

TIKTOK AS SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE STUDENTS' RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

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Abstract :

This study analyzes the use of TikTok social media and its implications for the construction of religious identity among university students. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the research was conducted at Al-Qolam University Malang over a period of two months, involving in-depth interviews and observations of female students who actively use TikTok for religious content. The findings indicate that TikTok functions as a space for the expression and negotiation of religious identity, where students act as both content creators and consumers. Although they strive to convey meaningful religious messages, many become entangled in algorithmic demands that prioritize viral content and visual aesthetics. This study affirms that TikTok is not merely a communication tool, but also an arena in which students' religious identities are constructed and presented within a broader social context.

Keywords : *TikTok, Religious Identity, University Students.*

Abstrak :

Penelitian ini menganalisis penggunaan media sosial TikTok dan implikasinya terhadap konstruksi identitas keagamaan di kalangan mahasiswa. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, penelitian ini dilakukan di Universitas Al-Qolam Malang selama dua bulan, melibatkan wawancara mendalam dan observasi terhadap mahasiswa perempuan yang aktif menggunakan TikTok untuk konten keagamaan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa TikTok berfungsi sebagai ruang ekspresi dan negosiasi identitas keagamaan, di mana mahasiswa berperan sebagai kreator dan konsumen konten. Meskipun mereka berusaha menyampaikan pesan keagamaan yang mendalam, banyak yang terjebak dalam tuntutan algoritma yang mengutamakan konten viral dan estetika visual. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa TikTok bukan hanya alat komunikasi, tetapi juga arena di mana identitas religius mahasiswa dikonstruksi dan dipresentasikan dalam konteks sosial yang lebih luas.

Kata Kunci: *Tiktok, Identitas Keagamaan dan Mahasiswa.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media in the digital era has become an essential element in the daily lives of the younger generation. (Hosniyeh, 2025) University students are part of this group and are actively engaged in the use of various online platforms, one of which is TikTok. Initially, TikTok functioned as an entertainment application closely associated with short videos featuring light and enjoyable content. However, over time, its function has undergone a significant transformation. Today, TikTok is no longer merely a space for entertainment, but has also evolved into a medium for delivering educational content, voicing social criticism, and even articulating religious expression. (Sinaga et al., 2024)

This change reflects how advancements in digital technology influence patterns of religious life, particularly among university students. Amid this digital trend, there has been a growing phenomenon of students increasingly using TikTok to disseminate Islamic messages. (Ryazi et al., 2023) They produce various forms of da'wah content using more aesthetic and communicative approaches. The content includes excerpts from verses of the Holy Qur'an, prophetic traditions, short religious sermons, spiritual reflections, and guidance on religious practices. (Kendju, Nento, & Soleman, 2022) Visual aesthetics, the use of harmonious background music, and emotionally engaging narratives have become distinctive elements of such content. The combination of audio and visual elements not only enhances aesthetic appeal but also creates an emotional atmosphere that strengthens the reception of religious messages among audiences. This phenomenon indicates a significant shift in religious practices that were previously personal, private, and ritualistic, toward forms that are more open, communicative, and rich in visual symbolism. In this context, religious experience is no longer confined to places of worship or individual spiritual activities, but is also mediated by digital technology that enables interaction, appreciation, and participation from a broader public.

Religiosity in the digital era is not experienced solely as an inward and internal process, but is also expressed through social media as a form of religious communication that is public, open, and capable of reaching more diverse and dynamic social networks. The shift in TikTok's role from merely an entertainment platform to a medium for conveying religious values raises an important question regarding the extent to which this social media platform contributes to the formation of students' religious identities. To

examine this issue, Henri Tajfel's social identity theory provides an appropriate conceptual framework. According to Tajfel, an individual's identity develops through their attachment to social groups.(Tajfel, 2006)

TikTok functions as a virtual medium that allows individuals to project, reconstruct, and even reformulate their religious self-image before a wide audience. However, it should be noted that not all forms of religious expression on this platform reflect genuine spiritual depth.(Budiarti et al., 2023) Much Islamic content instead prioritizes visual appearance and virality over the substantive meaning of the teachings being conveyed. This tendency illustrates how the logic of digital media particularly TikTok's algorithm encourages creators to emphasize visual appeal rather than the depth of spiritual messages. For example, elements such as the wearing of hijab, the recitation of Qur'anic verses, or the use of worship-related settings are often displayed merely as visual embellishments rather than as expressions of profound religious understanding. In other words, Islamic symbols that should carry theological and spiritual significance are frequently reduced to aesthetic ornaments designed to attract audience attention. Such practices risk shifting the orientation of religiosity from substantive reflection toward surface-level imagery, in which da'wah messages are treated more as commodities marketed according to the preferences of the digital marketplace.

TikTok's algorithm, which highlights content based on levels of interaction, popularity, and visual appeal, indirectly compels creators to adjust their religious expressions to align with the logic of the digital marketplace. As a result, religious identity is constructed not only through internal spiritual values but is also strongly shaped by competitive and instantaneous virtual social dynamics. By automatically prioritizing user engagement such as the number of likes, comments, and views, TikTok's algorithm encourages content creators to adapt the form of their religious expression to meet digital market demands. Consequently, the Islamic messages being shared risk experiencing a dilution of meaning and may even be reduced to mere commodities aimed at gaining social recognition and popularity.(Ibad, 2024)

The gender dimension within da'wah content on TikTok also reveals complex dynamics. Female university students, as active users of the platform, often face inner conflicts between the desire to display a religious identity and the pressure to conform to aesthetic standards currently trending on social media. In practice, they are required to adjust visual elements such as clothing style, background music selection, voice intonation, and facial expressions in order to capture audience attention, while

simultaneously striving to maintain the Islamic principles they uphold.(Yayuh Khufibasyaris & Suhendi, 2024) The tension between spiritual values and visual demands creates a challenging process of identity negotiation. In fast-paced and highly competitive digital spaces, religious images are shaped not only by personal beliefs but also by how they are packaged to appear attractive and socially acceptable within broader online communities.

Several previous studies have examined the relationship between social media and students' religious lives. However, most of these studies have primarily focused on the technical aspects of media use or on the quantitative effects of content on religiosity. For example, the study by Destiano et al. focused on the spirituality of ITS students in their use of TikTok, but did not examine in depth the social processes involved in identity formation.(Dkk, 2025) Similarly, the study by Fahmi and Fidriyani linked TikTok to spiritual intelligence in general, without providing a specific focus on university students.(Fikri et al., 2022)

This study aims to address the gaps in previous research by employing a more contextual and in-depth approach. A qualitative method was chosen because it is considered capable of holistically and reflectively revealing the complexity of the process of religious identity construction among university students. The focus of this study is not limited to the form or content of religious materials uploaded on TikTok, but also examines how students interpret these expressions, how they negotiate religious values amid digital trends, and how they respond to social pressures that emerge during the process of spiritual identity formation.(Muvid, Muhamma Basyrul dan Arnandy, Didiet Anindita dan Arrosyidi, 2024)

The primary objective of this research is to gain a comprehensive understanding of how university students construct their religious identities through the TikTok platform. This study seeks to explain the dynamics of religious expression, processes of value negotiation, and the challenges faced by students within a rapidly changing and highly open digital media ecosystem. The findings of this research are expected to enrich perspectives on social media as a potential space for religious identity formation, while also providing valuable insights for religious education in responding to the realities of young people's religiosity in the contemporary digital era.(Iswanto, 2018)

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach because it aims to comprehensively explore the process of religious identity formation among female university students through the TikTok social media platform. This approach enables the researcher to capture subjective meanings, personal experiences, and students' perspectives in expressing religious values within digital spaces in a contextual manner and directly from the source. (Muhammad Fazry, 2025) The research site was established at Universitas Al-Qolam Malang, East Java, and data collection was conducted over a two-month period, from June to July 2025. The selection of this university was based on its characteristics as an Islamic higher education institution rooted in pesantren traditions that not only upholds religious values but is also responsive to advancements in digital technology. Students in this environment are known to be actively engaged in religious activities while simultaneously being adaptive in utilizing social media, including TikTok, making them a relevant subject for this study.

Data were collected using several techniques, namely in-depth interviews, direct observation, and documentation. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, employing open-ended guidelines to allow the researcher to explore information more freely while remaining focused on the themes of religious identity and the use of TikTok as a space for expression. (Ari Abdi Widodo & Muhammad Husni, 2025) The observation process was conducted by following informants' activities on the TikTok platform, paying attention to the types of content uploaded, communication styles, and interaction patterns formed within the digital environment. Meanwhile, documentation included digital archives such as screenshots of TikTok content, field notes, and various documents related to religious activities recorded on social media. (Saiful Riza et al., 2019)

The informants in this study consisted of female students from Universitas Al-Qolam who were in their second and fourth semesters and were known to actively use TikTok, either as content creators or consumers of religious content. Informant selection was conducted using a purposive sampling technique, taking into account their relevance and capacity to provide rich and in-depth data related to the object of study. The focus on female students in the early to middle stages of their academic journey was intended to allow closer observation of the ongoing process of religious identity exploration. Each

informant had distinct backgrounds and characteristics, both in terms of their roles on TikTok and the types of content they produced or consumed. Detailed information about the informants is presented in the following table.

NO	Informant Name	Semester	Gender	TikTok Activity
1.	Uswatun Hasanah	4	Female	Da'wah content creator
2.	Bunga Nur Fatimah	2	Female	Consumer of religious content
3.	Lailatur Rohmah	4	Female	Islamic lifestyle content creator
4.	Luluk Nadhifah	2	Female	Observer of da'wah content
5.	Siti Aisyah	4	Female	Islamic study content creator

Through this analytical approach, the researcher expects to comprehensively and deeply describe the processes of formation, representation, and negotiation of students' religious identities on TikTok a digital medium rich in symbols, visual representations, and social interactions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Patterns of TikTok Use in Religious Expression

Based on the results of in-depth interviews and participatory observation, it was found that the use of TikTok as a medium for religious expression among university students demonstrates a striking diversity of patterns. Three main tendencies were identified in the utilization of this platform: content creators, content consumers, and passive observers of religious content. Each of these patterns illustrates how students interpret, convey, and respond to Islamic values within digital spaces.

Several informants, such as Uswatun Hasanah, Lailatur Rohmah, and Siti Aisyah, were more actively engaged as creators of religious content. They utilized TikTok as a medium for da'wah in a creative and contextual manner. The types of content they produced included Islamic motivational messages, short excerpts from religious lectures, daily spiritual reflections, and moral messages packaged through emotionally engaging narratives and visually appealing presentations. TikTok features such as Islamic-themed background music, video transitions, attractive filters, and inspirational captions were maximized to enhance the appeal of the messages. These creators perceived that such styles of delivery were more effective in reaching younger audiences who are accustomed to fast-paced and visually

oriented content. In addition to conveying religious messages, they also developed their ability to adapt da'wah communication styles to the characteristics of contemporary social media users.

Other informants, such as Bunga Nur Fatimah and Luluk Nadhifah, primarily assumed the role of viewers or consumers of religious content. They tended to access and engage with content more frequently than producing it themselves. Their preferences generally leaned toward content that was concise, simple, and easy to understand, yet still rich in touching spiritual values. This tendency suggests that students do not always require heavy or highly theoretical religious narratives, but rather favor practical approaches that are closely connected to everyday life. Thus, religiosity in digital spaces is not always expressed through complex verbal or visual forms, but also through reflective experiences derived from consuming short yet meaningful content.

In addition to acting as creators and consumers, some students used TikTok as a platform to observe and critically examine the dynamics of religiosity developing within it. Although they were not actively producing or regularly consuming religious content, they continued to follow popular trends and used them as material for personal reflection or group discussion. Their observations revealed a tendency for much da'wah content on TikTok to emphasize external symbols and virality rather than exploring the depth of Islamic values. This condition generated a sense of unease, particularly among students who possess sensitivity toward essential religious meanings. They began to question the extent to which religious expressions on social media genuinely reflect comprehensive understanding and practice of Islamic teachings, or whether they merely represent constructions shaped by algorithmic preferences and digital trend demands.

The use of TikTok's distinctive features, such as duets, stitches, and visual filters, became part of students' strategies for conveying religious messages in more creative ways. Da'wah content was not always presented in the form of conventional sermons, but rather through storytelling approaches, short skits, reactions to trending religious issues, and Islamic humor that still conveyed moral messages. Such approaches were considered more engaging because they allowed messages to be delivered in a light yet relevant manner. Through these practices, students demonstrated not only their understanding of religious teachings but also their digital competencies in packaging messages so that they could be more readily accepted by

broader audiences in the digital public sphere. (Daswin, 2025)

2. Forms of Religious Identity Representation on TikTok

The religious identity displayed by students through the TikTok platform is generally symbolic and performative in nature. Based on interview findings, it can be understood that the Islamic content created and disseminated is not solely intended as a means of da‘wah or the direct fulfillment of religious obligations, but also forms part of a consciously constructed digital self-image. In this context, TikTok functions not only as a medium for message dissemination but also as a digital performance space in which religious identity is constructed, refined, and presented to the public. (Yang & Syifa Fatimah, 2023)

Female students involved in the production of religious content revealed that they are motivated to present an ideal image of a Muslim woman that aligns with social expectations namely, appearing pious, graceful, and ethical. This is reflected in their choice of modest clothing, the use of Islamic-themed or neutral background music, the selection of gentle and polite diction, and the adoption of calm visual aesthetics. Some of them also utilize specific TikTok filters to enhance facial appearance or to create a visual impression that supports a religious atmosphere. All of these elements form part of a strategy to construct a stronger spiritual impression in the eyes of the audience.

Some informants even admitted feeling more confident when displaying their religious side on TikTok, despite the fact that in their everyday lives they are still in the process of learning and have not yet been fully consistent in practicing religious teachings in depth. This indicates that the religious identity represented on social media often does not entirely reflect authentic personal spirituality, but rather constitutes a social representation constructed based on public expectations and prevailing digital norms. Such an identity functions as a ‘religious persona’ that is consciously shaped to gain appreciation, social validation, or simply to increase user engagement.

This situation becomes increasingly complex when female students who actively produce Islamic content encounter a dilemma between maintaining spiritual values and fulfilling the demands of digital aesthetics. (Zanzibar, 2024) They are aware that, in order for content to be more readily accepted and to have the potential to go viral, adjustments are required in visual aspects such as lighting, makeup, facial

expressions, and even body movements. However, some of these elements are at times perceived as conflicting with conservative norms in religious practice. Under such conditions, they are compelled to continuously engage in processes of identity negotiation in order to maintain a balance between religious messages and content appeal. Furthermore, TikTok's algorithmic system plays a significant role in shaping how students present their religious identities. By prioritizing visually appealing content, high levels of interaction, and viral potential, the algorithm encourages creators to adapt the form of their content to the logic of digital engagement. As a result, the da'wah messages and Islamic expressions produced often do not fully emerge from deep spiritual reflection, but are instead tailored to the preferences of the digital marketplace in order to reach broader audiences. (Budiarti et al., 2023)

This phenomenon ultimately blurs the boundary between spiritual authenticity and symbolic expression constructed by the logic of social media. Students occupy a paradoxical position: on the one hand, they seek to voice Islamic values, while on the other hand, they are constrained by visual norms, aesthetic standards, and algorithmic expectations that tend to demand the commodification of identity. Nevertheless, students' presence on TikTok through religious content also creates new narrative spaces that are more contextual, inclusive, and easily accessible to their peers. Although such religious expressions are performative in nature, these contents still hold inspirational potential, capable of fostering Islamic consciousness and serving as a medium for spiritual reflection among students who are in the process of searching for their religious identities in the contemporary digital era.

3. Implications for the Construction of Religious Identity

The findings of this study indicate that the use of TikTok by university students has a tangible impact on the construction of religious identity. Religious identity, which has traditionally been practiced largely within the private sphere, has shifted toward digital representations that are public, open, and performative. This phenomenon reflects a transformation in the orientation of religiosity from personal spaces to virtual spaces characterized by intense social interaction and aesthetic demands. TikTok functions as a medium of expression that allows students to present themselves as part of a devout yet modern Muslim community. Through the creation of short da'wah content, quotations from sacred texts, and religious reflections,

students not only disseminate Islamic messages but also construct a self-image that gains legitimacy from digital audiences. The religious identity displayed in this context tends to be flexible, as it continuously adapts to algorithmic logic, visual trends, and evolving social expectations on the platform.(Wahyuni & Fajarini, 2025)

From a psychological perspective, the use of TikTok contributes to students' self-confidence in presenting a religious image, even though their everyday religious practices are still in a developmental stage. This sense of confidence grows through social validation in the form of follower counts, positive comments, and 'likes' from other users. However, this condition also brings internal pressures, such as fear of losing public recognition or being perceived as inconsistent. Thus, the construction of religious identity that emerges is not solely the result of individual belief, but is also shaped by social responses and symbolic interactions within the digital sphere.

This social media platform further encourages processes of identity negotiation. Students, particularly women, often face dilemmas between maintaining religious values and conforming to the aesthetic standards prevailing on TikTok. This struggle gives rise to identities that are fluid, adaptive, and constantly negotiated, as students seek to balance the substantive content of da'wah messages with visual strategies in order to remain acceptable to digital audiences.(Salsabila & Listyani, 2023) Religious identity in this digital context is not fixed, but continuously evolves in response to the dynamics of social interaction and shifting trends. Broader implications can be observed in the changing patterns of religiosity among younger generations. Islamic identity is no longer understood solely as a form of personal spiritual commitment, but also as a social performance that is displayed, publicized, and evaluated by audiences. Consequently, the construction of students' religious identity takes place within a reflective and collective social framework, in which self-formation occurs through digital communication, audience responses, and ongoing negotiation with media norms.(Am & Munir, 2025)

Overall, the use of TikTok reveals two contrasting dimensions in the construction of students' religious identity. On the one hand, the platform expands the space for da'wah while enhancing students' self-confidence in expressing Islamic values; on the other hand, it also presents challenges in the form of algorithmic pressure, the commodification of identity, and tensions between spiritual authenticity

and digital aesthetic demands. In other words, TikTok functions not only as a medium of religious communication, but also as a complex and dynamic arena for the formation of religious identity, one that is continuously shaped through ongoing processes of negotiation.

4. Challenges and Barriers in Communicating Religious Values

In conveying Islamic messages through the TikTok social media platform, the informants face a series of significant challenges that cannot be overlooked. One of the primary difficulties stems from the dominance of digital algorithms that underpin the platform's operational system. TikTok's algorithm systematically prioritizes content that is entertaining, light, and visually appealing, resulting in religious content that is rich in meaning and contemplative in nature often receiving less exposure. This condition places student creators of religious content in a dilemma between maintaining deep spiritual substance and adapting to digital market preferences in order to reach wider audiences. (Mubarok, Ramadhan, Muttaqin, Sundari, & Hidayat, 2025)

Several informants candidly acknowledged experiencing mental pressure as a consequence of these expectations. When uploaded videos fail to generate high levels of user engagement such as comments, 'likes,' or views doubts arise regarding the effectiveness of their methods of delivery. In some cases, this pressure develops into fear of losing followers or being perceived as lacking consistency (*istiqāmah*) in digital *da'wah*. Consequently, an internal demand emerges to continuously produce content, even when psychological or spiritual conditions may not be supportive. Religious identity, which ideally grows organically through reflection and personal experience, thus becomes influenced by algorithmic rhythms that emphasize constant production and rapid interaction.

External pressure also emerges from the surrounding social environment. Some informants reported that support from their families and campus peer groups remains relatively limited. In certain circles, engaging in *da'wah* through social media particularly TikTok, which is closely associated with light entertainment is perceived as lacking seriousness and is often viewed as a pursuit of popularity. Such perceptions place an additional burden on students who seek to maintain the integrity

of their da'wah, compelling them to be more cautious in selecting themes, communication styles, and the duration of the content they upload. (Kahpi & Puspita Dewi, 2024) Negative comments or cynical responses from others also have the potential to undermine their motivation to continue creating content.

Several informants also expressed concern about being labeled as 'riya' (showing off), overly self-promotional, or unworthy of engaging in da'wah due to an insufficiently established religious background. Such feelings not only pose psychological barriers but also widen the gap between da'wah idealism and a social reality that has yet to fully accept digital forms of religious practice. (Muhamad Akda et al., 2025)

Despite facing pressures from various directions, the majority of informants chose to continue their digital da'wah activities on TikTok. They recognize that such obstacles are an integral part of the process of developing resilient religious character. In the context of the digital era, religiosity requires adaptive capacity, emotional intelligence, and effective communication skills. This awareness encourages them to manage their content more wisely, while also giving rise to new spaces for discussion regarding how Islamic values should ideally be communicated amid the rapidly changing and highly competitive dynamics of digital culture. In other words, religious expression through TikTok does not take place in a pressure-free environment. On the contrary, the religious identities displayed by students on this platform must confront complex social, psychological, and algorithmic challenges. Under these conditions, students act not only as disseminators of Islamic messages, but also as active agents who continuously negotiate the meaning, existence, and authenticity of their religiosity within the dynamic and competitive currents of digital media. (Hilalludin, 2025)

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the use of TikTok as a social media platform has a tangible influence on the construction of religious identity among university students. In this context, students do not merely act as passive audiences, but also emerge as content producers who actively articulate their religious values. These activities take the form of performative expressions, in which religious identity is projected as part of the construction of a digital self-image. Although most students intend

to convey substantive religious messages, they are often confronted with the dynamics of TikTok's algorithm, which prioritizes visually appealing content with high viral potential. This condition creates a form of internal tension, particularly among female students, as they attempt to balance the desire to appear religious with the necessity of adhering to aesthetic norms and prevailing digital trends.

TikTok also functions as an arena of identity negotiation, where students continuously deliberate and adjust their religious values in relation to the personal identities they are in the process of forming. Amid various challenges such as social pressure, expectations of audience engagement, and criticism from other users students continue to demonstrate efforts to represent religiosity through approaches that are more contextual and aligned with contemporary digital culture. Accordingly, this study affirms that social media platforms such as TikTok do not merely serve as channels for information exchange, but also operate as complex social spaces in which students' religious identities are constructed, negotiated, and publicly presented within dynamic and diverse social frameworks.

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