

# Twitter: Among Humor, Religious, and Political Issues in Indonesia

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**Abstract.** This research investigates the use of social media, particularly Twitter, as a part of the conversations of Indonesians in the virtual world. The roles of the @MuhammadiyahGL and @NUgarislucu accounts will be seen as objects that play a significant role in responding to political and religious issues on Twitter. As we know, Islamic community organizations, such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdhatul Ulama, are considered to have strategic roles, both in political and religious issues. This situation is increasingly relevant when in 2019, Indonesia has just completed a presidential election. The process of political contestation has now involved social media as a campaign tool, including the presidential election itself. This research shows how the @MuhammadiyahGL and @NUgarislucu Twitter accounts respond to political and religious issues in Indonesia in a comical way. In this way, both accounts are indirectly reducing the tension that occurs in Indonesian society triggered by political and religious issues.

**Keywords:** *twitter, humor, political issue, religious issue.*

## INTRODUCTION

The development of technology gave birth to various types of internet-based social media. There are many social media platforms that have been born, and one of them is Twitter. Twitter allows people to share ideas through continuous multilogue conversations, and it can be a powerful tool for brainstorming idea development that may be beneficial for a broader engagement[1]. Therefore, the multilogue conversations on Twitter allow discussion of emerging issues to spread more widely.

Indonesia has considerably a vast number of Twitter users. Globally, Indonesians are one of the most active Twitter users in the world and are ranked the third after the United States and India. There are about 24.34 million active Twitter accounts in Indonesia. It means 77 percent of Twitter accounts in Indonesia are active[2][3][4]. These conditions show how Twitter has been massively used in Indonesia. A significant amount of Twitter users in Indonesia makes Twitter as a battleground for any discourses. All people who have a particular interest often rides on Twitter to express their opinions and thoughts in order to persuade other Twitter

users. As a result, we can see all the debates and issues in society through Twitter. In other words, Twitter is transformed into a storefront presenting the latest debatable issues in Indonesia.

The rapid development of the internet and social media has given a new face to the world of communication throughout the world. In many countries, internet use, and social media, in particular, is directly proportional to freedom of speech [5]. The characteristics possessed by Twitter are different from the mainstream media agenda in general because the themes and contents discussed are adjusted to the themes which are interested in targeted Twitter users[6][7]. It means, all interests and issues will be easily found on social media, and we can see Twitter as a new public sphere in the digital era.

@MuhammadiyahGL and @NUgarislucu accounts emerged as a response to discussions and debates surrounding the issue of religious and politic in the digital arena. From the choice of the account name, we can see that the two accounts refer to the names of two major Islamic mass organizations in Indonesia; Muhammadiyah and Nahdhatul Ulama (NU). In fact, both Twitter accounts are not official accounts of the two organizations, but what was later uploaded in both accounts can at least be seen as an alternative response to religious and political issues in Indonesia.

The interesting thing was that both accounts were using humor as a way to respond to an issue. Therefore, the issue of religious and politic that tends to be serious and tense will be loosened. In addition, this phenomenon can be used to identify how humor is used as a tool to respond and criticize various issues, particularly related to religion and politics.

## METHOD

In this research, the researchers used a qualitative method and descriptive-analytic technique in order to observe the @MuhammadiyahGL and @NUgarislucu Twitter accounts when responding to political and religious issues. There are two sources of data collected in this research: primary and secondary. The primary data is @MuhammadiyahGL and @NUgarislucu Twitter accounts and their uploaded tweets on Twitter. The secondary data were obtained from a search of existing data in the field, including various studies and books related to the issues in this research.

In this research, Twitter would be seen as a public sphere in the digital world. As Habermas said, the public sphere is something consisting of a different person who gathers as a society and articulates their needs to talk [8]. It means that people in the public sphere can speak freely to convey their ideas in response to social issues. Besides, the researchers see the function of the humor itself, which was used by @MuhammadiyahGL and @NUgarislucu in responding to any opinions on religious and political issues. In this context, humor is seen as a way of criticizing. As Billig argues that the effectiveness of criticism in humor is because humor is not straightforward [9]. Besides, humor is a cultural product where sharing ideas and norms take place. The success of humor can occur when the joker and audience both recognize and understand the cultural symbols and ideas that are in it [10]. Therefore, this study looks at how both accounts use Twitter as a public sphere to criticize political and religious issues by using humor.

#### DISCUSSION

The presence of the @MuhammadiyahGL and @NUgarislucu Twitters is very feasible to discuss from the academic perspective. The @MuhammadiyahGL account first appeared in May 2018, while the @NUgarislucu account first launching was in March 2015. Unlike the official Twitter accounts from Muhammadiyah and Nahdhatul Ulama, both accounts responded to the issue — and answered questions and statements on Twitter—using a humor approach. The humor factor in this context should be seen as a strategy for communication in multilogue conversation of Twitter. Besides, the humor can be a method or a way to reduce the tension when discussing sensitive issues. This phenomenon is relatively new in the world of social media in Indonesia. Moreover, both of these accounts, although they are not official accounts of the two most prominent Islamic mass organizations as stated in their names, they generally carry the idea that has been spread out by Muhammadiyah and Nahdhatul Ulama so far; peaceful Islam and polite politic.

As a new form of the virtual sphere, Twitter does make people able to talk freely on various topics. In its development, the two accounts often responded to current hot issues in Indonesia, like religious, political, or religious-political issues. Interestingly, political issues have rarely been missed to discuss in these two accounts. The main reason is that the two organizations that have millions of members were always targeted as main objects to gain more voices in elections. Therefore, political issues often get responses from both accounts.

In 2019, Indonesia was carrying out a presidential election only followed by two presidential candidates. This creates a considerable hole separating each of the supporters of the presidential candidate and makes Indonesian society is generally divided into two groups. Additionally, social media, mainly Twitter, is used as a battleground for each supporter to voice their support to their candidate. On Twitter, all forms of support are very

open; either for gaining sympathy and obtaining more supporters or counter-narratives for political opponents' campaigns. Furthermore, the use of politic of identity in presidential campaigns often makes the debate on Twitter even hotter. Also, @MuhammadiyahGL and @NUgarislucu accounts often have to answer and respond to debates that are not only political but also religious. At this situation, the smart way in responding to all issues on social media, particularly on Twitter, which is related to politics and religion is needed, because these two things are seen as sensitive. Consequently, the tension could be loosened.

Since the beginning of their twits, both accounts have responded to political issues on Twitter. For example, on March 21, 2019, @NUgarislucu criticized the behavior of fanatical supporters of the two presidential candidates who criticized the use of one-finger and two-finger as a symbol of supporting their candidates. By using humor, @NUgarislucu recommends that they use their thumb and index fingers together as a symbol of "love." @NUgarislucu goal was to satirize fanatical supporters who have to argue on unimportant thing related to the use of fingers as a symbol for the campaign. Implicitly, this mocking is a form of sarcasm to show they are arguing not on the substantive issue.

Furthermore, the @MuhammadiyahGL account also responded to issues and political conversations on Twitter. After election-day on April 17, 2019, social media was full of comments and debates about the election. Supporters from each presidential candidate were fighting on social media. On April 19, 2019, two days after the election day, the hostile atmosphere between groups was still "tense" on social media. Then @MuhammadiyahGL posted an expression that seemed to tease them who still could not move on from all the debates surrounding the election. That account tweeted that they had to go back to reality, back to work, and back to daily activities. This account implies that they were doing things in vain because they were far from the reality of their own lives. The humor element was undoubtedly found in this account tweet. Critics that are written in the form of humor like this one are more acceptable to Twitter users. It is because the tweet could eliminate political tension. That is why the use of humor in conversations on Twitter, which is so-called the new public sphere in the digital age, is effective.

Meanwhile, in the religious context, the discussion about the *ziarah* (visiting a grave) was also an exciting topic to discuss on Twitter. If all this time the issue of *ziarah* has become a polemic in society, then on Twitter the problem is only a joke material. On the tweet posted by @MuhammadiyahGL on May 4, 2019, we can see that the problem is made lighter with humor. The use of humor on Twitter on the account shows that the issue of the *ziarah* is no longer crucial. The people then would consider the problem unfit to be a matter of debate in society. In the end, such dissent was felt to be increasingly irrelevant.

Another thing that is often debated is the stipulation of the beginning and the end of the Ramadan month. The difference in the stipulation of Ramadan often takes the attention of the public, and this happens almost every year. Because Muhammadiyah uses different methods, they have different stipulation with the government or other Islamic organizations (such as NU) regarding the beginning and the end of Ramadhan month. Although it is not a principle in religion, this difference has always been a polemic in society. In the post on May 2019, both accounts tweeted a joke in response to the initial determination of Ramadan. In addition to the familiarity shown, these two accounts are actually decreasing the tension level. Eventually, the polemic that often occurs yearly in Indonesia is placed in an insignificant position in religious life. It shows how tolerance is shown in responding to different views in Islam.

The examples above are only a small part of the form of conversation and critique made by the @MuhammadiyahGL and @NUgarislucu Twitter accounts. Both of these accounts have the same strategy in responding to any religious and political issues in Indonesia; they have been using humor as the communication strategy. The similarity of this method also makes the two accounts look closer. It was shown by mutual mention or retweeting one another. The emergence of a "garislucu" (humor way) accounts at a particular stage can dampen the tension that often appears in conversations on Twitter.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The presence of @MuhammadiyahGL and @NUgarislucu accounts on Twitter is significant because they have a new approach to how religious and political discourses are discussed in social media. As a new form of a public sphere, Twitter offers a place to exchange ideas and thoughts for individuals. The most interesting one can be seen from the two accounts when they respond to every political and religious issue through humor. Their responses are indirectly reducing tension in the debate on politics and religion. Issues that are considered sensitive in both topics are discussed lightly, and that approach makes public to become mature in seeing and responding to any differences in politic and religion. In 2019 Indonesia held a presidential election

separating the public into two groups of supporters. This contestation is not only talking about politics but also dragging many things such as religion in the debate. Socially, the presence of @MuhammadiyahGL and @NUgarislucu on Twitter is proven to eliminate tension without hurting various parties, and obviously can trigger tolerance through appreciation of different views. The important thing that can be learned from these two accounts is criticizing on Twitter through humor is proven to be effective.

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