook and Twitter. Each platform's affordances influence how Islamic-inspired memes are created, distributed, and consumed in various ways. To frame this analysis, this chapter employs the concept of a meme ecosystem, referring to the interconnected network of users, content, interaction patterns, and platform-specific norms that shape the evolution and circulation of memes. Rather than treating memes as isolated objects, the meme ecosystem perspective situates them within a dynamic socio-technical environment, one shaped by platform

affordances, user agency, moderation practices, and algorithmic logics. This concept enables a more comprehensive examination of how memes serve as both cultural expressions and social tools within the distinct environments of Facebook and Twitter. It also identifies key actors within this ecosystem, including content creators, community moderators, and active participants.

Chapter 4: Socio-Cultural Interaction and Playful Citizenship: Investigating Ramadan Meme Videos on TikTok

The fourth chapter focuses on TikTok, examining how it serves as a platform for playful citizenship through the lens of Ramadan memetic videos, which engage with religious identity and cultural diversity. By employing humour, these videos provide a lighthearted approach to discussing religious practices, particularly the differences between Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. This chapter examines the intersection of TikTok's affordances and users' agency in creatively expressing religious identities, exploring how religious difference becomes an object of shared reflection rather than division through cross-group dialogue.

Chapter 5: Memes, Humour, and Religious Sensitivity: Navigating the Limits of Freedom of Expression in the Digital Age

Using the viral Borobudur Stupa meme as a prominent case in Indonesia's recent digital memory, this chapter explores the complex interplay between humour, religious sensitivity, and freedom of expression in Indonesia's digital age. The meme, which digitally edited President Joko Widodo's face onto a religious symbol, the Borobudur stupa, sparked a national debate on the boundaries of comedy when it crosses with religious symbols and what remains funny, both politically and religiously. This chapter investigates how digital humour, mainly memes, may blur the boundaries between lighthearted satire and offensive material, eliciting diverse reactions throughout Indonesian society.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The final chapter synthesises the findings from each preceding chapter, concluding the broader significance of Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia's digital culture. It reflects on how these memes, as a form of social commentary, contribute to the negotiation of religious identities, social norms, and public discourse. The conclusion also offers recommendations for further research. It highlights the broader implications of meme culture for understanding the evolving dynamics between religion, digital media, and socio-political change in Indonesia.

From Oral Traditions to TikTok:

The Evolution of Meme-Like Forms and Religious Expression in Indonesia

Having established the key definitions in Chapter 1, this chapter shifts to a historical and conceptual exploration of meme-like forms in Indonesia. Rather than treating memes as a purely digital phenomenon, it develops a framework for understanding memes as cultural agents by tracing their roots in pre-internet religious and cultural practices, while drawing selectively on memetic theory, cultural evolution, and anthropological debates on transmission and imitation.

Memes have become a prominent feature of contemporary religious and cultural discourse in Indonesia's digital public sphere. To understand their current forms and meanings, however, it is necessary to look beyond the internet and consider the dynamic network of religious symbols, cultural references, and everyday practices of which these memes are a part in Indonesia.

This chapter traces the historical and conceptual trajectories of meme-like forms in Indonesia, exploring how pre-internet practices, ranging from oral traditions and folklore to narrative and symbolic forms circulating before the 1990s, have evolved and re-emerged on digital platforms, from early online forums and IRC communities to contemporary social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok.¹⁷ In doing so, the chapter highlights how these forms possess a cultural life prior to the internet, while continuing to shape contemporary modes of religious expression in digital environments.

¹⁷ Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is a text-based communication protocol developed in 1988 and widely used in the 1990s and early 2000s for real-time group interaction. One of its most popular client applications was mIRC, particularly in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia.

Richard Dawkins (1976) originally introduced the term meme to describe units of cultural transmission, ideas, styles, or practices that replicate, mutate, and spread across a population. Viewed from this perspective, many pre-internet cultural forms in Indonesia already operated in memetic ways. Proverbs circulated widely because they were concise and adaptable; folktales evolved with each retelling; and *wayang* performances drew from a stable reservoir of characters and moral conflicts, while allowing *dalang* (puppeteers) to modify storylines in response to contemporary social and political events.¹⁸ These forms relied on repetition, variation, and communal uptake, mechanisms that closely resemble how digital memes circulate today.

Recognising this continuity helps us see memes not as a sudden digital rupture but as part of a longer cultural trajectory. What changes most visibly is the medium, while core logics of repetition, variation, and circulation remain recognisable across contexts. As Bolter and Grusin (1999) argue through the concept of remediation, older expressive forms are continually reworked through new technologies. Early digital artefacts such as emoticons and emojis (Davison in Börzsei, 2013), extended long-standing practices of symbolic shorthand; printed stickers, long used in Indonesia on cars, helmets, and public spaces to signal religious or moral messages, anticipated the personalised sticker packs and reaction images that circulate online today.

These transformations show how meme-like forms adapt to shifts in communication technologies while retaining their core purpose: sharing cultural values, negotiating norms, and making social commentary accessible to broad audiences. Whether expressed through oral storytelling, proverbial wisdom, sticker culture, or TikTok videos, these forms help Indonesians articulate religious belonging and navigate difference.

This chapter therefore examines how these pre-Internet meme-like traditions have shaped the development of Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia. By tracing the movement from oral transmission to digital replication, it shows how religious identities continue to be communicated, contested, and reimagined across changing media environments.

In doing so, this chapter answers the first research question by mapping the meme-like forms that Indonesians have used to navigate religious and cultural issues over time, and how these forms have shifted alongside changes in media technologies. To conceptualise these continuities more systematically, the next section revisits Susan Blackmore's understanding of memes as cultural replicators.

¹⁸ Combining shadow play with narrative and music, *Wayang* is an ancient Indonesian puppet theatre. Performances often show stories from Hindu epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana as well as local folklore, conveying moral and philosophical themes using puppets fashioned of leather (*wayang kulit*) or wood (*wayang golek*). This art form is highly appreciated in Indonesia for both entertainment and cultural education.

Memes as Cultural Replicators: Revisiting Blackmore's Framework

Rather than repeating the contemporary definitions of memes discussed in Chapter 1, this section revisits earlier memetic theory to trace the longer cultural genealogy of meme-like forms and to clarify why imitation and replication are central to understanding pre-internet religious expression in Indonesia. Building on Richard Dawkins's (1976) original formulation, Susan Blackmore expanded this idea in *The Meme Machine* (2000), arguing that memes behave like cultural replicators that survive because people keep copying and reshaping them. For her, a meme does not need institutional backing or formal teaching to travel, it survives when it is memorable and easy to reproduce across situations. Songs, gestures, slogans, and certain rituals fall into this category because people learn them by watching others rather than by reading manuals.

Blackmore illustrates this with everyday examples. The "Happy Birthday" song is among the most accessible. Everyone knows how to sing it, and few people were ever explicitly taught how to do so. This song is rarely written down or officially taught in schools, yet it transcends languages, nations, and generations. As Blackmore explains, people do not need formal instruction or institutional support to learn and spread the "Happy Birthday" song; it circulates effortlessly because it functions as a highly successful meme capable of self-replication across contexts (Blackmore, 2000). It succeeds memetically because it is straightforward, emotionally resonant and widely mimicked. As she puts it, a meme becomes widely disseminated not because it is factual or good, but because it is easy to remember, easy to emulate, and adaptable enough to adjust to various contexts. In her words: "Memes are not simply ideas or phrases. They are behavioural directives recorded in brains and transmitted by imitation" (Blackmore, 2000, p.17).

This way of thinking helps explain why many Indonesian cultural expressions resemble memes long before the internet arrived. *Pantun*, *peribahasa*, folk stories, and the narrative structures in *wayang* performances were all designed to be retold and adapted. They circulated through repetition, improvisation, and shared memories. Performers might keep the core storyline but play with tone, emphasis, or moral focus depending on the audience. These older forms stayed alive precisely because communities kept renewing them.

Yet Blackmore's approach has clear limits when we examine more complex cultural environments. Her model treats memes as if they move on their own, as though imitation alone explains why something spreads. In practice, cultural transmission is rarely that simple. The life of a meme is shaped by many factors: local norms, the humour people find appropriate, the technologies they use, and the communities they participate in. These elements influence which ideas catch on, which ones fade, and which mutate along the way.

Scholars working on digital culture have tried to respond to these gaps. Galip (2024), for instance, argues that meme studies must move beyond the Dawkins–Blackmore lineage by attending to the platform-specific, cultural, and socio-political conditions in which memes circulate. Rather than treating memes as self-replicating units, Galip highlights how their production, modification, and visibility are shaped by digital infrastructures, algorithmic logics, and participatory user practices. From this perspective, replication remains a useful idea but requires refinement through interdisciplinary approaches that recognise how meaning-making is mediated by platforms and embedded within broader cultural dynamics.

This perspective is particularly useful for making sense of the Indonesian context, where meme-like forms appear across both offline and online environments. Islamic sayings, visual symbols, jokes, and digital remixes often gain traction because they resonate with local sensibilities and fit the technological channels through which people communicate. For this reason, I use Blackmore’s notion of memes as a starting point but treat memetic spread as something that is always shaped by media infrastructures, cultural norms, and everyday user practices. This situated knowledge allows us to understand more precisely how memes work across offline and online, pre-digital and digital, in socially and technologically embedded ways.

This approach sheds light on how older oral, visual, and performative forms interact with new digital practices. It helps explain how Indonesian users reinterpret long-standing religious expressions within the environments provided by Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, and how these expressions continue to evolve as platform cultures shift.

Pre-Digital Meme Ecologies: *Wayang*, Rituals, and Islamic Storytelling

Long before the emergence of digital platforms, Indonesian societies had already developed rich traditions of visual, oral, and ritual communication that conveyed values, satire, humour, and communal identity within what Geertz (1973) famously described as webs of meaning. Many of these traditions continue to coexist with contemporary digital media, although they have been adapted to new technological and social contexts. In this chapter, I use the term *pre-digital meme ecologies* to refer to these enduring traditions because they illustrate processes of cultural replication, adaptation, and circulation that resemble what Limor Shifman (2014) describes as the logic of memetic transmission. Practices such as wayang performances, Islamic storytelling (*ceramah* and *kisah nabi*), and proverbial sayings therefore provide historical examples of how religious and cultural meanings were repeatedly reproduced, reinterpreted, and shared long before the emergence of internet memes

The examples discussed in this section were selected purposefully rather than intended as an exhaustive survey of Indonesia’s rich pre-digital expressive culture.

This chapter focuses on *wayang*, proverbs, ritualised Islamic expressions, and folklore because they represent long-standing forms of cultural transmission that circulated widely before the emergence of modern mass media. Their repetitive, adaptable, and collectively shared character also makes them particularly suitable for tracing historical continuities between pre-digital cultural expression and contemporary digital memes. Other forms of popular culture, such as television dramas, films, comedy, popular music, or fashion, have likewise contributed to the circulation of Islamic ideas in Indonesia. However, because they emerged largely within the era of modern mass media, they fall outside the historical focus of this chapter, which is to examine earlier cultural forms that help illuminate the longer historical genealogy of memetic practices in Indonesia.

Proverbs like *Sepandai-pandainya tupai melompat, akhirnya jatuh juga* (“Even the cleverest squirrel will eventually fall”) functioned as more than moral instruction; they were frequently repurposed into humorous or satirical commentary on power, behaviour, or social critique. Such expressions are memorable, adaptable, and open to reinterpretation, qualities that help explain why they endure and continue to circulate across generations.

The exact memetic mechanism is also visible in oral storytelling traditions such as the tale of Si Kancil, the clever mouse deer, whose adventures vary regionally while retaining the central message of wit and cunning. Similarly, the story of *Bawang Merah dan Bawang Putih* (Onion and Garlic), a localised variant of Cinderella, reflects cultural values such as kindness and resilience, as it is retold across generations in diverse formats, from oral storytelling by elders during family gatherings, to printed versions in children's books and school textbooks, televised adaptations such as *sinetron* and animated films, and more recently, reinterpretations through YouTube animations, Instagram reels, and TikTok dramatisations. These tales exemplify how cultural content spreads, mutates, and survives, hallmarks of memetic life.

Among the strongest examples of memetic cultural expression is the traditional *Wayang Kulit*¹⁹. While anthropologists often describe its syncretic role in blending Hindu epics, Javanese cosmology, and Islamic moral teachings (Beatty, 1999; Ricklefs, 2006), from a memetic lens, *wayang* is also a system of cultural replication. As Ricklefs suggests through the notion of ‘mystic synthesis’, Islamic values were incorporated into existing cultural forms, such as *wayang*, allowing moral teachings to be disseminated without displacing older traditions. Characters like *Pandhawa* (virtue) and *Kurawa* (vice) function as archetypes, but their enduring popularity is also due to their ability to be reinterpreted and transmitted over time and through different media.

¹⁹ Wayang Kulit is a traditional Javanese shadow puppet theatre created from intricately carved and painted animal hides. It is performed by a puppeteer (*dalang*) with musical accompaniment. The puppet theatre often teaches moral, cultural, and religious lessons through stories from epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana

Dalang (puppeteer) often adapt dialogues to include satire, contemporary issues, and moral critique, showing how wayang continually renews itself through reinterpretation. This reinterpetive flexibility transforms wayang into a memetic system, where symbols are both preserved and continuously reshaped. As Blackmore (2000, p.16) argues, the memes that survive are not necessarily the most accurate but rather those with the most replicable and emotionally resonant qualities. This idea helps clarify why wayang's narrative motifs and characters endure: their memetic qualities make them suitable for repeated adaptation across generations.

The memetic function of wayang becomes even more evident in Indonesia's political history. During the New Order regime, wayang was used to support ideological narratives: *Pandhawa* were cast as symbols of the state, while *Kurawa* became representations of dissent or opposition. Marshall Clark (2006) analyses Pipit Rochijat's *Baratayuda di Negeri Antah Berantah* (1977), revealing how mythological narratives were reworked to critique power, with the Kurawa being portrayed not just as villains, but also as humanised victims, an example of “wayang *mbeling*,” or subversive wayang (Clark, 2006). Clark describes wayang *mbeling* as a mischievous and radical reimagining of tradition, a means through which *dalang* (puppet masters) subvert official narratives and create space for critique within cultural structures (Clark, 2006).

Villagers affected by the 1965–1966 political violence interpreted the events through the lens of wayang, likening the massacre to a modern *Baratayuda* war. As Clark observes, “the 1965–1966 killings were perceived by some villagers as a modern *Baratayuda* war, with the Communists cast as *Kurawa*” (Clark, 2006, p.50). These cases demonstrate that wayang characters are not static symbols, but memetic entities that are constantly adapted to fit new socio-political realities.

In a similar vein, digital memes today continue this tradition of symbolic reframing. Through familiar religious figures, historical events, or fictional characters, memes are used to comment on contemporary issues, from corruption and sectarian tension to state policies and interfaith dynamics. As with wayang *mbeling*, meme creators often inject subversive humour or irony to challenge official narratives or to voice critiques that may otherwise be silenced in formal discourse. The logic remains consistent: symbols are not static, but mobile and reconfigurable across time and media. Whether it is the *Kurawa* symbolising communists in the 1960s or a fictional anime character representing a theological dispute on TikTok, the memetic mechanism is the same: to transmit cultural meaning through repetition, variation, and adaptation in response to current social conditions.

In this sense, wayang functions not only as a traditional art form, but as a cultural technology of memetic transmission. The reinterpretation of *Kurawa* and *Pandhawa*, as seen in political events or subversive performances like wayang *mbeling*,

reflects the same logic that underlies contemporary meme culture. Today's digital memes, whether they involve religious satire, political parody, or theological symbolism, similarly rework familiar narratives to reflect current tensions, critique authority, and provoke reflection. This continuity reveals that meme-making in Indonesia is not merely a byproduct of digital media, but part of a longer tradition of symbolic storytelling that adapts to changing platforms and publics.

Islamic expressions in Indonesia have also functioned memetically prior to the digital age. Oral storytelling, poetic recitations, and symbolic rituals, such as the *slametan*, *maulid*, or *sholawat*, became vehicles for transmitting Islamic values that were embedded within local cultures. One example is the case of *Sunan Kalijaga*, a Wali Songo figure known for using *wayang kulit* to spread Islam. While anthropologists label this approach as syncretism, the merging of Islamic teachings with local Javanese forms (Ricklefs, 2006), it also exemplifies memetic transmission. The story of Kalijaga's cultural strategy has been retold, adapted, and referenced across oral stories, da'wah, textbooks, and even digital platforms. Its longevity lies in its adaptability, embedding Islamic values in recognisable formats.

Similarly, *maulid* celebrations, as described by Beatty (1999), serve not only as devotional gatherings but as symbolic acts of collective memory and moral transmission. Practices like the recitation of *Barzanji*²⁰ function as shared symbols that both reflect existing religious values and shape future conduct. In Geertz's terms, they operate as *models of* religious life and *models for* moral action, carried across time through repetition and collective participation.

It is essential to note, however, the distinction: rituals like *slametan*²¹ or *Maulid* are not memes per se but instead *hosts* for meme-like transmission. Memes, in Blackmore's sense, are discrete, adaptable units (like a saying or symbolic gesture) that can be replicated independently, whereas rituals are broader cultural systems in which memes may reside.

²⁰ Barzanji is a tradition of reciting praises and the life history of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, usually carried out at religious events, such as the Prophet's birthday. The Barzanji text contains poems that tell the story of the birth, life, noble qualities, and miracles of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as expressions of love and respect for him. This tradition fosters love and respect for the Prophet and strengthens the bonds of faith within the Muslim community (NU Online, n.d.), <https://quran.nu.or.id/maulid/maulidul-barzanji>

²¹ *Slametan* is a Javanese communal feast involving prayers, symbolic foods, and recitations to mark significant life events or ward off misfortune. It blends Islamic ritual elements with local animistic and Hindu-Buddhist traditions (Beatty, 1999; Geertz, 1960).

Sholawat refers to the devotional recitation or singing of blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad. It is both a spiritual practice and a form of communal bonding that is widely practised across Indonesia.

Sekaten is a traditional Javanese Islamic ceremony held to celebrate the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (Maulid Nabi), often involving gamelan music, markets, and processions. It exemplifies the syncretic blending of Islamic reverence with local court traditions.

While traditions are broader frameworks that encompass rituals, beliefs, and repeated practices over time, memes function as discrete, replicable units of cultural meaning within those traditions. For example, a *slametan* is a communal ritual rich in symbolic acts. However, within it, one might find elements such as repeated phrases, prayer formulas, or even food symbolism, features that are easily imitated and transmitted beyond the ritual itself. In contrast, if a ritual is preserved only as a fixed routine with no meaningful adaptation or reproduction in other contexts, it may continue as a tradition but no longer functions as a meme. As Blackmore emphasises, the meme's vitality lies in its capacity to replicate, vary, and spread, not merely to persist (Blackmore, 2000).

To clarify the relationship between memes and longer-standing cultural traditions, this table does not treat them as oppositional categories but as different modes of cultural transmission. Drawing on a Geertzian understanding of culture as a system of symbols that both represent and shape social life, traditions are approached here as stabilising symbolic frameworks. Meme theory, by contrast, foregrounds replication, variation, and circulation as mechanisms through which meaning travels. The table below highlights these differences to show how memes and traditions operate through distinct, though occasionally overlapping, cultural logics.

Table 2.1. Key Differences Between Tradition and Meme

Aspect	Tradition	Meme
Definition	A broader cultural framework encompassing rituals, beliefs, and practices	A discrete, replicable unit of cultural meaning (e.g., image, phrase, gesture)
Form	Often framed as stable and formalized, though frequently reinterpreted or reinvented	Flexible, adaptable, and often informal
Transmission	Circulated across generations through repetition, ritualisation, and claims to continuity	Spreads rapidly through imitation and remixing, especially in digital environments
Adaptability	Change tends to be gradual and negotiated to preserve legitimacy	Encourages variation and mutation as a condition of survival
Function	Sustains continuity and legitimises religious or social authority through reference to inherited practices	Generates commentary, critique, and new meanings through circulation
Example	<i>Slametan</i> , <i>Maulid</i> , ritual prayer practices	TikTok videos, viral slogans, satirical images
Longevity Mechanism	Maintained through communal participation and normative obligation	Sustained through replicability, emotional resonance, and ease of imitation (Blackmore)

Source: Author's analytical synthesis based on (Blackmore, 2000), (Shifman, 2014), and anthropological theories of cultural continuity (Beatty, 1999; Geertz, 1960; Ricklefs, 2006).

Rather than opposing tradition and memes, this comparison functions as an analytical tool to clarify how memes operate alongside, within, or against traditional symbolic systems, a dynamic that becomes particularly visible in contemporary digital religious practices.

Visualising Pre-Internet Memes in the Digital Age

The transition to digital platforms has not only generated new memetic forms but also amplified and reconfigured older ones, breathing new life into longstanding cultural symbols. TikTok, in this sense, does not erase oral traditions or symbolic expressions. It reframes them with tools like filters, audio overlays, and rapid circulation, giving them renewed relevance in a contemporary digital landscape.

What we see on TikTok today, memes remixed and circulated to reflect current religious or cultural moments, is not entirely new; it is a continuation of this long-standing cultural practice. Digital platforms may have changed their speed and style, but the basic logic remains. The ideas survive when they are memorable, meaningful, and adaptable enough to take on many different forms.

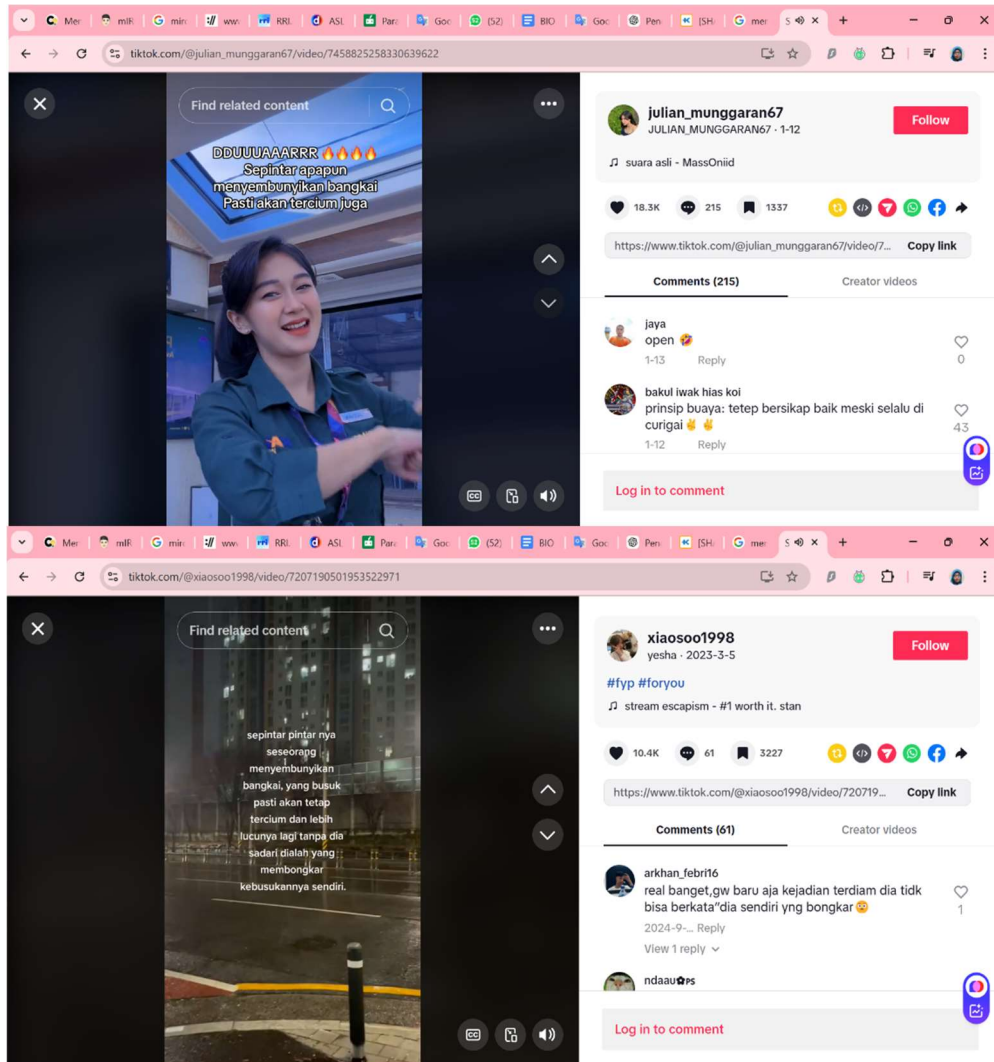


Figure 2.1. TikTok meme video drawing on a proverb about hidden wrongdoing
Source: TikTok @Julian_munggaran67 and @xiaosoo1998

To illustrate how traditional wisdom is remixed into digital formats, consider the adaptation of the proverb *Sepandai-pandainya menyimpan bangkai, baunya akan tercium juga* into TikTok meme videos. These videos employ dramatic reenactments, audio overlays, and visual humour to convey the proverb's moral message in a way that is emotionally resonant and socially relevant, particularly among younger audiences. This aligns with Blackmore's notion that successful memes are not

those that are true or sacred, but those that are memorable, repeatable, and adaptable across media and generations.

Early Digital Symbols: Emoticon to Emoji

Although this dissertation focuses on Islamic-inspired memes on public social media platforms, emoticons, emojis, and WhatsApp sticker practices matter as a prehistory of digital vernaculars. This section draws on digital ethnographic reflections and informal conversations with Indonesian internet users who were active in early online spaces such as mIRC and Kaskus during the 2000s. They illustrate how Indonesian users became accustomed to communicating affect, piety, and belonging through small, repeatable visual units, communicative habits that later inform and resonate with meme-making and platform-based circulation.

The earliest forms of digital visual expression, such as Scott Fahlman's :-) and :- (introduced in 1982, offered users a simple way to signal tone and emotion in text-based environments. These symbols were quickly adopted in Indonesian digital spaces, from mIRC and early mailing lists to Kaskus forums, and became part of the everyday visual vocabulary that structured early online interaction. Their rapid spread shows how users were already learning to communicate through small, replicable visual cues long before the emergence of full-fledged internet memes.

As internet access expanded globally, similar visual conventions began to shape local online cultures, including in Indonesia. Early forums and chatrooms provided new spaces where users experimented with humour, tone, and identity through these simple digital cues. Though they did not directly carry religious meaning, emoticons became part of the expressive repertoire in Indonesian online communities such as Kaskus and mIRC, where humour, sentiment, and subcultural identity began to be negotiated through visual expression. Kaskus (founded in 1999) was one of Indonesia's earliest and most influential online forums, known for its vibrant communities and unique local slang (*Bahasa Kaskus*), such as *Pertamax* (the first comment on a thread, often competed for), and *Agan/Aganwati* (respectful ways to address male and female users). mIRC widely used in the early 2000s, facilitated real-time group chats and early digital social interaction. A typical opening phrase was "ASL PLS" (Age, Sex, Location – Please), used to initiate conversations with unknown users. These accounts shed light on how emoticons shaped early online interaction in Indonesia. As one informant who was active on mIRC in the early 2000s recalled, "we used emoticons all the time, sometimes just a ':-)' was enough to show we were joking," highlighting how minimal visual cues could substitute for tone and intent in text-based interaction.

In these spaces, users adopted emoticons not only to signal humour or friendliness but also to negotiate subcultural identity, express teasing, or soften disagreement. Icon like :) for smiling, :P for teasing, XD for laughter, and T_T

for crying, became part of a shared visual repertoire among Indonesian users who were learning how to build sociality in emerging digital environments.

Despite a decline in usage, emoticons have served as the foundation for more elaborate and visually engaging forms of digital communication. These more complex and expressive forms of communication have made possible the development of more sophisticated tools, including emojis, GIFs, and stickers, which offer richer visual expressions. As the digital environment matured, these simple icons evolved into richer, more adaptable media for conveying not just tone, but cultural and religious values as well.

Although emoticons can be considered an early example of replicable digital expression, its classification as a "meme" remains a matter of contention. Some argue that emoticons, such as :-) and :- (were more akin to symbolic shorthand than full-fledged memes, lacking the re-mixable and referential qualities typically associated with memetic culture (Davison in Börzsei, 2013).

Global developments in digital visual expression did shape the landscape, but mostly as background influences. Early viral animations like the Dancing Baby (1996) or the Hampsterdance GIF spread internationally and demonstrated how looping images could circulate rapidly across online forums. At the time, internet penetration in Indonesia was still limited, and these examples were only encountered by small groups of urban, early adopters, especially in North America (Collins, 2018). They are relevant here not because they defined Indonesian online culture directly but because they mark the technological shift that later enabled more complex visual communication.

The more significant transition occurred in the early 2010s, when smartphones and messaging applications began to dominate everyday communication in Indonesia. The adoption of Android devices and the growing affordability of mobile internet accelerated the use of emojis.²² By then, emojis had already been standardised through Unicode, enabling cross-device use, and platforms such as WhatsApp (launched in 2009 and widely adopted in Indonesia during the early 2010s) helped normalise emoji as an everyday layer of digital expression, including within religious circles.

²² The emergence of emoji shortly afterwards also reshaped digital expression. Developed by Shigetaka Kurita in 1999 for NTT DoCoMo's i-mode platform, the first emoji set quickly spread beyond Japan and was later adopted into global messaging apps such as Apple's iMessage, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger (Danesi, 2016; Seargeant, 2019).



Figure 2.2. The newly rendered *Dancing Baby* and selected remixes by Kreationismistern, Yuuki Morita, Yonk, and Kid Eight.²³
Source: CNN (2023)

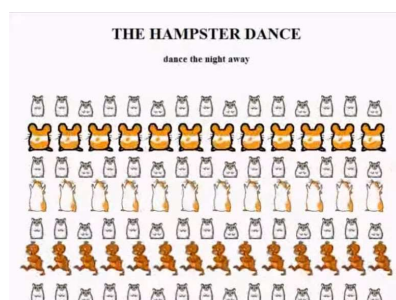


Figure 2.3. The original *Hamsterdance* website²⁴
Source: CBC Art (Collins, 2018)

Initial enthusiasm for emojis often portrayed them as a universal visual language capable of bridging linguistic and cultural differences (as discussed by Danesi, 2016; Evans, 2017; Seargeant, 2019). Yet empirical studies challenge this assumption. Miller et al., (2016) revealed that users often interpret the same emoji differently, even when viewing identical renderings. In their study, only 4.5% of emojis received consistent sentiment ratings, and in 25% of cases, users disagreed on whether the emoji expressed a positive, neutral, or negative emotion. This suggests that rather than eliminating ambiguity, emojis can introduce new layers of (mis)interpretation. Supporting this, Guntuku et al. (2019) found significant cultural differences in emoji usage across Eastern and Western countries. For instance, emojis related to food, drink, and leisure activities were used and interpreted differently, reflecting deeper cultural distinctions in everyday life.

These findings challenge what several scholars have described as the popular *myth of emoji universality*, the belief that emojis constitute a universal visual language transcending cultural and linguistic boundaries (Danesi, 2016; Evans, 2017; Seargeant, 2019). Rather than functioning as a shared visual code, emojis acquire meaning through cultural context and user practice. For example, in many Western cultures, the 🙏 emoji is used to convey prayer, whereas in Japan and Indonesia, the same emoji is inherently understood as expressing gratitude (thank you) or a kind request, illustrating how local customs and practices influence the use of emojis. Like language, emojis carry local knowledge and cultural resonance,

²³ Early examples of viral digital content, often cited as precursors to contemporary memes, appeared in the mid-to-late 1990s. Commentators such as Will Fulton (Thrillist) and Will Leitch (OneZero (2021)) frequently point to the *Dancing Baby* GIF (1996) as one of the earliest internet memes due to its rapid circulation and repeated remixing, a status further cemented by its appearance in the television series *Ally McBeal* (Higgins, 2017).

²⁴ Around the same period, *Hamster Dance*, created by Deidre LaCarte, became another widely shared GIF across early web communities (Collin, 2018), illustrating how looping animated visuals began shaping early online humour within the limits of the late-1990s internet.

however, unlike language, their meanings are more weakly stabilised and more dependent on platform design, visual convention, and situational use.

This ambivalence echoes earlier experiments at visual standardisation, such as Otto Neurath's ISOTYPE, which sought to create a universally readable pictorial language.²⁵ Yet even ISOTYPE's minimalist icons were shaped by cultural and ideological contexts, revealing that pictograms never fully escape local interpretation (Jansen, 2009; Youvan, 2023). Emoji work in a similar way, they look simple and neutral, but their meanings depend heavily on local norms and everyday communicative practice. The idea of emoji universality, therefore, does not hold up when confronted with actual user behaviour.

Yet the very ambiguity that limits emoji's universality also enables creativity. Users repurpose and reinterpret emojis in ways that sometimes even reshape design standards. As emoji libraries expand to include symbols tied to politics, culture, and religion (Stark & Crawford, 2015), they increasingly function as semiotic tools in global digital communication, tools that are expressive, adaptable, and culturally inflected rather than universally legible.

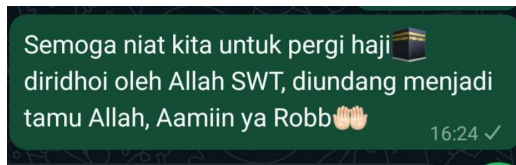
These findings are important in the Indonesian context, where emojis are starting to be used not only to express emotions, but also to give religious color to everyday conversations. Indonesian users frequently adopt emojis in their daily communications, particularly in religious contexts, as smartphone usage and instant messaging apps like WhatsApp and LINE gained widespread popularity in the early 2010s. Emojis such as the crescent moon (🌙) star (⭐), the palm position depicting prayer (🙏), or even the Kaaba (🕌) symbol are used in Islam-related messages. The inclusion of religious symbols such as the Kaaba (🕌) or prayer hands (🙏) on emoji keyboards was not a coincidence. They were facilitated by encoding in the Unicode Standard, which is a universal character system employed by a majority of significant technology companies to enable consistency across devices and platforms. As Stark and Crawford (2015) argue, emojis are ideologically loaded, not ideologically neutral, and are acts of socio-cultural negotiations undertaken in the name of the Unicode Consortium.²⁶ Since the mid-2010s, the Consortium has been presented with an increasing number of proposals aimed at expanding emoji depictions that include symbols relevant to Islam and other religious traditions (Unicode Consortium, n.d.).

As emojis began to enter everyday conversation, Indonesian Muslim users quickly adapted them to the context of worship and religious communities. Emojis are often included in greetings during Ramadan or Eid al-Fitr. WhatsApp users often

²⁵ International System of Typographic Picture Education

²⁶ The Unicode Consortium is a non-profit organisation that standardises characters and emojis for consistent cross-platform communication (see unicode.org for official updates).

combine the crescent moon emoji (🌙) and mosque (🕌) to add a visual element that enriches traditional greetings, demonstrating a desire to integrate cultural and religious identity into digital spaces. Here is an example of the use of emojis in the daily chat, one of the informants (a female lecturer in her 30s) with her sister.



Translate:

May our intention to perform the Hajj be granted by Allah SWT, and may we be invited as His guests. Aamiin, Ya Lord.”

Figure 2.4. Examples of emoji use in digital communication

The message combines text with the Kaaba emoji (🕌) and the supplication hands emoji (🙏) to express a prayer related to the intention to perform the Hajj.

In this context, the Kaaba emoji anchors the message in the sacred theme of pilgrimage, while the supplication hands visually reinforce the act of prayer concluded with *Aamiin ya Rabb*. Together, these emojis do not merely decorate the message but intensify its affective and religious tone, allowing the sender to signal sincerity, piety, and shared moral orientation. At the same time, their use indexes participation in a shared Muslim communicative repertoire, reinforcing a sense of belonging within a digital ummah during significant religious moments such as Hajj or Ramadan.

While this study aligns with Bai et al. (2019) and Godard & Holtzman (2022) in recognising the semiotic richness of emojis, particularly their ability to convey emotional and cultural meanings in religious contexts, it also engages with the limitations raised by Stark and Crawford (2015). The religious emojis used in WhatsApp or Instagram, such as the Kaaba or prayer hands, may appear expressive and contextually meaningful, especially during events like Hajj or Ramadan. However, their availability, standardisation are governed through Unicode, while their visual implementation is determined by platform providers such as Apple, Google, Meta, and other largely Western-based technology companies. This means users can imbue emojis with local religious meaning, but the range of available symbols and their visual conventions remain shaped by corporate infrastructures.

Stark and Crawford’s point is relevant here. Despite the limits imposed by platform-level design, Indonesian users in religious settings often reinterpret and repurpose emojis creatively. This capacity for creative reinterpretation has, at times, moved beyond personal use and even influenced emoji design standards. One clear example is the creation of the ‘Person with Headscarf’ emoji (🧕), emerged in response to user demands for better religious representation (🧕), approved by the Unicode Consortium in 2016 following a proposal by Rayouf Alhumedhi, a Saudi teenager who wished to see the hijab represented in digital

spaces (Vonberg et al., 2017). This moment marked a shift toward more inclusive emoji design, alongside other changes such as the introduction of skin tone modifiers, which similarly emerged from debates around representation, visibility, and cultural difference in digital communication. Together, these developments reinforce the role of emojis as tools not only for personal expression but also for negotiating cultural, racial, and religious visibility within global platform infrastructures.

As emojis became more integrated into daily communication, their use in religious contexts also expanded. WhatsApp, in particular, has helped share religious emotions through text and images, thereby strengthening cultural and spiritual ties. WhatsApp groups within the Islamic community have evolved as platforms for sharing spiritual support, moral guidance, and religious teachings. The group, such as the *Alumni Haji Mandiri* (Mandiri Hajj Alumni) and the *Amal Jariyah* Group (the jariyah charity group), helps to strengthen ties among its members. Often centred on Islamic worship rituals, these groups centre on congregational prayers at the mosque, fostering a feeling of community and shared religious commitment.²⁷



Translate:

The dawn is truly beautiful when the *Shubuh* prayer is performed at its earliest time and in congregation at the mosque'

As narrated from Buraidah al-Aslami, the Prophet Muhammad said: 'Give glad tidings to those who walk to the mosque in the darkness of night, that they will receive perfect light on the Day of Resurrection.' (Hadith narrated by Abu Dawud and Tirmidhi)."

Figure 2.5. Motivational message circulated within a digital group

This message motivates group members to engage in the *Subuh* prayer at the mosque collectively. Within Islamic communities, such as Hajj alumni groups or charity organisations, it is customary to share messages like this to serve as reminders and foster stronger relationships among members by collectively observing recommended Islamic worship practices. This phenomenon reflects how digital communication platforms, especially messaging apps like WhatsApp,

²⁷ The author has been an active member of this WhatsApp group since its formation, long before this research began. My role as both participant and observer has provided me with ongoing, informal access to the group dynamics and communications. All data presented have been anonymised and selected from non-sensitive interactions.

have evolved as central means of preserving spiritual ties and promoting religious observance, using the philosophy that together one stands strong. Using these channels, group members can regularly share inspirational and religious materials, thereby strengthening their sense of community and shared responsibility in fulfilling their religious obligations.

In this WhatsApp group, the practice of reminding each other highlights the importance of togetherness in the execution of worship. Teaching activities are still actively carried out in the *Subuh* prayer in congregation in Islam, which gets many rewards. In addition to religious WhatsApp groups, this habit is also widely used among general high school alumni or social communities, such as sending a friendly reminder for *Subuh* prayers. An informant, a member of the Smaga'95 Surakarta group (alumni of SMA Negeri 3 Surakarta, class of 1995), shared in an informal interview that he routinely posts digital stickers and short reminders to encourage the members of the WhatsApp group to join *Subuh* prayers or attend *Jumatan* (Friday prayers). As a fellow group member, I have also observed this pattern, which reflects how religious practice is maintained and encouraged within alumni digital communities. Similarly, ingrained patterns within close communities, such as Hajj Alumni or charity groups, demonstrate that collective prayer fosters a stronger sense of solidarity and social responsibility among them.

Indeed, such practices echo the daily digital religiosity noted by Eva Nisa, particularly in her ethnography of the "One Day One Juz" (ODOJ) movement, where group reminders through WhatsApp served as both spiritual encouragement and moral discipline within Muslim online piety networks (Nisa, 2018b). Technology helps these spiritual connections grow more actively and responsively. The rapid and straightforward form of communication, quick messages, emojis and stickers, allows for continuity in everyday worship and solidifies group religiosity. However, this sense of efficiency should not be viewed solely through the prism of functional efficiency; the sense of intimacy, immediacy, and emotional ties that come as a byproduct of these nudges is also part of the game. According to Nisa (2018a) and Slama (2017), digital platforms not only structure religious behaviour but also shape affective relationships among believers, making religiosity feel more present and lived in the everyday.

The mosque emoji () does more than simply depict a place of worship; it operates as a semiotic shorthand that reinforces the moral and communal tone of the message. Within Islamic communication, the mosque symbol evokes not only physical space but also the collective act of worship and belonging it represents. When used in digital invitations to prayer, it visually anchors the message in a shared religious context, providing affective resonance and reinforcing the sender's sincerity and piety. In this way, digital symbols such as the mosque emoji extend traditional modes of religious expression into everyday digital communication, transforming ritual reminders into acts of mediated devotion.

While emojis are designed as simplified, universal symbols, their visual references inevitably reflect particular cultural aesthetics. The mosque emoji, for instance, resonates with many Indonesian users because domes and minarets are also common in Southeast Asian mosques, even though local variations, such as tiered roofs or Javanese-inspired forms, differ significantly. This simplification illustrates a broader tension within emoji design, the attempt to create globally recognisable symbols that nevertheless privilege certain visual traditions over others (Guntuku et al., 2019; H. Miller et al., 2016).

In Indonesia, mosque architecture itself is remarkably diverse and deeply rooted in local culture. Mosques such as the *Menara Kudus* Mosque in Central Java, which has Hindu-Javanese architectural elements, or the Grand Mosque of West Sumatra, whose roof resembles a traditional *Minangkabau* house, are examples of how Islam has adapted to local cultures. Unfortunately, because emojis have to be made as universal as possible to be used in various countries, these local cultural elements are not visible in the current representation of mosque emojis.

Emojis enhance the message's appeal and alleviate monotony by introducing colourful, emotionally charged visuals that complement or replace words. For example, a simple heart (❤️) can quickly signal affection or agreement without the need for elaboration. In a digital environment saturated with information, these visual cues help messages stand out in busy chat groups or on social media, where numerous messages are shared quickly. Their visual form makes it easier for people to spot and remember the message. Religious emoji can instantly situate a message within a religious context, allowing recipients to process its meaning more intuitively than with words alone. Their symbolic clarity and familiarity can also support cognitive recall, as the brain tends to retain and retrieve visual content more efficiently than plain text (Bai et al., 2019; Danesi, 2016).

The widespread adoption of smartphones and messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter further embedded emojis into everyday communication practices (Ling, 2012). Beyond expressing emotion, emojis have increasingly taken on cultural and religious nuances in daily interaction.

As discussed above, emojis function as routine markers of religious tone in Indonesian Muslim communication. Rather than reiterating their symbolic meanings, the discussion now turns to the limits of emoji standardisation and how these constraints prompt users to adopt more flexible and locally grounded visual forms.²⁸

²⁸ While much of this section focuses on private messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, similar affective affordances are also visible on public platforms. On Facebook for example, reaction emojis expand beyond the single 'like' to offer a small repertoire of socially legible responses (e.g.,

However, the limitations of emojis as universal symbols have become the starting point for the birth of more local visual expressions, namely stickers, which allow users to negotiate cultural and religious identities more freely. Stickers on WhatsApp, LINE, or Telegram allow for more variation. Because individuals or communities can create stickers, their designs are more flexible and reflect a more specific cultural identity. Many users in Indonesia create and share Islamic-themed stickers featuring typical elements, such as the *peci* and *sarung*, or local cultural themes, including *bermaaf-maafan* (apologising) and the culture of *sungkeman* towards parents celebrating Eid al-Fitr.²⁹ This shift illustrates how digital expression, initially constrained by standardised emoji systems, evolves into more contextual and culturally grounded visual forms.



Figure 2.6. WhatsApp sticker images for *sungkeman* during Eid al-Fitr 2021

Source: https://suryamalang.tribunnews.com/2021/05/11/daftar-stiker-wa-whatsapp-lebaran-selamat-hari-raya-idul-fitri-gambar-lucu-saling-memaafkan?page=all#goog_rewarded (Suryamalang, 2021)

The limits of emoji standardisation are precisely what make other vernacular formats attractive. When users need more local details, faces, clothing, gestures, or culturally specific humour, they often turn to stickers. Unlike emojis, stickers are not constrained by Unicode standardisation and can be produced by communities themselves. In this sense, stickers function as a crucial transitional form between standardised visual symbols and fully memetic formats, preparing the ground for the Islamic-inspired memes analysed in the following sections.

♥ 'love', 😲 'wow', 😞 'sad'), which users can mobilise to signal sympathy, approval, or shared joy in religiously charged moments.

²⁹ The tradition of asking for forgiveness during Eid al-Fitr is an important part of Muslim culture in Indonesia. After a month of fasting, Muslims ask for forgiveness from each other to purify themselves and strengthen their relationships. *Sungkeman*, especially in Javanese culture, is a form of respect for parents and elders by kneeling and kissing their hands as a symbol of humility and asking for blessings.

Stickers and Visual Language of Digital Islam

As technology and social media platforms evolved, the circulation of visual content opened new possibilities for cultural and religious expression. The popularity of digital stickers in messaging apps, such as LINE stickers (Everypixel Journal, 2023) and BBM stickers (Kuittinen, 2014), gained momentum by drawing on a longstanding sticker culture (StickerYou, 2025). These stickers, whether digital or physical, have been used to convey humour, beliefs, and identity in public spaces. From bumper stickers on vehicles to slogans painted on trucks or *angkot*,³⁰ such visual texts serve a memetic function, replicating cultural messages with simplicity, recognisability, and resonance.

While this dissertation focuses on digital memes, it is important to note that many Indonesians have long interacted with visual texts in their everyday environments, especially in urban settings. Since the late 1990s, during my teenage years in Solo, Central Java, I have frequently used public transportation such as *angkot* and city buses. Through this experience, I became familiar with the widespread presence of stickers across bus shelters, vehicle interiors, and public walls. These stickers included a variety of content: anti-corruption slogans, religious messages, political campaign materials, and even humorous or commercial texts like *sedot WC* (Septic tank pumping service). While I do not claim to know when this practice began, these recurring visual elements shaped my early awareness of how text and image can serve persuasive or communal functions in public life.

This long-standing familiarity with sticker culture reveals how Indonesians have long employed short, repeatable visual formats to assert values, identities, and commentary, much like today's digital memes. The transition from these material expressions to online formats should not be seen as a rupture, but as part of a continuum. It reflects the ways in which symbolic and participatory media have evolved across platforms, adapting to new technologies while retaining local modes of humour, morality, and critique.

Stickers attached to motorcycles and cars, for example, reflect identity and political stance through slogans like *Aku Pancasila* (I am Pancasila, referring to Indonesia's state ideology) or *NKRI Harga Mati* (The Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia is non-negotiable). Others, such as *Peace* or similar messages, convey anti-violence sentiments and promote social harmony. During regional and national election periods, stickers featuring candidate portraits or political party logos are also commonly used to signal political allegiance. These examples demonstrate how even the simplest visual forms can operate as tools for social and political expression in everyday public spaces.

³⁰ *Angkot* (short for *angkutan kota*, or “city transport”) refers to a form of informal, shared public minivan transportation widely used in Indonesian urban areas. It typically follows semi-fixed routes and serves as an affordable mode of transit, often operating without strict schedules or centralised regulation.



Figure 2.7. “NKRI Harga Mati” sticker displayed on a private vehicle
Illustrative visualisation based on everyday observations.

In more personal settings, stickers found in books or notebooks often contain motivational quotes, such as *Semangat pagi!* (Morning spirit!) or *Stay Positive*, designed to uplift and inspire the user. Islamic-themed cartoon stickers, depicting children in hijab or Muslim dress, offer gentle visual affirmations of religious identity, especially among younger audiences. Public stickers with slogans like *Anti Korupsi* (Anti-Corruption) or *Save the Earth*, commonly found on walls or communal spaces, move beyond simple statements: they perform advocacy by raising awareness, prompting reflection, or subtly urging collective responsibility. Meanwhile, humorous local stickers, such as *Kesabaran tidak ada batasnya* (Patience has no limits), reveal how Indonesians often use humour to navigate tension, offering momentary relief and a sense of shared cultural resilience.

Much like their physical predecessors, such as slogans on trucks, bumper stickers, or wall posters, digital stickers are concise, visually striking, and contextually meaningful. Scholarships on street-based visual practices show that such interventions do more than decorating public space. As Nicholas Ganz (2015) demonstrates in *Street Messages*, forms of street visual expression, including graffiti, stencils, and posters, carry layered political, cultural, and social meanings and often function as tools of commentary or resistance. Physical stickers operate within this broader visual ecology, translating similar logics of brevity, repetition, and symbolic intervention into everyday environments.

In the digital realm, this visual culture has been translated into digital stickers, which function as shorthand for communicating emotion, identity, and commentary. Unlike emojis, which are more limited in detail and nuance, digital stickers offer larger, more expressive visuals that combine humour, stylistic diversity, and cultural specificity (Vandergriff, 2013). In Indonesia, their rapid rise in popularity stems from their ability to vividly and effectively express emotion and ideas, operating not only as personal communication tools but also as potent mediums for cultural and religious expression.

In Indonesia, the use of digital stickers is skyrocketing, since WhatsApp introduced the sticker feature in late 2018. Within just a year, Indonesian users began producing and circulating a wide range of Islamic-themed stickers, especially during Ramadan and Eid, integrating faith-based expressions into everyday digital communication, featuring illustrations of religious figures, prayers, and typical expressions that reflect Indonesian Muslim culture. These stickers enable more emotional and cultural digital communication, which can depict religious nuances more vividly and expressively (Kato et al., 2018). For example, in family or religious community WhatsApp groups, stickers such as "*Barakallah fiikum*" (May Allah bless you) or images of praying hands are often used as a form of prayer and emotional support in conversations. When someone is recovering from illness, it is common to receive stickers like "*Syafakallah*" (May Allah heal you), which function as digital surrogates for collective prayer and communal care. In this digital age, Islamic stickers in online chat rooms show how religious traditions and expressions continue to evolve and adapt to technology, creating new ways for people to connect and share meaning in their daily lives.

Various smartphone apps such as *Sticker.ly*, *Wemoji*, and *Personal Sticker for WhatsApp*, third-party tools commonly used worldwide, including by Indonesian users, enable the creation of customised sticker packs, support the trend of creating and sharing personalised stickers. These tools allow users to transform images, such as photos of family members, local expressions, or religious illustrations, into stickers that reflect their personal, cultural, or religious identities. In Indonesia, many Muslims use such apps to create stickers that depict moments surrounding the call to prayer (*adhan*), integrating both visual cues and religious expressions into their digital communication.

For example, stickers may feature a child in a white prayer outfit saying *Tuh Adzan... Sholat dulu yuk!* (That's the adzan... Let's go and pray!), or an animated figure with the text *Maaf off dulu... Kita Sholat yukkk* (Sorry, logging off... Let's pray). Another example features a cartoon boy and girl in Muslim attire, accompanied by the caption *Saatnya Sholat...* (It's time to pray). These images depict the call to prayer not through sound but through culturally familiar visual representations, transforming everyday chat interactions into moments of religious encouragement. They also demonstrate how ordinary people and ordinary everyday forms and objects, not just institutions or religious leaders, participate in shaping the religious digital landscape through creative, culturally rooted sticker content.

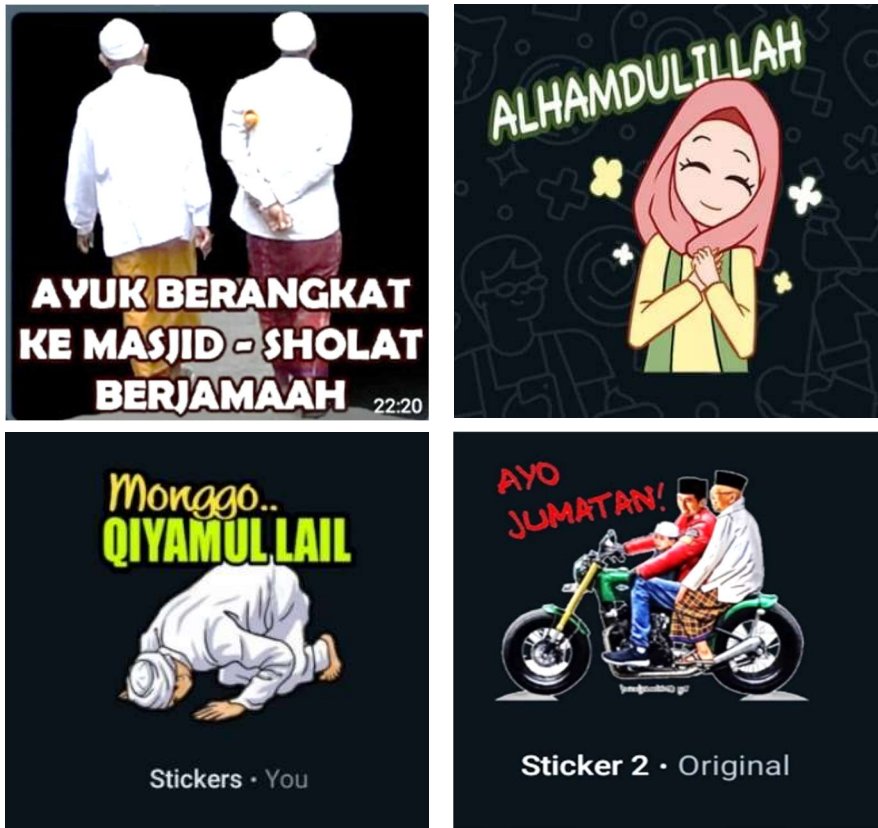


Figure 2.8. Examples of Islamic-themed digital stickers
Source: Various WhatsApp Groups

One of these WhatsApp stickers depicts three men wearing traditional Islamic attire riding a motorcycle. The sticker includes "AYO JUMATAN!" in Indonesian, which translates to "Let's go to Friday prayers!". This sticker cleverly merges wit with cultural allusions, portraying a prevalent scenario in numerous Indonesian communities, where congregating for Friday prayers is frequently undertaken collectively and holds significant social moments, the inclusion of men adorned in *sarongs* and *peci*, traditional cloths from Indonesia. The stickers also subtly hint at class differences and resource-sharing practices, where combining transportation is a common way to maximise limited means. This practical approach, in turn, reflects camaraderie and adds a layer of "street credibility," as it depicts the everyday realities of life that are down-to-earth for many Indonesians. Its playful tone, combined with meaningful cultural messages, makes it entertaining and reflective of societal norms. and gives this sticker a prominent cultural aspect, making it instantly recognisable to its audience.

Within digital communication, stickers like this offer a more nuanced and culturally significant means of conveying emotions and ideas, in contrast to standard emojis. In late 2018, after WhatsApp introduced its sticker feature,

Islamic-themed stickers have gained significant popularity in Indonesia, due to their ability to convey religious messages and values in a casual but spiritually resonant way. These stickers communicate a message and incorporate a cultural context that is readily comprehensible to users. This mode of communication enables individuals to integrate religious components into their daily interactions.

Another example is the *Madura Anti-COVID-19* sticker pack, developed to promote public health while reinforcing Madurese cultural identity. These stickers feature characters wearing sarongs and traditional headgear, humorous expressions, and proverbs in the Madurese language. Slogans such as *Jha' kalowaran mon tada' parola* (Don't go out without a good reason) or *Senga' korbân Corona bannya la'!* (Don't become Corona's next victim!) effectively blends humour with serious health messages. Several stickers also incorporate Islamic expressions, such as *Aamiin...*, or reflect the concept of *ikhtiar*, an Islamic theological principle emphasising human effort alongside trust in divine will. These subtle religious undertones reveal how stickers become vessels for both cultural and spiritual meaning. The sticker pack circulated widely through WhatsApp during the pandemic, shared informally in family and community groups or downloaded via popular sticker-making apps, showing how local communities adopt digital tools to reinforce both health awareness and cultural belonging.

Their visual design, combining comic-style illustrations with expressive gestures, makes these health messages both engaging and accessible. As Noordyanto and Ramadani observe, such culturally embedded stickers serve not only communicative functions but also bridge personal interaction and collective identity, particularly in contexts of social urgency, such as the pandemic (Noordyanto & Ramadhani, 2020).



Figure 2.9. “Madura Anti COVID-19” sticker package
Source: Noordyanto, N., & Ramadani, N. (2020)

Similar trends can be seen beyond Indonesia. In East and Southeast Asia, for instance, LINE sticker packs featuring ethnic or culture-based designs have become identity markers among youth, particularly in Japan, Thailand, and Taiwan, where LINE is a dominant messaging platform (Jasjfi, 2020). In Japan, seasonal and Shinto-influenced stickers are commonly exchanged during New Year celebrations; in Thailand, Buddhist-themed or Thai-script humour stickers circulate widely during major festivals; while in Taiwan, Indigenous and Hokkien-language stickers have gained popularity as expressions of cultural pride. Across these contexts, stickers serve as visual affirmations of belonging, moral values, and group solidarity. Whether used in daily conversations or during festive occasions, these stickers help reinforce cultural pride and religious identity in everyday communication.

Overall, these examples show that digital stickers are more than playful images; they are extensions of longstanding traditions of cultural expression, updated for the digital age. As visual, context-sensitive, and emotionally resonant tools, they also offer a new mode of visual *da'wah*, one that creatively blends religiosity, humour, and community engagement. This opens the door to a closer examination of how Islamic-themed stickers contribute to the broader *da'wah* economy within digital infrastructures.

Islamic Stickers and the Da'wah Economy

In Indonesia, digital stickers have emerged as a favoured medium for religious expression in messaging apps like WhatsApp. Islamic-themed packs with cute and adorable cartoon characters, student stickers, advice from Ulama, calligraphy, aphorisms, and special Ramadan stickers, have become increasingly popular. For example, on *Sticker WA Islami Lengkap*, a widely downloaded app with over 500,000 installs (play.google.com).³¹ These stickers facilitate richer digital communication that blends emotion and faith (Kato et al., 2018).

Muslim application developers, individuals, and communities in Indonesia have begun creating sticker packs that contain Islamic preaching messages, advice from clerics, and even distinctive Islamic-related humour. Several stickers feature popular religious figures, including Habib Luthfi, Gus Dur, Mbah Maimun, Gus Baha, Ustadz Abdul Somad, Ustadz Maulana, and Ustadz Adi Hidayat. In these stickers, they are depicted with distinctive quotes or short prayers

The “Fun Ramadhan with Ustadz Maulana” pack, for instance, was officially launched on LINE as a paid sticker set in 2016, reflecting a monetised form of religious engagement. Users could obtain it through the LINE Sticker Shop during its release. In contrast, WhatsApp-based stickers such as *Nasihat Ulama* (Clerical advice) are freely circulated by followers and communities, often outside any formal economic structure.

³¹https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?hl=en_US&id=com.mungmedia.stikermuslim, accessed 15 June 2025



Figure 2.10. “Fun Ramadan with Ustadz Maulana” sticker package

Source : <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/625367098246708402/>



Figure 2.11. “Nasehat Ulama” (clerical advice) sticker featuring Ustadz Adi Hidayat

Source: Play Store Application

The presence of such stickers underscores what Eva Nisa describes as *lucrative da'wah*, a form of religious engagement that operates within the logic of digital consumer culture (Nisa, 2018a). Even when distributed freely, these stickers enhance the visibility and informal branding of religious figures, illustrating how *da'wah* is increasingly intertwined with market dynamics.

Users, often followers or admirers of popular preachers, who create and circulate stickers serve as cultural intermediaries, translating religious authority into visual formats that resonate with younger, digitally literate audiences. For instance, one sticker featuring a cartoon of Ustadz Adi Hidayat with the caption "*Eits Hati-bati Jaga Lisan Anda!*" (Hey, be careful...watch your words) was described by a user as "*ngena banget, pas buat sharing kalau ada yang mulai emosi di WhatsApps grup*" (Really hits the mark, perfect to share when someone starts getting emotional in a WhatsApp group). Such responses show how users not only circulate these stickers but also attach specific emotional or pedagogical value to them.

For many young Indonesia Muslims, who create and share such stickers, sticker-making becomes both an act of devotion and a way to participate in the informal *da'wah* economy. This was affirmed in my informal conversations with several young clerics and Islamic educators in Solo and the surrounding area, who described such practices as part of a broader, more adaptive model of preaching, one that reflects the rhythms and affordances of contemporary digital life.

These practices, however, also expose deeper ethical tensions. While Islamic teaching emphasises *ikhlas* (sincerity) in religious acts, digital platforms are built to maximise engagement, extract data, and generate profit. LINE's paid sticker packs exemplify formal monetisation, whereas WhatsApp's sticker-sharing model, though non-commercial at the user level, still operates within platform capitalism. Everyday activities such as sending, receiving, and forwarding stickers produce valuable metadata about social interaction patterns, which feeds into Meta's wider data ecosystem and sustains its surveillance-based business model (Srnicek, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018; Zuboff, 2019). In this sense, "free" refers only to the absence of monetary exchange among users; at the platform level, sticker circulation continues to generate economic value.

Developers may profit through advertising, commissions, or premium downloads. While criticism of sticker-based *da'wah* remains relatively muted, parallels can be drawn to earlier forms of digital religious commodification. In the mid-2000s, several Indonesian mobile operators introduced paid SMS services offering Qur'anic verses or daily Islamic reminders. Although not widely documented in mainstream media, these services prompted informal concerns in online forums and community discussions, where some questioned the ethics of charging for sacred content and argued that divine messages should not be commercialised. Such reactions illustrate an early unease about monetising religious material, an anxiety that aligns with broader critiques of the marketisation of faith (Einstein,

2008). In this context, the use of Islamic stickers becomes entangled in broader techno-economic infrastructures. On one hand, they offer accessible, visually engaging means of religious expression. On the other hand, they raise important questions: can sincerity be preserved in systems optimised for profit? How should Muslim users negotiate their faith within the logics of platform capitalism?

Based on my fieldwork, responses to these tensions vary. Some users cultivate a form of *digital piety*, using stickers and other tools cautiously while reflecting on intention, sincerity, and the appropriate boundaries of religious expression online. Others take a more pragmatic approach, treating digital media as efficient instruments for da'wah, where relevance and outreach matter more than concerns over commodification. These divergent orientations not only shape everyday user practices but also influence how religious authority is interpreted and negotiated in digital spaces.

While the popularisation of Islamic-themed stickers through commercial apps may increase visibility and user engagement, it also raises questions about how religious authority is changing. Some critics worry that when religious content becomes a commodity, its sacredness is diluted, and religious figures are reframed through branding and consumer appeal, potentially weakening forms of authority grounded in scholarship and spiritual integrity. Others, however, see this not as a collapse of authority but as its adaptation to digital infrastructures, where being visible, emotionally resonant (affect), and relatable to everyday users (relatability) has become a new basis for moral influence.

This shows that Islamic-themed stickers are not merely decorative. They are dynamic cultural artefacts that mediate the intersection of faith, identity, and market forces, prefiguring the rise of even more complex and multimodal forms of religious expression, such as memes.

Tracing Meme Histories: Global Origins, Local Adaptations, Indonesia's Viral Moments

Digital stickers, with their concise, expressive visuals and cultural specificity, have laid the groundwork for more complex and dynamic forms of online religious expression. As participatory media, they have encouraged users to remix, personalise, and circulate content infused with faith, humour, and identity. Islamic-themed stickers, in particular, have made religion more accessible and emotionally resonant within everyday communication. As digital cultures evolve, so do their expressive forms. Memes build on similar visual and affective logics that underline sticker use. Both rely on concise imagery, emotional cues, and culturally recognisable references. While stickers introduce users to rapid, visually driven communication, memes extend this mode by adding humour, irony, intertextuality, and social critique. This shift marks an important development in the visual turn toward playful da'wah, where religious ideas are communicated

through symbolic, reflexive, and often humorous formats that appeal especially to younger, digitally literate audiences.

To understand the broader significance of memes in Islamic digital expression, I first trace their global and historical roots. Before the structured formats of internet memes became widespread, various viral visual and textual artefacts circulated across ‘the early web’, what scholars have retrospectively called *proto-memes*, early viral content that operated in meme-like ways despite lacking a standardised structure (Phillips, 2012, 2015). These were often humorous, absurd, or re-mixable digital objects shared via email, forums, or early websites, laying the groundwork for the memetic logics that would later flourish on platforms like 4chan, Reddit, and eventually TikTok.

As discussed earlier, early viral artefacts such as the *Dancing Baby* (1996) and similar looped animations marked an initial shift toward shareable visual culture online. Revisited here, these artefacts are not treated as isolated curiosities but as early manifestations of memetic logic. Despite lacking standardised templates, they circulated through repetition, mutation, and collective recognition, core features that would later define internet memes. Phillips (2012), for instance, uses “protomeme” to describe viral fragments such as the phrase “*fuckin’ magnets*” from a popular music video, which spread rapidly and became embedded within existing online vernaculars despite not conforming to a fixed meme template.

While early digital artefacts such as the Dancing Baby marked the beginning of meme-like content online, the rise of platforms like 4chan in the early 2000s introduced a more community-shaped mode of meme-making. De Zeeuw and Tuters (2020) describe this as *vernacular meme culture*, a space where a distinctive style of creativity emerged, one marked by anonymity, quick remixing, and humour that often only makes sense to those inside the community. What began in small anime and manga forums gradually developed into a broader culture of experimentation, where users tested the limits of parody, provocation, and playful transgression. These practices helped form an aesthetic that later circulated far beyond 4chan, influencing how memes came to be created and understood across many digital platforms.

The influence of this style of creativity can be seen in several memes that later entered mainstream culture, such as Rickrolling or Pepe the Frog, both originating from 4chan before circulating globally (Phillips, 2015).³² These examples show

³² Rickrolling is an internet prank in which a misleading link redirects users to Rick Astley's music video *Never Gonna Give You Up*, which originated on 4chan in 2007. It showcases how humour can spread online and become a lasting cultural phenomenon. Pepe the Frog, a character by Matt Furie from the comic *Boys Club*, gained popularity on 4chan in 2008 as a versatile meme. Over time, it took on various meanings, including controversial uses by extremist groups, highlighting how memes can evolve beyond their creators' intent.

how 4chan's anonymous and unstructured environment enabled a distinctive kind of creative freedom that shaped wider meme aesthetics across digital platforms.



Figure 2.12. Screenshot of the *Never Gonna Give You Up* music video on YouTube (2009)
Source: Rick Astley, *Never Gonna Give You Up* (official music video), RCA Records.



Figure 2.13. Pepe the frog meme
Source: in.pinterest.com (Rantman, 2019)

However, this same anonymity also caused various problems. The lack of moderation on 4chan has made the platform a breeding ground for illegal content, hate speech, and announcements of real-world violence (Bernstein et al., 2011). Scholars such as Gabriella Coleman argue that anonymity is a double-edged condition, it enables playful experimentation and collective creativity, but at the same time reduces accountability, making exclusionary and aggressive practices more likely (Coleman, 2014).

This paradox is well illustrated in the documentary *Feels Good Man* (2020), which traces the journey of *Pepe the Frog* from an innocuous comic character to a controversial symbol co-opted by extremist groups. The combination of unfiltered creativity and controversy has made 4chan a unique but often problematic place in the history of internet culture. Despite its undeniable role in meme innovation, its reputation as a trend incubator has been overshadowed by multiple controversies.

The trend of internet memes continued to gain traction in 2009 with the circulation of Joseph Ducreux meme, an 18th-century French portrait painter known for his unusually expressive self-portraits. His portraits were widely recirculated online with humorous and ironic captions, forming one of the early viral examples of the image macro format.

This format, characterised by re-mixability, irony, and user participation, became foundational for what we now recognise as modern internet memes (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). While the *Joseph Ducreux* meme did not originate from 4chan, it

exemplifies a meme format whose visual and textual conventions were shaped by earlier vernacular cultures of meme-making. Platforms like 4chan in the early 2000s helped popularise the image macro template, a picture paired with humorous or absurd captions, often in bold white Impact font with black outlines. These captions often feature quotes from popular songs or satirical commentary on everyday life.

By the time *Ducreux* memes gained popularity on platforms such as Reddit and memegenerator.net, they were drawing from a well-established memetic logic seeded by earlier subcultural hubs like 4chan. In this sense, 4chan catalysed a vernacular infrastructure and remix culture that influenced how memes were structured, circulated, and consumed in the following decade.

Although the exact timeline of meme culture's arrival in Indonesia remains uncertain, many sources refer to a Merdeka.com interview with Poerwanto, described in the article as a "meme activist", who is considered one of the early advocates of meme culture in the country. In the interview, he noted that memes have been increasingly popular in Indonesia since 2008 (Aliansyah, 2014). In this period, meme-like content circulated primarily through websites and forum-based platforms rather than social media. One such example is *yeahmahasiswa.com*, a student humour website that began circulating satirical content related to academic life around 2009. As social media platforms became more central to everyday digital interaction in the early 2010s, this content increasingly migrated to Facebook. *Yeahmahasiswa.com* officially joined Facebook on 11 February 2011 and, and currently records around 16,000 followers, indicating its resonance with a broader student audience.

This trajectory reflects a broader pattern in Indonesia's digital culture, in which early meme practices developed on websites and forums before being consolidated on social media platforms as they became dominant spaces for circulation and participation.

It shows various memes about parodies and satire of students' daily lives, such as the drama of working on theses, final assignments, and cumulative achievement indexes. Compared to "Shit Academics Say", both platforms focus on humorously portraying the struggles and experiences within academic life. However, *Yeahmahasiswa.com* began presenting satire about the lives of Indonesian students in 2009, long before the global phenomenon like Shit Academics Say that emerged on January 7, 2014. This shows that the academic meme culture in Indonesia has developed earlier, with content that is very relevant, close to local student experiences and has become part of digital culture in Indonesia.

The meme phenomenon then developed in a broader direction. Internet users then replicated this meme into various variations that discuss various topics,

including contemporary politics. Furthermore, users also spread this meme through social networks and other internet sites.

Starting in 2012, the use of memes in Indonesia became increasingly visible, particularly through Facebook-based communities such as 1CAK and Meme Comic Indonesia (MCI). Based on my digital ethnography on Facebook, 1CAK's page, created on 29 September 2012, functions as a major hub where users share rage comics and humorous images on a daily basis. At the time of my observation, the page had approximately 466,000 followers, which suggests its sustained relevance within Indonesia's meme ecosystem. Many users describe 1CAK as a local version of the HongKong based website 9GAG,³³ reflecting how the platform adapts global meme formats into local cultural contexts. The community terms used by followers, *wancaker* (male users) and *wancakermati* (female users), further indicate how 1CAK has cultivated its own internal vernacular, reinforcing its role as a participatory space for meme exchange and experimentation.

While much of meme history has been dominated by Western platforms like 4chan or Reddit, Indonesian users are not merely passive recipients of global trends. The viral spread of "Om Telolet Om" in 2016, illustrate how digital humour from the Global South can travel widely and, at times, shape global meme currents.

The phrase first circulated locally among children calling out to passing bus drivers to sound their modified horns, but its online spread drew extensive coverage from Indonesia and international media, including *The Jakarta Post*, NPR, *The Seattle Times* (AP), and Mixmag Asia, which highlighted how international DJs and social media users engaged with the meme (MixMag Asia, 2016; Penman, 2016; The Associated Press, 2016; Wreksono, 2016). International DJs such as DJ Snake amplified the trend through social media, while users even posted the phrase on Donald Trump's Facebook page after the 2016 U.S. presidential election (MixMag Asia, 2016)

³³ An online comedy site that displays various visual media, both images and videos, founded on 1 July 2008, by a group of Hong Kong administrators with 41M followers (GAG Facebook)

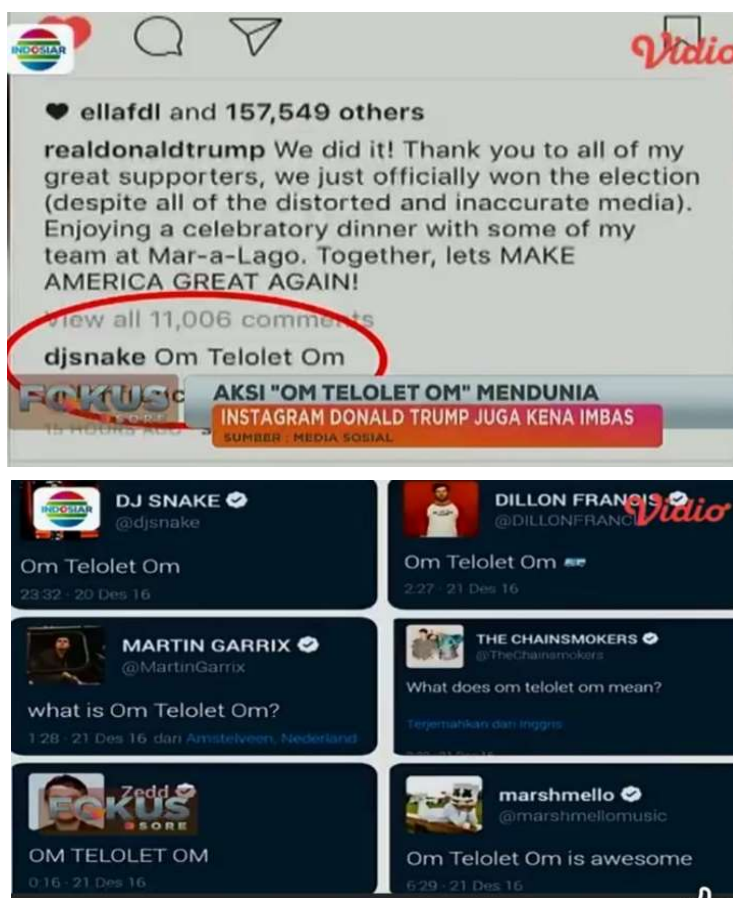


Figure 2.14. International circulation of the “Om Telolet Om” phenomenon
Source: Facebook @Fokus Indosiar, <http://bit.ly/2dawnXP> #FokusIndosiar

The reception of “Om Telolet Om” was mixed, celebratory in many contexts, but at times treated more as a cultural curiosity than as a creative contribution from the Global South. Even so, its rapid circulation shows how Indonesian humour can travel globally and invite creative reinterpretation.

More recent examples reinforce this dynamic. In 2025, the Pacu Jalur boat-race dancer from Riau, popularly known online as “Anak Coki”, became a global meme after videos of his energetic prow-side dancing circulated on TikTok and Instagram (BroBible, 2025; Seasia, 2025).³⁴ Although his movements are embedded in a local ceremonial tradition, the performance was recontextualised as a playful, remixable digital spectacle and taken up by users across Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America. Similarly, the *Tabola Bale* dance challenge from Maluku spread widely across TikTok in the same year, supported by millions of views on YouTube and Instagram Reels (ANTARA, 2025; VOI, 2015).

³⁴ The *Pacu Jalur* is a heritage practice dating back to the 17th century, is recognised as part of Indonesia’s intangible cultural heritage (Kementerian Pariwisata Republik Indonesia, 2025).

These phenomena, much like “Om Telolet Om,” reaffirms the agency of Indonesian digital creators and cultural practices in shaping memetic flows on a global scale. It challenges the conventional centre–periphery dynamics in internet culture by demonstrating that cultural exports from the Global South are not only consumable but also trendsetting. The case of the *Pacu Jalur* dancer thus reinforces the bidirectional nature of digital culture, where traditional performances are re-contextualised and celebrated in new media spaces. Although no systematic research has yet explored its global reception in depth, the meme’s broad adoption across diverse cultural contexts exemplifies how digital humour can operate with flexible and layered meanings.

If “Om Telolet Om”, *Pacu Jalur*, and song and dance *Tabola Bale* exemplify Indonesia’s capacity to influence global meme flows through playful and localised humour, Islamic-inspired memes represent another dimension of this creative agency: the fusion of religious devotion with digital expression. These memes do not merely imitate global formats; rather, they adapt, localise, and infuse memetic forms with theological, ethical, and cultural meanings specific to the Indonesian Muslim experience.

Emergence of Islamic-Inspired Meme Communities in Indonesia

Islamic-inspired meme communities began to emerge on Facebook in mid-2012, making significant contributions to the development of Indonesia’s digital landscape. One of the earliest and most influential groups was “Meme and Rage Muslim Indonesia”, founded on 28 August 2012. In a short time, this group managed to gather 86,000 followers, making it a pioneer in the spread of Islamic-themed memes in Indonesia. This success marked an important moment in how *da’wah* began to utilise digital space as a new medium to convey religious messages creatively.

Several factors contributed to the rise of these communities. Increasing internet penetration played a major role. Based on data from MarkPlus Insight internet penetration in urban cities in Indonesia increased from 30–35% in 2010 to 40–45% in 2011. This increase was primarily driven by young people aged 15–30 years, who accounted for 50–80% of the total internet users in each surveyed city.³⁵ With this increased access, social media such as Facebook became a new space that allowed the spread of creative content, including Islamic-inspired memes.

Following this initial emergence, new communities began to appear. Meme Comic Santri, established on 8 November 2012, was inspired directly by global platforms

³⁵ MarkPlus Insight, “Indonesia Urban Internet Users Survey,” *Marketeers Magazine*, November 2013, (Marketeers, 2013) cited in <https://www.slideshare.net/waizly/markplus-on-internet-user-in-indonesia-2013-marketeers-nov-2013-edition>. Accessed 10 September 2025.

such as 9GAG. In interviews with its founders,³⁶ they explained that 9GAG's humorous, easily shareable format offered a model that could be adapted for da'wah, by packaging Islamic messages in ways that were light, playful, and relatable to young Muslims. This reflects how Indonesian Muslim youth drew from global digital cultures while grounding their content in local religious values.

Similarly, Meme Comic Islam, founded on 25 March 2013, shared the goal of making Islamic teachings more approachable through humorous, easy-to-understand da'wah media on Facebook. They frame their da'wah activity as a means of seeking *ridho Allah* (divine approval expressing spiritual sincerity through everyday digital practice).³⁷ The topics raised are often related to Muslims' daily lives, such as prayer, fasting, the importance of Islamic values, and social phenomena such as dating. This relaxed approach has succeeded in attracting the attention of the younger generation, who often feel that conventional methods of da'wah are less relevant to their lifestyle. Through these communities, Islamic memes became a way for young Indonesians to comment on prayer, piety, romance, and everyday moral dilemmas in a format that felt lighter and more socially acceptable than formal preaching.

After this early wave (2012–2013), a second wave of communities emerged between 2017 and 2022, further strengthening the presence of Islamic-inspired memes in the online space. Groups such as *Meme Comic Santri Indonesia*, established on 10 November 2017, and *Meme Dakwah Indonesia*, founded on 25 June 2021, are a few of the many groups young Muslim users have highly recognised. Other significant communities include *Meme Dakwah Islam* (founded on March 30, 2020), *Meme Dakwah Islam Indonesia* (started on 2 June 2021), *Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman* (created on 29 January 2022), *Meme Islamic Centre Indonesia*, *Meme Comic Santri Nusantara* (established on 2 May 2020) expanded the presence of Islamic-themed visual culture online.

Although the names of several communities, such as *Meme Comic Santri* and *Meme Comic Santri Indonesia*, may suggest close associations with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) or pesantren traditions, these communities are independently managed and bring together contributors from diverse regions of Indonesia. Interviews with meme creators indicate that content is generally inspired by everyday religious experiences, sermons, popular culture, and current social issues rather than by the official perspectives of particular Islamic organisations. Consequently, while many memes draw on religious humour and visual references commonly associated with pesantren life and santri culture, these references circulate beyond formal

³⁶ Zoom, 5 September 2022

³⁷ *Ridho Allah* refers to a concept in Islam where a Muslim strives to do everything with the intention of seeking Allah's pleasure or blessings. In the context of Islamic memes, communities such as *Meme Comic Islam* emphasize that their dakwah activities are not only aimed at spreading religious messages but also considered an act of worship, with the hope of gaining rewards and Allah's approval.

organisational boundaries and are used by creators with diverse personal backgrounds. For this reason, the present study focuses on the practices of meme production and circulation within these communities rather than on the organisational affiliation of individual creators.

Some of these communities have built large followings, while others have remained more niche. Based on my observation of their posting patterns, the difference is often less about content style and more about consistency. Pages with high engagement, such as Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman, tend to post several times a day, ensuring continuous visibility within Facebook's algorithmic feed. By contrast, other pages upload irregularly, sometimes going days without new content, which limits their reach and slows follower growth. This pattern aligns with scholarship on social media algorithms, which shows that platforms prioritise active accounts and frequent posting when determining what becomes visible to users (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014). Despite this variation, their collective presence has significantly expanded and diversified Islamic meme culture in Indonesia. Meme Comic Santri has gathered more than 46,000 followers, while Meme Dakwah Islam Indonesia (137,000), Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman (204,000), Meme dan Rage Muslim Indonesia (85,000), and Meme Dakwah Islam (4,500) show different levels of engagement. These numbers illustrate how algorithmic rhythms and posting consistency shape the circulation and popularity of Islamic-themed memes, especially among younger users on social media.

As previously explained that global digital trends have greatly influenced the rise of Islamic memes in Indonesia. The popularity of platforms such as 9GAG played a significant role. The platform's mission to "make the world happier" through humorous content inspired Indonesian creators to develop similar content with a religious twist. This approach was particularly effective in engaging the youth demographic in Indonesia by making da'wah content more relevant and engaging.

In addition, Islamic meme accounts from abroad, such as "*Salab!!!* 5 a day, keep the shaitaan away" (founded in the UK on 8 February 2012) and "American Muslim Memes" (managed from the UK and Qatar since 26 February 2012), also became significant sources of inspiration, particularly for Indonesian meme creators. Based on interviews with the founders of *Meme Comic Santri*, these international accounts served as early models of how Islamic teachings could be communicated through humour and visual formats. While not necessarily widely consumed by the broader Indonesian audience, their influence was nonetheless pivotal in shaping the creative direction of early local Islamic meme communities. Their success demonstrated the potential of this content format, motivating Indonesian creators to adapt it to local contexts and sensibilities.

Before turning to TikTok, it is important to briefly acknowledge the role of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in the circulation of Islamic-inspired

memes during the 2010s. On these platforms, memes predominantly circulated as image–text combinations, relying on captions, hashtags, and comment-based interaction to convey humour, critique, and religious expression.

While these platforms were central to the consolidation of meme culture in Indonesia, they largely maintained a format in which visual content remained static and meaning was articulated primarily through textual framing. A more detailed comparison of Islamic-inspired memes on Facebook and Twitter, including their platform-specific affordances and modes of engagement, is developed in Chapter 3.

TikTok marks a different moment in this trajectory. Rather than extending existing meme formats, TikTok reconfigures memetic expression through short-form video, performativity, and algorithmic visibility.

Emergence of TikTok and the Transformation of Islamic-inspired Memes

While TikTok is examined in depth in Chapter 4 as the primary site of empirical analysis, it is introduced here to mark a broader shift in memetic form and platform logic within the longer history of digital religious expression.

If Facebook-based meme communities relied heavily on static images and text, TikTok brought Islamic meme culture into a more audiovisual, performative mode. TikTok's rise in Indonesia during the late 2010s introduced a new phase in the evolution of meme-like expressions. Its short-form video structure, remix tools, and algorithmic distribution reshaped how users create and circulate cultural and religious messages (Abidin, 2020; Zeng & Kaye, 2022). Unlike earlier platforms that relied on static visuals or captioned panels, TikTok normalised a more fluid and performative style of expression, where sound, gesture, and visual effects play an essential role in constructing meaning.

Based on my long-term digital observation on TikTok since 2020, this shift is immediately visible in Islamic-inspired content. Messages that were previously delivered through stickers, text-based memes, or rage comics now appear in short clips where creators speak directly to the camera, layer reminders over popular audio tracks, or use visual filters to emphasise tone and emotion. These stylistic shifts do not represent a break from earlier Islamic meme practices; rather, they expand their expressive range into a format that privileges mood, rhythm, and aesthetic immediacy.

This development contrasts with the earlier wave of Islamic meme communities on Facebook (2012–2013), which primarily relied on humour and text to communicate religious values. TikTok’s audiovisual character encourages a more personal and affective mode of *da’wah*. Creators embed religious messages within atmospheric cues, music, pacing, colour tones, making the content feel closer to everyday emotional life. Such transformations reflect the broader process of platformisation in which digital infrastructures shape cultural forms and practices (Klinger & Svensson, 2015).

TikTok’s participatory ethos further intensifies this evolution. Features such as duets, stitches, and sound remixes invite users to respond, reinterpret, or collaborate with existing Islamic content. As I frequently observed during my digital ethnography, a single religious reminder can trigger a chain of reinterpretations, parodies, harmonised recitations, or aesthetic remixes, demonstrating how meme-like forms on TikTok travel not only through sharing but through active engagement and creative transformation.

At the same time, TikTok’s algorithm broadens the reach of Islamic content beyond intentional audiences. Religious clips often appear on the For You Page even for users who do not follow religious accounts, illustrating how algorithmic curation, rather than explicit seeking, shapes exposure (Cotter, 2019). This dynamic differs from earlier platforms, where visibility was more dependent on following a page or being part of a community. The implications of this shift, especially for authority and interpretation, will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Seen in the larger historical arc traced throughout this chapter, TikTok represents a continuation rather than a rupture. Indonesian Muslims have long adapted religious messages to the expressive forms available to them, from oral storytelling and proverbs to stickers and image-based memes. TikTok extends this lineage into a highly visual, fast-paced environment where religious ideas circulate through sound, gesture, and participatory creativity. While the sociocultural dynamics of these practices need deeper discussion in later chapters, the platform’s emergence marks an important stage in the evolving meme ecology in Indonesia.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced how meme-like forms in Indonesia long predate the internet and how they have gradually migrated into digital environments. Starting from oral traditions, wayang narratives, proverbs, and rituals, it showed that many cultural expressions already behaved memetically: they were repeated, adapted, and recontextualised as they moved across time and social settings. Rather than

treating digital memes as a sudden break, this historical lens reveals a line of continuity in how Indonesians have used compact, recognisable forms to convey moral lessons, express criticism, and negotiate religious difference.

Revisiting Blackmore's notion of memes as cultural replicators and placing it alongside more recent work that foregrounds platforms, infrastructures, and user practices, the chapter argued that memetic life is never purely a matter of "ideas that want to spread". In the Indonesian context, whether we look at wayang characters, Islamic stories, or ritual phrases embedded in *slametan* and *maulid*, memetic transmission is always situated in local norms, power dynamics, and media regimes. As an analytical distinction, the differentiation between "tradition" and "meme" helps clarify this process: traditions provide the broader frameworks and ritual settings, while memes are the smaller, mobile units (phrases, images, gestures) that can detach, travel, and reappear in new contexts, including digital ones.

The move into digital communication did not erase these earlier logics but layered them onto new technical infrastructures. Early emoticons, and later emojis, introduced small visual cues that helped Indonesians express tone, intimacy, and piety in text-based environments. Their use in WhatsApp groups, Hajj alumni circles, and everyday family chats shows how religious feeling and communal discipline can be mediated through tiny icons on a screen. At the same time, the standardisation of emoji through bodies like the Unicode Consortium underscores that even apparently simple symbols are shaped by corporate and geopolitical decisions, and not only by users' creativity.

Stickers pushed this development further by opening space for local and religious specificity. Islamic-themed sticker packs, Madurese anti-COVID campaigns, and prayer-reminder stickers illustrate how users translate familiar visual tropes, *peci*, *sarung*, motorbikes, local language, humorous slogans, into a digital vernacular of faith and everyday life. These practices blur the line between devotion, play, and commerce. As Islamic stickers enter the circuits of paid LINE packs, app stores, and data-driven platforms such as WhatsApp, they become part of what Eva Nisa calls a lucrative form of *da'wah*, where piety is lived through tools that are also entangled in platform capitalism.

From there, the chapter followed how this visual and affective repertoire sets the stage for more complex memetic forms. Global "proto-memes" and early meme cultures on sites like 4chan and 9GAG provided templates for remixable humour, but Indonesian users did not simply consume these trends. Local actors experimented with formats and quickly developed their own styles: from *yeahmahasiswa.com* and 1CAK to the "Om Telolet Om" phenomenon, *Pacu Jalur* dance clips, and the *Tabola Bale* challenge. These cases show that Indonesian digital culture participates in, and sometimes redirects, global meme flows rather than sitting at the margins.

Within this broader landscape, Islamic-inspired memes emerge as a specific strand where digital creativity intersects with devotional life. Facebook communities such as *Meme dan Rage Muslim Indonesia*, *Meme Comic Santri*, and later *Meme Dakwah Indonesia*, turned meme templates into vehicles for da'wah, humour, and moral reflection geared especially toward younger Muslims. Their reach and rhythm are deeply shaped by platform logics: pages that post frequently and fit Facebook's engagement metrics thrive; others remain marginal despite similar content. In this sense, Islamic memes are not only cultural artefacts but also products of algorithmic visibility and everyday user labour.

The arrival of TikTok marks the latest turn in this trajectory. Short-form videos, sound-based remixing, filters, and the For You Page extend memetic practice into a more performative, affect-driven mode. Islamic reminders, jokes about prayer, or playful takes on NU–Muhammadiyah differences are no longer confined to static images but unfold through gesture, voice, and music. TikTok's infrastructure allows these clips to reach users who never actively seek religious content, reshaping how religious messages circulate and how authority is experienced in daily scrolling.

Seen across these shifts in medium, the chapter has answered the first research question by mapping a series of meme-like forms, from proverbs, *wayang*, and ritual phrases to emojis, stickers, Facebook memes, and TikTok videos, that Indonesians use to express, contest, and rework religious identities. Across shifts in medium, certain logics remain, such as repetition, variation, humour, and symbolic condensation. What changes are the infrastructures, economic arrangements, and participatory practices that enable some memes to flourish while others remain local or invisible. The following chapters build on this historical groundwork by examining in greater detail how platform-specific dynamics on Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok shape the creation, circulation, and reception of Islamic-inspired memes in contemporary Indonesia.

Digital Divergence: Unravelling The Local Dynamics of Islamic-Inspired Memes at Two Global Platforms

Following the historical journey of meme-like forms described in the previous chapter, in this chapter I investigate the dynamics of two prominent and popular platforms: Facebook and Twitter. Unlike TikTok, which centres on video-based content and visual performativity, Facebook and Twitter offer different affordances that shape how Islamic-inspired memes are produced, circulated, and consumed among Indonesian Muslims.

This chapter focuses on how platform-specific features, such as Facebook's community groups and sharing functions, and Twitter's retweet mechanism and trending topics, generate distinct patterns of engagement. These differences reflect what Van Dijck (2013) calls the logic of connectivity, referring to the technical and algorithmic structures that mediate user interaction and content circulation across platforms.

To further understand this dynamic, I introduce the concept of a *meme ecosystem*, defined as the digital environment in which memes are produced, circulated, and interpreted, shaped by technical affordances, user agency, and sociocultural context (Jenkins et al., 2013; Shifman, 2014).

In this dissertation, *meme ecosystem* refers to the interconnected set of elements that enable memes to emerge, circulate, and acquire meaning within specific platform environments. These elements include platform affordances and architectures, the actors involved in meme production and circulation (such as page administrators, meme creators, and ordinary users), shared cultural and religious references that give memes their recognisability, and the interactional dynamics

through which memes are interpreted, contested, or normalised. Rather than operating in isolation, these elements sustain one another: platform features shape patterns of visibility, actors mobilise familiar cultural repertoire, and user interactions determine whether a meme remains marginal, becomes communal, or escalates into controversy. Seen this way, memes are not standalone artefacts but outcomes of an ecosystem in which technology, agency, and sociocultural context are continuously entangled.

By unpacking these elements, this chapter explores the roles played by various actors, from meme creators and page administrators to ordinary users, fueling platform-based debates around religious identity and social norms. This analysis aims to reveal how different digital ecosystems shape the boundaries of online religious expression, community formation, and interfaith interaction in Indonesia

Moving beyond technical design alone, this chapter highlights how digital engagement with Islamic-inspired memes affects and is affected by religious and cultural identities. Facebook's emphasis on community and long-form content often supports normative, motivational, and educational Islamic memes. In contrast, Twitter's fast-paced and brief format encourages satire and critique, fostering dynamic conversations about religion and society. These platform-specific environments both enable and constrain online religious expression, interfaith dialogue, and community formation in Indonesia.

These different modes of engagement prompt essential questions about how the platforms shape the production, dissemination, and interpretation of religious memes and the kinds of audiences they attract. Although both platforms are widely popular in Indonesia, they each cultivate distinct interaction and religious expression styles. This, in turn, influences how memes circulate and resonate with Indonesian Muslim communities. Significantly, these distinctions do not merely shape expressions of Islamic identity but also affect religious experiences themselves, that is, how users come to feel, perform, and reflect upon their faith within the architecture and logic of different platforms. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for grasping how socio-technical factors, the interplay between technological design and social practice, shape not only the circulation of religious content but also the lived experiences of online religiosity (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021).

Islamic-inspired memes on Facebook: What's Trending

This section explores how Islamic-inspired memes have been used, consumed, and circulated globally on Facebook, the largest social media platform worldwide. Facebook ranks third in Indonesia after WhatsApp and Instagram (We Are Social

& Meltwater, 2024).³⁸ With the increasing popularity of memes as a form of communication, Islamic-inspired memes are now frequently encountered on Indonesian Facebook accounts.

By examining the patterns of meme use on Facebook, we can gain insight into the creation and dissemination of this content and its role in shaping digital discourse and online culture. In the following sections, I will examine the various dimensions of Islamic meme culture on Indonesian Facebook accounts, particularly focusing on thematic elements, content formats, dynamics of dissemination, and their significant impact on heterogeneous audiences

As Miller et al. (2016) argue in *How the World Changed Social Media*, social media platforms have not merely facilitated communication but have fundamentally reshaped the ways communities express, negotiate, and perform their cultural and religious identities. Building on this perspective, the following sections will explore how these transformations manifest specifically through Islamic-inspired memes on Facebook.

Themes: Faith-Nurturing and Value-Promotion

Observing and mapping Islamic-inspired memes shared on Facebook in Indonesia reveals a dominant thematic pattern centred on faith-nurturing and value-promotion. This is particularly evident in pioneering groups like Meme Comic Santri, which serves as a hub for the Islamic meme community, alongside other groups such as *Meme Dakwah Islam* (Islamic Da'wah Memes), *Meme Dakwah Islam Indonesia* (Indonesian Islamic Da'wah Memes), and *Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman* (Memes Da'wah Needs for Faith).

These groups predominantly revolve around a shared thematic orientation towards faith-nurturing and value-promotion, expressed through da'wah-oriented and educational content. These memes are designed to instruct and motivate, foster a more profound comprehension of faith, disseminate ethical principles, and promote constructive conduct. Within this overarching theme, the memes address a wide range of topics related to everyday Muslim life. For instance, some memes encourage the practice of daily prayers (*shalat*) by illustrating its benefits in humorous yet relatable ways, while others promote ethical values such as honesty (*kejujuran*) and respect for parents (*birrul walidain*) through easily shareable motivational quotes embedded in Islamic imagery. Additional topics include discussions of hijab, fasting, Qur'anic verses, and contemporary events interpreted through an Islamic lens. Taken together, these topic variations operate within a largely consistent thematic framework that reflects the normative and educative character of Islamic-inspired meme culture on Facebook, as well as broader moral expectations within Indonesian Muslim society.

³⁸ Digital 2024: Indonesia

Misbah, the owner of the *Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman* (Meme Da'wah Needs for Faith) account, is a Law student at a university in Malang, East Java. In an interview, he explained that there is a greater tendency on Facebook, compared to other platforms like Twitter, to use memes as an educational and inspirational tool, combining Islamic teachings with the contemporary context. Islamic-inspired memes on Facebook often aim to educate and inspire viewers by presenting religious teachings in a relatable and humorous way. For example, memes may provide practical tips for daily religious practices or share motivational quotes from Islamic scholars.³⁹

One notable development is the use of memes as motivational and pedagogical tools. Facebook Islamic-inspired memes frequently bridge traditional doctrines and challenges of modern life in which their followers find themselves. These memes serve a dual purpose by combining motivational quotes from Islamic scholars, practical advice for daily religious practices, and religious messages sprinkled with humour. As a result, they are both entertaining and informative.

The Content Format: Unleashing Creativity

Examining the creative forms that translate Islamic-inspired memes into life helps one appreciate their appeal and reach on Facebook. Meme creators, whether independent individuals, community administrators, or members of larger Islamic-themed pages, deliver material that appeals to various audiences and fits the platform's technical affordances using a range of media forms. Creators can visually engage users by experimenting with animated GIFs, image macros, short videos, and captioned photos, weaving humour and religious messages into easily shareable forms.

However, the various roles in meme production and distribution are not always distinct. Sometimes, the same individual can be an owner (who owns or runs a Facebook page), a moderator (who curates and approves memes inside a group), and a creator, who designs the meme. In other cases, several actors play these roles separately, which helps to create a dynamic and fluid meme ecosystem whereby users constantly remix and reinterpret current material. This adaptability allows meme producers and digital communities to create relevant and essential content for the Muslim online community.

The various components used in Facebook Islamic-inspired memes indicate the ingenuity and flexibility exhibited by those who generate such content. Among the most active contributors observed across multiple Facebook meme groups

³⁹ Interview with Misbahul Hidayah, the owner of the *Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman* (Meme Da'wah Needs for Faith) group account on Facebook in Malang, East Java, 15 September 2023. This Facebook group was created on 13 August 2020, when he was still enrolled in vocational high school in his hometown. This group currently has 201,000 members and receives an average of 10-14 posts per day.

was Bang Fir Art, an Islamic-inspired meme creator from Pematang Siantar, North Sumatra.⁴⁰ He shared several examples of the formats these internet memes commonly used to incorporate Islamic elements, including animated GIFs, image macros, videos, and captioned photos. He explains that GIF is an acronym for Graphics Interchange Format, usually animated, called Animated GIFs. They are a collection of images or frames that play in a loop, resulting in a brief animated sequence. Animated GIFs are popular in memes because they allow the creator to convey a short, humorous message or reaction. They can capture short, repetitive actions or expressions, giving the meme a dynamic and engaging quality. Related to an image macro, it is a photo or image that has text overlaid on it. The text is typically a bold caption or catchphrase superimposed on the image. He argues that memes commonly use image macros to convey a specific message, joke, or cultural reference. Combining an eye-catching image and concise text results in a visually appealing and easily shareable meme.

Memes can also be composed of videos, varying in length and complexity. They thus can be short clips or longer sequences that communicate humour, commentary, or storytelling. Video production provides an engaging technique for meme creators to express more complex ideas. They are appropriate for conveying subtle humour, mimicking popular trends, and even creating parodies. In addition to Facebook, this video meme format is also very much present on YouTube and TikTok. Regarding caption images, Bang Fir Art explains that they differ from image macros. Caption image entails adding captions to a static image/ photo/illustration containing text that may be less prominent or bolder than image macros. Captioned images are versatile and frequently serve as the foundation for numerous memes. The added text can clarify the intended message, provide context, or add to the humour. These memes are widely shared on social media and are simple for users to create and customise.

Although Bang Fir Art mainly uses caption images in his work, he also observed that meme creators sometimes vary their material across other memes rather than within a single meme. This approach helps them keep their audience interested, through using aspects of comedy, criticism, and cultural references. Offering a range of formats, such as image macros, GIFs, and short videos, within their accounts, creators want to inspire users to return often, ensuring ongoing interaction and visibility.

This approach to diversification uses multiple methods and modalities at the account level, enabling creators to establish a recognisable style while keeping the audience's attention, rather than overloading individual memes with too many visual or media elements. Creators often employ creative strategies that combine elements from local religious contexts with globally recognised meme formats

⁴⁰ We communicated using the Messenger feature on the Facebook platform, 17 September 2023

and aesthetics. They not only adapt popular meme structures or templates, such as those found in meme generators or from images on Pinterest that are then edited and added to with text but also rework their visual style to better suit particular cultural and religious contexts, such as by adding Islamic symbols (see the example below).

Global Forms, Local Faith: Cultural Hybridity in Meme Practices

To better understand the creative interplay between global meme formats and local Islamic expressions, this section draws on two key theoretical perspectives on global internet culture: *cultural imperialism* and *cultural hybridity*. The *cultural imperialism* thesis, advanced by scholars such as John Tomlinson (1991) and further discussed by Noh (2013), suggests that global, particularly Western, cultural flows tend to dominate and homogenise local cultures through media and technological influence. In contrast, the *cultural hybridity* approach, developed by Marwan Kraidy (2002), highlights the agency of local actors in adapting and transforming global cultural forms into something uniquely their own. It views globalisation not as a one-way imposition, but as a dynamic process of local creativity and co-creation.

Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia are a compelling example of such hybridity. While these memes often adopt popular global meme structures (image macros, GIFs, and viral formats) they simultaneously incorporate local religious teachings, symbols, and humour. This reflects the broader tension and negotiation between global Islam and local Islam (Roy, 2004), where universal Islamic principles are interpreted and expressed through culturally specific forms.

This process aligns with what Barendregt (2012) calls digital diversity, particularly in Southeast Asia, where users creatively appropriate global technologies to reflect their own cultural and religious identities. Rather than being passive consumers of Western internet culture, Indonesian Muslim communities engage in what Miller & Slater (2000) describe as *digitally grounded localism*, blending global platforms with context-specific values, historical memory, and aspirations.

A clear illustration of this hybridisation is found in the adaptation of the globally popular *Drakeposting* meme. Originally based on a 2015 image of Canadian rapper Drake from his “Hotline Bling” video, this meme format uses two contrasting panels to signal approval and disapproval. In its Indonesian Islamic reinterpretation, Drake is edited to wear a *peci*, a traditional Muslim cap, and the meme contrasts negative behaviours such as doing drugs, smoking or consuming alcohol with positive religious practices like *ngaji* (reciting the Qur’an), *zikir* (remembrance of God), and *sholat* (prayer).



Figure 3.1. Original *Drakeposting* Meme
Image Picture Source: Pinterest.com



Figure 3.2. Modified *Drakeposting* Meme
Image Source: Facebook.com

This adaptation not only localises a meme visually but also recontextualises its meaning to serve da'wah purposes. It bridges a global meme language with regional Islamic values, inviting audiences to engage with humour while reinforcing moral and religious norms.

In this way, Islamic-inspired memes are not simply derivative of global internet culture. Instead, they constitute a hybrid digital vernacular that speaks to local religious sensibilities while remaining accessible within broader global meme circuits. Through such adaptations, Indonesian Muslim netizens assert cultural agency, making the meme not only a medium of entertainment but also a vehicle for religious expression and identity negotiation in the digital age. This dynamic is central to the argument of this chapter, as it demonstrates how platform-specific meme ecosystems on Facebook and Twitter are shaped by the interplay between global meme forms, local religious norms, and user practices, rather than by technical affordances alone.

Features of the Facebook Platform

Facebook's affordances play a significant role in the creation and dissemination of Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia. Its visual orientation, viral potential, interactivity, and capacity for long-form and threaded discussions, features less prominent on fast-paced platforms such as TikTok and Twitter, allow for more sustained exchanges around religious topics. However, while Facebook can facilitate extended dialogue, it is also a space marked by polarisation, misinformation, and heated debate (Lim, 2017; Tapsell, 2021). These ambivalent dynamics make Facebook both an enabling and a contested arena for online religious expression.

Such differences across platforms highlight the need to view digital religious engagement not as tied to a single medium but as part of a broader ecology of communication. This is consistent with the polymedia theory developed by Madianou & Miller (2012) which stresses how users negotiate several digital platforms depending on their communicative affordances. Facebook is chosen for in-depth conversations, archival material, and community development, even if TikTok may be used for quick bursts of religious expression and Twitter for fast arguments. Miller et al.'s (2016) concept of *scalable sociality* further helps to explain this phenomenon. It captures how users move fluidly between private and public interactions, such as shifting from personal chats to large Facebook groups when discussing religious issues online. In this sense, Facebook enables a spectrum of engagement that accommodates both intimate and collective forms of religious expression.

Misbahul Hidayah, owner of Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman on Facebook, noted in an interview that the platform's features, particularly its sharing and comment functions, help facilitate the circulation of Islamic-inspired memes and make religious information more accessible to users.⁴¹ Facebook emphasises visual content, such as images and videos, which can help improve the user experience. This graphic element is critical because, in the meme practice images and text are used to convey messages in a humorous or satirical manner. This makes Facebook an ideal platform for meme distribution, as the appeal of visual content can provide users with a richer and more engaging sharing experience.

Facebook also has viral potential. Facebook's sharing algorithms and features promote viral content, including memes. Algorithms also play a significant role in inducing similarity across the platform, contributing to the spread of similar content within the network (Caplan & Boyd, 2018). In this context, Facebook's algorithms are designed to personalise users' experiences so that they are more likely to connect with relevant or interesting content. These algorithms attempt to match users' preferences and interests so that they can interact more actively with similar content.

However, as Tania Bucher points out, although many users think they know how Facebook's algorithm operates, in truth, few really do (Bucher, 2018). To make sense of the system, users, content creators, and even researchers may rely on anecdotal evidence or platform-released data; nonetheless, the precise processes remain mainly hidden and a "black box". Often experimenting with several forms and interaction strategies in an effort to "game the algorithm," this opacity affects how meme creators and religious content producers plan their postings. Whether accurate or not, how Islamic-inspired memes travel depends on how the algorithm performs; authors change their material to maximise visibility and reach.

⁴¹ Personal interview, 15 September 2023.

How does the algorithm work? Facebook users may not always find the way content is shown transparently. As Taina Bucher notes, many users feel they have control over their social media experience, yet the platform's opaque algorithmic design mainly shapes this sense of assumed agency (Bucher, 2018).

Misbah claims that the algorithm will consider the material relevant and may appeal to a larger audience if an Islamic meme gets many likes, comments, or shares.⁴² This presumption, however, captures what Bucher refers to as the illusion of control, where consumers believe they can affect the distribution of content (Bucher, 2018), while in fact, the algorithm keeps control over what is observed and by whom. The platform allows interaction, but the actual agency is limited by unseen systems that prioritise advertising income.

Moreover, Facebook uses an algorithm to customise users' homepage views depending on their interests and activities. Should users regularly interact with Islamic content or related memes, the algorithm might be more likely to include them in their home feed. This results in what Tarleton Gillespie describes as algorithmic curation, where the content is selectively displayed to maximise engagement at the expense of openness (Gillespie, 2018). Users hardly know why they view particular posts, which creates an environment where potentially extreme opinions or false information can flourish free from control.

One main result of this selective attention is the reinforcement of echo chambers. Facebook's algorithm limits exposure to many points of view, even while it personalises the user experience. As van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal contend, platforms shape public conversation in ways that might either increase or decrease democratic participation (van Dijck et al., 2018). Regarding Islamic-inspired memes, this raises a broader analytical question: are users really interacting with fresh ideas or are they mostly consuming material that supports their current views?

Meanwhile, based on my interview, Misbah also feels that friends interacting with a meme is crucial. Facebook's design guarantees that material appearing relevant to a user's social network is given top priority, supporting ideological clusters. Typically, posts that attract engagement from a user's friends are surfaced more prominently, thereby amplifying social validation loops. Rather than being the product of a fixed or transparent system, this visibility is shaped by constantly evolving algorithmic processes designed to leverage social ties and maximise participation (Kitchin, 2017).

No less crucial is the timing of material release. Algorithms give content uploaded during times of maximum interaction top priority, so influencing user

⁴² Chat through WhatsApp, 18 January 2024, a mix between chat and sound recording

interactions. Users actively strategise when and how to post to maximise visibility, a tactic also evident in the Facebook meme ecosystem, as noted by Sophie Bishop in her study on YouTube (Bishop, 2019). Not necessarily because they "understand" the algorithm, but rather because they see patterns they believe will increase engagement, meme creators meticulously time their posts to coincide with when their audience is most active.

In terms of the best time to post memes in the Facebook group, Misbah tailored the posting time to the characteristics of the users and their online habits when he first created the Group *Meme Da'wah Kebutuhan Iman*. It is essential to consider the user's free time. Because much of the audience for this Islamic meme is still in school, some are studying and working. He believes the best time is during school breaks or when they return home from school, also at night, after finishing their studies until bedtime. According to interviews I conducted with several informants, they also reported frequently checking their Facebook home page before bed at night.

This pattern suggests that Misbah, whether consciously or not, primarily targets a younger audience, high school and university students, whose daily routines align with these peak engagement times. It indicates how meme group strategies are subtly shaped by the demographic characteristics of their most active users.

Misbah understands the importance of posting at the right time. However, he is currently ignoring it due to the large number of memes sent by members of his group. The admin will then curate this work and post it in the group. On average, his admin posts 6 to 10 memes per day. From the standpoint of one user, timing posts improve interaction. From a moderator's perspective, timing is important for playing into Facebook's algorithm. Even if the underlying mechanics remain hidden, platform users, including group administrators, strategically change their behaviour depending on their perceived knowledge of the algorithm, as Taina Bucher explains (Bucher, 2018). Moderators and administrators maximise posting plans to ensure their group's content stays visible, engaging, and a top priority in members' news feeds. Facebook's algorithm favours content that produces high initial interaction. Therefore, postings submitted during peak hours are more likely to be amplified by the platform, so raising the group's visibility.

Posting times should also be tailored to specific days and dates; for example, users could have more time to interact with material, influencing their engagement with it. When planning and selecting meme releases, administrators consider these elements to guarantee maximum reach and preservation of group activity levels.

The Facebook Group Ecosystem

While the previous section outlined Facebook's platform affordances, such as tagging, long-form posts, and threaded interactions, this section shifts the lens

toward how those affordances are activated, interpreted, and adapted in the context of Facebook groups focused on Islamic-inspired memes. These groups are not merely content-sharing spaces; they operate as semi-structured communities where meme creation and circulation are governed by social norms, theological sensitivities, and the relational labor of moderation.

Facebook Groups operate in an ecosystem with a clear role structure, but the dynamics within it are often more flexible in practice. Each group has an owner, administrator (admin), and moderator, each of whom contributes to maintaining the community's activity and order.

The group owner possesses complete authority and control over the group. They can manage members, change group settings, and make strategic decisions for the group. The owner has full control over group administration, including permanently deleting the group if necessary. Owners can select administrators and moderators. Facebook Groups provides features that help with group management, monitoring, and interaction. These features are essential in determining what affordance to use because they provide specific capabilities or facilities for managing and maintaining group continuity.

Administrators are individuals assigned by the owner to help manage and oversee the group. They can help keep things in order and perform specific administrative tasks. Administrators can delete or deactivate member posts, set group rules, and manage join requests, but they do not have the same rights as owners. Moderators perform a similar role to administrators but with greater emphasis on monitoring content and member behaviour and ensuring compliance with group rules. Moderators can monitor discussions, delete or hide posts that violate the rules, and impose warnings or sanctions based on group policy. They do not have the same rights as administrators or owners.

Facebook also provides various features that support group management, such as interaction monitoring tools, post-approval features, and member engagement analysis. All of this is part of the mechanism that allows a group to remain active and relevant amidst the competition for content on this platform. More than just a space for sharing information, Facebook groups also function as a dynamic social ecosystem, where the rules, interactions, and platform algorithms help shape communication patterns and the dissemination of information within them.

In the context of the Facebook Group *Meme Da'wah Needs of Faith*, Misbah, the owner, selects administrators and moderators who are well-versed in the group's rules and values, mostly experienced users. They are in charge of maintaining a positive environment, ensuring regulations are followed, and resolving conflicts or rule violations by group policy. The varying levels of authority among owners,

administrators, and moderators form a hierarchy that aids in group management and maintenance.

So, the technical affordances allow owners and admins to effectively manage their communities, such as post-approval features, member activity monitoring, and access controls. With a hierarchy of owners, administrators, and moderators, this structure provides social affordances that create mechanisms for controlling and distributing responsibility within the group. Combining these technical and social affordances helps shape more structured community dynamics, ensuring a positive member experience and keeping the group environment healthy and well-managed (Bucher, 2018; Davis & Chouinard, 2016; Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

During our discussion regarding the spread of Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia, Misbah also explained that the process is cyclical, contrasting with the spread of linear or one-way processes. This means that the spread of these memes follows a recurring cyclical pattern in which content is constantly generated, shared, and adapted by the user community. Meme groups on Facebook allow users to create and share memes that can be seen by friends, followers, and other group members. They can then share the meme with their networks, increasing circulation.

This process is not only visible to moderators and administrators, who often have greater access to group analytics and member interaction patterns but is also recognisable to ordinary users. Users who are active in these communities often notice how certain memes reappear in modified, adapted, or recontextualised forms. In addition, the same meme is often found in different meme groups, either because the creator uploads it in several groups at once or because other users repost it. This reposting can occur with or without modification, depending on the user's strategy in re-sharing the meme. This phenomenon shows that the cycle of spread occurs not only within a closed community but also across communities, where a meme can move from one group to another, strengthening its visibility within Facebook's digital ecosystem. This cycle continues to repeat itself, expanding memes' exposure to new audiences across multiple groups. Although reaching new audiences does not automatically result in virality, the repeated circulation enhances the memes' visibility and potential for broader resonance within Facebook's digital environment. Thus, this pattern of spread can be identified not only by those who manage the group but also by community members involved in the production and redistribution of memes.

Facebook's "tag friend" feature allows users to tag or mention their friends in posts, photos, and status updates. When someone is mentioned or tagged in a post, they will be notified. This tagging allows friends to interact and engage with our posts. They may be likelier to comment, like, or share the content as they feel invited. Friends and friends with the tagged person will see the post in their feed, increasing its visibility. The "tag friend" feature can provide similar benefits when

disseminating Islamic-inspired memes. For example, suppose a meme is relevant to a specific friend or a group of friends who share similar interests.

Facebook, however, does not allow users to tag an entire group directly in a single post. Only specific individuals can be tagged in a post. Additionally, Facebook has introduced a mass-mention feature called “@everyone” that allows group admins and moderators to tag all group members at once in a post or comment. By typing “@everyone” in a post or comment, all group members will receive a notification about the post. This feature is helpful for important announcements or information that all group members need to know. However, this feature should be used wisely not to annoy group members with excessive notifications (Facebook.com, n.d.).

In this context, tagging becomes a practical strategy to entertain, signal familiarity, or initiate conversation within a known audience. Circulation inside these groups is rarely random. It is shaped by an unspoken understanding of shared values, boundaries, and sensitivities. Many Islamic meme groups on Facebook attract users who already share similar religious and cultural orientations, producing relatively cohesive environments. This cohesion reduces, though does not entirely remove, the risk of misinterpretation or offence.

The decision to post or engage within a particular Facebook group is therefore not merely technical. It is also social and relational. In a polymedia environment (Madianou & Miller, 2012), where users move easily across platforms and groups, choosing a specific Islamic meme group reflects an expectation of shared religious references and communicative norms. Content creators can, to some extent, anticipate how humour will be received and adjust their expressions accordingly.

However, this relative homogeneity has limits. Memes that touch on political alignments, such as support for or criticism of Islamic organisations backing particular candidates, often generate tension even within like-minded groups. The same applies to memes addressing gender roles, for example those advising women to remain at home or criticising public behaviour. While intended as humour, such content frequently provokes disagreement, revealing that shared religious affiliation does not guarantee uniform interpretations of social and political issues.

When creating these memes, content creators must convey the complexities of expressing a viewpoint while remaining mindful of the various interpretations and opinions within the Indonesian Muslim community. What some people consider to be lighthearted humour may be offensive or inappropriate to others. For example, the meme may inadvertently bring up a theological or cultural

nuance that divides the Muslim community. If the content is not carefully crafted to account for these nuances, it risks alienating some viewers or causing unnecessary discomfort.

In a group like *Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman*, not all content creators are moderators, admins, or group owners. However, admins and moderators are also active players in meme production. Most memes come from community members who submit their work to the group. Moderators and admins then have a role in selecting, curating, and ensuring that the memes posted follow the values and rules of the community. In other words, while content creators are responsible for the creativity in meme production, moderators and admins act as the primary filters in distributing their content. Facebook's affordances, its viral potential, interactivity, and emphasis on community engagement, make it a particularly conducive yet contested space for the creation and circulation of Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia.

Who is the Target Demographic?

Facebook users exhibit greater diversity in age, background, and interests, resulting in a more heterogeneous audience than other contemporary social media platforms, such as TikTok, which focuses on short video content and may be more popular among young users. One of the main reasons Facebook attracts a more diverse user base is its older age as a digital platform. Launched in 2004, Facebook has been building its ecosystem long before platforms like TikTok or Instagram, allowing more generations of users, from teens to seniors, to engage with the platform over time. In addition to its age, Facebook also offers more flexible communication formats than TikTok, including text, images, videos, and community group features that allow users from different backgrounds to engage in discussions. This keeps Facebook relevant to various demographics, including those looking for community-based discussion spaces rather than just the quick entertainment that is common on TikTok.

This diversity on Facebook enables the content to reach a wider audience, encompassing different generations, social groups, and communities in Indonesia. Based on Internetworldstats data, Usage and Population Statistics, until Q2 2021, Facebook users in Indonesia reached 176.5 million or an increase of 1.2 million users from Q1 2021 (175.3 million). This figure is equivalent to 63.4 per cent of the total population of 276.36 million people (2021 estimate) or 76.8 per cent of internet users in the country (Good News from Indonesia, 2021).⁴³ That number is rapidly increasing. According to NapoleonCat⁴⁴, as of October 2023, Indonesia

⁴³ <https://www.goodnewsfromindonesia.id/2021/10/30/pengguna-facebook-indonesia-dalam-bingkai-statistik>, last accessed 4 January 2025

⁴⁴ NapoleonCat is a social media analytics and marketing platform that offers insights and analytics across various social media platforms, including Facebook. It allows users to monitor and analyse their social media performance, engagement, and audience demographics.

had 198.3 million Facebook users, representing roughly 70% of the total national population. The majority of domestic Facebook users are recorded as coming from Generation Z, which is around 18-24 years old (32.1% of the total domestic users), followed by the generation of 25-34-year-olds (30.9%) (databooks Metadata.co.id).

However, this number does not necessarily reflect the number of unique individuals active on the platform. Several factors can affect this data's accuracy, such as duplicate accounts, accounts owned by deceased users who are still registered in the system, and accounts that are no longer active. In addition, Facebook also faces problems with automated bot accounts or fake accounts, which, in some cases, can increase the number of users counted. So even taking these factors into account, the number of users who actually interact actively may be lower than the number of registered accounts, but Facebook is still one of the largest social media platforms in Indonesia.

According to interviews I conducted with members of Facebook communities that centre around Islamic-inspired memes, such as Meme Comic Santri, Meme Indonesian Islamic Da'wah, and *Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman* (Meme Da'wah Needs of Faith), these members are generally between 16 and 22 years old. One of the informants, Nindy, who hails from Yogyakarta, is 16 years old and is in her first year of high school. Other participants include Rakhmat, aged 20, coming from Magelang; Faiz, aged 19, from Sidoarjo; and Dimas, aged 18, from Pematang, Ilham Tawakal, 17 years old, from Bogor; Muhammad Ihsan, 22 years old, from Bandung; Vin Dista, aged 20, from Palembang; Bang Fir Art, 21 years old, hailing from North Sumatra. Some of these individuals are currently enrolled in educational institutions. In contrast, others have entered the workforce upon finishing high school or vocational training, and others are in their initial semester at a university. Additionally, my interlocutors come from diverse regions within Indonesia, reflecting the platform's wide geographic reach and the cultural plurality that characterises its user base. The presence of such a varied audience enables a wide range of interpretations and viewpoints to be conveyed through Islamic-inspired memes, resulting in a vibrant and engaging online community.

Dynamics of Production: Collaborative Innovation

Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesian Facebook Groups are primarily created by individuals or communities with a creative flair for seamlessly blending relevant images with text. The creation of these memes on Facebook represents a dynamic process of cultural participation in which individuals actively shape and reinterpret Islamic values through the art of meme crafting. These meme creators bring their perspectives to Islam by drawing on personal experiences, cultural

NapoleonCat has researched or compiled data to provide statistics on Indonesia's Facebook users and demographic information such as age distribution

references, and religious teachings. During my interviews with several meme creators, I heard various perspectives.

One such creator is Kevin, known as Vin Dista on Facebook, a 20-year-old from Palembang, South Sumatra. In November 2022, while juggling responsibilities at the fish market with his father, he began creating memes using the *Pixellab* application. Vin makes memes in his spare time, usually in the afternoon or evening after a trip to the market. The time invested varies according to complexity; a text-only meme takes 2 minutes, whereas those with visuals and text that require the search for a template can take up to 30 minutes.

Even though he has no formal Islamic education and attended a state school, Kevin chooses to share his creative work on platforms like *Meme Da'wah Kebutuhan Iman* and *Meme Da'wah Islam Indonesia*. His initial inspiration came from seeing a friend share Islamic-inspired memes, which motivated him to contribute to spreading knowledge and goodness through his work. Receiving a 'reward' from Allah SWT is one of his motivations. "*Pahala jariyah*" is an Islamic concept that refers to rewards or kindness that continue to benefit someone after their death. The term "*jariyah*" derives from Arabic and means "continuous". *Jariyah's* rewards can be obtained by performing various deeds that benefit others or society. Bang Fir Art believes that if his meme work positively impacts those who enjoy it, he will be rewarded even after his death. This belief in ongoing rewards may also influence his choice of platform. Compared to faster-moving platforms like TikTok or Twitter, Facebook offers a more enduring archive where posts can remain visible for years, allowing the religious messages contained in memes to continue reaching audiences long after their initial posting.

In the digital context, this belief is further reinforced by the nature of social media and the internet, which enables content to persist for extended periods. Memes created and shared online are not easily deleted but can continue circulating across platforms, be re-uploaded, or be referenced by other users. In other words, the digital nature of memes that persist on the internet contributes to his belief that his works can continue to provide benefits even after he is gone. This also reflects how the traditional Islamic concept of *amal jariyah* is translated into the digital ecosystem, where content can continue to spread and be accessed indefinitely.

One noteworthy creation he posted on Meme Da'wah Islam received over 2300 likes, 139 comments, and 439 shares, reaching an audience of 258,000. Kevin's creative process for this particular meme begins with coming across an Al Habib Salim Asy Syathiri quote on Instagram. Following that, he envisions the visual representation, frequently searching for appropriate visuals on platforms such as Pinterest, Google, or YouTube if needed.



Figure 3.3. Meme created by Vin Dista

Source: *Meme Dakwah Islam* Group Facebook, 19 August 2023⁴⁵

Vin explains the behind-the-scenes of meme-making.⁴⁶ The visual used is a screenshot from another expression of global pop culture. Here is a video game, the "Grand Theft Auto" series, known for its open-world gameplay and depiction of urban life, including criminal activity. The image shows three characters: one in the foreground, observing two others in the background, and one who seems to be wielding a weapon. The text overlay in Indonesian, attributed to "Al-Habib Salim Asy-Syathiri," translates to: "One of the reasons for the loss of shame in women is going out of the house too often." He chose the content contrast type. The video game imagery is typically associated with themes of crime and violence, which contrasts with the moralistic tone of the text about modesty and the behaviour of women. The cultural message he wants to suggest is a conservative perspective on gender roles within certain societies, indicating that women should be more homebound to maintain 'shame' or modesty. It is worth noting that such views are subject to criticism and debate within various social and religious communities, as well as in Indonesian Muslim ones.

This meme can be interpreted in a variety of ways, not always in line with the moral message it wants to convey. The use of visuals from games such as GTA can give the impression of an implied threat to women in public spaces, mainly when associated with certain digital cultures that often contain misogynistic sentiments. Several studies show that antifeminist online communities within the manosphere mobilise misogynistic and violent narratives as expressions of social

⁴⁵ This meme got 2300 likes and 134 comments and was shared 439 times.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/183806310303581/permalink/694983002519240/>

⁴⁶ Chatting with Kevin (Vin Dista) through messenger on Facebook, 6 September 2023

and gender frustration (Rothermel, 2023). In this context, the meme can be read as moral advice and as an illustration that points to darker dynamics in the representation of women in digital spaces.

This interpretation and others can depend very much on the audience and their cultural background. In Indonesia, this meme may be read more in the context of digital *da'wah* with a sarcastic or satirical tone without having an explicit violent connotation. This shows how memes can have ambiguous meanings, depending on who sees and shares them.

This meme received 139 comments reflecting divergent views on women's roles in public space. While the meme appears to resonate with more traditional or conservative interpretations of gender norms, it also provoked discussion and critique from users who questioned its relevance to contemporary social realities. The juxtaposition of a serious moral message with a casual video game scene further opened space for ironic or satirical readings, rendering the meme potentially controversial.

The diversity of responses in the comment section illustrates that the meme does not generate a single, fixed interpretation. Instead, users actively negotiate its meaning by drawing on moral reasoning, personal experience, and contemporary understandings of gender roles. Many commenters reinterpreted the message by distinguishing between “going out” for work, education, or religious activities and “going out” for leisure or morally questionable purposes. As one user remarked, *Keluar rumahnya ke mana dulu? Kalau kerja ya beda cerita* (It depends on where she is going. If it's for work, that's a different matter). Others openly challenged the relevance of the message by questioning the applicability of older norms to women's current social and economic roles.

At the same time, several comments employed humour and self-irony through the use of the slang term *nolep* (derived from “no life”), commonly used in Indonesian online culture to describe someone who rarely leaves the house. This expression functions as a playful way of aligning with or distancing oneself from the meme's moral stance. A smaller but significant number of users also expressed scepticism toward the religious authority of the quote itself, questioning its status as a hadith or emphasising the need for contextual interpretation. Taken together, these reactions demonstrate how the meme functions as a site of interpretive negotiation rather than moral instruction, where religious norms, gender expectations, and everyday experience are actively debated.

As mentioned earlier, Bang Fir Art, a 21-year-old from Pematang Siantar, North Sumatra, began making memes in early 2023 after completing *Madrasah Aliyah* (high school-level education). Starting with random themes, he gradually shifted his focus to Islamic-inspired memes during the middle of the year. He told me how to work in producing Indonesian Islamic-inspired memes. Many creators

make their memes, but others collaborate with other meme creators to create more impactful and relatable memes. This collaboration allows for exchanging ideas and pooling creative talents to produce memes that resonate with their target audience. Regarding content circulation, Bang Fir Art states that it tends to be slower than Twitter and TikTok, which has an algorithm based on For You Page and real-time trends that accelerate virality. However, although it is slower, meme circulation on Facebook is often structured through tagging, sharing in groups, and utilising the share button.

Although Twitter and TikTok also have share features, their distribution mechanisms differ. Twitter allows retweets to spread content quickly, but tweets have a short lifespan on the timeline. Meanwhile, TikTok uses the For You Page (FYP) algorithm that can make videos go viral quickly. However, its virality cycle ends faster than memes on Facebook, which tends to last longer in community groups. Thus, although the speed of virality is lower, Islamic-inspired memes on Facebook have a greater chance of reaching a specific audience and creating deeper discussions.

This structured circulation allows memes to reach specific target audiences and initiate conversations on various topics, making them an effective tool for engaging with and disseminating Islamic teachings in Indonesia through humour and relatability.

My examination elucidates the complex strands of Islamic-inspired meme culture practised on the Facebook platform within an Indonesian context. Every aspect of the platform, including its distinctive attributes, audience dynamics, religiously motivated themes, and a wide range of content formats, eventually contributes to the dynamic fabric of Islamic-inspired memes, their reception, and the following discussions.

However, it is not only the production and distribution process that is important but also the agency of the audience in interacting with the meme. On Facebook, the audience is not only a passive recipient but also participates in the circulation and reinterpretation of the meme's meaning. User responses vary, from liking, commenting, sharing, and tagging friends to expanding the meme's reach to their social circle.

Moreover, some users actively remix or reinterpret memes, either by adding new text, changing the visual context, or adapting the format of an already popular meme to make it more relevant to their own experiences. This phenomenon shows that the audience not only consumes memes but also participates in creating new, more contextual versions.

Actors Shaping and Circulating Islamic-inspired Memes on Facebook

Based on the previous explanations, I argue that various players shape and spread Islamic-inspired memes in the Facebook ecosystem: meme consumers, creators, administrators, and moderators. Regarding meme creators, people like Kevin (Vin Dista), Bang Fir Art, and other creators are at the forefront of creating memes that mix humour, Islamic teachings, and cultural icons. Driven by personal religious values, these creative practices sometimes seek to start conversations on social concerns, morality, and faith.

The material shared in meme groups, such as Meme Da'wah Kebutuhan Iman, significantly influences the administrators and moderators of these groups. They are responsible for selecting memes that align with the group's values, ensuring that the content does not provoke excessive controversy, and maintaining a balance between humour and da'wah. From my observations and informal conversations with group owners, such as Misbah from *Meme Da'wah Kebutuhan Iman*, I asked them how they understood the group's values. Misbah explained in simple terms, "*Kami ingin berdakwah dengan cara yang santun, tanpa menyinggung, dan tetap menjaga adab, meskipun lewat media seperti meme.*" His statement reflects a broader principle that runs through the community: the desire to promote Islamic teachings with respect, modesty, and kindness, even within the fast-moving world of social media.

These values are not only expressed in interviews but are also made clear in the group's official rules, which I observed directly. In the description set by the administrators, members are reminded to uphold *adab* and *akhlak baik* (good manners and ethics) towards both Muslims and non-Muslims, to foster a welcoming environment, to avoid hate speech, hoaxes, and provocations, and to respect privacy as citizens of Indonesia. Pornographic content, offensive language, and divisive behaviour are strictly prohibited. Debates are allowed, but only within the limits of mutual respect. Rather than simply managing posts, the group administrators act as cultural curators, carefully filtering which memes align with their vision of a positive online Islamic space. Their role, therefore, extends beyond administration to maintaining a particular ethos of digital religious engagement, one that is both educational and socially responsible.

Finally, meme users (the audience) are not merely passive recipients but active participants in the cultural life of Islamic-inspired memes. Community engagement plays a vital role in interpreting and spreading these memes. Through their likes, shares, comments, and responses, users offer valuable input that subtly guides future meme creation and adaptation. Sometimes, consumers remix or repost material, adding their own interpretations or modifying it to fit their local cultural setting.

For example, in memes about Surah Al-Mulk and the concept of *siksa kubur* (divine punishment experienced in the grave in Islamic belief), although the core idea remains, depicting someone being protected by reciting Surah Al-Mulk, creators adapt different visual templates to make the message more engaging and relatable to a digital audience. This dynamic reflects what George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson (2010) describe as *prosumption*, a condition in which the boundaries between production and consumption increasingly collapse in digital culture.

In the context of Islamic-inspired memes, this means that users do not merely consume religious content but actively reinterpret, remix, and redistribute it, shaping religious messages in line with their own experiences and cultural understandings. This process resonates with Henry Jenkins et al. (2013) notion of participatory culture, in which meaning emerges through circulation, adaptation, and collective engagement rather than through top-down transmission alone.



Figure 3.4. Meme referencing Surah Al Mulk and the “punishment of the grave.”
Source: Facebook.com

In Islam, it is believed that after death, a person will face the accountability of their deeds in the grave. Reciting Surah Al-Mulk before going to bed is often associated with protection from the torment of the grave, as mentioned in various hadiths. These memes visualise this concept with superhero icons, such as Spider-Man and Superman, who are metaphorically depicted as protectors from a significant threat, in this case, the “punishment of the grave.” Although most current memes still rely on adapting popular images like Spider-Man or Superman, the growing use of generative AI tools such as DALL-E and Midjourney points to the possibility of producing more locally inflected and context-sensitive visual styles for Islamic messages. Rather than creating entirely original imagery in a strict sense, these tools may enable creators to experiment with new

combinations and visual idioms that resonate more closely with Islamic symbols and cultural references.

This meme exemplifies a common pattern in the Islamic-inspired meme community on Facebook, where a single humorous concept can be reworked into various visual forms. Creators often modify text elements to suit the context while still maintaining the narrative structure familiar to the audience. This reflects how the digital community participates in remixing and adapting memes, creating new versions that remain relevant to the user experience but still have a familiar resonance.

This pattern illustrates how Islamic-inspired memes on Facebook develop through a collective process of reinterpretation, remixing, and adaptation rather than through individual creativity alone. Users participate not only by consuming memes but also by modifying, recirculating, and recontextualising them within their own social environments. The visibility of humour drawing on pesantren traditions and everyday Islamic practices across several Facebook communities suggests that these forms of religious humour occupy a prominent place within Indonesia's digital meme ecology. This visibility should not be taken to imply that individual creators share the same organisational affiliation. Rather, it reflects the familiarity of these religious and cultural references among Indonesian Muslim audiences, enabling them to be remixed, adapted, and circulated by creators from diverse backgrounds. In this sense, Islamic-inspired memes on Facebook function not only as humour or light entertainment but also as collaborative forms of religious communication through which everyday Islamic values, cultural references, and social experiences are continually shared, reinterpreted, and circulated.

Islamic-inspired Memes on Twitter in Indonesia

As a continuation of the comparative framework outlined in the previous chapter, this section examines Twitter alongside Facebook as part of the same text- and image-based meme ecosystem, before the analysis turns to TikTok's video-centred affordances in Chapter 4.

This segment examines creating, distributing, and consuming Islamic-inspired memes on Twitter.⁴⁷ This microblogging platform significantly influences real-

⁴⁷ As of October 2023, Indonesia has approximately 27 million Twitter users. This figure places Indonesia among the top four countries worldwide regarding Twitter use (Mutia Annur, 2023)(Mutia Annur, 2023), see <https://databoks.katadata.co.id/media-sosial/statistik/>, last accessed 30 November 2024. In Indonesia, social media usage is also otherwise high, influenced by the extensive adoption of mobile internet access. WhatsApp is the most popular messaging app, with 88.7% of the country's internet users actively using it. Facebook and Instagram are also widely used, with around 81-85% of the country's internet users engaged on these platforms. TikTok has seen significant growth, reaching about 63.1% of the population (The

time (often global) conversations and holds a prominent position in the social media landscape in Indonesia. Compared to Facebook, Twitter has a more public discussion-oriented user base, with a higher propensity towards trends, politics, and social issues. Twitter users in Indonesia are generally active in shaping discourse, while Facebook tends to have a broader community with more engagement in community groups and private social network-based discussions. As a result, Islamic memes on Twitter are more likely to appear in a satirical format, are reactive to current issues, and quickly go viral, while on Facebook, the spread is more structured and community-based, with a more extended discussion cycle.

As memes have long served as a mode of cultural communication in Indonesia, Islamic-inspired memes have increasingly become visible on Twitter. This phenomenon most likely began on other platforms, such as Facebook, where communities already actively share Islamic-inspired meme content before transforming it into the popular meme format on Twitter. This study focuses on comprehending the intricate dynamics involved in the creation, distribution, and reception of memes on Twitter within Indonesian Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

By analysing the usage patterns of these memes on Twitter, I aim to understand the mechanisms behind their creation and distribution and reveal their influence on shaping digital conversations and cultural representation in online environments. In this context, usage patterns refer to how Twitter users create, spread, and respond to memes. This includes the frequency with which Islamic-inspired memes appear in a particular trend, how users participate in remixing or modifying memes, and how retweets and comments influence their spread. Unlike other platforms such as Facebook, which are more community-based, on Twitter, memes often evolve through real-time trends and conversations, allowing Islamic memes to adapt to current social and religious issues.

This section analyses different facets of Islamic meme culture on Twitter, encompassing thematic elements, content formats, distribution dynamics, and their significant influence on diverse audiences. By understanding how these memes are produced and disseminated, we can see how they function as a medium of digital expression that shapes Islamic discourse in the online environment.

Global Statistics, 2024/The Global Statistics, 2024, source: <https://www.theglobalstatistics.com/indonesia-social-media-statistics/>, last accessed 30 November 2024).

Demographic Characteristics of the Muslim Community on Twitter

One of Indonesia's most influential Twitter accounts featuring Islamic-themed satire is NU Garis Lucu (literally translated as "NU Funny Line", as discussed in the previous chapter). Twitter user demographics can change over time and vary by geographic region. However, according to an interview with one of the NU Garis Lucu administrators who had previously conducted a survey to find out the characteristics of his audience, several demographic characteristics can be distinguished from the NU Garis Lucu audience. Most of the users are aged 25 to 45. It is quite similar to the worldwide average demographics of Twitter users: 72.7% are men, and only 27.3% are women. That represents a huge gender bias and raises questions about what type of interactions occurs on the platform. What is it like that men dominate NU Garis Lucu conversations? Or could it be that women are participating, but not as visibly, enjoying a more passive role in the interaction? While this question remains open, it highlights the need to explore further how gender influences online engagement, particularly in religious and satirical digital spaces.

Demographic statistics indicate that the largest share of Twitter (X) users falls within the 25–34 age group, with a substantial portion of the user base also in the 18–24 cohort, while users under 18 constitute only a small minority of the overall audience (Exploding Topics, 2024; Hootsuite, 2024). These patterns align with We Are Social and Meltwater's findings, which show that the platform is predominantly used by adults aged 18 and above rather than adolescents or children (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2024).

Twitter is a global platform with users from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, naturally adding to the content's richness and multiplicity of viewpoints. While it provides a space for inclusivity and freedom of expression (Papacharissi, 2015), it is also known for fostering vitriolic debates and the spread of hate speech (Gillespie, 2018; A. Marwick & Boyd, 2011). This dual nature highlights both the platform's potential as an arena for open discussion and its challenges in moderating harmful interactions. In Indonesia, these tensions are especially visible during moments of heightened political or religious sensitivity, when Twitter becomes a key site for contestation, satire, and at times, polarization.

It is important to note that demographic data can change over time, and Twitter is a dynamic platform with increasing participation from various groups. With the majority of users aged 25 to 40, memes produced tend to reflect their interests, experiences, and perspectives. For example, many memes explore social challenges, government policies, or even reflections on current political phenomena. In addition, the higher educational background of most Twitter users also influences the characteristics of memes circulating on this platform. Because many memes on Twitter are satirical, understanding them often requires multiple

interpretations. Not only for the audience but also for the creator, creating sharp and effective satire requires special skills. In addition, users must always follow the development of current issues to understand the intent of the satirical post. Without the proper context, the message in the meme can be misinterpreted or lose its relevance.

Amongst Indonesian Muslim communities, the presence of users from East Java who have attended Islamic boarding schools (*Pondok Pesantren*) has a significant impact on meme production on Twitter, both in terms of content and terminology. Like the following meme, the meme uses Javanese terms such as *manaqiban*, *brokohan*, and *Kupengan*. However, this meme is more related to the reality of life in the NU community, which includes various traditional religious activities.

Pesantren, or Islamic boarding schools, are traditional religious institutions in Indonesia where students, known as *santri*, live and study Islamic teachings under the guidance of a *kyai* (religious teacher). This culture deeply shapes not only their religious knowledge but also their distinct sense of humour and everyday expressions. The influence of *pesantren* culture in memes is not only seen in the language used but also in the way students understand and convey their unique humour. For example, *tajwid* and *qira'ah* science are often used as metaphors in everyday conversations, including in unique romantic expressions. For instance, the sentence "*Aku selalu berdoa dan berharap cinta kita seperti waqaf lazim, terhenti sempurna di akhir hayat kita*" (I always pray and hope that our love is like a *waqaf lazim*, stopping perfectly at the end of our lives" uses the term *waqaf lazim*, the law of reading that requires a perfect stop, as a symbol of love that lasts until the end of life. Or expressions such as "*Setelah kau terima cintaku nanti, hatiku rasanya seperti qalqalah kubra. Terpantul-pantul dengan keras*" (After you accept my love later, my heart feels like *qalqalah kubra*, bouncing loudly" which uses the concept of *qalqalah kubra*, a strong resonance of sound in the reading of the Qur'an. In addition to terms in reading the hijaiyah letters, the Arabic alphabet letters used in the Qur'an, central to Islamic education and Quranic recitation practices, the typical humour of *santri* is also often rooted in their daily lives at *pesantren*.

Simple daily practices, such as wearing *bakiak* (wooden sandals) to the bathroom, following the Sunnah of drinking while seated, or studying the Qur'an while enjoying coffee, are not inherently humorous. However, these routines become rich material for jokes among *santri*, who creatively draw on their daily experiences to produce lighthearted humour. In the digital context, this humour has also developed by linking contemporary phenomena to the stories of the prophets. One popular example is the meme posted on NU Garis Lucu, "Why do women answer '*terserah*' (whatever you want) when asked what she wants to eat? Because they know that in the past, they were expelled from heaven just because they chose the wrong food." This joke clearly refers to the story of the

Prophet Adam and Eve (Hawa), who ate the forbidden fruit (*Quldi*), but is delivered in a lighthearted style that is relevant to everyday experiences.

This humorous approach demonstrates that the santri meme is not merely entertainment, but also a means of reinforcing the identity of the pesantren in digital culture. By using references that are close to their lives, this meme is not only interesting to santri or alumni of the pesantren, but also to the broader Muslim community, which understands the religious context more deeply. This creates a space where traditional values remain relevant in modern digital conversations, showing how religion-based humour can effectively communicate on social media.

Understanding the demographic characteristics of the Islamic community's Twitter audience allows meme creators to tailor their content to user preferences and interests better. This understanding can potentially influence the creative direction and distribution of Islamic-inspired memes on Twitter.

Can Humorous Tweets Be Considered Memes?

Rather than reopening the definitional debate on memes outlined in Chapter 2, this section addresses a platform-specific question that emerges from Twitter's textual and conversational architecture: can humorous tweets function as memes? This question becomes relevant not because tweets visually resemble memes, but because they circulate, gain traction, and invite reinterpretation through mechanisms similar to memetic processes.

At the same time, recognising memetic dynamics on Twitter requires a careful distinction. Not all viral humour on the platform can be categorised as memes. As Jenkins emphasises, while some content spreads widely, it does not necessarily undergo significant transformation or reinterpretation by users. Internet memes are distinct because they are not only disseminated but also modified and adapted in meaningful ways by online communities (Jenkins et al., 2013). This distinction between viral content and memes is therefore crucial when analysing how Islamic-inspired humour circulates on platforms like Twitter.

However, in the digital ecosystem, what is imitated in memes is not only the physical form (form) but also the content (including the idea) and position (stance) (Shifman, 2014). In other words, even if a humorous tweet does not undergo any changes in visual format, it can still be considered a meme if its content is reinterpreted, adapted to a new context, or used to convey a different point of view by the online community.

This theoretical perspective helps explain why humorous tweets, even in their brevity, can function as memes. Their popularity often stems from their relatability and adaptability in digital spaces. Humorous tweets are engaging and

frequently prompt users to like, retweet, and share with their followers. Due to their concise and easy-to-digest format, tweets spread quickly across platforms. Furthermore, humour's universal appeal allows such content to cross cultural and linguistic boundaries, increasing its potential for broader dissemination. Other users frequently adapt and transform tweet content, particularly humorous ones. This phenomenon reflects media's spreadability and content evolution, both of which are core characteristics of meme culture. These points lend credence to the idea that certain types of tweets, especially humorous ones, can be classified as memes within Twitter's digital culture.

Although humorous tweets and memes share similarities in how they spread and impact, the main difference lies in whether the content is modified by the digital community or replicated in the same form. Therefore, in this analysis, it is important to distinguish between memes that develop in the digital ecosystem and simply viral humour that spread without undergoing substantial changes.

What is a humorous tweet? according to interviews with one of Garis Lucu's account administrators⁴⁸, the humour in a tweet can be determined by various factors, including individual preferences, perceptions, culture, and background. In general, humorous tweets have several characteristics, including the sharpness of humour. It refers to how directly and effectively a tweet delivers its punchline or witty observation, often using satire, irony, or clever twists that leave a quick and strong impression on the reader. Creativity also determines how to use creative language and think outside the box. This could include using an intriguing metaphor, a humorous simile, or clever wording. The next factor is relevance, as funny Tweets are typically related to current popular, controversial, or relevant topics or events. This enables readers to respond quickly, feel connected to the discussed context, and have the courage to explore sensitive or taboo topics. However, it is critical to remember that humour should be delivered with sensitivity to avoid offending others' feelings; what one person finds funny may not be the same for another. Furthermore, Tweets with humour typically receive positive feedback from other users through retweets, likes, or responses.

Short, sharp, and memorable tweets are often the most appealing. In this sense, tweets are like memes, short words or sentences used rapidly and precisely to transmit a message. Like captions in memes, which provide context and guide interpretation, the character restriction in tweets functions as a structural constraint that determines how humour or satire is presented.

Although most tweets contain words or short sentences, visual elements such as images or gifs are crucial in creating funny tweets. These visual additions improve

⁴⁸ Interview with one of the administrators of NU Garis Lucu in his house, in Nganjuk, East Java, 13 September 2023

the power of the message and add an artistic dimension to a fun story. Images or GIFs in tweets can be considered a form of content modification or "remix," similar to memes. However, it is essential to note that not all tweets contain remix elements; most are single, unmodified texts.

Although tweets, whether textual or accompanied by images, often inspire interactions with other Twitter users, virality alone does not make a tweet a meme. A tweet qualifies as a meme only if it is widely circulated (e.g., through retweets) and undergoes some degree of alteration or reinterpretation by an online community. Users referencing the tweet in various contexts, including meme designs or customising its message for new situations, also fit this criterion. While retweets, likes, and replies contribute to rapid spread, the defining characteristic of a meme is its ability to evolve through user interaction rather than mere reposting.

Furthermore, tweets featuring humour or satire also play a significant role in shaping Twitter's digital culture. Internet culture includes memes, and amusing tweets contribute to its dynamism. Active user participation, where people share, reply, remix, and reinterpret tweets akin to the proliferation of memes, drives this dynamic. Users actively shape internet debates using humour rather than merely acting as viewers.

While humour remains a dominant mode of engagement, many influential tweets derive their impact from politically charged or emotionally provocative content, including moral outrage, religious rhetoric, and disinformation. Tweets that employ abusive language, false information, or ideological propaganda can also influence digital society by reinforcing prejudices, increasing divisiveness, or normalising destructive language. Hence, Twitter's viral nature pertains to light-hearted content and posts that promote negativity.

Therefore, even though humour plays a major role in shaping online interactions, it is important to recognise that all types of viral content, regardless of their intentions, contribute to the broader digital environment. Understanding the mechanics behind humour-driven tweets provides valuable insights into how digital discourse evolves; yet the exact mechanisms can equally be harnessed to amplify polarising or negative narratives. Recognising this dual potential reminds us to approach digital culture critically, acknowledging both its creative vitality and its more troubling aspects.

Tweets and memes share several communicative dynamics, particularly in how humour and satire circulate, attract attention, and invite audience response. On Twitter, such content can spread rapidly, granting visibility and influence to users whose posts resonate with broader conversations. However, similarity in circulation alone is insufficient to treat tweets as memes.

Recognising these overlaps allows for a more precise analytical stance. In this chapter, humorous tweets are approached as memes only when they are collectively taken up, recontextualised, or iterated upon by users, rather than merely achieving virality as isolated jokes. This distinction helps clarify how Islamic-inspired humour on Twitter operates not simply as fleeting entertainment, but as part of a participatory process through which religious meanings and social commentary are negotiated.

Theme: Where Humour Meets Actuality

Based on observations made on some popular Islamic Twitter accounts, including *NU Garis Lucu* and *MubammadiyahGL*, it becomes evident that the Muslim community in Indonesia is responsible for a wide range of expressions through memes, highlighting their variation and diversity. Notable recurring themes in Islamic-inspired memes on Twitter include Humour and Satire, Responses to Real-life Events, Tolerance and Inter-religious Dialogue, and Political Memes. One of the administrators of *NU Garis Lucu* said that the type of content he often creates is to satirise someone or respond to certain phenomena, including social and political phenomena, as well as dialogue with other Islamic groups or religions, like the Catholic or Buddhist Community, which is usually framed as making fun of each other.⁴⁹

It is essential to remember that these themes can intersect, and creating memes often involves amalgamating multiple elements. Examining and dissecting these themes can lead to a comprehensive understanding of how various religious communities on Twitter utilise memes for self-expression and communication. While this study focuses on Muslim communities, similar trends can be observed in other groups, such as *Katolik Garis Lucu*, *Buddha Garis Lucu*, and others, which use humour and satire as tools for digital engagement. For example, one of the tweets posted by *NU Garis Lucu* on 19 January 2024.

“Asal mau Jumatan, InsyaAllah dapat makan siang gratis, Gak usah nunggu Selesai Pemilu” (If you just show up for Friday prayers, you’ll get free lunch anyway, no need to wait for election season handouts). The humour here relies on local political irony and everyday social commentary, which are difficult to fully translate into English.

This tweet was seen by 68,500 people and received 110 comments, 318 reposts, and 1,223 likes. The tweet appears to insinuate or draw a comparison by highlighting the promises of a free lunch program that is part of the political campaign program of Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka in the 2024 presidential election. The Free School Lunch Program is a crucial focus for

⁴⁹ Interview with one of the administrators of *NU Garis Lucu* in his house, in Nganjuk, East Java, 13 September 2023

this candidate (Liputan6, 2024). At every opportunity to meet with the public, both frequently state that the program is being implemented to improve the nutritional quality of schoolchildren and stimulate the national economy. Prabowo believes that the complimentary breakfast and milk programs reflect his commitment to improving the welfare of children and the larger community. Rather than simply distributing free meals, the program is designed to create a structured economic ecosystem by sourcing food supplies, such as eggs, rice, and milk, directly from local farmers, breeders, and dairy cooperatives. This approach is expected to catalyse local and national economic development. This program is estimated to cost the state more than 450 trillion annually (Kompas, 2024).

The main satirical point is that a person does not need to wait for the election to be over to receive benefits, such as free lunches, because followers of the Islamic faith already do so; there is *Jumat Barokah* (Barokah Friday). Many mosques in Indonesia practice *Jumat Berkah*, where free meals are provided for Friday prayer congregants, funded either by mosque donations or individual contributions from the community. This initiative aligns with the Islamic tradition that recognises the significance of Friday and considers Friday prayers obligatory. While the extent of this practice varies, some mosques provide food regularly, while others depend on available donations. The broader concept of giving free meals on Fridays as an act of charity is widely embraced. In Islamic tradition, free food is distributed at mosques every Friday as a form of charity and social good unrelated to election agendas or political campaigns.

NU Garis Lucu next varies upon this theme with a follow-up tweet: "*There are tablilan, manaqiban, brokohan, kupengan, and other free lunch programs.*"⁵⁰

The tweet employs Javanese terms and intends to convey that various religious or traditional activities in Javanese society already involve providing free food. What is interesting is that, in addition to receiving a large number of comments, this tweet was also taken up by other accounts, including those from non-Muslim communities, Catholics Funny Line (Katholik Garis Lucu) with a photo of *sego berkat*⁵¹ and tweet:

⁵⁰ *Tablilan* is an activity in the form of dhikr and prayers performed by Muslims, particularly in Indonesia, to remember and pray for the spirits of the deceased. This event is frequently held on a series of death anniversaries or seven days after a person dies. *Manaqiban* is a Javanese tradition or event in which food or meals are distributed to visitors or gatherers. In this context, manaqiban refers to reading a person's life history or biography, particularly that of a scholar. The famous manaqiban is reading Sheikh Abdul Qadir's manaqib Jailani. Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jailani is a saint of Allah known as Sulthanul Auliya, or the leader of the saints. *Brokohan* is a Javanese social event or activity in which food is distributed to a large number of people, typically celebrating the birth of a baby. *Kupengan* is a Javanese tradition in which food is cooked and distributed to a large number of people. Kupengan is frequently associated with religious ceremonies or commemorative events.

⁵¹ *Sego berkat* (Rice blessing) is synonymous with the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world's largest Islamic organization. Every traditional religious event such as, *walimatul aqiqah* (birth), *tablilan*



Figure 3.5. "Nasi Berkah" meme
Source: @Komunitas Katolik Garis Lucu

"Cukup berteman dengan NU Garis Lucu, ternyata sudah dapat makan malam gratis, nggak perlu menunggu pilpres"
(Just be friends with @NUgarislucu; it turns out that you can get free dinner, so you don't need to wait for the presidential election).

This tweet showcases a variety of expressions, emphasising their variation and diversity. The theme alternates between humour and satire, responses to real-life events, tolerance and inter-religious dialogue, and political memes.

First, the tweet "Just be friends with @NUgaris Lucu. You can get free dinner; there is no need to wait for the presidential election" ultimately demonstrates the humorous skills of its makers and users. In response to the 2024 presidential candidate's campaign program, this tweet cleverly scrutinises political promises while conveying a critical message through humour.

Secondly, the tweet responds to real-life events but in a way that differs from most tweets. While it is true that many Twitter users react to trending topics, NU Garis

(death), *walimatul khatan* (circumcision), *walimatul urs* (wedding), *Maulid Nabi* (the Prophet Muhammad's birthday), *Isra Miraj*, *haul*, and so on includes blessed rice. Blessing rice is also known as *beseke* rice because it is served in a basket made of plastic or paper. Previously, it was made from bamboo baskets. Blessed rice has a long history dating back to the time of Wali Songo, the archipelago's Islam spreader. Meanwhile, the word blessing is derived from Arabic and means *zayyadatul khair* (increasing goodness). So blessed rice has *berkah* (blessings), specifically something good when taken home and eaten (lampung.nu.or.id).

Lucu's approach stands out because it does not just participate in digital conversations; it reframes them through a distinctly Islamic perspective, using humour to bridge religious and social discourse. The inclusion of Islamic elements in these memes is not merely a decorative touch but rather a way to reinterpret events within a cultural and religious framework familiar to many Indonesian Muslims. These references, whether to Islamic traditions, figures, or common expressions, not only add relatability but also reshape how specific issues are perceived and discussed.

Instead of simply making a topic 'seem religious', these memes often function as lighthearted commentary on the intersection between daily life, politics, and faith. By doing so, they provide an accessible medium for engagement with religious discourse in an online setting, reinforcing both collective identity and humour-driven critique. The result is a digital space where humour and religion are intertwined, fostering discussion, solidarity, and shared cultural understanding among Indonesian Twitter users (see Chapter 5).

Thirdly, because of the amicable relationship between the accounts "NU Garis Lucu" and "Katolik Garis Lucu," this tweet reflects the values of tolerance and interfaith dialogue. Humour serves as a bridge to foster positive relationships between religious communities. This interaction exemplifies how diversity can be celebrated and respected in social media.

Rather than engaging in profound theological debates, these accounts use humour to acknowledge each other's presence and shared values, creating a space where lighthearted interactions replace potential tensions, such as those that might arise from doctrinal differences or sensitive inter-religious issues. The exchanges demonstrate that interfaith dialogue is not always about intellectual discourse but can also take the form of casual, relatable interactions that promote mutual respect. The follow-up tweet emphasises how humour can effectively reduce tensions and promote understanding among religious communities. This fosters an environment where differences are valued, and interfaith dialogue is seen as a natural and positive part of everyday life.

Fourthly, this tweet illustrates how memes can also address political issues despite Islamic-inspired ones being rich in religious and cultural elements. This tweet subtly injects political criticism in a comedic way. By comparing the campaign promise of free school lunch with the current *Jumat Berkah* practice, the meme gently questions how political incentives are presented as innovative ideas while, in fact, religious and social traditions have long fostered acts of compassion and communal well-being.

Incorporating Islamic elements into this meme serves as both a moral critique of political narratives and a design choice. The meme highlights that charity acts are already embedded in religious practice, separate from political ambitions, thereby

challenging political opportunism. This aligns with a broader tendency in Indonesia, where political performance is frequently assessed and scrutinised through religious language. Consequently, the meme not only parodies campaign commitments but also endorses a moral standpoint that resonates with viewers who regard faith as a guiding principle in public life.

Twitter's Affordances

In this section, I explore the affordances of Twitter, those possibilities for action that are shaped by the platform's design and perceived by users (Gibson, 1979; Hutchby, 2001). Rather than merely listing features, I focus on how Twitter enables and constrains particular communicative practices, especially in the context of Islamic-inspired memes. These affordances not only influence the way religious humour and messages are produced and shared but also shape the strategies used by creators to connect with their audience.

According to an interview with one of the Garis Lucu administrators, tweets often receive quick responses due to Twitter's features, such as retweeting and quote-tweeting. Retweeting enables users to repost other people's tweets to their own timelines, which helps amplify memes with Islamic messages or contexts. Quote tweeting, meanwhile, allows users to add commentary or context to existing tweets, enabling the creation of remix-like content that adds new meaning to Islamic memes. These affordances empower users not only to circulate but also to reinterpret messages, facilitating dynamic digital conversations.

Another affordance is the use of hashtags, which allow users to categorise tweets under specific topics, enhancing discoverability. Hashtags are widely used in digital activism and religious outreach, as they can connect like-minded users and create thematic threads of discussion (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Sinpeng, 2021; Xiong et al., 2019). Through hashtags, Twitter users can join broader conversations or initiate new ones, contributing to public discourse within and across religious communities.

However, in the case of the NU Garis Lucu account, I observed an interesting phenomenon: even without using hashtags, their content still spreads effectively. According to one administrator, the key factors are content quality, which refers to contextual relevance, and timeliness in responding to social and political issues. They believe humour and relevance are more crucial in maintaining engagement than relying on hashtags. This strategy reflects a certain pride in their established audience, valuing organic interaction over algorithmic reach.

Furthermore, tweets can mirror the communication style meant for their target readers. For example, personal opinion-based tweets might not call for hashtags since they already appeal to readers from similar backgrounds. Although this might strengthen the feeling of community, by mostly distributing materials

among people who already hold the same opinions, it could create echo chambers. This raises questions about the broader goals of digital da'wah: Is the aim to reach new audiences or to strengthen bonds within a like-minded group?

Despite avoiding hashtags, NU Garis Lucu often attracts engagement from other religious humour accounts, like Katholik Garis Lucu, Buddhis Garis Lucu, and Hindu Garis Lucu, demonstrating interfaith interaction facilitated through shared comedic expression. This shows how much comedy still is a powerful affordance for advancing cultural dialogue and forging unexpected relationships even without applying traditional visibility strategies. From this vantage point, NU Garis Lucu functions not just as an account but also as a digital space where comedy becomes a means of ongoing commentary, conversation, and modest interfaith participation.

Another key affordance is brevity. Twitter's 280-character limit compels creators to craft concise, impactful messages. This shapes how Islamic memes are presented, often through punchy, tongue-in-cheek formats that deliver religious or ethical reflections in a digestible form. The character limit does not just restrict expression; it also encourages a form of creativity well-suited to satire and quick engagement.

Trend visibility is another crucial affordance. Twitter's "Trending Topics" feature shows what subjects are being discussed most widely in a given moment. This allows meme makers to interact with live chats and include Islamic ideas into more general debates. NU Garis Lucu depends on topicality and relevancy to make sure its material appeals even if it does not necessarily follow trends. The account's administrator emphasised that their focus is on authenticity and humour, rather than on exploiting the algorithm. This shows a smart navigation of platform affordances: employing tools like trending topics not as ends in themselves but as entrance points into meaningful, usually funny digital conversation.

Ultimately, Twitter's affordances shape not only how Islamic memes are produced and circulated, but also how communities grow around shared humour and values, demonstrating that digital da'wah can unfold through authenticity and organic interaction, rather than algorithmic manipulation.

Actors Shaping and Circulating Islamic-Inspired Memes on Twitter

Compared to Facebook's community-based structure, where admins curate content, enforce norms, and shape circulation, Twitter operates through a far more open, fluid, and conversational ecosystem. Yet this does not mean the flow of Islamic-inspired memes is random. Instead, several types of actors, creators, curators, ordinary users, and public figures, jointly determine what becomes visible, what turns into a shared joke, and what quietly disappears. The absence

of formal moderators intensifies the role of these human actors, making Twitter a dynamic site of negotiation where humour, religion, and politics constantly intersect.

Creator–Curator Accounts: The Case of NU Garis Lucu

Among the many actors shaping Islamic humour on Twitter, *Garis Lucu* accounts occupy a central position. NU Garis Lucu itself emerged as a playful counter to more conservative voices such as NU Garis Lurus, responding not through confrontation but through satire. This origin explains its characteristic tone today: light, quick, and aimed at lowering rather than escalating tension. Hoesterey (2021) describes such collectives as humour “brigades”, groups that use playful critique to mediate religious authority in digital publics. Although NU Garis Lucu is the most visible, it represents only one node in a broader ecosystem of “Garis Lucu–style” accounts that later appeared across Islamic and even non-Islamic communities. This wider humorous genre helps explain why NUGL’s commentary often becomes a reference point in religious meme conversations on Twitter.

The most prominent is NU Garis Lucu (@NUGarislucu), run by a small team of anonymous admins who collectively produce and curate satire around everyday religious and political life. Unlike Facebook’s pages with admin-visible profiles and rule-based moderation, the admins behind NU Garis Lucu work quietly in the background, monitoring trending topics and responding almost in real time.

During fieldwork, one admin explained informally that their goal was *ngasih komentar yang kena tapi tetap enteng* (dropping comments that hit the point but still feel light), to frame social and religious issues lightly without escalating tensions. This aligns with Hoesterey’s (2021) argument that humour is increasingly used by Indonesian Muslim publics to soften critique and maintain social harmony, functioning as a “cultural lubricant” in contested digital spaces. In this sense, NU Garis Lucu does not act as a hegemonic authority but as one influential node in a larger constellation of actors producing religious humour online.

A clear illustration of how these accounts operate, as creators and curators at once, can be observed from one of their posts on 19 January 2024, *Asal mau Jumatan, InsyaAllah dapat makan siang gratis, Gak usah nunggu Selesai Pemilu* (If you just show up for Friday prayers, you’ll get free lunch anyway, no need to wait for election season handouts). Although this tweet has been analysed earlier for its commentary on political actuality, here it matters for a different reason, its circulation pattern.

The tweet reached 68,500 views, with 110 comments, 318 reposts, and 1,223 likes. The high engagement demonstrates how creator-curator accounts like NU Garis Lucu serve as starting points for broader conversations. Yet it was the *comment*

thread that revealed the platform's participatory dynamic. Users did not simply laugh; they *added* meaning, such as *Di musholla kampungku tiap Jumat juga dapat snack, Mas. Relate banget* (At my neighborhood prayer hall we also get snacks every Friday. Super relatable), *Politik nasi bungkus emang nggak ada matinya* (Rice-box politics really never dies), *Ini kalau lewat FYP politik bisa panas* (If this showed up on political FYP, things would've gone heated fast).

These interactions reflect what Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) describe as spreadable media, where audiences do not passively consume content but reinterpret it in ways that extend its cultural life. The tweet became a template for broader discussions about mosque culture, populist politics, and the blurred boundary between religious and economic life. NU Garis Lucu functioned not as a gatekeeper but as a catalyst, its humour gaining traction because ordinary users transformed it into a collective, playful conversation.

Ordinary Users: Everyday Participants Whose Visibility Depends on Amplification

Unlike Facebook communities where users often interact within semi-closed groups, Twitter places ordinary users in a much more fluid environment. In my observations from 2022–2024, the replies to Islamic-themed humour, such as NU Garis Lucu's tweets, also came from small accounts with limited followers. Their comments rarely go viral on their own. Likes, retweets, and impressions tend to remain modest.

However, these ordinary users become visible when their posts are amplified by larger accounts, particularly NU Garis Lucu. A reply that initially receives only a handful of interactions can suddenly reach thousands of viewers once quoted or retweeted by a high-follower actor. In that sense, ordinary users act less as spontaneous agenda-setters and more as co-authors whose visibility is contingent upon the curatorial power of bigger accounts. For instance, in the NU Garis Lucu tweet discussed earlier (19 January 2024), most replies were small-scale, light jokes, brief comments, or personal anecdotes that typically receive only a handful of likes. However, once NU Garis Lucu *reposted* one of these everyday comments, the visibility of that reply shifted noticeably. Its impressions increased far more than its likes or replies, showing that amplification mainly expands reach, not necessarily conversation volume. After the repost, several users from different regions began to add their own comments or photos in a similar tone, not in large numbers, but enough to create a small pattern of regional variation. What appears at first glance to be a spontaneous, organic thread is often sparked by a modest act of amplification: a prominent account elevating an ordinary user's voice, making it visible to a much wider audience.

This pattern supports existing scholarship on algorithmic visibility: platforms do not simply reward “good jokes,” but amplify content through relational dynamics between large and small accounts (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2018). Ordinary users contribute the cultural material, local humour, personal stories, small sarcastic observations, but the trajectory of their content depends heavily on whether bigger actors pick it up.

Ordinary users also help shape interpretive meaning, but again, often as participants in a conversation already framed by larger accounts. When a user posts a simple anecdote, such as receiving free snacks after Friday prayers, other users quickly join in, adding their own regional experiences. Their contributions enrich the joke and diversify its cultural resonance, even if the initial push comes from a high-follower account.

In short, ordinary users are indispensable to the ecosystem, not because they independently drive virality, but because they provide the raw, grounded, everyday humour that larger accounts like NU Garis Lucu curate, amplify, and circulate. Their role is collaborative rather than central, and their visibility is relational rather than autonomous.

Public Figures as Amplifiers and Reframers

While ordinary users provide spontaneity, public figures often determine when a meme “breaks out” beyond its niche. Their retweets can shift a meme’s meaning from playful banter into political commentary or institutional critique. The Borobudur Stupa meme, analysed in Chapter 5, is the clearest example of how a meme posted by an ordinary user can transform into a national controversy once taken up by a political figure.

Although accounts like NU Garis Lucu are not among the biggest players on Indonesian Twitter, their follower base and cultural visibility are still large enough to amplify the reach of smaller tweets. A single retweet or quote-tweet from NU Garis Lucu can push an otherwise modest post into wider circulation. In this sense, their role mirrors that of public figures, ustadz celebrity, entertainers, or politicians, who regularly shape the trajectory of religious humour simply through the weight of their online presence.

This pattern is consistent with Marwick and boyd’s (2011) argument that visibility on social media is structured through hierarchies of attention: who engages with a piece of content often matters as much as the content itself. When a bigger account interacts with a tweet, whether through a like, comment, or retweet, it implicitly “anchors” how the post is understood and who ends up seeing it. Baym and boyd (2012) further note that amplification depends not just on the status of

the account but also on how closely the content resonates with ongoing cultural or political conversations. Religious humour that taps into familiar experiences, shared grievances, or widely recognised tropes tends to travel farther once picked up by influential actors.

Together, these dynamics show that meme circulation on Twitter emerges from the interplay of ordinary users who create the initial spark and larger accounts, whether organisational or individual, whose selective attention turns small jokes into broader public conversations.

Cross-Account Banter: Humour as a Networked Mode of Circulation

Although the example of NU Garis Lucu discussed earlier was used to illustrate religious, political humour, the same interaction can be read differently here: as evidence of how meme circulation on Twitter is co-produced across accounts. When @KatolikG and @NUgarislucu exchange playful jabs, such as the well-known Deddy Corbuzier conversion tweet and its humorous handover remark, they are not simply entertaining their followers. They are performing a kind of *networked collaboration* in which each reply expands the interpretive space for others to join in. Users respond with their own jokes, riffs, or local references, creating what Meyer (2000) describes as humour's "dual capacity": it softens intergroup tension while still allowing social critique to surface.

In this context, the value of the exchange lies not in the specific punchline but in the relational dynamics it sets in motion. These interactions create a shared discursive arena where Islamic and non-Islamic accounts participate in the same thread, normalising cross-religious engagement through everyday banter. Importantly, the visibility of such exchanges is not predetermined by content alone. As Marwick and Boyd (2011) argue, influential accounts help structure hierarchies of attention on social media by anchoring how a post is interpreted and by expanding its audience beyond its initial reach. Even when the initiating joke comes from an ordinary user, the moment a high-visibility account replies, quote-tweets, or reframes it, the conversation shifts, often becoming more public, more political, or more socially consequential.

Taken together, these dynamics show that Islamic-inspired meme circulation on Twitter is never driven by a single actor. It emerges from an ecosystem of (1) creator-curators such as NU Garis Lucu and other Garis Lucu accounts, (2) ordinary users who supply local humour and personal narratives, (3) public figures whose amplification reframes meaning, and (4) interfaith humour communities whose banter normalises cross-group interaction. Here, the meme does not function as a one-way message. It becomes a conversation, a constantly shifting,

multi-actor process in which humour anchors, challenges, or renegotiates religious meaning in real time.

Structural Comparison

Social media has become central to how religious messages and humour are created, circulated, and consumed in the digital age. Facebook and Twitter are the two most dominant platforms in Indonesia's digital landscape. While both support Islamic-inspired memes, their technical affordances differ significantly, Facebook with its community-based group features and comment-driven discussions, Twitter with its brevity, real-time flow, and viral mechanisms like retweets and hashtags.

These contrasts reflect more than just technical affordances, they shape the tone and purpose of Islamic meme practices. On Facebook, religious humour is often intertwined with pedagogy, togetherness, and moral instruction. Twitter, by contrast, encourages satire, irony, and immediacy, allowing for public critique and spontaneous da'wah. These distinctions matter because they shape not only how Islamic messages are framed and delivered, but also who engages with them, how humour is constructed, and how religious discourse circulates in different online publics

Table 3.1. Structural Comparison of Islamic-inspired memes on Facebook and Twitter in Indonesia.

	Facebook	Twitter (X)
Creation	Blends humour, satire, and religious symbolism for community-building. Utilises group-based architectures to target specific communities.	Characterised by brevity and immediacy. It uses trending hashtags and concise messages.
Dissemination	The "Share" feature amplifies the spread within and beyond (if set to "all") groups. The algorithm prioritises content from friends and liked pages, creating echo chambers.	The "Retweet" function allows rapid dissemination beyond the follower base, and the hashtag system enables viral spread across diverse audiences. However, in this case, the appeal of humour, the relevance of the content to the social and political context, and the timeliness of responding to current events may have more influence on the appeal of the meme and create a viral moment even without a hashtag.
Engagement	High levels of engagement (likes, comments, shares) in specific groups. In-depth discussions and debates in comments.	Quick and widespread interaction (retweets, likes, replies). Shorter, more public interactions contribute to broader engagement.
Structural Effects on Cultural Expression	Reinforces religious identity and cultural values within communities. Supports detailed discussions on religious and cultural topics.	Contributes to intercultural dialogue and global spread of Indonesian Islamic culture. Brief but impactful exchanges that can challenge or reinforce norms.

Source: Author's analytical synthesis based on platform affordance and meme studies.

Differences in Meme Creator Motivations

Facebook meme creators are typically motivated by the desire to build community and foster a shared sense of identity. This motivation results in memes that emphasise didactic messages, encourage moral conduct, and deepen religious understanding. As one administrator from Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman noted, “Kami ingin bikin meme yang bisa jadi pengingat kebaikan. Biar lucu tapi tetap ada pesannya” (We want to create memes that can serve as reminders of goodness, funny, but still carrying a moral message). In contrast, Twitter creators tend to prioritise humour and speed, using satire and sharp commentary to provoke thought or critique social issues. An administrator of NU Garis Lucu explained, “Kalau di Twitter, kita lebih bebas bercanda, kadang nyelekit, tapi tetap ada niat dakwah” (On Twitter, we have more freedom to joke, sometimes it can be biting, but the intention of *da’wah* remains). These differing motivations result in distinct tones of Islamic memes, Facebook’s being more nurturing and communal, while Twitter’s often reflect playful critique or even resistance through religious humour.

Content of Generated Memes

Meme content on Facebook emphasises community identity and social relationships in various formats, including images and videos. Facebook memes convey complex messages through lengthy discussions and interactions, particularly when compared to platforms like Twitter. According to Ilham, a 17-year-old member of a Facebook meme group, “*Saya suka karena bisa belajar hal baru dari meme dan diskusi yang muncul setelahnya.*” (I enjoy it because it allows me to learn new things through the memes and the subsequent discussions).

On the other hand, Twitter meme creators are motivated by trends and current events. Twitter’s fast-paced nature encourages creators to respond quickly to current events, dominating social conversations. Twitter memes are immediate, direct, and preferably concise. Characteristics include the number of characters, which requires the meme creator to convey the message concisely and directly. Twitter memes are primarily text-based and rely heavily on sharp humour, which helps to capture attention quickly and align with current trends.

Facebook memes focus on community identity and social relationships. Discussions in Facebook groups enable longer and more in-depth interactions, allowing members to share their experiences and understanding of religion. The group feature also allows for forming communities with closer ties, where members feel more connected to shared values. Facebook memes facilitate in-depth discussions and educational exchanges by offering a diverse range of content formats, including images and videos. In contrast, Twitter memes are distinguished by their responsiveness and brevity. Memes on Twitter take a

concise and direct approach, relying on sharp humour and quick contextual understanding.

Circulation and Response to Current Issues

Facebook supports sustained discussions over time, making it well-suited for conveying religious messages that require reflection, interpretation, and repeated engagement. Its group-based architecture allows memes to circulate within specific communities where ideas can be debated and contextualised. One informant from the group Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman noted, “*Kalau di Facebook, biasanya saya bikin meme yang ngajak diskusi, kadang bisa rame di kolom komentar sampai seminggu masih dibahas.*” (On Facebook, I usually create memes that invite discussion, sometimes the comment section stays active for up to a week). This highlights how Facebook enables meme creators to foster ongoing discourse within digital religious spaces.

Twitter, on the other hand, thrives on real-time engagement and instantaneous reactions. Its retweet and quote-tweet functions promote rapid circulation of content, often linked to trending events. As an administrator of NU Garis Lucu described, “*Kami biasa nge-tweet waktu ada isu panas, kayak RUU baru atau komentar tokoh publik, biar cepat viral.*” (We usually post tweets in response to hot issues, such as new legislation or remarks by public figures, to increase the chances of going viral quickly). This immediacy makes Twitter effective for reactive da’wah and social commentary that aligns with current political or cultural conversations, even when the message is satirical or critical.

Platform Usage Distinctions

These differences in platform logic shape how Islamic memes are produced and received. Facebook enables more layered content, such as videos, lengthy captions, and educational posters that can be discussed in depth, particularly within closed or interest-based groups. Twitter, in contrast, prioritises brevity and wit, memes are often short textual posts or captioned images that demand quick cognitive impact.

This explains why memes on Facebook tend to take the form of didactic narratives or community-based reflections, while Twitter memes are more likely to rely on satire, irony, or humorous provocation. For example, a meme on Facebook might elaborate on the virtues of sholat dhuha with scriptural references and encouragement, while on Twitter, a similar topic may be rendered with a punchline like: “*Sholat dhuha? Gue sih nunggu reminder dari emak dulu,*” (Dhuha prayer? I just wait until my mom reminds me) blending humour with mild moral messaging.

In sum, the differences between Facebook and Twitter go beyond technical affordances. they reflect broader shifts in how Islamic humour and da'wah are imagined and practised. Facebook cultivates a pedagogy of togetherness, where moral instruction and religious identity are nurtured within community settings. Twitter, meanwhile, promotes immediacy and critical voice, facilitating a more dynamic and responsive form of Islamic expression. These digital platforms become not just channels but shapers of religious communication, where humour serves as a mode of engagement, negotiation, and critique in contemporary Indonesia.

A thorough understanding of the differences between Facebook and Twitter in spreading Islamic-inspired memes benefits meme creators, social media users, and researchers by allowing for more effective content strategies, personalised engagement experiences, and insightful research results.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how Facebook and Twitter, two dominant platforms in Indonesia, offer distinct digital affordances that shape the production, circulation, and reception of Islamic-inspired memes. Rather than merely cataloguing technical features, this analysis has demonstrated how these affordances mediate broader questions of religious communication, humour, and community building in the digital age.

Facebook affords sustained, community-driven interactions where memes become part of a community-based digital learning space. Within groups like *Meme Dakwah Kebutuhan Iman*, memes are often designed to foster shared values and deeper engagement, supported by features like long-form comments and closed-group discussions. Meme creators here act as both educators and cultural curators. In contrast, Twitter emphasises speed, brevity, and trend responsiveness. On this platform, Islamic memes often take the form of satirical critiques, enabling rapid engagement with political or social issues through concise and witty formats.

These divergent logics show that digital da'wah is dynamic and adaptive. On Facebook, it unfolds through collective reflection and moral storytelling. On Twitter, it emerges via humour, spontaneity, and public critique. Ultimately, Twitter's affordances shape not only how Islamic memes are produced and circulated but also how communities grow around shared humour and values, demonstrating that digital da'wah can thrive through authenticity and organic interaction, rather than algorithmic manipulation.

Understanding this requires attending not only to platform structure but also to *user agency*, how creators and audiences actively shape content. While affordances provide possibilities, it is users who determine what is made meaningful. At the

same time, these affordances also shape the conditions under which questions of responsibility and moderation emerge, particularly when religious humour escalates into public controversy. Memes are therefore not merely technical outputs but social acts: created, curated, circulated, and sometimes contested by communities with specific values and concerns.

Reframing this within the concept of a *meme ecosystem*, we see how various actors, creators, admins, and audiences interact dynamically. An ecosystem in this sense refers to an interconnected digital environment where content flows, mutates, and accumulates meaning. Within this ecology, meme creators like Vin Dista and Bang Fir Art produce visual narratives inspired by Islamic teachings; moderators act as cultural gatekeepers; and audiences participate as *prosumers*, remixing or reinterpreting memes in new contexts.

Here, it is helpful to clarify *reinterpretation* refers to users giving new meaning or framing to an existing meme, often through quote tweets or comments. *Remix*, on the other hand, involves a more substantial alteration, such as modifying images, inserting new captions, or hybridising meme formats, to create an entirely new version. Both practices illustrate how Islamic memes are part of a *spreadable media* culture (Jenkins et al., 2013), where content circulates not passively but generatively. Importantly, this chapter also cautions against romanticising digital interaction. The same affordances allowing for playful da'wah and interfaith exchange can also reinforce echo chambers, limiting cross-group engagement.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that platform differences are not cosmetic. They structure how Islamic humour is produced, how authority circulates, and how religious publics take shape. Facebook nurtures slow, communal, and pedagogical forms of da'wah, while Twitter amplifies speed, satire, and real-time negotiation of religious meaning. These divergent logics show that Islamic-inspired memes are never platform-neutral, they are shaped, constrained, and reimagined through the socio-technical environments in which they circulate. Recognising this is essential for understanding how digital infrastructures mediate contemporary forms of piety, humour, and Muslim sociality in Indonesia.

The next chapter explores TikTok, a platform whose participatory and remix-driven culture invites different forms of humour, mimicry, and inter-religious dialogue. TikTok may offer new possibilities for inclusivity and cohesion in Indonesia's pluralistic digital landscape, expanding the scope of how Islamic humour travels, connects, and transforms online.

Sociocultural Interactions and Playful Citizenship:

Investigating Ramadan Memetic Videos on TikTok

This chapter argues that Ramadan memetic videos on TikTok function as sites of playful citizenship, where intra-Muslim differences, particularly between Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, are negotiated through humour, repetition, and participatory remixing rather than doctrinal debate.

It is important to note that TikTok Ramadan content in Indonesia is not limited to memes addressing NU–Muhammadiyah differences. During the data collection period, a wide range of Ramadan-related memes circulated on TikTok, including content about fasting struggles, takjil hunting, sahur challenges, charitable acts, humorous religious advice, and interfaith participation. These memes form a broader cultural ecology of Ramadan on TikTok, where humour, piety, and everyday life intersect.

However, this chapter focuses specifically on NU–Muhammadiyah memetic videos because these differences are historically entrenched, socially recognisable, and widely legible across Indonesian Muslim communities. Unlike lifestyle or devotional memes, NU–Muhammadiyah memes directly engage with questions of religious authority, group boundaries, and doctrinal distinction, making them analytically productive for examining playful citizenship and the negotiation of intra-Muslim diversity. These dynamics become particularly visible in viral TikTok videos circulated during Ramadan 2024, where doctrinal difference is rendered through everyday humour.

A widely circulated memetic video on TikTok, uploaded by the account @MenujuRamadan2025 with the caption “*NU santai dulu ga seb* (NU, should we relax for now)”, received a high engagement, with 1.3 million likes, over 21,000

comments, and almost 60,000 shares. The video was then replicated and imitated by many other accounts, such as @bintang_sarung, @Kikifofficial, @r2archives, @csaarrrr, and @wekzy_24, among others, expanding its reach and making it even more viral. Set on 11 March 2024 at noon, the video contrasts a visibly weak and hungry man, representing Muhammadiyah members who had begun fasting, with another figure enjoying a full meal, symbolising NU members who would only start fasting the following day.

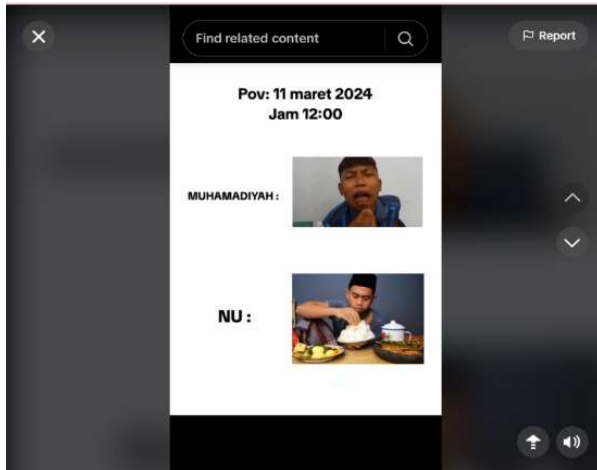


Figure 4.1. POV Meme post on 11 March 2024

Source: TikTok @MenujuRamadan2025 (TikTok.com, 2024b)

Despite its apparent simplicity, the memetic video touches on longstanding theological and institutional dynamics between the two organisations. Historically, disagreements between NU and Muhammadiyah over the determination of the start of Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr have gone beyond ritual differences. These tensions have often reflected deeper theological, institutional, and political divides within Indonesian Islam. During the New Order era, such differences even escalated into physical conflict. A notable example is the “*Tragedi Idul Fitri 1969*,” where clashes between supporters of the *rukyat* (moon sighting) and *bisab* (astronomical calculation) methods resulted in violence and casualties (Panji Masyarakat, 1989 in Azhari, 2006). Although such extreme incidents have become rare, the recurrence of “*Lebaran Kembar*” (twin Eid) moments in various years continues to symbolise division and provoke public debates over religious authority and legitimacy.

However, the nature of these tensions has changed over time. Several factors have contributed to this shift, including broader public awareness and acceptance of religious diversity, growing digital access, and increased institutional accommodation. This chapter examines an emerging factor that has not yet been fully explored in academic literature: the role of digital memes and humour in reframing and softening religious differences. On TikTok, memetic videos about

Muhammadiyah fasting a day earlier than NU do more than entertain, they open new spaces for reflexive engagement, negotiation, and playful dialogue.

Humour becomes an entry point into what scholars describe as playful citizenship: a mode of participation in which users engage sensitive religious issues through creativity, irony, and everyday digital play. Rather than deepening divisions, such humour enables moments where differences between NU and Muhammadiyah become more negotiable and publicly discussable. On TikTok, this shift is particularly visible, as viral memetic videos translate doctrinal disagreement into shared, playful interaction rather than formal religious debate.

The widespread imitation of the MenujuRamadan2025 video demonstrates how a single memetic format can trigger participatory engagement, inviting users to respond through remix, parody, and repetition. In doing so, the video functions less as a standalone joke than as a catalyst for collective reflection on religious differences.

The concept of memetic video is central to this study because it captures not only the rapid spread of video content but also the ways users actively transform, replicate, and adapt it through remix, parody, and reinterpretation (Shifman, 2013b, p.73). Rather than circulating passively, memetic videos evolve through collective participation, making them particularly useful for analysing sociocultural interaction and digital religious expression.

In this context, NU–Muhammadiyah Ramadan memes illustrate how playful citizenship operates through short-form video, where humour, repetition, and remixing enable everyday negotiations of religious difference.⁵² While humour and parody also circulate on platforms such as Facebook and twitter, TikTok offers a particularly dynamic visual environment in which these practices are intensified through short-form video and algorithmic visibility. Such expressions not only entertain but also invite audiences to reinterpret socio-cultural norms through participation. As Abidin (2020) notes, playful and performative practices on TikTok often become channels for negotiating social hierarchies and cultural expectations. Humour in short-form videos can further soften critique and lower

⁵² Regarding the disparity at the start of Ramadan between NU and Muhammadiyah on TikTok, memetic videos are being shared extensively, featuring the propagation and duplication of cultural aspects such as religious customs (for example, determining the position of the earth vs. heavenly bodies, *ruk'yat* and *hisab*), symbolism (for example, that of *hلال* or crescent moon), comedic and satirical content (in this case, parodies of Ramadan preparations), communal stories (here conversations between NU and Muhammadiyah members), and religious music. TikTok users generate their renditions of the initial videos, incorporating ingenuity and individualisation, thereby generating fresh iterations and understandings, enhancing the digital culture surrounding the disparities in approaches to determining the commencement of Ramadan between NU and Muhammadiyah.

barriers to engagement Cervi & Divon (2023), while memetic participation more broadly fosters new modes of everyday civic engagement (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021)

TikTok has emerged as one of the most prominent social media platforms in Indonesia, particularly in terms of user engagement. According to the *Digital 2024 Indonesia* report by We Are Social and Meltwater, as of January 2024 TikTok ranked fourth in overall platform usage, following WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook, with 73.5% of Indonesian internet users reporting active use. More notably, TikTok stands out in terms of time spent, with users spending an average of 38 hours and 26 minutes per month on the platform, exceeding the average time spent on YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram. This high level of engagement highlights TikTok's significance as a daily digital environment rather than merely a supplementary entertainment platform.

The rapid replication and circulation of memetic videos on TikTok reflect how the platform has become a key space for negotiating religious and cultural meanings. In Indonesia, where Islam is both dominant and internally diverse, TikTok functions not only as entertainment but as a venue for expressing difference, affirming identities, and engaging in playful critique. This is evident in the widespread circulation of memetic videos about differing Ramadan start dates between Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah in 2024, which used humour and repetition to reframe doctrinal differences as everyday digital interaction.

Through this case study, which focuses on a TikTok video that went viral and later inspired many user-made variations, this chapter explores how the platform becomes a space for discussing the diversity of religious practices in Indonesia. These playful videos do not stand alone but are built upon one another, cultivating a flowing dialogue that demonstrates how online communities navigate religious differences in the digital sphere. Therefore, this chapter will investigate how these videos reflect cultural and spiritual diversity while shaping public discourse on such issues.

Data Selection and Analytical Scope

To begin the analysis, I searched for videos using the hashtag #Ramadan2024 on TikTok to see how these differences appeared in memetic formats. Although the hashtag #Ramadan2024 is used globally, the videos that appeared during data collection were overwhelmingly tied to the Indonesian context. This is consistent with TikTok's recommendation system, which tends to prioritise content based on a user's language, interaction history, and inferred location. While the scraping process did not apply a manual location filter, all selected videos featured Indonesian-language captions, Indonesian creators, and themes specific to local phenomena related to Ramadan in Indonesia. These characteristics confirm that

the dataset reflects Indonesia's digital environment. Between March 9 and April 10, 2024, which coincided with Ramadan that year, 4,176 videos were identified using the hashtag. From this dataset, the ten videos with the highest number of likes were selected for further analysis.

Among the ten videos with the most likes, two explicitly discussed the differences between NU and Muhammadiyah at the start of Ramadan. The first video was uploaded by the account @menujuRamadan2025 with the caption "*NU santai dulu nggak sebh* (Is NU taking it easy first?)", while the second video came from the account @Miracle.Shann with the caption "*Kamu puasa mulai hari apa nich* (Which day are you starting your fast?)". Their presence among the most popular content demonstrates that religious differences, especially the start of Ramadan, are not confined to formal religious debates but have become accessible topics for playful and reflective discussion on TikTok, reaching a broad and diverse audience. This trend also reflects a broader cultural shift, where differences once reserved for scholarly and institutional settings are now reinterpreted and negotiated through everyday digital interactions, particularly among younger generations.

Table 4.1. Ten TikTok Videos with the Highest Engagement under the #Ramadan2024 (9 March – 10 April 2024)

Creator	Upload Date	Content Description (Shortened)	Likes	Comments
bagaskorosaja	10 April 2024	Replying to user comments using humorous Ramadan references	250,244	4,073
bro536864u756886gf	8 April 2024	Light-hearted Islamic humour responding to comments	1,415,691	1,795
menujramadhan2025	8 April 2024	NU santai dulu nggak seh (Satirical take on fasting practices during Ramadan)	1,300,000	25,800
wibuexe_	10 April 2024	Commentary on prayer and everyday Ramadan experiences	1,060,068	8,522
yahaaaaaja	8 April 2024	Greeting Ramadan with reflective and humorous tone	803,934	15,539
indra_yntks	10 April 2024	Ramadan humour using trending audio and hashtags	422,650	28,424
Miracle.Shann	8 April 2024	Personal reflection on beginning fasting	397,800	12,700
anggik_maem2	8 April 2024	Humorous depiction of breaking the fast	252,552	769
anggriyani277	8 April 2024	Expressing end-of-Ramadan emotions through satire	249,142	19,379
haraliscvt	8 April 2024	Responding to current social issues during Ramadan	238,527	234

Source: Author's dataset derived from TikTok data scraping (March–April 2024).

Note: Video descriptions have been shortened and paraphrased for readability. The complete dataset, including full captions, timestamps, and engagement metrics, is archived by the author.

Based on these initial findings, further observations were conducted using specific search queries related to the differences in the beginning of Ramadan between NU and Muhammadiyah. These included simple phrases such as “NU *vs* Muhammadiyah,” “*perbedaan awal puasa NU dan Muhammadiyah*,” and “*perbedaan NU Muhammadiyah*.”

This search revealed dozens of replication and modification videos with the same theme, showing that this phenomenon is not just a topic of conversation but has developed into a pattern of content production typical of memetic videos. Thus, this study not only highlights how religious issues have become part of the evolving digital culture landscape but also how TikTok users play an active role in shaping and disseminating narratives about differences in religious traditions through video formats that are easy to adapt and share.

Additionally, this section will examine how the concept of *playful citizenship* is enacted through memetic videos on TikTok, particularly in shaping the relations between NU and Muhammadiyah. These memes render boundaries between the two groups either salient, stable, or porous within public discourse. Rather than being mere expressions of entertainment, such videos serve as cultural artefacts that foster a broader understanding of diversity in digital religious life. The interplay between lighthearted clips and more reflective pieces illustrates not only the complexity of faith-related discussions online but also the potential for communal dialogue across differences when approached with creativity and openness. To complement the analysis of memetic content, this chapter includes responses from interviews with NU and Muhammadiyah youth, offering deeper insight into the reception and interpretation of religious humour on TikTok.

Playful Citizenship and Groupness: Humour as a Tool for Religious Dialogue

To understand how digital interactions on TikTok mediate religious expression and community dynamics among members of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, it is essential to draw upon Brubaker’s (2004) concept of groupness. Rather than assuming groups as static entities, Brubaker invites us to view group identities as fluid and situational, formed through discursive practices, emotions, and shared symbolic repertoires. In the context of Indonesian Islam, where distinctions between NU and Muhammadiyah have long been defined through doctrinal, institutional, and historical frameworks, TikTok introduces a playful and participatory arena where those boundaries are softened and continually renegotiated.

One of the central facets of this negotiation lies in playful citizenship, a concept introduced by Glas et al. (2019) to describe modes of public participation that emerge through humour, creativity, and playful digital engagement. Rather than relying on seriousness or formal political intent, playful citizenship highlights how

users participate in communal and identity-related dialogues through parody, remix, and light-hearted interaction. In digital environments such as TikTok, this mode of participation enables cross-group engagement without requiring persuasion or confrontation.

In a religious context, playful citizenship offers a fresh perspective on how Muslims, especially younger generations, engage with Islamic discourse. On platforms like TikTok, this is manifested through memetic videos that blend humour, religious knowledge, and cultural expression. In Indonesia, digital communities such as NU Garis Lucu, Muhammadiyah Garis Lucu, and Katolik Garis Lucu exemplify how humour is used as a medium to bridge differences. On TikTok, playful responses to religious issues, like the difference in the start of Ramadan between NU and Muhammadiyah, serve not only to entertain but also to invite reflective and inclusive dialogue. Memetic videos with captions such as *Is NU taking it easy first?* (TikTok @MenujuRamadan2025) or *What tim are you, NU or Muhammadiyah?* (TikTok @ummijihad) exemplifies how users bring lightness to long-standing doctrinal debates.

Another example is the trend often labelled under the hashtag #GombalanSantri (santri-style romantic banter), where users incorporate terms from the science of *tajwid*, the set of rules governing proper recitation of the Qur'an, into romantic or poetic expressions. One such phrase that has gained traction is: *"Aku selalu berdoa dan berharap cinta kita seperti waqaf لازم, terhenti sempurna di akhir hayat kita."* Translated, it means: *"I always pray and hope that our love is like a waqaf لازم, ending perfectly at the end of our lives."* The term *waqaf لازم* in *tajwid* refers to a mandatory stop in recitation, marked with the letter *mim* (م), indicating a complete pause at the end of a perfect sentence. By using this term metaphorically, users demonstrate religious literacy while embedding Islamic knowledge into everyday digital expression.

TikTok accounts such as @pondokpesantrensunni and @Daarul Huffadz Indonesia have popularised this format, which others have since replicated. This phenomenon reflects how Islamic teachings, particularly those related to the proper reading and appreciation of the Qur'an, are re-contextualised in digital spaces, making them more relatable and engaging for a broader audience without losing their reverence.

This approach aligns with Sicart (2014)'s perspective, which emphasises that play is not only a form of entertainment but also a complex strategy of social and cultural reflection. In this context, humour and symbol play become tools for Muslim communities to navigate their religious identities in the ever-changing digital landscape, also in Indonesia. For example, the #GombalanSantri trend shows how young Muslims play with religious language in everyday contexts, turning *tajwid* terminology into light, creative exchanges. Such moments illustrate

Sicart's point that play can function as a mode of reflection, allowing Islamic ideas to circulate in ways that feel familiar and socially engaging.

In this sense, humour becomes more than just comic relief and becomes a mode of dialogue. Cervi and Divon (2023) argue that humour in memetic videos facilitates communication across social boundaries, thereby reducing tensions surrounding sensitive topics. This is aligned with Vijay and Gekker (2021)'s findings on how humour and digital challenges on TikTok can increase engagement in broader sociopolitical discourses. This includes engaging theological differences without escalating conflict within religious discourse.

Some scholars prefer the term "playful activism" to describe such practices, but this often implies a more goal-oriented, change-driven approach. In contrast, playful citizenship more accurately captures the participatory, identity-affirming, and often non-confrontational nature of digital interactions among NU and Muhammadiyah members. These users are not seeking to persuade each other or advocate for doctrinal revision, but rather to construct a space of mutual recognition and humour-based solidarity. Thus, playful citizenship serves as a conceptual lens through which TikTok's religious content can be analysed, not as activism, but as a means of nurturing groupness while embracing intergroup differences in a non-threatening way.

This distinction invites us to consider Keane's concept of *semiotic ideologies* (2003, 2018), which refers to the assumptions people hold about what religious signs are, how they should be used, and what moral weight they carry. These underlying beliefs shape how individuals judge religious humour. For some, imitation or parody is a form of affectionate commentary and part of everyday negotiation of faith. For others, religious symbols demand strict seriousness, making such memes seem improper or offensive. This difference in semiotic expectations explains why the same memetic video can be read as either friendly teasing or a violation of sacred norms.

This framing prepares us to explore further how TikTok's affordances, such as its duet and stitch features (see below), enable such participatory interactions. It also sets the stage to examine how algorithmic visibility and content virality contribute to cross-group engagement during the Ramadan period.

TikTok's Affordance in Facilitating Playful Citizenship

In the digital era, religious expressions have undergone significant transformation. Social media platforms, especially TikTok, enable individuals to negotiate and express their religious identities in interactive and dynamic ways. While playfulness has long been part of religious practices through humour, storytelling, and community celebrations, digital forms of play introduce new scales and modes of interaction, making the negotiation of religious identity more visible

and participatory.⁵³ The platform's architecture, defined by its affordances, plays a crucial role in shaping these expressions. As Bucher and Helmond (2018) emphasise, platform affordances determine how users interact, access information, and express themselves. In this context, TikTok's affordances fall into three main aspects: technical, algorithmic, and participatory.

Technical Affordances: Duet, Stitch, Short-Form Videos, Filters, and Audio Reuse

TikTok's technical affordances, especially duet, stitch, short-form video, filters, and audio reuse, shape how religious content is responded to, recontextualised, and circulated. Duet enables side-by-side commentary, while stitch supports sequential response by inserting a clip into a new narrative. These features lower the threshold for users to participate, not only consuming religious content, but extending it through humour, explanation, or light teasing.

As noted by Zhao and Abidin (2023), the integration of playful visual and audio elements significantly affects how users interpret content. This dynamic is also present in TikTok videos about NU–Muhammadiyah differences, where humour often softens doctrinal tensions and turns them into approachable, relatable moments. As I show in the ethnographic findings later in this chapter, users frequently respond to these videos not with hostility but with playful commentary, reflections on their own practices, or light teasing across organisational lines.

While TikTok in Indonesia is used across age groups, the platform's Ramadan memes are especially visible among younger users who turn doctrinal differences into shared cultural play. A clear example of this dynamic appears in a stitched video where a user explains the difference between the *hisab* and *rukyyat* methods after watching the viral “POV 11 March 2024” meme by @MenujuRamadan2025,⁵⁴ which contrasts NU and Muhammadiyah starting Ramadan on different days. These interactions illustrate a pattern that recurs across the dataset, where users move beyond passive viewing and take part in shaping how religious issues are discussed on the platform.

⁵³ Historical traces of playfulness in Islamic traditions in Indonesia can be found in various cultural practices. For example, pesantren communities have long used humour and storytelling (a humorous remark by a kiai or humour *santri*, particularly NU *kiai*, such as Gusdur) as part of religious education to make learning more approachable. Similarly, religious festivities such as *Lomba Takbir Keliling* (Takbir Procession Competition) during Eid al-Fitr often involve creative and playful competitions, combining religious devotion with communal joy. These examples show that play and creativity elements were integral to religious life well before the advent of digital media.

⁵⁴ *Rukyyat* refers to the direct visual observation of the hilal (new crescent moon), following a literal interpretation of Islamic texts that instruct Muslims to start fasting when they “see” the new moon. In contrast, *hisab* relies on astronomical calculations to predict the moon's position, aligning religious observance with modern scientific advancements.

TikTok's short-form video format, typically ranging from 15 to 60 seconds, encourages users to share concise and digestible messages. As Divon points out, this brevity is ideal for transmitting ideas quickly and widely (Divon, 2022). During Ramadan, it enables users to post quick prayers, comedic takes on fasting struggles, or time-lapse videos of iftar preparations, turning everyday rituals into shareable cultural content.

Ramadan-themed filters, visual overlays such as crescent moons, lanterns, and Islamic calligraphy stickers, are often used to visually anchor content within the festive and religious atmosphere of the season. Although these features may seem superficial, they play a vital role in fostering emotional engagement and signalling cultural belonging. TikTok's technical affordances, therefore, can support feelings of seasonal belonging, making religious moments more visible, inclusive, and reflective of Indonesia's diverse society.

These visual features still carry cultural value by contributing to situational groupness, moments where users, regardless of their religious background, come together through shared digital rituals and cultural participation. For example, the “*takjil war*” phenomenon during Ramadan 2024 gained traction on TikTok, with non-Muslims participating and sharing their experiences.⁵⁵ The tradition of *buka puasa bersama* (bukber), originally a religious observance, has evolved into a cultural event that is now embraced by broader communities, often captured on TikTok videos.⁵⁶ Videos titled “*The First Time I Break My Fast with My Muslim Friends*” captured moments of waiting for the adzan, tasting iftar food, and enjoying the spirit of togetherness. These were complemented by culinary reviews, often made by non-Muslim creators, featuring restaurants that offer themed iftar packages (e.g., Javanese, Moroccan, Middle Eastern), further contributing to temporary yet meaningful moments of intergroup *groupness* online.

⁵⁵ *Takjil* is a light food or drink consumed when breaking the fast before eating the main course. In Indonesia, takjil usually consists of kolak, fruit ice, fried foods, or dates, which aim to restore energy after a day of fasting. The word “takjil” comes from the Arabic *‘ajjala*, which means “to hasten,” referring to the recommendation not to delay breaking the fast. The term “takjil war” emerged on TikTok during Ramadan 2024 to describe users’ playful documentation of searching for, competing to buy, or comparing *takjil* offerings in different neighbourhoods. The phrase does not imply actual conflict; it is a humorous framing of the lively rush and social excitement surrounding *takjil* hunting in Ramadan.

⁵⁶ *Bukber* is breaking the fast together, a tradition often held during the month of Ramadan. This event is not only a moment of worship but also an event to strengthen social relationships, both in the family, community, workplace, or reunion of old friends. In Indonesia, *bukber* is often held in mosques, restaurants, or cafes with a variety of breaking the fast menus according to taste and regional traditions.

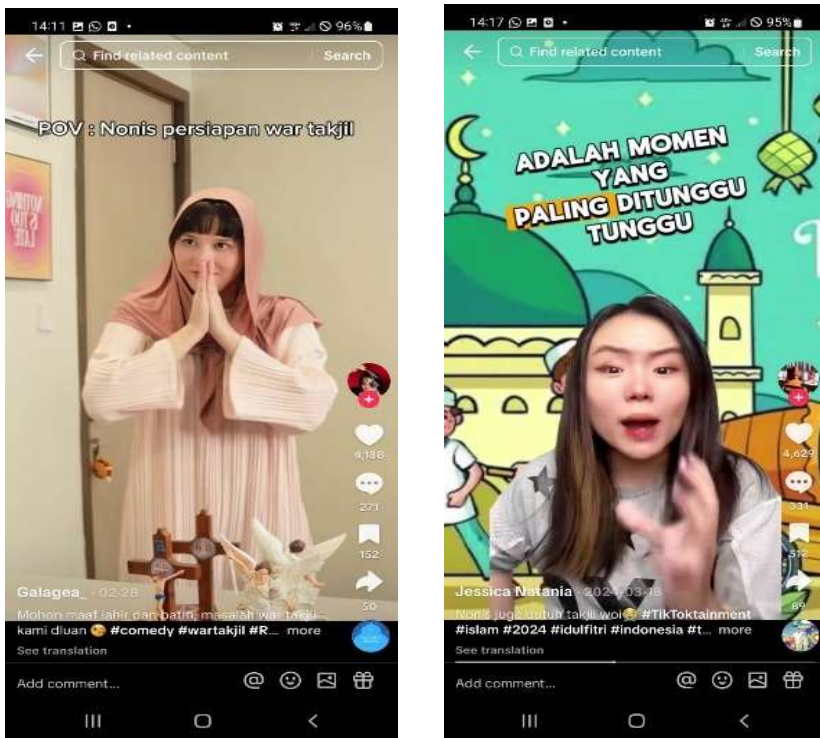


Figure 4.2: Intercultural groupness on TikTok: non-Muslim creators participating in Ramadan “takjil war” memes through humour and religious visual symbols
Source: TikTok @Galagea @Jessica Natania

This dynamic is particularly evident in two TikTok videos that go beyond mere digital play, offering moments of intercultural *groupness* that arise from shared online practices. During Ramadan 2024, a notable trend emerged in which *Nonis* (a colloquial term for non-Muslims) participated in the so-called “war takjil”, a playful popular expression referring to the collective rush to buy inexpensive snacks for breaking the fast before sunset, often in crowded street markets. The term “war” here is used humorously rather than literally, signalling excitement and shared anticipation rather than conflict.

One viral video by TikTok creator @Galagea shows a Christian user wearing a Muslim-style hijab and greeting viewers with a respectful gesture, accompanied by the caption: “POV: *Nonis persiapan war takjil*.” The video subtly juxtaposes Christian symbols, such as crosses and angel figurines in the background, with Islamic customs, creating a scene of playful hybridity. Although humorous in tone, the video conveys a sincere sense of cultural engagement and mutual respect.

Another widely shared video by @Jessica Natania humorously presents “three reasons why Nonis also need takjil,” using a background of Islamic visual motifs (mosques, crescent moons, lanterns) while emphasising inclusivity in Ramadan culinary culture. Her caption “*Nonis juga butuh takjil woi* 🌈” received overwhelmingly positive responses, suggesting a welcoming reception from Muslim audiences.

These examples show how TikTok’s technical affordances facilitate not only religious self-expression but also intercultural solidarity, all while making religious moments more visible, inclusive, and reflective of Indonesia’s diverse society.

While some trends reflect intergroup solidarity, others demonstrate how young users engage with religious differences in playful and casual ways as part of their everyday digital routines. This combination of short-form video, audio reuse, and creative filters makes the platform a space where religious themes appear both through intentional searches and through casual browsing.

This pattern is echoed in users’ everyday engagement with TikTok during Ramadan. Dea, a high school student I interviewed, described scrolling through TikTok while fasting after school, alternating between watching humorous sermons, browsing *takjil* recipes, and viewing relatable fasting content. Her account illustrates how religious themes appear alongside leisure, blurring the boundary between entertainment and light religious engagement.

A similar participatory logic can be observed in responses to the viral NU–Muhammadiyah meme discussed earlier. Rather than debating theological positions, users stitched, duetted, and remixed the video to explain, joke about, or soften doctrinal differences. These interactions transformed potential division into instances of shared play, exemplifying how technical affordances enable religious difference to become repeatable, discussable, and socially navigable.

This dynamic reinforces the argument of this section: that memetic expressions on TikTok tend to blur rather than harden group boundaries. Through humor and everyday participation, TikTok users construct a shared cultural space in which religious diversity can be navigated with warmth, curiosity, and mutual respect.

Taken together, TikTok’s technical features do not simply “host” religious expression; they structure how religious difference becomes repeatable and discussable. Through remixable formats, users turn doctrinal distinctions into everyday interaction, sometimes within a single community (NU–Muhammadiyah), and at other times across religious lines through shared Ramadan routines and humour. The next section examines how these practices gain traction through TikTok’s algorithmic visibility logic, especially the For You Page.

Algorithmic Affordance: For You Page (FYP) and Visibility Logic

Beyond technical tools, TikTok's most influential affordance lies in its algorithmic architecture, particularly the For You Page (FYP). Unlike platforms that depend on follower networks, TikTok promotes content through an algorithm-driven discovery system. This performance-based visibility logic means that videos with high engagement, such as likes, watch time, comments, and shares, are pushed to a wider audience, regardless of how many followers a creator has, effectively making them highly visible on the platform. At the same time, this visibility logic does not eliminate user agency but reshapes how religious content is encountered and interpreted.

TikTok remains a platform where user agencies and algorithmic curation intersect. While the system recommends content aggressively, users still decide whether to engage, ignore, or swipe past the videos that appear on their feed. This selective engagement means that religious videos, though accessible and often informative, are not always read through a spiritual lens. For many viewers, they function more as entertainment than as material for religious reflection. The recurrence of NU–Muhammadiyah memes during both the start of Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr illustrates how TikTok's algorithm amplifies seasonal humour. By responding to spikes in engagement around ritual moments, the platform enables cyclical religious debates to resurface precisely when they become socially salient, extending their visibility across the religious calendar. This pattern shows how TikTok's visibility logic responds to time-specific religious rhythms, allowing recurring debates to gain renewed traction at key ritual moments.

This dynamic is crucial in understanding how religious content spreads during Ramadan. As explained by Zeng & Kaye (2022), videos on TikTok are amplified not on the basis of who posts them, but on how users interact with them, via view counts, likes, shares, and engagement, emphasising the platform's "visibility moderation" logic. This explains why Ramadan memes, ranging from "*Gombalan Santri*" (as previously discussed) to NU Vs Muhammadiyah moon-sighting jokes, can cross the doctrinal boundaries that typically separate NU and Muhammadiyah. They gain visibility through humour, shared experiences, and remix culture, rather than being confined to any single religious community.

The logic of spreadable media (Jenkins et al., 2013) is clearly reflected here, as users not only consume but remix and adapt content to their cultural contexts. Hashtags like #Ramadan, #Ngaji, and #Gombalansantri enhance discoverability, especially when paired with trending sounds or styles. These algorithmic tools enable content to transcend religious and social boundaries, facilitating accidental encounters with religious content among non-Muslim users.

However, TikTok's algorithm is not value-neutral. It privileges content that triggers curiosity, amusement, or emotional response, regardless of its religious

accuracy or theological depth. This creates a form of algorithmic mediation where what appears as “religion” on the platform is shaped less by doctrinal substance and more by how well a video captures attention. In this sense, TikTok functions as a digital attention machine: it selects, amplifies, or sidelines religious content based on engagement performance rather than spiritual or theological significance.

Participatory Affordance: Ramadan Challenges and Campaigns

Alongside algorithmic visibility, TikTok’s design supports a participatory culture, visible in Ramadan-themed challenges and campaign-based engagement. While participatory culture is not an affordance in itself, it is enabled and shaped by the platform’s participatory affordances, such as duet, stitch, hashtag trends, and user-generated sounds, which turn everyday acts into performative expressions of religious values and social solidarity.

TikTok challenges are typically user-driven trends that encourage imitation or creative reinterpretation. During Ramadan, several challenges emerged organically or through influencer promotion, such as the #RamadanTiba Dance Challenge, which utilised Opick’s song “Ramadan Tiba” (2008), or the *Membangunkan Sabur* Challenge, where users recorded humorous or inventive ways of waking friends and family for the pre-dawn meal. In this challenge, participants often staged exaggerated wake-up calls, using loudspeakers, drumming on household objects, shouting playful rhymes, or mimicking the style of traditional *patroli sabur* groups found in many Indonesian neighbourhoods. Others offered gentler variations, such as using trending audio tracks, personalised greetings, or affectionate pranks tailored to siblings or partners. These videos capture the everyday social choreography of *sabur*: the mix of care, mischief, and communal responsibility that characterises the early-morning ritual. The challenge spread widely because its format was simple to imitate, culturally familiar, and easily adapted to different household contexts.

The trend evolved organically into a participatory meme ecology, meaning a space where content does not simply circulate but mutates, adapts, and accumulates through user-generated variations. Reusing shared audio, like “Ramadan Tiba” or sermon snippets, combined with visual gags and captions, allowed the trend to be continuously adapted. This flexibility empowered users to embed religious commentary within participatory play, deepening communal interaction during the holy month.

Beyond humour and celebration, campaign-style participation also gained prominence. Digital charity initiatives like #*SedekahRamadan* and #*BerbagiBerkah* in 2024 encouraged users to post videos of giving to the less fortunate, ranging from distributing food to motorcyclists during iftar traffic, to organising food drives for orphanages or street vendors. One widely circulated video under the

#Sedekah # Berbagi # Ramadan hashtag came from the account @Jessicafire (TikTok.com, 2024e).⁵⁷ The clip shows a foreign man walking through Malioboro, Yogyakarta, handing out takjil to *andong* drivers (horse-carriage drivers common in Yogyakarta) and small street vendors. The video received 11.4K likes and generated more than 800 comments, reflecting how acts of generosity resonate deeply with viewers. Comment sections were filled with emotional and appreciative responses such as “setiap lihat vt orang berbagi dengan ikhlas seperti ini ko tiba tiba berkaca-kaca mataku” (every time I see videos of sincere giving like this, my eyes suddenly well up), “berkah selalu rezekimu mister” (may your sustenance always be blessed, mister), and “MasyaAllah semoga bertambah rizkinya” (MasyaAllah, may his fortune increase). These reactions show how participatory Ramadan content on TikTok blends visual appeal with affective engagement, turning simple acts of charity into shared emotional moments within the platform’s wider Ramadan culture.

These participatory practices do not replace formal religious authority. Instead, they reconfigure how religious values are enacted, made visible, and collectively felt within TikTok’s platformed publics. Through short videos, hashtags, and affective responses, acts of charity become socially shareable moments, allowing piety to circulate as an everyday, emotionally resonant practice rather than a purely institutional one.

Taken together, the playful and philanthropic engagements observed during Ramadan illustrate a broad spectrum of digital religious expression, ranging from lighthearted mimicry to deeply emotional acts of kindness. These practices align with what Glas et al. and Schmidt conceptualise as playful citizenship (Glas et al., 2019; Schmidt, 2012), where participation in religious discourse emerges through creativity, affect, and shared moral sensibilities rather than doctrinal rigidity or formal authority.

During Ramadan, this sense of digital publicness, the way social media creates shared spaces for collective visibility and interaction, both mirrors and expands the cultural spirit of the holy month in contemporary Indonesia. What once occupied urban public spaces, such as lantern displays, *nasyid* performances, and community banners, now circulates across TikTok’s FYP and hashtags, inviting users of all backgrounds to remix and reflect on shared cultural moments.

While scholars such as Bail et al. (2018) note that identity cues in digital environments, such as religious symbols, group labels, or cultural markers, often reinforce polarisation in Western contexts, the Indonesian TikTok sphere may operate differently. Here, identity-based engagement frequently takes playful

⁵⁷ TikTok video by @Jessicafire, posted during Ramadan 2024, showing the distribution of *takjil* to *andong* drivers and street vendors in Malioboro, Yogyakarta. Accessed 5 July 2025, Original link: https://www.tiktok.com/@jessicafire_/video/7350129209571855637?_r=1&_t=ZG-91w20JE4Wwr

forms. For example, the widely circulated “takjil war” videos show non-Muslim users participating in Ramadan food-sharing culture, while NU–Muhammadiyah memes turn doctrinal differences into light, humorous exchanges. These practices suggest that, rather than deepening boundaries, identity cues on Indonesian TikTok often become points of shared cultural humour and everyday solidarity.

This playful spirit of religious engagement also extends to interfaith settings, where humour becomes a bridge for mutual understanding and shared reflection. For example, a viral TikTok video posted by @JabarEkspres captures a sermon from a Christian pastor at Gereja Tiberias Indonesia. In his sermon, he jokingly says (TikTok.com, 2024d):⁵⁸

Our religion is tolerant, when it comes to takjil, we are ahead. At 3 p.m., they are still tired from fasting, but we are already ready. However, my friends said, ‘Okay, you can win for now, but when Easter comes, we will take our revenge. We will buy up all the eggs, so you will have to celebrate Easter with Kinder Joy instead!

The congregation responds with laughter, and the video has garnered over 70,000 likes, been shared almost 5000 times, and received more than 2,400 comments. The comment section itself reflects how viewers interpret the moment as a gesture of humour-based solidarity. Responses such as “dipecah belah oleh politik, dipersatukan oleh takjil” (divided by politics, united by takjil), “masyaa Allah takjil pemersatu bangsa” (Masyaa Allah, takjil unites the nation), “sampai keluar air mata aku ketawa” (I laughed until I teared up), and “bahagianya hidup di Indonesia, damai itu indah” (how joyful it is to live in Indonesia, peace is beautiful) show how audiences frame the clip as a reminder of social harmony.

These reactions highlight how religious identity becomes a site for humorous reciprocity and mutual recognition. They also exemplify the emergence of bridging groupness on TikTok during Ramadan, where digital interactions cultivate cross-religious empathy and shared play.

Playful Citizenship in Addressing Religious and Cultural Differences

On TikTok, playful exchanges around NU and Muhammadiyah practices appear less as doctrinal debate and more as everyday digital interaction. Users riff on familiar contrasts, fasting dates, tarawih length, or rukyat versus hisab, turning them into quick visual jokes, short skits, or light teasing in the comments. These formats circulate widely not because they resolve the differences, but because they translate them into recognisable, low-stakes moments that invite participation. In

⁵⁸ https://www.tiktok.com/@jabarekspres/video/7347593312213208322?_r=1&_t=ZG-91w3TNn5d7B

this sense, the emphasis falls on how users take up these memes, through mimicry, duet, stitch, and commentary, rather than on the doctrinal content itself.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Indonesia's Islamic landscape is shaped by a wide range of organisations, from NU and Muhammadiyah to groups such as LDII and Salafi networks. Yet on TikTok, memetic humour tends to gravitate almost exclusively toward NU and Muhammadiyah. Their long-standing cultural visibility and familiar doctrinal contrasts make them highly legible to a broad audience, which in turn makes their differences easy to adapt into playful digital commentary. While these portrayals often appear in humorous, light-hearted forms, it is important to note that theological or organisational differences have also, at times, given rise to tensions, especially in offline or institutional contexts. Yet, within the memetic realm, these differences are more often softened through humour, enabling a form of public engagement that emphasises familiarity rather than friction. This pattern speaks directly to playful citizenship, where people interact across group boundaries through creative, easily accessible forms rather than through formal argument.

The popularity of NU–Muhammadiyah memes reflects this dynamic. Variants of the “team that started fasting with NU and celebrated Eid with Muhammadiyah” joke, the “POV 11 March 2024” clips, and short contrasts between *hisab* and *ruk'yat* circulate widely because they draw on well-known ritual differences that shape everyday Muslim life. These formats invite recognition rather than division, offering users a shared cultural script through which they can laugh at, and reflect on, their differences.

Smaller groups such as Salafi or LDII receive far less attention not because they are insignificant, but because their practices are less publicly visible and less embedded in the everyday rhythms of Indonesian Muslims. By contrast, the NU–Muhammadiyah divide permeates domestic life, work schedules, public holidays, and even family negotiations, making it fertile material for memetic play and commentary.

Humour, remixing, satire, and mimicry thus become tools through which TikTok users negotiate cultural and religious identity. This engagement is not limited to doctrinal issues; it often overlaps with political themes, social critique, or even populist narratives circulating on the platform.

In the meme showing contrasting NU and Muhammadiyah reactions, for example, viewers did not simply laugh at the joke, they responded with reflections that turned the meme into a form of meaningful commentary. This pattern mirrors the responses found in other videos within the dataset, such as the *takjil*-sharing memetic video discussed earlier. Comments like *dipecah belah oleh politik, dipersatukan oleh takjil* (divided by politics, united by takjil), or *damai itu indah* (peace is beautiful), show how users often use humour as an entry point into broader

reflections on harmony, coexistence, and the everyday negotiation of religious difference.

Playful citizenship on TikTok frequently uses humour and satire to make serious topics more accessible. Humour can relieve tension and create a common ground for discussion, whereas satire can highlight contradictions and spark thought.⁵⁹ Additionally, remixes and mimicry are popular methods for creating content. Remixes involve technological manipulation, such as editing an image with Photoshop or adding a new soundtrack and have become popular due to user-friendly applications that allow people to download and re-edit content. Conversely, mimicry is the practice of "redoing," or re-creating, a specific text using other people and methods (Shifman, 2013b). Together, these components enable users to explore and negotiate their religious and cultural identities in a creative, engaging, and accessible manner.

On TikTok, emulating religious figures has become a popular method for users to replicate or adjust certain expressions. The phenomenon can manifest in various forms, from recapturing the style of renowned clerics' sermons to adopting their gestures and emotions in digital format. For example, a recent TikTok video features a child, estimated to be around 10 years old, parodying the preaching style of Ustadz Abdul Somad (UAS), one of Indonesia's most prominent clerics. In another clip posted by the account @novicantika4, a youngster lip-syncs to a UAS sermon, synchronising his mouth movements with the original audio while imitating UAS's signature gestures (TikTok.com, 2024a).⁶⁰ His mouth motions match the original audio played in the background as he mimics the cleric's trademark gestures. In the age of social media, impersonations like those in the videos aim to attract attention, garnering up to 72,500 likes and over 1,461 comments, demonstrating how this type of emulation can garner widespread attention on digital platforms.

Similarly, Indonesian comedian Wendi Cagur impersonated one of Indonesia's famous preachers, Ustadz Maulana. Not only does Wendi copy the way he talks, his intonation, his similar costume, but also how Ustadz Maulana also moves when giving a sermon. In this case, mimicry is received not as mockery but as lighthearted homage, a practice that echoes the English saying, "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

⁵⁹ It is worth noting the difference between humour and satire. For example, humour is widely used to reduce tension and establish common ground in debates, while satire draws attention to inconsistencies and can be a strong instrument of social critique (Shifman, 2013b). This difference is further examined in the analysis of the Borobudur Stupa meme in chapter 5, explaining the Roy Suryo case, where satire triggers a controversial discourse of religion.

⁶⁰ https://www.tiktok.com/@novicantika4/video/7337976870685723909?_r=1&_t=ZG-91x44UjZwPp

Audience responses reinforce this reading. Comments such as “Lucu banget, bisa pas banget ngikutin UAS” (So funny, he nailed the impression of UAS perfectly) and “Ini UAS pasti ngakak banget lihat ini” (UAS himself would probably burst out laughing watching this), suggest that viewers understood the mimicry as affectionate rather than derogatory. Several users even encouraged the child to impersonate other preachers such as Ustadz Zainuddin MZ, while reactions like “Masyaa Allah Tabarakallah” and laughter or thumbs-up emojis further indicate that audiences framed the performance as light-hearted admiration, not mockery.

These reactions reveal how Indonesian digital publics often interpret religious parody as playful respect (*hormat yang bersenda gurun*), echoing cultural norms in which humour and piety are not necessarily opposed. In such contexts, TikTok becomes more than a site for imitation; it transforms into a communal space where religiosity is performed with joy, creativity, and a sense of relational intimacy. This resonates with Beatty (1999)’s observations that Indonesian religious life is deeply shaped by *rasa*, an embodied sensitivity to social harmony and emotional attunement, because the positive, affectionate tone of these comments reflects forms of closeness, ease, and warmth that Beatty associates with Javanese modes of religious experience.

These forms of mimicry subtly reshape how young Indonesians relate to religious authority. Instead of differences mediated through institutional settings, users approach religious figures through humour, emotional resonance, and shared digital play. In a media landscape where clerics function partly as celebrities, this dialogic and affective engagement becomes especially potent. Such practices open informal spaces where religious identity is reimagined not through instruction but through imitation, comedy, and everyday digital rituals that elicit laughter, empathy, and recognition from diverse audiences.

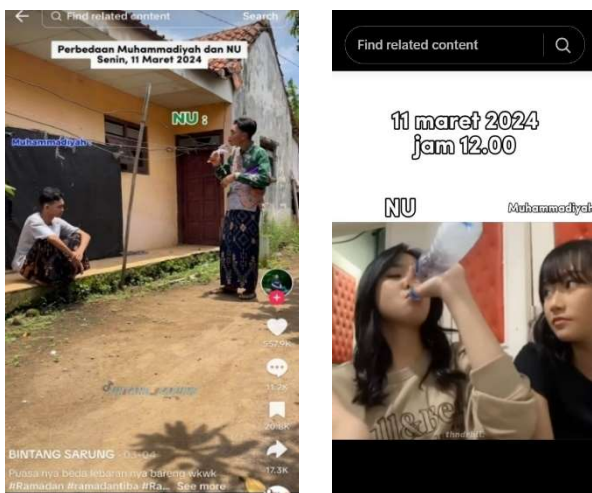


Figure 4.3. Screenshots of POV memetic videos posted on 11 March 2024
Source: TikTok @bintang_sarung and @csaarrrr

As discussed earlier, these memes playfully contrast NU–Muhammadiyah ritual differences, functioning as a familiar entry point rather than a theological confrontation. This dynamic echoes Beatty (1999) ’s observation that religious difference in Javanese Muslim life is negotiated through everyday interactions rather than doctrinal debate. For some, practices remain flexible and fluid; for others, they carry a stronger scriptural authority. Tensions surface not because of the differences themselves, but when questions of legitimacy and authenticity are felt to be at stake.

This ethnographic framing is vital to understanding the everyday tensions between NU and Muhammadiyah, two of Indonesia’s most influential Islamic organisations, which are at the centre of this chapter. Their long-standing differences over religious authority, ritual practice, and public visibility are increasingly mediated through humour and digital expression, especially during moments of heightened religious observance, such as Ramadan.

By reimagining difference through exaggeration and parody, these memes foster a form of peaceful negotiation. They offer a way to engage with intra-Muslim diversity that is emotionally resonant, culturally grounded, and socially constructive, suggesting that humour, far from trivialising belief, can create room for dialogue, recognition, and coexistence in Indonesia’s complex religious terrain. These memes do not seek to resolve doctrinal disagreement; instead, they translate it into every day, low-stakes interaction that invites participation rather than confrontation.

This humour echoes a broader Indonesian tendency to address sensitive issues through satire and light commentary. Everyday frictions, such as recurring debates over whether food stalls should remain open during fasting hours, are often reframed as playful content rather than moral confrontation. In this way, memes about NU–Muhammadiyah differences similarly become relaxed digital spaces where doctrinal variation is acknowledged with humour rather than hostility.

Thus, although the historical tension over the Islamic calendar has not disappeared, its expression has shifted. If “*Lebaran kembar*” was once a source of theological and social division, it is now increasingly treated as a cultural phenomenon, often discussed in a lighthearted manner rather than in an antagonistic manner. TikTok and other social media platforms have become spaces where these religious differences can be dynamically engaged, enabling new modes of dialogue that are both humorous and meaningful.

This shift is particularly visible despite the continued role of the state. Although the government's *isbat* meeting⁶¹ aims to standardise the determination of Ramadan and Eid, plural religious authority persists. Muhammadiyah, for instance, continues to follow *hisab*-based calculations even when these diverge from NU or state decisions. Rather than producing overt conflict, such differences are commonly lived as part of Indonesia's everyday religious plurality, especially when reframed through humour and memetic circulation on platforms like TikTok.

The memes enable a more open and inclusive discussion of differing religious practices in a way that is understandable and appealing to a larger audience. They also allow for the creative and fun exploration of cultural and religious identities, many expressed through memetic video content on TikTok. This is seen in one of the memetic videos posted by the TikTok account @ummijihad.



*Kalian Tim yang mana...?
Tim NU...?
Tim Muhammadiyah...?
Atau tim yang awal puasa ikut NU dan lebarannya ikut Muhammadiyah?*

Translate:
Which team are you on...?
NU team...?
Muhamadiyah Team...?
Or did the team that started their fast join NU and for Eid join Muhammadiyah?

Figure 4.4. Tim NU vs. Muhammadiyah meme
Source : TikTok @ummijihad

The humour lies in its subtle social critique. By invoking the idea of “starting late, finishing fast,” the meme satirises those perceived to take the most convenient route in navigating doctrinal difference. Rather than attacking belief, it playfully surfaces a familiar moral tension surrounding convenience, commitment, and religious consistency in everyday life.

⁶¹ The *Isbat* meeting is an official meeting held by the Indonesian government, specifically the Ministry of Religious Affairs, to determine the beginning of the month in the Hijri calendar, which includes the start of Ramadan, *Syawal* (Eid al-Fitr), and *Dzulhijjah* (Eid al-Adha). Scholars, representatives of Islamic mass organisations, astronomers, and other interested parties are among those attending this meeting. The *Isbat* meeting is usually held as the crucial months approach, and the results are publicised.

Humour has long served as a social lubricant in Indonesia, easing tension and facilitating dialogue across religious and cultural lines. On TikTok, this tradition continues in digital form, where creators use humour to bridge differences and express critique in relatable ways. Humour opens up space to convey criticism and discuss issues that are considered sensitive, particularly in Javanese and broader Indonesian settings (Beatty, 1999; Geertz, 1960).

Novrita Widiyastuti, CEO of the Indonesian Humour Institute (IHIK3), also notes that jokes made by comedians often reflect the condition of society (Widiyastuti in *kompas.id*, 1 September 2022 (Kompas.id, 2022), such as comedy shows on television, *Lapor Pak* on Trans TV and the *Sketsa Komedi Main Hakim Sendiri* on NET.TV. These shows use humour not only to entertain but also to comment on political, social, and cultural issues. In this way, humour can become a subtle yet impactful tool of social critique.

While humour is often framed by scholars and practitioners as a means of fostering social harmony in Indonesia, this view warrants critical reflection. Rather than accepting humour as inherently unifying, this study examines its dual potential, to both bridge and highlight religious and cultural differences, depending on how it is framed, circulated, and interpreted on platforms like TikTok.

This dual role of humour echoes longer Indonesian traditions, including *wayang kulit*, where Punakawan figures use comedy to mediate tension and offer critique.⁶² As Victor Turner (1969) argues, liminal characters, those who occupy an in-between position, not fully inside nor outside social hierarchies, soften conflict by translating sensitive issues into culturally palatable forms. This cultural logic helps explain why digital humour today can operate simultaneously as critique and cohesion, making sensitive religious differences easier to negotiate.

The role of the puppeteer in inserting humour is not only a source of entertainment but also a strategy to reduce social tensions. With a relaxed and humorous style, criticism of *wayang* performances becomes more acceptable without causing conflict.

In the digital context, the role of “dalang” is no longer singular. While TikTok creators visibly shape the narrative through humour, mimicry, and satire, the platform’s algorithm also acts as an unseen puppeteer, deciding which content

⁶² The Punokawan, consisting of Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong, are clown-servant characters unique to Javanese wayang traditions. Unlike the noble heroes of the Indian epics, these figures were locally developed and are known for their comic behaviour, sharp wit, and subversive wisdom. They often act as intermediaries between the audience and the main narrative, using humour, satire, and vernacular language to comment on contemporary social and political issues (Mrázek, 2019).

gains visibility and when it circulates. Audiences, through comments, duets, and remixes, further redirect the storyline, collectively reshaping meaning. This distributed form of agency contrasts with the traditional *dalang*'s singular control, but it echoes the same cultural logic: humour becomes a vehicle through which tensions are mediated, reframed, and made socially manageable.

Against this backdrop, Indonesian values of *rukun* (togetherness) and mutual cooperation shape expectations of social harmony, even amid religious disagreement (Koentjaraningrat, 1985). Within this ethos, humour becomes a socially acceptable way to acknowledge differences without escalating tension. Memes contrasting NU and Muhammadiyah fasting schedules operate precisely in this register. The viral “POV: 11 March 2024, 12:00 PM” meme, for instance, depicting a Muhammadiyah follower already fasting beside an NU member still eating, reframes doctrinal divergence as an everyday quirk rather than a theological fault line. Audience responses frequently echoed this tone, with comments such as “*divided by politics, united by takjil*” or “*peace is beautiful*”, signalling relief and recognition rather than antagonism. In this way, humour supports the broader cultural expectation of harmony, reinforcing social cohesion in a light and non-threatening manner. This aligns with theories that understand humour as a mechanism for preserving equilibrium in communities where unity is deeply valued (see also Chapter Five).

Yet these findings do not suggest that humour is inherently harmonising. The widespread assumption that humour naturally smooths over tension requires critical scrutiny. While many TikTok memes function as tools for fostering togetherness, humour can also intensify division, particularly when religious differences intersect with political sentiment or circulate within emotionally charged digital environments. In Indonesia, which often presents itself as tolerant and pluralistic, social and religious tensions persist, and humour may either soften or sharpen ideological boundaries depending on context, framing, and audience reception.

This ambivalence reflects the dual nature of digital spaces. As Lim (2002) demonstrates in her analysis of Laskar Jihad's online mobilisation, digital media can be used to escalate religious tensions rather than mitigate them. Although such movements did not rely on memes or humour, they illustrate how online infrastructures can reinforce sectarian divisions. Similarly, Wijayanto and Sastramidjaja (2021) show how cyber troops strategically weaponise religious and political sentiment to polarise public discourse. These cases underline that humour and playfulness operate within broader media ecologies that are not value-neutral.

As Andrew Beatty (1999) shows in his ethnography of Javanese Muslim communities, religious difference is rarely a fixed binary; instead, it is negotiated through everyday social interactions, shaped by local traditions, doctrinal

interpretations, and perceived threats to religious legitimacy. Applying this insight into the digital realm, we can see how humour in TikTok memes reflects a similar negotiation: tensions between NU and Muhammadiyah are neither fully resolved nor openly contested but instead reimagined in culturally resonant and humorous forms. In contrast to past moments of conflict, such as the 1969 Eid al-Fitr incident, today's digital expressions suggest a shift toward softer, more performative ways of managing religious diversity, informed both by social norms and legal frameworks like SARA (an Indonesian term referring to issues of ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup relations) and ITE (Electronic Information and Transactions Law), which formally emphasise social harmony and mutual respect, but are also widely debated due to concerns over their impact on freedom of expression and human rights. From a sociological perspective, this shift can be seen as a process of informalization (Elias, 2000), whereby formal authority and confrontation give way to more subtle, humorous, and socially negotiated expressions of difference. On platforms like TikTok, these long-standing differences are now reinterpreted through irony, parody, and playful commentary.

Memes, therefore, negotiate religious identity, suggesting that divergences in worship need not result in schism. TikTok users turn doctrinal differences into comedic material, thereby contributing to a more extensive discussion of Indonesian Islamic identity, which is not a static group identity but one that is constantly produced through everyday life and digital culture.

However, the reception of such humorous content is not solely determined by the intention of the creator. As Keane (2003) suggests through the notion of *semiotic ideology*, the meaning of a sign, such as a meme, is not fixed but shaped by underlying assumptions about how signs relate to intention, truth, and authority. Consequently, a meme intended as lighthearted or unifying can still be perceived as offensive or provocative, depending on the viewer's interpretive framework, religious background, or ideological stance.

These semiotic ideologies are not static; they vary across religious communities, generational cohorts, and communicative settings, and can shift over time. In the context of digital platforms such as TikTok, processes of informalization (Elias, 2000) contribute to this shift by loosening rigid expectations around religious authority and expression, allowing humour, irony, and parody to become more acceptable modes of engaging with religious differences. As a result, what counts as respectful, offensive, or playful is continually renegotiated through everyday digital interaction rather than determined by fixed doctrinal boundaries.

A clear illustration of this dynamic can be seen in the meme text “the team that started their fast with NU and celebrated Eid with Muhammadiyah.” While framed humorously, it also functions as social commentary on perceived

convenience-seeking in religious practice (*mau enak nya sendiri*). Some viewers read it as light satire; others interpreted it as judgmental or divisive.

Choosing to follow NU or Muhammadiyah is not merely a theological decision; it reflects a form of lived religious identity shaped by loyalty to particular methods and communal traditions. As Schielke (2015) and Kloos (2017) note, religious life is negotiated through everyday practices rather than doctrine alone, influenced by social environment, habit, and personal orientation. Decisions about when to begin Ramadan or celebrate Eid thus express how people inhabit their faith in daily life, whether through *rukyyat*, *hisab*, or the playful debates that appear on TikTok.

Seen in this light, the “Islam KTP” meme operates as a gentle satire of perceived inconsistency, using humour to surface the tension between convenience and religious commitment in everyday practice.



*Jadwal puasa 1445H,
Muhammadiyah, senin, 11 Maret 2024
NU, selasa, 12 Maret 2024
Sedangkan untuk yang Islam KTP, bebas waktunya yang penting ikut
sahur dan buka puasa di rumah... ???*

Translation:
1445H fasting schedule,
Muhammadiyah, Monday, 11 March 2024
NU, Tuesday, 12 March 2024
Meanwhile, for those Islam with ID cards, Free to choose, the
important thing is to participate in *sahur* and break the fast at
home...???

Figure 4.5. Fasting schedule meme
Source: Tiktok@aretero20

Audience reactions to this meme varied. While some responded with amusement, “Enak ya jadi orang bebas” 😄 (Must be nice to live so freely), others perceived it as judgmental or divisive. Comments such as “Jangan saling hina, kita cuma beda pendapat, bukan beda agama” (Do not insult each other, we just have different opinions, not different religions) or “Belum tentu lo lebih baik dari mereka” (You are not necessarily better than them).

Viewed as a whole, these findings suggest that humour on TikTok should not be understood as inherently unifying. Rather, it is a culturally embedded practice whose effects depend on circulation, interpretation, and platform dynamics. In the case of NU–Muhammadiyah memes, humour often enables a form of peaceful negotiation by translating difference into shared cultural reference

points. Yet this same mechanism can also expose fault lines, reminding us that playful citizenship remains contingent, situational, and open to contestation.

The Role of TikTok in Reconstructing Religious Groupness

In an era when digital platforms mediate much of public life, TikTok has become a crucial site where Islamic identities in Indonesia are not only expressed but actively reshaped. Memetic videos, brief, humorous, and highly shareable, operate as more than entertainment; they participate in redefining group belongings. Yet, this renegotiation no longer unfolds solely within communities themselves. Increasingly, it is filtered through the infrastructure of a big tech platform whose algorithm decides what becomes visible, amplified, or forgotten. The issue is not only how NU and Muhammadiyah define themselves, but how moments of religious groupness are activated, circulated, and made visible through algorithmic mediation.

Traditionally, narratives surrounding NU and Muhammadiyah have been shaped by religious institutions, leaders, and formal education channels, often emphasising their doctrinal distinctions, such as differences in ritual practices, religious authority, and theological interpretation (Burhani, 2013; Fealy, 2003). While these differences do not always imply conflict, they have historically defined the two as distinct streams within Indonesian Islam, with distinct institutional and symbolic boundaries. On TikTok, however, these boundaries become publicly negotiable through memetic formats that invite playful participation rather than formal arguments. In Brubaker's terms, what we often see is not stable "groups" but an activated *sense of groupness*, a situational, affective, and performative belonging that emerges in particular moments, interactions, and media settings (Brubaker, 2004). As will be elaborated further throughout this chapter, this concept helps us understand how religious identity is not merely inherited but negotiated through social and technological contexts.

Digital Reinterpretation of Group Identity

On TikTok, the differences between NU and Muhammadiyah, which were once discussed through rigid theological debates, are now reinterpreted in a more flexible and participatory manner. Rather than being caught in the dichotomy of "Us vs. them," TikTok enables communities to negotiate differences collectively, using humour not just as a reconciliatory tool but also as a medium that reshapes how these groups are perceived in digital spaces.

One example is a memetic video from the TikTok account @miracle.shann, which humorously compares the differences in religious practices between NU and Muhammadiyah. The video highlights distinctions in rituals such as *tahlil*, *qunut*, the number of *rakaah* during *tarawih*, *ziarah* (pilgrimage), *Maulid Nabi* (Prophet Muhammad's birthday celebration), and *tujuh bulanan* (rituals for

pregnant women)⁶³. With 397.4K likes and 12.7K comments, the video illustrates how religious differences are transformed into accessible and reflexive digital content, fostering understanding rather than deepening divisions.

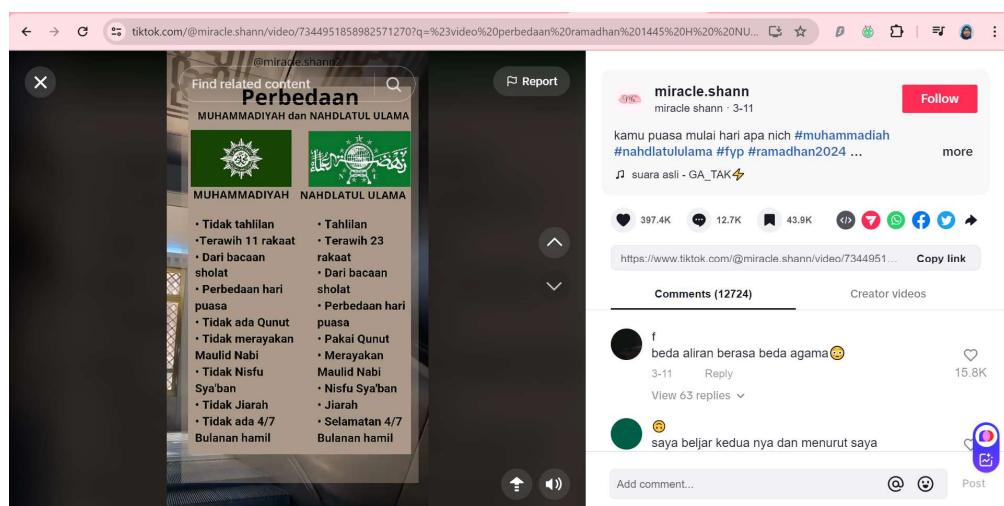


Figure 4.6. Screenshot of a TikTok meme addressing NU–Muhammadiyah differences
Source : TikTok @Miracle.shann

The original video analysed during fieldwork is no longer publicly accessible, and the account has since shifted to fashion-related content, a common occurrence in digital ethnography where posts are frequently deleted, privatised, or repurposed. The analysis presented here is based on archived fieldnotes and screenshots collected during the research period. To illustrate the same memetic pattern, I refer to a comparable video from the account @ Gerald Vincent which received 483.3K likes and 16.3K comments (TikTok.com, 2023).⁶⁴ This video employs a similar humorous contrast between NU and Muhammadiyah ritual practices. The

⁶³ The term seven monthly events for pregnant women refers to a local tradition known as "*tingkepan*," especially among Javanese and Sundanese communities in Indonesia. This ritual is usually performed in the seventh month of pregnancy. The purpose is to pray for the safety of the mother and the baby and ask for blessings and protection for the family. In the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) community, this event often involves the recitation of prayers, *tahlil*, and the *siraman* ritual, where the pregnant woman is symbolically bathed as part of a ceremony filled with spiritual and cultural nuances. This ritual reflects a combination of Islamic teachings and local traditions that emphasise the importance of togetherness and social support for pregnant women.

Meanwhile, among Muhammadiyah, events like this are often considered part of a tradition not required by Islamic teachings. They avoid cultural elements with no basis in *sharia* and prefer simplicity in praying alone or in a community without many additional rituals. In the context of meme videos on TikTok, this difference in practice is often used as a source of humour, such as in the video by @miracle.shann. The video highlights the differences between NU and Muhammadiyah in carrying out religious traditions and invites viewers to reflect on how far culture can or may be integrated with worship.

⁶⁴ https://www.tiktok.com/@geraldvincentt/video/7223621548136041754?_r=1&t=ZG-91z8bAXyVUm

example does not replace the original dataset, but it demonstrates the broader circulation of the meme format across multiple TikTok accounts.

TikTok users from NU and Muhammadiyah circles responded to the meme video about the differences at the start of Ramadan in various ways. Usually, the identity of the user can be assumed based on the context of the comment, the language used, or previous interactions with related content, or the affiliation of the meme creator or account that posted the meme can be seen from the hashtags they included, for example, #NU or #Muhamadiyah, or others. However, this assumption is not always accurate. Therefore, it is essential not to rely too heavily on the explicit identification of religious affiliation when analysing comments on social media unless there are clear clues. To further investigate affiliations, a more comprehensive approach could include analysing recurring themes in the comments, such as references to specific religious practices (e.g., *tahlilan*, *qunut*, *tarawih*) or direct mentions of religious groups or figures associated with NU or Muhammadiyah. Additionally, examining the user's profile, bio, and interaction history with similar content may offer further insight into their religious affiliation. Cross-referencing comments with hashtags or observing the tone, whether playful, defensive, or corrective, provide insight into how viewers position themselves in relation to the meme without requiring precise affiliation to be established.



Figure 4.7. Screenshot of user comments responding to a TikTok meme
Source: [TikTok@Miracle.Shann](#)

This screenshot of the comments highlights how TikTok's memetic videos create a space where people can openly talk about religious differences and similarities. For example, NYZ's comment, "*Keluargaku Muhammadiyah tapi tablilan kok, ziarah juga*" (My family is Muhammadiyah, but we also perform *tablilan* and *ziarah*), illustrates how family and social contexts often override strict organisational divides. This response highlights that, despite theological differences, personal and communal practices remain fluid, reinforcing a more pragmatic rather than doctrinal understanding of religious identity.

The video demonstrates how religious practices can blend within families, transcending strict labels like "Muhammadiyah" or "NU." This interaction reveals that the boundaries between these groups are not always rigid, and people also adapt traditions to meet personal or familial needs. The fact that these ideas are discussed so openly in the comments mirrors how TikTok's algorithm brings diverse perspectives into user's feeds, encouraging encounters with practice, that may differ from their own. While scholars such as Bail et al. (2018) have shown that exposure to opposing views on social media can intensify polarisation, the interactions observed here suggest that, when mediated through humour and everyday religious practice, such exposure can also open space for reflection and negotiation rather than outright confrontation.

TikTok's Algorithm and the Exposure to Cross-Group Interactions

As discussed by Campbell and Tsuria (2021), digital spaces like TikTok also create opportunities for cross-group engagement, fostering conversations that transcend traditional boundaries of religious identity. TikTok's algorithm introduces content based on behaviour rather than pre-existing connections, allowing users to engage with perspectives outside their social networks. This means that even users who primarily follow content from one religious group (e.g., NU) will still be exposed to perspectives from the other group (e.g., Muhammadiyah). This exposure fosters a digital ecosystem (not in the broad, metaphorical sense, but as a dynamic environment shaped by algorithmic curation, user participation, and memetic circulation) where both agreement and contestation occur, creating new opportunities for interaction between members of different religious traditions.

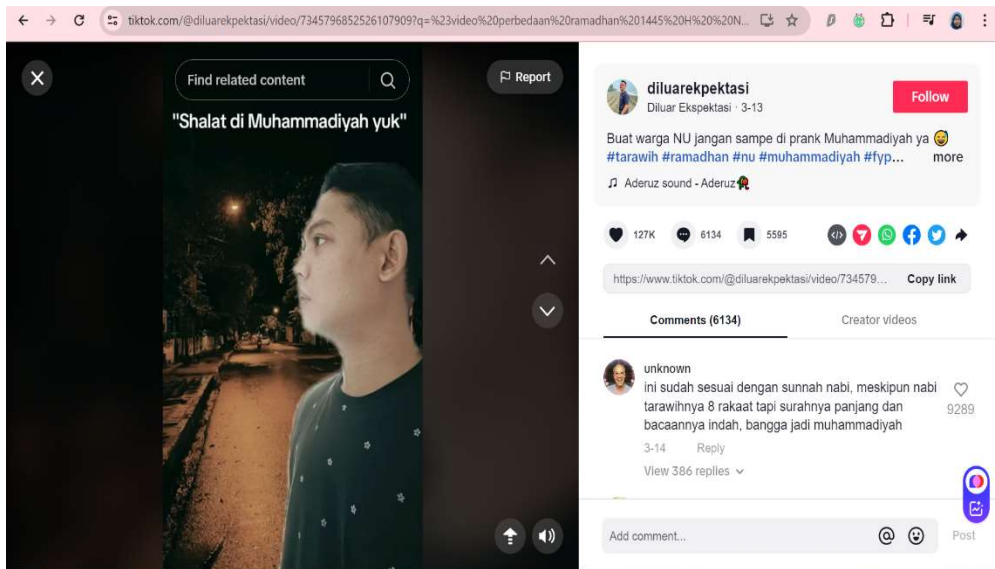


Figure 4.8. Screenshot of the TikTok meme “Sholat di Muhammadiyah Yuk”
Source: TikTok@diluarekpektasi (TikTok.com, 2024c)

The video plays on a well-known difference: NU typically performs 23 rakaat during tarawih, while Muhammadiyah performs 11. This contrast is a familiar cultural reference for Indonesian Muslims and therefore becomes fertile ground for humour on TikTok. Because such content is pushed beyond its immediate audience through TikTok’s FYP, users from both NU and Muhammadiyah, regardless of who they follow, encounter and respond to the same humorous depictions. The humour lands precisely because the audience already recognises the ritual stereotype, allowing the meme to circulate across groups with ease.

This video demonstrates the use of humour to highlight differences and encourage inter-community dialogue. Users responded overwhelmingly, with 127K likes and 6,134 comments. Observations of meme video posts and user comments on the TikTok platform reveal several critical points about various community responses, including emotional responses and acceptance, as well as criticism and discomfort.

The video humorously depicts a Muhammadiyah member inviting NU members to a mosque with fewer *rakaah*, only for them to discover that the surahs are much longer, turning the perceived convenience into an unexpected twist. Although only being 11 *rakaah*, the surah chosen was long and read in full, with the caption, “buat warga NU awas jangan sampe di prank oleh Muhammadiyah” (NU members must be careful not to be pranked by Muhammadiyah).

The humour in the @diluarekpektasi video hinges on a classic incongruity: the expectation of convenience is suddenly overturned. Muhammadiyah’s tarawih is

popularly perceived as “shorter” because it consists of fewer rakaah, and this stereotype is widely recognised among Indonesian Muslims. The joke plays on this cultural script. An NU member accepts an invitation expecting an easier, faster prayer, only to find that the surah recitations are unexpectedly long. The punchline rests in this reversal, the prayer becomes just as long, or even longer, despite having fewer rakaah. This mismatch between expectation and outcome is what makes the situation funny and relatable, especially to viewers familiar with these ritual differences.

The joke “Watch out, do not get pranked by Muhammadiyah” contains elements of satire. “Prank” means “trap,” where they thought the prayer would be shorter because the number of *rakaah* was fewer, but it turned out not to be because of the extended reading. For someone unfamiliar with the practice of tarawih prayer, this humour may be challenging to understand without knowing the context of the differences in how the two groups perform this prayer. This illustrates how slight differences in ritual can be the subject of jokes that strengthen the sense of togetherness and humour between groups without neglecting the spiritual essence of the prayer itself. The caption, *Buat warga NU, awas jangan sampe di prank oleh Muhammadiyah* turns a theological distinction into a lighthearted humorous moment.

Most comments showed acceptance and appreciation for using humour to highlight these differences. For example, many comments contain laughing emojis or praise for the video creator’s creativity, such as:

“akhirnya lewat fyp lagi ni meme 😂” (Finally via fyp again with this meme 😂 @Vinnz Vallencia)_

“jokes sudah mulai muncul kembali” (jokes have started to appear again @deqdit)

“jokes setahun sekali 🤡 🤡” (jokes once a year 🤡 🤡 @maikel).

Although commenters’ specific religious affiliations cannot always be identified, the tone and volume of engagement suggest that the joke resonated across different communities. Rather than reinforcing group boundaries, humour around NU–Muhammadiyah differences becomes a shared cultural script that enables users to participate without explicitly naming their affiliation.

However, some users voiced criticisms and concerns, highlighting that humour might trivialise critical religious practices and create unnecessary debates, for example comments like:

“Kenapa org2 ribut masalah kek gini?” (“Why are people making a fuss about something like this?” @24Kboy)

“Apaan dh komen ny 🗨 beda organisasi kek beda agama” (“What are you commenting about? different organizations, like different religions.” @Alamsyah)

"*Bukannya itu ga tuma'ninah*⁶⁵ ya? *Tuma'ninah* *bukannya rukun sholat*. Beneran nanya 🙏." ("Isn't that *Tuma'ninah*?" *Tuma'ninah* is a pillar of prayer? I'm really asking 🙏)" @Hi_Kidz)

These reactions emphasise the centrality of TikTok's algorithm in enabling cross-group interactions, broadly exposing users to content from different communities regardless of initial group affiliations. While positive engagement can foster inclusive participation in satirical discourse, critical feedback reveals the relational tensions and contradictions involved in negotiating religious identity online. By curating diverse perspectives through the FYP, TikTok's algorithm creates a space where agreement and contestation coexist. In this sense, the algorithm does not merely distribute content; it structures the conditions under which religious difference becomes visible, discussable, and emotionally charged.

Humour as a Vehicle for Religious Negotiation

The comment section under TikTok memes related to NU and Muhammadiyah rituals reveals a diverse spectrum of user responses. While many users engaged with the humour lightheartedly, others offered more reflective or even critical takes on the issues raised. Rather than presenting a unified stance, these conversations unfolded across a continuum, from pragmatic and flexible interpretations of ritual to more rigid or doctrinally concerned perspectives. The following examples serve to illustrate some of the more reflective and inclusive responses, without suggesting that they represent the dominant or only voice in the discussion.

Several users responded in ways that foreground sincerity and pragmatism in religious practice. One example comes from @babang_tamvan, whose profile, typical of many TikTok users with minimal biographical information and a mix of humorous and everyday-content posts, offers no explicit religious affiliation. His comment nevertheless reflects a widely shared sentiment: "Mau tahlilan atau tidaknya, niatnya dan tujuannya ke mana, semua nya sudah ada di hati dan niat yang ikhlas" (Whether to do tahlilan or not, it's about the intention and purpose, it's all in the heart and sincerity). Others, like @Rendi, take a pragmatic approach, noting that "Sama, yang penting tidak membebankan" (The same; what matters is that it does not become a burden). These comments were part of a broader thread responding to humorous TikTok content that compared religious rituals. While these quotes reflect individual viewpoints rather than collective positions,

⁶⁵ *Tuma'ninah* is one of the pillars of prayer in Islam, which refers to calmness and steadfastness in every movement of prayer. *Tuma'ninah* means pausing for a moment in every movement, such as when bowing, prostrating, and rising from bowing so that the body is completely calm and not in a hurry. According to some scholars, *tuma'ninah* is a state in which a person gives enough time for all parts of his body to be calm, at least for a moment before continuing to the next movement. The existence of *tuma'ninah* is essential because it is included in the pillars of prayer, which means that if it is not carried out, the prayer is considered invalid.

they illustrate how sincerity, intention, and flexibility are recurrent themes in the discussion. In line with Markham (2013)'s emphasis on contextual integrity in digital research, these interpretations are framed with sensitivity to the setting in which they were shared.

The tone of many comments suggests a willingness to engage playfully rather than defensively. Users acknowledge differences without escalating them into confrontation, often responding with humour or casual remarks instead of doctrinal argument. This shows how TikTok, primarily through memes, can spark relatively respectful and thoughtful conversations about issues that might otherwise trigger tension. In other online spaces, similar discussions, for example debates on Facebook over *qunut*, *tablilan*, or the “Lebaran kembar” controversy, often become heated or moralising, with accusations of *bid'ah* or insufficient adherence to scripture. Against this backdrop, the light, humorous exchanges on TikTok offer a distinct and more flexible mode of negotiating religious difference.

These contrasting modes of interaction show how humour can function not only as entertainment but also as a social mechanism for managing differences. Shifman (2014) notes that memes gain traction because they draw on widely recognised cultural cues, making them effective tools for reframing sensitive issues. On TikTok, this quality is especially visible: NU–Muhammadiyah differences are not simply repeated but reshaped through irony and exaggeration.

Additionally, many comments demonstrate flexibility in interpreting religious practices. @dena-de's commented: “*Jangan ribet soal cara ibadah, yang penting hati kita bersih. Mo tablil mo enggak ya nggak da masalah*” (Do not be complicated about how to worship, what is important is that our hearts are clean. Whether you do *tablilan* or not, it does not matter.) or comment like @raka_19 “*Tablilan atau tidak, yang penting kita selalu berdoa untuk orang yang sudah meninggal*.” (*Tablilan* or not, what is important is that we always pray for the deceased).

In TikTok context, this quality becomes particularly visible. NU–Muhammadiyah differences are not simply copied into digital form; they are reshaped through irony, exaggeration, and the playful tone that characterises much of the platform.

Memes in this context act less like passive reflections and more like small interventions in how people talk about religious practice. As outlined in the discussion of distributed agency in Chapter 1, this perspective is not new in media studies; scholars such as Bennett (2010); and Latour (2005) have noted how objects and technologies can influence social relations, but TikTok gives this agency a distinct texture. Humour, remix, and repetition allow these videos to redirect conversations, soften disagreement, or turn a sensitive distinction into something easier to discuss. Seen in this way, TikTok memes take part in the ongoing negotiation of religious life in Indonesia. They do not replace doctrine

or formal authority, but they open a lighter, more flexible space where differences can be approached without the weight of confrontation.

While user comments illustrate how TikTok fosters spontaneous public discussions around religious difference, more in-depth interview responses reveal a deeper layer of meaning-making. To better understand how memetic videos are internalised and interpreted, the next section explores how young Muslims from NU and Muhammadiyah communities respond to these memes, not only as viewers but as active participants in defining and defending their religious identities.

Affirming Religious Identity Through Reflexive Memetic Responses

This section draws on interview excerpts with NU- and Muhammadiyah-affiliated youth who were shown selected Ramadan-themed TikTok memes during fieldwork sessions. Their reactions show how and where memetic humour becomes meaningful: in small group discussions during interviews, in their everyday browsing practices, and in the emotional responses triggered when they recognise their own traditions being referenced playfully on screen. These moments reveal how digital humour becomes a site where young Muslims affirm religious belonging, negotiate differences, and articulate pride in their traditions. Rather than seeing memes as trivial or disrespectful, participants often described them as helping them recognize, sometimes with amusement, sometimes with reflection, what matters in their communities. In this way, the material demonstrates Brubaker (2004)'s idea of *groupness* as something activated in specific situations and shows how playful citizenship operates as a lived digital practice rather than an abstract concept.

One example of how humour can reinforce religious identity comes from Syafii, an 18-year-old student at a pesantren in Central Java.⁶⁶ Raised in a village by parents and grandparents embedded in NU tradition, Syafii expressed deep pride in the practices he grew up with, such as tahlil and qunut. He explained:

“As a member of NU, I believe that tahlil and qunut are essential to our religious identity. Although some see them as controversial, we believe they are an integral part of our heritage that must be preserved. This sense of

⁶⁶ After graduating from *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* (MI) in one of the rural villages in Central Java, his birth city, his parents sent him to this boarding school to study the *Al Quran*. Ahmad Syafii was raised by his parents, had been members of the NU congregation since his grandmother and great-grandfather. Syafii's parents desired that he become a preacher who had memorised the *Al Quran* and would bestow upon his parents a sparkling crown. According to a hadith about memorising the *Al Quran*, specifically from Buraidah radhiyallahu 'anhu, the Prophet sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam said, "Whoever memorises the Quran, studies it, and puts it into practice, Allah will give crowns to his parents from its bright light like the sun. Syafii continued his education from Madrasah Tsanawiyah (Mts) to Madrasah Aliyah (MA), where he is currently studying.

humour about differences helps us appreciate and celebrate our traditions more”.

Syafii’s opinion shows how humour, when aligned with community values, becomes a medium of pride rather than ridicule, allowing youth to maintain a connection with inherited traditions through a playful digital lens.

A different dynamic appears in the account of Roudhatul Jannah, a 20-year-old from a mixed NU–Muhammadiyah household. The memes she encountered, particularly those comparing tarawih lengths or greeting styles, allowed her to hold both traditions without feeling torn between them. Reflecting on her own practice, she said: “I frequently attend tarawih at Muhammadiyah mosques for variety, and despite the differences, I believe it enriches my religious experience. However, I remain proud of NU’s traditions, which have their spiritual depth”.

For her, TikTok memes became a gentle reminder that differences in ritual or belief need not be divisive. Instead, they created a space where ambivalence and hybridity could be acknowledged with humour, allowing her to navigate plural traditions without the pressure to choose sides.

From the Muhammadiyah side, a similar expression of pride and affirmation can be seen. A 21-year-old student and member of HMI in Surakarta reflected on a meme that referenced tarawih practices.⁶⁷ He explained how these humorous videos not only entertained but also validated his commitment to Muhammadiyah’s understanding of sunnah:

“For me, adhering to the Prophet’s sunnah of eight rakaah is an essential part of my identity as a Muhammadiyah member. These meme videos are entertaining but confirm my belief that our actions are deeply rooted in Islamic tradition”.

A similar sentiment was echoed by a 19-year-old Muhammadiyah medical student:

“The humour in this meme allows us to view differences more positively. Regardless of our differences, I am proud to be part of a community that directly follows the Prophet’s teachings”.

Here, the humour he refers to is the recurring meme format that exaggerates the difference between NU’s 23 rakaat and Muhammadiyah’s 11 as explain before,

⁶⁷ The Islamic Student Association (HMI) is an independent Islamic organization that is still active and developing at universities in Indonesia to this day. This is a youth organization with the tagline *Merenung bagai gunung, bergerak bagai ombak* (Contemplate like a mountain, move like a wave)

and the accompanying jokes about “choosing the shorter one.” These playful contrasts made him feel that his group’s choices were visible and valued.

These responses indicate that humour does not dilute religious commitment but instead offers a mode of expression that reinforces one’s identification with core values. Through light-hearted contrasts, young people express pride in their ritual distinctiveness while affirming the integrity of their religious identity. Even anonymous interactions on TikTok’s comment sections reflect this sense of communal affirmation. One user wrote, “*Ini sudah sesuai dengan sunnah nabi, meskipun nabi tarawihnya 8 rakaah tapi surahnya panjang dan bacaannya indah, bangga jadi Muhammadiyah.*” (This follows the sunnah of the Prophet. Although the Prophet’s tarawih was eight rak’ahs, the surahs were long and beautifully recited. Proud to be Muhammadiyah.)

These examples show that memetic engagement is not merely performative or entertaining, it is emotionally compelling and deeply tied to identity-making processes. Humour becomes a gateway into a more profound articulation of faith, bridging tradition with modern digital expression. Rather than reinforcing division, TikTok memes enable users to celebrate distinctiveness with mutual recognition, where laughter becomes an expression of understanding.

In doing so, these users exemplify what Brubaker (2004) calls an “activated sense of groupness”, a situational and performative engagement with collective identity that is shaped by context, emotion, and participation. Memes, then, become tools for reflexive self-definition, where young Muslims affirm their communal values while actively participating in digital culture. This affirmation is not rooted in exclusion but in the celebration of religious diversity, and in the capacity to laugh with, not at, each other.

Viewed collectively, these interview accounts suggest that the identities negotiated through Ramadan memes are more complex than a simple opposition between NU and Muhammadiyah. For some participants, the memes reaffirm organisational belonging by expressing pride in particular ritual traditions, such as *qunut*, *tahlilan*, or differing approaches to determining the beginning of Ramadan. For others, however, the memes create space for more flexible forms of religious self-understanding. Some participants described combining practices commonly associated with different Islamic traditions without seeing these practices as mutually exclusive. Rather than presenting these combinations as contradictions, participants often treated them as ordinary aspects of everyday religious life.

These findings suggest that the identities emerging through TikTok memes operate at multiple levels simultaneously. Memes may reinforce organisational affiliations, affirm everyday religious practices, and at the same time reveal broader forms of Indonesian Muslim belonging that extend beyond formal institutional boundaries. In this sense, religious identity is not simply reproduced through digital humour; it is continually enacted through everyday interactions,

personal experiences, and the shifting contexts in which memes are created, circulated, and interpreted. This also helps explain why Brubaker's notion of groupness is particularly useful here: rather than reflecting fixed and bounded groups, the memes reveal situational forms of belonging that become more or less salient depending on the topic, platform, and social interaction

Conclusion

This chapter reveals how Ramadan meme videos on TikTok play a significant role in social and religious dynamics in Indonesia through socio-cultural interactions and playful citizenship. Here, humour and creativity become practical tools for navigating doctrinal differences, easing tension, and fostering moments of shared reflection. Rather than functioning only as entertainment, humour allows users to approach sensitive issues lightly, without turning them into confrontation.

User participation, particularly among NU and Muhammadiyah communities, demonstrates how TikTok becomes a space for both enjoyment and quiet critique. Many users engage with digital humour in ways that reaffirm or gently reinterpret existing values, rather than dismantling them. TikTok's role in this process differs from platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, which rely heavily on pre-existing networks that encourage homophily and closed-group interaction as discussed in Chapter 3. TikTok's algorithmic curation pushes content beyond familiar circles, generating accidental encounters between different groups. This chapter builds on that analysis by showing how such encounters often take shape through humour. Even so, further research is needed to understand when and how memes move beyond their initial clusters and whether this circulation consistently contributes to inclusivity.

Playful citizenship, as an approach to social interaction, emerged as a response to shifting modes of participation in contemporary societies, where traditional forms of communication and activism often appeared too rigid or confrontational. In socio-political movements, this approach aims to reduce tensions while conveying criticism in a light-hearted manner through humour, satire, and creativity. Rather than directly engaging in clashes or confrontations, playful citizenship adopts a more fluid approach, one that is readily accepted by various levels of society, including those who may be less interested in more aggressive or formal forms of engagement.

In the Indonesian setting, particularly within the long-standing NU–Muhammadiyah relationship, playful citizenship appears in the use of memes that highlight ritual differences without moralising them. These humorous depictions ease social tension by framing distinctions as familiar, negotiable, and non-threatening. At the same time, it is important to recognise the limits of this dynamic. The ease with which NU and Muhammadiyah interact is linked to their shared acceptance as mainstream Islamic organisations. In contrast, groups such

as the Ahmadiyah, who face significant institutional marginalisation and whose legitimacy is frequently contested in Indonesia, do not occupy the same social position as NU or Muhammadiyah. Because their public visibility is shaped by stigma and securitisation rather than everyday ritual differences, humour does not circulate around them in the same playful and reciprocal way. This example is mentioned only to illustrate the limits of playful citizenship, not as an analytical focus of the chapter.

The chapter's contribution lies in showing how playful citizenship operates not only as a bridge to social harmony but also as a way of understanding how religious diversity is lived and negotiated in everyday digital practices. Rather than assuming harmony as an inherent cultural trait, the analysis traces how humour becomes one of the mechanisms through which people maintain social cohesion amidst difference. This does not replace conflict or doctrinal debate, but it creates a parallel space where diversity can be approached more lightly and creatively than in formal religious discourse. While playful citizenship has largely been applied to social and political participation, this chapter demonstrates how its logic also maps onto religious life, where users navigate ritual differences through similar modes of creativity, lightness, and collective engagement.

Finally, the chapter sets up the transition to a more critical examination of digital humour. While Ramadan memes illustrate the unifying potential of playful citizenship, the next chapter examines a contrasting case: the Borobudur Stupa meme. Here, humour does not merely amuse, it provokes moral anxiety, exposes boundaries of religious sensitivity, and challenges norms of public expression. Moving from comedy that unites to comedy that divides reveals the delicate balance digital platforms must navigate in religiously diverse societies. This shift underscores the broader theme of this dissertation: humour in the digital age is never neutral. It can soothe or agitate, include or exclude, depending on who receives it and under what conditions.

Memes, Humour, And Religious Sensitivity:

Negotiating Boundaries of Expression in The Digital Age
Case Study: Borobudur Stupa Meme⁶⁸

While playful religious expression can foster inclusion, humour is not always benign, it may also be perceived as offensive, particularly when it touches upon sacred symbols. This chapter argues that the Borobudur Stupa meme illustrates how digital humour can rapidly shift from political satire to religious offence once sacred symbols circulate within mediated publics and are amplified by public figures.

First circulating in 2022, the Borobudur Stupa meme sits at the intersection of digital humour, political satire, and religious sensitivity in Indonesia's online public sphere. The meme depicts one of the sacred stupas of Borobudur Temple, a ninth-century Mahayana Buddhist monument in Central Java, not with the image of the Buddha, but with the face of Indonesia's then president, Joko Widodo.

The meme initially appeared to be a satirical critique of government policies on heritage preservation and tourism, notably the plan to raise the entrance fee for Borobudur Temple from IDR 50,000 to IDR 750,000 (approximately equivalent to 3 euros to almost 40 euros). On a broader level, the meme also criticised the allocation of the thus earned funds, suggesting they were needed to finance the costly relocation of Indonesia's capital from Jakarta to Nusantara in Kalimantan's forests. The resulting controversy highlights the profound complexity of striking a balance between freedom of expression and respect for religious and cultural values in the pluralistic society that Indonesia is today.

Unsurprisingly, this meme provoked anger among the local Buddhist community, a minority in the world's largest Muslim-majority nation. Many non-Buddhists also viewed it as a form of blasphemy. For the Buddhist community, a line was

⁶⁸ An earlier version of this chapter was developed as a co-authored journal manuscript with Prof. Bart Barendregt. The present chapter has been substantially revised and expanded for this dissertation.

crossed, as this joke was not funny anymore but rather an insult to their religion and sacred symbols. After being reported by the Buddhist organisation Dharmapala Nusantara,⁶⁹ Roy Suryo, the former Minister of Youth and Sports, who played a key role in making the meme go viral, was sentenced to nine months in prison. Suryo was charged and found guilty of mishandling sensitive issues related to Ethnicity, Religion, Race, and Intergroup Relations (SARA) that can provoke conflict or discrimination.⁷⁰

While not explicitly Islamic, the Borobudur Stupa meme generated strong responses in Indonesia's Muslim-majority digital space, where Islamic values often shape public ethics. In this chapter, I adopt a broader approach to Islamic-inspired memes, defined not only as those with Islamic visual references but also those that provoke moral, cultural, or religious discourse within Muslim-dominant publics. While the meme centres on a Buddhist monument, the public outcry surrounding interfaith respect, ethical speech, and social harmony demonstrates how Islamic sensibilities guide digital engagement in a plural society like Indonesia.



While it's the weekend, it's better not to be too serious in the tweets." This aligns with the protests against the planned increase in the entrance fee for Borobudur Temple (from 50,000 to 750,000), which (reasonably) has been POSTPONED. Netizens use their creativity to transform one of Borobudur's iconic open stupas, FUNNY, he-3x, AMBYAR)"

Figure 5.1: Roy Suryo's post on Twitter, 10 June 2022
Source: Twitter@KRMTRoySuryo2

⁶⁹ Buddhist advocacy and cadre development institution in Indonesia, which has a vision to be the guardian and protector of Buddha Dharma in the Indonesian archipelago

⁷⁰ Indonesia's SARA Law refers to legal provisions aimed at addressing and penalizing actions that incite hatred, discrimination, or conflict related to Ethnicity, Religion, Race, and Intergroup Relations. The law prohibits speech, actions, or media (including online content) that insult or degrade specific groups, provoke hostility, or threaten unity, and it carries criminal penalties for violations. These provisions are often invoked under articles of Indonesia's Criminal Code (KUHP) or the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE) for online cases.

The Borobudur Stupa meme case highlights a critical tension in Indonesia's pluralistic society: Where is the boundary between satire and religious sensitivity? At what point does political critique become disrespectful? The increasingly borderless digital world gives rise to expressions in the form of stickers, posts, and memes that transcend geographical, cultural, and religious boundaries. When religious symbols are incorporated into political or social satire, such expressions can become powerful rhetorical tools, capable of reinforcing or challenging religious and social norms.

Hoesterey (2021), in his study of the Nahdlatul Ulama's "Funny Brigade," (see Chapter 3) shows how satire can both unite and polarise digital publics in Indonesia. Similarly, Nugraha (2024) demonstrates how humorous commentary on Instagram plays a role in shaping public discourse. Hapsoro (2018) further reveals that memes have become tools of civic participation, especially among Indonesian youth. Together, these studies demonstrate that satire, while potentially incendiary, can also serve as a dynamic force for reflection and dialogue.

To address these questions, this chapter draws on incongruity and benign violation theories to examine how humour involving religious symbols is perceived across cultural and religious contexts, with a particular focus on the Borobudur Stupa meme. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach that combines sentiment analysis, discourse analysis, and in-depth interviews to capture both the emotional tone of online responses and the deeper socio-cultural perspectives surrounding the Borobudur Stupa meme. Although the dataset consists of 236 direct comments, its targeted nature prioritises contextual depth over volume, aligning with digital ethnographic principles that emphasise interpretative richness rather than statistical generalisation.

By analysing this meme through these theoretical and methodological lenses, the chapter aims to explore how satire can foster dialogue and provoke offence within Indonesia's diverse society, offering broader insights into managing digital spaces sensitive to cultural and religious plurality.

Historical Precedents of Religious–Political Satire

Before turning to the detailed analysis of public responses to the Borobudur Stupa meme, it is important to recognise that Indonesia has experienced earlier moments in which digitally circulated satire intersected with religious and political sensitivities. One of the most defining periods occurred in 2016–2017, when political and religious tensions were amplified through visual memes involving figures such as Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), Habib Rizieq Shihab, and King Salman. These precedents shaped the interpretive habits that later influenced how the Borobudur meme was received.

As social media became embedded in everyday life, memes in Indonesia quickly evolved from simple entertainment into a medium capable of carrying layered symbolic messages. This shift became especially visible in moments of heightened political tension. By the mid-2010s, memes that initially appeared harmless were increasingly mobilised to express critique, sharpen political narratives, and reinforce social boundaries. Humour, in this context, did not merely entertain; it became a tool for signalling allegiance, questioning authority, or amplifying collective anxieties.

This development reflects deeper structural dynamics within Indonesian politics, where religion has long served as a key moral and political resource. As Hefner (2000) and Pepinsky, Liddle, and Mujani (2018) note, religious organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah have long acted as moral and political brokers, shaping public opinion and legitimising political authority. In such an environment, it is unsurprising that political memes began to embed religious imagery to bolster claims of moral authority or to criticise opponents. Religious symbolism, implicit or explicit, became part of the visual language through which political messages were communicated and contested.

The Jakarta election period illustrated how digital space became an arena where humour, critique, and mobilisation increasingly overlapped. What began as visual play could quickly become an instrument of propaganda or a reflection of deeper polarisation. This dynamic was particularly evident in the memes sparked by the March 2017 meeting between Ahok and King Salman.



Figure 5.2. Basuki Tjahaja Purnama's post on Instagram and Twitter

Source: BBC News Indonesia (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2017)(British Broadcasting Corporation, 2017)

The photo of then-Jakarta Governor Ahok greeting King Salman of Saudi Arabia received many responses from social media users. On Twitter, Ahok's tweet was retweeted 4,800 times. Even though Ahok greeted King Salman in his capacity as the Governor of Jakarta, the photo was still placed in the context of the blasphemy case that is currently befalling Ahok (see below). There was news that King Salman would meet the General Chairman of FPI, Rizieq Shihab. So, this photo of Ahok and King Salman is also seen in the context of Ahok's rivalry with Shihab.⁷¹ For example, it did not take netizens long to mock Rizieq Shihab in this meme tweeted by journalist Hasief Ardiasyah.⁷²



Figure 5.3. Meme featuring Habib Rizieq and Basuki Tjahaja Purnama
Source: @Hasief Ardiasyah

The sarcastic attitude towards Rizieq Shihab appears even more prominent in the following meme, created by film-producer and Ahok supporter Kemal Arsjad who tweeted as follows:⁷³

⁷¹ Ahok and Rizieq Shihab's rivalry stems from divergent political and religious points of view. As a non-Muslim governor of Jakarta, Ahok became entangled in a scandal over blasphemy accusations in 2016 that set off large-scale demonstrations headed by Rizieq Shihab and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI). Reflecting the conflict between Ahok's more secular approach and Rizieq's more conservative and religious points of view, Rizieq, the head of the FPI, has frequently been a vocal critic of Ahok. Some saw King Salman's meeting with Rizieq as part of this dynamic, thus the picture of Ahok and King Salman became a public emblem of the rivalry.

⁷² Hasief Ardiasyah is a music journalist, perhaps better known as one of the Associate Editors at Rolling Stone Indonesia. He worked there from the magazine's founding in early 2005 until its closure on 31 December 2017.

⁷³ Film producer and commissioner at BUMN (a state-owned company).



Translate:
Finally, the King of the Petamburan Street also shook hands with the King of the Arabs.

Figure 5.4. Meme featuring Habib Rizieq and King Salman
Source: @Kemal arsjad

A meme shows Habib Rizieq blocking Ahok from shaking hands with King Salman, while President Joko Widodo monitors the situation. Ahok appeared neat, wearing a formal suit and a black peci. The peci is considered a national symbol but has Islamic origins. Although it does not mention religion directly, this image uses strong symbolism related to figures closely associated with religious and political issues in Indonesia.

This meme was created in response to a phenomenon widely discussed in society, particularly contemporary Indonesian politics and society, from 2016 to 2017. This period was marked by many significant events concerning religious issues, especially those emerging from within the Islamic community, which influenced political dynamics in Indonesia, such as the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, cases of blasphemy, and societal polarisation.

The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election was one of the most contentious in Indonesian history. This political battle brought together Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), who was then serving as governor, with several other candidates, including Anies Baswedan. Ahok, a Chinese Christian, became the centre of attention and the target of various political attacks that often-carried religious themes.

During the election campaign, Ahok was accused of committing blasphemy after his speech on a trip in the Seribu Islands quoted the Surah Al-Maidah verse 51, a verse in the Qur'an that has been widely interpreted as a prohibition against Muslims taking non-Muslims as leaders. A selectively edited video of his remarks circulated online, intensifying accusations and public anger. His statement, which suggested that some people had been misled by others citing this verse to

discourage Muslims from voting for a non-Muslim candidate, was perceived by his critics as an insult to Islamic teachings. The accusations sparked protests by conservative Islamic organisations, including the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) led by Habib Rizieq Shihab. The protests culminated in a series of mass demonstrations known as Action 411 (4 November 2016) and Action 212 (2 December 2016), which called for the arrest and punishment of Ahok. The blasphemy accusations and the reactions that accompanied them deepened the polarisation of Indonesian society (Fealy, 2016; Lim, 2017).

In contemporary Indonesia, religion has become a potent marker of political identity, often functioning less as a unifying moral framework than as a boundary of social and ideological division. During the Ahok blasphemy controversy, this polarisation was vividly reflected in the circulation of memes on social media: some defended Ahok, framing the accusations as politically orchestrated, while others portrayed him as a blasphemer unworthy of leadership. These memes, as illustrated in Figures 2.15–2.17, effectively combine key political, social, cultural, and religious elements to convey a powerful message. Figures such as Habib Rizieq Shihab, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, King Salman, and President Joko Widodo are digitally altered and placed in unusual situations.

This qualifies as a photo-based meme according to Shifman's (2014) taxonomy. It employs an edited photograph in a novel context, aiming to amuse or satirise. The image playfully yet pointedly portrays interactions between figures, implicitly touching upon tremendously controversial issues related to politics and faith roiling at that instant. While not explicitly raising matters of Islam, Habib Rizieq's appearance, as leader of the hardline Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), imbues it with unmistakable religious undertones. Therefore, this meme can be categorised as one with Islamic nuances, as it triggers discussions about Islam, albeit not in the context of traditional religious issues.

Memes with Islamic nuances in Indonesia are utilised not only for proselytising but also for airing socio-political critique. In this environment, memes have evolved into a potent medium for conveying complex messages that intertwine religion and politics, often aiming to shape public opinion. Their spread has elicited varied reactions and at times exacerbated societal polarisation, particularly during eras of religio-political strain.

One example is a meme depicting Habib Rizieq “protecting” King Salman from Ahok, widely interpreted as symbolising the rise of identity politics. As noted by scholars, this reflects how religious figures and symbols are used to mobilise support and delegitimise opponents (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019; Fealy, 2016; Lim, 2017). According to one of my interlocutors, the meme highlights how religion is weaponised to divide society along identity lines rather than policy or merit.

“This meme strikes me as a critique of how religion is used as a political tool rather than just for entertainment. At the time, societal polarisation was extreme, and this meme demonstrates how specific figures use religious identity to influence politics. Habib Rizieq in this meme is a symbol of a group that uses religion for political gain, which, in my opinion, is extremely dangerous to national unity.”⁷⁴

For supporters of conservative Islamic groups, this meme can be alternatively interpreted as a symbolic reinforcement of their support for Habib Rizieq and opposition to Ahok. In the context of the Jakarta gubernatorial election, this meme reinforces the notion that Ahok, a non-Muslim, is unfit to lead a Muslim-majority region. The meme suggests that Islamic figures like Habib Rizieq wield significant power and influence to protect Muslim interests. Alternatively, as another interlocutor explained:

“For me, this meme exemplifies Habib Rizieq's position, as he is always at the forefront of safeguarding Muslims' interests. When Ahok, a non-Muslim, attempts to shake hands with King Salman, this meme appears to imply that Habib Rizieq is there to protect the people from leaders who are deemed unfit for Islamic values. I agree with the message conveyed by this meme because it demonstrates the power and influence of ulama (clergy) in our politics”.⁷⁵

However, the meme can also be interpreted differently, as demonstrated by the account @ireнна09 who shared the photo-based meme with the caption: "Nemu inihh, kacian ga diajakk ketemu n salamann.. Sabar y." (Found this, poor guy, not invited to meet and exchange handshakes. Hang in there). Likewise, Instagram user @timothywisnu posted a similar image, writing, "Eit eit... Ente mau ngapain hok?" (Hey, hey... what are you up to, Hok?).

These alternative captions reflect the meme's multivocal nature, where the duplicate visual content generates varied interpretations, ranging from satire and political critique to playful mockery or even sympathy. This echoes what Andrew Beatty described in his reading of the Javanese slametan as a ritual open to multiple readings, depending on the social and symbolic positioning of the observer (Beatty, 1999).

⁷⁴ Interview with Andre, 32 years old, is a Social Media activist and a Digital Literacy activist who volunteers in one of the official organisations or communities concerned with eradicating harmful information content or hoax news.

⁷⁵ Interview with Dorry, 40 years old, Habib Rizieq supporter, formerly a sympathiser of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI).

Similarly, memes function as “floating signifiers” whose meanings shift according to context, intention, and the audience's perspective. The plurality of interpretations demonstrates how memes, like rituals, can function as both personal expression and public commentary, revealing layered and sometimes conflicting meanings within the same symbolic form.

King Salman's position as the King of Saudi Arabia and guardian of Mecca and Medina, two holy cities, carries significant symbolic weight. Not only in the framework of diplomatic ties but also as a symbol of religious power and influence, King Salman's 2017 visit to Indonesia was regarded as historic and strategic. Particularly for Muslim leaders, meeting King Salman was considered a significant and honourable opportunity. The absence of Habib Rizieq from the conference led to a narrative that he lacked the access or influence he had expected, which his political rivals used as a source of mockery.

Supporters of Ahok and Pro-kebhinekaan (Pro-Diversity) interpreted this meme as a symbolic attack on the values of pluralism and tolerance. Rather than a neutral joke, the meme was seen as part of a broader narrative that sought to delegitimise Ahok through religious identity politics. While it may not constitute a direct attack in itself, the meme reflects and potentially reinforces the wider social tensions in which religious rhetoric was used to undermine political opponents. It embodies the perception that certain religious groups were asserting dominance in Indonesian politics, prioritising identity over competence or policy. Alternatively, as someone I interviewed suggested:

“In my opinion, this meme shows how certain groups use religious sentiment to divide the nation. Ahok, a non-Muslim, has always been the target of this type of attack. This meme appears to support the narrative that Indonesia should only be led by Muslims, even though competence and integrity should be prioritised over religion. I see this as part of an effort to erode our country's pluralism and tolerance.”⁷⁶

The meme also sparked a broader debate about the role of religion in Indonesian politics. Many people began to question how much religion should influence political decisions and how society should react to its use as a political tool.

Socially, the meme is viewed as a form of satire criticising Indonesia's political conditions at the time. Satire is often employed to convey truths that are difficult to express directly. In this case, the meme critiques how religious and political figures manipulate situations to their advantage.

⁷⁶ Denny, 42 years old, is a PDI Perjuangan sympathiser from Solo. In Solo, Central Java, the PDI-P supporters are very dominant; that is why it is called *Kandang Banteng* (Bull Cage), PDI-P's Stronghold Area. Although not a resident of Jakarta, he supported Jokowi and Ahok when they both ran for governor and deputy governor of DKI Jakarta in 2012.



Figure 5.5. Memes posted on Agan's personal Instagram account⁷⁷
Source: Instagram @aganharahap

Agan Harahap is an Indonesian visual artist and photographer known for satirical photo manipulations featuring public figures in improbable situations, including intimate scenes of Ahok and Habib Rizieq. His work combines humour and social critique, using visual exaggeration to comment on political polarisation and religious tension. In a talk at the Umar Kayam Forum,⁷⁸ he described these images as a personal response to the fatigue produced by constant conflict between opposing political camps; his goal, he explained, was to interrupt this atmosphere with a different, more ironic perspective.

Long before the rise of generative AI, Agan's practice showed how easily digital tools could blur the line between documentation and fabrication. His edits circulated widely beyond his immediate circle, sometimes reaching audiences unfamiliar with his reputation as a photo manipulator. In those spaces, the images were at times mistaken for reality or treated as deliberate provocation. The meme of Ahok and Habib Rizieq shaking hands, for instance, triggered not only amusement but also threats from those who felt the image mocked sensitive religious and political dynamics. For Agan, this was a turning point: he publicly

⁷⁷ Agan edited photos always get thousands of likes. Even the photo of Habib Rizieq walking hand in hand with King Salman got 4359 likes, 1060 comments

⁷⁸ held at the PKK H UGM building on Thursday, 27 April 2017. Umar Khayam Forum is a discussion program organised by Pusat Kebudayaan Koesnady Hardjasoemantri (PKKH) UGM, which tries to bring the spirit and *modus operandi* of the late Umar Kayam. In his time, the late Umar Kayam embraced three main elements (academics, artists, and journalists) in discussing various issues in a severe but relaxed manner. This discussion forum is an effort to make PKK H UGM a fluid place, a meeting place for people with various backgrounds to discuss cultural matters and its current practices (Forum Umar Kayam, 2015)

admitted taking a temporary step back from such work after experiencing how quickly nuance disappeared once his images travelled beyond their original context.

Previously, the phrase “no pic equals hoax” gained popularity because photographs were widely perceived as direct representations of reality. The phrase circulated in online forums and early digital cultures to challenge claims lacking visual evidence, implying that images functioned as markers of credibility (Dibbell, 1999). However, the proliferation of digital devices and image-editing technologies has significantly altered this assumption. Visual content can now be easily manipulated, fabricated, or recontextualised, blurring the boundary between authentic and constructed realities. As a result, photographs no longer guaranteed truthfulness, and public scepticism toward visual evidence has increased (Farid, 2019; Mitchell, 2006)

In this regard, a crucial question arises: Does the fact-checking mechanism in Indonesia encompass content such as memes or satirical images? Based on information from the Head of the Mafindo Research and Development Committee,⁷⁹ (Indonesian Anti-Slander Society), satire can also be the object of fact-checking if it contains non-factual claims. However, if a disclaimer explicitly states that the content is intended as a joke, then fact-checking is usually unnecessary.

The difficulty lies in how satire travels. Jokes are rarely shared together with their original disclaimers, and once detached from their initial framing, they can function as misleading or inflammatory content. This tension is compounded by Indonesia’s legal framework, particularly the ITE Law, which can be applied to manipulated images that are seen as insulting religion or inciting hatred. The same ambiguity that grants satire its critical power also exposes creators and sharers to legal and social risk.

In addition, the regulatory aspect related to this manipulative content is also in the spotlight in today’s Indonesia. The ITE Law in Indonesia regulates various aspects related to digital content, including the potential for violations through the use of manipulative images. However, its application often causes debate, especially when discussing satire or humour, which is considered to be in a grey area between freedom of expression and its potential negative impacts. These tensions not only expose the limits of existing regulation but also feed into ongoing public debates about how far religion should shape political life in Indonesia.

⁷⁹ Interview via WhatsApp with the Head of Research and Development of Mafindo (Indonesian Anti-Slander Society), Fact-checking organisations in Indonesia, 6 February 2025

Taken together, these memes fueled wider debates about the proper place of religion in Indonesian politics: whether faith should guide leadership choices, how far religious sentiment should be mobilised for electoral gain, and what is lost when identity is prioritised over competence and integrity. Habib Rizieq, the leader of the FPI, is regarded as a symbol of conservative Islam, whereas King Salman represents global Islamic authority. Through editing these photos, meme creators associate specific events or issues with religious meanings relevant to the public. It means the meme is funny or provocative and contains messages about religious identity and beliefs. The reaction to this meme demonstrates how powerful visual content can be in shaping and directing public opinion in the digital age, particularly regarding sensitive issues like religion and politics in Indonesia.

What these earlier cases reveal is not simply that Indonesian digital culture mixes humour with politics and religion, but that repeated controversies have habituated digital publics to read satire involving religious symbols as carrying moral and ideological weight. A single edited image can thus operate as a symbolic battleground where questions of authority, identity, and legitimacy collide. This interpretive climate forms the backdrop against which the Borobudur Stupa meme emerged, helping explain why an image that began as political commentary quickly escalated into claims of religious offence, police involvement, and a wider debate over the limits of satire.

Between Digital Humour and Sensitive Religious Contexts

These earlier controversies make one thing clear: digital humour in Indonesia unfolds within a sensitive cultural landscape. Humour often aims to entertain, while satire mobilises humour to critique or expose social and political tensions, often carrying a sharper, more critical intent than humour's general focus on amusement. However, especially in the digital space, the line between the two is easily blurred, as one person's joke can easily be perceived as sharp criticism by others. Humour involving sacred symbols can be viewed as transgressive or disrespectful. In pluralistic societies like Indonesia, where religion plays a crucial role in public life, digital humour that incorporates sacred symbols can provoke intense reactions, ranging from amusement to accusations of blasphemy.

To make sense of these dynamics, this section draws on key concepts in the study of digital satire, religious sensitivity, and public discourse in the Indonesian context. Indonesia, despite recent conservative trends (Barton et al., 2021; Hadiz, 2018), has long been characterised by traditions of religious moderation and mutual respect (van Bruinessen, 2013). By reviewing foundational theories and recent studies, this review evaluates how humour (and satire) involving sacred symbols is perceived, how it is analysed, and how public figures and online communities shape its reception.

The political significance of humour has long been recognised. Scholars have shown that humour can function both as a vehicle for critique and as a means of reinforcing existing power relations (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). Satire, in particular, allows sensitive political and religious issues to be addressed indirectly, often navigating social constraints around overt criticism. This function is especially relevant in Indonesia, where public commentary on religious and political institutions is shaped by strong normative expectations.

In the digital age, memes have become a particularly influential form of political satire. Their multimodal nature, combining images, text, and sometimes sounds, and their ability to reach large audiences rapidly make memes particularly influential in digital public discourse (Bülow & Johann, 2023). Bülow and Johann's study explores the impact of contextualisation in political memes, explicitly analysing how elements like language variation and visual humour influence audience perception. Their online experiments revealed that the visual presentation of political content as memes has a more significant impact on user engagement than variations in language or humour. This pattern is reflected in the Borobudur Stupa meme case, where the visual alteration of a sacred monument, rather than its textual commentary, became the primary trigger for public outrage, illustrating how powerful visual elements are in shaping meme reception in culturally sensitive contexts.

Understanding why such images generate divergent reactions requires engagement with humour theory. Two influential frameworks are incongruity theory and benign violation theory. Incongruity theory explains humour as emerging from a mismatch between expectations and reality. In digital memes, such as those combining sacred religious symbols with satirical political commentary (e.g., the Borobudur Stupa meme), humour often arises from the unexpected interplay of text and images that challenge cultural norms. Influenced by Kant's ideas on aesthetic judgment and imagination, as well as work by Ruch and Heintz, this theory demonstrates how humour can elicit laughter or discomfort, depending on the cultural context and the audience's sensitivities (Ruch & Heintz, 2016).

Beyond cognitive mismatch, humour also operates as a social practice. Ted Cohen's *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* emphasises jokes as a means of creating social bonds and shared understanding (Cohen, 1999). He argues that humour is often context-dependent, relying on shared knowledge and social proximity to be understood as playful rather than offensive. When this shared context is absent, the same humorous act may be perceived as inappropriate or even hostile. For instance, an inside joke between friends may be harmless within a closed group but become offensive once circulated beyond that circle. In digital environments, where content travels rapidly across social, religious, and ideological boundaries, this shift in interpretation becomes especially pronounced.

Benign Violation Theory further clarifies this dynamic by suggesting that humour arises when social or moral norms are violated in a way that feels safe or acceptable. This framework helps explain why religious memes often provoke mixed responses: some audiences perceive them as harmless satire, while others experience them as offensive due to the symbolic weight of sacred objects or figures. Research by McGraw and Warren demonstrates that cultural values, particularly in societies with strong religious traditions, shape whether norm violations are perceived as benign or unacceptable (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

Together, Incongruity Theory and Benign Violation Theory highlight humour's dual nature: the cognitive surprise that produces laughter and the contextual conditions that determine its acceptability. While these frameworks are widely used in Western scholarships, often in experimental psychology or studies of stand-up comedy and interpersonal humour (Attardo et al., 2024; Martin, 2007), their application to digital satire in non-Western settings remains limited. As Nilan and Feixa (2006) have noted in their critique of youth culture studies in Southeast Asia, such limitations often stem from the dominance of globalised, Western-centric analytical frameworks.

To account for how humour circulates beyond immediate social contexts in digital environments, Baym & Boyd (2012) conceptualise mediated publicness as a condition that reshapes visibility, audience, and interpretation in digital environments. While this framework has been widely applied, its relevance to humour involving religious symbols and public figures in plural contexts remains less systematically examined.

This limitation is evident in much of the literature on political memes. For example, Bülow & Johann (2023) analyse political memes, such as those featuring Angela Merkel, but their focus remains firmly on European publics. Yet, their focus on relatively secular contexts offers limited insight into cases where humour intersects with religious sensitivity in plural societies such as Indonesia. Related insights also emerge from research at the intersection of humour and law. Initiatives such as *ForHum* (*Forum for Humour and the Law*) document legal disputes involving visual political humour, including cartoons, memes, and satirical images, that test the boundaries between freedom of expression and respect for religious and cultural sensibilities, primarily in European contexts (forhum.org). These cases show how visual humour can function both as a vehicle for critique and as a trigger for offence, often resulting in legal action or public controversy.

Reception studies further show that humour is interpreted through culturally situated experiences. Kuipers (2011) highlights how socioeconomic background and cultural proximity shape responses to humour in multicultural societies. This is particularly relevant to the Indonesian context, where religious identity is closely tied to social norms and cultural values. This is confirmed by Lim's research on social media activism in Indonesia and how it provides insights into the ways

various digital platforms facilitate political expression, even on sensitive issues (Lim, 2013). Lim argues that while social media creates opportunities for political critique, it exposes users to conflicting interpretations of acceptable satire, especially in a country where religious and political values are interwoven. This insight also aligns with findings by Slama, who illustrates how Indonesian Muslims utilise social media to negotiate their religious identity, revealing the complexities of engaging in online satire in a way that tries to respect religious sensitivities (Slama, 2018). Moreover, Kuipers highlights how humour's reception in multicultural settings is highly variable, as individuals tend to interpret satire through their own experiences and beliefs while living close to others. This variability underscores the need for sensitivity when employing humour intersecting with deeply rooted religious or cultural symbols.

These limitations are directly relevant to the Borobudur Stupa meme, where political humour intersected with sacred symbolism in a plural religious setting, triggering reactions that cannot be fully explained by studies grounded in secular European contexts. By analysing public sentiments related to the posting and circulation of that meme on social media, and utilising interviews with varied audiences that have engaged with, discussed, and reflected on the meme, along with the legal ramifications and the role of key figures in shaping meme circulation, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how humour, when applied to religious symbols, can provoke complex debates about freedom of expression and respect for belief systems in Indonesia's digital public sphere.

Data Collection and Preprocessing

To analyse public reactions to the Borobudur Stupa meme, I collected a dataset of 236 comments directly responding to the meme from Twitter. This dataset was curated to capture initial reactions to the meme itself rather than responses to other users' opinions. By excluding second-order interactions (i.e., replies to comments rather than replies to the meme), the analysis foregrounds how audiences respond to the meme as a symbolic object, rather than how they negotiate or contest each other's interpretations. This distinction is analytically important: first-order comments capture immediate evaluations of the meme's imagery and meaning, whereas second-order replies tend to shift the discussion toward interpersonal debate and opinion alignment. This focus allows the study to capture initial affective and moral reactions to the meme, which are central to understanding how religious offence and humour are first articulated in digital public discourse.

While 236 comments may seem limited in size, qualitative studies focusing on digital discourse often work with targeted datasets that prioritise relevance and depth (Kozinets, 2020; A. Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Additionally, this study combines sentiment analysis with qualitative discourse analysis, ensuring that statistical trends are interpreted within their socio-political and cultural contexts.

This approach aligns with digital ethnography methods, which can be applied to both smaller, targeted datasets and larger-scale online interactions, depending on the research objectives and available resources (Boyd, 2014; A. E. Marwick, 2013).

Furthermore, given that the viral moment of the meme was relatively short-lived, the dataset effectively captures the peak period of engagement, specifically on Roy Suryo's Twitter post after he re-uploaded the meme on 10 June 2022. Since the dataset consists of 236 direct responses to his post, it represents the initial public reaction to the meme within the first critical days of its circulation under his account. While broader discussions surrounding the meme continued on various platforms, this dataset focuses on how Twitter users engaged with Roy Suryo's role in popularising the meme rather than the meme's circulation in other digital spaces.

To retrieve this dataset, I used the Twitter API and applied filters based on relevant keywords, such as "Borobudur," "meme," and "Roy Suryo," ensuring the collection of comments that explicitly referenced the meme. Unlike TikTok, where hashtags function as a primary mechanism for content clustering and algorithmic visibility, hashtags on Twitter are often used inconsistently, ironically, or strategically, and are therefore less reliable indicators of thematic relevance. For this reason, the Twitter dataset prioritises direct replies to a specific post rather than hashtag-based retrieval. The data collection spanned from 7 June 2022 (the date of the first upload), until 30 June 2022, encompassing both the meme's initial circulation and the height of its virality following Roy Suryo's re-upload on 10 June 2022. This timeframe allowed for capturing immediate reactions and responses as the discourse evolved.

Sentiment Classification

After isolating the dataset, I prepared the comments for sentiment analysis through a series of preprocessing steps designed to preserve contextual meaning while enabling reliable classification. Given the informal and conversational nature of Twitter discourse in Indonesia, particular attention was paid to how slang, tone, and evaluative language were handled.

The first step involved cleaning the text by removing URLs, user mentions, special characters, and non-alphanumeric symbols that do not contribute to semantic interpretation. Rather than applying stemming, this study prioritised text normalisation due to the prevalence of informal language and slang in the dataset. Normalisation allows non-standard lexical forms to be converted into their standard equivalents while preserving grammatical structure and contextual meaning.

To implement this process, I developed a custom normalisation function which contains a collection of informal Indonesian words and their standardised

equivalents from a word library at GitHub: Kamus Alay (Salsabila et al., 2018).⁸⁰ This function converts all non-standard forms of words in the data set into their standard forms. For example, the informal term “gajelas” (unclear) was normalised to “tidak jelas” while “males” (lazy) was converted to “malas. While this normalisation inevitably reduces some tonal nuance, it was necessary to ensure consistent semantic representation for sentiment classification.

Unlike stemming, which reduces words to their root forms, normalisation preserves pragmatic and evaluative meanings that are central to interpreting online discourse. In Indonesian social media contexts, slang expressions often carry culturally specific connotations that shape how humour, offence, or critique is communicated. Term such as “*santuy*” (relaxed but can also be ironic), “*receh*” (light humour) and “*ngegas*” (angry or aggressive response) were therefore retained in their contextualised forms, as reducing them to lexical roots would risk flattening their affective meaning.

After normalisation, standard preprocessing steps, including stopword removal and tokenisation,⁸¹ were applied to prepare the text for classification. These steps were implemented to support computational processing while maintaining the interpretive integrity of the comments. The processed dataset was then analysed using IndoBERT (Koto et al., 2020), a transformer-based language model trained specifically on Indonesian-language corpora, which is well suited to capturing semantic and contextual nuance in informal digital texts.

The sentiment classification divided comments into three categories: positive, negative, and neutral. Comments were classified as positive when they expressed approval, amusement, or support for the meme. Negative comments included expressions of criticism, disapproval, or offence, particularly those addressing the perceived misuse of religious symbols. Neutral comments neither endorsed nor rejected the meme but treated it as part of broader digital culture or commented descriptively without clear evaluative positioning.

By combining sentiment classification with qualitative interpretation, this approach avoids treating sentiment scores as self-contained indicators. Instead, computational results are read alongside discursive context, allowing emotional tone, moral judgement, and religious sensitivity to be interpreted as socially situated responses rather than isolated data points. This integration is particularly important in analysing humour that intersects with sacred symbols, where

⁸⁰ The term *alay* itself refers to a style of exaggerated, playful, or intentionally distorted language popular among Indonesian internet users, particularly youth communities.

⁸¹ Stopword removal refers to excluding high-frequency function words (e.g., *di*, *ke*, *dari*) that do not contribute to sentiment meaning, while tokenisation involves segmenting text into units (words or phrases) for computational analysis. While basic tokenisation is applied during preprocessing, IndoBERT performs its own internal subword tokenisation as part of the model architecture.

reactions are often shaped by cultural proximity, religious norms, and the mediated publicness of digital platforms.

Sentiment Analysis and Interpretative Perspectives on the Borobudur Stupa Meme

In this section, I will present the sentiment analysis findings for the responses to the Borobudur Stupa meme. This analysis aims to classify responses as positive, negative, or neutral and explore some of the larger discursive patterns that arose around the meme as they relate to sensitivity to religion, digital humour, and public accountability.

Analysing the usage of language in response to the meme, I can identify themes that were central to the debate over the meme, not just in terms of its content but also the roles that public figures play in amplifying digital controversies and the intersection of digital ethics with any legal ramifications. This approach allows us beyond mere sentiment classification; it helps us understand how specific words are central to discussions surrounding Roy Suryo, religious respect, and legal accountability.

The dataset contains a total of 236 comments specifically addressing the meme and reveals a range of viewpoints including those who found the meme offensive, others who considered it political satire, and those who treated it as an ordinary feature of online political humour rather than a morally or religiously significant act. Instead of discussing the meme itself, public discussions mainly focused on questioning Roy Suryo's involvement in spreading the meme. The insight becomes clear with each word turning up, as illustrated with the emerging word clouds based on the dataset.

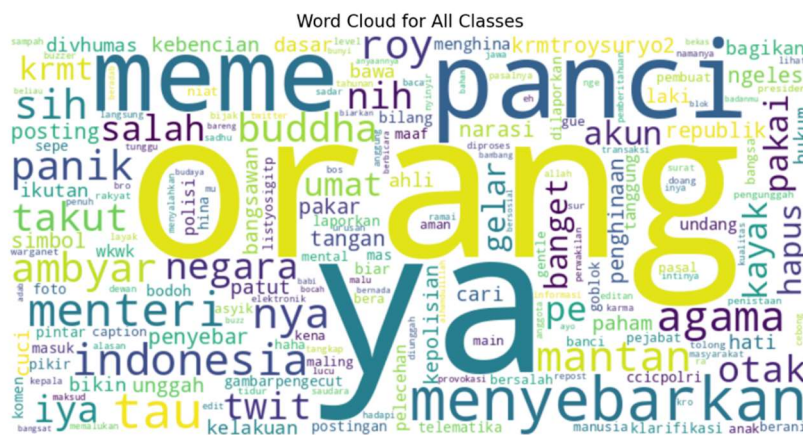


Figure 5.6. The Visualisation of Word Cloud for All Classes
Source: Sentiment Analysis Results

While word clouds are often associated with quantitative text analysis, my approach in this section remains firmly within the realm of qualitative discourse analysis. Rather than relying on word frequency as a proxy for significance, I use the word cloud as a visual entry point to identify discursive patterns, affective tones, and socio-cultural cues embedded in language. This method enables me to examine how certain terms, although visually dominant or seemingly trivial, acquire meaning through their relational use, cultural context, and rhetorical function, in line with discourse-analytical approaches that treat language as a form of social practice rather than a neutral reflection of reality (Fairclough, 2013). In doing so, I move beyond surface-level visualisation and read the word cloud as a discursive artefact through which humour, responsibility, and religious sensitivity are negotiated in Indonesian digital culture.

Words that Matter: A Cultural Reading of Digital Reactions

At first glance, the word cloud appears dominated by ordinary terms such as *orang* (person), *ya*, *meme*, *menyebarkan* (spreading), and *panci* (pan). In the context of Indonesian digital discourse, however, these seemingly generic words carry layered social meanings. Rather than functioning as neutral descriptors, they become sites where moral judgment, responsibility, and public accountability are negotiated. Reading these terms relationally allows us to trace how the Borobudur Stupa meme was discussed not only as an image, but as a moral and political incident embedded in broader cultural expectations.

The Actor, Not Just the Artefact

Among the most visually dominant terms in the word cloud is *orang* (person), a seemingly generic word that, upon closer inspection, reveals more profound discursive significance. In this case, *orang* is often referred to indirectly or explicitly as Roy Suryo, the public figure who re-posted the meme. Phrases like “*Orang kok begitu sih?*” (“Why would a person do such a thing?”), “*Orang ini sudah keterlaluan*” (This person has gone too far) or “*Sebagai sesama orang Jogja, saya malu*” (“As someone also from Jogja, I am embarrassed”), “*anda ini orang jawa pak....*” (Sir, you are Javanese...) show that people were not just reacting to the meme, they were reacting to the person behind it. It also reveals a broader social and cultural dimension, where Roy Suryo's actions are assessed not only as individual mistakes but also as something shameful in the context of a particular community or regional identity. This illustrates how online users position themselves in a normative framework to judge the actions of a public figure against broader cultural and social standards. The conversation shifted from the meme's message to a broader judgment of character, identity, and cultural responsibility.

These comments, while not explicitly Islamic, reflect deeper moral expectations within Indonesia's predominantly Muslim society. The emphasis on proper conduct, shame, and responsibility aligns with Islamic ethical values such as *akhlak*

al-karimah (noble character), particularly in how netizens expect public figures to behave with sensitivity in matters involving religion and public morality.

Similarly, *ya*, a seemingly trivial word, becomes rhetorically powerful. The word “*ya*” appears in various comments that show expressions of disapproval, irony, and sarcasm towards Roy Suryo's role in spreading the meme. For example, comments such as “*Klo lihat tangkapan layar ini, yang memprovokasi siapa ya?*” (If you look at this screenshot, who provoked it?) shows the use of “*ya*” as a form of rhetorical question that implies that the public already has their own conclusion about who is responsible for this controversy. Something similar can also be seen in the comment “*Cieeee, ketar ketir ya...?*” (Eaaa... feeling nervous, huh?), which uses “*ya*” as a way of satirising someone who seems to be starting to worry about the consequences of their actions.

In addition, in comments such as “*Lab. Ada postingan gak patut, ya jangan di reposting. Gitu aja kok ya gak bisa mikir sih?!!*” (Huh? If a post is inappropriate, it shouldn't be reposted. Isn't that just basic common sense?!), the use of “*ya*” functions as an emphasis on something that is considered a logical conclusion or decision that should have been understood without the need for further debate. In this context, “*ya*” is not just an affirmative particle but functions to strengthen the tone of satire, criticism or social expectations in public discourse. These small words tell us that the reactions were not just about the meme's content, they were emotionally and culturally loaded.

Both words, *orang* and *ya* do not immediately reflect the content of the meme but suggest that attention in the discussion shifted away from the meme's artistic or religious dimensions toward the actor responsible for its circulation, Roy Suryo, and his perceived ethical responsibilities.

Although *menteri*, *Indonesia*, and *twit* (the Indonesian colloquial form of “tweet”) are also visually dominant, they are used primarily on descriptive or contextual ways, such as “*memalukan nama Indonesia*” (bringing shame to Indonesia) or “*twit ini tidak pantas*.” (this tweet is inappropriate). These do contribute to the discourse, but they do not carry the same affective or moral weight as more emotionally charged terms.

Layer Two: Religious Sensitivity and Legal Anxiety

If the first layer centres on moral evaluation of the actor, a second cluster of terms points more directly to religious sensitivity and legal anxiety. This layer brings the discussion closer to the core of the controversy, where humour intersects with sacred symbols and legal norms.

To interpret the meme as a socio-religious controversy, I focus on a second set of keywords that are less visually dominant but more thematically charged:

menyebarkan, *Buddha*, *penghinaan* (insult), *agama* (religion), *salah* (wrong), *takut* (afraid), and *panik* (panic). These terms signal a shift in public discourse from casual commentary toward moral judgement, legal accountability, and ethical positioning.

For instance, *Buddha* directly references the religious symbol that was satirised. Its presence signifies that many viewers interpreted the meme not just as political satire, but as a violation of religious sanctity. *Penghinaan* and *agama* further frame the incident within the moral-legal framework of religious blasphemy in Indonesia, echoing laws around SARA (Ethnicity, Religion, Race, and Intergroup Relations).

The strong disapproval from Muslim online users toward perceived disrespect of Buddhist symbols indicates an active defence of interfaith harmony. Although the comments did not invoke Islam directly, this response resonates with the principle of *tasamuh* (tolerance) in Islamic ethics, demonstrating how Islamic-inspired moral norms shape digital discourse even in cases involving non-Islamic religious icons.

Salah, *takut*, and *panik* reflect emotional and normative responses to Roy Suryo's role in circulating the meme. These responses reveal a broader discourse of accountability, where users engage in public shaming or demand legal action, rather than simply critiquing the content. Drawing on scholars like Van Leeuwen and Wetherell et al, I understand that language is not only a tool for communication but also a means for enacting power relations, asserting social norms, and negotiating identity (van Leeuwen, 2008; Wetherell et al., 2001). The presence of terms like *takut* and *panik*, often used sarcastically, suggests a performative layer of discourse where users publicly mock and morally indict a public figure.

The word "*menyebarkan*" (spreading) also became dominant in the discussion, but not only in the context of the virality of the meme. Many comments underline the legal aspects of Roy Suryo's actions as a meme spreader, citing regulations such as Article 45, paragraph 3 of the 2016 ITE Law, which regulates the spread of information that can cause hatred based on SARA. For example, comments such as "*Tidak mengedit tapi ikut turut menyebarkan tetap melanggar KUHP* (Not editing but also spreading it still violates the Criminal Code)" or "*Pembuat, pengedit, dan yang menyebarkan juga layak bertanggung jawab secara hukum*" (The creator, editor, and spreader also deserve to be held legally responsible) show that some netizens see the spread of this meme not just as an action without consequences, but as a violation that must be processed legally.

In this case, the word "*menyebarkan*" does not only refer to the viral nature of the meme but also shows a more serious meaning: that the act of spreading is considered to have significant legal and moral impacts. This is in line with

concerns that the spread of memes that are considered offensive to minority religions could set a precedent in legal debates regarding freedom of expression and respect for religious symbols.

The ‘Panci’ Effect: Scandal as Meme Memory

The word *panci* carries a unique backstory in this context, closely linked to Roy Suryo himself. After stepping down as Menpora (Minister of Youth and Sports), Roy was involved in a scandal where he was accused of taking items from his official residence, including kitchen pans (*panci*). This led to him being sarcastically dubbed the "*Dewa Panci*" (God of Pans) by social media commentators, a nickname that became a running joke among netizens. When Roy posted the Borobudur Stupa meme, which went viral, his nickname resurfaced in discussions, blending humour and criticism. The prominence of *panci* in this context is more than just a kitchen item; it has become a symbol of ridicule tied to Roy Suryo's controversial public image. 'Panci' in this discussion indicates that for many users, the controversy surrounding the meme was about Roy Suryo's credibility, not just about sensitivity around religion. This blending of humour, satire, and political critique reflects how digital culture in Indonesia highlights personal scandals within the broader context of socio-political conversations.

From Meme to Mirror: Digital Discourse as Moral Arena

This reading suggests that what initially appeared as a typical internet meme evolved into a moment of public reckoning, revealing deeper tensions around ethics, collective memory, and the boundaries of religious expression. While terms like *orang* and *ja* reveal evaluative framing, the second-layer words within these direct responses reflect how cultural and legal discourses were activated through public reactions to the meme, showing how humour, morality, and legality intersected in online user's interpretations. To clarify, by "evaluative framing," I refer to the way online users use language not only to describe the meme or its circulation, but to judge, criticise, or express approval/disapproval, whether through explicit moral commentary or subtle rhetorical devices like sarcasm, repetition, or emotionally loaded particles.

Rather than functioning merely as a visual summary, the word cloud helps trace how attention shifted from the image itself to questions of responsibility, offence, and accountability. Words that appear visually marginal nonetheless remain analytically significant, as they point to what was at stake in the debate: the limits of humour, the ethics of circulation, and the protection of religious symbols in a plural public sphere.

As Bruns and Burgess (2015) remind us, visualisations like word clouds become powerful interpretive tools when read alongside contextual and cultural understandings of discourse. In this case, the meme and its reception reveal the

intersections of humour, digital ethics, and religious politics in Indonesia’s evolving media ecology.

Unpacking these key terms suggests that the Borobudur Stupa meme not only creates a space where social norms and legal interpretations are contested in real-time. Mockery, legal concerns, and moral arguments converge in the meme, reinforcing its focus on the image’s symbolic and provocative content. The meme thus acts as a litmus test, revealing where the boundaries of free expression, religious reverence, and digital accountability are drawn, and how they are contested in public discourse.

While the word cloud provides insight into the moral, religious, and legal textures of the conversation, it does not capture how widespread particular affective responses were across the dataset. To address this, the analysis now turns to sentiment classification using IndoBERT (Koto et al., 2020), which offers a quantitative overview of how users responded to the meme during its peak circulation, particularly following its amplification by Roy Suryo.

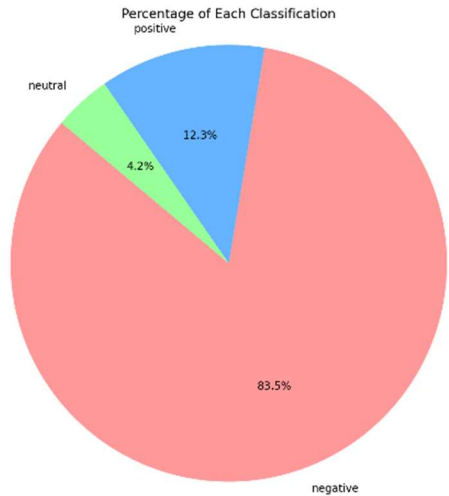


Figure 5.7. Percentage of Each Classification
Source: Sentiment Analysis’s Results

The sentiment classification shows a strongly negative pattern within this dataset, with 83.5% of the 236 comments classified as negative, followed by 12.3% positive and 4.2% neutral responses. While this dataset is limited in size and does not claim statistical representativeness, the distribution nonetheless reveals a clear tendency in how users reacted during the meme’s peak circulation. This multilayered reaction illustrates the numerous overlapping influences, including religion, politics, and personal credibility, that contribute to digital disputes.

Notably, the machine learning model categorised comments into these groups based on the frequency and intensity of specific words that the model was trained to recognise as negative, positive, or neutral. Words such as "*takut*" (afraid), "*panik*" (panic), and "*ngeles*" (dodging) were flagged as negative because they tend to reflect emotions or mock Roy. Conversely, words like "meme," "agama" (religion), and "ahli" (expert) were flagged as positive in some contexts because they often convey value, appreciation, or authority comments that did not show strong feelings either way and saw the meme as just part of online culture.

Reading Negative Sentiment Through Keyword Patterns

To support and deepen the word cloud analysis, the sentiment classification helps clarify how negative reactions were articulated rather than merely how many there were. While early responses centred on the perceived disrespect toward Buddhist religious symbolism, the discussion rapidly shifted toward a broader public critique of the actor responsible for disseminating the meme, in this case Roy Suryo. This shift from religious concern to political critique becomes particularly evident when we examine the most frequent keywords in the negative sentiment class.

Table 5.1. Ten Most Frequent Words in Negative Sentiment Class
Source: Sentiment Analysis (IndoBERT Classification Model) Class: Negative

Word	Translation	Count
Ya	Yes	37
Orang	People	34
Menyebarkan	Spreading	24
Panci	Pan	24
Meme	Meme	19
Menteri	Minister	14
Tau	Know	14
Indonesia	Indonesia	13
Panik	Panic	13

As shown in Table 5.1, the frequent occurrence of the word "*ya*" in the negative class, despite being a relatively neutral word on its own, can be explained by how it is used contextually within the comments. In Indonesian, "*ya*" often affirms or emphasises a negative sentiment, especially when paired with robust and critical language. For example, phrases like "*ya, ini menghina*" (yes, this is insulting) or "*ya, tidak menghargai*" (yes, it's disrespectful) are common ways people agree with negative sentiments.

In this context, "*ya*" serves as a supportive or affirmative particle that enhances the impact of the expressed critique. Although the word itself does not carry a

negative connotation, its frequent use in the dataset is tied to the overall negative tone of the comments, particularly in affirming complaints, criticisms, or offensive statements regarding the Borobudur Stupa meme, as the following comment:

“ya ternyata pengecut” (Yes, it turns out to be a coward)

“ya jelas banget kalau anda ikut menyebarkan dengan bumbu tweet yang penuh penghinaan dan kebencian” (Yes, it is very clear that you are involved in spreading tweets full of insults and hatred)

Thus, the prominence of “*ya*” reflects the emotional intensity of the negative reactions and functions as an affirmative discourse particle that reinforces evaluative stance in conversational Indonesian (Sneddon, 2003). Likewise, *orang* appears repeatedly in personal attacks or moral judgments, often used to generalise blame or character assessment and frequently directed at Roy Suryo.

Words such as “menyebarkan,” “panci,” and “meme” overlap with the word cloud findings, indicating that the controversy was not merely theological but entangled with questions of digital responsibility, political credibility, and accumulated public memory. In this case, religious sensitivity served as the trigger, but what sustained public interest and drove most of the critique was the perceived irresponsibility of a former state official and the political baggage associated with his past. This suggests that in Indonesia’s digital public sphere, religion rarely stands alone as a point of contention. Instead, it intersects with public memory, power, and legality, transforming seemingly light content, such as memes, into arenas of moral and political judgment.

Although other emotionally charged terms, such as *penghinaan* (insults) or *takut* (fear) do not appear in this top-ten list, their discursive significance remains high, as they explicitly index moral judgement and affective response within Indonesian evaluative language practices (Sneddon, 2003). This suggests that sentiment models and discourse analysis work best when used in conjunction: the former reveals general trends, while the latter uncovers deeper layers of meaning. Together, these perspectives underscore that digital controversies, such as the Borobudur meme, are not just about the content itself but also about who shares it, how it is received, and the broader cultural tensions it triggers. This also underscores how digital controversies serve as arenas where authority, legitimacy, and ethical responsibility are continuously negotiated in Indonesia’s mediated public life.

From Sentiments to Subjectivities: Exploring How People Make Meaning of the Meme

While the word cloud and sentiment analysis provide a macro view of the dominant themes and emotional tones in responses to the Borobudur Stupa meme, they do not fully capture the personal and cultural meanings that underpin

these reactions. This section draws on a subset of in-depth interviews conducted as part of the broader digital ethnographic fieldwork outlined in the methodology chapter. Through these qualitative accounts, the analysis moves beyond what people felt to examine why they responded as they did, foregrounding the frames of reference, lived experiences, and cultural values that shape interpretations of humour, satire, and religious sensitivity.

This section draws from in-depth interviews to explore three recurring response types: (1) those who found the meme humorous and politically relevant, (2) those who experienced it as offensive and disrespectful, and (3) those who viewed it neutrally as part of broader meme culture. Applying Incongruity Theory and Benign Violation Theory, I demonstrate how humour is not simply a matter of intention or design, but also of interpretation, and how the same meme can function as critique, violation, or creative expression depending on the viewer.

Reactions of Humour: Politically Motivated Critique

The first informant is a fruit trader in one of Semarang's markets, aged 41 years. He was born into a Buddhist family. I met him when he attended the Wahana Negara Rahaja (WNR), The Indonesian Nichiren Shoshu Buddha Dharma Council (MNSBDI) hosted the event at the Alila Hotel in Solo City.⁸²

I presented the meme to him and inquired about his viewpoint. He did not blame the former Minister of Youth and Sports (Menpora), Roy Suryo, for a meme depicting the Borobudur Temple stupa, which was altered to resemble Indonesian President Joko Widodo (also known as Jokowi). He even questioned why Roy seemed to be the centre of attention for the pros and cons of uploading a meme of a photo that looked like Jokowi. He did not create the meme; he only reposted and captioned it, and there is nothing wrong with that.

He believed uploading a stupa meme similar to Jokowi does not require legal action. According to him, the meme initially appeared as a protest against the government's plan to raise the ticket price for the Borobudur Temple by IDR 750,000. As a Buddhist, he admitted that he was not offended by the meme depicting Jokowi as a stupa. "It would be different if the stupa were edited with animal faces like pig, rat, and dog faces; I would undoubtedly be upset." The

⁸² Wahana Negara Rahaja (WNR) is an activity to pray for peace in the homeland, by the Buddha's teachings, "*Aku adalah Tiang, Mata dan Bahtera bagi Bangsa.*" (I am the Pillar, Eyes, and Ark of my Nation). As a concrete manifestation of actively participating in the development of the homeland, this activity is always accompanied by various social service activities in the area where the WNR event occurs. The event takes place from 28 September to 1 October 2023. WNR always includes real-world community action programs and collaboration with organisations from diverse backgrounds. WNR 2023 began with a 1,000-fruit-tree planting event in the Solo Urban Forest area. More than 300 Buddhists, interfaith leaders, and young people from Solo participated in the planting. WNR has occurred in Bali, North Sumatra, South Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Jakarta, Bandung, Semarang, Surabaya, and Solo.

President did not make any angry or offensive statements. He interprets the meme as a satirical or critical commentary on the government's policies, like the rising ticket costs for Borobudur. The viewpoint is based on the practitioner's interpretation of the meme as a critique of social issues rather than a direct assault on religious symbols.

He believed that Buddhism does not worship statues, but rather the heart and mind, which must be pure, free from evil, and full of virtue. Furthermore, he claimed that Roy's actions regarding the Jokowi-like stupa meme were a form of criticism. Roy Suryo frequently criticises the government, such as with sharp criticism of the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project, which he calls Kereta Cepat Bohong-bohongan (a fake high-speed rail project), also known as “kecebong” (a tadpole). He said that the criticism should be viewed as constructive, allowing government policies to be refined.

This view aligns with a public statement by Lieus Sungkharisma, a Buddhist community figure and public commentator, who expressed surprise at the determination of Roy Suryo as a suspect in the Borobudur stupa meme case. Lieus stated that the meme emerged as a form of protest against the planned increase in the entrance ticket price for Borobudur Temple from IDR 50,000 to IDR 750,000. He also added that President Jokowi himself did not show any anger or offence towards the meme. According to Lieus, the criticism conveyed through the meme should be considered as constructive criticism of government policy (VOI.id, 2022b).⁸³

Another informant is Isa, 22, from Central Sulawesi, who was in the Communication Department at Sebelas Maret University. He stated there was no intention of insulting specific groups but rather to criticise the government's policy of raising the entrance ticket price to the Borobudur Temple. This informant's statement suggests that the dissemination of the Borobudur Stupa meme was driven by criticism of government policies rather than an intention to insult or target specific religious groups. The Borobudur Stupa meme serves as a platform for diverse perspectives and interpretations, inviting users to engage in dialogue about the intersection of religion, politics, and cultural heritage.

Those informants did not perceive the meme as an attack on religion or a violation of religious norms. Instead, they saw it as a satirical critique of government policy, particularly regarding the hike in the Borobudur entrance fee. While the meme used a religious symbol, they interpreted it primarily as political humour rather than an insult to Buddhism. For them, the meme criticises the government's decision to raise ticket prices for Borobudur, making the violation of sacred imagery less threatening or offensive since it serves a broader, socially acceptable cause (political critique), not intentionally targeting religious sensitivities.

⁸³ https://voi.id/en/news/185015?utm_source

These perspectives align with key humour theories that help us understand why some may receive such content positively. Incongruity Theory also applies here, as humour comes from the incongruity of using a revered religious symbol to criticize a governmental decision. They see the meme as an incongruous but effective way of highlighting issues around public policy, such as ticket price hikes. The dissonance between a sacred image and a political message creates humour for them, but it does not cross the line into being offensive. Their reception falls into the category of Reactions of Humour, particularly in the context of political satire.

This pattern aligns with Shifman (2014)'s account of humour as often working through a sense of superiority, where laughter emerges at the expense of someone or something being mocked. In the case of the Borobudur Stupa meme, those who found it funny were not laughing at Buddhism as a tradition but at the political figure implied in the edited image. For these respondents, the humour lies in poking fun at state authority and the public figure involved. In this reading, the altered stupa becomes a tool for criticising power rather than belittling a sacred symbol, which helps clarify why the same meme can read as playful critique to some and as disrespect to others.

Reactions of Offence: Violation of Religious Symbols

In contrast, another respondent expressed offence toward the meme, citing a deep violation of religious values and cultural norms. The informant, a 52-year-old batik vendor in Solo, who identifies as Buddhist and is of Chinese Indonesian background, articulated his response through a moral framework shaped by Buddhist teachings as well as Javanese cultural values such as *rukun* (social harmony) and *unggah-ungguh* (respectful conduct). These ethical orientations strongly inform how he evaluates public expression, particularly when sacred symbols are involved.

When I showed him the Borobudur Stupa meme, he acknowledged having seen it but admitted he had not followed the controversy closely. However, from a Buddhist perspective, he found it offensive. "First, he altered the iconic Borobudur. Then, he added that phrase, 'Lucu... hehehe, ambyar'. That's mocking." For him, the tone of the phrase was even more upsetting than the image itself. It trivialised the sanctity of the temple and conveyed indifference toward Buddhist sensitivities.

He argued that such actions warranted legal consequences. While the image alteration was already offensive, it was the mocking caption that, in his view, transformed the post into a direct insult toward Buddhism. By trivialising a sacred site, the post was seen as both irreverent and culturally insensitive.

This sense of offence did not remain confined to individual interpretation but also surfaced in broader public discourse, including online commentaries and

media coverage. VOI reported that Roy Suryo was considered to have insulted Buddhists by uploading an edited photo of the Buddhist symbol at Borobudur Temple, which was replaced with the face of the head of state. Social media activist Yusuf Muhammad stated that Roy's upload had hurt the feelings of Buddhists as adherents of a religion that uses all the symbols at Borobudur as a place of worship (VOI.id, 2022a).⁸⁴

I sent messages to some other informants based on their comments on Twitter. Someone with the username Bocah Tua Nakal @Sydney Whiteee wrote on his profile, "Practice religion in a humane way, so that you don't become a God for your fellow man." His reaction to Roy Suryo's post, "*benar tidak mengedit, tapi anda sudah memprovokasi juga, anda pasti sudah tahu jika budha itu berkaitan dengan agama, maka bisa dipastikan anda sengaja menyebar kebencian. Anda pakar telematika yang faham UU ITE,⁸⁵ berpendidikan tapi tidak beradab, eling pak!!!!*" (Indeed, you did not edit, but you have provoked it, too; you must have known that if Buddhism is related to religion, then you can be sure that you are deliberately spreading hatred. You are a telematics expert who understands ITE Law. You are educated but not civilised, so remember Pak!!!!). By producing the meme, he stated that such an act could cause religious conflicts, and he views Roy's actions as intentionally exacerbating divisive emotions. Public personalities should behave more responsibly, particularly when it comes to delicate religious issues.

Additionally, the Pemburu Senja account (@eighball8) stated that he deeply loves Indonesia and is committed to fighting political figures driven by a lust for power. In his response to the Borobudur meme controversy, he tagged @DivHumas_Polri account, asking, "Kapan minoritas memiliki keadilan kalau agamanya dihina seperti ini?" (When will minorities have justice if their religion is insulted like this?). It reflects a more profound concern about religious sensitivities and the feeling of marginalisation among minority religious groups. This comment in the Borobudur Stupa meme indicates a perceived lack of respect for Buddhist religious symbols. It raises a broader question about justice and equality for religious minorities in Indonesia. He emphasised the importance of sensitivity to diverse religions and beliefs, particularly regarding religious symbols.

In addition, two representatives of the Buddhist community, Kurniawan Santoso and Kevin Wu, reported Roy Suryo to the police on charges of hate speech and blasphemy. They considered that Roy's actions had violated Article 28, Paragraph (2) in conjunction with Article 45a of Law Number 19 of 2016 concerning Information and Electronic Transactions (ITE) and Article 156a of the Criminal Code (VOI.id, 2022c).⁸⁶

⁸⁴ https://voi.id/en/news/178920?utm_source

⁸⁵ ITE (Information and Electronic Transactions) Law

⁸⁶ https://voi.id/en/bernas/200237?utm_sourc

Also, a comment from one of the accounts on the Youtube video related to the Borobudur Stupa meme case, [@anamariaaa71820](#), “*Sebagai umat Sidharta, saya marah dan tidak terima dengan permintaan maaf Roy Suryo, perlakuan yang sangat tidak pantas dilakukan oleh orang sekelas mantan pejabat tinggi, semoga segera diproses ke pengadilan* (As a Sidharta follower, I am angry and do not accept Roy Suryo's apology, this is a very inappropriate treatment for someone of the class of a former high-ranking official, hopefully it will be processed in court soon).

Based on the incongruity theory, it suggests that humour arises when there is a mismatch between expectations and reality. In the case of the Borobudur Stupa meme, the alteration of the sacred symbol (the stupa) to serve as a satirical commentary on a political issue, particularly when accompanied by the mocking phrase “*Lucu... hehehe, ambyar*”, creates a dissonance. They perceive this mismatch between the sacred (the stupa) and the profane (humorous political critique) as deeply disrespectful. In their view, juxtaposing a revered religious site with casual and flippant language was not considered funny. Instead, it belittled and mocked the cultural and spiritual significance of Borobudur Temple. This highlights how incongruity, in this instance, does not generate humour but discomfort, as it crosses the line into what is seen as disrespectful.

The informant's discomfort reflects what incongruity theory refers to as a failed comedic dissonance, where the juxtaposition of sacred and profane elements does not generate humour but rather offence. Likewise, benign violation theory breaks down here: the violation of religious norms was perceived not as benign but as hostile, particularly given the actor's public status.

These reactions highlight how sacred symbols are not only theological artefacts but also carriers of cultural and emotional significance. In plural societies like Indonesia, humour involving religious imagery must navigate not only doctrinal boundaries but also deep historical and communal sensitivities.

As Brenner (1996)'s ethnographic work on veiling practices in Java shows, religious symbols often operate as “nodes of contestation,” where questions of morality, identity, and public propriety are actively negotiated. Although her study predates the rise of digital media, the dynamics she describes remain visible in contemporary controversies. The reactions to the Borobudur Stupa meme reflect a similar pattern: once a religious symbol is reframed, even humorously, it becomes a focal point for wider debates about respect, sensitivity, and communal boundaries. The offence articulated by Buddhist informants echoes Brenner's observation that religious symbols carry emotional and cultural weight that extends far beyond their immediate ritual function.

Neutral Reactions: Balancing Incongruity and Violation

However, another informant possesses extensive knowledge of the meme's cultural references and nuances. She is a 49-year-old single woman with an educational background in history and art. She also serves as a guest lecturer at an arts college, teaching courses on Nusantara aesthetics. Her research has involved scholarly investigations and field trips to examine historical landmarks in Indonesia, including its presence in Central and East Java temples. She is currently working on a project about the Borobudur temple and its surrounding society.

As someone interested in Borobudur's cultural and historical aspects, she sees memes as a unique way to interact with the site more informally and enjoyably. She may know the Borobudur Stupa meme as a way to pay tribute to a significant historic site while also recognising its importance. Although the memes may contain comedic or satirical elements, she sees them as a fun form of artistic expression or creativity rather than a derogatory insult to the site or the associated religion.

Despite finding amusement in the meme's comedic elements, she recognises Borobudur's profound historical and religious significance. She views the phrase "*Lucu... hehehe, ambyar*" as a playful expression of creativity rather than an insult.

However, when asked about the additional caption, *Pantas saja tiketnya mahal ternyata opung sudah buat patung 'I Gede Utange Jokowi' untuk tambahan dana bangun IKN* (No wonder the ticket price is so high, apparently 'grandpa' has already built a statue of 'Jokowi the Great Debtor' to help finance the construction of the new capital city (IKN)), she expressed greater reservation. Although the text ostensibly refers to the rising ticket prices, her concern was not about the economic issue. Instead, she noted that using Borobudur, a site of immense cultural and religious value, as a vehicle for political satire risked diminishing its historical and sacred significance. In her view, while humour and satire are essential forms of cultural expression, they should still be mindful of the dignity attached to heritage sites like Borobudur.

This middle-ground perspective was also echoed by several informants who, while aware of the meme's religious context, did not perceive it as inherently offensive. One 38-year-old, woman visual communication design lecturer described the meme as *biasa saja*, a common form of online expression, arguing that not all images containing religious elements are intended to demean or insult. For her, humour functions as an accessible way of engaging public issues, making satire easier to receive than direct critique. In this view, context and intention matter more than the mere presence of religious imagery. This illustrates an interpretive posture whereby digital innovation shapes visual satire, rather than necessarily

being perceived as a moral transgression. Context and intention are more to her than the simple existence of a religious image.

Likewise, a 21-year-old student of computer science voiced a generationally complex perspective: *“Kalau dilihat dari konteks medsos, banyak kok meme lain yang lebih kasar. Ini malah tergolong biasa aja. Yang bikin rame ya karena tokoh publik yang nyebarin.”* His response points to a broader desensitisation among younger digital natives who encounter satire and parody as routine elements of their online environments. The controversy, in his view, stemmed less from the content and more from who amplified it.

A 35-year-old mother and active TikTok user shared a comparable sentiment: *“Saya lihat meme-nya, ya biasa aja. Orang-orang di internet memang suka begitu. Saya gak tersinggung karena tahu ini cuma buat lucu-lucuan, meskipun saya juga ngerti kenapa orang lain bisa tersinggung.”* Her perspective illustrates how neutrality can coexist with empathy. She is not offended but acknowledges why others might be. These voices collectively underscore how interpretive flexibility plays a key role in shaping online reception and how, for some, the meme represented a benign violation rather than an act of defilement. For this informant, the meme works as an example of incongruity. On the one hand, Borobudur is a site of great historical and religious significance. On the other hand, the meme presents this revered symbol in an unexpected, playful way.

According to the Benign Violation theory, developed by Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren (2010), humour arises when something is perceived as a violation of social, cultural, or moral norms, while remaining benign enough not to cause actual harm or offence. From this perspective, the Borobudur meme can be read as presenting a violation insofar as it humorously alters a sacred religious site. However, as one informant explained, it remains benign because it does not fundamentally harm or disrespect the temple or Buddhism. For her, the meme represents a playful rather than harmful form of humour, which allows her to appreciate its creativity despite its sensitive subject matter.

However, when political commentary is introduced through the meme, as seen with the references to Jokowi and IKN, this female historian perceives it as moving beyond a benign violation into a genuine one. In this instance, the humour no longer feels lighthearted or playful but instead becomes disrespectful of Borobudur's standing as a UNESCO World Heritage site. In her view, the meme grows inappropriate since it fails to stay within the confines of benign humour and makes her uncomfortable with how the location is employed in political discourse.

The variety of responses from informants indicates that personal views are shaped not solely by shared religious beliefs but also by individual experiences, cultural contexts, and interpretations of satire. People may view the same meme

differently, even within the same religious community. One individual may see it as harmless satire or criticism of government policy, yet another finds it offensive and disrespectful of their sacred symbols. This complexity suggests that the boundaries of freedom of expression and respect for religious icons can be fluid and subjective, even within the same religious context.

It is essential to understand the diversity of viewpoints that can exist within similar communities of faith and emphasise that reactions to humour, even satire, are far from monolithic. When transgression appears innocuous, such as when the altered Borobudur stupa is read primarily as a critique of ticket price policies rather than as a mockery of Buddhist symbolism, it is more likely to be perceived as safe and acceptable.

Across these interviews, incongruity and benign violation recur not as abstract theories, but as lived interpretive logics, mobilised differently by each informant depending on religious background, social position, and personal experience.

What shifted this meme from individual interpretation to controversy, however, was the participation of public figures. The meme had circulated widely only after it was reshared by Roy Suryo, a former Indonesian government minister, who said he had found it on somebody else's timeline. This shift reframes how I consider digital humour, not only in terms of the content of the humour itself, but also in terms of the authority of who is amplifying it. This brings us neatly to the next topic of conversation: how the role of public figures shapes the reception of memes and online discourse.

Initially uploaded by an ordinary user, the meme gained significant public attention when Roy Suryo, the former Minister of Youth and Sports, re-shared it. This is where the role of power and social dynamics comes into play, how the actions of a public figure can change the context of a meme from mere digital humour to a more complex issue involving discussions about responsibility, positions of power, and the limits of freedom of expression.

Power Dynamics And Public Figure

The Borobudur Stupa meme had been uploaded several times by different users before it eventually caught the public's attention. Accounts like @IrutPagut and @NewOpang shared the meme as early as June 7 and 9, 2022, and @fly_free_DY on June 10, 2022, but it was not until June 10, when Roy Suryo, a former Minister and public figure, reposted it, that the meme indeed went viral. What is fascinating here is that the content itself had not changed, but its reach and impact skyrocketed when it was shared in the public eye. This raises a key point about the power dynamics of digital humour: it is not just about *what* is said but *who* says it.



The meme initially was shared on Twitter
@IrutPagut on 7 June 2022:

"Just found out now that there is a statue of the God Cebong at the top of Borobudur. In the past, there were no such idols. No wonder ticket prices are skyrocketing."



@fly_free_DY on 10 June 2022

"No wonder the tickets are expensive, it turns out that *Opung* has made a statue of '*Gede Utange Jokowi*' to increase the funds to build the IKN"

Figure 5.8. The Chronology of Borobudur Stupa Memes
 Source: Digital Observation on Twitter

Roy's repost frames the meme as part of a protest against the planned ticket price hike for Borobudur Temple. However, as a former government official, Roy's voice carried weight. In line with what Marwick and Boyd said, the individual's status influences the dynamics of attention on social media. The relational ties between users can create a hierarchy of influence where the voices of public figures carry more weight (A. Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Roy's connection to the meme amplified its spread and invited more scrutiny. Suddenly, a meme that might have slipped through the cracks was thrust into the national spotlight.

While "who says it" (i.e. public figures) can influence the spread of content, Baym and Boyd (2012) argue that virality also depends heavily on the cultural relevance and social context of the content itself. Content that resonates with an audience or reflects essential social issues is more likely to go viral, regardless of who shares it.

While the meme already carried the potential to provoke controversy, its reception shifted decisively once it became associated with a figure linked to authority, expertise, and public responsibility. The meme was no longer read solely as commentary on Borobudur or ticket pricing, but became entangled with broader and highly charged issues, including Buddhism, President Joko Widodo, national debt, and the development of Indonesia's new capital city (IKN). In this context, humour ceased to function as a benign or playful critique and was increasingly perceived as an ethical violation, particularly given the symbolic weight of religious imagery in Indonesian society.

Roy Suryo thus became the focal point of public criticism, not merely for sharing a meme, but for failing to meet the moral expectations attached to his position. As Marwick and boyd (2011) emphasise, public figures are not passive participants in digital discourse; their online actions entail emotional labour and social responsibility. This case demonstrates how the involvement of a public figure can transform digital humour into a site of moral judgment, intensifying debates over freedom of expression, accountability, and respect for religious sensitivities in Indonesia's contemporary digital public sphere.

The Broader Discourse Surrounding the Borobudur Stupa Meme

Beyond Roy Suryo's role in amplifying the Borobudur Stupa meme, the controversy also sparked reactions from other public figures, illustrating how digital humour and political critique intersect in Indonesia's mediated public life. A notable instance was the response from Mohamad Guntur Romli, a politician and public commentator who had been associated with the Indonesian Solidarity Party (Partai Solidaritas Indonesia, PSI) before later joining the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-Perjuangan) in 2023.



Figure 5.9. Guntur Romli's post on Twitter, 19 June 2022
Source: Twitter@GunRomli

Romli's engagement highlights how criticism of Roy Suryo evolved into a broader moral and political evaluation that extended beyond religious sensitivity into civic discourse. On 19 June 2022, Romli shared a caricature created by komikkita.com on Twitter (@GunRomli) referencing the Jokowi-like stupa meme. The image juxtaposed the Borobudur stupa labelled "STUPA" with a caricature resembling Roy Suryo, above which appeared the word "STUP*D." Accompanying this,

Romli tweeted that a stupa is a sacred Buddhist structure, whereas “stupid” refers to an inability to appreciate diversity and beliefs, framing his humour as a moral critique of Roy’s actions.

Guntur Romli immediately responded to the caricature through his tweet on Twitter. He seemed to explain the meaning of the words stupa and stupid mentioned in the komikkita.com caricature. Here is the Tweet "A stupa is a sacred Buddhist building that resembles an inverted bowl. Stupid is a term for people who cannot appreciate the diversity and beliefs of others." Based on that tweet, I can infer that Guntur Romli used humour to criticise Roy Suryo's actions and ignorance, highlighting the importance of respecting diversity and religious beliefs.

Guntur Romli, a non-Buddhist Indonesian, sees the meme as disrespectful to the Stupa Borobudur and the Buddhist Community, which they consider a sacred site and part of Indonesia's cultural heritage. This individual may consider modifying the image of the Stupa in a humorous or satirical way as inappropriate and disrespectful.

His use of humour and satire to challenge Roy’s apparent insensitivity reflects how political actors mobilise cultural norms and ethical expectations in mediated discourse. In doing so, Romli demonstrated how satire can function not just as ridicule but as a form of normative engagement, delineating boundaries of respect and pluralism in public communication.

This episode shows that once a meme enters elite discourse, its interpretive horizons expand. What began as a seemingly trivial political joke was reabsorbed into discussions about authority, moral accountability, and cultural respect. In this context, humour becomes a tool not only for entertainment or critique, but for moral positioning, where actors articulate and contest social norms, values, and expectations of public behaviour.

More broadly, the Borobudur Stupa meme reveals how digital platforms mediate the circulation and amplification of culturally sensitive content. Memes operate simultaneously as vehicles of humour, political commentary, and social judgement within highly networked media environments. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok do not merely host these interactions; algorithmic visibility shapes which narratives gain traction, and which frames dominate public attention. As a result, controversies like this one raise enduring questions about freedom of expression, digital ethics, and the responsibilities of both public figures and platforms in negotiating religious and cultural sensitivities in Indonesia’s contemporary digital public sphere.

Platform Responsibility in Content Moderation

Although the Borobudur Stupa meme emerged as political satire linked to public debate over Borobudur ticket pricing, its rapid circulation on Twitter illustrates how religiously sensitive symbolism can travel widely before any corrective framing or moderation takes effect. This case situates meme controversy within broader debates on platform governance, where states, platforms, and civil society actors negotiate the boundary between freedom of expression and the management of harms in digital public life (Gillespie, 2019; Kozyreva et al., 2023; Hefni, 2020; Latif et al., 2023). In Indonesia, these debates are further shaped by legal frameworks such as the Information and Electronic Transactions Law (Law No. 11/2008, as amended by Law No. 19/2016), which regulates online content, particularly when it intersects with religion, ethnicity, race, and intergroup relations. While intended to address online harms, the law has been widely debated for its broad and sometimes ambiguous application, especially in cases involving religious expression (Butt, 2015; Lindsey & Pausacker, 2016).

A key challenge is that platform visibility systems tend to prioritise engagement and virality, which can amplify controversial content regardless of cultural or religious sensitivity (Bülow & Johann, 2023). In this context, moderation is not simply a matter of detecting “bad words.” The Borobudur Stupa meme did not rely on explicit slurs, yet it was read by many users through its symbolic and visual provocation. This points to a common limitation of content moderation: content may comply lexically while still escalating social tension through context-dependent meaning.

Most social media platforms rely on automated systems, including artificial intelligence (AI), as a first layer of content moderation to flag potentially problematic content, such as hate speech, before further human review (Gillespie, 2018). However, AI-based approaches have significant limitations. Studies have shown that AI systems often struggle to detect irony, satire, and sarcasm in digital communication, as these forms of expression rely heavily on subtext, cultural knowledge, and contextual interpretation rather than literal meaning (Burgers et al., 2016; Joshi et al., 2018). Bias in training data further complicates this issue, particularly when models are trained predominantly on non-Indonesian corpora, increasing the risk of over-blocking or false positives/negatives in culturally specific discourse (Gillespie, 2020).

Platform governance also tends to operate reactively. User reporting tools exist, but they often lag behind rapid circulation dynamics, meaning controversy can solidify before any intervention occurs (Gillespie, 2020). In the Borobudur case, the speed of spread contributed to the establishment of moral judgements and public frames of interpretation early in the viral cycle, making later moderation, whether removal, warning labels, or account sanctions, less able to “undo” the controversy once it had already become a public incident.

Finally, the wider controversy also shows how users sometimes communicate sensitivity indirectly, including through coded or obfuscated forms in subsequent commentary, for example, the use of “Stup*d” in later satirical responses.⁸⁷ This reinforces the point that moderation cannot be reduced to surface-level lexical detection; it must contend with meaning that is produced through cultural reference, visual symbolism, and rhetorical strategy.

Rather than resolving these challenges, this section frames content moderation as a site of tension between automated systems, local cultural contexts, and user interpretation. The Borobudur Stupa meme shows that responsibility for managing religiously sensitive humour is distributed across platforms, public figures, and users themselves. The implications of this distributed responsibility, particularly in relation to digital literacy and user agency, are explored further in the concluding chapter.

Conclusion

The Borobudur Stupa meme serves as a profound case study, illustrating the relationship between humour, religious sensitivity, and the use of digital media in Indonesia. As earlier controversies around the Ahok–Rizieq memes have shown, such conflicts do not emerge in a vacuum but build on longer histories of religious–political tension in the digital sphere. The application of Incongruity Theory in this chapter highlights how humour often emerges from the unexpected merger of sacred religious symbols and a critical political context, eliciting laughter but potentially also outrage. This dual role of humour, unifying in some cases while deepening social divides in others, reflects the complex social dynamics in digital memes.

By incorporating the Benign Violation Theory, the study further reveals how humour operates differently depending on one’s perception and societal position. In one context, the violation of norms (in this case, using a religious symbol for satirical purposes) may be perceived as harmless, while it becomes deeply offensive in another. The involvement of public figures, like Roy Suryo, adds another dimension to the discussion. His participation increased the meme’s visibility and shifted the focus from humour and mild social critique to a debate on power, authority, and social responsibility. This study enriches both theories by integrating digital context, cultural sensitivity, power dynamics, and social roles, enhancing the understanding of how humour operates in a complex society

⁸⁷ Some users attempt to circumvent automated screening through strategic obfuscation, such as using asterisks in “Baj*gan” to imply bajingan (bastard) or masking letters in “Anj*g” to suggest anjing (dog). While such practices may bypass surface-level lexical filters, contextual cues often remain legible to human audiences. This illustrates a broader limitation of automated moderation, where meaning is produced not only through words but also through shared cultural knowledge and pragmatic inference.

like Indonesia. The findings emphasise that digital humour, although seemingly simple, has significant implications for discussions of freedom of expression and religious sensitivity towards fellow citizens. It also underscores the broader challenges of managing digital public spaces, where legal frameworks, platform governance, and public understanding intersect.

Regarding power dynamics and social roles, humour concerns “what is said, who says it, and in what context.” Public figures often become targets of perceived unsafe violations, but they can also be responsible for potentially escalating social tensions and shifting discourse from content to intent. Thus, humour and satire acquire new meanings based on the social standing and influence of the individuals involved.

By incorporating the dynamics of the digital media context and accounting for a more culture-sensitive conception of humour in relation to power, this research provides new insights within existing theories of humour. This underscores the fact that digital humour is not simply a mode of entertainment but a social and political force that encapsulates and, at times, actively subverts norms, arouses debate, and even shapes policy considerations, especially in an age of advanced photo manipulation and generative AI, where satirical images can easily detach from their original context and be recirculated as “truth”. The results underscore the importance of considering socio-political context and the potential of humour to produce unintended socio-legal consequences.

Navigating freedom of expression within Indonesia’s pluralistic society requires a thorough understanding of the boundaries between what is acceptable and what is honourable in the digital world. The Borobudur Stupa meme demonstrates how easily humour can shift from social commentary to social rupture, depending on context, actors, and audience reception. Rather than resolving these tensions, this chapter highlights the complexity of negotiating humour and religious sensitivity in digital public life, setting the stage for a broader discussion in the concluding chapter on responsibility, literacy, and ethical engagement in Indonesia’s digital sphere.

At the same time, this chapter recognises that questions of responsibility in digital humour cannot be addressed solely through regulation or platform governance. How users interpret, negotiate, and respond to humour involving sensitive religious symbols remains central to sustaining respectful digital environments. These issues of digital literacy, user agency, and ethical engagement are taken up more fully in the concluding chapter.

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined Islamic-inspired memes as part of Indonesia's contemporary digital landscape, where humour, religious expression, and cultural reference intersect in everyday online practice. While light-hearted Eid al-Adha memes illustrate how religious humour is routinely woven into digital life, the dissertation's core analyses focus on more contested cases, particularly the Borobudur Stupa controversy and Ramadan-themed TikTok videos. Together, these examples show how memes operate as sites where religious meanings are expressed, debated, and reinterpreted within platformed environments shaped by algorithmic visibility, public sensibilities, and historical memory. Rather than functioning merely as entertainment, memes appear as moments of cultural work, where religious meanings are expressed, reinterpreted, and cultural boundaries are periodically unsettled.

Across Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, the study shows that platform affordances play a decisive role in shaping how Islamic-inspired memes are created, circulated, and interpreted. Each platform fosters distinct modes of participation: Facebook encourages community-based circulation, Twitter amplifies political and ideological contestation, while TikTok enables playful, performative, and algorithmically mediated encounters with religious differences. Together, these environments demonstrate how digital culture reshapes religious expression without detaching it from broader social and moral concerns.

Taken as a whole, this research demonstrates that Islamic-inspired memes are not trivial by-products of online life. They participate actively in shaping social norms, articulating religious difference, and sustaining everyday conversations about coexistence within Indonesia's plural society. By tracing how humour, satire, and visual play travel across platforms, this study contributes to broader discussions

on religion and digital media, offering a framework that may be extended to other cultural and national contexts.

At the centre of this dissertation lies a guiding question: how do Islamic-inspired memes across different digital platforms shape and reflect religious identities, cultural practices, and social norms in Indonesia? Addressing this question required treating memes not simply as humorous texts, but as cultural artefacts that bridge pre-digital traditions and contemporary digital practices. Through this lens, memes appear both as reflections of existing religious sensibilities and as active agents that shape participation, visibility, and debate in Indonesia's digital public sphere.

The first line of inquiry traced meme-like forms from pre-internet cultural traditions, such as proverbs, folklore, and *wayang*, to contemporary social media practices. This historical perspective highlights continuity rather than rupture, showing how humour and symbolic play have long been part of religious and cultural transmission, even as their forms and circulation have evolved.

The second inquiry focused on Facebook and Twitter, examining how platform-specific dynamics shape the production, circulation, and reception of Islamic-inspired memes. Here, the analysis revealed the importance of meme ecosystems, key actors, and platform cultures in determining whether religious humour functions as communal bonding, political critique, or moral provocation.

The third inquiry examined TikTok, where Ramadan-themed memetic videos illustrate how humour and play foster forms of light participation across religious differences. These practices demonstrate how digital affordances enable what this study conceptualises as playful citizenship, allowing users to engage in religious difference without escalating it into conflict.

Finally, the Borobudur Stupa case examined how satirical memes can trigger intense public debate when religious symbols, political figures, and platform amplification converge. This case reveals how digital humour can shift rapidly from playful critique to moral controversy, exposing ongoing tensions between freedom of expression, religious sensitivity, and legal accountability in Indonesia's digital public life.

Together, these findings show that Islamic-inspired memes are central to understanding how religion, culture, and technology intersect in contemporary Indonesia. Digital platforms do not merely host religious expression; they structure how it is seen, contested, and felt. At the same time, the meanings that emerge within these environments remain dependent on users' everyday practices of interpretation, remixing, and participation, reminding us that platform structures and human agency continually shape one another.

By foregrounding memes as both cultural artefacts and cultural agents, this dissertation demonstrates how everyday digital humour has become a key site for negotiating religious identity, difference, and belonging in the digital age.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Indonesian digital culture is characterised less by the replacement of older religious traditions than by their continual adaptation, reinterpretation, and circulation through new media environments.

Tracing the Evolution of Islamic-Inspired Memes

This section addresses the first research question by tracing how Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia grew out of earlier cultural practices, were reshaped through shifts in media technology, and gradually became part of everyday religious expression on contemporary social media platforms.

Long before the internet, Indonesian communities were already circulating what could be described as “meme-like” cultural forms: wayang stories, proverbs, Islamic folklore, and ritual humour that conveyed moral lessons through repetition, imitation, and playful variation. Wayang kulit, for example, has long functioned as a medium for moral and religious instruction, embedding ethical reflection in humour, exaggeration, and narrative play. In this sense, traditional performances and popular publications often relied on short, memorable, and visually engaging elements that helped ideas travel across audiences and generations. These qualities closely resemble the logics that later came to define digital memes. Rather than emerging from nowhere, internet memes in Indonesia draw on expressive traditions that were already familiar and socially embedded.

As communication technologies changed, these cultural modes did not disappear but were reworked into new formats. Early digital environments were dominated by text-based creativity: emoticons, ASCII art, and simple visual symbols that allowed users to express emotion, identity, and religious feeling in compact ways. Over time, these practices developed into emojis and stickers, which made religious iconography more explicit and expanded the space for playful *da'wah* and symbolic self-representation. New forms did not replace older ones; instead, they accumulated, each layer adding to the visual and narrative resources available to Indonesian Muslims online.

With the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, Islamic-inspired memes became more openly participatory. Religious symbols, jokes, and everyday experiences were increasingly remixed, commented on, and re-circulated by users themselves. In these spaces, religious meaning was not simply transmitted from authorities to audiences, but shaped through collective engagement, humour, and interpretation. Memes became a way of folding theological reflection into vernacular digital culture.

The emergence of TikTok further accelerated this process. Its short-video format, remix affordances, and algorithmic visibility allowed religious expression to be translated into sound, gesture, timing, and visual performance. Ramadan-themed videos, NU–Muhammadiyah jokes, and everyday moral reflections spread quickly, not because of established networks or institutional backing, but because the platform prioritises relevance, repetition, and engagement. In this setting, the circulation of Islamic ideas is less tied to hierarchy and more dependent on algorithmic discovery and participatory uptake.

Across these developments, one pattern remains clear: older expressive modes do not vanish. Proverbs reappear as captions; wayang-like moral play resurfaces in short skits; early emoji cultures live on in religious stickers; and familiar Islamic narratives provide frames for meme humour. The evolution of Islamic-inspired memes is therefore cumulative rather than linear.

What emerges from this trajectory is that Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia are not simply a product of digital novelty. They are rooted in a longer cultural logic built around repetition, mimicry, humour, and shared storytelling, a logic that has been carried forward across changing media environments. As platforms evolve, religious meanings are continually reworked, allowing Indonesian Muslims to express faith, reflect on social norms, and engage authority in ways that feel both familiar and newly inventive.

Platform Affordances, User Agency, and Religious Expression

This section explores how different digital environments shape the creation, circulation, and reception of Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia. A comparison between Facebook and Twitter shows that platform architecture and user agency work together in structuring how humour, critique, and religious expression unfold online. Facebook's emphasis on groups and long-form interaction supports community-oriented meaning-making, while Twitter's fast-paced circulation enables rapid commentary and public debate.

Platform design alone, however, does not determine how memes operate. Equally important is how users engage with memetic content in everyday practice, drawing on religious knowledge, cultural references, and social positioning. Memes do not circulate as stable objects with fixed meanings; their significance emerges through use, reinterpretation, and response within particular communities. In this sense, technological affordances and user agency are inseparable: platform features create possibilities, but it is through situated engagement that memes become socially meaningful, humorous, or contentious.

My analysis of Islamic-inspired memes on Facebook and Twitter shows how each platform's technical history and design shape patterns of visibility and interaction.

On Facebook, group features encourage sustained discussion and collective interpretation, while on Twitter, retweets and real-time engagement allow memes to respond quickly to unfolding political and religious events. Even posts without hashtags can gain traction when they resonate with current concerns, underscoring that visibility depends not only on platform mechanics but also on contextual relevance and timing.

This comparison highlights how affordances take on different meanings depending on users' cultural and religious backgrounds. Identical platform features can be mobilised in divergent ways, reflecting users' agency in negotiating, adapting, and sometimes resisting technological constraints. From a spreadable media perspective, Islamic-inspired memes circulate not simply through transmission but through processes of remixing and reinterpretation that mirror participants' social positions and religious sensibilities.

A side-by-side reading of Facebook and Twitter thus reveals distinct modes of religious expression. Facebook tends to foster community-bound engagement and continuity, whereas Twitter foregrounds immediacy, contestation, and public visibility. Rather than acting as neutral containers, these platforms actively shape how authority, humour, and critique are negotiated within Indonesian Muslim publics.

Although TikTok is not the focus of this chapter, it offers a contrasting model of algorithmic visibility that prioritises personalised discovery over follower networks. Its implications for religious expression are taken up in the following chapter. Viewed across platforms, these findings show that meme practices are inseparable from the technological and cultural environments in which they emerge.

TikTok's Playful Citizenship: Fostering Unity through Play

This section examines how memes on TikTok foster social and cultural interaction, encouraging what can be described as playful citizenship amid Indonesia's religious and cultural diversity.

TikTok offers a particularly revealing setting for observing how Islamic-inspired humour is taken up in everyday practice. Its short-video format, remix features, and algorithmic circulation invite users to engage religious difference through play, creativity, and performance rather than confrontation. During Ramadan, for instance, distinctions between NU and Muhammadiyah are rarely addressed head-on. Instead, they appear in jokes, mimicry, and light satire that acknowledge difference while keeping the tone familiar and non-threatening.

Ramadan-themed TikTok memes thus function as more than casual entertainment. They operate as informal spaces where religious difference is translated into shared cultural references, references that are easily recognised, commented on, and reworked by others. TikTok's For You Page (FYP) plays a key role here. Because content is distributed beyond stable follower networks, religious humour often reaches audiences who do not necessarily share the same organisational or theological background. This increases the likelihood of cross-group encounters and responses, something less common on platforms structured around enduring social ties.

These dynamics help explain why humour on TikTok often works across boundaries. Compared to Facebook, where discussion tends to remain within relatively homogeneous communities, or Twitter, where religious difference frequently becomes a site of rapid critique and contestation, TikTok facilitates encounters across lines of affiliation. Difference is not dissolved, but made manageable through timing, repetition, and shared vernacular forms.

What emerges from these practices is a mode of engagement that does not demand agreement. Through joking, imitation, and everyday performance, users temporarily loosen rigid boundaries and relate to difference in a low-stakes, affective register. In Indonesia's plural religious landscape, such moments of playfulness can function as a social resource, allowing cohesion to be maintained without erasing diversity.

The Borobudur Stupa case makes these limits visible. What circulates as playful religious humour on TikTok can quickly harden into moral conflict once sacred imagery and political authority enter the frame. In such moments, the meme ecosystem no longer functions as a space of light negotiation, but as an arena where ethical boundaries are publicly contested. Attending to these shifts helps clarify how humour mediates, and sometimes destabilises, religious life in Indonesia's digital public sphere.

Humour and Boundaries: The Sensitive Terrain of Satirical Memes

The Borobudur Stupa meme demonstrates how satirical content can unsettle the boundaries between humour, religious sensitivity, and public discourse in Indonesia. Although rooted in Buddhist symbolism, the controversy spills over into the broader Muslim-majority digital public, showing that jokes involving sacred symbols, regardless of which religious tradition is referenced, tend to be interpreted through Indonesia's dominant ethical and cultural sensibilities. In this sense, the meme expands the scope of this study on Islamic-inspired memes by revealing how humour about one faith can trigger moral debate in a multi-religious society.

This case confirms that digital humour rarely stands alone. The juxtaposition of a revered religious symbol with a political undertone produces incongruity that can elicit both laughter and discomfort, revealing humour's double-edged capacity to unify in some contexts while deepening divides in others. In a society as richly diverse as Indonesia's, this meme exemplifies the fragile balance between creative expression and reverence, reflecting the broader dynamics of pluralism in the digital age.

Read through the lens of Benign Violation Theory, this study delves further into how the same humour can provoke drastically different reactions depending on one's perspective. The satire was harmless; for others, it crossed a line. Public figures, particularly Roy Suryo, added another layer, shifting the discourse from humour to issues of authority, power, and the social responsibilities of prominent individuals. His involvement significantly amplified the meme's reach, transforming it from a mere joke into a commentary on the influence of public voices in shaping the debate over freedom and respect.

Rather than treating incongruity and violation as abstract mechanisms, this case shows how their effects are shaped by context, cultural sensitivity, and power relations. In Indonesia, where respect for religious diversity is woven into everyday social norms, humour does not simply entertain. It touches questions of propriety, offence, and the limits of acceptable critique. The Borobudur Stupa meme demonstrates how satire can open space for reflection while simultaneously exposing fault lines in plural public life.

The case also brings platform responsibility into sharper focus. As discussed in Chapter 5, the rapid circulation of the meme highlights how platform governance struggles to keep pace with context-dependent forms of offence. Content moderation systems tend to prioritise scale and speed, yet controversies like this hinge less on explicit language than on symbolism, history, and interpretation. Scholars have noted that addressing such cases requires moderation frameworks that combine automated systems with culturally informed human judgement (Gillespie, 2018; Kozyreva et al., 2023). In Indonesia, this points to the need for moderation approaches that are attentive to local religious and historical contexts, instead of applying one-size-fits-all restrictions.

Research question 4 shows that satirical memes in Indonesia can widen public conversation while simultaneously unsettling social boundaries. When humour intersects with sacred symbols, political authority, and uneven power relations, it becomes a site of negotiation rather than simple amusement. Memes, in this sense, do not merely reflect public sentiment; they actively participate in ongoing debates over respect, pluralism, and the ethical limits of expression in Indonesia's digital public sphere.

Concluding Reflections

This dissertation has examined Islamic-inspired memes as a key site through which the intertwined dynamics of humour, religion, culture, and technology in Indonesia's digital public sphere can be understood. Across Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, these memes reveal how religious meaning is negotiated between tradition and innovation, personal belief and public discourse.

Fundamentally, this study highlights how digital media both reshapes and sustains religious and cultural expression. Islamic-inspired memes are no longer merely entertaining; they operate as part of ongoing social dialogue, allowing individuals and communities to articulate values, engage with cultural difference, and navigate complex identities. Across platforms, the findings show the flexibility of religious discourse in digital environments, where humour, playful citizenship, and satire coexist within Indonesia's pluralistic society.

Theoretical contributions

This study presents a perspective on the relationship between online platforms, digital religious expression, and religious meaning-making. By analysing how features such as sharing, trends, and recommendations on sites shape Islamic-inspired memes, it becomes evident that platforms do not act alone. Users actively engage with these structures with their own cultural creativity and religious sensibilities. Memes do not emerge solely from platform design; they acquire meaning through users' practices of reinterpretation and circulation, reflecting the varied ways in which faith and humour are negotiated in digital spaces.

Rather than treating algorithms as neutral tools, this study understands them as participatory forces that shape how religious humour circulates, sometimes reinforcing familiar narratives, at other times enabling unexpected encounters across differences.

In line with spreadable media scholarship, this study treats memes not as fixed cultural artefacts but as dynamic expressions that move across online spaces and social settings through circulation, reinterpretation, and reuse (Jenkins et al., 2013). Their meanings are continually shaped by users' playful engagement, social tensions, and collaborative practices, rather than by original intent alone.

In this study, this fluidity is approached not as a purely technical feature of digital media, but as a social process through which religious meanings are continually reworked. Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia do not merely reflect existing religious values or identities; through circulation, commentary, and remixing, they actively shape how religion, humour, and moral boundaries are understood in everyday digital life. In this sense, memes function as cultural agents mediating religious discourse within platformed publics.

Understanding memes as evolving and cooperative forms of cultural communication opens new ways of thinking about participation in digital religious life. Moreover, the research expands on playful citizenship by investigating how religious humour and digital memes can facilitate interfaith discussion, providing a more inclusive space, especially in religiously diverse Indonesia. On TikTok, religious humour proves an effective tool for reducing tensions and uniting previously divided groups, transforming potential conflict into solidarity. This study presents a broader understanding of how digital citizenship can creatively and openly engage religious diversity by considering the digital context, algorithmic influences, and active participation.

Through Incongruity Theory, this study shows that humour often arises from clashes between sacred religious symbols and unexpected political contexts, eliciting laughter, anger, and contempt. This highlights humour's dual role: uniting yet also intensifying divisions. In the context of Benign Violation Theory, research shows that violations perceived as safe in one setting may be deemed offensive in another, particularly when involving religious symbols. By incorporating power dynamics and social roles, this extends both theories to the digital realm, where humour mirrors societal power relations, particularly how public figures become targets, amplifying social tensions. This study adds new dimensions to these theories, emphasising the intricate interplay of digital content and context, cultural sensitivity, social dynamics, and power in shaping humour and its impact on religious freedom of expression and sensitivity in Indonesia's public discourse.

These contributions point to a broader insight: humour in digital religion cannot be understood solely at the level of content or intention. It needs to be approached through its circulation, amplification, and interpretation within platformed publics, where meaning is continuously shaped through interaction rather than fixed in advance.

From an anthropological standpoint, this dissertation foregrounds everyday digital practices as central sites of religious meaning-making. Instead of starting from doctrine, authority, or institutional religion, it takes humour, memes, and playful interaction as ethnographic entry points into how religion is lived, negotiated, and contested in digital settings.

Viewed from this anthropological perspective, memes become valuable not simply because they are humorous, but because they reveal how ordinary people navigate religion, difference, morality, and public life through everyday digital practices

In this way, the dissertation contributes primarily to digital anthropology, while also speaking to wider debates in digital religion and media and cultural studies. First, it shifts analytical attention from formal religious authority and doctrinal debate to everyday religious humour, showing how memes, jokes, and playful interactions function as meaningful sites of religious negotiation rather than

peripheral noise. Second, it treats memes not merely as representations of belief or opinion, but as cultural agents that actively shape groupness, moral judgement, and public sensitivity in platformed contexts. Third, by examining playful citizenship within religious settings, particularly on TikTok during Ramadan, it expands prevailing understandings of digital citizenship beyond activism and protest, highlighting humour and affect as modes of civic and ethical engagement. Fourth, it offers an anthropological reading of algorithms as moral and affective infrastructures, showing how visibility, amplification, and circulation condition when humour connects and when it escalates into conflict. Finally, grounded in the Indonesian context, this study treats experiences from the Global South not as illustrative cases, but as generative sites where existing theories are tested, stretched, and reworked in relation to religion, humour, and digital life.

Taken seriously in this way, humour emerges not as a trivial by-product of online interaction, but as an ethnographic site where religious meanings, social boundaries, and moral expectations are continuously negotiated.

Practical Implications: Shared Responsibility in Platformed Publics

This dissertation shows that controversies around religious humour are rarely caused by content alone; they emerge through circulation, amplification, and interpretation within platformed publics. Responsibility therefore cannot be located in a single actor. Instead, the Indonesian case points to a shared responsibility model involving platforms, public figures, regulators, civil society, and ordinary users.

For platforms, the key implication is the gap between lexical compliance and symbolic offence. The Borobudur Stupa meme illustrates how content may avoid prohibited terms yet still trigger serious public tension because meaning travels through images, cultural reference, and context. Rather than claiming insight into local moderation operations, often opaque to researchers, this study highlights the need for more transparent governance: clearer enforcement rationales, accessible appeal mechanisms, and public-facing explanations of how culturally sensitive cases are assessed (Gillespie, 2019; Kozyreva et al., 2023). Where possible, moderation should combine automated detection with context-aware human review, particularly for satire involving sacred symbols.

For public figures, the implication is that amplification is itself an intervention. When influential actors repost sensitive humour, they can shift the frame from “joke” to “public incident,” raising the stakes of interpretation and accelerating the likelihood of legal and moral escalation. Finally, for users and civil society organisations, this study suggests that digital literacy is not merely technical competence but an interpretive capacity: recognising satire, tracing context, and assessing potential harm before sharing.

More broadly, these findings suggest that moderation and governance cannot be reduced to technical enforcement alone. Distinguishing between humour that opens dialogue and humour that produces harm relies on situated judgement, cultural knowledge, and forms of ethical reflection that are learned and negotiated in everyday social life. In pluralistic societies such as Indonesia, fostering digital spaces that allow contextualised humour while acknowledging religious sensitivity is not only a normative concern but also a practical one, shaping trust, participation, and platform legitimacy.

These challenges become even more pronounced in an era increasingly shaped by generative AI and automated image production, where satire can be rapidly detached from context and recirculated as apparent fact. In this context, humour does not automatically trivialise religious matters; rather, it can open spaces for reflection, dialogue, and critical engagement, while also carrying the risk of offence or escalation depending on context and circulation.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study contributes to understanding the circulation and meaning of Islamic-inspired memes on Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok in Indonesia. However, several limitations should be acknowledged, which also point to directions for future research.

First, this research focuses on Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok because their affordances support rapid circulation, short-form expression, and participatory interaction, features central to the dynamics of meme culture examined in this dissertation. While platforms such as Instagram and YouTube are widely used in Indonesia, their emphasis on curated visuals and longer-form content makes them less aligned with the fast-moving, remix-oriented meme practices that form the core of this study. As a result, certain dynamics of religious expression and humour on image and video dominant platforms remain outside the scope of this analysis. Future research could extend this inquiry to Instagram and YouTube to explore how Islamic-inspired memes and religious humour operate within slower, more narrative-driven visual environments.

Second, the study is grounded in the Indonesian socio-religious context, which is both a strength and a limitation. My familiarity with Indonesian culture and religion enables a nuanced interpretation of humour, symbolism, and religious sensitivity. At the same time, this positionality carries the risk of implicit bias, potentially normalising certain cultural assumptions or limiting analytical distance. A comparative or cross-cultural approach would enrich future research by examining how similar memes are interpreted in different national or religious contexts, allowing for a broader understanding of how digital religious humour travels, transforms, or encounters resistance across societies.

Third, this research primarily reflects experiences from urban and digitally connected populations. Indonesia's vast geography and uneven digital infrastructure mean that access to the internet and to meme culture itself, is not evenly distributed. As a result, rural voices and communities with limited digital access may be underrepresented. Future studies could address this gap by exploring how Islamic-inspired memes are encountered, adapted, or resisted in rural or semi-connected settings, offering a more comprehensive picture of digital religious expression across Indonesia.

Fourth, this dissertation focuses primarily on NU and Muhammadiyah because their theological differences are widely recognised, publicly negotiated, and culturally legible in everyday Indonesian life. These characteristics make them particularly conducive to humorous and reciprocal meme practices, especially on platforms such as TikTok. However, these findings cannot be generalised to religious communities that experience structural marginalisation or contested legitimacy, such as the Ahmadiyah. In such cases, public discourse is shaped more by stigma and vulnerability than by everyday ritual variation, rendering humour a far less viable medium for negotiation. This limitation reflects the scope of the dataset rather than an analytical exclusion, and future research could explore how digital humour functions, or fails to function, within marginalised religious communities.

Finally, emerging technologies such as generative AI and automated image production pose new challenges for the study of digital religious humour. As satirical images become easier to produce and increasingly detached from their original contexts, questions of authorship, accountability, and interpretation become more complex. Future research should therefore examine how AI-generated visual content reshapes the boundaries between satire, misinformation, and religious sensitivity, particularly in pluralistic societies like Indonesia.

While this dissertation examines how platform affordances, algorithmic visibility, and users' everyday practices shape the circulation of Islamic-inspired memes, it does not attempt an in-depth analysis of platform governance or the political economy of social media. Questions concerning moderation policies, commercial platform dynamics, and the institutional conditions that influence the visibility of digital religious content remain beyond the scope of this study. Future research could build on these findings by examining how these structural dimensions interact with the everyday cultural practices and religious meaning-making explored in this dissertation

These limitations do not diminish the contributions of this study. Rather, they clarify its analytical scope and highlight the need for continued, context-sensitive, comparative, and methodologically plural research into how humour, religion, and digital media intersect across platforms, communities, and technological regimes.

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This dissertation examines how Islamic-inspired memes shape and reflect religious and cultural differences in contemporary Indonesia, focusing on the intersections of humour, digital media, and everyday religious expression across social media platforms. Drawing on material from Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, it shows how memes are not simply vehicles for entertainment, but sites where religious meanings are worked through, negotiated, and sometimes contested in public.

Rather than approaching memes as isolated digital objects, the study follows their circulation, reception, and reinterpretation across platforms and social contexts. From light-hearted religious humour circulating around Eid and Ramadan to the highly contested Borobudur Stupa meme, the analysis traces how seemingly playful content can take on moral, political, and legal significance as it moves through platformed publics. These cases reveal how religious expression online is shaped not only by belief, but also by algorithmic visibility, platform norms, and wider histories of religious sensitivity in Indonesia.

The dissertation is organised around four interconnected questions. First, it situates contemporary Islamic-inspired memes within longer trajectories of cultural transmission, showing how pre-digital forms such as folklore, *wayang* and ritual humour share memetic logics of repetition, adaptation, and moral commentary. Rather than replacing these older forms, digital memes build upon them, translating familiar expressive practices into new media environments.

Second, by comparing Facebook and Twitter, the study examines how platform affordances and user practices jointly shape religious humour and critique. Facebook's group-based architecture encourages sustained, community-bound discussions, while Twitter's rapid circulation foregrounds immediacy, contestation, and public scrutiny. Across both platforms, memes acquire meaning through use, response, and reinterpretation, highlighting the role of user agency in shaping digital religious discourse.

Third, the dissertation turns to TikTok to explore how religious difference is navigated through playful citizenship. Focusing on Ramadan-themed content and jokes around NU–Muhammadiyah distinctions, it shows how humour operates as a low-stakes mode of engagement that allows difference to be acknowledged without direct confrontation. TikTok's algorithmic circulation enables such content to travel beyond established networks, creating moments of cross-group visibility that are less common on other platforms.

Finally, this dissertation examines the limits of humour as a mode of engagement across lines of religious difference by centring a case in which satire did not mitigate tension but instead exacerbated it. The Borobudur Stupa meme illustrated how humour can harden into controversy when a satirical reference to a Buddhist symbol circulated widely within a Muslim-majority digital public, triggering moral outrage, legal debate, and intense scrutiny of the public figure who amplified it. This case demonstrates how humour's effects depend not only on content, but on context, circulation, and power. What appears playful in one setting may be read as offensive or dangerous in another, particularly when religious symbols and public authority intersect.

Across these chapters and empirical materials, the dissertation contributes to digital anthropology by treating Indonesia not merely as a site of data, but as a context that puts existing theories to work. Concepts such as groupness, benign violation, and playful citizenship are examined through lived digital practices, showing how they are reshaped by religious pluralism, platform dynamics, and local moral frameworks. Rather than proposing a new theory, the study demonstrates how established concepts acquire different emphases, limits, and explanatory power when situated in everyday digital religion in the Global South.

The findings suggest that humour in digital religious life cannot be understood in isolation. It emerges through circulation, amplification, and interpretation within platformed environments, and its consequences range from connection and reflection to conflict and exclusion. Responsibility for managing these effects does not rest with a single actor, but is distributed across users, public figures, platforms, and regulatory frameworks.

By foregrounding memes as cultural agents rather than trivial content, this dissertation offers a nuanced account of how religious life in Indonesia is shaped through digital media. It shows how humour opens spaces for negotiation and belonging, while also revealing the limits of play in contexts marked by unequal power and religious sensitivity. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on digital religion, platform governance, and the anthropology of the contemporary public sphere.

Dit proefschrift onderzoekt islamitisch geïnspireerde memes als onderdeel van het alledaagse digitale leven in Indonesië en analyseert de wijze waarop humor, religieuze expressie en culturele referenties samenkomen op verschillende socialemediaplatforms. Op basis van materiaal afkomstig van Facebook, Twitter en TikTok laat het onderzoek zien dat memes niet slechts vormen van entertainment zijn, maar ook plekken waar religieuze betekenissen worden gevormd, onderhandeld en soms betwist in het publieke domein.

In plaats van memes te benaderen als geïsoleerde digitale objecten, volgt deze studie hun circulatie, receptie en herinterpretatie binnen uiteenlopende platforms en sociale contexten. Van luchtige religieuze humor rond Eid al-Fitr en Ramadan tot de controversiële Borobudur Stupa-meme: de analyse laat zien dat ogenschijnlijk speelse inhoud, wanneer zij zich binnen digitale publieken verspreidt, morele, politieke en juridische betekenissen kan krijgen. Deze voorbeelden tonen aan dat religieuze expressie online niet uitsluitend wordt gevormd door geloofsovertuigingen, maar ook door algoritmische zichtbaarheid, platformspecifieke normen en bredere geschiedenissen van religieuze gevoeligheden in Indonesië.

Het proefschrift is opgebouwd rond vier samenhangende onderzoeksvragen. Ten eerste situeert het proefschrift hedendaagse islamitisch geïnspireerde memes binnen langere trajecten van culturele overdracht, zoals folklore, wayang en rituele humor. Daarbij wordt aangetoond dat deze pre-digitale culturele vormen vergelijkbare memetische logica's van herhaling, aanpassing en moreel commentaar vertonen. Digitale memes vervangen deze oudere vormen niet, maar bouwen erop voort door vertrouwde expressieve praktijken te vertalen naar nieuwe mediaomgevingen.

Ten tweede onderzoekt het proefschrift, aan de hand van een vergelijking tussen Facebook en Twitter, hoe de mogelijkheden inherent aan platforms samen met gebruikerspraktijken religieuze humor en kritiek vormgeven. De groepsgerichte architectuur van Facebook stimuleert langdurige discussies binnen gemeenschappen, terwijl de snelle circulatie op Twitter juist directheid, contestatie en publieke zichtbaarheid bevordert. Op beide platforms krijgen memes betekenis door de manier waarop gebruikers ze delen, erop reageren en opnieuw interpreteren. Daarmee benadrukt het onderzoek de centrale rol van gebruikers in de vormgeving van digitaal religieus discours.

Ten derde richt het onderzoek zich op TikTok om te analyseren hoe religieuze verschillen worden genavigeerd via *playful citizenship*. Aan de hand van Ramadan-gerelateerde content en grappen over verschillen tussen Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)

en Muhammadiyah laat het onderzoek zien hoe humor kan functioneren als een laagdrempelige vorm van interactie waarin verschillen worden erkend zonder dat directe confrontatie noodzakelijk is. De algoritmische verspreiding van TikTok maakt het mogelijk dat dergelijke content buiten bestaande netwerken circuleert en momenten van zichtbaarheid tussen verschillende groepen creëert die op andere platforms minder vaak voorkomen.

Ten slotte onderzoekt het proefschrift de grenzen van humor als vorm van betrokkenheid over religieuze scheidslijnen heen door de Borobudur Stupa-meme centraal te stellen. Deze casus laat zien dat humor spanningen niet altijd vermindert, maar deze soms juist kan versterken. Een satirische verwijzing naar een boeddhistisch symbool verspreidde zich binnen een overwegend islamitisch digitaal publiek en leidde tot morele verontwaardiging, juridische discussies en intensieve publieke aandacht voor de persoon die de meme verder verspreidde. Deze casus toont aan dat de effecten van humor niet uitsluitend afhankelijk zijn van de inhoud zelf, maar ook van context, circulatie en machtsverhoudingen. Wat in de ene situatie als speels wordt ervaren, kan elders als beledigend of bedreigend worden opgevat, vooral wanneer religieuze symbolen en publieke autoriteit samenkomen.

Door de verschillende hoofdstukken heen levert dit proefschrift een bijdrage aan de digitale antropologie door Indonesië niet uitsluitend te beschouwen als een locatie waar data worden verzameld, maar als een context waarin bestaande theoretische concepten worden getoetst en verder ontwikkeld. Concepten zoals *groupness*, *benign violation* en *playful citizenship* worden onderzocht aan de hand van alledaagse digitale praktijken en blijken nieuwe accenten, beperkingen en verklarende mogelijkheden te krijgen binnen de context van religieus pluralisme, platformdynamieken en lokale morele kaders.

De bevindingen suggereren dat humor in digitaal religieus leven niet los kan worden gezien van processen van circulatie, versterking en interpretatie binnen platformomgevingen. De gevolgen ervan lopen uiteen van verbinding en reflectie tot conflict en uitsluiting. De verantwoordelijkheid voor het omgaan met deze gevolgen ligt niet bij één actor, maar wordt gedeeld door gebruikers, publieke figuren, platforms en regulerende instanties.

Door memes te benaderen als culturele actoren in plaats van triviale vormen van online inhoud, biedt dit proefschrift een genuanceerd inzicht in de wijze waarop religieus leven in Indonesië mede wordt gevormd door digitale media. Het laat zien hoe humor ruimte kan scheppen voor onderhandeling en verbondenheid, maar tegelijkertijd ook de grenzen van speelsheid blootlegt in contexten die worden gekenmerkt door ongelijke machtsverhoudingen en religieuze gevoeligheden. Daarmee levert dit proefschrift een bijdrage aan bredere discussies over digitale religie, platform governance en de antropologie van de hedendaagse publieke sfeer.

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