

A NETNOGRAPHY ANALYSIS OF THEMATIC HADITH MEMES DISTRIBUTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Ermawati Usman

Universitas Islam Negeri Datokarama Palu
Email: ermawati@uindatokarama.ac.id

Nurdin Nurdin

Universitas Islam Negeri Datokarama Palu
Email: nurdin@uindatokarama.ac.id

Ashir Ahmed

Swinburne University, Australia
Email: azamed@swin.edu.au

Miftachul Huda

Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia
Email: miftachul@fsk.upsi.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Instead, the use of hadith memes among Muslim communities is rampant, and the study of hadith memes is scarce. This study, therefore, aims to examine the use of hadith memes by millennial Ulama and the types and content of hadith memes disseminated and exchanged in the virtual world by millennial Ulama. This study built thematic hadith memes based on their contents and formats on social media platforms using Rajan's (2015) theory of religious memes. This study employed a netnography method, collecting data from the social media sites Facebook and WhatsApp of Islamic millennial Ulama. We used a thematic approach in analyzing the data. Our results show that hadith memes disseminated on social media sites fall into four themes. The first theme is prayer hadith memes that present the traditions of prayers in Islam. The second theme is hadith memes related to sacrifice, which depict messages of Muslims' willingness to practice gratitude and to sacrifice to do things according to Allah's will. The third theme of the hadith memes is that they present messages about the afterlife, which tells about the end of life, such as life in the grave, hell, and heaven. The last theme is hadith memes about tolerance, which tell about the importance of living in tolerance and respecting each other. We conclude that our study contributed to understanding the distribution of hadith meme themes in the virtual world to enhance the sharing and exchange of Islamic teachings.

Keywords: Hadith Memes; Social Media; Online Hadith; Thematic Analysis; Netnography

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has enabled the spread of various forms of digital information for communication purposes. This digital information can be in images, text, videos, memes, and more (Rogers, 2021). Currently, memes have attracted more attention and become a subject of many researchers across the globe. Memes have also become a new media to facilitate the distribution of messages among Internet users. Studies found that more and more internet users search for memes on Google for various purposes, such as marketing, information sharing, and propaganda (Beskow, Kumar, & Carley, 2020). Memes have been widely used to spread information through various social media platforms, either just for notification purposes or for campaign purposes on various social, political, and educational issues, and even the dissemination of religious-related information (Ratkiewicz et al., 2011).

Previous studies found that most of the young Muslim generation no longer rely on conventional teachers or educational institutions, such as Ulama, madrasah, or Islamic boarding schools, to learn Islam (C.-M. Hefner, 2016). A survey conducted by the State Islamic University of Jakarta, which involved 1214 young generations from 34 provinces in Indonesia, also found similar results in which Muslim millennials have intensive access to online resources to increase their knowledge of Islamic teachings (Halimatusa'diyah, 2021). The changing paradigm in learning Islam reflects the changing behavior of the young generation in utilizing new media. The young Muslim age uses digital media not only for fun but also for educational purposes. As such, the role of digital media in religious studies has also become pivotal for the acquisition and dissemination of religious knowledge (Hjarvard, 2008). This caused the emergence of various digital platforms and digital media that interfere with knowledge authorities.

As a result of the phenomenon of using the Internet for communication purposes through various platforms, Islamic da'wah activities are also increasingly prevalent in multiple digital formats through social media and the form of digital memes. More than ten years ago, using digital images to distribute online messages and content caused the emergence of memes as a new digital media to facilitate digital information and knowledge exchange among virtual communities (Wood, 2020). Likewise, the spread of religious texts that were previously shared and communicated through manual leaflets has been transformed into digital memes, such as the dissemination of hadiths and Quranic verses (Syahridawaty & Qudsy, 2019). Even the religious memes of the Internet are considered to represent the humanist and spiritual ideas of certain people, which is called Sufistic memes.

Currently, the young generation tends to distance themselves from conventional religious institutions, such as Mosques and churches, to obtain religious-related knowledge because they are busy or attached to new media. Thus, creating and circulating aesthetically pleasing short-form videos such as memes has become a new media of religious dissemination that is considered meaningful for conveying more touching religious messages (Haden Church & Feller, 2020). The rampant use of memes has triggered the dissemination of religious teaching in online spaces. The memes support the virilizing of information at a low cost and minimum effort. In addition, Internet users can see the memes repeatedly because they are funny and attractive, which causes them to keep them in mind for an extended period and circulate them across Internet platforms.

The memorable characteristics of memes have caused them to be a practical tool for delivering Islamic teaching to online communities. Individual Muslim scholars or organizations can utilize memes to deliver various religious messages to change Muslim communities' knowledge and behavior. Islamic education and religious messages can be designed and modified with exciting characteristics and disseminated with memes. For example, hadith related to Islamic praying, fiqh, sadaqah, zakat, etc., can be delivered with interesting digital memes through images, videos, and texts. The memes can also be distributed and exchanged using various social media sites that connect Muslims across regions and the globe.

Previous studies (e.g: Obada & Dabija, 2022; Zulli & Zulli, 2022) argue that most online communication modes have used memes on the Internet to distribute information and to persuade virtual communities to adopt particular behavior and knowledge. As such, various memes are growing in online space to shape communities and opinions. The memes also deliver various messages based on the creators of the memes' mission (Latchem, 2014). For example, business actors might create memes for their product marketing. In contrast, religious actors, such as preachers and Ulama, might create and use memes to deliver religious teachings and messages to their followers. This helps Muslim communities access knowledge by distributing religious memes, such as hadith and Qur'an verses memes, faster and more conveniently.

Likewise, popular Ulama such as Abdul Somad, Adi Hidayat, Felix Siau, and others have carried out da'wah communication activities through various platforms on the Internet. The use of short memes in text, images, and videos is also increasingly widespread by individuals and religious organizations. Experts such as Bellar et al. (2013) said that religion-related Internet memes can shed more light concepts on religious concepts about religious messages in society.

The distribution of religious memes, such as hadith memes, has been found to be able to instill divine experiences of internet users even while transcending the constraints of mobile media that circulates them (Haden Church & Feller, 2020). Similarly, the use and distribution of hadith memes across internet platforms are considered to increase the Muslim community's spiritual experience and knowledge of various Islamic teachings. However, studies on the distribution of hadith memes and their topics shared in online space are scarce. Meanwhile, such studies are critical to providing deep insight into the distribution of various types of hadith memes across online platforms to increase digital hadith meme distribution effectiveness among Muslim communities.

Therefore, this study aims to examine and discuss the distribution of the types of hadith memes spread on the Internet. This study also intends to classify or categorize what sorts of hadith memes are spread on the Internet. In doing this study, we used Rajan's theory (2015) of faith meme types to examine the types of hadith memes shared in the social media groups of millennial Ulama in Central Sulawesi, both on Facebook and WhatsApp groups. This research is expected to provide understanding to academics and practitioners regarding the spread of hadith meme types in increasing public Muslim knowledge and spirituality.

NETNOGRAPHY APPROACH TO RESEARCH

This research used a netnography methodology to study community and social interaction in a virtual world (Bowle, 2010). The term ethnography comes from ethnography which is a research method to study communities' social interaction within a conventional context, and when the community interactions are practiced in a virtual world, then the ethnography becomes ethnography (Morais, Santos & Gonçalves, 2020; O'Donohoe, 2010). In this study, we examined millennial ulama social interaction on the Internet and social media platforms when they disseminate and exchange information in a virtual world. Communication in this study was related to the spread of hadith memes on the social media platforms of millennial Ulama.

The observation and examination of millennial ulama interaction on social media sites such as WhatsApp groups and Facebook were conducted for three months. Such observation and reflection resemble the ethnography method where the researchers and online communities (millennial Ulama) engage with the millennial Ulama and other online communities as practiced by Jeacle (2021). Through the use of netnography method, we were able to understand deeply the interaction of millennial Ulama as virtual communities in sharing and transferring hadith memes. Then, we collected types of hadith

memes shared among them and other Muslim communities.

Furthermore, the analysis of hadith memes on the Internet was carried out by identifying and classifying the types of memes spread by referring to the theory of faith memes by Rajan (2015), which includes prayer memes, sacrifice memes, and end-of-day memes. We used the concepts from the theory to observe and categorize the hadith memes shared by millennial Ulama in Central Sulawesi on their social media groups. However, in this study, we are also open to new themes of hadith memes. In other words, Rajan's theory did not preclude our analysis of new themes of hadith memes shared by millennial Ulama.

The data from social media content analysis related to the spread of hadith memes was analyzed using an online content analysis approach (Su et al., 2017). This allowed researchers to understand the cultural context of human action in the context of online communities related to the spread of hadith memes. The content analysis results were categorized through a coding process by following the categories and themes of the memes (Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl, & Dobusch, 2018) communicated in the social media groups of the millennial Ulama.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF MEMES

The concept of 'meme' was first mentioned by Richard Dawkins. It refers to the transmission of small units of culture analogous to genes that spread from person to person as genes spread themselves from one pool to another by moving from one body to another. Dawkins gives instances of memes such as slogans, fashions, and musical songs. As such, the term Memes has been transformed into Internet Memes when they are used and transmitted across internet platforms in the forms of digital messages and images, and they are quickly designed and transformed into new tools for online communication (Mielczarek, 2018).

The term of Meme has been simplified from the word mimeme, which relates to the concept of memory with genes. Memes can be defined as cultural units that duplicate themselves in a process of copying and imitating. In a broad sense, the concept of Meme includes repeated lines, phrases, images, behaviors, ideas, or fragments of ideas that are perceived to quickly stick to the minds of users and also spread quickly (Susan Blackmore & Blackmore, 2000). Then, memes are widely used as a new metaphor to distribute digital content in online space. The memes are considered to fit new media in online communication, and they are also fitted with other digital media species. The

memes also support delivering various types of messages produced by different individuals and organizations to be disseminated across online environments (Zhang & Pinto, 2021).

Internet memes support the production and the creation of online content in a new format to be distributed online across communication environments by adjusting messages to give them subjectivity and generating new ways of communication (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Memes can be in the form of images, content, and videos while at the same time adding other language elements to them that are able to adapt to the internet media environment (Rajan, 2015). Memes present a participatory notion in the context of online communication that leads to the production and utilization of content that often takes the form of humor. Memes often take the form of digital photos or images that are humorous and ironic and sometimes aim to provoke humorous and critical ideas in society (Brantner, Lobinger, & Stehling, 2020).

Internet memes are also considered to be highly visual and emotive online communications media that use images of popular culture with short messages to communicate. Internet users use the word Meme to describe a medium of absorption and dissemination of certain ideas presented in the form of written text, images, language, or other cultural units (Truskowski, Rouff, Akhavannik, & Tunstel, 2020). These characteristics of Internet Memes' rapid dissemination and modification characteristics have provided insights into how culture is produced and transmitted in the context of new media. This process describes the participatory culture involving internet users modifying memes to distribute their digital messages.

Scholars found that the successful engagement of communities in online media space should be supported by the communities' literacy on digital media. Social media literacy aims to address the negative effects of social media use (Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2021). Within religious message distribution, media literacy can help Muslim communities participate actively and exchange meaningful content to deliver Islamic teachings. In other words, the Muslim community must have better technological proficiency in being involved in pop culture discourses to make and design digital media content to enable the spreading of Islamic messages virally. Such viral distribution of Islamic information can lead to Live Religion (Silvestri, 2015), in which the Islamic information and teachings are circulated and manifested by literate Muslim society. Thus, Muslim society's ability to understand Internet memes as a construction created in the form of images and texts with various themes, such as religious culture or religious traditions, can be combined with our ability to understand elements of popular culture.

MEMES IN RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

Previously, memes belonged to political and business institutions to promote their interest and business. In context, the memes were mainly adopted and used by religious believers. However, currently, the memetic culture is consumed by religious believers. Their religious institutions also utilize it by creating memes in particular formats, such as a short movie to be distributed online (Campbell & Sheldon, 2021). Such short films may consist of religious preaching that mimics the style and the form of a popular culture meme.

It often does not explicitly list the identity of the author of the religious memes. Some research shows that posting photos generates more likes, and people will post repeatedly, making it more effective in spreading the message (Campbell & Sheldon, 2021). Religious institutions use this to their benefit by posting meme-image-based religious messages in the hope that they will spread effectively. The distribution of religious memes is particularly important on more fully structured social media sites such as Instagram, Pinterest, Google+, and so on (Brubaker, Boyle, & Stephan, 2017). Such used memes are a way of being metonyms for themes preached by religious institutions and thus become more easily disseminated. By attaching images in the dissemination of religious beliefs, the attention of social media users can be attracted and religious materials can spread quickly digitally (Burroughs & Feller, 2015).

The messages of religious institutions online usually aim to instill divine experiences in their followers and must even transcend the boundaries of the mobile media that circulates them. In response to this urgency, religious institutions' messages can overcome communication barriers by using *synecdoche* or language that represents multiple meanings to create a more complete interaction with God (Haden Church & Feller, 2020). Internet religious memes can simplify the dissemination of religious beliefs in a more effective way. The use of Internet memes in spreading religion has made religious content more accessible and possibly more relevant in the lives of religious people on social media networks. Internet memes can also help promote religious allegiance, but they can also criticize religious beliefs (Burroughs & Feller, 2015).

Religious individuals and institutions can act as a creator of religious memes by continually producing and distributing religious memetics on their social sites. Religious memetics can be incorporated with various religious teachings and messages to increase believers' knowledge and spirituality. The religious memetic can also be used for worship to make the believers more attached to their religion in online space. For example, Muslim society often shares memes related to praying, hadith, and Al-Quran verses for worship. Even though

society does not attend conventional religious learning, such as in schools, mosques, or churches, they still can learn religious teaching and practice it in daily life. This reflects that religious practices have jumped from the pages of scripture into a virtual reality, which is called a new home by millennial individuals, both religious and non-religious. Related to memes in the context of religion, there are three types of memes, according to Rajan (Rajan, 2015), namely:

1. **Faith Memes or Prayer Memes** are the format of memes that are used to encourage societies to build a prayer habit by attracting and persuading the society to read the prayer meme texts or images. The prayer memes also encourage people to interact and communicate with God. The content of prayer memes is often based on values embedded in scripture, compassion, and forgiveness. The prayer memes can influence people to practice their praying even though they interact online. The prayer memes also want to depict that society does not need to spend longer time and get bored doing rituals, but the ritual can be made shorter, understandable, and still with a sincere conversation with God. The prayer memes can also facilitate the practice of prayer and popular religious culture among people who may need to be more religiously literate.
2. **Sacrifice Memesevoke** a sense of gratitude that obligates people to follow a particular way of life. These memes reaffirm beliefs through visualizations of sacrifices God encourages people to make. For example, images around us show a selfless lifestyle and encourage others to live the same way. The potency of such imagery creates respect in the minds of people who do not belong to a religious tradition. The messages of such memes are simple and, therefore, appeal to those outside the tradition who are accustomed to the value of sacrifice. The depiction of sacrifice aims to reaffirm the belief in the love of God.
3. **End of Days** memes are formats of memes that use narratives and images to communicate about the coming of doomsday and its signs. These memes also present images of the destruction of the world and stories of life in heaven and hell. End times memes are also used to evoke fear in the mind of the viewer. Fear not only works as a threat that affects individuals, but it also requires an understanding of the scriptures that provide references for the separation of good from evil in relation to the day of judgment or the afterlife. Allah frees those who do good deeds by admitting them to heaven and punishes those who do evil. These end-times memes, therefore, show the glory and holiness of God only to users who have knowledge of the apocalypse and thus will be motivated by the fear portrayed in the Meme.

THE DISTRIBUTION OF HADITH MEMES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The utilization of hadith knowledge acquired online in daily activities shows a high significance level. The use of hadith in everyday life is related to answering fiqh questions asked by the people in the daily lives of millennial Ulama, such as issues of worship and muamalah. Our study found that millennial Ulama uses the hadith knowledge acquired from online sources by sharing them on social media for the public to read. Transmitting hadith online has been done using previously popular memes in other fields, such as business, politics, and social affairs. Millennial Ulama is using memes to spread hadith that can increase the knowledge of Islamic society.

We found that the use of hadith memes in distributing Islamic teachings among millennial Ulama is considered an effective way to create participative religious messages and living hadith understanding among Muslim communities, as said by a millennial ulama as follows:

“I think the reason to use hadith memes in circulating Islamic teachings among Muslim communities is to increase the participation of Muslim communities in creating digital media to ease the distribution of Islamic teachings because such memes are easy to make and can be distributed quickly across regions. Besides, by using memes in sharing hadith, we can create a live religious experience because religious messages can be created and shared by someone self” (Participant ANW)

The participant statement above shows reasons for the use of hadith memes in the distribution of Islamic teachings among Muslim communities. The arguments are consistent with research conducted by Aguilar et al. (2017) and (Campbell, 2017), who found that the use of memes in religious message distribution can create lived religious experiences and digital culture, which become essential resources for presenting popular beliefs about religions.

The hadith memes shared include thematic hadiths such as hadith related to prayer, hadiths related to the Day of Judgment, and related to making sacrifices, and related to tolerance. Here are some examples of traditions based on these themes:

HADITH MEMES ABOUT PRAYER

The hadith memes shared by informants are related to prayers that are often used in everyday life. The prayer hadith memes shared by millennial Ulama are prayers that are commonly used by the community. For example, memes of hadith prayers easily accepted by Allah swt are shown in picture 1 below.



Source: <https://www.islamquote.com/2020/04/13/dua-supplication-for-protection-against-evil-diseases/>

The two Meme hadiths above show prayer for protection from lousy characters and from evils and black magic, commonly practiced by Muslim communities. The hadith memes reflect several prayers often shared among Muslims and used in their daily lives. Millennial Ulama even shares hadith prayer memes from their own organization, namely *Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, and also takes hadith prayer memes from other social media, such as Mutiara Islam.net, which are then shared in their social media groups.

HADITH MEMES ABOUT SACRIFICE

The second type of hadith memes that millennial Ulama often share are those that narrate the theme of sacrifice. The sacrifice hadith memes depict the willingness to do good deeds, sacrifice on Hajj, and give alms. Some examples of hadith memes with the theme of sacrifice shared by millennial Ulama on social media include the hadith depicted in picture 2.



Source: <https://www.nubontang.or.id/2020/06/berqurban-1-unta-atau-sapi-untuk-7-orang.html>

The two examples of hadith memes with a sacrifice theme encourage Muslims to make charity related to kind words and sacrificial prayers to slaughter animals. Such hadith memes can encourage the Muslim community to be aware and make charity, such as zakah and infaq, which potentially contribute to the welfare of the Muslim community. The distribution of hadith memes about the charity can increase the Muslim community's willingness to make infaq, sadaqah, and waqaf. This could help the government and improve Muslim society's economic welfare (Ascarya, 2022). As such, the distribution of hadith memes about charity and sacrificial animals can play significant roles in Islamic economic development.

HADITH MEMES ABOUT DOOMSDAY

The third category of hadith memes shared online by millennial Ulama are end-of-life hadith memes in which a hadith tells about the end of the world, the end of life, and lives in heaven and hell. These hadith memes are mostly intended to raise Muslims' awareness about the future of life and to prepare themselves by doing good deeds. Examples of these hadith memes include those shown in picture 3 below:



Source: <https://kumparan.com/berita-terkini/dalil-tentang-hari-akhir-jangan-diabaikan-1v5tRi1aWQL>

Such hadith memes narrating the story of hell and doomsday can prevent people from doing evil deeds. Such stories about hell and doomsdays can function as moral apocalyptic instruments (Cook, 1997) which can be used as a guidance that prevents them from doing evil things. Such hadith memes are commonly shared through millennial Ulama's social media site, Facebook. The content of the hadith memes narrated about living in the grave and hell can also be used as material for dakwah by other Muslims.

HADITH MEMES ABOUT TOLERANCE

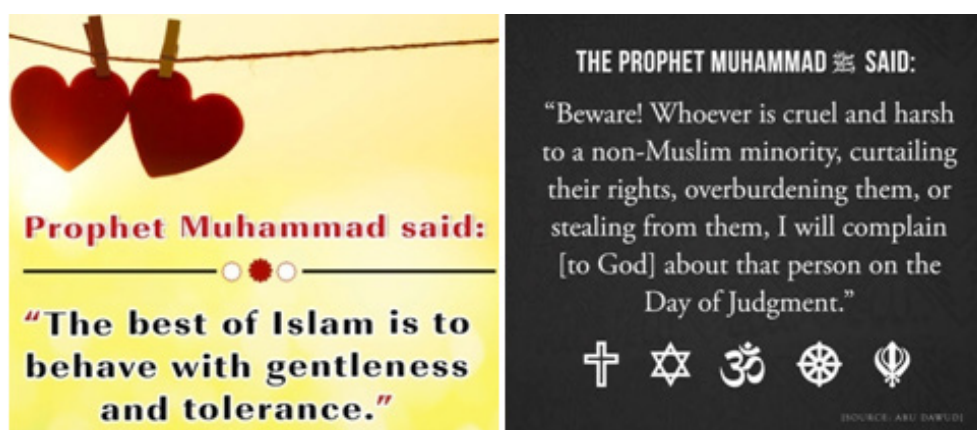
The millennial ulama generation also shared several hadith memes related to tolerance on their social media. Some of these hadith memes discuss the need to live well with neighbors, namely by loving neighbors as part of a Muslim's faith. The neighbors referred to here are not only Muslim neighbors but also non-Muslim neighbors. An example of a hadith about the need to respect neighbors is shown in Picture 4 below.



Source: <https://brainly.co.id/tugas/14909020>

Tolerance has become an important issue among millennial Ulama since they were trained with religious moderation topics in their Ulama cadet program. The religious material given during their ulama cadet program training were implemented daily by distributing hadith memes about tolerance with a neighbor and different race, as depicted in figure 5 above. The roles of religious authorities in promoting tolerance among societies have been found to be significantly important, in particular in reducing inter-race and religious conflict in Pakistan (Kalin & Siddiqui, 2014).

Given tolerance is an important issue in Indonesia (R. W. Hefner, 2021; Widayati & Maulidiyah, 2018), millennial Ulama shows their concern regarding the problems by stressing the importance of tolerance behavior and the importance of treating non-Muslims in a good manner. The concerns were reflected in the meme hadith they shared on social media as depicted in picture 6 below.



Source: <https://www.fly-cards.com/en/cards/108>

The distribution of hadith memes about tolerance is expected to grow a sense of tolerance and respect in the Muslim community to the non-Muslim minority. The sense of tolerance has become a critical psychological variable in raising mutual respect and forming positive feelings towards other minority groups (Dangubić, Verkuyten, & Stark, 2021). In some memes, tolerance also contains an invitation to love and respect fellow human beings, both fellow Muslims and other humans of different religions. The Prophet's words, "I will complain (to God) on the day of judgment," reflect the essential of respecting non-Muslim minorities. Sharing memes and hadith could potentially provoke the Muslim community to love other religious believers.

Memes tolerance has been discussed in the previous study, but it is limited to social and political context (Tawadros, 2020) rather than religious context.

In this study, religious meme tolerance was found to be shared in the form of hadith memes, which is a new theme. The memes hadith about religious tolerance in this study is different from Rajan's (2015) theory, which focuses on three themes: prayer, sacrifice, and the day after memes. Therefore, memes about tolerance are the new finding of this study. The finding of hadith memes about tolerance contributes to the development of theory in the context of hadith memes study. The new finding as the result of our netnography method we used in this study allows us to explore online phenomenon of virtual communities (Caliandro, 2014; Kulavuz-Onal, 2015; Lizzo & Liechty, 2022) of ulama millennial interaction in creating and distributing of hadith memes.

CONCLUSION

The results of our study show that various hadith memes shared by millennial Ulama on their social media can be categorized into four themes. Three of the themes are following Rajan's (2015) theory. However, in this study, the themes of hadith memes have been adapted to the context of hadith memes so that they are in accordance with the Islamic context, namely hadith memes about prayers, hadith memes about the last days such as the grave, and the day of judgment, and hadith memes related to pleasing sacrifices such as selfless sacrifice and sacrifice by giving alms. In this study, we also found a new theme of hadith memes, namely hadith memes about tolerance, which is an important theme in the context of the Indonesian state, especially in the context of the department of religion as the spearhead of maintaining moderation among Muslims.

This research only focused on the themes of hadith shared by the millennial ulama generation through the social media Facebook and WhatsApp. This research has not studied whether the individuals who share them have an excellent or superficial understanding of hadith. In the future, there is a need for further research that also focuses on in-depth interviews with individuals who often share hadith on social media to find out their level of knowledge about hadith.

Although some researchers argue that people who learn hadith through Internet memes have a superficial understanding of the meaning of hadith, the spread of hadith in the form of various memes can increase people's knowledge of different types of hadith. For example, hadiths related to prayers can increase the piety of people's understanding of multiple prayers derived from hadith. Then, the hadiths about sacrifices, such as sacrificing for charity, can increase the willingness of Muslims to make charity.

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