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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, Humour, And Religious Sensitivity:

Negotiating Boundaries of Expression in The Digital Age
Case Study: Borobudur Stupa Meme⁶⁸

While playful religious expression can foster inclusion, humour is not always benign, it may also be perceived as offensive, particularly when it touches upon sacred symbols. This chapter argues that the Borobudur Stupa meme illustrates how digital humour can rapidly shift from political satire to religious offence once sacred symbols circulate within mediated publics and are amplified by public figures.

First circulating in 2022, the Borobudur Stupa meme sits at the intersection of digital humour, political satire, and religious sensitivity in Indonesia's online public sphere. The meme depicts one of the sacred stupas of Borobudur Temple, a ninth-century Mahayana Buddhist monument in Central Java, not with the image of the Buddha, but with the face of Indonesia's then president, Joko Widodo.

The meme initially appeared to be a satirical critique of government policies on heritage preservation and tourism, notably the plan to raise the entrance fee for Borobudur Temple from IDR 50,000 to IDR 750,000 (approximately equivalent to 3 euros to almost 40 euros). On a broader level, the meme also criticised the allocation of the thus earned funds, suggesting they were needed to finance the costly relocation of Indonesia's capital from Jakarta to Nusantara in Kalimantan's forests. The resulting controversy highlights the profound complexity of striking a balance between freedom of expression and respect for religious and cultural values in the pluralistic society that Indonesia is today.

Unsurprisingly, this meme provoked anger among the local Buddhist community, a minority in the world's largest Muslim-majority nation. Many non-Buddhists also viewed it as a form of blasphemy. For the Buddhist community, a line was

⁶⁸ An earlier version of this chapter was developed as a co-authored journal manuscript with Prof. Bart Barendregt. The present chapter has been substantially revised and expanded for this dissertation.

crossed, as this joke was not funny anymore but rather an insult to their religion and sacred symbols. After being reported by the Buddhist organisation Dharmapala Nusantara,⁶⁹ Roy Suryo, the former Minister of Youth and Sports, who played a key role in making the meme go viral, was sentenced to nine months in prison. Suryo was charged and found guilty of mishandling sensitive issues related to Ethnicity, Religion, Race, and Intergroup Relations (SARA) that can provoke conflict or discrimination.⁷⁰

While not explicitly Islamic, the Borobudur Stupa meme generated strong responses in Indonesia's Muslim-majority digital space, where Islamic values often shape public ethics. In this chapter, I adopt a broader approach to Islamic-inspired memes, defined not only as those with Islamic visual references but also those that provoke moral, cultural, or religious discourse within Muslim-dominant publics. While the meme centres on a Buddhist monument, the public outcry surrounding interfaith respect, ethical speech, and social harmony demonstrates how Islamic sensibilities guide digital engagement in a plural society like Indonesia.



While it's the weekend, it's better not to be too serious in the tweets." This aligns with the protests against the planned increase in the entrance fee for Borobudur Temple (from 50,000 to 750,000), which (reasonably) has been POSTPONED. Netizens use their creativity to transform one of Borobudur's iconic open stupas, FUNNY, he-3x, AMBYAR)"

Figure 5.1: Roy Suryo's post on Twitter, 10 June 2022

Source: Twitter@KRMTRoySuryo2

⁶⁹ Buddhist advocacy and cadre development institution in Indonesia, which has a vision to be the guardian and protector of Buddha Dharma in the Indonesian archipelago

⁷⁰ Indonesia's SARA Law refers to legal provisions aimed at addressing and penalizing actions that incite hatred, discrimination, or conflict related to Ethnicity, Religion, Race, and Intergroup Relations. The law prohibits speech, actions, or media (including online content) that insult or degrade specific groups, provoke hostility, or threaten unity, and it carries criminal penalties for violations. These provisions are often invoked under articles of Indonesia's Criminal Code (KUHP) or the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE) for online cases.

The Borobudur Stupa meme case highlights a critical tension in Indonesia's pluralistic society: Where is the boundary between satire and religious sensitivity? At what point does political critique become disrespectful? The increasingly borderless digital world gives rise to expressions in the form of stickers, posts, and memes that transcend geographical, cultural, and religious boundaries. When religious symbols are incorporated into political or social satire, such expressions can become powerful rhetorical tools, capable of reinforcing or challenging religious and social norms.

Hoesterey (2021), in his study of the Nahdlatul Ulama's "Funny Brigade," (see Chapter 3) shows how satire can both unite and polarise digital publics in Indonesia. Similarly, Nugraha (2024) demonstrates how humorous commentary on Instagram plays a role in shaping public discourse. Hapsoro (2018) further reveals that memes have become tools of civic participation, especially among Indonesian youth. Together, these studies demonstrate that satire, while potentially incendiary, can also serve as a dynamic force for reflection and dialogue.

To address these questions, this chapter draws on incongruity and benign violation theories to examine how humour involving religious symbols is perceived across cultural and religious contexts, with a particular focus on the Borobudur Stupa meme. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach that combines sentiment analysis, discourse analysis, and in-depth interviews to capture both the emotional tone of online responses and the deeper socio-cultural perspectives surrounding the Borobudur Stupa meme. Although the dataset consists of 236 direct comments, its targeted nature prioritises contextual depth over volume, aligning with digital ethnographic principles that emphasise interpretative richness rather than statistical generalisation.

By analysing this meme through these theoretical and methodological lenses, the chapter aims to explore how satire can foster dialogue and provoke offence within Indonesia's diverse society, offering broader insights into managing digital spaces sensitive to cultural and religious plurality.

Historical Precedents of Religious–Political Satire

Before turning to the detailed analysis of public responses to the Borobudur Stupa meme, it is important to recognise that Indonesia has experienced earlier moments in which digitally circulated satire intersected with religious and political sensitivities. One of the most defining periods occurred in 2016–2017, when political and religious tensions were amplified through visual memes involving figures such as Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), Habib Rizieq Shihab, and King Salman. These precedents shaped the interpretive habits that later influenced how the Borobudur meme was received.

As social media became embedded in everyday life, memes in Indonesia quickly evolved from simple entertainment into a medium capable of carrying layered symbolic messages. This shift became especially visible in moments of heightened political tension. By the mid-2010s, memes that initially appeared harmless were increasingly mobilised to express critique, sharpen political narratives, and reinforce social boundaries. Humour, in this context, did not merely entertain; it became a tool for signalling allegiance, questioning authority, or amplifying collective anxieties.

This development reflects deeper structural dynamics within Indonesian politics, where religion has long served as a key moral and political resource. As Hefner (2000) and Pepinsky, Liddle, and Mujani (2018) note, religious organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah have long acted as moral and political brokers, shaping public opinion and legitimising political authority. In such an environment, it is unsurprising that political memes began to embed religious imagery to bolster claims of moral authority or to criticise opponents. Religious symbolism, implicit or explicit, became part of the visual language through which political messages were communicated and contested.

The Jakarta election period illustrated how digital space became an arena where humour, critique, and mobilisation increasingly overlapped. What began as visual play could quickly become an instrument of propaganda or a reflection of deeper polarisation. This dynamic was particularly evident in the memes sparked by the March 2017 meeting between Ahok and King Salman.



Figure 5.2. Basuki Tjahaja Purnama's post on Instagram and Twitter

Source: BBC News Indonesia (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2017)(British Broadcasting Corporation, 2017)

The photo of then-Jakarta Governor Ahok greeting King Salman of Saudi Arabia received many responses from social media users. On Twitter, Ahok's tweet was retweeted 4,800 times. Even though Ahok greeted King Salman in his capacity as the Governor of Jakarta, the photo was still placed in the context of the blasphemy case that is currently befalling Ahok (see below). There was news that King Salman would meet the General Chairman of FPI, Rizieq Shihab. So, this photo of Ahok and King Salman is also seen in the context of Ahok's rivalry with Shihab.⁷¹ For example, it did not take netizens long to mock Rizieq Shihab in this meme tweeted by journalist Hasief Ardiasyah.⁷²



Figure 5.3. Meme featuring Habib Rizieq and Basuki Tjahaja Purnama
Source: @Hasief Ardiasyah

The sarcastic attitude towards Rizieq Shihab appears even more prominent in the following meme, created by film-producer and Ahok supporter Kemal Arsjad who tweeted as follows:⁷³

⁷¹ Ahok and Rizieq Shihab's rivalry stems from divergent political and religious points of view. As a non-Muslim governor of Jakarta, Ahok became entangled in a scandal over blasphemy accusations in 2016 that set off large-scale demonstrations headed by Rizieq Shihab and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI). Reflecting the conflict between Ahok's more secular approach and Rizieq's more conservative and religious points of view, Rizieq, the head of the FPI, has frequently been a vocal critic of Ahok. Some saw King Salman's meeting with Rizieq as part of this dynamic, thus the picture of Ahok and King Salman became a public emblem of the rivalry.

⁷² Hasief Ardiasyah is a music journalist, perhaps better known as one of the Associate Editors at Rolling Stone Indonesia. He worked there from the magazine's founding in early 2005 until its closure on 31 December 2017.

⁷³ Film producer and commissioner at BUMN (a state-owned company).



Translate:
Finally, the King of the Petamburan Street also shook hands with the King of the Arabs.

Figure 5.4. Meme featuring Habib Rizieq and King Salman
Source: @Kemal arsjad

A meme shows Habib Rizieq blocking Ahok from shaking hands with King Salman, while President Joko Widodo monitors the situation. Ahok appeared neat, wearing a formal suit and a black peci. The peci is considered a national symbol but has Islamic origins. Although it does not mention religion directly, this image uses strong symbolism related to figures closely associated with religious and political issues in Indonesia.

This meme was created in response to a phenomenon widely discussed in society, particularly contemporary Indonesian politics and society, from 2016 to 2017. This period was marked by many significant events concerning religious issues, especially those emerging from within the Islamic community, which influenced political dynamics in Indonesia, such as the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, cases of blasphemy, and societal polarisation.

The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election was one of the most contentious in Indonesian history. This political battle brought together Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), who was then serving as governor, with several other candidates, including Anies Baswedan. Ahok, a Chinese Christian, became the centre of attention and the target of various political attacks that often-carried religious themes.

During the election campaign, Ahok was accused of committing blasphemy after his speech on a trip in the Seribu Islands quoted the Surah Al-Maidah verse 51, a verse in the Qur'an that has been widely interpreted as a prohibition against Muslims taking non-Muslims as leaders. A selectively edited video of his remarks circulated online, intensifying accusations and public anger. His statement, which suggested that some people had been misled by others citing this verse to

discourage Muslims from voting for a non-Muslim candidate, was perceived by his critics as an insult to Islamic teachings. The accusations sparked protests by conservative Islamic organisations, including the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) led by Habib Rizieq Shihab. The protests culminated in a series of mass demonstrations known as Action 411 (4 November 2016) and Action 212 (2 December 2016), which called for the arrest and punishment of Ahok. The blasphemy accusations and the reactions that accompanied them deepened the polarisation of Indonesian society (Fealy, 2016; Lim, 2017).

In contemporary Indonesia, religion has become a potent marker of political identity, often functioning less as a unifying moral framework than as a boundary of social and ideological division. During the Ahok blasphemy controversy, this polarisation was vividly reflected in the circulation of memes on social media: some defended Ahok, framing the accusations as politically orchestrated, while others portrayed him as a blasphemer unworthy of leadership. These memes, as illustrated in Figures 2.15–2.17, effectively combine key political, social, cultural, and religious elements to convey a powerful message. Figures such as Habib Rizieq Shihab, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, King Salman, and President Joko Widodo are digitally altered and placed in unusual situations.

This qualifies as a photo-based meme according to Shifman's (2014) taxonomy. It employs an edited photograph in a novel context, aiming to amuse or satirise. The image playfully yet pointedly portrays interactions between figures, implicitly touching upon tremendously controversial issues related to politics and faith roiling at that instant. While not explicitly raising matters of Islam, Habib Rizieq's appearance, as leader of the hardline Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), imbues it with unmistakable religious undertones. Therefore, this meme can be categorised as one with Islamic nuances, as it triggers discussions about Islam, albeit not in the context of traditional religious issues.

Memes with Islamic nuances in Indonesia are utilised not only for proselytising but also for airing socio-political critique. In this environment, memes have evolved into a potent medium for conveying complex messages that intertwine religion and politics, often aiming to shape public opinion. Their spread has elicited varied reactions and at times exacerbated societal polarisation, particularly during eras of religio-political strain.

One example is a meme depicting Habib Rizieq “protecting” King Salman from Ahok, widely interpreted as symbolising the rise of identity politics. As noted by scholars, this reflects how religious figures and symbols are used to mobilise support and delegitimise opponents (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019; Fealy, 2016; Lim, 2017). According to one of my interlocutors, the meme highlights how religion is weaponised to divide society along identity lines rather than policy or merit.

“This meme strikes me as a critique of how religion is used as a political tool rather than just for entertainment. At the time, societal polarisation was extreme, and this meme demonstrates how specific figures use religious identity to influence politics. Habib Rizieq in this meme is a symbol of a group that uses religion for political gain, which, in my opinion, is extremely dangerous to national unity.”⁷⁴

For supporters of conservative Islamic groups, this meme can be alternatively interpreted as a symbolic reinforcement of their support for Habib Rizieq and opposition to Ahok. In the context of the Jakarta gubernatorial election, this meme reinforces the notion that Ahok, a non-Muslim, is unfit to lead a Muslim-majority region. The meme suggests that Islamic figures like Habib Rizieq wield significant power and influence to protect Muslim interests. Alternatively, as another interlocutor explained:

“For me, this meme exemplifies Habib Rizieq's position, as he is always at the forefront of safeguarding Muslims' interests. When Ahok, a non-Muslim, attempts to shake hands with King Salman, this meme appears to imply that Habib Rizieq is there to protect the people from leaders who are deemed unfit for Islamic values. I agree with the message conveyed by this meme because it demonstrates the power and influence of ulama (clergy) in our politics”.⁷⁵

However, the meme can also be interpreted differently, as demonstrated by the account @ireнна09 who shared the photo-based meme with the caption: "Nemu inihh, kacian ga diajakk ketemu n salamann.. Sabar y." (Found this, poor guy, not invited to meet and exchange handshakes. Hang in there). Likewise, Instagram user @timothywisnu posted a similar image, writing, "Eit eit... Ente mau ngapain hok?" (Hey, hey... what are you up to, Hok?).

These alternative captions reflect the meme's multivocal nature, where the duplicate visual content generates varied interpretations, ranging from satire and political critique to playful mockery or even sympathy. This echoes what Andrew Beatty described in his reading of the Javanese slametan as a ritual open to multiple readings, depending on the social and symbolic positioning of the observer (Beatty, 1999).

⁷⁴ Interview with Andre, 32 years old, is a Social Media activist and a Digital Literacy activist who volunteers in one of the official organisations or communities concerned with eradicating harmful information content or hoax news.

⁷⁵ Interview with Dorry, 40 years old, Habib Rizieq supporter, formerly a sympathiser of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI).

Similarly, memes function as “floating signifiers” whose meanings shift according to context, intention, and the audience's perspective. The plurality of interpretations demonstrates how memes, like rituals, can function as both personal expression and public commentary, revealing layered and sometimes conflicting meanings within the same symbolic form.

King Salman's position as the King of Saudi Arabia and guardian of Mecca and Medina, two holy cities, carries significant symbolic weight. Not only in the framework of diplomatic ties but also as a symbol of religious power and influence, King Salman's 2017 visit to Indonesia was regarded as historic and strategic. Particularly for Muslim leaders, meeting King Salman was considered a significant and honourable opportunity. The absence of Habib Rizieq from the conference led to a narrative that he lacked the access or influence he had expected, which his political rivals used as a source of mockery.

Supporters of Ahok and Pro-kebhinekaan (Pro-Diversity) interpreted this meme as a symbolic attack on the values of pluralism and tolerance. Rather than a neutral joke, the meme was seen as part of a broader narrative that sought to delegitimise Ahok through religious identity politics. While it may not constitute a direct attack in itself, the meme reflects and potentially reinforces the wider social tensions in which religious rhetoric was used to undermine political opponents. It embodies the perception that certain religious groups were asserting dominance in Indonesian politics, prioritising identity over competence or policy. Alternatively, as someone I interviewed suggested:

“In my opinion, this meme shows how certain groups use religious sentiment to divide the nation. Ahok, a non-Muslim, has always been the target of this type of attack. This meme appears to support the narrative that Indonesia should only be led by Muslims, even though competence and integrity should be prioritised over religion. I see this as part of an effort to erode our country's pluralism and tolerance.”⁷⁶

The meme also sparked a broader debate about the role of religion in Indonesian politics. Many people began to question how much religion should influence political decisions and how society should react to its use as a political tool.

Socially, the meme is viewed as a form of satire criticising Indonesia's political conditions at the time. Satire is often employed to convey truths that are difficult to express directly. In this case, the meme critiques how religious and political figures manipulate situations to their advantage.

⁷⁶ Denny, 42 years old, is a PDI Perjuangan sympathiser from Solo. In Solo, Central Java, the PDI-P supporters are very dominant; that is why it is called *Kandang Banteng* (Bull Cage), PDI-P's Stronghold Area. Although not a resident of Jakarta, he supported Jokowi and Ahok when they both ran for governor and deputy governor of DKI Jakarta in 2012.



Figure 5.5. Memes posted on Agan's personal Instagram account⁷⁷
Source: Instagram @aganharahap

Agan Harahap is an Indonesian visual artist and photographer known for satirical photo manipulations featuring public figures in improbable situations, including intimate scenes of Ahok and Habib Rizieq. His work combines humour and social critique, using visual exaggeration to comment on political polarisation and religious tension. In a talk at the Umar Kayam Forum,⁷⁸ he described these images as a personal response to the fatigue produced by constant conflict between opposing political camps; his goal, he explained, was to interrupt this atmosphere with a different, more ironic perspective.

Long before the rise of generative AI, Agan's practice showed how easily digital tools could blur the line between documentation and fabrication. His edits circulated widely beyond his immediate circle, sometimes reaching audiences unfamiliar with his reputation as a photo manipulator. In those spaces, the images were at times mistaken for reality or treated as deliberate provocation. The meme of Ahok and Habib Rizieq shaking hands, for instance, triggered not only amusement but also threats from those who felt the image mocked sensitive religious and political dynamics. For Agan, this was a turning point: he publicly

⁷⁷ Agan edited photos always get thousands of likes. Even the photo of Habib Rizieq walking hand in hand with King Salman got 4359 likes, 1060 comments

⁷⁸ held at the PKK H UGM building on Thursday, 27 April 2017. Umar Khayam Forum is a discussion program organised by Pusat Kebudayaan Koesnady Hardjasoemantri (PKKH) UGM, which tries to bring the spirit and modus operandi of the late Umar Kayam. In his time, the late Umar Kayam embraced three main elements (academics, artists, and journalists) in discussing various issues in a severe but relaxed manner. This discussion forum is an effort to make PKK H UGM a fluid place, a meeting place for people with various backgrounds to discuss cultural matters and its current practices (Forum Umar Kayam, 2015)

admitted taking a temporary step back from such work after experiencing how quickly nuance disappeared once his images travelled beyond their original context.

Previously, the phrase “no pic equals hoax” gained popularity because photographs were widely perceived as direct representations of reality. The phrase circulated in online forums and early digital cultures to challenge claims lacking visual evidence, implying that images functioned as markers of credibility (Dibbell, 1999). However, the proliferation of digital devices and image-editing technologies has significantly altered this assumption. Visual content can now be easily manipulated, fabricated, or recontextualised, blurring the boundary between authentic and constructed realities. As a result, photographs no longer guaranteed truthfulness, and public scepticism toward visual evidence has increased (Farid, 2019; Mitchell, 2006)

In this regard, a crucial question arises: Does the fact-checking mechanism in Indonesia encompass content such as memes or satirical images? Based on information from the Head of the Mafindo Research and Development Committee,⁷⁹ (Indonesian Anti-Slander Society), satire can also be the object of fact-checking if it contains non-factual claims. However, if a disclaimer explicitly states that the content is intended as a joke, then fact-checking is usually unnecessary.

The difficulty lies in how satire travels. Jokes are rarely shared together with their original disclaimers, and once detached from their initial framing, they can function as misleading or inflammatory content. This tension is compounded by Indonesia’s legal framework, particularly the ITE Law, which can be applied to manipulated images that are seen as insulting religion or inciting hatred. The same ambiguity that grants satire its critical power also exposes creators and sharers to legal and social risk.

In addition, the regulatory aspect related to this manipulative content is also in the spotlight in today’s Indonesia. The ITE Law in Indonesia regulates various aspects related to digital content, including the potential for violations through the use of manipulative images. However, its application often causes debate, especially when discussing satire or humour, which is considered to be in a grey area between freedom of expression and its potential negative impacts. These tensions not only expose the limits of existing regulation but also feed into ongoing public debates about how far religion should shape political life in Indonesia.

⁷⁹ Interview via WhatsApp with the Head of Research and Development of Mafindo (Indonesian Anti-Slander Society), Fact-checking organisations in Indonesia, 6 February 2025

Taken together, these memes fueled wider debates about the proper place of religion in Indonesian politics: whether faith should guide leadership choices, how far religious sentiment should be mobilised for electoral gain, and what is lost when identity is prioritised over competence and integrity. Habib Rizieq, the leader of the FPI, is regarded as a symbol of conservative Islam, whereas King Salman represents global Islamic authority. Through editing these photos, meme creators associate specific events or issues with religious meanings relevant to the public. It means the meme is funny or provocative and contains messages about religious identity and beliefs. The reaction to this meme demonstrates how powerful visual content can be in shaping and directing public opinion in the digital age, particularly regarding sensitive issues like religion and politics in Indonesia.

What these earlier cases reveal is not simply that Indonesian digital culture mixes humour with politics and religion, but that repeated controversies have habituated digital publics to read satire involving religious symbols as carrying moral and ideological weight. A single edited image can thus operate as a symbolic battleground where questions of authority, identity, and legitimacy collide. This interpretive climate forms the backdrop against which the Borobudur Stupa meme emerged, helping explain why an image that began as political commentary quickly escalated into claims of religious offence, police involvement, and a wider debate over the limits of satire.

Between Digital Humour and Sensitive Religious Contexts

These earlier controversies make one thing clear: digital humour in Indonesia unfolds within a sensitive cultural landscape. Humour often aims to entertain, while satire mobilises humour to critique or expose social and political tensions, often carrying a sharper, more critical intent than humour's general focus on amusement. However, especially in the digital space, the line between the two is easily blurred, as one person's joke can easily be perceived as sharp criticism by others. Humour involving sacred symbols can be viewed as transgressive or disrespectful. In pluralistic societies like Indonesia, where religion plays a crucial role in public life, digital humour that incorporates sacred symbols can provoke intense reactions, ranging from amusement to accusations of blasphemy.

To make sense of these dynamics, this section draws on key concepts in the study of digital satire, religious sensitivity, and public discourse in the Indonesian context. Indonesia, despite recent conservative trends (Barton et al., 2021; Hadiz, 2018), has long been characterised by traditions of religious moderation and mutual respect (van Bruinessen, 2013). By reviewing foundational theories and recent studies, this review evaluates how humour (and satire) involving sacred symbols is perceived, how it is analysed, and how public figures and online communities shape its reception.

The political significance of humour has long been recognised. Scholars have shown that humour can function both as a vehicle for critique and as a means of reinforcing existing power relations (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). Satire, in particular, allows sensitive political and religious issues to be addressed indirectly, often navigating social constraints around overt criticism. This function is especially relevant in Indonesia, where public commentary on religious and political institutions is shaped by strong normative expectations.

In the digital age, memes have become a particularly influential form of political satire. Their multimodal nature, combining images, text, and sometimes sounds, and their ability to reach large audiences rapidly make memes particularly influential in digital public discourse (Bülow & Johann, 2023). Bülow and Johann's study explores the impact of contextualisation in political memes, explicitly analysing how elements like language variation and visual humour influence audience perception. Their online experiments revealed that the visual presentation of political content as memes has a more significant impact on user engagement than variations in language or humour. This pattern is reflected in the Borobudur Stupa meme case, where the visual alteration of a sacred monument, rather than its textual commentary, became the primary trigger for public outrage, illustrating how powerful visual elements are in shaping meme reception in culturally sensitive contexts.

Understanding why such images generate divergent reactions requires engagement with humour theory. Two influential frameworks are incongruity theory and benign violation theory. Incongruity theory explains humour as emerging from a mismatch between expectations and reality. In digital memes, such as those combining sacred religious symbols with satirical political commentary (e.g., the Borobudur Stupa meme), humour often arises from the unexpected interplay of text and images that challenge cultural norms. Influenced by Kant's ideas on aesthetic judgment and imagination, as well as work by Ruch and Heintz, this theory demonstrates how humour can elicit laughter or discomfort, depending on the cultural context and the audience's sensitivities (Ruch & Heintz, 2016).

Beyond cognitive mismatch, humour also operates as a social practice. Ted Cohen's *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* emphasises jokes as a means of creating social bonds and shared understanding (Cohen, 1999). He argues that humour is often context-dependent, relying on shared knowledge and social proximity to be understood as playful rather than offensive. When this shared context is absent, the same humorous act may be perceived as inappropriate or even hostile. For instance, an inside joke between friends may be harmless within a closed group but become offensive once circulated beyond that circle. In digital environments, where content travels rapidly across social, religious, and ideological boundaries, this shift in interpretation becomes especially pronounced.

Benign Violation Theory further clarifies this dynamic by suggesting that humour arises when social or moral norms are violated in a way that feels safe or acceptable. This framework helps explain why religious memes often provoke mixed responses: some audiences perceive them as harmless satire, while others experience them as offensive due to the symbolic weight of sacred objects or figures. Research by McGraw and Warren demonstrates that cultural values, particularly in societies with strong religious traditions, shape whether norm violations are perceived as benign or unacceptable (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

Together, Incongruity Theory and Benign Violation Theory highlight humour's dual nature: the cognitive surprise that produces laughter and the contextual conditions that determine its acceptability. While these frameworks are widely used in Western scholarships, often in experimental psychology or studies of stand-up comedy and interpersonal humour (Attardo et al., 2024; Martin, 2007), their application to digital satire in non-Western settings remains limited. As Nilan and Feixa (2006) have noted in their critique of youth culture studies in Southeast Asia, such limitations often stem from the dominance of globalised, Western-centric analytical frameworks.

To account for how humour circulates beyond immediate social contexts in digital environments, Baym & Boyd (2012) conceptualise mediated publicness as a condition that reshapes visibility, audience, and interpretation in digital environments. While this framework has been widely applied, its relevance to humour involving religious symbols and public figures in plural contexts remains less systematically examined.

This limitation is evident in much of the literature on political memes. For example, Bülow & Johann (2023) analyse political memes, such as those featuring Angela Merkel, but their focus remains firmly on European publics. Yet, their focus on relatively secular contexts offers limited insight into cases where humour intersects with religious sensitivity in plural societies such as Indonesia. Related insights also emerge from research at the intersection of humour and law. Initiatives such as *ForHum* (*Forum for Humour and the Law*) document legal disputes involving visual political humour, including cartoons, memes, and satirical images, that test the boundaries between freedom of expression and respect for religious and cultural sensibilities, primarily in European contexts (forhum.org). These cases show how visual humour can function both as a vehicle for critique and as a trigger for offence, often resulting in legal action or public controversy.

Reception studies further show that humour is interpreted through culturally situated experiences. Kuipers (2011) highlights how socioeconomic background and cultural proximity shape responses to humour in multicultural societies. This is particularly relevant to the Indonesian context, where religious identity is closely tied to social norms and cultural values. This is confirmed by Lim's research on social media activism in Indonesia and how it provides insights into the ways

various digital platforms facilitate political expression, even on sensitive issues (Lim, 2013). Lim argues that while social media creates opportunities for political critique, it exposes users to conflicting interpretations of acceptable satire, especially in a country where religious and political values are interwoven. This insight also aligns with findings by Slama, who illustrates how Indonesian Muslims utilise social media to negotiate their religious identity, revealing the complexities of engaging in online satire in a way that tries to respect religious sensitivities (Slama, 2018). Moreover, Kuipers highlights how humour's reception in multicultural settings is highly variable, as individuals tend to interpret satire through their own experiences and beliefs while living close to others. This variability underscores the need for sensitivity when employing humour intersecting with deeply rooted religious or cultural symbols.

These limitations are directly relevant to the Borobudur Stupa meme, where political humour intersected with sacred symbolism in a plural religious setting, triggering reactions that cannot be fully explained by studies grounded in secular European contexts. By analysing public sentiments related to the posting and circulation of that meme on social media, and utilising interviews with varied audiences that have engaged with, discussed, and reflected on the meme, along with the legal ramifications and the role of key figures in shaping meme circulation, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how humour, when applied to religious symbols, can provoke complex debates about freedom of expression and respect for belief systems in Indonesia's digital public sphere.

Data Collection and Preprocessing

To analyse public reactions to the Borobudur Stupa meme, I collected a dataset of 236 comments directly responding to the meme from Twitter. This dataset was curated to capture initial reactions to the meme itself rather than responses to other users' opinions. By excluding second-order interactions (i.e., replies to comments rather than replies to the meme), the analysis foregrounds how audiences respond to the meme as a symbolic object, rather than how they negotiate or contest each other's interpretations. This distinction is analytically important: first-order comments capture immediate evaluations of the meme's imagery and meaning, whereas second-order replies tend to shift the discussion toward interpersonal debate and opinion alignment. This focus allows the study to capture initial affective and moral reactions to the meme, which are central to understanding how religious offence and humour are first articulated in digital public discourse.

While 236 comments may seem limited in size, qualitative studies focusing on digital discourse often work with targeted datasets that prioritise relevance and depth (Kozinets, 2020; A. Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Additionally, this study combines sentiment analysis with qualitative discourse analysis, ensuring that statistical trends are interpreted within their socio-political and cultural contexts.

This approach aligns with digital ethnography methods, which can be applied to both smaller, targeted datasets and larger-scale online interactions, depending on the research objectives and available resources (Boyd, 2014; A. E. Marwick, 2013).

Furthermore, given that the viral moment of the meme was relatively short-lived, the dataset effectively captures the peak period of engagement, specifically on Roy Suryo's Twitter post after he re-uploaded the meme on 10 June 2022. Since the dataset consists of 236 direct responses to his post, it represents the initial public reaction to the meme within the first critical days of its circulation under his account. While broader discussions surrounding the meme continued on various platforms, this dataset focuses on how Twitter users engaged with Roy Suryo's role in popularising the meme rather than the meme's circulation in other digital spaces.

To retrieve this dataset, I used the Twitter API and applied filters based on relevant keywords, such as "Borobudur," "meme," and "Roy Suryo," ensuring the collection of comments that explicitly referenced the meme. Unlike TikTok, where hashtags function as a primary mechanism for content clustering and algorithmic visibility, hashtags on Twitter are often used inconsistently, ironically, or strategically, and are therefore less reliable indicators of thematic relevance. For this reason, the Twitter dataset prioritises direct replies to a specific post rather than hashtag-based retrieval. The data collection spanned from 7 June 2022 (the date of the first upload), until 30 June 2022, encompassing both the meme's initial circulation and the height of its virality following Roy Suryo's re-upload on 10 June 2022. This timeframe allowed for capturing immediate reactions and responses as the discourse evolved.

Sentiment Classification

After isolating the dataset, I prepared the comments for sentiment analysis through a series of preprocessing steps designed to preserve contextual meaning while enabling reliable classification. Given the informal and conversational nature of Twitter discourse in Indonesia, particular attention was paid to how slang, tone, and evaluative language were handled.

The first step involved cleaning the text by removing URLs, user mentions, special characters, and non-alphanumeric symbols that do not contribute to semantic interpretation. Rather than applying stemming, this study prioritised text normalisation due to the prevalence of informal language and slang in the dataset. Normalisation allows non-standard lexical forms to be converted into their standard equivalents while preserving grammatical structure and contextual meaning.

To implement this process, I developed a custom normalisation function which contains a collection of informal Indonesian words and their standardised

equivalents from a word library at GitHub: Kamus Alay (Salsabila et al., 2018).⁸⁰ This function converts all non-standard forms of words in the data set into their standard forms. For example, the informal term “gajelas” (unclear) was normalised to “tidak jelas” while “males” (lazy) was converted to “malas. While this normalisation inevitably reduces some tonal nuance, it was necessary to ensure consistent semantic representation for sentiment classification.

Unlike stemming, which reduces words to their root forms, normalisation preserves pragmatic and evaluative meanings that are central to interpreting online discourse. In Indonesian social media contexts, slang expressions often carry culturally specific connotations that shape how humour, offence, or critique is communicated. Term such as “*santuy*” (relaxed but can also be ironic), “*receh*” (light humour) and “*ngegas*” (angry or aggressive response) were therefore retained in their contextualised forms, as reducing them to lexical roots would risk flattening their affective meaning.

After normalisation, standard preprocessing steps, including stopword removal and tokenisation,⁸¹ were applied to prepare the text for classification. These steps were implemented to support computational processing while maintaining the interpretive integrity of the comments. The processed dataset was then analysed using IndoBERT (Koto et al., 2020), a transformer-based language model trained specifically on Indonesian-language corpora, which is well suited to capturing semantic and contextual nuance in informal digital texts.

The sentiment classification divided comments into three categories: positive, negative, and neutral. Comments were classified as positive when they expressed approval, amusement, or support for the meme. Negative comments included expressions of criticism, disapproval, or offence, particularly those addressing the perceived misuse of religious symbols. Neutral comments neither endorsed nor rejected the meme but treated it as part of broader digital culture or commented descriptively without clear evaluative positioning.

By combining sentiment classification with qualitative interpretation, this approach avoids treating sentiment scores as self-contained indicators. Instead, computational results are read alongside discursive context, allowing emotional tone, moral judgement, and religious sensitivity to be interpreted as socially situated responses rather than isolated data points. This integration is particularly important in analysing humour that intersects with sacred symbols, where

⁸⁰ The term *alay* itself refers to a style of exaggerated, playful, or intentionally distorted language popular among Indonesian internet users, particularly youth communities.

⁸¹ Stopword removal refers to excluding high-frequency function words (e.g., *di*, *ke*, *dari*) that do not contribute to sentiment meaning, while tokenisation involves segmenting text into units (words or phrases) for computational analysis. While basic tokenisation is applied during preprocessing, IndoBERT performs its own internal subword tokenisation as part of the model architecture.

reactions are often shaped by cultural proximity, religious norms, and the mediated publicness of digital platforms.

Sentiment Analysis and Interpretative Perspectives on the Borobudur Stupa Meme

In this section, I will present the sentiment analysis findings for the responses to the Borobudur Stupa meme. This analysis aims to classify responses as positive, negative, or neutral and explore some of the larger discursive patterns that arose around the meme as they relate to sensitivity to religion, digital humour, and public accountability.

Analysing the usage of language in response to the meme, I can identify themes that were central to the debate over the meme, not just in terms of its content but also the roles that public figures play in amplifying digital controversies and the intersection of digital ethics with any legal ramifications. This approach allows us beyond mere sentiment classification; it helps us understand how specific words are central to discussions surrounding Roy Suryo, religious respect, and legal accountability.

The dataset contains a total of 236 comments specifically addressing the meme and reveals a range of viewpoints including those who found the meme offensive, others who considered it political satire, and those who treated it as an ordinary feature of online political humour rather than a morally or religiously significant act. Instead of discussing the meme itself, public discussions mainly focused on questioning Roy Suryo's involvement in spreading the meme. The insight becomes clear with each word turning up, as illustrated with the emerging word clouds based on the dataset.

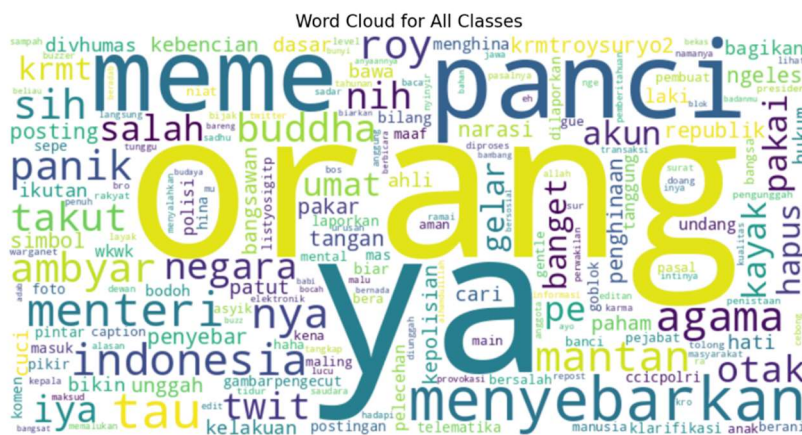


Figure 5.6. The Visualisation of Word Cloud for All Classes
Source: Sentiment Analysis Results

While word clouds are often associated with quantitative text analysis, my approach in this section remains firmly within the realm of qualitative discourse analysis. Rather than relying on word frequency as a proxy for significance, I use the word cloud as a visual entry point to identify discursive patterns, affective tones, and socio-cultural cues embedded in language. This method enables me to examine how certain terms, although visually dominant or seemingly trivial, acquire meaning through their relational use, cultural context, and rhetorical function, in line with discourse-analytical approaches that treat language as a form of social practice rather than a neutral reflection of reality (Fairclough, 2013). In doing so, I move beyond surface-level visualisation and read the word cloud as a discursive artefact through which humour, responsibility, and religious sensitivity are negotiated in Indonesian digital culture.

Words that Matter: A Cultural Reading of Digital Reactions

At first glance, the word cloud appears dominated by ordinary terms such as *orang* (person), *ya*, *meme*, *menyebarkan* (spreading), and *panci* (pan). In the context of Indonesian digital discourse, however, these seemingly generic words carry layered social meanings. Rather than functioning as neutral descriptors, they become sites where moral judgment, responsibility, and public accountability are negotiated. Reading these terms relationally allows us to trace how the Borobudur Stupa meme was discussed not only as an image, but as a moral and political incident embedded in broader cultural expectations.

The Actor, Not Just the Artefact

Among the most visually dominant terms in the word cloud is *orang* (person), a seemingly generic word that, upon closer inspection, reveals more profound discursive significance. In this case, *orang* is often referred to indirectly or explicitly as Roy Suryo, the public figure who re-posted the meme. Phrases like “*Orang kok begitu sih?*” (“Why would a person do such a thing?”), “*Orang ini sudah keterlaluan*” (This person has gone too far) or “*Sebagai sesama orang Jogja, saya malu*” (“As someone also from Jogja, I am embarrassed”), “*anda ini orang jawa pak....*” (Sir, you are Javanese...) show that people were not just reacting to the meme, they were reacting to the person behind it. It also reveals a broader social and cultural dimension, where Roy Suryo's actions are assessed not only as individual mistakes but also as something shameful in the context of a particular community or regional identity. This illustrates how online users position themselves in a normative framework to judge the actions of a public figure against broader cultural and social standards. The conversation shifted from the meme's message to a broader judgment of character, identity, and cultural responsibility.

These comments, while not explicitly Islamic, reflect deeper moral expectations within Indonesia's predominantly Muslim society. The emphasis on proper conduct, shame, and responsibility aligns with Islamic ethical values such as *akhlak*

al-karimah (noble character), particularly in how netizens expect public figures to behave with sensitivity in matters involving religion and public morality.

Similarly, *ya*, a seemingly trivial word, becomes rhetorically powerful. The word “*ya*” appears in various comments that show expressions of disapproval, irony, and sarcasm towards Roy Suryo's role in spreading the meme. For example, comments such as “*Klo lihat tangkapan layar ini, yang memprovokasi siapa ya?*” (If you look at this screenshot, who provoked it?) shows the use of “*ya*” as a form of rhetorical question that implies that the public already has their own conclusion about who is responsible for this controversy. Something similar can also be seen in the comment “*Cieeee, ketar ketir ya...?*” (Eaaa... feeling nervous, huh?), which uses “*ya*” as a way of satirising someone who seems to be starting to worry about the consequences of their actions.

In addition, in comments such as “*Lab. Ada postingan gak patut, ya jangan di reposting. Gitu aja kok ya gak bisa mikir sih?!!*” (Huh? If a post is inappropriate, it shouldn't be reposted. Isn't that just basic common sense?!), the use of “*ya*” functions as an emphasis on something that is considered a logical conclusion or decision that should have been understood without the need for further debate. In this context, “*ya*” is not just an affirmative particle but functions to strengthen the tone of satire, criticism or social expectations in public discourse. These small words tell us that the reactions were not just about the meme's content, they were emotionally and culturally loaded.

Both words, *orang* and *ya* do not immediately reflect the content of the meme but suggest that attention in the discussion shifted away from the meme's artistic or religious dimensions toward the actor responsible for its circulation, Roy Suryo, and his perceived ethical responsibilities.

Although *menteri*, *Indonesia*, and *twit* (the Indonesian colloquial form of “tweet”) are also visually dominant, they are used primarily on descriptive or contextual ways, such as “*memalukan nama Indonesia*” (bringing shame to Indonesia) or “*twit ini tidak pantas.*” (this tweet is inappropriate). These do contribute to the discourse, but they do not carry the same affective or moral weight as more emotionally charged terms.

Layer Two: Religious Sensitivity and Legal Anxiety

If the first layer centres on moral evaluation of the actor, a second cluster of terms points more directly to religious sensitivity and legal anxiety. This layer brings the discussion closer to the core of the controversy, where humour intersects with sacred symbols and legal norms.

To interpret the meme as a socio-religious controversy, I focus on a second set of keywords that are less visually dominant but more thematically charged:

menyebarkan, *Buddha*, *penghinaan* (insult), *agama* (religion), *salah* (wrong), *takut* (afraid), and *panik* (panic). These terms signal a shift in public discourse from casual commentary toward moral judgement, legal accountability, and ethical positioning.

For instance, *Buddha* directly references the religious symbol that was satirised. Its presence signifies that many viewers interpreted the meme not just as political satire, but as a violation of religious sanctity. *Penghinaan* and *agama* further frame the incident within the moral-legal framework of religious blasphemy in Indonesia, echoing laws around SARA (Ethnicity, Religion, Race, and Intergroup Relations).

The strong disapproval from Muslim online users toward perceived disrespect of Buddhist symbols indicates an active defence of interfaith harmony. Although the comments did not invoke Islam directly, this response resonates with the principle of *tasamuh* (tolerance) in Islamic ethics, demonstrating how Islamic-inspired moral norms shape digital discourse even in cases involving non-Islamic religious icons.

Salah, *takut*, and *panik* reflect emotional and normative responses to Roy Suryo's role in circulating the meme. These responses reveal a broader discourse of accountability, where users engage in public shaming or demand legal action, rather than simply critiquing the content. Drawing on scholars like Van Leeuwen and Wetherell et al, I understand that language is not only a tool for communication but also a means for enacting power relations, asserting social norms, and negotiating identity (van Leeuwen, 2008; Wetherell et al., 2001). The presence of terms like *takut* and *panik*, often used sarcastically, suggests a performative layer of discourse where users publicly mock and morally indict a public figure.

The word "*menyebarkan*" (spreading) also became dominant in the discussion, but not only in the context of the virality of the meme. Many comments underline the legal aspects of Roy Suryo's actions as a meme spreader, citing regulations such as Article 45, paragraph 3 of the 2016 ITE Law, which regulates the spread of information that can cause hatred based on SARA. For example, comments such as "*Tidak mengedit tapi ikut turut menyebarkan tetap melanggar KUHP* (Not editing but also spreading it still violates the Criminal Code)" or "*Pembuat, pengedit, dan yang menyebarkan juga layak bertanggung jawab secara hukum*" (The creator, editor, and spreader also deserve to be held legally responsible) show that some netizens see the spread of this meme not just as an action without consequences, but as a violation that must be processed legally.

In this case, the word "*menyebarkan*" does not only refer to the viral nature of the meme but also shows a more serious meaning: that the act of spreading is considered to have significant legal and moral impacts. This is in line with

concerns that the spread of memes that are considered offensive to minority religions could set a precedent in legal debates regarding freedom of expression and respect for religious symbols.

The ‘Panci’ Effect: Scandal as Meme Memory

The word *panci* carries a unique backstory in this context, closely linked to Roy Suryo himself. After stepping down as Menpora (Minister of Youth and Sports), Roy was involved in a scandal where he was accused of taking items from his official residence, including kitchen pans (*panci*). This led to him being sarcastically dubbed the "*Dewa Panci*" (God of Pans) by social media commentators, a nickname that became a running joke among netizens. When Roy posted the Borobudur Stupa meme, which went viral, his nickname resurfaced in discussions, blending humour and criticism. The prominence of *panci* in this context is more than just a kitchen item; it has become a symbol of ridicule tied to Roy Suryo's controversial public image. 'Panci' in this discussion indicates that for many users, the controversy surrounding the meme was about Roy Suryo's credibility, not just about sensitivity around religion. This blending of humour, satire, and political critique reflects how digital culture in Indonesia highlights personal scandals within the broader context of socio-political conversations.

From Meme to Mirror: Digital Discourse as Moral Arena

This reading suggests that what initially appeared as a typical internet meme evolved into a moment of public reckoning, revealing deeper tensions around ethics, collective memory, and the boundaries of religious expression. While terms like *orang* and *ja* reveal evaluative framing, the second-layer words within these direct responses reflect how cultural and legal discourses were activated through public reactions to the meme, showing how humour, morality, and legality intersected in online user's interpretations. To clarify, by "evaluative framing," I refer to the way online users use language not only to describe the meme or its circulation, but to judge, criticise, or express approval/disapproval, whether through explicit moral commentary or subtle rhetorical devices like sarcasm, repetition, or emotionally loaded particles.

Rather than functioning merely as a visual summary, the word cloud helps trace how attention shifted from the image itself to questions of responsibility, offence, and accountability. Words that appear visually marginal nonetheless remain analytically significant, as they point to what was at stake in the debate: the limits of humour, the ethics of circulation, and the protection of religious symbols in a plural public sphere.

As Bruns and Burgess (2015) remind us, visualisations like word clouds become powerful interpretive tools when read alongside contextual and cultural understandings of discourse. In this case, the meme and its reception reveal the

intersections of humour, digital ethics, and religious politics in Indonesia’s evolving media ecology.

Unpacking these key terms suggests that the Borobudur Stupa meme not only creates a space where social norms and legal interpretations are contested in real-time. Mockery, legal concerns, and moral arguments converge in the meme, reinforcing its focus on the image’s symbolic and provocative content. The meme thus acts as a litmus test, revealing where the boundaries of free expression, religious reverence, and digital accountability are drawn, and how they are contested in public discourse.

While the word cloud provides insight into the moral, religious, and legal textures of the conversation, it does not capture how widespread particular affective responses were across the dataset. To address this, the analysis now turns to sentiment classification using IndoBERT (Koto et al., 2020), which offers a quantitative overview of how users responded to the meme during its peak circulation, particularly following its amplification by Roy Suryo.

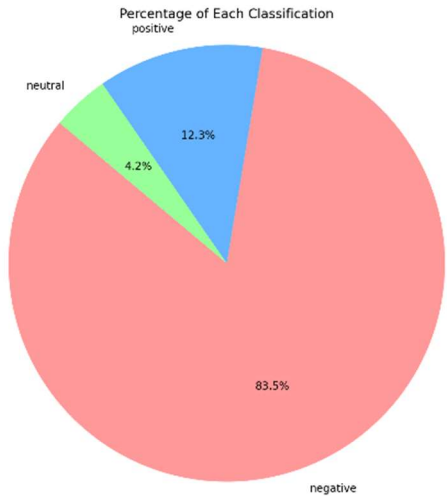


Figure 5.7. Percentage of Each Classification
Source: Sentiment Analysis’s Results

The sentiment classification shows a strongly negative pattern within this dataset, with 83.5% of the 236 comments classified as negative, followed by 12.3% positive and 4.2% neutral responses. While this dataset is limited in size and does not claim statistical representativeness, the distribution nonetheless reveals a clear tendency in how users reacted during the meme’s peak circulation. This multilayered reaction illustrates the numerous overlapping influences, including religion, politics, and personal credibility, that contribute to digital disputes.

Notably, the machine learning model categorised comments into these groups based on the frequency and intensity of specific words that the model was trained to recognise as negative, positive, or neutral. Words such as "*takut*" (afraid), "*panik*" (panic), and "*ngeles*" (dodging) were flagged as negative because they tend to reflect emotions or mock Roy. Conversely, words like "meme," "agama" (religion), and "ahli" (expert) were flagged as positive in some contexts because they often convey value, appreciation, or authority comments that did not show strong feelings either way and saw the meme as just part of online culture.

Reading Negative Sentiment Through Keyword Patterns

To support and deepen the word cloud analysis, the sentiment classification helps clarify how negative reactions were articulated rather than merely how many there were. While early responses centred on the perceived disrespect toward Buddhist religious symbolism, the discussion rapidly shifted toward a broader public critique of the actor responsible for disseminating the meme, in this case Roy Suryo. This shift from religious concern to political critique becomes particularly evident when we examine the most frequent keywords in the negative sentiment class.

Table 5.1. Ten Most Frequent Words in Negative Sentiment Class
Source: Sentiment Analysis (IndoBERT Classification Model) Class: Negative

Word	Translation	Count
Ya	Yes	37
Orang	People	34
Menyebarkan	Spreading	24
Panci	Pan	24
Meme	Meme	19
Menteri	Minister	14
Tau	Know	14
Indonesia	Indonesia	13
Panik	Panic	13

As shown in Table 5.1, the frequent occurrence of the word "*ya*" in the negative class, despite being a relatively neutral word on its own, can be explained by how it is used contextually within the comments. In Indonesian, "*ya*" often affirms or emphasises a negative sentiment, especially when paired with robust and critical language. For example, phrases like "*ya, ini menghina*" (yes, this is insulting) or "*ya, tidak menghargai*" (yes, it's disrespectful) are common ways people agree with negative sentiments.

In this context, "*ya*" serves as a supportive or affirmative particle that enhances the impact of the expressed critique. Although the word itself does not carry a

negative connotation, its frequent use in the dataset is tied to the overall negative tone of the comments, particularly in affirming complaints, criticisms, or offensive statements regarding the Borobudur Stupa meme, as the following comment:

“ya ternyata pengecut” (Yes, it turns out to be a coward)

“ya jelas banget kalau anda ikut menyebarkan dengan bumbu tweet yang penuh penghinaan dan kebencian” (Yes, it is very clear that you are involved in spreading tweets full of insults and hatred)

Thus, the prominence of “*ya*” reflects the emotional intensity of the negative reactions and functions as an affirmative discourse particle that reinforces evaluative stance in conversational Indonesian (Sneddon, 2003). Likewise, *orang* appears repeatedly in personal attacks or moral judgments, often used to generalise blame or character assessment and frequently directed at Roy Suryo.

Words such as “menyebarkan,” “panci,” and “meme” overlap with the word cloud findings, indicating that the controversy was not merely theological but entangled with questions of digital responsibility, political credibility, and accumulated public memory. In this case, religious sensitivity served as the trigger, but what sustained public interest and drove most of the critique was the perceived irresponsibility of a former state official and the political baggage associated with his past. This suggests that in Indonesia’s digital public sphere, religion rarely stands alone as a point of contention. Instead, it intersects with public memory, power, and legality, transforming seemingly light content, such as memes, into arenas of moral and political judgment.

Although other emotionally charged terms, such as *penghinaan* (insults) or *takut* (fear) do not appear in this top-ten list, their discursive significance remains high, as they explicitly index moral judgement and affective response within Indonesian evaluative language practices (Sneddon, 2003). This suggests that sentiment models and discourse analysis work best when used in conjunction: the former reveals general trends, while the latter uncovers deeper layers of meaning. Together, these perspectives underscore that digital controversies, such as the Borobudur meme, are not just about the content itself but also about who shares it, how it is received, and the broader cultural tensions it triggers. This also underscores how digital controversies serve as arenas where authority, legitimacy, and ethical responsibility are continuously negotiated in Indonesia’s mediated public life.

From Sentiments to Subjectivities: Exploring How People Make Meaning of the Meme

While the word cloud and sentiment analysis provide a macro view of the dominant themes and emotional tones in responses to the Borobudur Stupa meme, they do not fully capture the personal and cultural meanings that underpin

these reactions. This section draws on a subset of in-depth interviews conducted as part of the broader digital ethnographic fieldwork outlined in the methodology chapter. Through these qualitative accounts, the analysis moves beyond what people felt to examine why they responded as they did, foregrounding the frames of reference, lived experiences, and cultural values that shape interpretations of humour, satire, and religious sensitivity.

This section draws from in-depth interviews to explore three recurring response types: (1) those who found the meme humorous and politically relevant, (2) those who experienced it as offensive and disrespectful, and (3) those who viewed it neutrally as part of broader meme culture. Applying Incongruity Theory and Benign Violation Theory, I demonstrate how humour is not simply a matter of intention or design, but also of interpretation, and how the same meme can function as critique, violation, or creative expression depending on the viewer.

Reactions of Humour: Politically Motivated Critique

The first informant is a fruit trader in one of Semarang's markets, aged 41 years. He was born into a Buddhist family. I met him when he attended the Wahana Negara Rahaja (WNR), The Indonesian Nichiren Shoshu Buddha Dharma Council (MNSBDI) hosted the event at the Alila Hotel in Solo City.⁸²

I presented the meme to him and inquired about his viewpoint. He did not blame the former Minister of Youth and Sports (Menpora), Roy Suryo, for a meme depicting the Borobudur Temple stupa, which was altered to resemble Indonesian President Joko Widodo (also known as Jokowi). He even questioned why Roy seemed to be the centre of attention for the pros and cons of uploading a meme of a photo that looked like Jokowi. He did not create the meme; he only reposted and captioned it, and there is nothing wrong with that.

He believed uploading a stupa meme similar to Jokowi does not require legal action. According to him, the meme initially appeared as a protest against the government's plan to raise the ticket price for the Borobudur Temple by IDR 750,000. As a Buddhist, he admitted that he was not offended by the meme depicting Jokowi as a stupa. "It would be different if the stupa were edited with animal faces like pig, rat, and dog faces; I would undoubtedly be upset." The

⁸² Wahana Negara Rahaja (WNR) is an activity to pray for peace in the homeland, by the Buddha's teachings, "*Aku adalah Tiang, Mata dan Bahtera bagi Bangsa.*" (I am the Pillar, Eyes, and Ark of my Nation). As a concrete manifestation of actively participating in the development of the homeland, this activity is always accompanied by various social service activities in the area where the WNR event occurs. The event takes place from 28 September to 1 October 2023. WNR always includes real-world community action programs and collaboration with organisations from diverse backgrounds. WNR 2023 began with a 1,000-fruit-tree planting event in the Solo Urban Forest area. More than 300 Buddhists, interfaith leaders, and young people from Solo participated in the planting. WNR has occurred in Bali, North Sumatra, South Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Jakarta, Bandung, Semarang, Surabaya, and Solo.

President did not make any angry or offensive statements. He interprets the meme as a satirical or critical commentary on the government's policies, like the rising ticket costs for Borobudur. The viewpoint is based on the practitioner's interpretation of the meme as a critique of social issues rather than a direct assault on religious symbols.

He believed that Buddhism does not worship statues, but rather the heart and mind, which must be pure, free from evil, and full of virtue. Furthermore, he claimed that Roy's actions regarding the Jokowi-like stupa meme were a form of criticism. Roy Suryo frequently criticises the government, such as with sharp criticism of the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project, which he calls Kereta Cepat Bohong-bohongan (a fake high-speed rail project), also known as “kecebong” (a tadpole). He said that the criticism should be viewed as constructive, allowing government policies to be refined.

This view aligns with a public statement by Lieus Sungkharisma, a Buddhist community figure and public commentator, who expressed surprise at the determination of Roy Suryo as a suspect in the Borobudur stupa meme case. Lieus stated that the meme emerged as a form of protest against the planned increase in the entrance ticket price for Borobudur Temple from IDR 50,000 to IDR 750,000. He also added that President Jokowi himself did not show any anger or offence towards the meme. According to Lieus, the criticism conveyed through the meme should be considered as constructive criticism of government policy (VOI.id, 2022b).⁸³

Another informant is Isa, 22, from Central Sulawesi, who was in the Communication Department at Sebelas Maret University. He stated there was no intention of insulting specific groups but rather to criticise the government's policy of raising the entrance ticket price to the Borobudur Temple. This informant's statement suggests that the dissemination of the Borobudur Stupa meme was driven by criticism of government policies rather than an intention to insult or target specific religious groups. The Borobudur Stupa meme serves as a platform for diverse perspectives and interpretations, inviting users to engage in dialogue about the intersection of religion, politics, and cultural heritage.

Those informants did not perceive the meme as an attack on religion or a violation of religious norms. Instead, they saw it as a satirical critique of government policy, particularly regarding the hike in the Borobudur entrance fee. While the meme used a religious symbol, they interpreted it primarily as political humour rather than an insult to Buddhism. For them, the meme criticises the government's decision to raise ticket prices for Borobudur, making the violation of sacred imagery less threatening or offensive since it serves a broader, socially acceptable cause (political critique), not intentionally targeting religious sensitivities.

⁸³ https://voi.id/en/news/185015?utm_source

These perspectives align with key humour theories that help us understand why some may receive such content positively. Incongruity Theory also applies here, as humour comes from the incongruity of using a revered religious symbol to criticize a governmental decision. They see the meme as an incongruous but effective way of highlighting issues around public policy, such as ticket price hikes. The dissonance between a sacred image and a political message creates humour for them, but it does not cross the line into being offensive. Their reception falls into the category of Reactions of Humour, particularly in the context of political satire.

This pattern aligns with Shifman (2014)'s account of humour as often working through a sense of superiority, where laughter emerges at the expense of someone or something being mocked. In the case of the Borobudur Stupa meme, those who found it funny were not laughing at Buddhism as a tradition but at the political figure implied in the edited image. For these respondents, the humour lies in poking fun at state authority and the public figure involved. In this reading, the altered stupa becomes a tool for criticising power rather than belittling a sacred symbol, which helps clarify why the same meme can read as playful critique to some and as disrespect to others.

Reactions of Offence: Violation of Religious Symbols

In contrast, another respondent expressed offence toward the meme, citing a deep violation of religious values and cultural norms. The informant, a 52-year-old batik vendor in Solo, who identifies as Buddhist and is of Chinese Indonesian background, articulated his response through a moral framework shaped by Buddhist teachings as well as Javanese cultural values such as *rukun* (social harmony) and *unggah-ungguh* (respectful conduct). These ethical orientations strongly inform how he evaluates public expression, particularly when sacred symbols are involved.

When I showed him the Borobudur Stupa meme, he acknowledged having seen it but admitted he had not followed the controversy closely. However, from a Buddhist perspective, he found it offensive. "First, he altered the iconic Borobudur. Then, he added that phrase, 'Lucu... hehehe, ambyar'. That's mocking." For him, the tone of the phrase was even more upsetting than the image itself. It trivialised the sanctity of the temple and conveyed indifference toward Buddhist sensitivities.

He argued that such actions warranted legal consequences. While the image alteration was already offensive, it was the mocking caption that, in his view, transformed the post into a direct insult toward Buddhism. By trivialising a sacred site, the post was seen as both irreverent and culturally insensitive.

This sense of offence did not remain confined to individual interpretation but also surfaced in broader public discourse, including online commentaries and

media coverage. VOI reported that Roy Suryo was considered to have insulted Buddhists by uploading an edited photo of the Buddhist symbol at Borobudur Temple, which was replaced with the face of the head of state. Social media activist Yusuf Muhammad stated that Roy's upload had hurt the feelings of Buddhists as adherents of a religion that uses all the symbols at Borobudur as a place of worship (VOI.id, 2022a).⁸⁴

I sent messages to some other informants based on their comments on Twitter. Someone with the username Bocah Tua Nakal (@Sydney Whiteee wrote on his profile, "Practice religion in a humane way, so that you don't become a God for your fellow man." His reaction to Roy Suryo's post, "*benar tidak mengedit, tapi anda sudah memprovokasi juga, anda pasti sudah tahu jika budha itu berkaitan dengan agama, maka bisa dipastikan anda sengaja menyebar kebencian. Anda pakar telematika yang faham UU ITE,⁸⁵ berpendidikan tapi tidak beradab, eling pak!!!!*" (Indeed, you did not edit, but you have provoked it, too; you must have known that if Buddhism is related to religion, then you can be sure that you are deliberately spreading hatred. You are a telematics expert who understands ITE Law. You are educated but not civilised, so remember Pak!!!!). By producing the meme, he stated that such an act could cause religious conflicts, and he views Roy's actions as intentionally exacerbating divisive emotions. Public personalities should behave more responsibly, particularly when it comes to delicate religious issues.

Additionally, the Pemburu Senja account (@eighball8) stated that he deeply loves Indonesia and is committed to fighting political figures driven by a lust for power. In his response to the Borobudur meme controversy, he tagged @DivHumas_Polri account, asking, "Kapan minoritas memiliki keadilan kalau agamanya dihina seperti ini?" (When will minorities have justice if their religion is insulted like this?). It reflects a more profound concern about religious sensitivities and the feeling of marginalisation among minority religious groups. This comment in the Borobudur Stupa meme indicates a perceived lack of respect for Buddhist religious symbols. It raises a broader question about justice and equality for religious minorities in Indonesia. He emphasised the importance of sensitivity to diverse religions and beliefs, particularly regarding religious symbols.

In addition, two representatives of the Buddhist community, Kurniawan Santoso and Kevin Wu, reported Roy Suryo to the police on charges of hate speech and blasphemy. They considered that Roy's actions had violated Article 28, Paragraph (2) in conjunction with Article 45a of Law Number 19 of 2016 concerning Information and Electronic Transactions (ITE) and Article 156a of the Criminal Code (VOI.id, 2022c).⁸⁶

⁸⁴ https://voi.id/en/news/178920?utm_source

⁸⁵ ITE (Information and Electronic Transactions) Law

⁸⁶ https://voi.id/en/bernas/200237?utm_sourc

Also, a comment from one of the accounts on the Youtube video related to the Borobudur Stupa meme case, [@anamariaaa71820](#), “*Sebagai umat Sidharta, saya marah dan tidak terima dengan permintaan maaf Roy Suryo, perlakuan yang sangat tidak pantas dilakukan oleh orang sekelas mantan pejabat tinggi, semoga segera diproses ke pengadilan* (As a Sidharta follower, I am angry and do not accept Roy Suryo's apology, this is a very inappropriate treatment for someone of the class of a former high-ranking official, hopefully it will be processed in court soon).

Based on the incongruity theory, it suggests that humour arises when there is a mismatch between expectations and reality. In the case of the Borobudur Stupa meme, the alteration of the sacred symbol (the stupa) to serve as a satirical commentary on a political issue, particularly when accompanied by the mocking phrase “*Lucu... hehehe, ambyar*”, creates a dissonance. They perceive this mismatch between the sacred (the stupa) and the profane (humorous political critique) as deeply disrespectful. In their view, juxtaposing a revered religious site with casual and flippant language was not considered funny. Instead, it belittled and mocked the cultural and spiritual significance of Borobudur Temple. This highlights how incongruity, in this instance, does not generate humour but discomfort, as it crosses the line into what is seen as disrespectful.

The informant's discomfort reflects what incongruity theory refers to as a failed comedic dissonance, where the juxtaposition of sacred and profane elements does not generate humour but rather offence. Likewise, benign violation theory breaks down here: the violation of religious norms was perceived not as benign but as hostile, particularly given the actor's public status.

These reactions highlight how sacred symbols are not only theological artefacts but also carriers of cultural and emotional significance. In plural societies like Indonesia, humour involving religious imagery must navigate not only doctrinal boundaries but also deep historical and communal sensitivities.

As Brenner (1996)'s ethnographic work on veiling practices in Java shows, religious symbols often operate as “nodes of contestation,” where questions of morality, identity, and public propriety are actively negotiated. Although her study predates the rise of digital media, the dynamics she describes remain visible in contemporary controversies. The reactions to the Borobudur Stupa meme reflect a similar pattern: once a religious symbol is reframed, even humorously, it becomes a focal point for wider debates about respect, sensitivity, and communal boundaries. The offence articulated by Buddhist informants echoes Brenner's observation that religious symbols carry emotional and cultural weight that extends far beyond their immediate ritual function.

Neutral Reactions: Balancing Incongruity and Violation

However, another informant possesses extensive knowledge of the meme's cultural references and nuances. She is a 49-year-old single woman with an educational background in history and art. She also serves as a guest lecturer at an arts college, teaching courses on Nusantara aesthetics. Her research has involved scholarly investigations and field trips to examine historical landmarks in Indonesia, including its presence in Central and East Java temples. She is currently working on a project about the Borobudur temple and its surrounding society.

As someone interested in Borobudur's cultural and historical aspects, she sees memes as a unique way to interact with the site more informally and enjoyably. She may know the Borobudur Stupa meme as a way to pay tribute to a significant historic site while also recognising its importance. Although the memes may contain comedic or satirical elements, she sees them as a fun form of artistic expression or creativity rather than a derogatory insult to the site or the associated religion.

Despite finding amusement in the meme's comedic elements, she recognises Borobudur's profound historical and religious significance. She views the phrase "*Lucu... hehehe, ambyar*" as a playful expression of creativity rather than an insult.

However, when asked about the additional caption, *Pantas saja tiketnya mahal ternyata opung sudah buat patung 'I Gede Utange Jokowi' untuk tambahan dana bangun IKN* (No wonder the ticket price is so high, apparently 'grandpa' has already built a statue of 'Jokowi the Great Debtor' to help finance the construction of the new capital city (IKN)), she expressed greater reservation. Although the text ostensibly refers to the rising ticket prices, her concern was not about the economic issue. Instead, she noted that using Borobudur, a site of immense cultural and religious value, as a vehicle for political satire risked diminishing its historical and sacred significance. In her view, while humour and satire are essential forms of cultural expression, they should still be mindful of the dignity attached to heritage sites like Borobudur.

This middle-ground perspective was also echoed by several informants who, while aware of the meme's religious context, did not perceive it as inherently offensive. One 38-year-old, woman visual communication design lecturer described the meme as *biasa saja*, a common form of online expression, arguing that not all images containing religious elements are intended to demean or insult. For her, humour functions as an accessible way of engaging public issues, making satire easier to receive than direct critique. In this view, context and intention matter more than the mere presence of religious imagery. This illustrates an interpretive posture whereby digital innovation shapes visual satire, rather than necessarily

being perceived as a moral transgression. Context and intention are more to her than the simple existence of a religious image.

Likewise, a 21-year-old student of computer science voiced a generationally complex perspective: *“Kalau dilihat dari konteks medsos, banyak kok meme lain yang lebih kasar. Ini malah tergolong biasa aja. Yang bikin rame ya karena tokoh publik yang nyebarin.”* His response points to a broader desensitisation among younger digital natives who encounter satire and parody as routine elements of their online environments. The controversy, in his view, stemmed less from the content and more from who amplified it.

A 35-year-old mother and active TikTok user shared a comparable sentiment: *“Saya lihat meme-nya, ya biasa aja. Orang-orang di internet memang suka begitu. Saya gak tersinggung karena tahu ini cuma buat lucu-lucuan, meskipun saya juga ngerti kenapa orang lain bisa tersinggung.”* Her perspective illustrates how neutrality can coexist with empathy. She is not offended but acknowledges why others might be. These voices collectively underscore how interpretive flexibility plays a key role in shaping online reception and how, for some, the meme represented a benign violation rather than an act of defilement. For this informant, the meme works as an example of incongruity. On the one hand, Borobudur is a site of great historical and religious significance. On the other hand, the meme presents this revered symbol in an unexpected, playful way.

According to the Benign Violation theory, developed by Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren (2010), humour arises when something is perceived as a violation of social, cultural, or moral norms, while remaining benign enough not to cause actual harm or offence. From this perspective, the Borobudur meme can be read as presenting a violation insofar as it humorously alters a sacred religious site. However, as one informant explained, it remains benign because it does not fundamentally harm or disrespect the temple or Buddhism. For her, the meme represents a playful rather than harmful form of humour, which allows her to appreciate its creativity despite its sensitive subject matter.

However, when political commentary is introduced through the meme, as seen with the references to Jokowi and IKN, this female historian perceives it as moving beyond a benign violation into a genuine one. In this instance, the humour no longer feels lighthearted or playful but instead becomes disrespectful of Borobudur's standing as a UNESCO World Heritage site. In her view, the meme grows inappropriate since it fails to stay within the confines of benign humour and makes her uncomfortable with how the location is employed in political discourse.

The variety of responses from informants indicates that personal views are shaped not solely by shared religious beliefs but also by individual experiences, cultural contexts, and interpretations of satire. People may view the same meme

differently, even within the same religious community. One individual may see it as harmless satire or criticism of government policy, yet another finds it offensive and disrespectful of their sacred symbols. This complexity suggests that the boundaries of freedom of expression and respect for religious icons can be fluid and subjective, even within the same religious context.

It is essential to understand the diversity of viewpoints that can exist within similar communities of faith and emphasise that reactions to humour, even satire, are far from monolithic. When transgression appears innocuous, such as when the altered Borobudur stupa is read primarily as a critique of ticket price policies rather than as a mockery of Buddhist symbolism, it is more likely to be perceived as safe and acceptable.

Across these interviews, incongruity and benign violation recur not as abstract theories, but as lived interpretive logics, mobilised differently by each informant depending on religious background, social position, and personal experience.

What shifted this meme from individual interpretation to controversy, however, was the participation of public figures. The meme had circulated widely only after it was reshared by Roy Suryo, a former Indonesian government minister, who said he had found it on somebody else's timeline. This shift reframes how I consider digital humour, not only in terms of the content of the humour itself, but also in terms of the authority of who is amplifying it. This brings us neatly to the next topic of conversation: how the role of public figures shapes the reception of memes and online discourse.

Initially uploaded by an ordinary user, the meme gained significant public attention when Roy Suryo, the former Minister of Youth and Sports, re-shared it. This is where the role of power and social dynamics comes into play, how the actions of a public figure can change the context of a meme from mere digital humour to a more complex issue involving discussions about responsibility, positions of power, and the limits of freedom of expression.

Power Dynamics And Public Figure

The Borobudur Stupa meme had been uploaded several times by different users before it eventually caught the public's attention. Accounts like @IrutPagut and @NewOpang shared the meme as early as June 7 and 9, 2022, and @fly_free_DY on June 10, 2022, but it was not until June 10, when Roy Suryo, a former Minister and public figure, reposted it, that the meme indeed went viral. What is fascinating here is that the content itself had not changed, but its reach and impact skyrocketed when it was shared in the public eye. This raises a key point about the power dynamics of digital humour: it is not just about *what* is said but *who* says it.



The meme initially was shared on Twitter
@IrutPagut on 7 June 2022:

"Just found out now that there is a statue of the God Cebong at the top of Borobudur. In the past, there were no such idols. No wonder ticket prices are skyrocketing."



@fly_free_DY on 10 June 2022

"No wonder the tickets are expensive, it turns out that *Opung* has made a statue of 'T Gede Utange Jokowi' to increase the funds to build the IKN"

Figure 5.8. The Chronology of Borobudur Stupa Memes
 Source: Digital Observation on Twitter

Roy's repost frames the meme as part of a protest against the planned ticket price hike for Borobudur Temple. However, as a former government official, Roy's voice carried weight. In line with what Marwick and Boyd said, the individual's status influences the dynamics of attention on social media. The relational ties between users can create a hierarchy of influence where the voices of public figures carry more weight (A. Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Roy's connection to the meme amplified its spread and invited more scrutiny. Suddenly, a meme that might have slipped through the cracks was thrust into the national spotlight.

While "who says it" (i.e. public figures) can influence the spread of content, Baym and Boyd (2012) argue that virality also depends heavily on the cultural relevance and social context of the content itself. Content that resonates with an audience or reflects essential social issues is more likely to go viral, regardless of who shares it.

While the meme already carried the potential to provoke controversy, its reception shifted decisively once it became associated with a figure linked to authority, expertise, and public responsibility. The meme was no longer read solely as commentary on Borobudur or ticket pricing, but became entangled with broader and highly charged issues, including Buddhism, President Joko Widodo, national debt, and the development of Indonesia's new capital city (IKN). In this context, humour ceased to function as a benign or playful critique and was increasingly perceived as an ethical violation, particularly given the symbolic weight of religious imagery in Indonesian society.

Roy Suryo thus became the focal point of public criticism, not merely for sharing a meme, but for failing to meet the moral expectations attached to his position. As Marwick and boyd (2011) emphasise, public figures are not passive participants in digital discourse; their online actions entail emotional labour and social responsibility. This case demonstrates how the involvement of a public figure can transform digital humour into a site of moral judgment, intensifying debates over freedom of expression, accountability, and respect for religious sensitivities in Indonesia's contemporary digital public sphere.

The Broader Discourse Surrounding the Borobudur Stupa Meme

Beyond Roy Suryo's role in amplifying the Borobudur Stupa meme, the controversy also sparked reactions from other public figures, illustrating how digital humour and political critique intersect in Indonesia's mediated public life. A notable instance was the response from Mohamad Guntur Romli, a politician and public commentator who had been associated with the Indonesian Solidarity Party (Partai Solidaritas Indonesia, PSI) before later joining the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-Perjuangan) in 2023.



Figure 5.9. Guntur Romli's post on Twitter, 19 June 2022
Source: Twitter@GunRomli

Romli's engagement highlights how criticism of Roy Suryo evolved into a broader moral and political evaluation that extended beyond religious sensitivity into civic discourse. On 19 June 2022, Romli shared a caricature created by komikkita.com on Twitter (@GunRomli) referencing the Jokowi-like stupa meme. The image juxtaposed the Borobudur stupa labelled "STUPA" with a caricature resembling Roy Suryo, above which appeared the word "STUP*D." Accompanying this,

Romli tweeted that a stupa is a sacred Buddhist structure, whereas “stupid” refers to an inability to appreciate diversity and beliefs, framing his humour as a moral critique of Roy’s actions.

Guntur Romli immediately responded to the caricature through his tweet on Twitter. He seemed to explain the meaning of the words stupa and stupid mentioned in the komikkita.com caricature. Here is the Tweet "A stupa is a sacred Buddhist building that resembles an inverted bowl. Stupid is a term for people who cannot appreciate the diversity and beliefs of others." Based on that tweet, I can infer that Guntur Romli used humour to criticise Roy Suryo's actions and ignorance, highlighting the importance of respecting diversity and religious beliefs.

Guntur Romli, a non-Buddhist Indonesian, sees the meme as disrespectful to the Stupa Borobudur and the Buddhist Community, which they consider a sacred site and part of Indonesia's cultural heritage. This individual may consider modifying the image of the Stupa in a humorous or satirical way as inappropriate and disrespectful.

His use of humour and satire to challenge Roy’s apparent insensitivity reflects how political actors mobilise cultural norms and ethical expectations in mediated discourse. In doing so, Romli demonstrated how satire can function not just as ridicule but as a form of normative engagement, delineating boundaries of respect and pluralism in public communication.

This episode shows that once a meme enters elite discourse, its interpretive horizons expand. What began as a seemingly trivial political joke was reabsorbed into discussions about authority, moral accountability, and cultural respect. In this context, humour becomes a tool not only for entertainment or critique, but for moral positioning, where actors articulate and contest social norms, values, and expectations of public behaviour.

More broadly, the Borobudur Stupa meme reveals how digital platforms mediate the circulation and amplification of culturally sensitive content. Memes operate simultaneously as vehicles of humour, political commentary, and social judgement within highly networked media environments. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok do not merely host these interactions; algorithmic visibility shapes which narratives gain traction, and which frames dominate public attention. As a result, controversies like this one raise enduring questions about freedom of expression, digital ethics, and the responsibilities of both public figures and platforms in negotiating religious and cultural sensitivities in Indonesia’s contemporary digital public sphere.

Platform Responsibility in Content Moderation

Although the Borobudur Stupa meme emerged as political satire linked to public debate over Borobudur ticket pricing, its rapid circulation on Twitter illustrates how religiously sensitive symbolism can travel widely before any corrective framing or moderation takes effect. This case situates meme controversy within broader debates on platform governance, where states, platforms, and civil society actors negotiate the boundary between freedom of expression and the management of harms in digital public life (Gillespie, 2019; Kozyreva et al., 2023; Hefni, 2020; Latif et al., 2023). In Indonesia, these debates are further shaped by legal frameworks such as the Information and Electronic Transactions Law (Law No. 11/2008, as amended by Law No. 19/2016), which regulates online content, particularly when it intersects with religion, ethnicity, race, and intergroup relations. While intended to address online harms, the law has been widely debated for its broad and sometimes ambiguous application, especially in cases involving religious expression (Butt, 2015; Lindsey & Pausacker, 2016).

A key challenge is that platform visibility systems tend to prioritise engagement and virality, which can amplify controversial content regardless of cultural or religious sensitivity (Bülow & Johann, 2023). In this context, moderation is not simply a matter of detecting “bad words.” The Borobudur Stupa meme did not rely on explicit slurs, yet it was read by many users through its symbolic and visual provocation. This points to a common limitation of content moderation: content may comply lexically while still escalating social tension through context-dependent meaning.

Most social media platforms rely on automated systems, including artificial intelligence (AI), as a first layer of content moderation to flag potentially problematic content, such as hate speech, before further human review (Gillespie, 2018). However, AI-based approaches have significant limitations. Studies have shown that AI systems often struggle to detect irony, satire, and sarcasm in digital communication, as these forms of expression rely heavily on subtext, cultural knowledge, and contextual interpretation rather than literal meaning (Burgers et al., 2016; Joshi et al., 2018). Bias in training data further complicates this issue, particularly when models are trained predominantly on non-Indonesian corpora, increasing the risk of over-blocking or false positives/negatives in culturally specific discourse (Gillespie, 2020).

Platform governance also tends to operate reactively. User reporting tools exist, but they often lag behind rapid circulation dynamics, meaning controversy can solidify before any intervention occurs (Gillespie, 2020). In the Borobudur case, the speed of spread contributed to the establishment of moral judgements and public frames of interpretation early in the viral cycle, making later moderation, whether removal, warning labels, or account sanctions, less able to “undo” the controversy once it had already become a public incident.

Finally, the wider controversy also shows how users sometimes communicate sensitivity indirectly, including through coded or obfuscated forms in subsequent commentary, for example, the use of “Stup*d” in later satirical responses.⁸⁷ This reinforces the point that moderation cannot be reduced to surface-level lexical detection; it must contend with meaning that is produced through cultural reference, visual symbolism, and rhetorical strategy.

Rather than resolving these challenges, this section frames content moderation as a site of tension between automated systems, local cultural contexts, and user interpretation. The Borobudur Stupa meme shows that responsibility for managing religiously sensitive humour is distributed across platforms, public figures, and users themselves. The implications of this distributed responsibility, particularly in relation to digital literacy and user agency, are explored further in the concluding chapter.

Conclusion

The Borobudur Stupa meme serves as a profound case study, illustrating the relationship between humour, religious sensitivity, and the use of digital media in Indonesia. As earlier controversies around the Ahok–Rizieq memes have shown, such conflicts do not emerge in a vacuum but build on longer histories of religious–political tension in the digital sphere. The application of Incongruity Theory in this chapter highlights how humour often emerges from the unexpected merger of sacred religious symbols and a critical political context, eliciting laughter but potentially also outrage. This dual role of humour, unifying in some cases while deepening social divides in others, reflects the complex social dynamics in digital memes.

By incorporating the Benign Violation Theory, the study further reveals how humour operates differently depending on one’s perception and societal position. In one context, the violation of norms (in this case, using a religious symbol for satirical purposes) may be perceived as harmless, while it becomes deeply offensive in another. The involvement of public figures, like Roy Suryo, adds another dimension to the discussion. His participation increased the meme’s visibility and shifted the focus from humour and mild social critique to a debate on power, authority, and social responsibility. This study enriches both theories by integrating digital context, cultural sensitivity, power dynamics, and social roles, enhancing the understanding of how humour operates in a complex society

⁸⁷ Some users attempt to circumvent automated screening through strategic obfuscation, such as using asterisks in “Baj*gan” to imply bajingan (bastard) or masking letters in “Anj*g” to suggest anjing (dog). While such practices may bypass surface-level lexical filters, contextual cues often remain legible to human audiences. This illustrates a broader limitation of automated moderation, where meaning is produced not only through words but also through shared cultural knowledge and pragmatic inference.

like Indonesia. The findings emphasise that digital humour, although seemingly simple, has significant implications for discussions of freedom of expression and religious sensitivity towards fellow citizens. It also underscores the broader challenges of managing digital public spaces, where legal frameworks, platform governance, and public understanding intersect.

Regarding power dynamics and social roles, humour concerns “what is said, who says it, and in what context.” Public figures often become targets of perceived unsafe violations, but they can also be responsible for potentially escalating social tensions and shifting discourse from content to intent. Thus, humour and satire acquire new meanings based on the social standing and influence of the individuals involved.

By incorporating the dynamics of the digital media context and accounting for a more culture-sensitive conception of humour in relation to power, this research provides new insights within existing theories of humour. This underscores the fact that digital humour is not simply a mode of entertainment but a social and political force that encapsulates and, at times, actively subverts norms, arouses debate, and even shapes policy considerations, especially in an age of advanced photo manipulation and generative AI, where satirical images can easily detach from their original context and be recirculated as “truth”. The results underscore the importance of considering socio-political context and the potential of humour to produce unintended socio-legal consequences.

Navigating freedom of expression within Indonesia’s pluralistic society requires a thorough understanding of the boundaries between what is acceptable and what is honourable in the digital world. The Borobudur Stupa meme demonstrates how easily humour can shift from social commentary to social rupture, depending on context, actors, and audience reception. Rather than resolving these tensions, this chapter highlights the complexity of negotiating humour and religious sensitivity in digital public life, setting the stage for a broader discussion in the concluding chapter on responsibility, literacy, and ethical engagement in Indonesia’s digital sphere.

At the same time, this chapter recognises that questions of responsibility in digital humour cannot be addressed solely through regulation or platform governance. How users interpret, negotiate, and respond to humour involving sensitive religious symbols remains central to sustaining respectful digital environments. These issues of digital literacy, user agency, and ethical engagement are taken up more fully in the concluding chapter.

