

The Use of Religious Memes on the Internet in Islamic Preaching by Millennial Da'i in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia

Nurdin Nurdin¹

¹Postgraduate School, Universitas Islam Negeri Datokarama Palu, Indonesia

Email: nurdin@uindatokarama.ac.id

Munif Godal²

²Department of Islamic Communication, Universitas Islam Negeri Datokarama Palu, Indonesia

Email: munifgodal@uindatokarama.ac.id

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ABSTRACT: *Digital media development has encouraged religious scholars to utilize memes for religious teaching distribution. Muslim scholars or Ulama have also used memes to disseminate Islamic teaching in their preaching activities. This study, therefore, discusses the use of religious memes in Islamic preaching by millennial Ulama in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. This study used a qualitative approach, and the data was gathered through focus group discussion, in-depth interviews with millennial Ulama, and the netnography approach. The use of netnography was intended to examine the millennial ulama activities in online space when they use social media sites for their interaction while they deliver Islamic preaching. The results of this study show that millennial Ulama has intensively used memes to provide Islamic teachings. Islamic teaching that is distributed through memes can be categorized based on five Islamic pillars. The content of the memes includes Islamic teaching relating to tawhid, the invitation to perform five times daily prayer, fasting during Ramadhan month, paying zakat or alms, and performing Hajj. The millennial Ulama also shares memes that contain various Dua that can be recited in Muslim daily life. We conclude that the distribution of Islamic teaching through the use of memes has supported the distribution of Islamic teaching wider geographically, and the memes also help the spread of Islamic teaching across geographic.*

KEYWORDS: Islamic preaching, religious memes, millennial Ulama, digital Islamic teaching

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has enabled the dissemination of various forms of digital information for communication purposes. This digital information can take the form of images (Gunden, Morosan, & DeFranco, 2021), text (Martens et al., 2005), videos (Ng, Lim, & Fong, 2020), memes (Riser, Clarke, & Stallworth, 2020), and others. In recent years, memes have become a worldwide phenomenon, and their popularity among Internet users has remained strong for a while. A recent report from Google Trends revealed more people are using its search engine to search for "memes" (Brubaker, Boyle, & Stephan,

2017). Memes have been widely used to disseminate information through various social media platforms, either just for notification purposes or for campaign purposes on various social, political, and educational issues, and even sharing information related to religion (Ali, 2020; Kostygina et al., 2020).

The Minister of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia said that Ulama are no longer the main reference for the millennial generation in studying religion. This statement from the Minister of Religion refers to research results from the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University (UIN) which found that the Internet has become the new reference for the millennial generation in religion. This shift is a result of the digital era which is forming a completely new Islamic civilization. The National Survey carried out by the Center for Islamic and Community Studies (PPIM) UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta concluded that the millennial generation's primary reference point in religion is the Internet (Tohir, 2018). This means that online facilities have become a new medium for studying various Islamic teachings, including fiqh issues (Scharank, 2012).

As a result of the phenomenon of ease in using the Internet for communication purposes through various platforms, Islamic da'wah activities are also increasingly widespread in various digital formats through social media (Nurdin, 2012; Nurdin, Pettalongi, Ahsan, & Febrianti, 2023). Currently, da'wah has also been carried out in the form of interesting digital memes. More than a decade ago, the popularity of remixed images circulating in online discussion forums offered internet memes a new home in media, communication, and participatory culture studies (Haden Church & Feller, 2020). Likewise, the distribution of religious texts, which were previously widely shared and communicated through manual leaflets, has changed in the form of digital memes, such as the distribution of hadiths and verses from the Koran (Qudsy, Abdullah, & Pabbajah, 2021). Even Internet religious memes are considered to represent the humanist and spiritual ideas of certain people, which are called Sufistic memes (Sabrina & Ahmadi, 2021).

There is a phenomenon that young people are increasingly distancing themselves from religious affiliation in institutional religious organizations such as mosques and churches, so the creation and distribution of aesthetic short-form videos such as memes has become a new means for spreading religion, which is considered meaningful to convey religious messages more touching (Haden Church & Feller, 2020). Thus, the popularity of memes has become the driving force behind spreading religious messages on the Internet. Internet memes are created to achieve viral status but with less effort and cost (Denisova, 2019). It is not uncommon for social media users to see certain memes repeated-repeat because a meme is very memorable both because it is memorable and because it is funny. In the end, a user will repost and retweet over and over again so that it becomes viral (Schmidt, 2021; Singler, 2020).

These characteristics of Internet memes can be a very effective medium in spreading Islamic religious messages through da'wah. Internet memes can be used to convey Islamic preaching messages by a preacher to represent his ideas or religious behavior. These da'wah messages and religious behavior can be spread through the dissemination of da'wah information in an online cultural or social system (Campbell & Sheldon, 2021). This online cultural and social system can be formed in an online social media network such as WhatsApp groups, Facebook, etc. Wang and Wang (2015) found that many

communication-based activities have become crazy about using Internet memes in communicating. They continue to create memes to help form opinions and promote various ideas and marketing. Therefore, some experts argue that memes can also be used for religious marketing (Bergsman, 2013) or in relation to this research, Memes can be used for Islamic religious propagation.

Likewise, many da'wah communication activities have been carried out by famous scholars such as Abdul Somad, Adi Hidayat, Felix Siau, and others through various platforms on the Internet. The use of short memes in text, images, and videos is also increasingly widespread by individuals and religious organizations. Experts such as Aguilar, Campbell, Stanley, & Taylor (2017) say that Internet memes related to religion can shed more light on religious concepts regarding religious messages in society.

However, research on Internet religious memes by millennial preachers among the public still needs to be completed. The lack of research on the use of religious memes in preaching by millennial preachers can impact our lack of knowledge on maximizing the use of internet religious memes for da'wah purposes. Therefore, this research will examine the use of internet religious memes to provide an understanding of the use of memes for da'wah communication purposes. In this way, this research will contribute academically and practically regarding the use of Internet religious memes in preaching among the millennial generation, who are very dependent on the Internet.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of Meme

The term 'meme' was first introduced by biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 in his book *The Selfish Game* to refer to small units of cultural transmission that are analogous to genes in the way they spread from individual to individual, 'Just as genes spread themselves across the gene pool by leaps and bounds. From body to body... so memes spread themselves in the meme pool by jumping from brain to brain (Burman, 2012). While Dawkins initially gave examples of memes such as music songs, fashion, and catchphrases, later, the concept of Meme has become closely related to the discussion of Internet Memes which are used to describe the way digital images and messages are spread quickly and modified into new forms of online communication (Aguilar et al., 2017).

The word Meme is a simplification of mimeses, which connects the idea of memory with genes. Memes can be defined as cultural units that reproduce themselves in a process of copying and imitation. In a broad sense, the concept of a Meme includes lines, phrases, images, behavior, ideas, or fragments of repeated ideas that are considered to stick in the user's mind quickly and spread quickly (Regiani & Borelli, 2017). Departing from the biological approach mentioned above, the concept of Meme has been widely used as a metaphor, especially in the context of disseminating content on the Internet. As far as the communication area is concerned, the Meme metaphor can be well understood by society. This means it reflects how Memes can coexist with species. Other media and memes can also adapt various characteristics of messages created by different people and interest groups to be circulated in different environments (Sabrina & Ahmadi, 2021).

Religious Memes

The messages of online religious institutions aim to instill divine experiences in their audiences and even have to go beyond the limitations of the mobile media that distribute them. Responding to this urgency, the messages of religious institutions can overcome communication barriers by using synecdoche or language that represents multiple meanings to create a complete iteration of God (Haden Church & Feller, 2020). Internet religious memes can simplify the spread of religious beliefs in a more effective way. The use of Internet memes in the spread of religion has undoubtedly made religious content more accessible and perhaps more relevant in the lives of religious people who are active on social networks. Internet memes can help promote loyalty to religion, memes can also criticize religious beliefs (Burroughs & Feller, 2015). Religious memes provide inter-textuality that encourages religious organizations to confront tensions that have existed for centuries between institutional control and individual understanding and practice of religious material in new and more creative ways.

Religious organizations can act as curators by continuing to incorporate digital technology and social media platforms into their institutional practices, so religion will increasingly play an integral role in the social and spiritual lives of religious individuals. Digital religion and the use of religious memes are now a way for religious followers to worship, make sense of, and share their religion and beliefs. Religious practices have leaped from the pages of scripture and into the virtual reality that millennial individuals, both religious and non-religious, are calling new home. Everyday religion is now advocacy and criticism, followers and skepticism, memes, and anti-memes (Brubaker et al., 2017). Then the new variables contained in religious practice must be handled by religious leaders and also by religious institutions.

Internet for Islamic Preaching

Research related to da'wah on the Internet has been carried out by a number of experts, including Gardner, Mayers, & Hameed (2018), and the link between the presence of the Internet and the knowledge construction process has been widely carried out (e.g. Farquhar, 1996; Hardey, 1999; Nurdin, 2022; Potosky, 2007). This research focuses on the practice of Islamic da'wah on the Internet, which is understood as the practice of accessing and disseminating Islamic knowledge and teachings via the Internet (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020)

Da'wah or preaching is the process of improving favorable conditions (thoughts, feelings, behavior) of a person or society (Nisa, 2018; Nurdin, 2014). Specifically, Islamic da'wah is defined as an activity to call or invite people to change to prevent ignorance. Based on the description above, da'wah activities can be successful if they are carried out optimally and supported by an effective communication process. The communicator or preacher must also pay attention to the appearance and message that Mad'u wants to convey so that an active communication process is established.

In this context, digital media platforms have become a means of communication da'wah for teenagers (Ridwan, Nurdin, & Fitriingsih, 2019). Male teachers (asatidz) and female teachers (asatidzah) as da'i take advantage of the open access to conduct lectures and preach in various mosques or in places that can be used as prayer places will later be uploaded to YouTube and repeatedly watched

by many viewers. In principle, da'wah is an activity that targets individuals to follow and practice Islamic teachings (Latepo, Suharto, & Nurdin, 2021). This invitation is carried out with a targeted approach according to their characteristics and tendencies. The nature of the media to be used and the community's character need to be understood because user culture differences influence the effect's strength—social media use.

Da'wah communication is conveying information or messages (from a person or group of people) originating from the Al-Qur'an and Al-Hadith using symbols (both). Verbal and nonverbal) to change other people's attitudes, opinions, or behavior. Da'wah runs according to Islamic teachings both directly and indirectly, verbally and through the media.

Islamic sites have been an effective medium for disseminating knowledge. Research shows more than one million visits to Islamic sites daily (Şisler, 2007). These Islamic sites provide various topics, sources of Islamic knowledge and Islamic teachings online. Islamic teachings circulating online are related to family law (Sisler, 2009), related to radical Salafism (Rusli, 2015), and online shopping laws (Hosen, 2008). Apart from that, there are also a number of sites that provide question-and-answer activities related to jurisprudence related to various topics such as <https://islamqa.info/en> , <http://www.fatwaislam.com/fis/> , <https://www.sistani.org/english/qa/>. These sites can be accessed easily by Muslims who want to ask various questions related to Islamic jurisprudence

METHODOLOGY

The research uses a qualitative method approach (Creswell, 1998; G. Morgan & Smircich, 1980). The qualitative research method is a research method that focuses on studying phenomena in depth on a research topic (Supiani, Nurdin, Syahid, & Fakhurrozi, 2022). This in-depth study was obtained through interaction with sources or informants (Haryanto, Nurdin, & Ubadah, 2022). In this research, the sources are millennial preachers who are used to preaching via the Internet. The resource persons came from young Ulama, who are members of the Indonesian Ulema Council, and also young da'i, who come from other religious organizations.

Because this research also aims to identify religious narratives communicated by religious memes on the Internet, this research also uses a netnographic approach (Ingrassia, Altamore, Bacarella, Columba, & Chironi, 2020; Tenderich, Tenderich, Barton, & Richards, 2019). The focus of research on the Internet is religious memes that display religious and social practices and discursive narratives about religious practices by individuals and groups of Islamic religious organizations such as Nahdatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and the Indonesian Ulema Council.

Data were collected through focus group discussions (e.g. D. L. Morgan, 1996, 1997). In this research, focus group discussions will be held with several millennial preachers in the Central Sulawesi district. The purpose of the focus group discussion is to gain knowledge (Parent, Gallupe, Salisbury, & Handelman, 2000) regarding the description of how millennial preachers use religious memes in preaching in cyberspace, both through personal social media sites and closed social media groups such as WhatsApp. It is also to obtain information regarding what types of religious memes are used in

preaching. Then, the researchers also conducted in-depth interviews with participants from focus group discussions. In this research, researchers also analyzed web content and social media on the Internet using a netnographic approach to extract data related to the spread of religious memes on the Internet by preachers and religious organizations. Analysis of web and social media content related to the spread of religious memes focuses on preachers and specified religious institutions.

Analysis of data originating from interviews and focus group discussions broadly follows the process suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998) where the data analysis process is carried out through four stages of iteration, namely, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In the first stage, researchers will group data into various categories based on research questions and theoretical constructs in the literature review. In the next iteration, axial coding was carried out by making connections between the various categories and themes that emerged (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). At this stage, the various categories from open coding were then extracted into a smaller number based on the core themes conveyed by the informants. In the third iteration stage, selective coding assists the researcher in an in-depth assessment of the various categories that have been identified in the second coding stage by "refining their meaning and articulating the relationships between the various categories and themes" (Jin & Robey, 2008, p. 183) to enable giving birth to new theories and solutions to problems that arise in interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Distribution of Religious Memes

The spread of religious memes among millennial scholars online in their daily activities shows a high level of significance. The use of religious memes in daily preaching life is related to answering fiqh questions asked by people in the daily lives of millennial scholars, such as matters of worship and muamalah. Our study found that millennial scholars use religious memes obtained from online sources by spreading them on social media so that the public can read them (Nasrul, Nurdin, & Askar, 2023). The phenomenon of sharing religious memes online has been carried out using memes that were previously more popular in other fields, such as business, politics, and social affairs. Millennial scholars use memes to spread hadith that can increase knowledge of the Islamic community.

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Memes about Tawhid

The values of monotheism, which are related to the belief in Allah as the only God worshiped by Muslims and the belief that the prophet Muhammad was the messenger of Allah, are the core of the Islamic religion (Yamani & Nurdin, 2023). Because of this, millennial scholars are trying to spread Islamic teachings regarding monotheism, which is the basis of the Islamic faith. Millennial clerics spread memes related to the saying *ashaduallailah haillallah wa ashaduanna Muhammad rasulullah* to strengthen the monotheism of the Islamic ummah, as depicted in picture 1 below.



Picture 1. Memes about Belief in God and the Prophet

An explanation by millennial scholars regarding the position and importance of monotheism in the Islamic religion also followed the spread of the monotheism meme. Belief in God and his prophet is the core of Islamic teachings before carrying out various other religious rituals because, without true monotheism, different religious practices will not be accepted by Allah. The Muslim community is enlightened through various memes about monotheism in the Islamic religion.

Memes about Angels

Muslim belief that angels are one of God's creatures and belief in angels is one of Islam's main articles of faith. Angels play an important role in Muslim everyday life by protecting the believers from evil influences and recording the deeds of humans. According to Qur'an verses and the prophet's hadith, the angels have different duties, including praising God, interacting with humans in ordinary life, defending against devils and carrying on natural phenomena. In the six pillars of faith, angels are mentioned in the second Islamic pillar, where Muslims are required to believe in the existence of angels. Even though Muslims are taught to believe that the number of angels is uncountable, in the six pillars of the Muslim faith, there are ten famous angels, which include Jibril, Mikail, Israfil, Izrail, Munkar and Nakir, angels Raqib, Atid, Malik, and angel Ridwan. In their preaching, millennial ulama shares memes about angels to keep Muslim society members as the second pillar of the Islamic faith, as shown in picture 2 below.



Picture 2. Memes about angels in Islam

Belief in Fate and Destiny

Belief in good and bad luck determined by God is an important value in Islam and one basic principle in Islamic teaching. Muslims are taught to believe that Allah determines their fate and destiny as the only God. However, Islam also teaches Muslims to make a strong effort to make their fate and destiny changeable according to their will. The fate and destiny might change when Muslims pray or Dua regularly, followed by strong effort. As such, millennial Ulama delivers their preaching with relevant memes containing Dua relating to seeking God's grace to change humans' fate and destiny. Some memes distributed on social media are depicted in picture 3 below.



Picture 3. Memes about Fate and Destiny

Invitation to perform the five daily prayers

Five-time prayer a day is the second fundamental principle of Islam, which is also understood as the pillar of all Islamic rituals. Praying five times a day is compulsory for all Muslims. It is believed that praying is the foundation of Islam's faith because other religious activities are accepted easily when Muslims pray five times a day regularly. As such, millennial Ulama intensively remains Muslim, not forgetting to pray five times a day. They share memes that invite Muslims to perform praying every day, as shown in picture 4 below.



Picture 4. Memes about invitations to pray five times a day

Memes of paying zakat

Memes inviting people to pay zakat are also widely spread by millennial scholars to persuade Muslims to pay zakat in accordance with Islamic law. However, the spread of memes inviting people to pay zakat is also followed by an explanation of the benefits of zakat from social and economic aspects in building the welfare of the Muslim community. Some examples of memes inviting people to pay zakat can be seen in Figure 5 below.



Picture 5. Memes about paying zakat

Zakat is the main source of collective income for Muslims because it can be used to help other Muslims who have low incomes or are poor with zakat contributions from Muslims who have higher incomes. In Islam, the term tax is not known because the concept of tax is more coercive and does not contain the concept of sincerity. Meanwhile, zakat is a concept of building the people's economy together sincerely and voluntarily.

Memes about live after death

The life of the afterlife or life after death is a form of faith in Islam that all Muslims must believe. Memes about life after death exist, depicting life in hell and heaven. Examples of memes about life in hell and heaven can be seen in Figure 6 below.



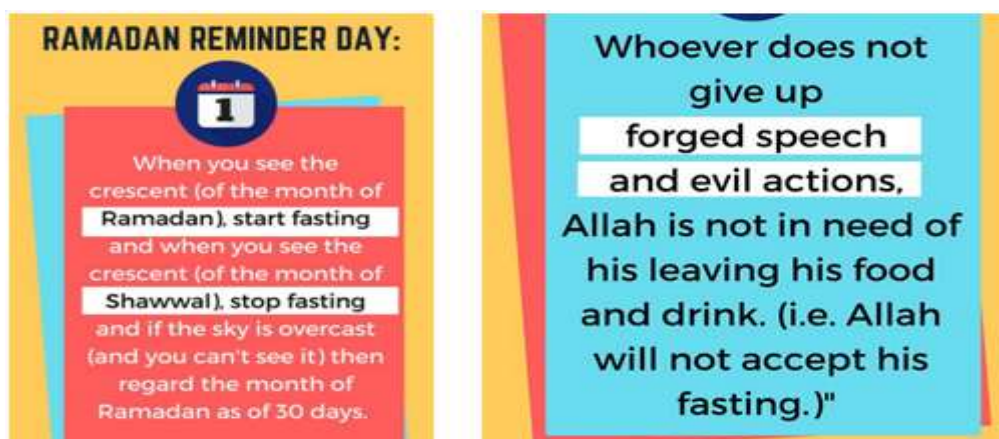
Picture 6. Memes about the Hell and Heaven

The Meme above shows the pain of life in hell for people who sin. The distribution of memes about scary hell is a way of preaching by millennial clerics to scare Muslims into obeying their worship. Meanwhile, memes about life in heaven show the opposite atmosphere, namely about a more pleasant and comfortable life. The seductive Meme of life in heaven is also a way for millennial scholars to preach to persuade Muslims to carry out God's commands as revealed to the prophet Muhammad.

Memes about fasting in Ramadhan

Fasting during Ramadhan month is an important ritual that causes Muslims to be patient and honest daily. Fasting is a ritual forbidding Muslims to eat and drink and to have intercourse during mid-day. The fasting ritual also encourages Muslims to practice a healthy diet by controlling food intake. In short, fasting has value in terms of economic and health. In most preaching activities, fasting has

become central issue in disseminating Islamic teaching through digital media. Various memes that contain information about Ramadhan distributed by millennial Ulama can be seen in picture 7 below.



Picture 7. Memes about Fasting in Ramadhan Month

Mememes about Performing Pilgrim

Performing Hajj is the last basic Islamic principle in Islam. Performing Hajj is compulsory for Muslims who have better income, but it is not mandatory for Muslims with insufficient income. Performing Hajj for rich Muslims is compulsory for one time during their life. If they perform Hajj more than one time, it is Sunnah or not compulsory. Performing Hajj has become a major topic in Islamic preaching delivered by millennial Ulama. The importance of performing Hajj is distributed through various digital memes, as depicted in picture 8 below.



Picture 8. Mememes about Performing Hajj

The memes above show interesting messages that persuade Muslims to perform Hajj. The memes show the equality of human beings during performing Hajj because they wear same clothes and all people are similar in the eyes of Allah when they are in the Hajj ritual. The Hajj has attracted millions of Muslims around the world every year. They believe performing Hajj can clean their sin and obtain Allah's blessing. In the Qur'an, Allah has promised that all sin will be forgiven when humans perform Hajj seriously. As such, Muslims around the world try very hard to get income to fund their trip to Mecca for Hajj.

CONCLUSION

The results of our research show that millennial Ulama have shared various religious memes on their social media. The religious memes fall into meme themes in accordance with the five pillars of Islam. The religious memes reflect the importance of Muslim pillars of faith, including the belief that there is only one God and Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, an invitation to perform five times daily salat, fasting during Ramadhan month, belief in angels, and performing Hajj. Muslim millennial scholars produce and share religious memes due to their duty as religious authorities in Islamic teaching dissemination to Muslim societies. The use of religious memes in disseminating Islamic teachings and values is considered a new method of preaching in Islam to make Muslims more interested in learning Islam.

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