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M. Khusna Amal , Hepni Hepni , Anadia Aqiela Nuril Izza , [Depict Pristine Adi](#) \*

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## Article

# The Role of Humor in Bringing Smile Islam Back Home in the Digital Public Space

M. Khusna Amal <sup>1</sup>, Hepni <sup>2</sup>, Anadia Aqiela Nuril Izza <sup>3</sup> and Depict Pristine Adi <sup>2,4,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> State Islamic University (UIN) K.H. Achmad Siddiq Jember

<sup>2</sup> State Islamic University (UIN) K.H. Achmad Siddiq Jember

<sup>3</sup> Gadjahmada University Yogyakarta

<sup>4</sup> Islamic University (UIN) K.H. Achmad Siddiq Jember

\* Correspondence: depict.pristine@uinkhas.ac.id

**Abstract:** The increasing activism of moderate Muslim groups in promoting religious moderation and countering radicalism has garnered significant scholarly attention. However, there remains a paucity of comprehensive studies exploring the role of education grounded in local cultural practices, such as humor, in this context. This article aims to analyze the utilization of humor-based platforms on social media by moderate Muslim organizations to advance religious moderation and reinforce the portrayal of a tolerant and peaceful Indonesian Islam in virtual public spaces. It argues that humor functions not merely as a vehicle for entertainment but as an effective educational tool capable of de-escalating tensions and conflicts without inciting violence, by employing humorous language. This study employs Virtual Ethnography to observe the online activism of the "Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Garis Lucu" and "Muhammadiyah Garis Lucu" platforms, particularly in their engagements with similar humor platforms operated by radical Islamic groups. The findings reveal that humor platforms can effectively disseminate discourses on religious moderation while also providing a critique of the religious narratives propagated by radical groups through the use of memes that are both humorous and respectful. Moreover, these platforms have evolved into deliberative public spaces where diverse religious groups can engage in dialogue over various contemporary religious issues. The emergence of these humor platforms has successfully contributed to the representation of Indonesian Islam as witty, inclusive, and fundamentally opposed to radicalism.

**Keywords:** humor; moderation literacy; radicalism; moderate; smile Islam and digital space

## 1. Introduction

Since the post-reform era in Indonesia, the ideological contestation between radical and moderate Muslim groups has intensified and resurfaced, reflecting deeper societal tensions. Radical groups have aggressively promoted orthodox interpretations of Islam, advocating for the strict implementation of Sharia law and, in some cases, the establishment of an Islamic state. In contrast, moderate Muslim factions have consistently worked to advance the values of moderation, tolerance, and democratization. Each group strategically utilizes various resources, including material, social, cultural, and symbolic capital, in their struggle (Fadhil, 2015; Asnawi, 2017).

With the advent of new media, the ideological battle between these Islamic groups has expanded into the digital realm. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and various websites have become new arenas for this ideological contest. These digital battles often escalate into more fierce and brutal confrontations, deviating from the original intent of conveying substantive religious messages in a civilized manner. Instead, these groups often become entangled in competitive currents, producing disinformation, hate speech, and hoaxes (Zaini, 2019; Wirawan, 2021).

The strengthening of ideological battles in the digital realm involving radical and moderate groups has garnered significant attention from scholars. Many anticipated that moderate Muslims, who have historically played a crucial role in promoting tolerance, pluralism, and democracy, would

easily prevail in this new arena. They believed that the advent of new media would further facilitate the efforts of moderate Muslims to encourage the Indonesian Muslim community to embrace these values (Rahman, 2018; Setiawan, 2020).

However, these predictions have not entirely materialized. Radical Muslim groups have demonstrated greater technological proficiency in leveraging new media to disseminate their religious views. Before the government implemented stricter media regulations to curb the spread of hoaxes and hate speech, the digital space was saturated with news, information, and propaganda emanating from radical Muslim cyber networks. The spread of extremist ideologies, as evidenced by acts such as the suicide bombings in Surabaya, East Java, cannot be separated from the jihad propaganda circulated by these groups on social media (Fadillah, 2021; Hamidi, 2022).

In addition to their technological adeptness, radical Muslims have been more active and engaging in occupying public spaces on social media, consistently delivering religious content. This dynamic has contributed to a perception that moderate Islamic actors are less progressive in responding to the surge of radicalism in the digital world. Consequently, this has led to concerns about the emergence of a more conservative image of Indonesian Islam. Observers and socio-political scholars increasingly perceive Indonesian Islam and society as becoming more intolerant and exclusive (Syahrin, 2022; Yusuf, 2023).

Is it accurate to claim that moderate Muslims are less progressive in addressing the rise of religious radicalism in the digital sphere? Many scholars argue that there is a decline in the ideological temperament and praxis of moderate Muslims, particularly in their contestation with radicals during the digital media era (Munir, 2019; Amri, 2021). However, contrary to this mainstream view, this paper posits that moderate Muslims are not entirely passive or defensive in countering the penetration of religious radicalism in the digital space. The emergence of narratives such as Islam Nusantara promoted by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Islam Berkemajuan (Progressive Islam) by Muhammadiyah, and the mainstreaming of religious moderation by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs represent active responses by moderate Muslims against intolerance, discrimination, and religious violence in digital media (Wahid, 2019; Arifin, 2020).

The struggle of moderate Muslims to counter radicalism is conducted through various media. One noteworthy method is the promotion of moderation through humor. This paper argues that humor is not merely 'meaningless babble' or 'spare change entertainment' devoid of sociological impact. Rather, it plays a crucial role in the cultural work of moderate Muslims, particularly in restoring the smiling face of Indonesian Islam in the digital world. Beyond entertainment, humor serves as a form of cultural education, offering psychological relief, social inclusion, and political empowerment. It presents an antithesis to various forms of intolerance, exclusivism, and radicalism (Haryanto, 2022; Putri, 2023).

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study investigates the role of humor as a medium for promoting moderate literacy rooted in local wisdom within digital spaces, employing a netnography (virtual ethnography) methodology. This approach facilitates a comprehensive analysis of the social dynamics prevalent in digital communities, particularly those affiliated with humor-based platforms such as NU Garis Lucu, Muhammadiyah Garis Lucu, Hizbut Tahrir Garis Lucu, and Salafi Garis Lucu (Kozinets, 2015). The research was conducted from May to September 2022, focusing on daily discourses related to religious issues, especially those concerning moderation and radicalism (Miller et al., 2016).

Data for this study were obtained directly from the content shared on these humor platforms, with a primary focus on Twitter as a social media outlet (Barton, 2019). The observational technique used enabled the collection of pertinent data, which was subsequently analyzed through a systematic process involving categorization, classification, annotation, and conclusion drawing. The study's findings provide insights into how humor can act as a strategic tool in countering radical narratives and promoting a more inclusive and tolerant digital public sphere (Saxena & Sharma, 2018).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. The Influence of Digital Radicalism on Indonesian Islam and Democracy

The analysis of humor-based platforms such as NU Garis Lucu, Muhammadiyin Garis Lucu, Hizbut Tahrir Garis Lucu, and Salafi Garis Lucu revealed several key findings regarding the use of humor in promoting moderate literacy. Data collected from Twitter and other humor platforms during the research period (May to September 2022) demonstrated that humor is employed as a strategic tool to address and counter radical narratives.

**Humor as a Tool for Moderation:** The study identified that humor is frequently used to subtly challenge extremist viewpoints while promoting moderate perspectives. This aligns with findings by Berger and Morgan (2015), who argue that humor can be an effective means of communication in politically sensitive contexts, offering a non-confrontational way to engage audiences.

**Community Engagement:** Analysis of humor content showed that platforms foster community engagement by creating a shared space for discussion and reflection on religious moderation. This is consistent with the work of Milner (2016), who highlights the role of humor in building and maintaining online communities.

**Counter-Narrative Strategies:** Humor was found to be employed in counter-narrative strategies aimed at discrediting radical ideologies. This supports the research by Jane (2017), which examines how humor can subvert extremist messages and foster a more inclusive dialogue.

### 3.2. Promoting Religious Moderation Through Humor: A Scholarly Perspective

Humor, as a unique cultural expression, plays a significant role in shaping social interactions and conveying complex ideas in an accessible manner. In the context of religious moderation, humor serves as a powerful tool to bridge divides, diffuse tensions, and foster a spirit of inclusivity. By incorporating humor into discussions of religion, communities can challenge stereotypes, promote critical thinking, and create a more tolerant environment. This approach is particularly relevant in countering radicalism, where humor can undermine extremist narratives and provide an alternative discourse that emphasizes common humanity and shared values. In Muslim-majority societies like Indonesia, humor has historically been used not only for entertainment but also as a means of social critique and as a vehicle for promoting peaceful coexistence among diverse groups.

No.	Account	Slogan	Number of Tweets/ Following/ Follower
1.	<i>NU Garis Lucu</i> @NUgarislucu Joined March 2015	Speak the truth even if it's funny	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>913,259 followers</li> <li>227 following</li> <li>53,987 tweets</li> </ul>
2.	<i>Muhammadiyin Garis Lucu</i> @MuhammadiynGL Joined May 2018	Energizing Indonesia Delighting the Universe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>120,108 followers</li> <li>123 following</li> <li>15,945 tweets</li> </ul>
3.	<i>Gontor Garis Lucu</i> @GontorGarisLucu Joined March 2017	“ <i>Qulil Haqqa Walaw Kana Mudhikan.</i> ” Share The truth, though That's funny. If the Bitter Must Delivered, Moreover Funny?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>27,112 followers</li> <li>697 following</li> <li>2,833 tweets</li> </ul>
4.	<i>Hizbut Tahrir Garis Lucu</i> @HizbutTahrirGL Joined February 2018	Talking about the Caliphate is hard, don't forget to make it with funny	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>18,137 followers</li> <li>36 following</li> <li>4,375 tweets</li> </ul>
5.	<i>Tasawuf Garis Lucu</i>	Those who are not your brothers in faith are your brothers in humor.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>24,092 followers</li> <li>11 following</li> <li>7,876 tweets</li> </ul>

@TasawufGL Joined May 2018		
6.	<i>LDII Garis Lucu</i> @LdiiGL Joined January 2019	Funny not funny still thank you  We are just ordinary Buddhists. Our tweet is an expression of our heart, not representing all Buddhists. Whether it's funny or not depends on the intelligence of those who read it.
7.	<i>Buddhist Garis Lucu</i> @BuddhisGL Joined May 2019	We are just ordinary Buddhists. Our tweet is an expression of our heart, not representing all Buddhists. Whether it's funny or not depends on the intelligence of those who read it.
8.	<i>Hindu Garis Lucu</i> @HinduGL Joined April 2019	Different but funny too  Funny Love-Unity-Compassion-Universality. Don't forget Gus Dur. Just a joke account run by a stray sheep. DOES NOT REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.
9.	<i>Catholic Community Garis Lucu</i> @CatholicGL Joined April 2019	Funny Love-Unity-Compassion-Universality. Don't forget Gus Dur. Just a joke account run by a stray sheep. DOES NOT REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.
10.	<i>Koh Garis Lucu</i> @KonghucuGL Joined April 2019	The official account of the Commander-in-Chief of the #KongArmy. Representing only one believer. Because funnythings come from unexpected people.
11.	<i>Salafi Garis Lucu</i> @salafigarislucu Joined December 2018	God knows what is serious and what is a joke. AntiHizbut Tahlidzir  • 19,063 followers • 27 following • 2,878 tweets  • 76,190 followers • 2,248 following • 36,786 Tweets  • 87,204 followers • 661 following • 11,383 Tweets  • 152,556 folowers • 9,263 following • 17,164 Tweets  • 60,793 followers • 1,165 following • 20,931 Tweets  • 10,645 followers • 30 following • 1,208 tweets

Source: Twitter (2022).

### 3.3. The Return of the Smiling Face of Indonesian Islam

interpretation of Islam in Indonesia, marked by an emphasis on tolerance, humor, and positive social engagement. Historically, Indonesian Islam has been characterized by its adaptability to local cultures and its emphasis on peaceful coexistence, often symbolized by the metaphor of a "smiling face." This resurgence is a response to the growing influence of more rigid and exclusionary interpretations of Islam, which have gained prominence in recent years. By leveraging humor and cultural expressions, religious leaders and organizations are actively working to reclaim and promote an Islamic identity that is both compassionate and approachable. This approach not only counters radicalism but also reinforces the traditional values of Indonesian Islam, fostering a more harmonious and pluralistic society.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. The Influence of Digital Radicalism on Indonesian Islam and Democracy

The digital space has emerged as a significant platform for conservative and radical Muslim groups to propagate their religious ideologies. The ease of accessing internet-based communication technologies and virtual platforms has facilitated their efforts in contesting with moderate Muslim

groups and advancing their religious agendas. This phenomenon, described by Nicholas (2017) as the "death of expertise," reflects the shift in religious authority from established scholars to new media influencers who capitalize on digital platforms to assert their views.

The impact of new media on Islamist movements was notably evident in the 1990s, just before the fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime. This period marked the rise of a "Muslim middle class" that included political Islamists with different orientations from previous generations. While the older generation adhered to exclusionary views towards Western modernity and democracy, the new political Islam group displayed a more accommodating stance towards modernity while maintaining their Islamic identity. This shift represents what can be termed "post-Islamism," characterized by a focus on promoting Muslim piety without enforcing Islam as a formal system of governance (Henderson, 2020).

Islamist groups, particularly those with conservative and radical agendas, have adeptly utilized new media to promote their ideological and political agendas. For instance, Laskar Jihad has leveraged the internet to disseminate information about conflicts in the Moluccas and Ambon regions to evoke sympathy and religious sentiment among Muslims (Lindsey & Harper, 2018). This manipulation often involves dramatizing information to elicit emotional responses, thereby blurring the lines between factual reporting and misinformation (Zald & McCarthy, 2019).

Radical Islamist cyber media platforms, such as Voaislam.com and arrahmah.com, are known for their provocative and intolerant content. Headlines on these sites often include statements like "Kufar Media Will Call Al-Mahdi a Terrorist" and "Indonesia Needs a Faithful Dictator," which reflect their radical viewpoints and challenge democratic principles (Haris, 2021). This type of content underscores the growing trend of using digital media to propagate extremist ideologies and undermine democratic values.

On a global scale, groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS have demonstrated advanced capabilities in utilizing new media for ideological propaganda. Al-Qaeda has established a media committee to produce content that aligns with their jihadist objectives, as noted by Hegghammer (2017). The internet facilitates the dissemination of jihadist materials, including the "Encyclopedia of Jihad," which provides guidance and training for potential terrorists worldwide (Crenshaw, 2017).

Similarly, ISIS has used social media extensively to recruit and radicalize individuals. Research from 2015-2016 reveals that approximately 106,000 pro-ISIS activists were active on social media, with 90,000 pro-ISIS messages circulating daily (Klausen, 2017). This extensive use of social media has allowed ISIS to recruit thousands of young people from various countries, demonstrating the efficacy of their digital propaganda strategies (Pantucci, 2017).

Despite efforts by social media companies to combat radicalism, such as Twitter's removal of 125,000 pro-ISIS accounts, the persistence of radical content underscores the challenges faced in addressing digital extremism (Zetter, 2016). Cases like that of Ivan Armadi Hasugihan, a teenager involved in a terrorist attack in Indonesia, highlight the dangers of online radicalization (Hasan, 2018).

The persistence of radical and conservative ideologies in the digital space reflects a broader trend of increasing conservatism and radicalism in Indonesian Islam. This shift has been linked to a perceived regression in democratic consolidation in Indonesia, as noted by scholars who argue that the rise of radicalism has contributed to the erosion of democratic values (Mietzner, 2020). The weakening of democratic institutions and the growing influence of radical ideologies suggest a complex interplay between digital media, religious extremism, and democratic stability.

#### 4.2. Promoting Religious Moderation Through Humor: A Scholarly Perspective

Humor, as a form of local knowledge, is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of societies around the world, including among Muslim communities in Indonesia. It serves various functions, ranging from social cohesion to psychological relief. In the context of religious moderation, humor can be a powerful tool for literacy and education, helping individuals overcome feelings of inferiority and forming a positive communal image (Raskin, 2008). According to Martin (2007), humor

encourages individuals to maintain a cheerful and positive disposition, which is conducive to humanist and civilized behavior, standing in stark contrast to radicalism.

The association of Muslim-majority countries with radicalism, terrorism, and extremism is not merely a consequence of political and ideological factors but is also tied to the perceived lack of humor within these communities (Hafez, 2016). Western scholars have often depicted Islam through a lens of violence and anti-Western sentiment, which, while pejorative, prompts a critical reflection within Muslim societies (Said, 1978). This stereotyping is exacerbated by the reality of violence and conflict in certain Muslim countries, where anti-Western sentiments are heightened, leading to acts of jihad and, consequently, the global phenomenon of Islamophobia (Esposito, 2002).

In Indonesia, humor has always been an integral part of daily life, particularly among Muslims. Figures like Abdurrahman Wahid, also known as Gus Dur, exemplify how humor can transcend cultural and religious boundaries, serving as a diplomatic tool in interactions with Western leaders and as a means of promoting religious tolerance and moderation (Fealy, 2008). Gus Dur's famous phrase, "Gitu Aja Kok Repot," often cited in conflict resolution, underscores the role of humor in diffusing tensions and fostering a sense of inclusivity among diverse groups.

The strategic use of humor as a counter-radicalism tool has gained traction in recent years, with the emergence of platforms like NU Garis Lucu and Muhammadiyah Garis Lucu. These initiatives are part of a broader movement within moderate Islamic organizations to use humor as a response to more conservative or right-wing factions within the Muslim community (Hasan, 2019). The creation of these platforms draws inspiration from Gus Dur's legacy, aiming to bridge communication gaps and promote religious values in a way that resonates with the public.

The impact of these humorous platforms extends beyond their immediate audience, fostering interfaith dialogue and providing a space for constructive interaction. For instance, the interplay between @NUgarislucu and @MuhammadiyahGL on social media illustrates how humor can be a unifying force, allowing for discussions on sensitive theological differences without escalating tensions. This approach not only strengthens intra-faith relationships but also promotes a more tolerant and open society (Hefner, 2000).

Furthermore, the proliferation of interfaith humor accounts, such as Protestant Funny Line and Catholic Funny Line Community, highlights the potential of humor as a public deliberative space (Putnam, 2007). In these spaces, diverse religious communities engage in satire and critique, often leading to greater mutual understanding and reducing the likelihood of conflict.

In conclusion, humor is not merely an entertainment medium but a significant cultural tool that can promote religious moderation and counteract radical ideologies. By creating spaces for humor that bridge religious and cultural divides, societies can foster an environment of tolerance and mutual respect, essential for the stability and cohesion of diverse communities.

#### *4.3. The Return of the Smiling Face of Indonesian Islam*

"The Return of the Smiling Face of Indonesian Islam" encapsulates the re-emergence of a moderate and inclusive Islamic interpretation within Indonesia's diverse religious landscape. This resurgence is largely a reaction to the growing influence of conservative and exclusionary interpretations of Islam, which have escalated social tensions in recent years. By revisiting the traditional values of tolerance and cultural adaptability that have long characterized Indonesian Islam, various religious leaders and organizations are countering the rise of radical ideologies. Central to this movement is the strategic use of humor, a culturally resonant tool, to promote religious moderation and reinforce social cohesion.

Humor has proven to be an effective medium for conveying complex religious and social messages in a way that is accessible and engaging. Research suggests that humor can reduce interpersonal and intergroup tensions by facilitating more open communication and fostering positive social interactions (Martin & Ford, 2018). In Indonesia, humor is being used by moderate Islamic groups not just for entertainment but as a means to convey messages that challenge radical narratives and encourage a more inclusive interpretation of Islam. For instance, platforms like NU

Garis Lucu and Muhammadiyin Garis Lucu have leveraged humor to build bridges across ideological divides, creating a space for dialogue that might otherwise be fraught with tension.

The success of these humor-based initiatives can be understood through the lens of social cohesion theory, which posits that shared laughter and humor can strengthen group bonds and foster a sense of community (Hasan, 2020). In a pluralistic society like Indonesia, where multiple religious and cultural identities coexist, the use of humor by these moderate groups has helped to mitigate the divisive impact of radical ideologies. This approach has not only reinvigorated the traditional "smiling" face of Indonesian Islam but has also created a more resilient and adaptable religious identity that is better equipped to navigate the complexities of modern society.

Moreover, the application of humor as a tool for promoting religious moderation reflects broader trends in cultural diplomacy and soft power. By using humor to address sensitive issues, these groups are engaging in a form of cultural diplomacy that fosters understanding and reduces prejudice across different religious and cultural communities (Prasetyanto, 2019). This strategy is particularly effective in combating Islamophobia, as it presents a more relatable and humanized image of Islam to both domestic and international audiences.

In conclusion, the resurgence of moderate Islam in Indonesia, as symbolized by the "smiling face" metaphor, is a powerful counter-narrative to the rise of radicalism. The strategic use of humor by moderate Islamic organizations has proven to be an effective means of promoting religious tolerance and social cohesion. This approach not only reinforces the traditional values of Indonesian Islam but also serves as a model for how humor can be harnessed to foster a more inclusive and harmonious society. Future research should continue to explore the role of cultural tools like humor in promoting religious moderation and social harmony in diverse societies.

## 5. Conclusions

The study's findings reveal that humor serves as a significant instrument of local wisdom, playing a crucial role in restoring the smiling face of Indonesian Islam. Through the strategic use of humor, moderate Muslims are not only able to engage in literacy efforts but also effectively convey messages of religious moderation. These messages are delivered in a manner that is both entertaining and educational, providing a subtle yet powerful critique of religious views that deviate from the principles of Islamic moderation. Rather than provoking a defensive response from non-moderate groups, these humorous critiques often elicit equally humorous reactions, demonstrating humor's capacity to diffuse tension and foster a more congenial dialogue, even among those with differing religious perspectives.

Furthermore, humor has emerged as a deliberative space that facilitates encounters both within the Muslim community and between Muslims and non-Muslims. This interaction is marked by an open and dialectical exchange, wherein different humorous communities follow, tweet, and respond to one another's content. The apparent contradictions between moderate and radical Muslims, for example, find resolution or common ground through humor, which acts as a synthesizing force. These encounters, particularly among various religious communities' humorous accounts, play a significant role in reducing tensions, minimizing contradictions, and reaffirming diversity. In doing so, humor strengthens tolerance and fosters openness among religious groups, including those within Islam who hold divergent beliefs.

The evidence presented underscores the vital role of humor in promoting religious moderation and enhancing social cohesion in a pluralistic society like Indonesia. By harnessing humor as a tool for education and critique, moderate Muslims are effectively challenging radical ideologies and fostering a more inclusive and harmonious religious environment. This approach not only revitalizes the traditional values of Indonesian Islam but also offers a model for how humor can be employed to address complex social issues in a way that is both impactful and culturally resonant. Future research should continue to explore the potential of humor as a means of fostering dialogue and understanding in diverse and often divided societies.

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