

THE DISCOURSE OF ACEH'S ISLAMIC LAW ON TIKTOK: A DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE ETHNOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

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This article examines the discourse of Aceh's Islamic Law on TikTok as a digital public sphere that reshapes religious and political debates beyond formal institutional settings into a visual and algorithm-driven media environment. The study aims to analyze how meanings of Islamic law are produced, negotiated, and contested by diverse actors, including religious authorities, journalists, activists, political figures, and ordinary users in everyday digital interactions. Employing a qualitative digital ethnographic approach, the research analyzes selected TikTok videos and comment threads through non-participant observation and reflexive thematic analysis. The findings reveal that Aceh's Islamic Law is constructed both as a collective moral identity and a contested social symbol, characterized by tensions over justice and gender, the use of humor and satire as symbolic critique, shifting religious authority toward digitally visible actors, and the influential role of algorithmic amplification. These findings imply that TikTok functions as a legitimate digital public sphere, highlighting the need for more dialogic, reflective, and digitally literate public communication strategies among policymakers, religious institutions, and dakwah actors in Aceh.

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1. Introduction

The development of social media over the past decade has fundamentally transformed patterns of public communication in Indonesia, particularly in religious and political issues that are closely intertwined with social identity. This transformation has not only affected the medium through which messages are conveyed, but has also reconfigured the public sphere in which religious meaning, authority, and legitimacy are produced and openly contested. In this context, Aceh, as the only province in Indonesia that formally implements Islamic law (Sharia), represents a setting that is highly sensitive to digital cultural transformations. The growing consumption of short-form video among younger generations and urban communities has positioned TikTok as a prominent platform in shaping a new public sphere one characterized by interactivity, visuality, speed, and a strong reliance on algorithmic logic (Husna et al., 2022).

Through TikTok, issues related to Aceh's Islamic Sharia are no longer confined to formal institutional spaces such as sermons, Friday khutbahs, or religious deliberative forums. Instead, they are produced, circulated, and debated by a wide range of actors, including

ordinary citizens, popular preachers, content creators, local political activists, and official institutions. This process gives rise to an ecology of Islamic political communication that differs fundamentally from traditional channels, characterized by message fragmentation, heightened emotional intensity, and visibility shaped by algorithmic mechanisms. Theoretically, this phenomenon reflects processes of mediatization and hypermediation of religious practices, as articulated in public sphere theory (Habermas, 1991), the concept of the mediatization of religion (Hjarvard, 2008), and studies on the hypermediation of religious practices in Indonesia (Rohmawati et al., 2025).

This transformation has become increasingly evident through the shift of religious authority from traditional ulama to digital figures who produce and disseminate Islamic meanings in an instant and easily accessible manner (Ichwan et al., 2024). In the Acehese context, the dynamics of the digital public sphere have also been mediated by other platforms, such as WhatsApp, in shaping Sharia-related discourse (Bhakti & Duhri, 2022). At the same time, changes in information consumption patterns among younger generations call for religious communication approaches that are more adaptive to digital lifestyles and visual content preferences (Anwar et al., 2024), while other studies emphasize the importance of religious moderation in responding to the contestation of conservative narratives in digital spaces (Salendra, 2024). Research on the representation of religious identity such as veiled women on social media further demonstrates that digital spaces function not merely as channels for message transmission, but as arenas of symbolic negotiation that shape contemporary representations of Islam (Ummah, 2021).

Empirically, these dynamics are clearly evident in hundreds of TikTok contents that explicitly address issues related to Aceh's Islamic Sharia, ranging from da'wah videos and sermon excerpts to public criticism, political satire, and inter-actor dialogue facilitated through duet and stitch features. Various accounts managed by religious figures, organizations, local political parties, media outlets, as well as ordinary citizens produce representations of Sharia both as a moral identity that must be preserved and as a policy framework open to public critique. Public criticism encompasses issues such as selective law enforcement, gender inequality, the role of Wilayatul Hisbah, and concerns over the politicization of Sharia in the lead-up to political contests. The comment sections reveal a high intensity of interpretation, marked by doctrinal debates, emotional expressions, and the use of humor and satire as symbolic strategies to reframe sensitive issues.

The urgency of this study is further reinforced when considering the role of TikTok's algorithm, which operates according to the logic of the attention economy and virality. Studies indicate that TikTok's algorithm prioritizes content with high levels of engagement, resulting in religious messages often being reduced to brief, emotionally charged, and less in-depth narratives (Mubarok et al., 2025). This condition aligns with analyses of the shifting of religious authority in the digital era, where scholarly credibility is frequently supplanted by logics of popularity and algorithmic visibility (Rachman et al., 2025). Thus, TikTok's technological architecture is not neutral; rather, it actively shapes patterns of exposure, interpretation, and public meaning-making surrounding religious issues, including Aceh's Islamic Sharia.

Although global scholarship over the past five years has emphasized the role of social media in shaping religious opinion, identity politics, and digital morality, existing studies

remain largely dominated by issues of disinformation, radicalization, or propaganda, and tend to focus more heavily on platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. Research that specifically examines how TikTok's visual, short-form, emotionally charged, and hyper-algorithmic characteristics shape the construction of meaning surrounding Aceh's Islamic Sharia in everyday communication practices remains extremely limited. This condition points to a clear research gap, particularly at the micro-interactional level that reflects the experiences, emotions, and participatory practices of ordinary users within the digital public sphere.

Based on this context, this study aims to analyze the dynamics of Islamic political communication related to Aceh's Islamic Sharia on TikTok, with a focus on (1) how TikTok content frames the meaning of Sharia, (2) how interactions in the comment sections generate processes of meaning negotiation and power relations, and (3) how platform algorithms influence the visibility of discourse and public perception. By employing a qualitative approach grounded in digital ethnography through document analysis, this study is expected to contribute theoretically to scholarship on communication and the digital public sphere, as well as practically to the Aceh government, Sharia institutions, ulama, and da'wah organizations in formulating public communication strategies that are more adaptive, reflective, and responsive to the dynamics of contemporary digital media.

Digital Public Sphere Theory

The theory of the digital public sphere is rooted in the classical concept of the public sphere articulated by (Habermas, 1991), which emphasizes rational deliberation as the foundation for the formation of public opinion. However, within the context of digital media, this theory has undergone significant transformation. Social media create discursive spaces that no longer rely on extended argumentation and procedural rationality, but are instead characterized by fragmentation, speed, visuality, and users' emotional engagement. (Papacharissi, 2015) refers to this phenomenon as *affective publics*, namely publics that are formed through shared emotions, symbols, and affective expressions, while (Fuchs, 2014) emphasizes that the digital public sphere is a product of algorithmic power relations that determine the visibility of discourse.

In non-Western contexts such as Indonesia and Aceh, the theory of the digital public sphere needs to be read critically. The digital public sphere in Aceh does not operate entirely within the logic of liberal deliberation, but is instead intertwined with religious norms, local power relations, and political-religious sensitivities. (Bhakti & Duhri, 2022) show that the digital public sphere in Aceh actually opens up counter-discourses to formal religious authority, particularly when the implementation of Sharia is perceived as unjust or selective. Thus, the digital public sphere in Aceh functions as an arena for negotiating the meaning of Sharia that is participatory, emotional, and often confrontational.

Within the context of a visual platform such as TikTok, this digital public sphere is further shaped by algorithmic logics that prioritize short, rhythmic, emotionally charged, and visually driven content, thereby reinforcing the formation of *affective publics* that generate both solidarity and polarization through digital symbols and affect (M. Lim, 2025). The shift of religious discourse from extended textual formats toward visual performativity enables the emergence of religious authority grounded in aesthetics, emotional proximity, and performative consistency, as demonstrated by the practices of religious influencers who employ visual strategies to build public legitimacy (Harry, 2023). In the Acehnese context,

these dynamics position society not merely as consumers of digital discourse, but also as producers of new forms of religious authority through the adaptation of traditional ulama and the emergence of non-formal figures, underscoring a shift in the production and validation of Islamic knowledge within the digital media ecosystem (Samsuar et al., 2025); (Ali et al., 2025); (Masruha et al., 2025).

The limitations of classical public sphere theory lie in its assumptions of universal rationality and equal participation, which are difficult to apply in non-Western Muslim societies characterized by strong structures of religious authority. Therefore, this study positions digital public sphere theory not as a normative framework, but as an analytical tool to examine how discourses on Aceh's Islamic Sharia are produced, contested, and interpreted in everyday communication practices on TikTok a public sphere that is algorithmic, emotional, and rich in religious symbolism.

Mediatization and Hypermediation of Religion

The concept of the mediatization of religion explains that religion can no longer be understood as separate from media, as media gradually assume the role of religious institutions in shaping how religion is practiced, represented, and understood by the public (Hjarvard, 2008). In the context of visual social media platforms such as TikTok, this process develops into hypermediation, a condition in which religion is produced as a short, performative, and visually driven experience curated by the platform's algorithmic mechanisms (Evolvi, 2022); (Rohmawati et al., 2025). Religious practices are thus not merely communicated as normative messages, but are packaged as content designed to capture attention, evoke emotions, and potentially go viral.

Various studies over the past five years indicate that the virality of religious content on TikTok is driven more by visual aesthetics, the rhythm of short-form videos, emotional expression, and format innovation than by the depth of theological argumentation (Liu et al., 2025); (Wahid, 2024). Within the framework of digital religion, (Campbell, 2017) emphasizes that digital materiality cameras, screens, audio-visual elements, and platform interfaces shapes contemporary religious experience as a performance that is produced, consumed, and circulated within social media ecosystems. These findings align with the analysis of (Rohmawati et al., 2025), which demonstrates that hypermediation shifts the orientation of religious practice from ritual action toward the production of visual content tailored to engagement logics, such as the use of background music, dynamic text, visual effects, and affective expressions.

In the Acehnese context, mediatization helps explain why Islamic Sharia frequently appears on TikTok in the form of short clips depicting law enforcement actions, brief sermons, public criticism, and political satire. Content related to Wilayatul Hisbah patrols or debates over Sharia policy goes viral not solely because of its substantive content, but because of the visual appeal and emotional intensity generated within the short-video format (Mubarok et al., 2025). TikTok's algorithm prioritizes content that triggers high emotional engagement, resulting in the meaning of Sharia often becoming fragmented and detached from its social-historical context, and perceived by the public through easily consumable and shareable narrative fragments.

Within this framework, mediatization and hypermediation enable this study to understand that Aceh's Islamic Sharia on TikTok does not merely reflect religious practices, but is a media construction shaped by visual aesthetics, platform technologies, and the logic of virality. Through this framework, the analysis is directed toward tracing how emotions, humor, and visual performativity operate as communication strategies, as well as how TikTok's algorithm shapes public perception and steers the dynamics of religious discourse within the digital public sphere.

Media Ecology and Digital Religious Authority

Media ecology theory emphasizes that media are not merely channels of communication, but epistemic environments that shape how humans produce knowledge, evaluate truth, and recognize authority (Postman, 2000); (Strate, 2008). Within the digital media ecology, platforms such as TikTok generate new forms of authority that are algorithmic in nature, where legitimacy is attained through visibility, engagement, and emotional resonance. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as *algorithmic authority* (Rachman et al., 2025) and *vernacular religious authority* (Ali et al., 2025).

The contrast between algorithmic authority and traditional Islamic epistemology becomes particularly significant in this context. Classical Islamic epistemology emphasizes *sanad*, scholarly authority, methodologies of *ijtihad*, and the institutionalization of the ulama. By contrast, within TikTok's media ecology, religious authority is often shaped by content popularity, visual performativity, and the logic of the *For You Page*. Studies by (Ichwan et al., 2024) and (Masruha et al., 2025) show that non-institutional figures and digital influencers frequently gain greater public legitimacy than traditional ulama.

In the Acehese context, this shift is inherently ambivalent. On the one hand, traditional ulama such as *Tengku Dayah* adapt to digital media in order to maintain their authority (Samsuar et al., 2025); on the other hand, ordinary citizens, local journalists, and activists produce Sharia-related discourses that are often more trusted by the public because they are perceived as more "authentic" and emotionally resonant. Media ecology theory enables this study to understand TikTok as a new epistemic arena in which religious truth and authority are continuously negotiated between traditional Islamic epistemology and fluid, competitive algorithmic logics.

This study integrates digital public sphere theory, the concepts of the mediatization and hypermediation of religion, and media ecology theory as an analytical framework for examining the dynamics of discourse on Aceh's Islamic Sharia on TikTok. Digital public sphere theory, originating from (Habermas, 1991) and further developed through the notion of *affective publics* (Papacharissi, 2015) and algorithmic power relations (Fuchs, 2014), is employed to understand TikTok as an algorithmic and affective participatory space in which Sharia discourse is produced and contested in everyday communication practices, including contexts of affective polarization and solidarity (W. M. Lim, 2025) as well as visual legitimization strategies employed by religious influencers (Harry, 2023). The concept of the mediatization of religion (Hjarvard, 2008) and hypermediation (Evolvi, 2022); (Rohmawati et al., 2025) explains how Islamic Sharia is transformed into visual communication practices that are performative, emotional, and aligned with the logics of virality and TikTok's format (Liu et al., 2025); (Wahid, 2024) consistent with digital religion's emphasis on platform materiality (Campbell, 2017). Meanwhile, media ecology theory (Postman, 2000); (Strate,

2008) enables analysis of TikTok as an epistemic environment that shapes religious authority based on visibility both as *algorithmic authority* (Rachman et al., 2025) and *vernacular religious authority* (Ali et al., 2025) and explains shifts and adaptations of religious authority in the Acehese context (Ichwan et al., 2024); (Masruha et al., 2025); (Samsuar et al., 2025). The integration of these three perspectives guides a multi-level analysis of (a) content framing, (b) the negotiation of meaning and power relations in comment sections, and (c) the role of algorithms in determining discourse visibility and public perception, including digitally contested dynamics of Sharia implementation (Bhakti & Duhri, 2022); (Mubarok et al., 2025).

Unlike previous studies that have predominantly focused on text-based platforms or long-form video platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, this study specifically positions TikTok as a visual, affective, and hyper-algorithmic digital public sphere for examining the construction of meaning surrounding Aceh's Islamic Sharia. The novelty of this study lies in three main contributions: first, it highlights short-form video as the dominant mode of production and circulation of religious discourse, accelerating the mediatization and hypermediation of Sharia practices (Hjarvard, 2008); (Evolvi, 2022); (Rohmawati et al., 2025); second, it centers analysis at the micro-interactional level through comment sections, duet, and stitch features as arenas of symbolic negotiation, interpretive contestation, and power relations that reconfigure religious authority (Habermas, 1991); (Papacharissi, 2015); (Fuchs, 2014); and third, it positions TikTok's algorithm as an active non-human actor that determines discourse visibility and reinforces the shift in legitimacy from scholarly authority toward visibility- and engagement-based authority (Mubarok et al., 2025); (Rachman et al., 2025). Accordingly, this study extends the field of digital religion by demonstrating how the experiences, emotions, and participatory practices of ordinary users play a crucial role in shaping, contesting, and reinterpreting Aceh's Islamic Sharia within the contemporary digital media ecosystem (Ichwan et al., 2024); (Bhakti & Duhri, 2022); (Anwar et al., 2024); (Salendra, 2024); (Ummah, 2021).

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a digital ethnographic case study design to examine the dynamics of Islamic political communication related to Aceh's Islamic Sharia within TikTok's public sphere. A case study design is adopted because the research focuses on a single bounded phenomenon, namely the contestation and negotiation of meanings surrounding Aceh's Islamic Sharia on TikTok, while digital ethnography is used to understand patterns of interaction, communication practices, and processes of meaning negotiation within TikTok as a new "social field," in line with the study's emphasis on dynamics of meaning, emotion, and authority relations (Pink et al., 2016). Geographically, the study is grounded in the context of Aceh as the only province in Indonesia that formally implements Islamic Sharia, whereas empirically the research field consists of traces of TikTok content addressing issues of Aceh's Islamic Sharia. Accordingly, the research field is dual in nature: (1) Aceh's socio-political space as the context of Sharia implementation; and (2) TikTok's digital space as a media ecology that shapes how Sharia-related issues are produced, circulated, and interpreted through visibility, algorithmic logics, and user participation practices. This approach aligns with previous findings on the emergence of counter-discourses toward formal Sharia authority in digital spaces (Bhakti & Duhri, 2022); (Ichwan et al., 2024).

Data collection was conducted in stages from January to September 2024, during a period when TikTok functioned as one of the primary channels for the consumption and production of short-form religious and political videos in Indonesia. Within the framework of digital ethnography, the research “participants” include TikTok accounts that produce or share content related to Aceh’s Islamic Sharia; videos featuring da’wah, criticism, satire, policy documentation, or event recordings; and comment interactions containing support, opposition, debate, humor, and public emotional expressions concerning Sharia-related issues. Data selection was carried out through purposive sampling that evolved into digital snowball sampling, beginning with core accounts such as @kebuliminimalis.2, @holongsunnah, @bincangsyariah, @politikislam_, @dpp_partaiaceh, @nu_online, as well as several other Aceh-based local accounts. This process was subsequently expanded through TikTok’s algorithmic recommendations (*For You Page*), duet and stitch features, and the use of thematic hashtags such as #syariatAceh, #WilayahHisbah, #hukumislam, and #syariatIslamAceh.

The inclusion criteria comprised: (1) videos that explicitly address Aceh’s Islamic Sharia; (2) content produced by creators who are based in Aceh or who consistently refer to the Acehese context; (3) videos with significant levels of interaction (views, comments, or engagement); and (4) content published within the research timeframe. From the identified materials, this study conducted in-depth analysis of 67 core videos and archived and coded [K] relevant comments (drawn from the selected videos) until data saturation was reached, in accordance with (Saunders et al., 2018). Comments were not treated as a full census; only comments relevant to meaning contestation, affective expression, and authority negotiation were coded until saturation was achieved.

Data were collected through digital document analysis and non-participant observation (Pink et al., 2016), including: (1) the archiving of videos and metadata (links, pseudonymized accounts, upload dates, descriptions, durations, hashtags, and engagement indicators such as views, likes, comments, and shares); (2) the transcription of audio-visual elements, on-screen text, and visual symbols (e.g., gestures, facial expressions, and religious attributes); and (3) the archiving of comments that represent the dynamics of public discourse. The data were further supplemented with secondary documents such as online news reports, statements from Sharia institutions, and fatwas issued by the Aceh Ulama Council (MPU) to enrich the socio-political context of the issues discussed.

This study does not employ interviews because the analytical focus is directed toward public communication practices as captured in digital traces (content and comments) that can be directly observed through digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016). Moreover, the political and religious sensitivity surrounding Aceh’s Islamic Sharia could increase ethical risks if direct contact with content creators or commenters were pursued. Consequently, the interpretation of findings is not intended to claim personal motives or internal intentions of creators, but rather to examine how representations of Sharia, interaction patterns, and the negotiation of meaning and authority emerge and are contested within TikTok’s public sphere.

Data analysis employed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), combined with the interactive analysis framework proposed by (Miles et al., 2014), through stages of data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, and theoretical interpretation. NVivo was used to organize data and trace coding patterns across different types of content and accounts, map relationships among themes, and support comparative readings of discourse

dynamics across upload periods. Nevertheless, interpretation was conducted reflexively by the researcher, taking into account Aceh's socio-political context as well as the literature on Islamic political communication and the mediatization of religion.

Data trustworthiness was ensured through the four criteria proposed by (Lincoln & Guba, 1985): credibility, achieved through prolonged engagement on TikTok, triangulation of sources and account types, and peer debriefing; transferability, through rich contextual description; dependability, through the maintenance of an audit trail documenting the research process; and confirmability, through researcher reflexivity and the grounding of findings in empirical evidence such as content excerpts and comments. From an ethical standpoint, the study followed the guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al., 2020) by using only publicly available TikTok content, pseudonymizing sensitive accounts, employing screenshots selectively, and avoiding information that could potentially harm individuals. Given the political and religious sensitivity of Aceh's Islamic Sharia, the interpretation of findings was conducted in a proportional and non-stigmatizing manner, aimed at contributing to academic scholarship and improving the quality of public communication rather than reinforcing polarization.

3. Results and Discussion

Sharia as Collective Identity and Moral Negotiation

Empirical findings indicate that Aceh's Islamic Sharia on TikTok is positioned simultaneously as a collective identity that distinguishes Aceh from other regions in Indonesia and as an open and dynamic arena of moral negotiation. Affirmative narratives portraying Sharia as a symbol of pride and Acehnese distinctiveness appear prominently in da'wah content, short sermons, and posts emphasizing Sharia as a historical legacy and moral foundation. At the same time, these narratives are consistently counterbalanced by evaluative and critical comments that question how Sharia is practiced in everyday life. This pattern demonstrates that Sharia is not treated as a static legal concept taken for granted, but as a social symbol that is continuously contested and reinterpreted by the digital public.

This finding resonates with studies in other Muslim-majority contexts experiencing the mediatization of religion. Research from Malaysia, Turkey, and the Middle East shows that Islamic symbols and laws often function as sources of collective pride, while simultaneously becoming objects of criticism when their implementation is perceived as political, selective, or unjust (Evolvi, 2022); (Wahid, 2024). What distinguishes Aceh is its structural specificity: Sharia is formally institutionalized by the state, causing identity negotiation to intersect directly with public policy, law enforcement, and institutional power relations. As a result, debates surrounding Sharia on TikTok in Aceh tend to be more intense, emotionally charged, and politically sensitive than in Muslim minority settings or non-Sharia states.

Within the framework of *affective publics* (Papacharissi, 2015) and mediatization (Hjarvard, 2008), TikTok functions as a digital public sphere that enables Sharia identity to be reproduced both as Aceh's *brand identity* and as an object of social negotiation. Meaning-making is no longer monopolized by the state or the ulama, but openly negotiated by ordinary citizens through fragmented, affective, and visually driven algorithmic interactions.

Justice, Gender, and Politicization

The second theme highlights justice, gender bias, and the politicization of Sharia as consistent and recurring discourses within the dataset, particularly in content depicting enforcement practices by *Wilayahul Hisbah*. Videos documenting clothing raids, couple inspections, and public-order operations such as those uploaded by @dsiacut, @tpante, @isnupidie, and @sagoetv generate waves of critical comments questioning the selectivity of law enforcement and its disproportionate focus on women's bodies. Recurrent questions such as "*Sharia for whom?*" appear alongside accusations that structural issues such as corruption, online gambling, and violence receive far less attention.

Importantly, the intensity, recurrence, and prominence of these critiques often appearing as top comments indicate that justice- and gender-based criticisms constitute dominant rather than marginal discourses within TikTok's public sphere. From a mediatization perspective, the recording and viral circulation of enforcement practices shift Sharia from an administrative domain into a form of digital spectacle, where each action by authorities becomes subject to public scrutiny. Digital public sphere theory (Fuchs, 2014) and the notion of *counter-discourse* (Bhakti & Duhri, 2022) help explain how such critiques circulate, gain legitimacy, and form counter-narratives through networks of comments, duets, and stitches.

The synthesis of these findings points to a shift in Sharia's legitimacy from normative compliance toward public perceptions of justice. In the digital public sphere, Sharia is evaluated not only through its legal foundations, but through how it is practiced, represented, and emotionally experienced. TikTok thus operates as a form of social audit, where legitimacy increasingly depends on visible and perceptible accountability.

Humor, Satire, and Viral Fear

The third theme reveals that humor and satire function as prominent communication strategies in responding to Sharia discourse on TikTok. Accounts such as @bangdee224, @tanohcak74, @miraatzani_, and @siletgaibaceh actively produce parodies of enforcement raids, playful distortions of Sharia-related jargon, and narratives about being "*afraid of going viral*" linking law enforcement practices to shame and public exposure. In many cases, humor is intertwined with anxiety, particularly when individuals subjected to enforcement become publicly identifiable.

Most satirical content in the dataset is produced by Acehnese users themselves, indicating insider critique rather than external mockery. Within the framework of *affective publics* (Papacharissi, 2015), humor operates as collective affect, allowing criticism to be articulated without direct confrontation. Mediatization renders religious and legal practices *meme-able* easily clipped, parodied, and recirculated while a media ecology perspective highlights a shift in the sources of fear: from punishment or sin toward cameras, the *For You Page*, and public commentary.

The synthesis of this theme shows that humor is not merely entertainment, but a form of symbolic resistance. Through laughter, citizens negotiate power, express discomfort, and renegotiate the boundaries of acceptability in Sharia enforcement.

Liquid Religious Authority in Algorithmic Arenas

The final theme addresses the fluidity of religious authority within TikTok's media ecology. The video corpus reveals a diverse constellation of actors ulama, preachers, political parties, local media, activists, and ordinary citizens operating within the same algorithmic arena, namely the *For You Page*. In comment sections, formal authority is frequently questioned, corrected, or challenged by anonymous users and personal experiences. Notably, critical local journalism content often receives higher engagement than official outreach from Sharia institutions.

This dynamic aligns with the concepts of *liquid religious authority* and *vernacular authority*, where legitimacy derives from emotional resonance, narrative proximity, and algorithmic visibility rather than institutional credentials alone (Ali et al., 2025); (Ichwan et al., 2024). Algorithms function as *curators of authority*, amplifying certain voices while marginalizing others. Concepts such as *algorithmic authority* (Rachman et al., 2025) and *algorithmic folk theories* (Karizat et al., 2021) explain how credibility becomes associated with frequency of appearance and engagement intensity.

In the long term, this condition may reconfigure religious legitimacy in Aceh, compelling formal institutions to adopt more dialogical, transparent, and media-literate communication strategies in order to remain authoritative within digital publics.

Taken together, these four themes demonstrate that TikTok has transformed Aceh's Islamic Sharia into an algorithmic public discourse shaped by visibility, emotion, humor, and the logic of virality. Sharia no longer operates as a singular norm passively accepted by society, but as a media construction continuously negotiated through everyday communication practices. This study reveals a fundamental shift in Islamic political communication in Aceh from legitimacy grounded in normative authority toward legitimacy based on visibility, affective resonance, and public acceptance within digital spaces.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Islamic political communication surrounding Aceh's Islamic Sharia on TikTok operates within a complex, emotional, and algorithmically structured public sphere. Sharia does not appear as a single or stable normative framework, but rather as a visual and affective discourse that is continuously negotiated through short-form videos, emotionally charged comments, humor, and platform-based interactions. In this space, Sharia simultaneously functions as a collective moral identity, a site of contestation over justice, gender bias, and politicization, an object of satire and symbolic resistance, and an arena of authority competition among ulama, political actors, journalists, influencers, and ordinary citizens. The findings confirm that TikTok has become a legitimate politico-religious public sphere where meanings and legitimacy are shaped not only by doctrinal arguments, but also by affect, visibility, and algorithmic circulation. Through processes of mediatization, hypermediation, and digital media ecology, religious authority increasingly operates in a fluid and competitive environment, where credibility is closely tied to resonance, engagement, and algorithmic amplification rather than solely to institutional or textual legitimacy.

The study makes three original theoretical contributions. First, it extends digital public sphere theory by demonstrating that Islamic political discourse on visual platforms is

driven less by deliberative rationality and more by affective publics, performativity, and algorithmic visibility. Second, it advances the mediatization of religion framework by showing how Islamic Sharia in Aceh is not merely represented but reconstructed as a fragmented, emotional, and viral media experience. Third, drawing on media ecology, the study empirically substantiates the concept of algorithmic religious authority, showing how religious legitimacy is increasingly shaped within platform-specific epistemic environments.

Practically, the findings suggest that public communication strategies on Sharia in Aceh cannot rely solely on formal, top-down approaches. Government institutions, Sharia authorities, and religious leaders need to adopt more dialogical, digitally literate, and culturally sensitive communication strategies that recognize the roles of emotion, humor, and algorithmic logic in shaping public perception. Such approaches may help reduce polarization and foster more constructive public engagement with Sharia-related issues.

This study is limited to the Aceh context and the TikTok platform, and it focuses on public digital traces rather than interviews with content creators or audiences. As a result, the analysis does not aim to capture individual intentions, but to examine observable communication practices within the digital public sphere. Future research could pursue comparative studies across platforms such as YouTube or Instagram, conduct longitudinal analyses to trace discursive shifts over time, or integrate interviews to deepen understanding of how actors navigate religious authority in algorithmic environments. Overall, this research highlights the importance of examining religion, emotion, and algorithms together in understanding contemporary Islamic political communication. TikTok, in the Aceh context, emerges not merely as a site of entertainment, but as a central arena where Sharia is publicly produced, contested, and reinterpreted in everyday digital life.

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