

# Humorous and Profane Religious Communication among Indonesian Millennials and Centennials: The Investigation on X

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**Abstract:** Religious narratives are filled with orthodoxy and ideal manners in communicating their goal to the masses. However, the transition from this conservatism toward flexible delivery of spiritual beliefs in social media is still underrepresented. This study aims to picture how the narratives in the X social media may reduce the holistic and sacred tones of religious communication. Under the qualitative approach of phenomenology, a content analysis on the X application is applied to contrast the holy and, conversely, the profane chats of the application users. Our study finds a significant shift in how the millennials or even the centennials express their feelings toward religion. They often approach daily life, even critical issues, with a sense of humor and thus potentially create a laughable conversation for the X's users. This study highlights how millennials and the commoners perceive their religiosity in relaxed tones.

**Keywords:** Millennials, Religious Communication, Indonesia, Social Media, Content Analysis

## Introduction

Ideally, the adoption of deep knowledge and learning about religion originates from opportunities to acquire it directly from Professors, Teachers, religious figures, and authoritative religious educators (Roose, 2020). However, the fact that higher-spirituality believers absorb spiritual knowledge through social media available on their devices also warrants specific research attention, including in Indonesia. This narrative is based on Hootsuite's research in January 2023, which showed that out of Indonesia's 275 million population, social media users via mobile phones accounted for 191 million of the population. Internet usage still dominated with 212.9 million residents, compared to the 5.16 billion global internet users, with a 1.9% increase compared to the same period, year on year (yoy). Data from the Central Statistics Agency of Indonesia (source: [bps.go.id](https://bps.go.id)) also recorded that 95.79% of active youths use mobile phones, and access to information and communication technology is higher in urban areas than in rural areas.

Social media has a significant impact on religion, both positive and negative. On the one hand, social media makes it easier for people to connect with others who share the same beliefs, share their religious experiences and perspectives, and learn about different religions and cultures. On the other hand, social media also creates new challenges, such as spreading misinformation, religious extremism, and echo chambers (Jost et al., 2018; Raja Zulkifi et al., 2018). The nature of social media platforms can have a significant impact on how religious conversations take place online. The fact that social media platforms are algorithmic means that netizens are often exposed to repetitive religious content, potentially leading the audience to become more entrenched in their beliefs and less open to new ideas (Imtiaz & Islam, 2020; Thomas et al., 2019). Additionally, social media platforms are designed to facilitate interaction and engagement, which can lead to more

polarized and heated religious conversations, especially since the potential for user anonymity can make people feel more comfortable expressing extreme or controversial religious views without adequate checks and controls (Amin, 2020; Stout, 2016).

Religious conversations among millennials appear more fluid and humorous than previous generations due to their comfort with ambiguity, adaptability as social media users, and more personal and private views on religion (Ramon et al., 2006). They tend to view religion as a complex and multifaceted system of thought rather than rigid rules and doctrines (Zaid et al., 2022). They are also more inclined to question religious beliefs and explore various perspectives (Dash et al., 2021; Loke et al., 2020). The anonymity of social media increases their comfort in expressing themselves without feeling pressured to conform to traditional religious norms (Stout, 2016). In practice, some use humor to promote understanding and respect for various religious beliefs, although this can be highly sensitive and offensive (Hampton et al., 2017).

Further research is needed to fully understand this phenomenon, as this mode of expression will color the social media landscape in Indonesia. It is essential to closely observe the impact of social media on young people in shaping their influence on changes in thinking patterns, attitudes, behaviors, and even their religious behaviors within the narrative of social media conversations. Application X (formerly Twitter) is chosen because it specializes in text-based conversations rather than image or video sharing, allowing the information acquired to have more evident meaning than image or video clips. Text conversations in Application X are also widely shared on various other media, as the quality of posted content compels people to share their thoughts in written form, thus sparking discourse from recorded tweeted posts.

## Literature Review

### *Social Media and The Behavior of User Interaction*

Millennials, born between 1980 and 1999, constitute a generation intimately acquainted with media, particularly the digital realm (Bilgihan, 2016). Today's adult Millennials, in particular, are closely connected to social media, accessing the ever-evolving landscape of technology and digital information through their sophisticated smartphones (Zaid et al., 2022). Social media has become an incredibly familiar medium for a significant portion of the Indonesian population (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020). Internet-based social media has revolutionized its function in disseminating and receiving information. The rapid developments in this domain have even compelled baby boomers and Generation X to adapt to the constantly evolving hardware and software.

Easily accessible media sometimes escapes control in its utilization. Consequently, Millennials often exhibit aggressive behaviors (Crowson, 2009). Such aggression often manifests as a direct or indirect influence on social information processing, involving imitation or modeling of what occurs in society and how they interpret their perceptions (Saroglou et al., 2005). Several epidemiological and cross-cultural studies have supported a cause-and-effect relationship between media violence and aggressive behavior in children, teenagers, and adults (Malik, 2009). The correlation is robust with prior exposure to violence (McDonald et al., 2012). Exposure to analog and digital media content elicits profound excitement, leading children to perceive aggression as an acceptable means of conflict resolution (Ybarra et al., 2007). Films, videos, music, video recordings, writings, images, and words that depict violence can lead to the false conclusion that violence is an effective way to resolve conflicts (Weidmann, 2015, 2016).

Media theory approaches associated with social media indicate that it can alter the existing news agenda in society, even becoming news itself (Edgell, 2017). Indeed, social media plays a role in constructing and modifying public opinion as a new public relations medium in society,

transforming various facets (Sallam et al., 2021). Social media has evolved from a medium primarily for personal storytelling and venting into an effective platform for fostering diverse opinions within specific circles, sometimes even expanding into public discourse by reshaping community perceptions and behaviors (Abdullahi et al., 2018). Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of effective social media utilization is necessary for fostering effective interaction and mutual influence between information providers and recipients within society.

Raymond Williams (1981), in his book *Communications Technologies and Social Institutions*, stated that communication technology has three roles through the advent of the Internet and its various applications—first, the amplification, which allows for the dissemination of information and long-distance conversations. Second, there's durability, as there is a time duration permitting information storage. Third, alternative data comprises various signs, including alternative methods for conveying meaning, such as written messages and infographics. The communication technology industry enables the emergence of culture and industry products based on commercial, social, legal, and political factors that mutually influence one another (Afzal et al., 2019).

These new media are grounded in social interaction and social integration. In the social interaction approach, new media are more interactive and foster a more personal understanding of communication (Ho & Dempsey, 2010). This view is supported by Pierre Levy's concept of cyberspace, which sees the World Wide Web as an open, flexible, dynamic, yet interactive information environment (Miranda, 2021). New media are not just places to acquire information or interact; they have become rituals and means of shaping distinct communities within tightly-knit groups that possess and integrate (Stout, 2016). This perspective is bolstered by the media equation theory, which posits that humans treat media (such as computers or mobile phones) as actual humans. This approach examines how new media can influence individuals and the social structure of the communities around them (Reeves & Nass, 2013).

This study examines issues based on Henry Jenkins' Participatory Media Culture theory, which outlines various approaches and mechanisms undertaken by individuals or audiences who collectively play a role as media consumers and producers of specific information from that media. In this theory, with their various forms of creativity, audiences can respond to media content by creating cultural commodities, deciphering and discovering multiple meanings within the messages and media products (Jenkins et al., 2013). The use of social media in society, particularly among young people, undoubtedly has various psychological, direct, and indirect impacts on changes in attitudes, cognition, and behavior in their daily lives (Sallam et al., 2021).

## **Research Method**

### *Research Design and Rationale*

In this subsection, we elucidate the research design, logic, and rationale underpinning our study, which employs content analysis to examine Twitter conversations on the Islamic religion, explicitly focusing on humorous and educational tones. The following overarching research objectives drive our study: (1) To investigate how Twitter users employ humor in discussions related to the Islamic religion; (2) To explore instances of Twitter users employing profane approaches in their discourse about Islamic teachings. The significance of this research lies in its potential to shed light on the multifaceted nature of online discussions about religion, with a particular emphasis on the often-neglected humorous and educational dimensions. This examination contributes a more comprehensive understanding of how social media platforms are used for religious discourse in the digital age.

Content analysis is the chosen method for this study due to its suitability for quantitative and qualitatively examining textual data. By analyzing Twitter conversations, we aim to discern patterns, themes, and trends within the discourse regarding the Islamic religion in the context of X's users in Indonesia. The decision to focus on humorous and educational tones in Twitter conversations about the Islamic faith is driven by several considerations. First, humor is a critical social and cultural mechanism through which individuals negotiate sensitive topics like religion. Second, the educational dimension provides insights into how Twitter users disseminate religious teachings or seek to impart knowledge in an informal online environment. Together, these aspects offer a nuanced perspective on the dynamics of religious discourse on social media.

### *Data Collection and Presentation*

The data for this study is sourced from conversations on the Twitter platform. Specifically, we purposively selected tweets about the Islamic religion with humorous and educational tones. These tweets were collected through a systematic screening process, focusing on incorporating humor or pedagogical elements within the discourse. To ensure the representativeness of our dataset, we employed purposive sampling. This method allowed us to curate tweets that exhibit the desired tones and originate from diverse user-profiles and geographical regions. To maintain transparency and replicability, we provide details of the number of tweets collected, the sampling criteria, and any limitations inherent in our data selection process. Throughout the paper, we present the selected tweets as illustrative examples to support our analysis. Each tweet is cited with its timestamp, the Twitter handle of the user, and any contextual information necessary for understanding the content. The anonymity and privacy of users are rigorously maintained through the use of pseudonyms when citing tweets.

## **Result**

### *Presentations of Humorous & Profane Religious Conversation on X*

In recent years, there has been a significant evolution in social media platforms as spaces for religious discourse. Much of these changes can be attributed to the distinctive communication tendencies of the millennial and centennial generations, who are shaping the narrative and style of online religious conversations. One intriguing aspect of this shift is the departure from the conservative and formal tone traditionally associated with religious discussions. Millennials and centennials prefer a more relaxed and informal conversational style, avoiding the solemnity often attached to spiritual topics.

At the forefront of this transformation is humor as an emerging element in religious discussions. Social media, particularly platforms like X (formerly Twitter), have witnessed the fusion of religious discourse with humor, often featuring satire, memes, or clever comments (Salman et al., 2016). This approach creates a more accessible and easily comprehensible avenue for engaging with religious content. Besides humor, millennials and centennials tend to nurture more harmonious and inclusive narratives in their discussions about religion. Unlike the rigid and dogmatic views of the past, these generations often seek common ground, emphasizing shared values and interfaith dialogue (Zaid et al., 2022). This shift reflects a desire for unity and understanding, transcending the historical boundaries often separating religious groups.

The digital landscape plays a central role in this transition. With their instant reach and diverse user bases, social media platforms provide an ideal arena for millennials and centennials to redefine religious discourse based on shared values rather than strict religious affiliations (Ben-Arieh et al., 2006). There are broad implications for how younger generations convey, receive, and understand spiritual messages. The move toward a more relaxed and harmonious style can promote

greater engagement with religious content among millennials and centennials, potentially sparking renewed interest in spirituality and interfaith dialogue. Figure 1-7 represents how humorous and profane communications in X shape the narratives of this generation.

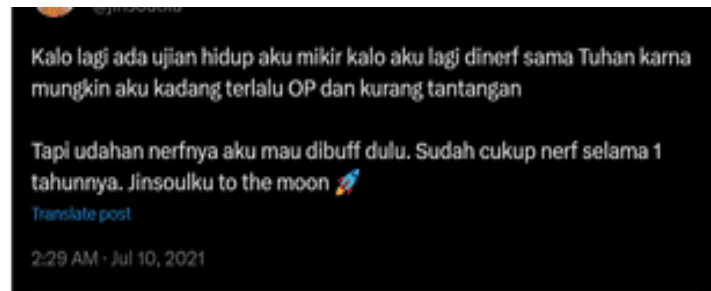


Figure 1. Mobile Game and Godly Conversation

Source: User A (Screenshotted on application X, accessed on 25-09-2023)

Figure 1 displays one of the messages presented by a young user on X, which can be translated as *"When I'm facing life's challenges, I sometimes think that God is nerfing me because maybe I'm too OP and lack challenges. But after this nerf, I want to be buffed. I've had enough nerfing for the past year. My Jinsoul [referring to a personal context] to the moon."* User A intriguingly combines a plea to God with a language style commonly found in the world of online gaming, using terms like "buff" and "nerf." The phrase "being nerfed by God" indicates that God is testing them with difficulties. By integrating these two themes, the humorous aspect of a person's plea to God becomes quite clear. Gaming terminology also extends to social criticism, as seen in User B's tweet in Figure 2. The comments state, *"Indonesia is already OP, abundant resources. That's why God nerfed the people and made them stupid."* User B humorously suggests that most Indonesians are foolish because God has already bestowed incredible blessings through abundant natural resources, representing balance. The term "OP" (overpowered), commonly found in anime or gaming culture, also indicates how the narrative of God's policies in Indonesia is fluid among most young social media users.

Snapshots of conversations on social media platform X also capture tweets from User C lamenting their love life, as in Figure 3. They say, *"This time, let God arrange my destiny because the last time I arranged it myself, everything (every User C's romance arrangement) became someone else's lover."* This tweet is quite interesting as the user expresses acceptance of God's objective in their destiny regarding relationships, as if User C takes matters into their own hands, their love life always seems to falter. This tweet implies a religious message about destiny as part of God's prerogative in a humorous way.

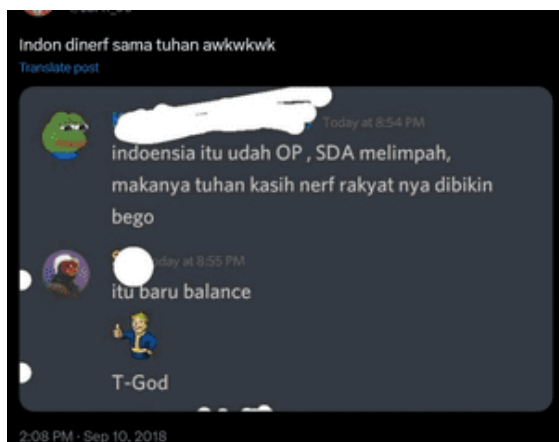


Figure 2. Realization of Country's Problem and God's Intervene  
Source: User B (Screenshotted on application X, accessed on 25-09-2023)

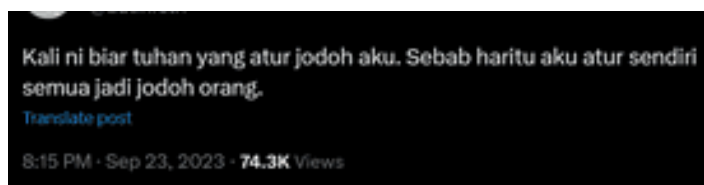


Figure 3. Love in God's will  
Source: User c (Screenshotted on application X, accessed on 25-09-2023)

Another narrative emerges from several accounts with religious backgrounds or religion-based community organizations in Indonesia but in the form of parody. One of the accounts with a large following, reaching up to 100,000, such as "Komunitas Katolik Garis Lucu," is a user on X that expresses religious opinions or societal responses in a humorous narrative. Figure 4 records a short video post from this account, where a child about to be baptized suddenly urinates and "pretends" to baptize the baptizer. This humor is wrapped in the comment, "*When you were baptized as a baby, what were you doing?*" This tweet delivers a more vital humorous message to the video post.



Figure 4. Baptizing the Baptizer  
Source: @KatolikG (Screenshotted on application X, accessed on 25-09-2023)

Parody religion accounts for humor have also emerged to represent Indonesia's largest religion-based community organization, Nahdlatul Ulama. An account like "NU Garis Lucu," as seen in Figure 5, provides a pun of the narrative related to the Islamic hadith about ablution that will make one's face shine in the afterlife. This narrative is consistent with image posts capturing an incident where a Muslim woman is shopping, but the seller's light obstructs her face. Combining a funny image and comments tailored to the hadith narrative makes religious messages less rigid and potentially more readily accepted by a broader audience.



Figure 5. The Pun of Hadith regarding Ablution in Islam

Source: @Nugarislucu (Screenshotted on application X, accessed on 25-09-2023)

The tweet from User E in Figure 6 captures the comment, "*Even Malaikat Raqib and Atid are confused.*" This narrative can be confusing when viewed from the perspective of the Islamic belief that angels are perfect creations with perfect knowledge. The context of this tweet jumps from an image post that records someone's comment on a selfie of a beautiful young woman, with the message "*Are you a sajadah? Because I want to be on top of you five times a day.*" This private message imbues a pornographic tone to engage in sexual activity using Islamic terms such as "*prayer mat*" and the obligatory prayers in Islam.

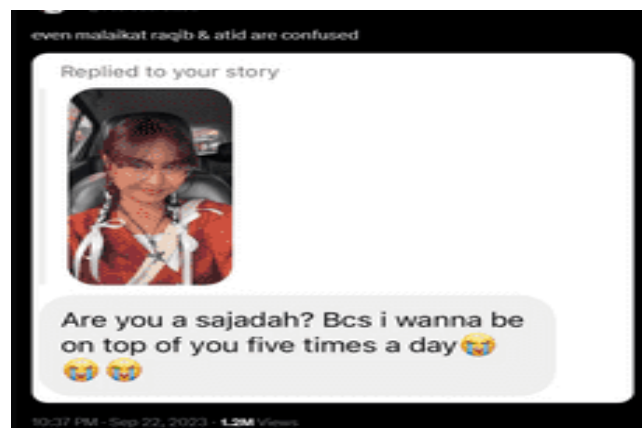


Figure 6. The Confused Guardian Angels

Source: user e (Screenshotted on application X, accessed on 25-09-2023)



Several posts by users on the X app in Indonesia, which are predominantly dominated by Gen Z and Alpha generations, indicate that religion is seen as a form of public expression that is not rigid. The range of comments can vary, from those supporting religious messages to narratives undermining spiritual teachings' noble values within a humorous communication framework. Therefore, it is necessary to have a specific approach to understanding humor as a realm that can make religion more profane yet can also be a subject of ridicule.

## Discussion

### *Participatory Media Culture on X*

One of the primary principles of Participatory Media Culture is the blurring of boundaries between various forms of media and content (Jenkins et al., 2013). This research indicates that the younger generation effectively remixes topics that are typically serious, such as religion, with humor and various other subjects on X. This reflects the participatory nature of digital media, where individuals actively interpret and reshape content, sometimes transcending conventional boundaries—furthermore, the democratization of media production in participatory culture. Our research findings align with this concept, highlighting that millennials and centennials are not passive consumers of religious discourse but active contributors who produce content. The inclusion of humor in these discussions reflects how digital platforms enable them to democratize religious discourse in the digital era.

Additionally, Participatory Media Culture often involves elements of cultural appropriation, where individuals take factors from popular culture. Our research illustrates how millennials and centennials adopt elements of humor from various sources and combine them with religious themes. This creative approach demonstrates how they leverage cultural aspects to engage with religion in a more accessible and relevant manner. There is an emphasis on collaborative and creative problem-solving, as our findings indicate that young people on Twitter engage in communal expression by collectively creating humorous narratives that connect various topics with religion. This collaborative dimension underscores how digital platforms facilitate collective engagement in religious discourse and encourage the construction of meaning collectively.

Millennials and centennials express diverse views that may align with or challenge religious norms. This diversity of voices promotes dialogue and the exchange of ideas, emphasizing the inclusive nature of participatory culture. Online communities often form around shared interests. Our research findings indicate that these generations have even formed virtual communities centered around humorous discussions about religion on X. These digital communities facilitate content sharing and the formation of social bonds among participants, further illustrating how digital platforms foster collective engagement.

### Social Media and Religion

Communication is one of humanity's greatest potentials because it enables individuals to express their thoughts and understand language. In the realm of religion, at least three distinctions are found. Firstly, all societies, at any level of development, have not only secular or natural cultural elements (separation of religion from the real world) but also supernatural elements. Furthermore, all spiritual-value-realization components possess magical and religious characteristics, albeit in different proportions and realizations (Abdurahim et al., 2016). Secondly, all belief components play a role that can support the system of faith, even with various combinations of features within



them (Menchik, 2019). Thirdly, at the normative level, the design of faith and the religious system have sanctions manifested in taboos and religious ethics (Graham et al., 2009). Therefore, communication in religion has rules that encompass rewards (rewards) and punishments (punishments) (Schwörer & Romero-Vidal, 2020).

Religion guides people to understand the path they should take in their life activities. So, what motivates people to be religious? To what extent does religion play a role in the lives of humans, especially millennials? These questions are part of an ongoing discussion and debate, especially in an era filled with the specter of new religions for modern humans or the slow but inevitable replacement or marginalization of religion. The urgency of religion for millennials becomes an interesting question for discussion and debate amid the dramatic and fantastic development of media today. Religion is a highly private matter among millennials. Many millennials believe religion is sufficient by showing good morals or being kind to others as the true essence of religion instead of rituals (Perera, 2021). On the contrary, other millennials with a slightly different perspective believe religion is part of the identity that every individual must have (Zaid et al., 2022).

James Marcia (1966), a contemporary psychologist from Simon Fraser University, stated that an adolescent experiences a crisis in their identity development, where the adolescent continues to explore many alternatives. According to him, adolescents have at least four identity statuses: (1) Identity Diffusion: A situation in which an individual has never experienced a crisis or made any commitments. They have not only made no decisions regarding work or any ideology, but they are also not interested or committed to anything. (2) Identity Foreclosure: The status of individuals who have made commitments but have never experienced a crisis. (3) Identity Moratorium: The status of individuals in a crisis who do not have clear commitments or have vaguely identified their commitments. (4) Identity Achievement: The status of individuals who have experienced a crisis and are committed to solutions.

Millennials and Centennials engaged in humorous discussions about religion reflect characteristics that align with these identity statuses. They fall into the "identity diffusion" category, represented by individuals who have not experienced a crisis or formed firm commitments regarding religious beliefs or affiliations, as reflected in their humor-filled discussions. On the other hand, they have "identity foreclosure," where they are committed to religious views as it has been ingrained in them since birth. Another generation experiences an "identity moratorium" during a crisis, struggling with their religious beliefs and expressing themselves through humor amid this uncertainty. Lastly, "identity achievement" is where they can integrate their religious beliefs into their identity as a potent form of self-expression. This psychological framework can help understand how young individuals interact with religion and humor amid complex identity development and interactions.

Several studies indicate that adolescents involved in religious activities tend to participate in various religious outreach activities compared to those less interested in religious activities (Salmanian et al., 2020). Matters of belief are significant for most teenagers. However, with the development of the 21st century, there has been a trend of declining religious beliefs among teenagers (Perera, 2021). In a national study in the United States in 2007, as many as 78% of young people stated that they attended places of worship regularly, which was lower than previous studies showing that around 85% of teenagers or high school students attended places of worship. Research on the religious beliefs of adolescents in the US decreased from the age of 14 to the age of 20. In this study, the measured factors included the frequency of prayer, religious teachings discussions, moral decision-making based on religion, and the importance of religion in daily life.

More adolescents attended places of worship at ages 14-18 compared to ages 20-24. The frequency of attending places of worship was highest at age 14, decreased from ages 14 to 18, and increased again at age 20.

An interesting study indicates that the level of religiosity among adolescent girls is higher than among teenage boys (Jones, 2007). Research on adolescents aged 13-17 shows that teenage girls are more likely to attend places of worship because religion shapes their daily personality, participate in religious groups, pray frequently, and feel closer to God (Hill et al., 2003). Furthermore, an analysis of the World Values Survey of adolescents aged 18 to 24 shows that individuals who come of age in less developed countries are more religious than those in developed countries.

Many religious groups also use social media to proselytize (Käsehage, 2022). This situation has given rise to new religious leaders with a millennial style who are embraced by the public. In the global context, the terrorist organization ISIS also utilizes social media to promote its extremist teachings (Käsehage, 2022; Levchak & Levchak, 2020). In certain aspects, ISIS propaganda saturates the Twittersverse and becomes a trending topic (Suharto, 2018). They showcase the "glory days of ISIS," such as suicide bombings, speeches by Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi as the leader, and brutal acts of beheading individuals deemed infidels. These conditions led to the affirmative need for the youths to absorb the best value of moral offerings in the religions, even punitively.

## Conclusion

The rapid proliferation of convergent media has ensnared society, including the millennial generation, in the culture of avid media consumption. There is a pressing need for awareness of the impact of social media due to the ease with which every individual, especially young people, can access all types of information on new media spread across various social networking platforms. The euphoria of freedom in the realm of democracy is still a learning curve for the Indonesian nation. Therefore, there is an urgent call for a media education movement, often called media literacy.

One of the most striking findings is how actively the millennial and centennial generations employ humor as a tool to express their thoughts on various topics and weave them into discussions about religion. This finding suggests that using social media for them is a form of meeting complex and multidimensional needs. Firstly, the use of humor in discussions about religion adds an extra layer of entertainment to the online experience, enabling the avoidance of potential tensions in conversations about faith. Moreover, this strategy fulfills the need for social interaction, with humor as a catalyst for smoother dialogues and the exchange of views among users. Humor also satisfies creative needs, as seen in creating memes, jokes, and humorous narratives that they share. Employing humor in the context of religion functions as a way to meet spiritual needs with a more relaxed and inclusive approach to forging a closer connection with values or beliefs. Further research could delve into the sentiment context emerging from various humor-based conversations, its impact on cultural norms, differences in responses among social media users, the formation of users' religious identities, or changes in the general public's perceptions of religion. The potential for further research in this area can aid in a deeper understanding of the interplay between religion and humor and its effects on individuals' attitudes, perceptions, and identities in the digital media landscape.

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