

Mediating Religion Through Memes: A Netnographic Comparison of Islamic and Buddhist Instagram in Indonesia

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how religious messages are mediated through meme-based communication on Instagram in Indonesia by comparing Islamic and Buddhist meme accounts. It aims to clarify how different religious traditions adapt their communicative styles to a highly visual, template-driven, and participatory platform environment. **Methodology:** Using a qualitative netnographic approach, the study analyzed 120 meme posts (60 per account) and 3,847 user comments collected from February–April 2025 from two Indonesian Instagram accounts, @memeislam.id and @sadhu.meme. Data were coded to compare thematic patterns, visual/message framing strategies, circulation routines (posting frequency/timing, captions, hashtags, templates), and observable audience participation traces in comment threads. **Findings:** The analysis identified four recurring theme categories. @memeislam.id emphasized Scripture Quotation and Universal Moral Values (66.7% combined), while @sadhu.meme foregrounded Religious Satire/Humor (41.7%); both devoted an equal share to Religious Social Criticism (13.3%). Visual packaging differed in how authority and humor were rendered (e.g., short, high-readability scriptural excerpts versus citation-oriented quotation cards, alongside pop-culture meme templates). Circulation practices also diverged, including hashtag density and posting routines. Audience participation traces contrasted “rapid affirmation” (devotional phrases, emoji-only replies, tagging/mentions) with more aphoristic and concept-referential comments; captured examples showed 55,500 likes/36 comments versus 472 likes/25 comments. **Implications:** Findings suggest that meme-based religious communication can increase accessibility and shareability while also carrying risks of doctrinal compression and interpretive ambiguity. Practical implications include pairing meme posts with context-expanding features and strengthening digital religious literacy for audiences. **Originality/Value:** This study contributes an Indonesia-based, cross-religious comparison of Instagram religious memes using a shared coding framework and integrating visual-rhetorical analysis with a typology of bilingual audience response traces.

Keywords: Digital religion; religious memes; Instagram; netnography; Islamic communication; Buddhist communication; Indonesia.

Abstrak

Tujuan: Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana pesan-pesan keagamaan dimediasi melalui komunikasi berbasis meme di Instagram di Indonesia dengan membandingkan akun meme Islam dan Buddha. Studi ini bertujuan menjelaskan bagaimana tradisi keagamaan yang berbeda menyesuaikan gaya komunikasinya dengan lingkungan platform yang sangat visual, bertumpu pada template, dan bersifat partisipatif. **Metodologi:** Dengan pendekatan netnografi kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis 120 unggahan meme (60 per akun) dan 3.847 komentar pengguna yang dikumpulkan pada periode Februari–April 2025 dari dua akun Instagram Indonesia, @memeislam.id dan @sadhu.meme. Data dikodekan untuk membandingkan pola tematik, strategi retorika visual/pembingkayaan pesan, rutinitas sirkulasi (frekuensi/waktu unggahan, caption, tagar, template), serta jejak partisipasi audiens yang tampak pada kolom komentar. **Temuan:** Analisis mengidentifikasi empat kategori tema yang berulang. @memeislam.id menekankan Kutipan Kitab Suci dan Nilai Moral Universal (gabungan 66,7%), sementara @sadhu.meme menonjolkan Satire/Humor Keagamaan (41,7%); keduanya mengalokasikan porsi yang sama untuk Kritik Sosial Keagamaan (13,3%). Pengemasan visual berbeda dalam cara menampilkan otoritas dan humor (misalnya, kutipan teks keagamaan yang singkat dan sangat mudah dibaca versus kartu kutipan berorientasi sitasi, disertai template meme budaya populer). Praktik sirkulasi juga berbeda, termasuk

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kepadatan tagar dan rutinitas unggahan. Jejak partisipasi audiens memperlihatkan kontras antara “afirmasi cepat” (ungkapan devosional, respons hanya emoji, tagging/mention) dan komentar yang lebih aforistik serta merujuk konsep; contoh yang terekam menunjukkan 55.500 likes/36 komentar dibanding 472 likes/25 komentar. **Implikasi:** Temuan menunjukkan bahwa komunikasi keagamaan berbasis meme dapat meningkatkan aksesibilitas dan kemudahan berbagi, namun juga berpotensi menimbulkan reduksi kompleksitas ajaran dan ambiguitas penafsiran. Implikasi praktisnya meliputi penguatan konteks pada tiap unggahan (misalnya melalui fitur penjelasan tambahan) serta peningkatan literasi keagamaan digital bagi audiens. **Orisinalitas/Nilai:** Penelitian ini berkontribusi melalui perbandingan lintas agama berbasis Indonesia terhadap meme keagamaan di Instagram dengan kerangka pengodean yang sama, serta mengintegrasikan analisis retorika visual dengan tipologi jejak respons audiens dwibahasa.

Keywords: Agama digital; meme keagamaan; Instagram; netnografi; komunikasi Islam; komunikasi Buddha; Indonesia..

INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital platforms has transformed religious communication by enabling teachings, guidance, and devotional discourse to circulate beyond traditional physical settings such as mosques and temples into everyday, networked environments. Across social media, websites, and mobile applications, religious messages are increasingly produced for public-facing visibility and broad engagement—ranging from platform-mediated preaching and influencer-led outreach to the circulation of short-form guidance such as online fatwas and event-driven posts that intensify participation through metrics and interaction features (Adel & Numan, 2023; Asiedu & Boateng, 2019; Fuente-Cobo, Gutiérrez-de-Cabiedes, & Visiers Elizaincin, 2023; Sharma & Sharma, 2025). These shifts have also expanded the range of religious “spaces,” including immersive virtual worlds where users can customize ritual settings and experience heightened interactivity, suggesting that digital environments may reshape the material and experiential dimensions of religion rather than merely “hosting” it (Dos Santos & da Cruz, 2024). At the same time, platformed religiosity introduces tensions: algorithmic visibility incentives can challenge established norms and disciplinary boundaries for religious figures, while selective exposure dynamics may reinforce in-group boundaries and polarization through echo-chamber effects (Haq & Kwok, 2024; Paolillo, 2025). The COVID-19 period further accelerated the integration of digital media into routine religious life, including home-based ritualization and new forms of mediated community, while mobile phones in diverse contexts have supported religious ties and mobilization alongside calls for new guidance from religious authorities (Alzouma, 2017; Cheong & Campbell, 2022; Giménez Béliveau, 2021; Lang, 2025). Taken together, these developments underscore the need for format- and platform-specific analysis to understand how particular digital environments shape the packaging, circulation, and reception of religious messages in contemporary public culture.

On Instagram in particular, the mediation of religion has increasingly taken a visual and template-driven form, where short text overlays, familiar pop-culture references, and humor/memes function as everyday modes of religious communication within the scroll-based logic of the feed. In the Indonesian context examined here, @memeislam.id and @sadhu.meme exemplify this mode of “digital religiosity,” operating through highly recognizable meme conventions and participation-oriented posting practices. Profile indicators captured in the study suggest that these practices take place at a public scale: @memeislam.id was documented with 51,700 followers and 1,132 total posts, while @sadhu.meme was documented with 25,500 followers and 2,910 total posts. At the same time, the meme form foregrounds an inherent tension that motivates the present inquiry: while meme templates can lower barriers to access and accelerate circulation through quick readability and shareability, they may also compress doctrinal nuance into punchlines or ambiguous satire that is open to multiple interpretations. This combination of

high-visibility visual packaging and participatory feed dynamics underscores the need for a format-specific (meme) and platform-specific (Instagram) analysis of how religious messages are produced, circulated, and received in contemporary digital publics.

Research on the relationship between social media and religion has expanded rapidly over the past two decades, and the existing literature can be synthesized into three major strands that frame how digital media reshapes contemporary religiosity. First, studies in Digital Religion and Social Media position digital space as a new arena for religious practice, expression, and mediation, showing that religion is not merely “present” online but is transformed through virtual rituals, online worship, religious mobile applications, and platform-based faith communities (Campbell & Cheong, 2022). Prior work further demonstrates that social media enables religious engagement beyond geographic boundaries and supports religious learning and identity performance across platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube (Bellar, 2017; Hartogsohn, 2022; Kerim, Kurmanaliyev, Ongarov, & Kaliyeva, 2025; Nsohya, 2023; Sbardelotto, 2014; Shareefa, Moosa, & Rashad, 2025; Wright-Ríos & Martínez-Don, 2024). At the same time, this strand highlights the ambivalence of social media as a religious environment: alongside opportunities for youth engagement and religious activism (Ma’rof & Abdullah, 2025b, 2025a; Rohid, Sugihartati, Suyanto, Susilo, & Zikri, 2025), scholars also note risks such as polarization, echo chambers, commodification, and shifts in religious authority shaped by mediatization and prosumerism (Ding, Xiao, Jiang, & Zhou, 2025; Haq & Kwok, 2024; Mathew & Tholath, 2023). Overall, however, much of this work remains macro-level and descriptive, often stopping short of examining how specific content forms structure religious meaning-making and participation.

Second, the strand on Transformation of Religious Authority through Social Media emphasizes how digital environments reconfigure the sources and mechanisms of religious legitimacy. Rather than relying solely on institutional endorsement or formal religious education, authority in digital contexts may become increasingly tied to communicative skill, visibility, popularity, and engagement metrics (Andok, 2024; Campbell, 2022; Golan & Martini, 2020). This scholarship also frames social media as enabling wider participation and the negotiation of religious discourse through online forums, virtual communities, and practices such as online fatwas (Adel & Numan, 2023; Mishol-Shauli & Golan, 2019; Okun & Nimrod, 2017). Related studies suggest that authority is progressively “performed” and evaluated through interactional signals—clicks, comments, and engagement—particularly among younger followers (Kurniawan, Rahman, Achmad, & Fahroji, 2022; Siallagan, Sampaleng, & Siboro, 2025). Cross-cultural work further documents varied institutional adaptation and resistance, including gendered dynamics of visibility in digital religious spaces (Hemay, Muradi, Paskarina, & Solihah, 2025; Oloba & Blankenship, 2025; Whyte, 2022). Yet, this literature has tended to prioritize actors and institutional structures, leaving underexamined how authority is enacted through *popular visual formats*—especially meme-based communication—within platform logics.

Third, research on Religion, Popular Culture, and Digital Visuality situates religious expression within digital popular culture, foregrounding visual practice, humor, and meme circulation as key mechanisms through which religion is represented and negotiated online. Scholars argue that digital religion increasingly operates through the visual and popularity-driven logics of social media, where religious discourse intersects with contemporary digital aesthetics and cultural references (Campbell, 2023; Helland, 2016; Sheldon & Campbell, 2021). Studies of Instagram and other visually oriented platforms show how religious communities use visual strategies to build identity, visibility, and audience connection, while also facing risks of simplification due to ethical and technical constraints of image-based communication (Dushakova, 2020; Kuhlin, 2025). In this context, humor and memes are often described

as pragmatic tools for solidarity-building, creating common ground, and articulating critique or resistance toward religious practice or authority (Jegade, 2025; Richter, 2021; Yus, 2023). Work on multimodality and intertextuality further suggests that memes produce meaning rapidly and often ambivalently, embedding religion in everyday digital consumption (Al-Ali & Djelloul, 2025). Nonetheless, religious memes are still frequently treated in generalized terms, and relatively few studies systematically examine how meme-based religious communication is produced, interpreted, and socially negotiated by specific accounts within a particular cultural setting.

This three-strand synthesis indicates a clear research gap. While digital religion scholarship has established that social media transforms religious practice, authority, and popular religious expression, much of the literature remains conceptually broad, with limited attention to *format-specific* dynamics of widely circulated visual genres such as memes. In addition, despite Indonesia's strong religiosity, plural religious traditions, and intensive social media use, the Indonesian context remains underrepresented in international discussions—particularly regarding how religious memes are crafted, circulated, and interpreted within platformed publics. Addressing these gaps, the present study provides a focused empirical contribution by examining Instagram-based religious memes in Indonesia through a cross-religious comparison and a shared coding framework, allowing systematic analysis of content form, circulation routines, and observable participation traces in audience responses.

This study aims to examine how religious memes on Instagram function as a mode of mediated religious communication and how audiences participate in negotiating their meanings in the comment space. Specifically, it compares two Indonesian accounts—@memeislam.id and @sadhu.meme—to identify (1) how religious messages are framed and made persuasive through visual rhetoric and meme conventions, (2) how circulation strategies on Instagram (e.g., posting routines, captioning styles, and hashtagging practices) shape the visibility of meme-based religious content, and (3) how users respond through different participation modes, ranging from quick affirmations and lightweight sharing cues to longer interpretive or concept-oriented comments. By focusing on these three dimensions, the study clarifies how Islamic and Buddhist meme communication adapts to Instagram's participatory environment while retaining distinct tradition-specific communicative orientations.

The present study starts from the view that Instagram has become a consequential arena for contemporary religious communication, where teachings and moral cues are increasingly conveyed through visual, shareable, and everyday formats such as memes. In this setting, religious messages are not simply “moved” online; they are reframed through platform conventions—what is made visible, what is quickly recognized, and what is easily reacted to—so that the form of communication becomes part of the meaning-making process. At the same time, differences across religious traditions may remain visible in how authority, instruction, and moral orientation are articulated, even when expressed through the same popular visual grammar. This starting point is consistent with networked religion perspectives that emphasize how religious life adapts within digital environments while preserving tradition-shaped patterns of communication (Campbell, 2012) and with framing theory's claim that meaning is shaped by the selection and packaging of cues in mediated texts (Goffman, 1974). It also aligns with scholarship on platform-shaped religiosity, which suggests that metricized engagement and circulation dynamics can influence how religious expression is performed and received online (Echchaibi & Hoover, 2023).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative design using netnography, an ethnographic approach adapted for examining online communities and digital cultural practices (Kozinets, 2015). Netnography was selected because it enables naturalistic observation of religious communication on social media without disrupting users' authentic behaviors, making it suitable for analyzing meaning-making processes embedded in digital interactions. Instagram served as the research site due to its prominence among Indonesian youth, its visual-centric architecture, and its established role in shaping contemporary forms of religious expression (We Are Social, 2024). The Indonesian digital landscape marked by high religious diversity and strong youth engagement—provides a fertile context for understanding how traditional religiosity intersects with popular culture in online spaces.

The study focused on two public religious meme accounts: @memeislam.id, representing Islamic discourse, and @sadhu.meme, representing Hindu-Buddhist spirituality. Both accounts were purposively selected based on clear religious identity, consistent meme-based content, large follower bases exceeding 50,000, and regular posting activity. A total of 120 memes (60 per account) were systematically sampled through stratified random selection across a three-month period (February–April 2025), ensuring temporal representativeness. Eligible posts included visual-textual religious memes, while announcements, advertisements, and reposts without original commentary were excluded. All user interactions associated with the sampled memes were documented, resulting in a corpus of 3,847 comments (2,156 from @memeislam.id and 1,691 from @sadhu.meme). Data collection followed non-participatory observation procedures. Each meme was archived through screenshots along with metadata such as posting date, caption, and hashtags. Engagement metrics were recorded at 24 hours after posting and again at the end of the study period. All comments were captured with anonymized usernames, timestamps, and nested threads, and high-resolution images were stored for detailed visual analysis.

Data analysis followed a three-dimensional thematic-critical approach. Visual analysis drew on Kress and van Leeuwen's (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020) framework to interpret compositional structure, religious iconography, typography, and intertextual elements. Message framing analysis, informed by Goffman (Goffman, 1974), examined theological themes, rhetorical strategies, modes of authority, and emotional appeals. Audience engagement was analyzed through an inductively developed typology distinguishing affirmative, interpretive, and critical responses. Two researchers independently coded 20% of the dataset, achieving strong inter-coder reliability ($\kappa = 0.83$), after which full coding was conducted using NVivo 14. Research trustworthiness was strengthened through prolonged engagement, triangulation of visual, textual, and interactional data, peer debriefing with a digital religion research group, member checking with digital religion practitioners, and maintenance of a complete audit trail. This methodological framework enabled a rigorous and ethically grounded examination of how religious meanings are constructed, circulated, and contested through meme-based communication in Indonesia's multi-religious digital culture.

RESULTS

This section presents findings from netnographic analysis of 120 meme posts (60 per account) and 3,847 user comments collected between February–April 2025. Results are organized by research question, comparing visual strategies, message framing, distribution patterns, and audience engagement across @memeislam.id and @sadhu.meme accounts. The @memeislam.id account has 51,700 followers with 1,132 total posts. The account bio identifies as a "digital creator" focused on "learning together" with an open approach to follower corrections. The @sadhu.meme account has 25,500 followers with 2,910 posts, describing itself as producing "Buddhist memes to make ur day happy" under the banner of "non-sectarian Buddhism" in Indonesia.

Representation and Visual Rhetoric of Religious Memes

Analysis of 120 meme posts revealed four primary thematic categories across both accounts: Scripture Quotation, Universal Moral Values, Religious Satire/Humor, and Religious Social Criticism. Table 1 presents the distribution of these themes.

Table 1 Distribution of Meme Themes Across Accounts

Theme	@memeislam.id (n=60)	@sadhu.meme (n=60)	Total (N=120)
Scripture Quotation	18 (30.0%)	12 (20.0%)	30 (25.0%)
Universal Moral Values	22 (36.7%)	15 (25.0%)	37 (30.8%)
Religious Satire/Humor	12 (20.0%)	25 (41.7%)	37 (30.8%)
Religious Social Criticism	8 (13.3%)	8 (13.3%)	16 (13.3%)

Table 1 indicates clear differences in thematic emphasis across the two accounts. Posts from @memeislam.id are concentrated in Scripture Quotation and Universal Moral Values (40 of 60 posts; 66.7%), suggesting a stronger orientation toward explicit doctrinal reference and direct moral instruction. In contrast, @sadhu.meme places greater weight on Religious Satire/Humor (25 of 60 posts; 41.7%), indicating a more humor-driven and indirectly didactic style of religious messaging. Both accounts devote an equal share of content to Religious Social Criticism (13.3%), suggesting that critique-oriented themes occupy a comparable but smaller portion of their overall meme production.

Table 2 Comparative Content Characteristics by Theme

Theme	@memeislam.id Characteristics	@sadhu.meme Characteristics
Scripture Quotation	Short extracts, bold fonts, photographic backgrounds	Complete passages, minimalist design, serif fonts
Universal Moral Values	Inspirational imagery (desert, Muslim woman), direct messaging	Animal imagery (lion), metaphorical messaging
Religious Satire/Humor	SpongeBob characters, visual edits (caps, religious attire)	Buddha statues, Kamen Rider characters, absurdist humor
Social Criticism	Current events (Nenengism), video clips, contrasting colors	Government critique, cartoon characters, satirical text

Table 2 provides a concise comparison of how *@memeislam.id* and *@sadhu.meme* construct their content across key thematic categories. Overall, the table shows that *@memeislam.id* tends to use short scriptural extracts, direct moral messaging, and relatable humor drawn from popular characters, whereas *@sadhu.meme* adopts longer textual passages, metaphorical visuals, and absurdist satire. The table also highlights differences in how both accounts frame social criticism: *@memeislam.id* focuses on current events using bold visual contrasts, while *@sadhu.meme* uses symbolic imagery and satirical text to critique broader political issues. In sum, the table illustrates distinct stylistic and rhetorical patterns that reflect each account's religious orientation and digital communication style.



Figure 1 Meme of Holy Quote from *@memeislam.id*

Figure 1 illustrates how *@memeislam.id* packaged scriptural authority into a highly relatable Indonesian-language meme format. The post uses a two-panel reaction image of a young man with contrasting facial expressions, paired with colloquial captions—"MK Lapar pas puasa:" ("When you're hungry while fasting") and "Tau ganjarannya:" ("Do you know the reward?")—to create a humor-to-reverence transition. The lower portion then anchors the joke in a clearly legible, bold-text quotation of a hadith in Indonesian (with Arabic honorific phrasing), stating that good deeds are multiplied and that fasting is uniquely rewarded by God ("Except fasting, for it is for Me and I will reward it," HR. Muslim). Visually, the meme relies on a photographic background, high-contrast typography, and large font sizes optimized for mobile viewing, demonstrating a framing strategy that connects everyday emotional experience (hunger during fasting) to normative religious teaching through an accessible vernacular register.



Figure 2 Scripture Quotation Meme from @sadhu.meme

Figure 2 demonstrates how @sadhu.meme presented scriptural authority through an Indonesian-language quotation card rather than a conventional humorous meme template. The post foregrounds bibliographic clarity at the top—"AN 4.105: Amba Sutta (*Mangga*)"—and explicitly credits the source as a translation from Pāli by Bhikkhu Bodhi, positioning the content as textual teaching and citation-driven learning. Visually, the meme adopts a minimalist layout with a neutral background, centered headings, and clean typography, followed by a relatively long excerpt in Indonesian that preserves the narrative structure of the mango parable ("there are four kinds of mango..."). Instead of compressing the message into a short punchline, this format prioritizes sustained reading and contemplative reflection, framing the Instagram post as a micro-scriptural lesson that invites interpretation through its extended passage and didactic tone.



Figure 3 Universal Moral Value Meme from @memeislam.id

Figure 3 illustrates a universal-moral framing strategy used by @memeislam.id through Indonesian-language motivational text layered over contemplative photography. The image shows a solitary veiled figure standing in a desert landscape beneath a dramatic sky, creating a visual mood of quietness and spiritual distance. The main caption in large, high-contrast typography reads “*Sesuatu yang tinggi tak harus dicapai dengan berjinjit*” (“Something high does not have to be reached by standing on tiptoe”), with the key word “*BERJINJIT*” highlighted for emphasis. Rather than citing a verse or hadith, the post delivers an aspirational message that implicitly directs attention toward humility and reliance on God, using minimal textual content and a serene, symbolic scene to evoke reflection. This combination of iconic Muslim imagery and short aphoristic wording positions the meme as easily shareable moral encouragement while maintaining a devotional tone consistent with Islamic digital piety.



Figure 4 Universal Moral Value Meme from @sadhu.meme

Figure 4 shows how @sadhu.meme conveyed a universal moral message through animal symbolism and a concise Indonesian-language aphorism. The meme uses a monochrome image of a lion in profile against a dark background, paired with centered text reading “*Seekor singa tidak akan menangis ketika matanya kena asap saat sembahyang*” (“A lion will not cry when its eyes are exposed to smoke during prayer”). Rather than presenting a scriptural citation, the post relies on metaphor: the lion functions as an emblem of composure and resilience, while the reference to prayer smoke (commonly associated with incense in worship settings) situates the message within a Buddhist devotional context without stating doctrine explicitly. The minimalist design and restrained wording invite reflective interpretation, framing moral endurance as a contemplative lesson communicated indirectly through symbolic imagery.



Figure 5 Religious Satire or Humor Memes from @memeislam.id

Figure 5 exemplifies how @memeislam.id used Indonesian-language humor and popular culture to satirize everyday religious behavior while still reinforcing a normative message. The meme repurposes a SpongeBob character image, edited with a black prayer cap, and adds a conversational caption at the top—“*minimal punya pacar lah biar ada yang ngingetin sholat!!*” (“at least have a boyfriend/girlfriend so someone reminds you to pray!!”). The punchline appears through the label “*Tukang adzan:*” (“the caller to prayer:”), paired with the character’s unimpressed expression, implying irony: the adhan already functions as a public reminder, yet it is ignored in favor of a personal reminder from a romantic partner. The visual strategy relies on a familiar meme template, minimal text, and a clear juxtaposition between religious obligation and contemporary youth relationships, producing a light satirical tone that invites quick recognition and shareability while subtly promoting attentiveness to prayer.



Figure 6 Religious Satire or Humor Meme from @sadhu.meme

Figure 6 illustrates @sadhu.meme's use of Indonesian-language irony to critique popular misconceptions about Buddhist devotional practice. The meme juxtaposes a large reclining Buddha statue with a caption that reads, "*Saat umat meminta-minta kekayaan ke depan patung Buddha... Buddha yang dah ngajarin Manggala Sutta be like:*" ("When devotees keep asking for wealth in front of a Buddha statue... the Buddha who has already taught the Mangala Sutta be like:"), followed by the single emphatic word "*MALAS*" ("lazy / can't be bothered"). Rather than quoting scripture directly, the post invokes the Mangala Sutta as a doctrinal reference point associated with ethical and spiritual "blessings," then uses a sarcastic punchline to highlight the mismatch between material requests and the teaching's moral orientation. The design is straightforward—large black text on white space plus a central image—so the humor depends primarily on the contrast between doctrinal knowledge and everyday practice, inviting viewers to reflect on the tension between spiritual cultivation and instrumental, wealth-oriented religiosity.



Figure 7 Religious Social Criticism Memes from @memeislam.id

Figure 7 shows how @memeislam.id mobilized a current socio-political controversy as a form of religious social criticism through a remix of Indonesian-language text and popular media visuals. The meme references the viral discourse around "Neneng Rosdiyana" and "Nenengism," foregrounding a screenshot-like post that frames *pengajian ibu-ibu* (women's religious study gatherings) as a practical form of equality through food-sharing, implicitly juxtaposed with Marxist rhetoric. This is then paired with a cinematic clip featuring a cat character overlaid with the bold caption "Karl Marx," producing an ironic contrast between everyday religious communal practice and ideological labeling. Rather than offering a scriptural quotation, the post frames religious identity through commentary on public debate, using recognizable social-media screenshot conventions, an inserted video reaction element, and large readable text to simplify a complex controversy into an easily shareable critique. The overall effect positions Islamic communal

practices as socially beneficial while questioning (and satirizing) attempts to interpret them through socialist categories.



Figure 8 Religious Social Criticism Meme from @sadhu.meme

Figure 8 illustrates how @sadhu.meme used a familiar SpongeBob meme template to deliver Buddhist-inflected social criticism in Indonesian. Across four panels, the meme combines short statements about everyday corruption and injustice—such as “*Korupsi merajalela sampai level bawah, contoh sederhananya pungli*” (corruption spreads even at lower levels, e.g., illegal levies) and references to structural unfairness and cheating “from school to work”—with an explicit moral frame: “*Rakyat kita agamis... karma buruknya asalnya dari mana*” (“Our people are religious... so where does the bad karma come from?”). By invoking *karma* as an evaluative lens, the post links civic problems to ethical accountability, positioning social critique as a moral-spiritual reflection rather than purely political complaint. The multi-panel format, bold white text overlays, and recognizable cartoon imagery make the critique easy to scan and share, while the satirical tone encourages readers to connect Buddhist ethical concepts with contemporary governance and public behavior.

To clarify how the thematic categories were operationalized in the coding process, this section next presents representative examples from each account that illustrate the defining features of the four categories identified in Table 3. Rather than treating the themes as abstract labels, the examples demonstrate how each category was expressed through recurring combinations of textual cues (e.g., explicit scriptural citation, aphoristic moral statements, punchline-based humor, or issue-oriented critique) and visual formats (e.g., quotation cards, photographic backgrounds, and popular meme templates). Table 3 summarizes these representative figures to show how the same thematic framework is applied across both accounts while capturing account-specific stylistic realizations within each category.

Table 3 Categorization of Representative Meme Examples (Figures 1–8) by Theme and Account

Category (Theme)	@memeislam.id (Islam) – representative figure(s)	@sadhu.meme (Buddhist) – representative figure(s)	Key categorical marker (what qualifies the category)
Scripture Quotation	Fig. 1	Fig. 2	Explicit citation/quotation of religious text (hadith/Qur'an or Buddhist canon), with identifiable source markers or teaching excerpt.
Universal Moral Values	Fig. 3	Fig. 4	Moral encouragement/advice presented as general ethical guidance; may be devotional or symbolic but not anchored in a direct scripture quote.
Religious Satire/Humor	Fig. 5	Fig. 6	Humor/irony used to comment on religious practice or misconceptions; relies on meme templates/punchlines to deliver critique or reminder.
Religious Social Criticism	Fig. 7	Fig. 8	Social or political critique framed through religious-moral vocabulary (e.g., communal practice, ideology, karma), targeting societal problems rather than individual piety alone.

Table 3 summarizes how the four thematic categories were consistently applied across both accounts using the same operational markers while allowing for different stylistic realizations. Scripture Quotation posts were identified by the presence of explicit textual citations and recognizable source cues, represented by Fig. 1 (@memeislam.id) and Fig. 2 (@sadhu.meme). Universal Moral Values were coded when the message took the form of general ethical encouragement without direct scriptural anchoring (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). Religious Satire/Humor captured posts that relied on irony or punchline-based meme conventions to comment on religious practices or misconceptions (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6). Finally, Religious Social Criticism referred to content that framed broader societal or political issues through religious-moral language and evaluative concepts (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8). The table demonstrates that the thematic framework functioned cross-account, while each account expressed the categories through its preferred meme templates and communicative tone.

This representation shows that memes can be a creative medium to translate religious values in the form of visual content that is fresh, light, and easy to understand. Instead of being patronizing, religious messages are delivered in a casual and popular manner, according to the communication style in the digital era. In this way, digital spirituality is fluid and contextual, reaching a wider audience and making religious teachings feel more relevant in the daily lives of the tech-savvy generation.

Strategies and Patterns of Meme Content Dissemination

This section described the strategies and distribution patterns used by the Instagram accounts @memeislam.id and @sadhu.meme to reach digital audiences. Findings indicated that both accounts aligned their posting practices with Instagram's circulation features, including decisions about upload timing and frequency, the use (or non-use) of hashtags, and captioning styles that shaped content visibility and interaction. In addition, both accounts employed visual and textual meme formats that were easy to consume and share, supporting the circulation of religious messages across varied audience networks, particularly among younger users.

Through observational data and analysis, it is seen that religious content creators adapt to Instagram's algorithm and platform characteristics, such as maximizing the carousel and reels features, using popular language and visual styles, and actively interacting in the comment section to increase engagement. These strategies not only make religious messages more relevant and attractive in the digital space, but also create a two-way communication space, where audiences feel involved in the process of interpreting and spreading spiritual values in a creative and lighthearted manner. In this way, the design and distribution of religious memes is a clear example of how da'wah content is adapted to be more appropriate and responsive to today's digital consumption and participation patterns.

Posting Frequency and Schedule

Posting frequency and timing were key elements of the dissemination patterns observed across the two accounts. During the study period, @memeislam.id posted more regularly, averaging approximately 4–6 uploads per week, with uploads most commonly appearing in the morning (around 07:00–08:00). In contrast, @sadhu.meme posted less frequently, averaging approximately 2–3 uploads per week, and uploads more often appeared in the evening (around 19:00–20:00). Overall, both accounts showed relatively consistent scheduling within specific time windows, but they differed in their preferred posting periods: @memeislam.id clustered posts in the morning, whereas @sadhu.meme clustered posts in the evening. These patterns indicate that dissemination practices were organized around routine time slots that potentially shaped early visibility and initial audience interaction within the Instagram feed.

Caption Format

During the observation period, captions emerged as a key micro-layer of meaning-making that complemented the on-image text and shaped how memes were framed for quick consumption in the Instagram feed. Rather than functioning merely as descriptions, captions operated as paratexts that could (a) reinforce devotional tone, (b) cue humor and wordplay, or (c) add brief contextual guidance for interpreting the meme. For this reason, caption format was examined as part of the accounts' dissemination practices to see how each account used short textual framing to support visibility, affective resonance, and audience interaction in a highly template-driven platform environment.



Figure 9 Caption format from @memeislam.id and @sadhu.meme

Figure 9 illustrates contrasting captioning practices between the two accounts. During the observation period, @memeislam.id more frequently used captions that incorporated devotional Indonesian-Islamic expressions (e.g., “*alhamdulillah*”—“praise be to God”) to signal piety and emotional warmth, often functioning as a brief reflective reinforcement of the meme’s message. In some posts, captions remained short and direct (especially for humorous content), while in more didactic or scripture-oriented posts they were occasionally expanded to provide additional framing or persuasion.

In contrast, @sadhu.meme more often relied on humor and wordplay with relatively minimal explanatory captions, allowing the meaning to be carried primarily by the on-image text and the meme template. As shown in the “Pari Nirvana” example, the post used a pun that linked a Buddhist term (*nirvana*) to everyday Indonesian pop-cultural references (“because if *arwana*, then *Tukul*”), while the caption itself could remain sparse or playful (e.g., repetitive “Ea ea...”). Overall, the comparison indicated that @memeislam.id captions tended to operate as devotional-affective cues and message reinforcement, whereas @sadhu.meme captions tended to function as humor cues that complemented the meme’s punchline and encouraged light, interpretive engagement.

Hashtags Used

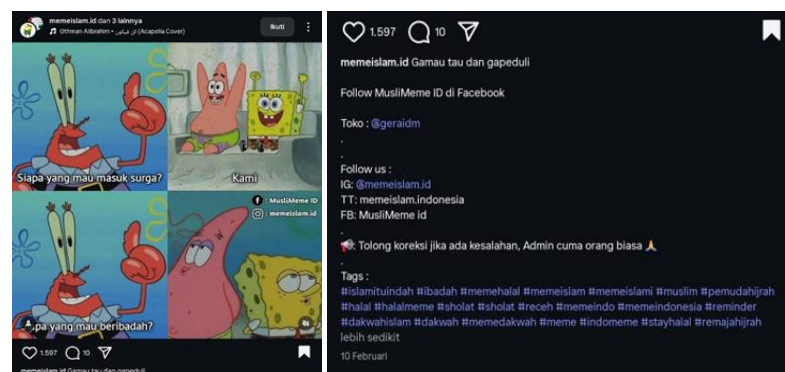


Figure 10 One of the Hashtags in @memeislam.id account posts

Figures 10 and 11 show contrasting hashtagging practices between @memeislam.id and @sadhu.meme. During the observation period, @memeislam.id commonly appended multiple hashtags to a post (typically around 10–18 tags when hashtags were used). The tags were largely repetitive and clustered around Islamic identity and devotional themes (e.g., #islamituindah, #ibadah, #muslim, #pemudahijrah), alongside seasonal markers (e.g., #ramadhan, #puasa) and broader meme-discovery tags (e.g., #meme, #memeindonesia). However, hashtagging was not fully uniform across posts, as some uploads appeared with few or no hashtags, indicating variation in tagging intensity across the feed.

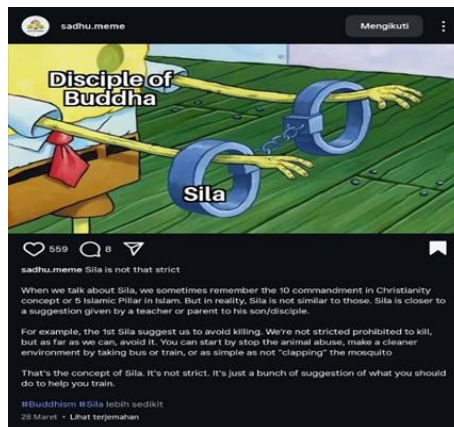


Figure 11 One of the Hashtags in @sadhu.meme account posts

By contrast, @sadhu.meme used hashtags more selectively and sparingly. Across the sampled period, only a limited number of posts included hashtags, and when present they typically consisted of one to two tags that were closely tied to doctrinal or educational framing (e.g., #Buddhism, #Sila). Overall, these patterns suggested that @memeislam.id relied more consistently on hashtag clusters to index posts within broader Islamic and meme-related visibility networks, whereas @sadhu.meme treated hashtags as optional and primarily used them when they directly matched the instructional content of the post.

Visual Strategy

In addition to themes and captioning, the study examined each account's visual strategy because Instagram is a visual-first platform where meaning is primarily carried through images, layout, and instantly recognizable templates. Visual choices—such as character selection, text-overlay placement, typography size, and overall aesthetic—functioned as design cues that helped posts become legible at scrolling speed and positioned the religious message within familiar popular-culture frames. Analyzing these recurring visual conventions is therefore essential for understanding how meme-based religious content is packaged for feed visibility, quick comprehension, and shareability within Instagram's template-driven environment.



Figure 12 One of the visualizations from the @memeislam.id account



Figure 13 One of the visualizations from the @sadhu.meme account

Figures 12 and 13 illustrate how both accounts relied on familiar popular-culture visuals while differentiating their religious tone through text overlays, character selection, and overall aesthetic. In @memeislam.id, memes frequently repurposed widely recognizable cartoon imagery (e.g., SpongeBob/Squidward) and paired it with short Indonesian statements framed in a devotional register. As shown in Figure 12, the visual template emphasized high readability through large text placed over a clean background image, allowing the religious message (e.g., reminders about goodness and divine reward) to be immediately legible in the feed. The repeated use of similar cartoon-based templates across posts produced a recognizable visual style associated with light, everyday religious reminders.

By contrast, @sadhu.meme drew on a broader range of “viral” visual templates, including character-based pop-culture imagery such as Kamen Rider, which was then overlaid with situational dialogue and humorous narrative framing. Figure 13 shows a two-character scene with contrasting caption blocks that simulated a conversational exchange, turning Buddhist figures (e.g., *bhante*) and everyday experiences (e.g., sharing personal struggles) into relatable meme storytelling. Across both accounts, posts were typically formatted for Instagram feed viewing (square or vertical proportions) and relied on text-overlay composition rather than branding elements (e.g., logos or watermarks), indicating that visibility and shareability were primarily pursued through recognizable templates and high-contrast readability.

Engagement Hooks

On @memeislam.id, engagement prompts were generally indirect. The account rarely ended captions with explicit questions, but it frequently included soft participation cues such as

devotional expressions (e.g., “*alhamdulillah*”) and corrective invitations (e.g., “Please correct any mistakes”), which positioned followers as co-participants in maintaining message accuracy. Some posts also included cross-platform prompts (e.g., inviting users to follow a related Facebook page), indicating an attempt to extend interaction beyond Instagram. In addition, visibility-oriented tags (e.g., #fyp, #pemudahijrah) appeared in selected posts alongside other thematic hashtags, functioning as supplementary circulation markers rather than direct conversational prompts.

Across both accounts, engagement was also shaped by the broader dissemination setup already described: @memeislam.id tended to post in the morning using cartoon-based templates paired with short narrative text, whereas @sadhu.meme tended to post in the evening and relied more heavily on humor, satire, and colloquial phrasing to trigger quick recognition and reactions. Overall, these patterns suggested that engagement cues were embedded in tone, template choice, and caption style, rather than structured through consistent question-led interaction.

Table 5 Summary of Religious Meme Dissemination Strategies Across Accounts

Strategy element	@memeislam.id	@sadhu.meme
Upload frequency & timing	4–6 posts/week; morning (≈07:00–08:00)	2–3 posts/week; evening (≈19:00–20:00)
Caption format	Reflective/devotional; sometimes narrative	Playful/colloquial; often minimal or punchline-oriented
Hashtags used	Frequent; usually 10–18 tags when used (e.g., #islamituindah, #pemudahijrah, #ramadhan, #memeindonesia)	Selective; typically 1–2 tags when used (e.g., #Buddhism, #Sila)
Visual strategy	Popular cartoons + large, readable text overlays	Viral meme templates (incl. character-based scenes) + dialogue-style text overlays
Engagement hook	Soft invitations (e.g., correction requests), devotional cues, occasional cross-platform prompts	Humor cues, irony, and short punchline framing

Table 5 consolidates the main dissemination differences observed between the two accounts. @memeislam.id showed a more regular posting rhythm concentrated in the morning, paired with reflective captions, frequent hashtag clusters, and cartoon-based templates designed for rapid readability. In contrast, @sadhu.meme posted less frequently and more often in the evening, used hashtags sparingly, and relied on viral meme templates with humor-driven or dialogue-style overlays where the meme itself carried most of the contextual framing. Taken together, the table indicates that both accounts organized circulation through a combination of timing, captioning, hashtagging, and template selection, but they emphasized different pathways to visibility and interaction within Instagram’s feed environment.

Patterns of Religious Meme Dissemination

Two representative posts illustrated contrasting circulation outcomes and participation profiles across the accounts. Figure 14 showed a @sadhu.meme post that used a four-panel SpongeBob template to deliver Indonesian-language social critique framed through Buddhist moral

vocabulary (e.g., karma and intention). The post received 391 likes and 8 comments, and its caption explicitly anchored the meme's message in ethical framing (e.g., "*Karma itu artinya perbuatan, dilandasi oleh niat*"—"Karma means action, grounded in intention"), providing contextual guidance for interpretation.

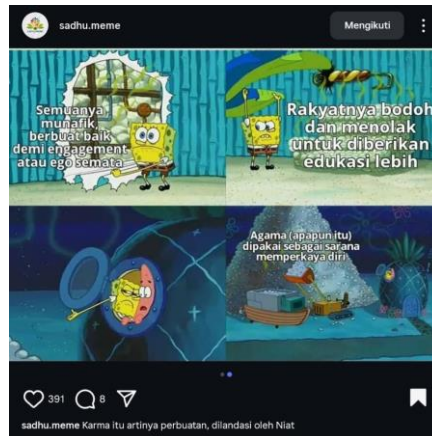


Figure 14 One of the Patterns of spreading Religious Memes from @sadhu.meme

In contrast, Figure 15 showed a Ramadan-themed @memeislam.id post that also employed SpongeBob imagery but framed the message as an everyday affective experience—anger control during fasting (e.g., "*Puasa puasa gini malah lebih susah nahan marah, daripada nahan laper*"—"During fasting, it can feel harder to hold back anger than hunger"). This post received 2,410 likes and 8 comments, indicating substantially higher visible reach through likes, while comment activity remained limited in absolute terms. Taken together, these examples suggested that @memeislam.id posts could circulate widely through quick-recognition humor and relatable fasting experiences, whereas @sadhu.meme posts—despite lower like counts—could sustain comparable comment volume within a more explicitly framed, issue-oriented meme format.



Figure 15 One of the Patterns of spreading Religious Memes from @memeislam.id account

User Response and Participation to Religious Memes

During the February–April 2025 observation period, audience interactions with meme-based religious posts on @memeislam.id and @sadhu.meme were captured through multiple visible engagement forms, including likes, comment counts, emoji-only reactions, and comment content (short affirmations, humorous remarks, and longer interpretive statements), as well as social-sharing cues such as tagging/mentions of other users. Across both accounts, participation ranged from largely passive engagement—such as liking posts or responding with single emojis—to more active involvement, where users tagged friends to circulate the meme within their networks and contributed reflective or concept-focused comments that interpreted the religious message beyond the image text.

To summarize these observed participation patterns, **Table 6** presents a concise typology of representative audience responses from both accounts. Drawing directly on the captured comment corpus, it groups examples by account and meme context, identifies the dominant response mode (e.g., affirmative–emotional, critical–humorous, interpretive–reflective), and includes short representative quotations (in Indonesian) as primary evidence of how users reacted to and negotiated the meaning of the memes.

Table 6 Typology of Audience Responses Across Accounts (Representative Comments)

Account	Meme theme/context	Response mode/type	Representative comment (ID) [EN translation]
@memeislam.id	Universal Moral Value	Affirmative–emotional	“MasyaAllah ustadz Thanos 🙏” [“Praise be to God, ‘Ustadz Thanos’ 🙏”]; “Alhamdulillah” [“Praise be to God”]
@memeislam.id	Prayer & Girlfriend Satire	Critical–humorous	“Adzan diabaikan, giliran perintah pacar dilaksanakan 🐱” [“The call to prayer is ignored, but a partner’s ‘orders’ get followed 🐱”]
@memeislam.id	Patience Reflection	Interpretive–reflective	“Manusia selalu mencari yang sempurna, pertanyaannya kenapa bisa begitu kalau harus mencari...” [“People always look for the perfect; the question is why it becomes that way if one has to keep searching...”]
@sadhu.meme	Buddhist Social Criticism	Reflective humor	“Hina = kecil. Maha = besar.” [“Hina = small. Maha = great.”]; “Apapun ‘kendaraannya’, yang penting kualitas ‘rider’.” [“Whatever the ‘vehicle,’ what matters is the quality of the ‘rider.’”]
@sadhu.meme	Karma & Precepts	Interpretive–theological	“Buddha juga tidak melarang melanggar sila... kalau karena melanggar sila lahir di alam sengsara, santai...” [“The Buddha also did not forbid breaking precepts... if breaking precepts leads to rebirth in a suffering realm, relax...”]
@sadhu.meme	Philosophical Comedy	Reflective dialogue	“Ingat ges, semuanya itu yana, kendaraan, wadah... kalau makan mie ayam nggak perlu fanatik sama mangkoknya 🤔” [“Remember, everything is a yanā—vehicle, container... if you eat chicken noodles you don’t need to be a fanatic about the bowl 🤔”]

Table 6 indicates that audience participation took distinct yet overlapping forms across the two accounts. In @memeislam.id, the most visible responses were brief devotional affirmations (e.g., “Alhamdulillah,” “MasyaAllah...”) and humor-based reactions that evaluated everyday religious behavior through satire, suggesting that the comment space often functioned as a channel for rapid emotional confirmation and peer-to-peer sharing rather than extended elaboration. By contrast, @sadhu.meme comments more frequently appeared as aphoristic reflections and concept-elaborating remarks that explicitly referenced Buddhist moral language (e.g., karma, sila/precepts, yana/vehicle), indicating a tendency for users to extend the meme’s meaning through short interpretive statements or informal dialogue. Across both accounts, humor remained a common entry point, but the examples in the table show that it was expressed either as quick affirmation and critique (@memeislam.id) or as reflective framing and conceptual play (@sadhu.meme).

On @memeislam.id, the comment threads were dominated by short affirmative and emotional expressions, most commonly devotional praise phrases such as “MasyaAllah ...” and “Alhamdulillah.” Many responses also appeared as emoji-only reactions (e.g., 🙏👉👉🔥❤️) and tagging/mentions of other users, indicating that commenters frequently used the space to signal approval and share the post within their personal networks rather than to elaborate at length. Alongside these brief affirmations, satirical posts occasionally elicited concise humor-based critique, such as the comment “Adzan diabaikan, giliran perintah pacar dilaksanakan 🤪 [The call to prayer is ignored, but a partner’s ‘orders’ get followed], this post, which directly reacted to the meme’s irony about prayer reminders. In one fasting-themed post, engagement was recorded at 55,500 likes and 36 comments (as captured during the observation period), illustrating a high volume of visible appreciation accompanied by a comparatively limited number of written replies.

On @sadhu.meme, comment threads displayed a wider range of interpretive styles than simple affirmation. Responses included short aphoristic formulations, such as “*Hina = kecil. Maha = besar.*” [“Hina = small. Maha = great.”], as well as more concept-oriented interpretations that referenced Buddhist ideas through everyday analogies—for example, “*Apapun ‘kendaraannya’, yang penting kualitas ‘rider’.*” [“Whatever the ‘vehicle,’ what matters is the quality of the ‘rider.’”] and “*Semuanya itu yana, kendaraan, wadah...*” [“Everything is a yanā—vehicle, container...”]. Beyond reflective humor and conceptual play, some threads also contained morally framed social criticism, including comments invoking Buddhist cosmology to condemn corruption (e.g., expressing a wish to be born in the asura realm to punish corruptors). In one humorous-philosophical post, engagement was recorded at 472 likes and 25 comments (as captured during the observation period), and the comment thread included multiple instances of brief interpretive elaboration rather than predominantly emoji-only or one-word replies.

The primary comment evidence suggests contrasting participation patterns across the two accounts. On @memeislam.id, audience responses were most often expressed through brief devotional affirmations (e.g., “MasyaAllah,” “Alhamdulillah”), emoji-only reactions, and tagging/mentions, indicating a mode of rapid, low-effort participation that also facilitated peer-to-peer sharing within users’ networks; humorous posts sometimes added short satirical critiques, but these were typically concise. On @sadhu.meme, comment threads more frequently included aphoristic reflections and longer interpretive comments that referenced Buddhist concepts in everyday language (e.g., “yana/vehicle/container,” “vehicle/rider”), alongside morally framed remarks in response to social issues. Thus, while both accounts attracted interactive engagement, the visible comment traces showed @memeislam.id tending toward quick affirmation and sharing cues, whereas @sadhu.meme more often elicited concept-elaborating and reflective formulations within the comment space.

DISCUSSION

This study employed a qualitative netnographic design to examine religious meme communication on Instagram across two Indonesian accounts—@memeislam.id and @sadhu.meme—during the February–April 2025 observation period. The dataset consisted of 120 meme posts (60 per account) and 3,847 user comments, allowing comparison of how each account represented religious messages, circulated content through platform routines, and elicited visible audience participation within the same visual-centric and interaction-driven environment.

Across the sampled corpus, four core patterns emerged. First, thematic emphasis differed by account (Table 1): @memeislam.id concentrated its output in Scripture Quotation and Universal Moral Values (66.7% combined), whereas @sadhu.meme foregrounded Religious Satire/Humor (41.7%), with both accounts allocating the same share to Religious Social Criticism (13.3%). Second, the accounts displayed distinct visual-rhetorical packaging (Table 2; Figures 1–8), ranging from scriptural citation formats and moral aphorisms to punchline-based satire and issue-oriented critique. Third, dissemination routines varied (Figures 9–15; Table 5), including differences in posting frequency and timing, captioning practices, hashtag density, and preferred meme templates used to support feed visibility and shareability. Fourth, audience participation traces diverged (Table 6), with examples showing high-like/low-comment configurations in @memeislam.id posts (e.g., 55,500 likes and 36 comments, as captured) alongside more modest like counts but comparable comment activity in @sadhu.meme (e.g., 472 likes and 25 comments, as captured), reflected in response forms that ranged from brief devotional affirmations and emoji/tagging to longer interpretive or concept-referential comments.

The patterns observed across the two accounts may be explained, first, by differences in religious communication orientation that shape how teaching is framed and made legible in meme form. The concentration of @memeislam.id posts in Scripture Quotation and Universal Moral Values (Table 1) is consistent with da'wah styles that foreground doctrinal affirmation and moral exhortation, where authority is commonly anchored in Qur'anic and hadith citation. This orientation is visible in the way scriptural authority was embedded into everyday Indonesian vernacular and high-readability layouts (e.g., Fig. 1's humor-to-textual-authority shift; Table 3's operational marker of explicit citation). In contrast, @sadhu.meme's heavier emphasis on Satire/Humor (Table 1) alongside quotation-card pedagogy (Fig. 2) aligns with Buddhist instructional conventions that often communicate through indirect teaching, paradox, or humor (Gethin, 1998), while still maintaining citation-driven authority in selected posts (Table 3). In Campbell's (2012) terms, these differences suggest that "networked religion" does not erase tradition-specific epistemologies; rather, religious worldviews continue to organize what counts as persuasive religious speech online. This also maps onto Slama's (2017) "scripturalization" dynamic in Indonesian Islam, where textual reference functions as a recurrent authenticity cue—evident in @memeislam.id's preference for short extracts, bold typography, and explicit source markers (Table 2; Fig. 1).

Second, the results may be explained by how Instagram's affordances are likely compatible with certain formatting and circulation choices, producing the dissemination and participation patterns captured in the data. Practices such as high-contrast text overlays, familiar meme templates, and consistent time-window posting (Fig. 9–13; Table 5) are likely compatible with Instagram's visibility conventions—especially feed readability on mobile screens and rapid recognition as users scroll. In this sense, @memeislam.id's clustering of posts in routine morning windows, frequent hashtag indexing, and repeated cartoon-based templates (Table 5; Fig. 12) may indicate an approach optimized for quick discoverability and low-friction engagement, which is consistent with "algorithmic piety" as a platform-

shaped performance of religiosity oriented toward measurable signals such as likes and shares (Echchaibi & Hoover, 2023). By contrast, @sadhu.meme's selective hashtag use and reliance on either longer quotation cards (Fig. 2) or dialogue-style meme scenes (Fig. 13) may indicate a circulation strategy that relies less on indexing and more on template familiarity and interpretive payoff within the post itself. These affordance-linked choices also help contextualize why comment traces differed (Table 6): low-effort participation (likes, emoji-only responses, tagging) is structurally easy on Instagram and may therefore appear more frequently in posts designed for quick recognition (e.g., the "as captured" high-like example in @memeislam.id), while formats that invite reading, conceptual play, or moral framing (e.g., quotation cards or issue-oriented satire) may be more likely to generate aphoristic or interpretive comments even when like counts are lower (as captured in @sadhu.meme).

This study's findings can be situated within the broader scholarship on digital religion and social media, which has widely conceptualized online platforms as new arenas for religious practice, expression, and mediated community formation. Drawing on a netnographic dataset of 120 Instagram meme posts (60 per account) and 3,847 user comments collected between February–April 2025, the analysis documented clear divergence in both content and participation patterns across @memeislam.id and @sadhu.meme, visible in thematic distribution (66.7% Scripture Quotation + Universal Moral Values in @memeislam.id vs 41.7% Satire/Humor in @sadhu.meme; Table 1), circulation strategies (Table 5), and engagement traces (55,500 likes/36 comments vs 472 likes/25 comments, as captured; Table 6). These results are consistent with digital religion research that frames digital spaces as sites where religious identity, learning, and spiritual experience are expanded and reformulated through mediated interaction (Campbell & Cheong, 2022; Hartogsohn, 2022; Sbardelotto, 2014), and with studies emphasizing social media as a channel for religious expression and audience formation across platform ecologies (Kerim et al., 2025; Nsohya, 2023; Shareefa et al., 2025; Wright-Ríos & Martínez-Don, 2024). Unlike prior macro descriptions, however, this study specifies content form (Instagram memes), platform setting (Instagram), and cross-religious comparison using a shared coding framework (Table 3), thereby moving beyond general claims that "religion is present online" to show how religious messages were packaged through distinct visual-rhetorical strategies (Table 2; Figures 1–8) and how audiences left differentiated, observable participation traces through likes, emoji, tagging, and interpretive commenting (Table 6).

This study's findings also align closely with scholarship on the transformation of religious authority through social media, while showing that authority cues are not only attached to actors or institutions but can also operate through popular visual formats circulating on platforms. Empirically, @memeislam.id concentrated its content in Scripture Quotation and Universal Moral Values (66.7%; Table 1), with Figure 1 illustrating how hadith authority was packaged within a highly readable Instagram meme through Indonesian vernacular captions and visually prominent text layout. In contrast, @sadhu.meme displayed textual authority through a quotation-card format that foregrounded citation and source marking (Fig. 2), while also mobilizing humor and irony as a mode of message reinforcement (e.g., Fig. 6). At the level of audience traces, the @memeislam.id comment space was dominated by short devotional affirmations, emoji-only reactions, and tagging/mentions (Table 6), alongside a visibility example recorded at 55,500 likes and 36 comments (as captured). These patterns are consistent with studies arguing that digital religious authority is increasingly mediated by visibility, popularity, and engagement metrics (Andok, 2024; Campbell, 2022; Golan & Martini, 2020; Kurniawan et al., 2022; Siallagan et al., 2025), and that religious discourse is renegotiated through digital interaction and platform affordances (Adel & Numan, 2023; Mishol-Shauli & Golan, 2019; Okun & Nimrod, 2017). However, whereas much of the prior literature centers on authority in terms of actors and structures, this study extends the discussion by demonstrating

how authority can be enacted through communication artifacts themselves: scriptural excerpts embedded in shareable meme templates (Fig. 1 and Fig. 5) and citation-driven quotation cards (Fig. 2). The study also suggests that “negotiation” does not necessarily take the form of lengthy debate; the prevalence of standardized affirmations, emojis, and tagging practices (Table 6) may indicate reinforcement/echoing of authority cues within comment threads, positioning these accounts as *authority cues* in everyday Instagram attention flows.

This study further speaks to literature on religion–popular culture–digital visibility by showing how meme humor, pop-cultural intertextuality, and multimodal design operated as both *form* and *function* in religious communication on Instagram. Satire/humor was especially prominent in @sadhu.meme (Table 1), exemplified by Figure 6 where a Buddha statue image was paired with a punchline to critique materialized devotional expectations, while both accounts repeatedly drew on recognizable pop-culture templates (e.g., SpongeBob and Kamen Rider) as reusable visual scaffolds for religious messaging (Table 2; Figs. 5–6; Figs. 12–13). In addition, social criticism appeared in both accounts within meme conventions (Figs. 7–8), indicating that issue-oriented commentary could be embedded in the same quick-scan visual grammar as scripture or moral advice (Table 1). These patterns are consistent with arguments that digital religion is increasingly entangled with platform logics of visibility, visual style, and popular culture (Campbell, 2023; Helland, 2016; Sheldon & Campbell, 2021), and that humor/memes can function as resources for solidarity-building, creating common ground, and articulating critique or resistance (Jegade, 2025; Richter, 2021; Yus, 2023), often through fast, ambivalent meaning-making enabled by intertextuality and visibility (Al-Ali & Djelloul, 2025). They also resonate with work, noting that Instagram visual practices can strengthen identity and visibility while carrying risks of simplification (Dushakova, 2020; Kuhlin, 2025). At the same time, many prior studies treat “religious memes” broadly; this study extends digital visibility scholarship by operationalizing cross-account meme categories with consistent markers (Table 3) and demonstrating how the *same categories* were realized through distinct stylistic repertoires (Table 2; Figs. 1–8), while also adding an audience-facing dimension through bilingual comment evidence that captured negotiation traces beyond content form alone (Table 6). This supports studies on digital visibility, while extending them by mapping meme categories to engagement traces across two traditions.

The findings also align with the literature’s emphasis on the ambivalence of social media as a religious space, where expanded participation coexists with potential constraints and distortions. Across both accounts, visible participation ranged from low-effort engagement (likes, emoji-only responses, and tagging/mentions) to more elaborated interpretive comments (Table 6), with sharply contrasting engagement profiles in the captured examples. These differences occurred alongside distinct dissemination practices (Table 5; Figs. 9–11), suggesting that interaction opportunities were shaped not only by message content but also by circulation routines (timing, captioning, hashtag use). This pattern is consistent with studies that describe social media as enabling youth engagement and forms of participation or activism (Ma’rof & Abdullah, 2025b, 2025a; Rohid et al., 2025), while also underscoring the medium’s ambivalence through dynamics such as mediatization, prosumerism, and risks of commodification or polarized reception (Ding et al., 2025; Haq & Kwok, 2024; Mathew & Tholath, 2023). However, because polarization, echo chambers, and commodification were not directly measured in this design, the present evidence should be read as visible engagement traces: the observed mix of “quick affirmation” and more interpretive talk is consistent with the literature’s account of ambivalence, although the present study does not directly measure polarization or commodification.

These findings invite a balanced reflection on the functions and dysfunctions of meme-based religious communication on Instagram. On the functional side, the accounts' reliance on familiar templates and high-readability text overlays supported accessibility and shareability, making messages easy to scan in-feed and easy to circulate through lightweight participation practices such as likes, emoji-only replies, and tagging/mentions (Figs. 12–13; Table 5; Table 6). The meme form also appeared to bridge religious discourse to everyday life, translating piety and ethics into relatable situations—fasting-related affect, routine struggles, and humorous contrasts—so that doctrinal or moral cues were embedded in ordinary experience (Figs. 1, 5, 15). At the same time, the comment traces suggested that Instagram could function as a limited conversational space, especially where users contributed aphoristic or concept-oriented remarks that extended the meme's meaning beyond the image text (Table 6; @sadhu.meme). Yet the same affordances also imply potential dysfunctions: high circulation may privilege rapid, low-effort affirmation over sustained elaboration, and the compression of complex teachings into punchlines or short overlays may risk oversimplification or selective uptake, even when engagement remains positive and highly visible.

A potential dysfunction of meme-based religious communication lies in the reduction of doctrinal complexity when sacred teachings are compressed into short punchlines or visual overlays (Figs. 5–6). Religion in the media, while enhancing accessibility and engagement, often risks simplifying intricate theological concepts into digestible fragments that privilege entertainment and shareability over depth (El Ghamari, 2024). Such oversimplification may result in surface-level interpretations or distortions of meaning, echoing what Toft (2020) describes as “binary teaching,” where religious understanding becomes polarized between extremes rather than reflective nuance. Similarly, Hashemi and Yeganeh (2009) note that modern digital preaching tends to lose the emotional and interpersonal depth characteristic of traditional communication, leading to diminished affective engagement with faith. From a representational perspective, Entman (2015) reminds that all media expressions involve framing, a selective process that highlights certain aspects while omitting others, thereby shaping how audiences perceive religious authority and values. Furthermore, the integration of religion with new media environments can blur boundaries between devotion and consumption, potentially diluting the quality of religious ties and heightening distraction in everyday practice (Campbell & Connelly, 2015; Ferguson, Ecklund, & Rothschild, 2021). In this sense, while memes and short-form content make religious ideas more visible, they also carry an inherent tension between accessibility and authenticity, where clarity of message may come at the cost of theological richness and contemplative engagement.

These functional gains and potential dysfunctions suggest several actionable implications for platform-facing religious communication policy and practice. First, religious content creators and educators could adopt a hybrid dissemination model: memes can be used as low-threshold “entry points” for reach and shareability, but each post should be paired with context-expanding affordances (e.g., carousel slides that add explanation, pinned comments that clarify sources/terms, or links to longer lessons) to reduce the risk of doctrinal compression while preserving accessibility (Figs. 5–6; Figs. 12–13; Table 5). Second, community-level guidelines can formalize responsible humor and satire by encouraging clear framing cues (e.g., “satire” labels, brief interpretive prompts, or reminder lines about intended meaning) in posts most prone to ambiguity, thereby limiting misinterpretation and offense without eliminating humor as a bridge to everyday religiosity (Figs. 6–8; Table 6). Third, institutions and interfaith practitioners can invest in digital religious literacy initiatives for followers—short modules or campaign content that trains audiences to distinguish (a) quotation vs. moral aphorism vs. satire and (b) scriptural citation vs. meme paraphrase—so that engagement practices (likes, emojis, tagging) are complemented

by basic interpretive competence rather than purely metric-driven participation (Table 6; Table 5). Finally, platform governance stakeholders can refine moderation and recommendation policies by consulting local religious communities to avoid one-size-fits-all handling of scriptural quotes and satirical religious content, prioritizing context-sensitive labeling and escalation pathways rather than blanket suppression, which aligns more closely with the observed diversity of participation traces and content strategies across traditions (Tables 1–3; Tables 5–6).

CONCLUSION

This study shows that meme-based religious communication on Instagram functions as a distinctive mode of digital religiosity in which tradition-specific orientations remain visible even within the same platform environment. Across the two Indonesian accounts examined, Islamic meme communication tended to foreground textual authority and direct moral exhortation, while Buddhist meme communication more frequently relied on satire/humor and citation-oriented quotation cards; both traditions also used meme formats to articulate social criticism. Taken together, the findings indicate that Instagram’s visual, template-driven architecture does not homogenize religious expression, but rather amplifies different ways of making religious authority, ethics, and critique “legible” for fast-scrolling audiences through recognizable visual rhetoric, circulation routines, and lightweight participation cues.

In terms of scholarly contribution, this research advances digital religion and religion–visuality scholarship by providing a format-specific account of how religious meaning is produced and negotiated through memes as a popular visual artifact, rather than treating social media religion only at a macro-conceptual level. The study contributes a cross-religious comparison within a single platform setting using a shared coding framework, while integrating (i) thematic and message-framing analysis, (ii) visual-rhetorical examination of meme templates and citation practices, and (iii) observable participation traces in comment spaces. This combination clarifies how authority cues can be embedded not only in religious actors, but also in communication artifacts (e.g., scriptural excerpts, quotation cards, punchline satire) and in patterned audience responses (e.g., affirmation, tagging, interpretive remarks).

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, as a netnographic study grounded in visible platform traces, the analysis cannot establish creators’ intentions, audiences’ motivations, or users’ demographic backgrounds without complementary interviews or surveys. Second, the scope is limited to two accounts and a specific observation period, so generalization should be cautious, and the study does not directly measure polarization, echo chambers, commodification, or algorithmic effects beyond what is inferable from observable engagement patterns. Future research could extend this work through multi-account and multi-platform sampling, longitudinal tracking of meme cycles, mixed-method designs that combine interviews with creators and followers, and network or computational analyses to examine how meme-based religious messages travel across communities and how interpretive disputes or consensus form over time.

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