

REPRESENTATION AND RECEPTION OF WASATIYYAH THROUGH HUMOR: AN ANALYSIS OF TIKTOK COMMENT SECTIONS ON MILLENNIAL MUSLIM INFLUENCER DA'WAH

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Abstract: TikTok has become an important arena for digital proselytization, where Islamic messages circulate through short video content that is entertaining in nature, and audience reception is openly visible through the comment section. This research examines how humorous da'wah oriented toward wasatiyyah is received, negotiated, and debated in the public space of TikTok comments, with a case study of one creator (Husein Ja'far) during the period of July–December 2025. This study uses qualitative reception analysis through purposive salient comment sampling and an operational codebook to analyze individual comments and reply chains that demonstrate negotiation, correction, and escalation. The research findings indicate that the comment section repeatedly serves as a space for informal religious learning and peer counselling, facilitating micro-fiqh questions, navigating modern ethical dilemmas, and interfaith literacy. Wasatiyyah is most often accepted as an everyday relational ethic—mercy, anti-coercion, and good interpretation—rather than as an ideological label. However, moderation remains fragile because it is contested through moral policing, authority disputes, conflict framing, and credibility issues. Humor serves as an interactional adhesive that fosters affiliation and de-escalation, but it can also mask derogation and reinforce boundary policing. Additionally, a pattern of reception bifurcation emerged where audiences accepted the moral content but rejected the performative esthetics, which underscores the importance of value legitimacy and esthetic legitimacy in the reception of digital proselytization. This finding strengthens the study of digital religion by positioning moderation as an achievement negotiated within platformed publics and explaining the ambivalent role of humor in shaping moderation discourse.

Keywords: Digital proselytization; TikTok comments; moderation; humor in religion; audience reception; negotiation of religious authority; Islamic moderation

Introduction

The rapid development of digital platforms has fundamentally changed the landscape of religious communication, including how Islamic messages are produced, circulated, and received by the public. In recent years, short-video platforms like TikTok have gained prominence due to their concise format, algorithmic distribution that boosts content visibility, and participatory

culture that enables public interaction through comment and reply features. In the context of Muslim society, TikTok no longer functions solely as a space for entertainment, but has evolved into an important arena for digital proselytization, where religious meanings are conveyed through everyday narratives, storytelling, and a more informal communication style compared to conventional lectures. This transformation shows that digital platforms not only expand the reach of da'wah but also reconfigure the dynamics of Islamic communication by emphasizing creativity, affective closeness, and public interaction as part of the message circulation process (Aydin, 2023; Mavianti, 2025; Mavianti et al., 2022; Richter, 2021)

Several studies emphasize that TikTok's ecology, which combines entertainment and personal expression, can make Islamic messages more accessible, especially for young people accustomed to social media culture. Creators can convey Islamic teachings, ethics, and values through a format that is concise, relevant, and close to contemporary issues, thus encouraging broader audience engagement compared to formal religious communication patterns (Khamis, 2021). In this context, humor and satire are often understood as communication resources that lower the social cost of discussing sensitive issues, including identity, social norms, and intergroup relations, which may be difficult to address in formal religious spaces (Aydin, 2023; Richter, 2021). Therefore, digital preaching on TikTok needs to be understood not only through the content of religious messages, but also through the interactional environment where these messages are received, evaluated, and reprocessed by the audience in platform-based public spaces.

An important question that has not yet been explored in depth is how Islamic moderation (*wasatiyyah*) is received and negotiated in the interactive digital arena. Literature often positions *wasatiyyah* as a framework for understanding moderation in Islam, particularly in responding to extremism and promoting tolerance (Khamis, 2021). However, in the context of digital platforms, moderation does not always present itself as an explicit ideological slogan or doctrinal label. Conversely, moderation can emerge as an everyday ethic manifested through compassion, anti-coercion, and interpretive practices that mitigate conflict in social interactions. Thus, the reception of *wasatiyyah* on TikTok is likely determined not only by the substance of the da'wah message, but also by the tone of interaction, affection, and the esthetics of entertainment that influence whether the audience will engage with, negotiate the meaning of, reject, or amplify the message.

The comment section becomes a crucial space in this process because it is where audience reception is publicly visible and dialogically produced. In the study of platformed publics, the comment section is understood as a performative arena where users negotiate meaning, convey moral evaluations, and build or dismantle the legitimacy of creators and the authority claims they make (Hirzalla et al., 2013; Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2016). In the context of digital da'wah, comment threads often function as "public classrooms" and "peer counselling spaces" that facilitate *micro-fiqh* questions, negotiation of everyday ethical dilemmas (e.g., credit and debt, the permissibility of trading, or digital distractions affecting prayer), as well as interfaith literacy learning through clarification of terms and identities. This pattern aligns with the finding that millennial Muslims are increasingly utilizing short-form video content as a medium for religious learning, identity formation, and moral reasoning directly related to their life experiences (Khamis, 2021; Thonnart, 2024).

In this kind of ecological commentary, humor plays a central but ambivalent role. Theoretically, humor not only serves as entertainment but also as a communication strategy that can support social criticism, strengthen community solidarity, and manage tension in both moral and ideological discourse (Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2016; Richter, 2021). Humor can facilitate participation by making sensitive issues more "talkable" and maintaining relational warmth, thus

encouraging the audience to ask questions, share experiences, and engage in collective reflection. In digital preaching, humor can also increase message accessibility by adapting religious communication to the informal interaction norms and characteristics of the youth-oriented social media environment (Aydin, 2023; Khamis, 2021).

However, humor doesn't always have a constructive impact. A number of studies show that humor can mask derogation, reinforce stigma, or subtly assert the boundaries between "us" and "them" through seemingly playful but socially impactful boundary policing practices (Gaillard, 2025; Richter, 2021). In the comment chain, humor can serve a dual purpose: on the one hand, it can de-escalate conflict, but on the other hand, it can spark controversy through moral outrage or debates about the appropriateness and limits of religious expression. This ambivalence becomes increasingly complex when the audience not only evaluates the moral substance of the preaching but also assesses the performative esthetics and legitimacy of religious authority in an entertainment-oriented format. This kind of tension aligns with the finding that entertainment esthetics can increase engagement, but also create friction with traditional expectations of sacredness and religious authority (Hassan, 2022).

Although previous research has provided important insights into audience agency and the negotiation of authority on social media, there are still empirical gaps that need to be addressed. Studies on online religious communication show that audiences are not passive recipients, but rather active participants who affirm, correct, challenge, and reinterpret creators' messages, making religious authority increasingly negotiable in platform-based public spaces (Hirzalla et al., 2013; Lion & Dhaenens, 2023). Other studies emphasize that humorous digital preaching can broaden engagement, initiate cross-identity dialog, and foster empathy by challenging stereotypes and reducing communicative hostility (Aydin, 2023; Richter, 2021). However, much literature still positions humor primarily as a content presentation strategy, and moderation as a normative framework, without detailing how *wasatiyyah* is operationalized through observable reception mechanisms in comment interactions.

Starting from this gap, this research adopts an audience reception-based approach to examine how *wasatiyyah* "works" in the public comment space of TikTok. By using Husein Ja'far as a case study of one creator within the young influencer ecosystem, this research analyzes selected videos and salient comment threads collected between July and December 2025 through screenshots and video links. The unit of analysis for this research is individual comments and reply chains when negotiation, correction, or escalation occurs. This study aims to (1) identify the dominant audience acceptance attitudes toward humorous da'wah oriented toward *wasatiyyah*, (2) explain how humor functions as a mechanism for acceptance through de-escalation, affiliation, criticism, or stigmatization, and (3) examine the forms of contestation that influence the fragility or strength of moderation acceptance in the comment section, including authority disputes, moral boundary work, esthetic evaluation, and conflict framing. By developing a typology of acceptance attitudes and cross-video thematic synthesis, this research contributes to the study of digital religion by positioning *wasatiyyah* on TikTok as a negotiated interactional achievement, rather than a static, one-way message in digital proselytization.

Literature Review

Communication in Islam is not merely understood as a technical exchange of messages between the communicator and the recipient, but rather as a practice bound by divine values and human ethics (Tanjung & Abdullah, 2025). Within this framework, communication carries a dimension of moral responsibility that goes beyond pragmatic interests, as it is aimed at building understanding that promotes good (*al-ma'ruf*) and prevents harm (*al-munkar*) (Effendy et al., 2023). The effectiveness of a message is thus not solely determined by the appeal of the

packaging, but by its capacity to present social benefits and peace that are in line with the principles of Islamic law (Turhamun, 2022). This perspective is important because it positions communication as an ethical space, not merely a space for persuasion. The foundation of Islamic communication ethics also rests on principles that emphasize courtesy, exemplary behavior, and moral consistency. The principle of *Qaulun Karima*, for example, emphasizes the importance of using noble, respectful, and non-demeaning speech toward others (Faizin, 2022). In addition, *Uswah Hasanah* serves as the foundation for exemplary behavior, which presupposes harmony between the message and the sender's conduct, ensuring that religious communication does not lose its moral legitimacy. This framework shows that Islamic communication is adaptable to media changes, including the transformation of da'wah to the digital space, as long as it maintains the dignity of truth and courtesy as its core principles.

In contemporary communication science discourse, humor is understood not merely as entertainment, but as a strategy to attract attention and increase audience engagement. Psychologically, humor serves as an icebreaker that can reduce resistance to messages perceived as heavy, dogmatic, or rigid (Gulevich & Kalashnik, 2023). A more relaxed affective state allows the audience to be more open to receiving new information, while also building emotional closeness between the communicator and the communicatee. This aligns with persuasive communication, which emphasizes the importance of a pleasant atmosphere to make the message feel more personal and less preachy (Muhammad Aris et al., 2026). In the context of religious communication, the function of humor becomes significant because it can transform the experience of receiving religious messages from initially tense to more dialogical.

The effectiveness of humor is also often explained through incongruity theory, which emphasizes that laughter arises when the audience finds a surprise or a gap between their expectations and the reality presented in the narrative. In comedy preaching, this technique is often used by juxtaposing the ideal values of religion with the paradoxes of everyday life for young people, making the message more relevant and memorable (Nur Abida et al., 2024). Humor thus not only serves to improve information retention but also helps simplify complex theological issues so they can be understood through lighthearted narratives without losing the essence of the message (Ajmain et al., 2020). To a certain extent, humor can be a bridge connecting the sacred world of religion with the profane world of the audience's experience in a more communicative way.

On the other hand, the discussion of humor in religious communication needs to be placed within the framework of the values of Islamic moderation (*wasatiyyah*). *Wasatiyyah* is understood as the middle path that positions Muslims between two extreme poles: rigid radicalism (*ghuluw*) and excessive liberalism that disregards religious principles (*tafrit*) ("An Overview of Islam and Religious Moderation: Concept, Principles, and Indicators," 2023). This principle is rooted in the values of justice (*'adl*) and balance (*tawazun*) in understanding religious texts and responding to social issues. *Wasatiyyah* also emphasizes that steadfastness in faith can go hand in hand with tolerance (*tasamuh*), so Islam presents itself as a blessing that is adaptable to the changing times without losing its spiritual identity (Yani, 2022). Thus, moderation is not merely a normative concept, but an ethical orientation that shapes the way people practice religion and interact in public space.

For the younger generation, internalizing *wasatiyyah* requires a communication approach that is no longer predominantly doctrinal and one-way. In a digital landscape that easily triggers polarization, Islamic moderation needs to be translated into a language that is fluid and close to everyday reality. The right communication strategy—including the use of light narratives and humor—makes *wasatiyyah* easier to understand as an inclusive, solution-oriented, and calming lifestyle, rather than just heavy theological theory (Elvinaro & Syarif, 2022). Moderation in this

context serves as a framework for thinking that enables young people to practice religion intelligently: being critical in reasoning, but remaining polite in behavior, both in social and digital spaces.

The preference of Millennials and Gen Z for visual, concise, and interactive content further strengthens the urgency of an adaptive communication approach. This group tends to prioritize authenticity and the closeness of experience, making them more responsive to messages delivered honestly, as they are, and relevant to everyday life. In the highly competitive flow of social media information, young people develop self-filtering mechanisms and tend to ignore communication that is too formal, rigid, or one-way (Efendi & Giyana, 2025). This pattern makes digital da'wah strategies that prioritize conversational style, humor, and emotional closeness easier to gain attention. Additionally, young people also tend to trust influencers as a source of values because of the emotional bond and sense of closeness built through regular digital interactions. In receiving religious messages, they prefer narratives that can address practical anxieties without making them feel judged. This is what explains why humor-infused preaching has a strong appeal: humor breaks down formality, reduces tension, and makes religious topics more "relatable" in everyday life. Social media, in this context, is not just a space for entertainment, but also a space for discourse where young generations form a moderate Islamic identity that is also in line with the dynamics of modern life (Rizal Effendi Putra et al., 2024).

Several previous studies have explored digital preaching, but the majority still focus on preacher branding strategies, the effectiveness of platform usage, or the representation of Islamic values in video content. Studies on millennial preaching, for example, often conclude that engaging visual content is key to attracting a young audience, while research on Islamic moderation is widely discussed in the context of formal education. Although the literature provides an important foundation regarding the digital behavior of the ummah, there is still a gap in how humor is specifically used as the main narrative to ground *wasatiyyah*, which is often considered too theoretical for the general public (Ahmad et al., 2022). Additionally, although research indicates that TikTok transforms da'wah practices into something more concise, popular, and engagement-oriented, many studies continue to focus on the messages produced by creators, rhetorical styles, and value representation strategies in videos (Ariff, 2012; Khamis, 2021). Literature on humor in religious communication has also affirmed its role in building closeness, reducing tension, and opening up space for discussion on sensitive issues. However, humor is also understood as an ambiguous device because it can evoke resistance, reinforce identity boundaries, or mask stigma through jokes that are difficult to distinguish between criticism, mockery, and delegitimization (Gaillard, 2025; Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2016; Richter, 2021). In the context of platform-based public spaces, the meaning of a message is not solely determined by the creator, but also by the public, dynamic, and layered reception practices of the audience, where the message can be negotiated, contested, or diverted by user-to-user interactions (Hirzalla et al., 2013; Lion & Dhaenens, 2023). Therefore, the literature has not adequately explained the interactional mechanisms that make moderation messages strong or fragile in the comment ecology, especially when humor serves as both a gateway to participation and a medium that can mask boundary policing and subtle forms of stigma (Aydin, 2023; Gaillard, 2025; Kuipers, 2011).

Starting from this gap, this study aims to qualitatively analyze audience reception patterns toward humorous da'wah with a *wasatiyyah* orientation on TikTok through a case study of the Husein Ja'far account. This study maps the dominant reception stances (acceptance, negotiation, resistance), explains the function of humor in reception dynamics (de-escalation, affiliation, criticism, or stigmatization), and identifies the forms of authority contestation and

conflict framing that shape moderation negotiations in the comment section. Thus, this research offers a conceptual contribution in the form of a typology of reception and an explanation of social mechanisms that enriches understanding of digital proselytization and the practice of *wasatiyyah* as an achievement negotiated within platformed publics.

Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with a reception analysis framework to understand how audiences interpret, respond to, and negotiate moderation-oriented (*wasatiyyah*) da'wah messages in TikTok comment sections as a discursive space and public interaction (Ariff, 2012; Choquette, 2022; Hirzalla et al., 2013; Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2016; Kaplan et al., 2021; Ott & Schweizer, 2018).

Research Materials

The data consists of public comments and reply chains from 16 selected videos posted between July and December 2025. Comments were collected via screenshots as "evidence comments" rich in themes and narratives, read within the context of the thread to capture negotiation, correction, and escalation (Ariff, 2012; Hirzalla et al., 2013; Lion & Dhaenens, 2023; Ott & Schweizer, 2018).

Sampling Strategy

Sampling used purposive salient sampling to select "thick moments" based on high engagement, thematic relevance, and reply chain dynamics. The analysis prioritizes the early comment window (first 7 days), while comments outside this period are treated as evidence of sustained resonance, not prevalence (Choquette, 2022; Khamis, 2021; Ott & Schweizer, 2018; Richter, 2021). User identities are disguised to protect privacy and the ethics of public comment use.

Coding Framework

Negotiation/Inquiry, Acceptance, Humor-affiliative, Resistance, and cross-case mechanisms: collective sense-making, escalation dynamics, platform noise (Hirzalla et al., 2013; Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2016; Ott & Schweizer, 2018; Richter, 2021). Table 1 contains the main codes, sub-codes, operational definitions for coding purposes, and examples of indicators in the form of phrases or language patterns that commonly appear in comments. The Negotiation/Inquiry category includes practical fiqh, modern ethical dilemmas, interfaith/term literacy, and strategic advice. The Acceptance category includes affective resonance, devotional affection, prosocial/*rahmah* ethics, *wasatiyyah* principles, and dissemination. The Humor-affiliative category includes de-escalation humor, wordplay/parody, and humor+critique. The Resistance category includes moral policing, authority delegitimization, conflict frame/provocation, form-based disapproval, and derogation via humor. Cross-case mechanism codes include collective sense-making and noise/platform intrusion.

The use of this codebook is not intended to produce quantitative measurements, but rather to strengthen consistency in interpretation and transparency in analysis. Literature emphasizes that clear code definitions, initial coding trials, and iterative refinement are essential practices for enhancing the validity of interpretations in qualitative content analysis (Ott & Schweizer, 2018). Thus, the codebook serves as a tool to link comment evidence to interpretive claims in an accountable manner.

Analysis Procedure

Analysis was conducted by coding salient comments per video, tracing reply chains, synthesizing cross-video themes, and constructing interpretive claims based on comment

snippets without frequency generalization (Hirzalla et al., 2013; Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2016; Lion & Dhaenens, 2023).

Table 1.

Audience Reception Codebook

Main Code	Sub-code	Operational Definition (for coding)	Example Indicator (phrase/pattern)
Negotiation / Inquiry	Practical fiqh	Questions about religious rulings, worship practices, etiquette (adab), or bodily ethics	“What is the ruling on...?”, wudu/prayer while sick, cosmetic surgery, eating while sitting
	Modern ethical dilemmas	Contemporary life dilemmas brought into the da’wah comment space	instalments/credit, halal trading, TikTok distraction → neglecting prayer
	Interfaith/terminology literacy	Confusion about religious terms/identities and requests for conceptual clarification	Christian–Catholic–Protestant; priest–pastor–deacon
	Strategic advice	Suggestions for communication strategy or outreach	“Why not talk about this outside...?”
Acceptance	Affective resonance	Expressions of being emotionally moved or validated	“This hit my heart,” “goosebumps,” “perfectly on my FYP”
	Devotional affection	Prayers, intercession requests, spiritual vulnerability, longing	“O Messenger of God...,” “a sinner like me...”
	Prosocial / rahmah ethic	Helping others, non-judgment, universal compassion	“helping others,” “love all of God’s creation”
	Wasatiyyah principles	Anti-coercion, charitable interpretation (husnuzan), de-escalation	“faith must come from the heart,” “maybe it’s their livelihood,” reframing “not the ummah”
	Dissemination	Acceptance expressed as intent to share or reuse content	asking permission to repost/use clips
Humor-affiliative	De-escalation humor	Humor used to reduce tension around sensitive issues	“don’t take it too seriously,” calming memes
	Wordplay/parody	Joining the joke through exaggeration, playful scenarios, parody	“share location, O Messenger,” parody of “tepuk sakinah”
	Humor + critique	Criticism delivered through jokes/emojis	sarcastic remarks about “bad actors,” “wrong-ology” (“kelirumologi”)
Resistance	Moral policing	Norm enforcement regarding behaviour, modesty, or creed	“don’t wear shorts...,” “this is dangerous...”
	Authority delegitimization	Rejecting the legitimacy of religious titles/authority	“it’s haram to call someone habib”
	Conflict frame / provocation	Pushing discussion toward confrontation logic	“what if your religion is insulted...?”
	Form-based disapproval	Rejecting the format/aesthetics rather than the message content	“the clapping is cringe,” “embarrassing to watch”
	Derogation via humor	Negative labeling/stigma disguised through laughter	“lost sheep” + emoji
Cross-cutting mechanism	Collective sense-making	Correction, fact-checking, and building shared narratives within threads	correcting terms; correcting rumors; consolidating convert-family narratives
Control code	Noise / platform intrusion	Promotional/spam comments unrelated to the content	job ads; brand/admin promotions

Result and Discussion

Generally, audience reception patterns can be understood through three main orientations: acceptance, negotiation, and resistance, which have been identified as dominant patterns in online religious communication studies (Aydin, 2023; Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2016; Kuipers, 2011; Lion & Dhaenens, 2023). However, the findings of this study indicate that these three orientations are not always present as rigid and separate categories. In many cases, audience reception moves dynamically through comment chains, where humor, corrections, moral affirmations, and identity assertions intertwine to form a complex ecology of interaction. Using the framework of reception analysis, which emphasizes audience agency in constructing meaning, this study highlights that *wasatiyyah* is not merely "received" as a message, but is practiced as a social practice negotiated through language, affect, and relationships in the TikTok comment section.

Comment Space as Informal Religious Learning and Peer Counselling

Cross-video findings indicate that the TikTok comment section repeatedly functions as both a space for informal religious learning and a space for peer counselling that is accessible with low barriers. In this space, the audience doesn't just express agreement or disagreement, but uses the content and comment sections as a medium to seek life guidance, test moral boundaries, and negotiate religious practices relevant to daily life situations. This pattern aligns with the understanding that digital platforms have reconfigured da'wah from one-way communication to an arena of interaction that allows audiences to actively participate in the construction of meaning (Hirzalla et al., 2013; Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2016). Thus, audience reception in this context appears as practical use-value: the content is not only "liked," but used as an ethical compass and a trigger for discussions that provide direct benefits.

The most dominant negotiation topics include *micro-fiqh* questions and daily practices, such as those related to etiquette, worship limitations, and body ethics. This kind of question shows that the audience uses the comment section as an informal "*mini-fiqh class*" that is rich in interaction and quick responses. Additionally, modern moral dilemmas brought into the realm of preaching have also emerged, such as issues of installments and credit, questions about the permissibility of trading, and experiences of digital distraction that affect the quality of worship, especially prayer. This dilemma shows how audiences view TikTok preaching as a moral reference for navigating the tension between the demands of modern life and religious values. This finding is consistent with studies showing that millennial Muslims utilize short video content as a more contextual medium for religious learning and moral reasoning (Khamis, 2021; Thonnart, 2024). Beside issues of practice and ethics, the comment section also serves as a space for interfaith literacy and identity literacy. In several threads, the audience expressed confusion about socio-religious terms and labels, such as the differences between Christian–Catholic–Protestant or the different roles of religious figures like priests, pastors, and deacons. The clarification process is not hierarchical, but rather collective: other comments serve as responses that refine terms, add information, or steer the discussion toward a more precise understanding. This pattern confirms that audience reception doesn't stop at the "agree" level, but evolves into participatory practices of collaborative learning and peer counselling. Within the framework of

platformed publics, the comment section becomes an arena where religious meaning is shaped through repeated and open micro-interactions (Hirzalla et al., 2012; Hirzalla & van Zoonen, 2016).

Wasatiyyah as Everyday Ethics: Mercy, Anti-Coercion, and Good Interpretation

In the dimension of acceptance, the findings show that Islamic moderation (*wasatiyyah*) most often appears as a practical moral orientation, not as an explicit ideological slogan. The audience expresses moderation through language that emphasizes anti-coercion, for example, the idea that belief must grow from the heart and cannot be forced. This orientation shows *wasatiyyah* as a relational ethic that rejects symbolic violence while also allowing for a gradual spiritual process. This finding strengthens the literature that positions *wasatiyyah* as a framework for moderation that seeks to reduce polarization and avoid extremism through a balanced approach (Khamis, 2021). Besides being anti-coercion, audience acceptance is also manifested through the framing of compassion (*rahmah*) and prosocial ethics. Many comments expressed non-judgmental moral support, inclusive prayers, and encouragement to help others regardless of their identity. This form of acceptance shows that *wasatiyyah* is accepted as a social practice that prioritizes care, not as a claim of moral superiority. In some cases, audiences also exhibit charitable interpretation as a moderation mechanism, which is the tendency to reduce prejudice, offer the most favorable reading of others' actions, and avoid hasty judgments. This practice confirms that moderation is not only about the content of da'wah messages, but also manifests in how the audience speaks about others in digital public spaces.

Interfaith discussions show the acceptance of moderation as an affective bridge. Some threads show the audience reframing, that is, shifting the narrative from intergroup conflict toward a narrower critique of specific figures or actors, thus avoiding generalization about the religious group as a whole. In this context, moderation appears as the ability to manage conflict through more precise language that does not produce collective hatred. Additionally, expressions of admiration and gratitude emerged across identities, indicating that humorous preaching can open up a warmer space for dialog. These findings align with the literature emphasizing that humor can serve as a communication bridge to build empathy and understanding across identities, while also challenging stereotypes that hinder dialog (Aydin, 2023; Richter, 2021).

Moderation as a Negotiated Achievement: Contestation, Boundary Work, and Authority Disputes

Although the reception of moderation appears strong in many comments, the results of this study confirm that *wasatiyyah* is not a message that flows smoothly and one-directionally. Conversely, moderation emerges as a social achievement that is constantly tested through negotiation and contestation in the comment section. In the negotiation category, the audience not only asked questions to understand, but also engaged in critical inquiry that tested the moderation framework. For example, there is a question asking why intolerance persists despite the Quranic teachings that emphasize tranquility and balance. This kind of question shows that the audience does not fully accept moderation as the final answer, but rather uses it as a framework to assess the social reality they observe. Beside critical inquiry, negotiation also appears in strategic advice directed toward creators or communities, for example, the suggestion that moderation messages be disseminated more widely or more accurately targeted. This shows

that the audience plays a role as a co-producer in digital da'wah practices: they not only consume messages but also contribute to suggesting the direction of communication considered effective. This pattern is consistent with reception analysis, which emphasizes that audiences have agency and are able to shape the meaning and implications of the content they consume (Hirzalla et al., 2012; Hirzalla & van Zoonen, 2016).

Meanwhile, resistance emerged in several relatively consistent forms across videos. First, moral policing, which are comments that enforce norms of behavior, decency, or the body, often with a scolding or reprimanding tone. Second, authority delegitimization, which is the rejection of the legitimacy of certain titles or symbols of authority, indicating that religious authority in the digital space is fluid and can be challenged. This pattern aligns with the literature stating that social media allows users, especially young people, to question traditional authority through humor, satire, or direct criticism (Richter, 2021; Aydin, 2023). Third, conflict framing or provocation, which are comments that push the debate toward a confrontational "us vs them" logic, making moderation difficult to maintain. Literature suggests that this type of conflict framing can strengthen in-group and out-group identities, while also reducing the likelihood of productive dialog (Emami & Sobhani, 2020; Kaplan et al., 2021).

Resistance also manifests in the form of credibility policing, for example, accusations that creators are "like farming" or presenting a certain persona for popularity. Such accusations show that audience reception depends not only on the substance of the message, but also on the perception of the creator's authenticity and credibility. In the context of the comment section as a mini public sphere, these resistance practices affirm that the boundaries of moderation are constantly contested and tested. Thus, *wasatiyyah* emerges as a social process that is both dynamic and fragile, as its success depends on whether norms of interaction can be maintained when the contestation of authority and morality intensifies.

Humor as an Infrastructure for Participation and a Double-Edged Mechanism

Humor is the most prominent element in the audience's reception ecology of TikTok preaching content. The findings indicate that humor often serves as an interactional glue that facilitates audience participation. In the affiliative humor category, the audience doesn't just laugh or give emojis, but actively participates in building the humor through parody, wordplay, and meme-like elaborations that strengthen social closeness. This practice demonstrates that humor can be a pedagogical infrastructure that makes sensitive issues more "talkable" without immediately triggering hostility. Literature confirms that humor can alleviate tension and allow moral criticism or reflection to be delivered more acceptably (Richter, 2021; Hirzalla & van Zoonen, 2016).

Humor also serves as a de-escalation mechanism. Some comments noted that sensitive issues should not be taken too seriously, or that humor could be used to de-escalate conflict. This pattern shows that humor can be a social strategy to keep the atmosphere of interaction light, allowing discussions to continue without immediately turning into arguments. In the context of online religious communication, this kind of humor serves as a tool to maintain social affiliation while preventing polarization.

However, the findings also confirm that humor is two-edged. In some threads, humor is used to disguise derogation, for example, through negative labeling delivered with laughter or

emojis. This kind of resistance is important because it shows how stigma can operate subtly under the guise of humor. Literature on humor in ideological discourse shows that humor can be a tool for reinforcing social boundaries and reinforcing moral hierarchies, not just building solidarity (Kuipers, 2011; Hirzalla & van Zoonen, 2016; Gaillard, 2025). Additionally, humor can generate noise platforms in the form of rumor talk or irrelevant comments that distract from the main message. In some cases, this noise triggers fact-checking and correction processes by other audience members, demonstrating the existence of a collective sense-making mechanism that works to maintain order in the meaning of the discussion.

Content Accepted, Performance Debated: Esthetic Legitimacy in Digital Da'wah One of the most salient patterns in the cross-video findings is the bifurcation of reception, which is a situation where the audience accepts the moral substance of the content but rejects or doubts its performative style. Some comments affirm that the Qur'anic message or ethical values conveyed are considered good, but the performance, deemed "cringe," embarrassing, or childish, generates resistance to the form of delivery. This pattern indicates that the reception of digital preaching is evaluate through two layers: content/value legitimacy and aesthetic/performative legitimacy. This tension aligns with the literature stating that entertainment esthetics can increase engagement but also create friction with norms of sacredness and traditional authority (Hassan, 2022).

In this context, humor serves as a face-saving mechanism for criticism. Audiences can reject the form of presentation without fully attacking the creator's message or figure, so resistance is expressed in the form of jokes or satire. This finding shows that humor not only serves as a bridge for acceptance but also as a tool that allows audiences to negotiate distance from content considered inconsistent with their esthetic preferences. Thus, moderation in digital preaching does not only depend on the normative quality of the message, but also on the compatibility of the performative style with the norms of decency and the audience's taste within TikTok culture.

Authority Negotiation, Collective Sense-Making, and Platform Conditions The final findings highlight how religious authority is explicitly negotiated through the practices of naming, labeling, and claiming symbolic boundaries in the comment sections. Some audience members used casual address that flattened hierarchies, while others asserted authority boundaries by rejecting certain titles or issuing moral warnings. This dynamic is consistent with the literature showing that social media has become an arena where religious authority can be challenged, negotiated, or reasserted through public interaction (Richter, 2021; Aydin, 2023; Khamis, 2021). Thus, moderation is not only a matter of "message content," but also a matter of the legitimacy of who is considered entitled to speak and in what style religious messages can be accepted as valid.

In addition, many threads demonstrate the process of collective sense-making, where the audience collaborates to correct terms, clarify identities, and build a more complete narrative understanding. This practice shows that the acceptance of moderation is not only individual, but is formed through collective interpretive work that occurs in a chain of interactions. However, the findings also indicate that correction can trigger escalation dynamics when accountability turns into personal attacks. When the correction process enters the realm of interpersonal

aggression, moderation becomes fragile and discussion shifts toward polarization. This kind of escalation pattern has been identified in studies of online debates, where anonymity and emotional intensity can drive a shift from disagreement to open conflict (Emami & Sobhani, 2020; Ford et al., 2014; Kaplan et al., 2021).

In summary, the cross-video evidence map in Table 2 shows that audience reception of *wasatiyyah* on TikTok does not function as one-way approval of creator messages, but rather as a situational and interactional practice of meaning-making. The comment section becomes a social infrastructure where the audience transforms da'wah content into everyday ethical references, as well as an arena where the boundaries of moderation's legitimacy are constantly tested through negotiation, correction, resistance, and conflict framing. In this ecology, humor serves as a mechanism that broadens participation and maintains relational warmth, but at the same time can be a medium for veiled resistance through stigma, delegitimization, and platform noise. Thus, Islamic moderation in digital da'wah is more accurately understood as a communicative achievement shaped by audience agency and platform conditions that emphasize visibility, affect, and viral potential (Gallardo et al., 2024; Kuipers, 2011; Lion & Dhaenens, 2023; Speck, 2019).

Table 2.

Cross-Video Evidence Map

Cross-video theme	Strongest videos	Brief evidence (comment types)	Meaning for “reception”
Comment space as a micro-fiqh classroom and informal counselling	J1, A1, O1/O2, N2, D1	bodily/adab fiqh questions; interfaith marriage; praying while ill; instalments/trading; neglecting prayer due to TikTok	Reception as use-value: audiences treat content as an everyday ethical compass
Wasatiyyah as relational ethics (anti-coercion, rahmah, charitable interpretation)	A1, A2, D2, S3	“faith comes from the heart,” “not forced”; universal compassion; enabling questions without stigma; solidarity narratives	Moderation appears as social practice, not an ideological slogan
Moderation is negotiated and contested	J2, J3, O1	moral policing; conflict provocation; delegitimising titles; terminology debates turning aggressive	The comment field becomes an arena of authority and meaning negotiation; wasatiyyah is not “smooth” or automatic
Humour as interactional glue—yet double-edged	J1, A2, S1, N1, N2, J3	humour alignment; de-escalation (“don’t take it too seriously”); laughter used for labelling (“lost/strayed sheep”)	Humour can calm tensions, but also mask resistance and stigma
Content accepted, performance contested (aesthetics of da’wah)	S4 (most explicit)	“good lyrics/Qur’anic source” vs “cringe clapping/childish rhythm”; embarrassment to watch	Reception is shaped by propriety and aesthetic norms, not only values
Genre effect: content type shapes comment ecology	S1, J3, D1, D2	S1 → prayers/affection; J3 → identity/terminology confusion; D1 → guilt–habit narratives; D2 → harmony/nostalgia	Reception varies by genre: devotional, interfaith-identity, moral-life navigation

Overall, the findings of this study show that the acceptance of *wasatiyyah* on TikTok is a dynamic and never-final social process. Moderation appears strong when the audience uses the comment section as a space for learning and peer counselling, and when relational ethics such as mercy, non-coercion, and good faith are practiced through language that avoids stigma and generalizations. However, moderation also appears fragile because it is constantly threatened by

moral policing, authority disputes, conflict provocation, and interpersonal escalation that can shift discussions from clarification toward polarization (Ford et al., 2013; Emami & Sobhani, 2020; Kaplan et al., 2021). Humor becomes a key node in this ecology: it broadens participation and makes it easier to discuss sensitive issues, but it can also mask derogation and reinforce boundary work through ambiguous jokes (Kuipers, 2011; Hirzalla & van Zoonen, 2016; Gaillard, 2025). Thus, *wasatiyyah* in digital da'wah cannot be understood solely as a normative message delivered by the creator, but rather as a communicative achievement shaped by audience agency and the dynamics of platform-based public space, where moderation is constantly negotiated in the tension between learning, affiliation, contestation, and conflict (Alnajjar et al., 2025; Garnes-Tarazona, 2025)

Conclusion

This research shows that TikTok proselytization oriented toward moderation and laced with humor is not accepted as a fixed doctrinal message, but rather as an interactional achievement that is constantly negotiated in the public comment space. In the various videos analyzed, the audience utilized the comment section as an infrastructure for informal religious learning and peer counselling, where micro-fiqh questions, everyday ethical dilemmas, and cross-faith terminology literacy were collectively processed. Moderation most often appears as an everyday relational ethic—compassion, anti-coercion, and good interpretation—rather than as an ideological slogan. However, the comment section also becomes an arena for contestation, as moral policing, delegitimization of authority, conflict framing, and credibility disputes repeatedly test the boundaries of moderation. Humor serves as both a social adhesive and a double-edged sword, as it can foster affiliation and de-escalation, but can also mask stigma and subtly reinforce boundary policing. The significant contribution of this research is the identification of the bifurcation pattern of reception, where the audience accepts the moral content but rejects the performative esthetics, indicating that the legitimacy of digital proselytization is evaluated through two layers: values and esthetics. This study enriches the study of digital religion through a typology of audience acceptance attitudes and an explanation of the social mechanisms that shape moderation in platformed publics. Further research could compare different creators, test changes in comment ecology longitudinally, and examine the influence of platform affordances on moderation narrative vulnerability.

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