

# Commodification of Religion: Disruption and Shallowing of Religious Values in the Digital Era

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## ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of widespread and massive use of social media TikTok has changed the social order and even religious values in society. TikTok, which was originally used as a social media, quickly turned into a platform used for purposes such as political economy and religion. Religious activities distributed on social media experience disruption and shallowing of values, because these activities are carried out solely to pursue economic needs. This research aims to find out comprehensively and analytically the extent to which disruption and shallowing of religious values occur on TikTok social media. The method used in this research is a qualitative method using Clifford Greetz's Thick Description theory approach, where the theory focuses on studying the in-depth meaning of cultural symbols. This research data was obtained through documentary data collection techniques in the form of videos of lectures or religious preaching on TikTok social media. The research results show that the presence of social media and its rapidly growing use has encouraged the commodification of religion, where religion is constructed and reduced in such a way that religion that was originally sacred becomes profane. Religious preaching is not only driven and constructed by the interests of the religion itself but also by market interests so that spiritual values in religion become increasingly shallow and uprooted.

**Keywords:** commodification of religion, digital era, disruption, shallowing of religious values, tiktok

## INTRODUCTION

The biggest discovery and change of this century are the internet network which allows every human being across the world to connect with each other without regional boundaries. Of course, the internet doesn't work alone. The internet is the forerunner of the continued production of various communication media technologies and especially virtual communication and information media called social media. Since the presence of the internet on earth, social media has also become a new invention that has developed very rapidly, in fact the development of social media and its impact are much faster than human reaction to this phenomenon. Since the advent

of the internet, there have been many social media that have been able to attract people's physical and psychological attention. This exceeds previous communication and information media such as television, which is also said to be the media that absorbs the most physical and psychological energy of people.

In fact, nowadays social media is the media most consumed by the public. According to the We Are Social report, active social media users in Indonesia reach 167 million (60.4% of the total population) with 212.9 million internet users (77% of the total population) by 2023. Compared to the previous year where active social media users reached 191.4 million, the number of active social media users in 2023 has indeed decreased or not as much as the previous year. However, social media is still one of the most widely used media, where the average daily time spent accessing social media is 3 hours, 18 minutes. If we look in more detail, still based on the same site, there are several social media that are actively used by Indonesian people, namely WhatsApp with a usage percentage of 91.1%, Instagram 86.5%, Facebook at 83.8% and Tiktok at 70.8%. Especially Tiktok, this figure increased from the previous year which was at 63.1%, and this is categorized as a rapid increase in numbers. This is also proven by—although this requires matching detailed data with figures released by We Are Social—the statement that Indonesia has the second largest number of Tiktok users in the world as of April 2023 (Annur, 2023).

In general, TikTok and social media are people's choice, both in building or developing relationship between individuals in consuming various types of information. Social media is the easiest, cheapest and not limited by space and time, so it allows two-way communication, which means feedback can occur in real time (Kent, 2013). Because of this character, social media is able to create a new public sphere and living space which has become known as cyberspace (*virtual world*) (Rahawarin, 2022). The social media has extraordinary potential so that it is widely used for various purposes and interests, from just socializing to becoming a means of business transactions. Apart from being a means of disseminating information and news with new forms and models that are completely different from the dissemination of information and news in previous generations, social media has also become an alternative medium for every individual to produce message and information. People are flocking to become information producer, even if the information is distributed without filtering, thus encouraging the rise of fake information or fake news (Purwaningtyas, 2018). This phenomenon encourages a follow-up phenomenon called viral news or information. Viral is a term that refers to news that has been reproduced many times and carried out by different people in a short time span.

In the era of social media, any information can easily become a trending topic. This happens because social media users can connect with each other without being blocked by territory. This has extraordinary potential and is one of the reasons for people to continue accessing social media. Moreover, social media always provides a

variety of the latest information as an effect of the reality where everyone has ample opportunities to become information producer and humans naturally have a need to always update the information, they have to reduce uncertainty (Bahfiarti, 2020). However, there are actually many motives underlying someone's use of social media to access information. According to Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas, a person's need for information is driven by needs such as cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integration needs, social integrative needs, and escapist needs (Arbiyanto, 2016).

The study of social media use can be based on the Uses and Gratification theory which discusses how a person uses or avoids mass media. Just like when dealing with mass media, a person is also influenced by certain things in using or avoiding social media. However, studies on the use of social media cannot only be seen from the consumer's side, but must also be seen from the producer's side, which means that a producer also has a certain basis or motive for using social media and what social media is used for. In line with this, the presence of social media has especially given birth to what is called virtual reality. This reality has started since the discovery of the internet, which was followed by the phenomenon of mass migration of humanity to the virtual world. Since then, modern society has begun to recognize two completely different realities, namely actual reality and virtual reality. If actual reality is limited by territory, then virtual reality is not. In virtual reality, humans no longer make long journeys or have to stop first at actual terminals to arrive at their destination as happens in actual reality. In virtual reality, humans seem to be able to fold distance and time, even human life in virtual reality can be considered without barriers so that various worlds blend into one. For example, there are no longer any barriers or boundaries between the world of adults and the world of children.

This does not include the volume of information that has become obese and explosive. Information clumps together and then explodes so that someone does not need to carry out massive expansion to obtain it because the information will come to anyone by itself. In recent years, this information explosion has also occurred on Tiktok social media, ranging from the most important information to the most trivial information containing hate speech, sarcasm, hoaxes and even body trafficking. Even though the existence of Tiktok has increasingly opened up opportunities for anyone to convey hate speech, false information and slander, on the other hand this media has also opened wide opportunities for every citizen to convey their criticisms, aspirations, ideas and beliefs, including in this case religious discourses or teachings. This is what has happened recently, where quite a few virtual preachers have appeared on TikTok social media in an effort to convey religious teachings. This is the answer for anyone who needs a solution to life's problems which they think the answer can be found in religion. Virtual preachers are here to answer their problems, ranging from questions about the oneness of God, sharia issues, to even social, political and state issues. The people also don't mind, in fact they are very enthusiastic for learning religion through

social media (Malik, 2021). What is even more sad is that they also do not hesitate to pray on social media (Rustandi, 2020).

This illustrates that religion is not just about abstract doctrines that are floating in the sky, but has also been manifested in the form of practical work in social life or in sociological terms, manifested in material form. In this context, religion is not only seen as doctrine, but also as a religious practice and an important part of the cultural system. Religion or religious identity becomes manifest and is more easily accepted when it has been translated into material form, either through ways of thinking or behaving, including in this case the religion of Islam. Islam not only contains the doctrine of divinity, servanthood or the like, but also practical teachings that manifest in the form of material work. This means that ideological religion or ideology itself can be materialized into certain concrete forms in life (Althusser, 2006). Referring to this idea, the Islamic religion, for example, can actually be materialized into various forms of cultural attributes. As an example, Islam became synonymous with sarongs, skullcaps, headscarves, robes and/or the activities of religious study groups, from limited ones to those attended by thousands of worshipers. In fact, recently there has been a recitation group that has been mobilized or dominated by artists with the activity title Hijrah Festival. Another example is the recitation activity commemorating the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad led by Muhammad Iqdam Khalid which was attended by more than 150 thousand worshipers. Muhammad Iqdam Khalid is the founder of the Sabilu Taubah Assembly, which in the last year, both the assembly and Gus Iqdam himself have become phenomenal or viral on Tiktok. The study group founded by Muhammad Iqdam Khalid and the way Muhammad Iqdam Khalid presents himself in clothes that look trendy are one form of material aspect of Islamic ideology.

Thus, it can be seen that religion which comes from God then becomes something cultural due to the perspective of a religionist and how the religionist then displays it in a set of material works. This is also classified as one of the approaches taken by a preacher to reach the market. A preacher must adapt to the market or target of his da'wah if his preaching is to be easily accepted, especially by the millennial generation and generation Z who in fact struggle with technology (El Qudsi & Purnama, 2018). So, conveying da'wah material virtually on Tiktok social media is a strategic choice. The impact is that religion is treated like goods (products) which are managed in such a way as to suit market needs or in this case have selling value. According to Vincent Mosco, the process of changing goods and services which were initially valued from the point of view of their usefulness, into commodities seen from their exchange value is called commodification (Arianti & Purnama, 2018). Thus, commodification of religion means the process in which religion is managed and transformed into a commodity that has economic value. Tiktok social media is not only a means of conveying da'wah, but also a driver for the capitalization of content, so that sacred religion then becomes profane and experiences a shallowing of value

because it is treated like a commodity with selling value. Religion is no longer a sacred doctrine and work of servitude because it has undergone changes in material form to suit market conditions and needs.

## **METHOD**

This research uses qualitative research with a thick description approach. This approach focuses on examining the in-depth meaning of a cultural symbol. By Pals, culture is described as a pattern of meanings or ideas contained in symbols (Syarifah & Samatan, 2020). That is why Geertz offers an interpretative concept of culture, namely a semiotic concept, where culture is seen as a text whose meaning needs to be interpreted rather than as a concrete pattern of behavior (Geertz, 1992). The primary data for this research were obtained from Ustaz Muhammad Iqdam Khalid's Tiktok social media account. The data obtained is then presented and analyzed systematically, then explained comprehensively and concluded.

## **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

Technology has a huge influence on almost all aspects of human life, especially on social and cultural aspects (McLuhan, 1962). Technology is able to become a medium that bridges relationships between humans, both in the actual world and in the virtual world, even socially, technology has also replaced the role of human hands and various other aspects of interaction. Apart from that, changes are also slowly occurring in the cultural aspect, because fundamentally the presence of communication media has indirectly changed the way humans communicate, act, interact and behave. Radical changes that have clearly occurred have occurred especially since humans recognized or entered the era of digital technology, where humans collectively began to enter a new world called the virtual world (Nuruzzaman, 2018). In the virtual world, humans live without being limited by certain dimensions, where the world of adults is mixed with the world of children or vice versa. Likewise with information, which has become obese so that people find it difficult to recognize the useful information and hoax, fake and slanderous information or in general information that is stripped of its substance.

It cannot be denied that the presence of communication media technology makes it easier and even replaces human work. Technology is used to make it easier for humans to convey and spread various types of ideas and values, especially religious values. The presence of communication media is fully maximized by religious groups or preachers in conveying religious teachings and values. If several years ago preachers conveyed their sermons on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, now they have penetrated social media which is currently being used heavily by the millennial generation and generation Z, namely Tiktok. The majority of Tiktok users are aged

18-24 years, and Indonesia is the second largest Tiktok user in the world with 99.79 million users. This is why the millennial generation and generation Z are the main targets for conveying religious da'wah on Tiktok. There are many Indonesian preachers who carry out virtual preaching on Tiktok, apart from that of course in the real world. However, because today's society is dominated by the millennial generation and generation Z, like it or not, preachers also have to target them with new methods and therefore have to maximize the Tiktok communication media. There are two possibilities, firstly, a preacher deliberately created a Tiktok account to spread religious values, or secondly, there is a special media team that optimizes the use of Tiktok as a means of preaching for the ustaz and this is of course impossible without the ustaz's knowledge. Several preachers in Indonesia who also deliver virtual da'wah on Tiktok are Muhammad Iqdam Khalid with the account name @muhammad\_iqdam\_khalid.

### **Religion Commodification of Virtual Dais or Preachers**

On the one hand, the presence of the TikTok communication media makes it easier for people to learn or search for information and knowledge about religion (Dwistia et al., 2022). Apart from that, social media also makes it easier for a preacher to convey religious preaching as done by Ustaz Muhammad Iqdam Khalid. The activities carried out by virtual preachers in conveying religious values that are welcomed by the public by consuming them are the reality of sharing knowledge virtually. In this context, there are three things that social media promises to support the knowledge sharing process (Zheng & Lui Li, 2010). First, content distributed via social media contains social cues. This provides an opportunity for users to do more knowledge sharing because knowledge social cues can provide users with information on how to find a colleague or an expert to develop sustainable social relationships in knowledge sharing. Second, social media promises users' hopes of increasing motivation to share knowledge, so that they can share knowledge better. Third, social relationships are very necessary for the successful sharing of knowledge, which if social relationships are carried out at the right time and in adequate circumstances, then social media can guarantee the efficiency of these social relationships.

However, on the other hand, virtual religious preaching cannot be separated from disruption, a radical change that occurs as a result of innovation that is so great that it has an impact on changing the system and order of life in society at large (Nisaet al., 2021). The impact of the era of disruption is clearly visible in the social and religious life of society. The latest innovations in the field of communication media technology have changed the system and order of people's behavior in disseminating and consuming information. This also happens in religion. The preachers convey their religious preachings through social media and the public consumes these religious preachings through the same type of media. This change in societal behavior causes the commodification of religion. Religious symbols and attributes have turned into

commodities in mass media and social media. Especially on Tiktok, currently there are many preaching accounts and fanpages that broadcast the teachings and attributes of the Islamic religion. The important thing that must be underlined here is that they are indeed conveying sacred religious messages, but the way they convey their da'wah, the style of preaching they use, the media they use as channels, including how they must adapt to the characteristics of the media and listeners are a manifestation of the commodification of religion.

Basically, religion is defined as something that makes everything orderly or not chaotic. Religion is also described as obedience or servitude to God. Not only that, religion is also associated with the relationship between humans and humans and humans and nature. However, as time goes by, followed by the development of increasingly sophisticated media technology, religion has not only become a way of life to achieve happiness, but has also become goods for sale or objects that are bought and sold (commodities) (Amna 2019). This means that commodities are goods that are bought and sold or traded. In this case, commodification of religion (Islam) means trading religion or religious symbols to gain profit. In the case of virtual preaching on Tiktok, what the preachers initially did was only to convey religious ideas and values. But, what happened next, with the large number of viewers and followers who followed and watched each of their virtual preaching video uploads, this would have a positive impact on the Tiktok account owner because they were able to make money through Tiktok monetization or through well-known brands who were sponsors of the Tiktok account. every activity carried out by the account owner.

As a social media platform-based on video, Tiktok has provisions for its users to be able to monetize their accounts. Some of these provisions are that someone can join the TikTok creator fund if they are 18 years old, have at least 10,000 followers, and have achieved at least 100,000 video views in the previous 30 days period. In other terms, account owners can make money from live streaming if they already have 1,000 followers. A TikTok user can also earn money by joining the TikTok creativity program for videos longer than one minute, provided the user has at least 10,000 followers and at least 100,000 video views in the last 30 days. Looking at these provisions, the @muhammad\_iqdam\_khalid account seems to be able to earn money from Tiktok by doing live streaming because it already has more than 1,000 followers. Therefore, it is not surprising that Tiktok has become one of the most popular social media for conveying religious values virtually.

### **Disruption and Shallowing of Religious Values in the Digital Era**

Religion is not only about dogmatic doctrines about divinity, but also about the application of sacred symbols in actual reality. In reality, religious attributes are also part of cultural attributes—if not an acculturation of the two, where the application of religious values that originate from God is adjusted or adapted to the culture of society for things that are not related to the faiths. As long as it is related to

aspects of the Shari'a, religion can enter and adapt to each cultural reality. This side is the background to the conception that religion is a cultural system because religion has a symbol system that contains certain goals; building an inner atmosphere and strengthening motivation, so that it spreads easily and does not easily disappear within a person; formulate a general order of values and conception of life; attaching this conception to factual emanations of value; thus causing this conception to be seen as a unique reality (Pals, 2011). This unique reality is based on the fact that complex symbols in religion can be practically translated into life. This is also in line with the opinion that religion contains a sacred aspect where the values in a religion are always actualized in everyday life (Langaji, 2016).

Therefore, the definition of religion and how an individual or group acts on that religion depends on how they interpret the symbols contained in that religion. In more direct and simple terms, a person's various ways in everyday life depend on the network of meaning he builds on the symbols in the religion he adheres to. This is quite identical to the definition of culture according to Geertz, that humans are like spiders whose lives depend on networks of meaning that they weave themselves and culture is like that network. Explanations about culture and religion are not much different. Culture has a symbol system, as does religion. The symbol system in religion is anything that can represent and convey meaning or ideas to someone. The ideas contained in a symbol are public because the meaning or symbol is not impersonal and is not attached to the brain of the person who influences it. Ideas or symbols in a partner's religion encourage a person to feel and move to achieve certain goals. Every individual who is motivated to do something according to an understood goal will be guided by a collection of value systems, so that the individual is able to determine right and wrong and whether something is good or bad for him or herself. Third, religion can form integrated concepts regarding the value order of its entire existence. In this context, religion is interpreted as something that refers to the final meaning, namely a definite goal for the world. Fourth, these conceptions and motivations form a reflection of factual values which Geertz summarizes into two things, namely religion as an "ethos" and religion as a "view of life". Fifth, the emission of factual values will give birth to unique rituals that have a special position in the order of values, which humans consider more important than anything else (Pals, 2011).

During its development, the surface aspects of the unique ritual mentioned by Pals then changed according to the current conditions of reality. This means that religion is not only understood substantively, but also functionally, which refers to social functions, existential functions and transcendent functions. Here it is very clear that religion is interpreted existentially for both individuals and groups. This existential meaning then gave birth to the concept of religion in digital form, an innovation that quickly replaced the old religious concept which was only followed by a handful of groups. This new concept was welcomed by most millennials and generation Z, whose intensity of interaction with technology is very high among all

generations born before. The new concept replacing the old concept is the substance of disruption, which is not only about the media used, the lecture system and concepts, but also the interpretation of religion itself which is manifested in the form of representations that appear and are practiced in everyday life.

In practice, old concepts in religion have begun to be replaced by concepts that are more contemporary and accepted by most groups of people born after the 90s. For example, in the videos uploaded by Ustaz Muhammad Iqdam Khalid's media team, the young ustaz always appears in a trendy and contemporary style of clothing with his lecture models that break generational boundaries. Here the meaning to be conveyed is that religion does not need to be too serious like previous people where they had to wear robes, turbans and other religious attributes. Of course, this is very different from what Ustaz Muhammad Iqdam Khalid showed by wearing clothes that are friendly to the contemporary styles of the millennial generation and Gen Z. Apart from that, Ustaz Muhammad Iqdam Khalid represents the preacher's style which is quite close to the fringe generation or the generation that is labeled as naughty children. so that the choice of diction and lecture discourse that is built cannot be separated from the habits of the congregation who tend to like to use harsh words and other diction in a relaxed speaking style that is easily accepted by young people.

Indeed, it cannot be completely said that the emergence of virtual ustaz on Tiktok is solely for economic and political purposes, although such identity political purposes certainly exist. However, what needs to be noted is that the emergence of preachers on social media - not a new phenomenon - is an answer to the social and religious problems faced by the millennial generation and generation Z. Apart from that, of course this is an effort to fight for Islamic religious values. to fight other values that are considered secular, liberal or generally far from morality and religious values. Nevertheless, what virtual preachers have done has caused a shift from traditional generic religious communication to internet-based communication. Cultural spaces are changing to become wider and more limitless so that public participation is increasingly open. However, what is actually happening is not just a shift in delivery patterns and orientation, but also a shallowing of religious values in the midst of an era where everything is completely digital. Religious preaching is starting to lose substance because virtual preachers adapt their preaching to market tastes, where the market has the characteristic of always needing an attractive and alluring commodity. In the end, what is important is not the substance of religious values, but rather attractive physical appearances with languages that have lost their sacredness.

In almost every lecture forum, Ustaz Muhammad Iqdam Khalid often utters words that are foreign to most people's ears, but these words are actually easier to remember. These foreign words were said while joking in a humorous style. These terms include, for example, *gangan* which refers to an omnivorous animal, *wonge yo teko*, and *central dengane*. Of course, these words refer to certain meanings. However,

along with these words, a sense of the sanctity, glory of the recitation forum and all its spiritual values is buried within it. Apart from that, as a young preacher who is still 28 years old, Ustaz Muhammad Iqdam Khalid also pays attention to his clothing style in daily interactions, where Ustaz Muhammad Iqdam Khalid often appears wearing a typical batik sarong and slim fit clothes, then adding a skullcap or peci. black. His other attributes are a large motorbike (moge), a Vespa motorbike and sunglasses. From this it can be explained that there are other lifestyle tendencies shown by virtual preachers in looking like Ustaz Muhammad Iqdam Khalid. It's not just appearance, but how your appearance creates an image of yourself that is different from the many other preachers, both in the actual world and in the virtual world. The new concept in religion then gave rise to high enthusiasm for the growth of virtual religious communities. What developed then was the tendency to seek spiritual satisfaction through new forms, which Yuval Noah Harari called neospiritualism.

In the midst of conditions where religion tends to be massed and commodified, religious values have now become commodities. Religion is no longer a sacred entity before the public on social media but has become profane. Religion is no longer a way of life to totally devote oneself to God and disciplinedly carry out His commands in actual space, but has become just a lifestyle that appears luxurious on the surface. This is the point where religious values begin to lose their sacredness and the opposite happens, namely superficiality. Religious attributes such as how to dress and speak are starting to lose their sacredness due to the use of clothing that is more concerned with contemporary visuality. Religious values are increasingly separated from ritual values, because religious rituals themselves, such as recitation of the Koran, for example, have experienced a distortion of form so that people prefer the surface aspect of the ritual rather than the spiritual aspect contained in it.

## CONCLUSION

Communication technology innovations are driving massive disruption in various aspects of people's lives, one of which is the religious sector. Religion is no longer conveyed using generic traditional concepts, but has been conveyed in a new concept, namely the concept of virtual da'wah. The new concept of conveying religious values through social media does not immediately eliminate the old concept, but this phenomenon has caused enormous changes in the context of sharing religious knowledge. Preachers and society dominated by the millennial generation and generation Z are increasingly sharing and consuming religious knowledge on social media. Religion, which consists of a set of symbol systems, is conveyed in a new concept that is adapted to the characteristics of the media and consumers. This process encourages disruption, especially after religious symbols are massed and commodified into valuable commodities. Da'wah content on Tiktok is commodified through the forms of monetization offered, so that sacred symbols of preaching are turned into

economically profitable sales items. The reality of the commodification of religious symbols has encouraged the shallowing of religious values themselves, so that people tend to prioritize the surface aspects of religious rituals rather than the spiritual aspects of the religious rituals performed. In simpler terms, religious values are slowly starting to be uprooted.

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