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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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This dissertation has examined Islamic-inspired memes as part of Indonesia's contemporary digital landscape, where humour, religious expression, and cultural reference intersect in everyday online practice. While light-hearted Eid al-Adha memes illustrate how religious humour is routinely woven into digital life, the dissertation's core analyses focus on more contested cases, particularly the Borobudur Stupa controversy and Ramadan-themed TikTok videos. Together, these examples show how memes operate as sites where religious meanings are expressed, debated, and reinterpreted within platformed environments shaped by algorithmic visibility, public sensibilities, and historical memory. Rather than functioning merely as entertainment, memes appear as moments of cultural work, where religious meanings are expressed, reinterpreted, and cultural boundaries are periodically unsettled.

Across Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, the study shows that platform affordances play a decisive role in shaping how Islamic-inspired memes are created, circulated, and interpreted. Each platform fosters distinct modes of participation: Facebook encourages community-based circulation, Twitter amplifies political and ideological contestation, while TikTok enables playful, performative, and algorithmically mediated encounters with religious differences. Together, these environments demonstrate how digital culture reshapes religious expression without detaching it from broader social and moral concerns.

Taken as a whole, this research demonstrates that Islamic-inspired memes are not trivial by-products of online life. They participate actively in shaping social norms, articulating religious difference, and sustaining everyday conversations about coexistence within Indonesia's plural society. By tracing how humour, satire, and visual play travel across platforms, this study contributes to broader discussions

on religion and digital media, offering a framework that may be extended to other cultural and national contexts.

At the centre of this dissertation lies a guiding question: how do Islamic-inspired memes across different digital platforms shape and reflect religious identities, cultural practices, and social norms in Indonesia? Addressing this question required treating memes not simply as humorous texts, but as cultural artefacts that bridge pre-digital traditions and contemporary digital practices. Through this lens, memes appear both as reflections of existing religious sensibilities and as active agents that shape participation, visibility, and debate in Indonesia's digital public sphere.

The first line of inquiry traced meme-like forms from pre-internet cultural traditions, such as proverbs, folklore, and *wayang*, to contemporary social media practices. This historical perspective highlights continuity rather than rupture, showing how humour and symbolic play have long been part of religious and cultural transmission, even as their forms and circulation have evolved.

The second inquiry focused on Facebook and Twitter, examining how platform-specific dynamics shape the production, circulation, and reception of Islamic-inspired memes. Here, the analysis revealed the importance of meme ecosystems, key actors, and platform cultures in determining whether religious humour functions as communal bonding, political critique, or moral provocation.

The third inquiry examined TikTok, where Ramadan-themed memetic videos illustrate how humour and play foster forms of light participation across religious differences. These practices demonstrate how digital affordances enable what this study conceptualises as playful citizenship, allowing users to engage in religious difference without escalating it into conflict.

Finally, the Borobudur Stupa case examined how satirical memes can trigger intense public debate when religious symbols, political figures, and platform amplification converge. This case reveals how digital humour can shift rapidly from playful critique to moral controversy, exposing ongoing tensions between freedom of expression, religious sensitivity, and legal accountability in Indonesia's digital public life.

Together, these findings show that Islamic-inspired memes are central to understanding how religion, culture, and technology intersect in contemporary Indonesia. Digital platforms do not merely host religious expression; they structure how it is seen, contested, and felt. At the same time, the meanings that emerge within these environments remain dependent on users' everyday practices of interpretation, remixing, and participation, reminding us that platform structures and human agency continually shape one another.

By foregrounding memes as both cultural artefacts and cultural agents, this dissertation demonstrates how everyday digital humour has become a key site for negotiating religious identity, difference, and belonging in the digital age.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Indonesian digital culture is characterised less by the replacement of older religious traditions than by their continual adaptation, reinterpretation, and circulation through new media environments.

Tracing the Evolution of Islamic-Inspired Memes

This section addresses the first research question by tracing how Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia grew out of earlier cultural practices, were reshaped through shifts in media technology, and gradually became part of everyday religious expression on contemporary social media platforms.

Long before the internet, Indonesian communities were already circulating what could be described as “meme-like” cultural forms: wayang stories, proverbs, Islamic folklore, and ritual humour that conveyed moral lessons through repetition, imitation, and playful variation. Wayang kulit, for example, has long functioned as a medium for moral and religious instruction, embedding ethical reflection in humour, exaggeration, and narrative play. In this sense, traditional performances and popular publications often relied on short, memorable, and visually engaging elements that helped ideas travel across audiences and generations. These qualities closely resemble the logics that later came to define digital memes. Rather than emerging from nowhere, internet memes in Indonesia draw on expressive traditions that were already familiar and socially embedded.

As communication technologies changed, these cultural modes did not disappear but were reworked into new formats. Early digital environments were dominated by text-based creativity: emoticons, ASCII art, and simple visual symbols that allowed users to express emotion, identity, and religious feeling in compact ways. Over time, these practices developed into emojis and stickers, which made religious iconography more explicit and expanded the space for playful *da'wah* and symbolic self-representation. New forms did not replace older ones; instead, they accumulated, each layer adding to the visual and narrative resources available to Indonesian Muslims online.

With the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, Islamic-inspired memes became more openly participatory. Religious symbols, jokes, and everyday experiences were increasingly remixed, commented on, and re-circulated by users themselves. In these spaces, religious meaning was not simply transmitted from authorities to audiences, but shaped through collective engagement, humour, and interpretation. Memes became a way of folding theological reflection into vernacular digital culture.

The emergence of TikTok further accelerated this process. Its short-video format, remix affordances, and algorithmic visibility allowed religious expression to be translated into sound, gesture, timing, and visual performance. Ramadan-themed videos, NU–Muhammadiyah jokes, and everyday moral reflections spread quickly, not because of established networks or institutional backing, but because the platform prioritises relevance, repetition, and engagement. In this setting, the circulation of Islamic ideas is less tied to hierarchy and more dependent on algorithmic discovery and participatory uptake.

Across these developments, one pattern remains clear: older expressive modes do not vanish. Proverbs reappear as captions; wayang-like moral play resurfaces in short skits; early emoji cultures live on in religious stickers; and familiar Islamic narratives provide frames for meme humour. The evolution of Islamic-inspired memes is therefore cumulative rather than linear.

What emerges from this trajectory is that Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia are not simply a product of digital novelty. They are rooted in a longer cultural logic built around repetition, mimicry, humour, and shared storytelling, a logic that has been carried forward across changing media environments. As platforms evolve, religious meanings are continually reworked, allowing Indonesian Muslims to express faith, reflect on social norms, and engage authority in ways that feel both familiar and newly inventive.

Platform Affordances, User Agency, and Religious Expression

This section explores how different digital environments shape the creation, circulation, and reception of Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia. A comparison between Facebook and Twitter shows that platform architecture and user agency work together in structuring how humour, critique, and religious expression unfold online. Facebook's emphasis on groups and long-form interaction supports community-oriented meaning-making, while Twitter's fast-paced circulation enables rapid commentary and public debate.

Platform design alone, however, does not determine how memes operate. Equally important is how users engage with memetic content in everyday practice, drawing on religious knowledge, cultural references, and social positioning. Memes do not circulate as stable objects with fixed meanings; their significance emerges through use, reinterpretation, and response within particular communities. In this sense, technological affordances and user agency are inseparable: platform features create possibilities, but it is through situated engagement that memes become socially meaningful, humorous, or contentious.

My analysis of Islamic-inspired memes on Facebook and Twitter shows how each platform's technical history and design shape patterns of visibility and interaction.

On Facebook, group features encourage sustained discussion and collective interpretation, while on Twitter, retweets and real-time engagement allow memes to respond quickly to unfolding political and religious events. Even posts without hashtags can gain traction when they resonate with current concerns, underscoring that visibility depends not only on platform mechanics but also on contextual relevance and timing.

This comparison highlights how affordances take on different meanings depending on users' cultural and religious backgrounds. Identical platform features can be mobilised in divergent ways, reflecting users' agency in negotiating, adapting, and sometimes resisting technological constraints. From a spreadable media perspective, Islamic-inspired memes circulate not simply through transmission but through processes of remixing and reinterpretation that mirror participants' social positions and religious sensibilities.

A side-by-side reading of Facebook and Twitter thus reveals distinct modes of religious expression. Facebook tends to foster community-bound engagement and continuity, whereas Twitter foregrounds immediacy, contestation, and public visibility. Rather than acting as neutral containers, these platforms actively shape how authority, humour, and critique are negotiated within Indonesian Muslim publics.

Although TikTok is not the focus of this chapter, it offers a contrasting model of algorithmic visibility that prioritises personalised discovery over follower networks. Its implications for religious expression are taken up in the following chapter. Viewed across platforms, these findings show that meme practices are inseparable from the technological and cultural environments in which they emerge.

TikTok's Playful Citizenship: Fostering Unity through Play

This section examines how memes on TikTok foster social and cultural interaction, encouraging what can be described as playful citizenship amid Indonesia's religious and cultural diversity.

TikTok offers a particularly revealing setting for observing how Islamic-inspired humour is taken up in everyday practice. Its short-video format, remix features, and algorithmic circulation invite users to engage religious difference through play, creativity, and performance rather than confrontation. During Ramadan, for instance, distinctions between NU and Muhammadiyah are rarely addressed head-on. Instead, they appear in jokes, mimicry, and light satire that acknowledge difference while keeping the tone familiar and non-threatening.

Ramadan-themed TikTok memes thus function as more than casual entertainment. They operate as informal spaces where religious difference is translated into shared cultural references, references that are easily recognised, commented on, and reworked by others. TikTok's For You Page (FYP) plays a key role here. Because content is distributed beyond stable follower networks, religious humour often reaches audiences who do not necessarily share the same organisational or theological background. This increases the likelihood of cross-group encounters and responses, something less common on platforms structured around enduring social ties.

These dynamics help explain why humour on TikTok often works across boundaries. Compared to Facebook, where discussion tends to remain within relatively homogeneous communities, or Twitter, where religious difference frequently becomes a site of rapid critique and contestation, TikTok facilitates encounters across lines of affiliation. Difference is not dissolved, but made manageable through timing, repetition, and shared vernacular forms.

What emerges from these practices is a mode of engagement that does not demand agreement. Through joking, imitation, and everyday performance, users temporarily loosen rigid boundaries and relate to difference in a low-stakes, affective register. In Indonesia's plural religious landscape, such moments of playfulness can function as a social resource, allowing cohesion to be maintained without erasing diversity.

The Borobudur Stupa case makes these limits visible. What circulates as playful religious humour on TikTok can quickly harden into moral conflict once sacred imagery and political authority enter the frame. In such moments, the meme ecosystem no longer functions as a space of light negotiation, but as an arena where ethical boundaries are publicly contested. Attending to these shifts helps clarify how humour mediates, and sometimes destabilises, religious life in Indonesia's digital public sphere.

Humour and Boundaries: The Sensitive Terrain of Satirical Memes

The Borobudur Stupa meme demonstrates how satirical content can unsettle the boundaries between humour, religious sensitivity, and public discourse in Indonesia. Although rooted in Buddhist symbolism, the controversy spills over into the broader Muslim-majority digital public, showing that jokes involving sacred symbols, regardless of which religious tradition is referenced, tend to be interpreted through Indonesia's dominant ethical and cultural sensibilities. In this sense, the meme expands the scope of this study on Islamic-inspired memes by revealing how humour about one faith can trigger moral debate in a multi-religious society.

This case confirms that digital humour rarely stands alone. The juxtaposition of a revered religious symbol with a political undertone produces incongruity that can elicit both laughter and discomfort, revealing humour's double-edged capacity to unify in some contexts while deepening divides in others. In a society as richly diverse as Indonesia's, this meme exemplifies the fragile balance between creative expression and reverence, reflecting the broader dynamics of pluralism in the digital age.

Read through the lens of Benign Violation Theory, this study delves further into how the same humour can provoke drastically different reactions depending on one's perspective. The satire was harmless; for others, it crossed a line. Public figures, particularly Roy Suryo, added another layer, shifting the discourse from humour to issues of authority, power, and the social responsibilities of prominent individuals. His involvement significantly amplified the meme's reach, transforming it from a mere joke into a commentary on the influence of public voices in shaping the debate over freedom and respect.

Rather than treating incongruity and violation as abstract mechanisms, this case shows how their effects are shaped by context, cultural sensitivity, and power relations. In Indonesia, where respect for religious diversity is woven into everyday social norms, humour does not simply entertain. It touches questions of propriety, offence, and the limits of acceptable critique. The Borobudur Stupa meme demonstrates how satire can open space for reflection while simultaneously exposing fault lines in plural public life.

The case also brings platform responsibility into sharper focus. As discussed in Chapter 5, the rapid circulation of the meme highlights how platform governance struggles to keep pace with context-dependent forms of offence. Content moderation systems tend to prioritise scale and speed, yet controversies like this hinge less on explicit language than on symbolism, history, and interpretation. Scholars have noted that addressing such cases requires moderation frameworks that combine automated systems with culturally informed human judgement (Gillespie, 2018; Kozyreva et al., 2023). In Indonesia, this points to the need for moderation approaches that are attentive to local religious and historical contexts, instead of applying one-size-fits-all restrictions.

Research question 4 shows that satirical memes in Indonesia can widen public conversation while simultaneously unsettling social boundaries. When humour intersects with sacred symbols, political authority, and uneven power relations, it becomes a site of negotiation rather than simple amusement. Memes, in this sense, do not merely reflect public sentiment; they actively participate in ongoing debates over respect, pluralism, and the ethical limits of expression in Indonesia's digital public sphere.

Concluding Reflections

This dissertation has examined Islamic-inspired memes as a key site through which the intertwined dynamics of humour, religion, culture, and technology in Indonesia's digital public sphere can be understood. Across Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, these memes reveal how religious meaning is negotiated between tradition and innovation, personal belief and public discourse.

Fundamentally, this study highlights how digital media both reshapes and sustains religious and cultural expression. Islamic-inspired memes are no longer merely entertaining; they operate as part of ongoing social dialogue, allowing individuals and communities to articulate values, engage with cultural difference, and navigate complex identities. Across platforms, the findings show the flexibility of religious discourse in digital environments, where humour, playful citizenship, and satire coexist within Indonesia's pluralistic society.

Theoretical contributions

This study presents a perspective on the relationship between online platforms, digital religious expression, and religious meaning-making. By analysing how features such as sharing, trends, and recommendations on sites shape Islamic-inspired memes, it becomes evident that platforms do not act alone. Users actively engage with these structures with their own cultural creativity and religious sensibilities. Memes do not emerge solely from platform design; they acquire meaning through users' practices of reinterpretation and circulation, reflecting the varied ways in which faith and humour are negotiated in digital spaces.

Rather than treating algorithms as neutral tools, this study understands them as participatory forces that shape how religious humour circulates, sometimes reinforcing familiar narratives, at other times enabling unexpected encounters across differences.

In line with spreadable media scholarship, this study treats memes not as fixed cultural artefacts but as dynamic expressions that move across online spaces and social settings through circulation, reinterpretation, and reuse (Jenkins et al., 2013). Their meanings are continually shaped by users' playful engagement, social tensions, and collaborative practices, rather than by original intent alone.

In this study, this fluidity is approached not as a purely technical feature of digital media, but as a social process through which religious meanings are continually reworked. Islamic-inspired memes in Indonesia do not merely reflect existing religious values or identities; through circulation, commentary, and remixing, they actively shape how religion, humour, and moral boundaries are understood in everyday digital life. In this sense, memes function as cultural agents mediating religious discourse within platformed publics.

Understanding memes as evolving and cooperative forms of cultural communication opens new ways of thinking about participation in digital religious life. Moreover, the research expands on playful citizenship by investigating how religious humour and digital memes can facilitate interfaith discussion, providing a more inclusive space, especially in religiously diverse Indonesia. On TikTok, religious humour proves an effective tool for reducing tensions and uniting previously divided groups, transforming potential conflict into solidarity. This study presents a broader understanding of how digital citizenship can creatively and openly engage religious diversity by considering the digital context, algorithmic influences, and active participation.

Through Incongruity Theory, this study shows that humour often arises from clashes between sacred religious symbols and unexpected political contexts, eliciting laughter, anger, and contempt. This highlights humour's dual role: uniting yet also intensifying divisions. In the context of Benign Violation Theory, research shows that violations perceived as safe in one setting may be deemed offensive in another, particularly when involving religious symbols. By incorporating power dynamics and social roles, this extends both theories to the digital realm, where humour mirrors societal power relations, particularly how public figures become targets, amplifying social tensions. This study adds new dimensions to these theories, emphasising the intricate interplay of digital content and context, cultural sensitivity, social dynamics, and power in shaping humour and its impact on religious freedom of expression and sensitivity in Indonesia's public discourse.

These contributions point to a broader insight: humour in digital religion cannot be understood solely at the level of content or intention. It needs to be approached through its circulation, amplification, and interpretation within platformed publics, where meaning is continuously shaped through interaction rather than fixed in advance.

From an anthropological standpoint, this dissertation foregrounds everyday digital practices as central sites of religious meaning-making. Instead of starting from doctrine, authority, or institutional religion, it takes humour, memes, and playful interaction as ethnographic entry points into how religion is lived, negotiated, and contested in digital settings.

Viewed from this anthropological perspective, memes become valuable not simply because they are humorous, but because they reveal how ordinary people navigate religion, difference, morality, and public life through everyday digital practices

In this way, the dissertation contributes primarily to digital anthropology, while also speaking to wider debates in digital religion and media and cultural studies. First, it shifts analytical attention from formal religious authority and doctrinal debate to everyday religious humour, showing how memes, jokes, and playful interactions function as meaningful sites of religious negotiation rather than

peripheral noise. Second, it treats memes not merely as representations of belief or opinion, but as cultural agents that actively shape groupness, moral judgement, and public sensitivity in platformed contexts. Third, by examining playful citizenship within religious settings, particularly on TikTok during Ramadan, it expands prevailing understandings of digital citizenship beyond activism and protest, highlighting humour and affect as modes of civic and ethical engagement. Fourth, it offers an anthropological reading of algorithms as moral and affective infrastructures, showing how visibility, amplification, and circulation condition when humour connects and when it escalates into conflict. Finally, grounded in the Indonesian context, this study treats experiences from the Global South not as illustrative cases, but as generative sites where existing theories are tested, stretched, and reworked in relation to religion, humour, and digital life.

Taken seriously in this way, humour emerges not as a trivial by-product of online interaction, but as an ethnographic site where religious meanings, social boundaries, and moral expectations are continuously negotiated.

Practical Implications: Shared Responsibility in Platformed Publics

This dissertation shows that controversies around religious humour are rarely caused by content alone; they emerge through circulation, amplification, and interpretation within platformed publics. Responsibility therefore cannot be located in a single actor. Instead, the Indonesian case points to a shared responsibility model involving platforms, public figures, regulators, civil society, and ordinary users.

For platforms, the key implication is the gap between lexical compliance and symbolic offence. The Borobudur Stupa meme illustrates how content may avoid prohibited terms yet still trigger serious public tension because meaning travels through images, cultural reference, and context. Rather than claiming insight into local moderation operations, often opaque to researchers, this study highlights the need for more transparent governance: clearer enforcement rationales, accessible appeal mechanisms, and public-facing explanations of how culturally sensitive cases are assessed (Gillespie, 2019; Kozyreva et al., 2023). Where possible, moderation should combine automated detection with context-aware human review, particularly for satire involving sacred symbols.

For public figures, the implication is that amplification is itself an intervention. When influential actors repost sensitive humour, they can shift the frame from “joke” to “public incident,” raising the stakes of interpretation and accelerating the likelihood of legal and moral escalation. Finally, for users and civil society organisations, this study suggests that digital literacy is not merely technical competence but an interpretive capacity: recognising satire, tracing context, and assessing potential harm before sharing.

More broadly, these findings suggest that moderation and governance cannot be reduced to technical enforcement alone. Distinguishing between humour that opens dialogue and humour that produces harm relies on situated judgement, cultural knowledge, and forms of ethical reflection that are learned and negotiated in everyday social life. In pluralistic societies such as Indonesia, fostering digital spaces that allow contextualised humour while acknowledging religious sensitivity is not only a normative concern but also a practical one, shaping trust, participation, and platform legitimacy.

These challenges become even more pronounced in an era increasingly shaped by generative AI and automated image production, where satire can be rapidly detached from context and recirculated as apparent fact. In this context, humour does not automatically trivialise religious matters; rather, it can open spaces for reflection, dialogue, and critical engagement, while also carrying the risk of offence or escalation depending on context and circulation.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study contributes to understanding the circulation and meaning of Islamic-inspired memes on Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok in Indonesia. However, several limitations should be acknowledged, which also point to directions for future research.

First, this research focuses on Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok because their affordances support rapid circulation, short-form expression, and participatory interaction, features central to the dynamics of meme culture examined in this dissertation. While platforms such as Instagram and YouTube are widely used in Indonesia, their emphasis on curated visuals and longer-form content makes them less aligned with the fast-moving, remix-oriented meme practices that form the core of this study. As a result, certain dynamics of religious expression and humour on image and video dominant platforms remain outside the scope of this analysis. Future research could extend this inquiry to Instagram and YouTube to explore how Islamic-inspired memes and religious humour operate within slower, more narrative-driven visual environments.

Second, the study is grounded in the Indonesian socio-religious context, which is both a strength and a limitation. My familiarity with Indonesian culture and religion enables a nuanced interpretation of humour, symbolism, and religious sensitivity. At the same time, this positionality carries the risk of implicit bias, potentially normalising certain cultural assumptions or limiting analytical distance. A comparative or cross-cultural approach would enrich future research by examining how similar memes are interpreted in different national or religious contexts, allowing for a broader understanding of how digital religious humour travels, transforms, or encounters resistance across societies.

Third, this research primarily reflects experiences from urban and digitally connected populations. Indonesia's vast geography and uneven digital infrastructure mean that access to the internet and to meme culture itself, is not evenly distributed. As a result, rural voices and communities with limited digital access may be underrepresented. Future studies could address this gap by exploring how Islamic-inspired memes are encountered, adapted, or resisted in rural or semi-connected settings, offering a more comprehensive picture of digital religious expression across Indonesia.

Fourth, this dissertation focuses primarily on NU and Muhammadiyah because their theological differences are widely recognised, publicly negotiated, and culturally legible in everyday Indonesian life. These characteristics make them particularly conducive to humorous and reciprocal meme practices, especially on platforms such as TikTok. However, these findings cannot be generalised to religious communities that experience structural marginalisation or contested legitimacy, such as the Ahmadiyah. In such cases, public discourse is shaped more by stigma and vulnerability than by everyday ritual variation, rendering humour a far less viable medium for negotiation. This limitation reflects the scope of the dataset rather than an analytical exclusion, and future research could explore how digital humour functions, or fails to function, within marginalised religious communities.

Finally, emerging technologies such as generative AI and automated image production pose new challenges for the study of digital religious humour. As satirical images become easier to produce and increasingly detached from their original contexts, questions of authorship, accountability, and interpretation become more complex. Future research should therefore examine how AI-generated visual content reshapes the boundaries between satire, misinformation, and religious sensitivity, particularly in pluralistic societies like Indonesia.

While this dissertation examines how platform affordances, algorithmic visibility, and users' everyday practices shape the circulation of Islamic-inspired memes, it does not attempt an in-depth analysis of platform governance or the political economy of social media. Questions concerning moderation policies, commercial platform dynamics, and the institutional conditions that influence the visibility of digital religious content remain beyond the scope of this study. Future research could build on these findings by examining how these structural dimensions interact with the everyday cultural practices and religious meaning-making explored in this dissertation.

These limitations do not diminish the contributions of this study. Rather, they clarify its analytical scope and highlight the need for continued, context-sensitive, comparative, and methodologically plural research into how humour, religion, and digital media intersect across platforms, communities, and technological regimes.

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