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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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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 reimagined 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.

