Performing Religion in the Stadium: Football and the Dynamics of Interreligious Engagement in Indonesia

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Abstract

This article examines how a highly visible, prayer-like gesture performed in a non-religious arena—professional football—circulates across social media and catalyzes interreligious engagement in Indonesia. Focusing on a pre-match gesture by China's goalkeeper Wang Dalei during the Indonesia–China fixture (date verified), we analyze how the gesture's platformed visibility and algorithmic amplification on TikTok triggered mixed public responses ranging from pious affirmation to skepticism and humor. Using qualitative content analysis of the most viral posts within a bounded window (H–3 to H+7), we code comments by theme (piety/devotion, identity/membership, performativity/gimmick, nationality/competition, humor/sarcasm) and sentiment (affirmative, neutral, critical), and interpret patterns through the lenses of Public Value (deliberation versus mere signaling in the public sphere) and the Contact Hypothesis (equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, institutional support). We find that digital encounters around sport can momentarily widen attention to religious difference while rarely fulfilling the structural preconditions for constructive contact; nevertheless, pockets of deliberation emerge where users negotiate norms of respect and sportsmanship. The study contributes to scholarship on lived religion and sport by relocating interfaith engagement from formal arenas to everyday digital publics, and by clarifying how platform logics shape the visibility, framing, and moral evaluation of religious gestures in popular culture.

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INTRODUCTION

The entanglement of religion and public life in Indonesia is not a new phenomenon. Known as a multireligious and multicultural country, the relationship between religion and public life is rather complex and multifaceted. Although Indonesians has been predominantly Muslims even the largest Muslim populations in the world since a long time ago, the rights of believers of all religions are guaranteed in the Indonesian constitution and Pancasila. This has brought Indonesia as a country that has been well-known in the aspects of religious tolerance and democratic values [1]. However, the realities are not always ideal. Religious-based conflicts and intolerance can still be found in many areas. Those can be seen mainly in the effect of the abuse use of religious symbols. Religion has been also used for the political purposes which then often traps into violence. Even in a few cases, the total still increases [2]. Several efforts, to respond to that reality, are implemented by the government such as the project of religious moderation, the establishment of Pancasila Ideology Supervisory Body (BPIP), and the Center of Religious Harmony (PKUB). This is important to minimize the occurrence of intra religious and inter religious intolerance, particularly against non-Muslims and Sunni groups as the minorities [3].

Having entangled in many religious aspects explicitly such as in the houses of worship and public rituals, this reality does not mean that the engagement did not occur in non-religious settings. What has been happening in the dynamics of religion and public life in Indonesia is that public spaces, even perceived as secular arenas such as stadiums, market, and roads, also become the arenas where religious identities are expressed, manifested, encountered, and contested. The differentiation of what is deemed as secular and sacred now is no longer static. The boundaries between them are now blurred and transparent, manifesting that religion might also be present in the non-religious settings [4]. This implies that every aspect of everyday life, be it clearly religious or not religious space, cannot be separated from the role and the present of religion, especially in the country which religiosity level is very strong. This reality could also be more evidence that what was argued by Peter Berger on the decline of religion, and he himself

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[1] Nicola Colbran, "Realities and Challenges in Realising Freedom of Religion or Belief in Indonesia," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 14, no. 5 (2010): 678; Benyamin F Intan, "Religious Pluralism, Public Religion, and Principled Pluralism in Indonesia," *Transformation* 40, no. 4 (2023): 334–49.

[2] Amirul Mukminin, "Religious Education in the World Largest Muslim Country's Public Schools: Past and Current Policies, Challenges, and Policy Recommendations," *LOGOS-A Journal of Religion, Philosophy, Comparative Cultural Studies and Art*, no. 113 (2022): 203; Benyamin Intan, "Religious Violence and the Ministry of Religion:'Public Religion'in the Pancasila-Based State of Indonesia," *International Journal of Public Theology* 13, no. 2 (2019): 230.

[3] Akhmad Rizal Shidiq, Arief Anshory Yusuf, and Dharra Widdhyaningtyas Mahardhika, "Comparing Religious Intolerance in Indonesia by Affiliation to Muslim Organizations," *Pacific Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2023): 5–34; Fahruddin Ali Sabri, "Membangun Fiqih Toleransi: Refleksi Fatwa-Fatwa Terhadap 'Aliran Sesat' Di Indonesia," *AL-IHKAM: Jurnal Hukum & Pranata Sosial* 13, no. 1 (2018): 145–66; Intan, "Religious Pluralism, Public Religion, and Principled Pluralism in Indonesia."

[4] Hent De Vries and Lawrence Eugene Sullivan, *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (Fordham Univ Press, 2006), ix–x; Kim Knott and Elizabeth Poole, *Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred: Representation and Change* (Routledge, 2016), 4–5.

later acknowledged for his inaccurate argument [5], is completely wrong, and religion increasingly becomes the inseparable aspect of current everyday life. Jose Casanova even argued that religion has been on the track of the process of what he called as "deprivatization", meaning that it witnesses towards the phenomenon of what might be described as "public religions" [6]. Any expressions and presences or religious symbols and gestures in the seemingly secular contexts then could be carefully considered. This is crucial to not downplay the role of religion where it also contributes to the people's behavior and actions.

In terms of interreligious dialogue and engagement, the mainstream scholarly works which are largely focused on the formal, institutional, and elitist forms of dialogue have also shifted and transformed towards the lived and everyday dimensions of interreligious relations and engagements. The formal and institutional forms of dialogue and relations previously overlooked the role of lay people and marginalized voices like women in the dialogue process, whereas the numbers of expert people in the formal institutions and the government are very few compared to the laypeople [7]. Then how it comes to be representative of the society where only a small part of them speaks about interreligious relations and dialogue. This was previously as if the non-experts cannot speak and represent themselves in the dialogue arenas, so that their voices were neglected [8]. In response to that condition, the emerging discourse of engagement turns in interreligious dialogue and relations opens this pandora to allow laypeople to speak and contribute to the dialogue and the broader aspects of interreligious relations. This growing aspect of interreligious relations is not by no means without any consequence. The ability to adapt and adjust with open public spaces will determine whether the people are capable or not to engage with people from different religions in just ways [9]. Engaging with the broader horizons of our identity means that engagement requires such a specific ethics of interactions. People of all religions must transform themselves from being exclusive to be pluralist, in a sense that peaceful interactions pay the attention on the common goal of interactions [10]. Any individual tendencies which could attract the unbeneficial results must be avoided. By implementing such dialogical awareness in interreligious engagement, the positive results of engagement might be achieved and conflicts might be prevented [11].

As for my case study in this article, I will try to examine the recent phenomenon which has gone viral in the social media about a goalkeeper from China national football group which gestured like doing a prayer identical with the Islamic prayer. With that gesture, many people in

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[5] Peter L Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999); Peter L Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Open Road Media, 1990).

[6] Jose Casanova, "Private and Public Religions," *Social Research*, 1992, 19–20.

[7] Judith Gruber, "Can Women in Interreligious Dialogue Speak? Productions of in/Visibility at the Intersection of Religion, Gender, and Race," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 36, no. 1 (2020): 51–69.

[8] Anna Neumaier and Gritt Klinkhammer, "Interreligious Contact and Media: Introduction," *Religion* 50, no. 3 (2020): 325.

[9] Nicholas Adams et al., "Interreligious Engagement in the Public Sphere," *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, 2013, 299.

[10] Anna Halafoff, "Encounter as Conflict: Interfaith Peace-Building," *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, 2013, 268–70.

[11] Izak Yohan Matrik Lattu and Fatimah Husein, "Dialog Antaragama: Dari Dialog Ke Engagement: Pengalaman Mengajar Di CRCS UGM," in *Studi Antar Agama: Metode Dan Praktik* (Yogyakarta: Gama Press, 2023), 2.

the social media assumed that he is a Muslim. There are debates on the comment columns whether that is true or not. This phenomenon simply shows that religion can also present in the stadium, in the football match, which is truly non-religious setting. To that phenomenon, so far, there was still few studies concerning the relationship between interreligious dialogue/engagement/encounter/contact and football, whereas this sport is the most popular one in the world. Those existing studies at least can be mapped into two research tendencies. First, the study which see the football as an instrumental tool for interreligious dialogue. This might be best represented by the study of Sterchele. His study explored the functions of collective rituals, including football rituals, which contributed to the reintegration process of Bosnian people as the aftermath of the 1992-95 war [12]. Also, the study of Muller revealed that an Amsterdam Soccer Tournament was constructed and instrumentalized for the purpose of social integration. The study of Martelli also emphasized on the football role in the social integration in the Europe, but in the case of immigrants [13]. Second, the study of Chidester which examined how the football has been historically intertwined in its emergence with Christianity and Indigenous religions. Even more, he stated that the football also has acted as the religion in terms of the functions. He called with the term "Sportgeist" or which means it represent the spirit of sport, or religion itself [14]. Then, the study of Ugba focused to reveal how the media explicitly and implicitly reported the religious tone of football in English premiership. This has rather similar tendency to the Chidester study, especially on the content of religion or belief in the football [15]. The study of Ludwig also shows the connection between cultic, superstitious, and quasi-religious practices in football [16]. In similar, the work of King also comprehended the quasi-religion phenomenon of football [17].

Amidst the observations of those existing studies, this article posits to fulfill the gaps left by previous researchers on the discourse of interreligious engagement on the football. This is because the previous studies tended to focus on capturing the relationship between religion and football merely on the discourse of instrumentalization of the football and quasi-religious roles. What I aim to examine here is regarding the expression of religious symbols on the field which then has been amplified in the social media as a contested gesture. This case might at some point have similarity whit what Ugba did in analyzing the media [18], but my focus will go deeper on grasping this phenomenon along with its relationship with the question of belief and

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[12] Davide Sterchele, "The Limits of Inter-Religious Dialogue and the Form of Football Rituals: The Case of Bosnia-Herzegovina," *Social Compass* 54, no. 2 (2007): 211–24.

[13] Floris Müller, Liesbet Van Zoonen, and Laurens De Roode, "The Integrative Power of Sport: Imagined and Real Effects of Sport Events on Multicultural Integration," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 25, no. 3 (2008): 387–401; Stefano Martelli, "Religions and Sports: Are They Resources For the Integration of Immigrants in the Host Society?," *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* 7, no. Italian Journal of Sociology of Education 7/3 (2015): 215–38.

[14] David Chidester, "Interreligious Football: Christianity, African Tradition, and the Religion of Football in South Africa," in *Global Perspectives on Sports and Christianity* (Routledge, 2017), 49.

[15] Abel Ugba, "Playing and Praying in the Premiership: Public Display of Beliefs in English Football," in *Global Perspectives on Sports and Christianity* (Routledge, 2017), 146–58.

[16] Frieder Ludwig, "Football, Culture and Religion: Varieties of Interaction," *Studies in World Christianity* 21, no. 3 (2015): 201–22.

[17] Anthony King, *The European Ritual: Football in the New Europe* (Routledge, 2017).

[18] Ugba, "Playing and Praying in the Premiership: Public Display of Beliefs in English Football."

the majority position of Muslims in Indonesia. Based on those departing points, my main research question is "how do public religious gestures in football amplified by social media activate the public's questions of beliefs, and what it means to the dynamics of informal interreligious engagement". Answering this question might bring us to be more attentive to every public expression thrown explicit or implicitly and consciously or not. Understanding this phenomenon might also broaden our horizons about the practice of interreligious engagement which is not solely in formal and religious settings. This article argues that highly visible public religious gestures which are performed in secular or non-religious settings could trigger the direct questions of belief. It also serves as a catalyst for an informal interreligious engagement especially if mediated by the social media. That is to say that the dynamics of interreligious relations along with their ethical values and practical implications will develop continuously following the technological and societal advancements.

METHOD

We conduct a qualitative content analysis of TikTok posts depicting Wang Dalei's pre-match, prayer-like gesture during the Indonesia–China fixture (date verified against official schedules). The study focuses on how visibility and framing are negotiated in the comment threads.Collection spans T_1–T_2: from three days before (H–3) to seven days after (H+7) the match. Search keywords: *"Wang Dalei," "prayer/berdoa," "Indonesia vs China," "goalkeeper ritual."* Language filters were not applied to preserve multilingual uptake; non-English/Indonesian comments were translated for coding when relevant. We define viral as meeting both criteria within T_1–T_2: (i) views ≥ 90th percentile across search results; (ii) engagement ratio (likes + comments + shares ÷ views) ≥ 75th percentile. From qualifying posts we select N = 3–5 videos with the highest combined score. For each video we extract up to M = 200 top comments by relevance/engagement (or all if <200), remove duplicates/bots, and archive URLs, timestamps, and counters in a study log.

The unit of analysis is the individual comment (utterance level); thread structure is noted when analytically necessary (e.g., reply chains that display norm negotiation). User identities are anonymized by truncating handles and omitting avatars. Screenshots, when used, redact identifiers and non-essential UI elements. The thematic codebook includes: piety/devotion, identity/membership, performativity/gimmick, nationality/competition, humor/sarcasm, other. Sentiment codes: affirmative, neutral, critical. Each category has an operational definition and a brief anonymized exemplar. Two coders double-code 20% of the sample; intercoder agreement is assessed with Cohen's ᴋ (target ≥ 0.70). Disagreements are discussed to consensus; the codebook is refined before full coding.

We treat TikTok comment threads as mediated interreligious encounter spaces[19] and interpret patterns through Public Value[20] (locating comments on a continuum from signaling to deliberation) and the Contact Hypothesis[21] (assessing which preconditions—equal status,

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[19] Neumaier and Klinkhammer, "Interreligious Contact and Media: Introduction."

[20] Edoardo Ongaro and Michele Tantardini, "Bringing Religion into Public Value Theory and Practice: Rationale and Perspectives," *Administration & Society* 56, no. 8 (2024): 972–1000.

[21] Gordon Willard Allport, Kenneth Clark, and Thomas Pettigrew, "The Nature of Prejudice," 1954.

common goals, intergroup cooperation, institutional support—are met in stadium and platform contexts). Analytically, we first provide a light descriptive overview (comment counts, sentiment proportions, top themes) and then map theme/sentiment clusters to these frameworks to evaluate prospects for constructive engagement in digital arenas. We analyze publicly accessible data under minimal-risk social-media research norms; we do not infer the player's religious affiliation without explicit self-disclosure. Anonymization protocols and screenshot limits are applied; platform terms and local norms of fair use are observed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. A Brief History on the Relationship Between Religion and Football

The first encounter between religion and football perhaps can be traced as early as in the practice of sacrifice in Mayan's ball games in ancient era. At that time, the ball game as a sport often sacrificed the weaker players as offerings to deities. The phenomenon of Olympic games which was intended for such offerings also marked the meeting between religion and sports at the very beginning [22]. The behavior of having pre-games rituals in current era also signifies its resonation with the practice of Olympic games which performed sacrifice as a pre-games ritual [23]. The ways the current sport players do the ritual might be much different from the ancient era, but how they perform something related with belief as something important before the match strengthens the fact that sports and religion or ritual have been related from a long time and cannot be separated [24]. Even until now, we can see that the football tournaments from the very small until high scale participants are always preceded and concluded with sort of rituals. What is meant by rituals of course may have broader meanings. The big event of football tournament such as FIFA World Cup, UEFA Champions League, and AFC Asian Cup always engage the specific performative rituals.

In the modern Europe, following the Durkheimian notion of religion or ritual, the regular sense of meetings of certain football groups in exercise or tournament purposes, then feeling connected and experienced ecstasy with the satisfactory result of the winning of the admired groups, shows that this is obviously kind of rituals [25]. As for the development of the modern football clubs, Churches and Christian community organizations had a very significant role. Put as an example, in the UK as for the end of the nineteenth century there were among twenty five percent of the football clubs ownership under the auspicious of Churches and religious organizations [26]. This data is not merely data with its relatively big numbers. It means much when it is compared to the previous period in the UK, where the Churches had the hostile attitude towards the sports. It is true that at the beginning of the nineteenth century Protestantism saw that there is no correlation and value connecting the sport with the Christian belief. The transformation of this hostile view took in a place with the contribution of public

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[22] Jeffrey Scholes and Raphael Sassower, *Religion and Sports in American Culture* (Routledge, 2014), 3–12.

[23] Scholes and Sassower, *Religion and Sports in American Culture*.

[24] William J. Baker, "Religion," in *Routledge Companion to Sports History*, 2010, 216.

[25] King, *The European Ritual: Football in the New Europe*.

[26] Andrew Parker and J Stuart Weir, "Sport, Spirituality and Protestantism: A Historical Overview," *Theology* 115, no. 4 (2012): 257.

schools in addressing this public concerns. As time goes, the Churches became affirmative but supportive towards sports [27].

As have been mentioned above, although it is consciously deemed as the game which is different from religion, the tendencies of treating football as quasi-religious practices still have been relevant in such regions like in Africa and Latin America. The adoption of cultic and superstitious practices in the football matches and tournaments might be seen by many as a cultural phenomenon, but it is undeniable that its historical roots could speak louder than merely a normative claim [28]. Even some that claim such practices as a cultural form of practices cannot denigrate that the origin of that culture can be traced to the same historical roots of those practiced football as a ritual or a quasi-religious practice. Furthermore, as the sort of violence phenomenon became something inseparable to the western football history, the current practice of commemoration has marked that the society's collective memory resist to remove the past memory of football disasters. Put the case of several football clubs experienced disasters in the UK such as the disasters of Heysel and Hillsborough in 1985 and 1989, their fans commemorated those events by gathering at the stadium and or the Cathedral [29]. The involvement of religious forms of rituals and praying, also the role of religious institutions which facilitate the events shows and strengthens that there has been interwoven connection between religion and football. Put another case, the recent phenomenon of the disaster occurred in Malang, East Java, Indonesia, mobilized people from different background and identities, particularly who have an interest in football, to make a communal prayer to their brothers as the victims of the disaster [30].

2. A Phenomenon of China's Goalkeeper

The specific case or incident chosen for this study is regarding the gesture of the goalkeeper of China national football club. It was on 5th of June 2025 when they came to Indonesia for the sake of a match of qualification series to road to World Cup 2026. China's teams were beaten by Indonesia' with the score of 1-0. The match coincided with the night of idul adha which was on 6th of June. Before the match being started, it was captured that the Wang Dalei, the name of that goalkeeper, raised his hand and gestured like what Muslims do when praying. The captured moment which was then uploaded in the social media gone viral and received many comments and responses from people from different religion and identities, mainly from Muslims as the majority in Indonesia and as groups which are identical with that kind of gesture. What made this performed gesture viral is that the reality that he played for the national teams which are predominantly non-Muslims (China), and he performed the unique gesture which has been perceived as Islamic in Muslims majority country (Indonesia). These

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[27] Parker and Weir, "Sport, Spirituality and Protestantism: A Historical Overview."

[28] Ludwig, "Football, Culture and Religion: Varieties of Interaction."

[29] John Eade, "Football Disasters and Pilgrimage: Commemoration through Religious and Non-Religious Ritual and Materiality," *Religions* 15, no. 5 (2024): 3–5.

[30] Syamsuddin, "Polres Malang Dan Keluarga Korban Kanjuruhan Gelar Doa Bersama," 2024; Eko Widianto, "Teriak Histeris Pecah Di Saat Doa Bersama Keluarga Korban Tragedi Kanjuruhan Tengah Berlangsung," 2023.

two contexts along with the notion of echo-chamber in digital media support the contingency of this viral gesture phenomenon of Wang Dalei.

Picture 1: @lembu_petheng in Tiktok

The tendencies of the comment from the most viral content in Tiktok regarding the Islamic gesture of Wang Dalei, in general can be categorized into two categories: those who are affirmative and those who are cynical, critical, and suspicious on his expression in the gesture form. Although the affirmative comments are majority, in this article I attach them in relatively similar captures just for the sake of analysis, and showing how those comments are different from the affirmative ones. First, for those responded with the affirmative comments, those attitudes emerge from the contexts that the public value surrounding the commentators support those comments. Following the category of public values grounded by Ongaro, there are two types of public value: deliberative and public sphere. The former type of PV emphasizes on how the definition of PV is determined by the process of deliberation. It means that the dialectical process of the sort of values before being determined as PV is an imperative. The contestation towards the proposed or suggested values became the essence of PV itself before being deemed as public [31]. For the case of this study, there are contestation between commentators on how his gesture showed the sense of profound piety and humility or just for the sake of gimmick aiming to gaining the attentions from Muslims public spectators. The dialectical and contestation process here has taken in place. The position of non-Muslims towards this phenomenon is almost similar, although in just few numbers of comments. This is supposedly also because the echo chamber mechanism will be more decisive on the contingency of the meeting of people with the same identity and concern [32]. Or they saw the viral content on this gesture but reluctant to react or comment. At least, the interreligious engagement

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[31] Ongaro and Tantardini, "Bringing Religion into Public Value Theory and Practice: Rationale and Perspectives."

[32] Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 75–76.

occurred in the stadium where all people with different religious identity saw the Islamic gesture performed by Wang Dalei.

From the departing assumption that the spectators did not know the religion of Wang Dalei how they responded to his seemingly Islamic gesture. For those holding Islamic values in a moderate way might see that his gesture showed on the attitudes of piety and humility, in a sense that the gesture of raising hands which has been generally perceived as Islamic gesture is transformed into the public value. In Indonesian context where most populations are Muslims the process of publicizing Islamic values will be productive or at least not conflictual. This is because the non-Muslims citizens have been living as neighborhoods of the Muslims for a long time and this no problem. Even in a discourse of civilization, the context of "Islamdom" [33] in Indonesia, borrowing the term of Marshall Hodgson, it might be similar with the attitudes of Muslims in the current era who live in non-Muslims majority country. They live in the condition where the public values are not Islamic; they negotiate their identity if the public values do not contradict with their Islamic identities, then it will be no problems [34]. For the second tendency of comments, this might reflect the attitude of Muslims with a more rigid worldview. What is perceived as the Islamic identity should be performed only by and for Muslims not the others. Using Islamic identity by them could be considered as unethical which might trigger the emergence of conflicts. From this analysis, it seems that both positions have not yet been attained; the condition is that both affirmative and critical spectators departed from the position that they did not know how exactly what religion Wang Dalei hold and believe, because the spectators just assumed on whether he is Muslim or not. Despite that ambiguity, at least what can be grasped from this phenomenon is the ability of religious symbols like the performed gesture in necessitating the process of interreligious engagement in everyday life. The symbolic interaction in this sense is not merely the meeting of people from different background through the mediation of religious symbols, rather the symbolic interaction itself can grow a new sense of collective consciousness. People can break out the narrow boundary of their mind, then be broadened by the new horizon of meeting of minds of different believers [35].

Then, how about the questions of belief thrown towards the identity of Wang Dalei as the aftermath of his gesture. The two conditions which have been explained above show how people become decisive in responding the Islamic gesture of Wang Dalei, but they laid their response under certain assumptions that his religion of belief is Islam. The critics, in relatively small numbers compared to the majority, emerge to contest the belief of Wang Dalei whether he is a real Islam or not, because he never states publicly that he is a Muslim. What happens on the field and social media is that, based on the concept of contact hypothesis grounded by Allport [36], the people with the same identity, purpose, and social status gathered are faced in two conditions: bridging religious divides to be more pluralist or just masking the underlying

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[33] Marshall G S Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 126.

[34] Stewart M Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (Routledge, 2025), 174.

[35] Izak Lattu, "A Sociological Breakthrough of Interreligious Engagement in Everyday-Symbolic Interaction Perspectives," *Religió Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama* 6, no. 2 (2016): 167–68.

[36] Allport, Clark, and Pettigrew, "The Nature of Prejudice."

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assumptions. In this case study, perhaps as what can be seen above might show that the conditions will be relatively similar with what the theory of public value explained. The condition is still blurred. The contestation of religious or truth claims cannot be addressed without a clear clarification from the person which has been contested on their belief. Belief and religion are something private in many countries. People do not need to explicate their belief publicly, as also can be seen from one of the comments that religion in the country of Wang Dalei is something private. That is to say that Indonesian people must be aware of the ethical conduct of people from the different regions or countries about what is considered as appropriate to be asked or concerned and what is not. To this point, it seems that the cross-cultural understanding is something urgent in today's globalized and interconnected world [37]. People can easily respect one another if they have a mutual understanding towards what can be collectively achieved and what they might be different [38]. This blurred phenomenon of Islamic gesture does not necessarily give an answer of what belief do Wang Dalei holds, rather contemplating and evaluating the deeper realities happened behind that phenomenon needs to be considered so that the constructive engagement and relation might be attained.
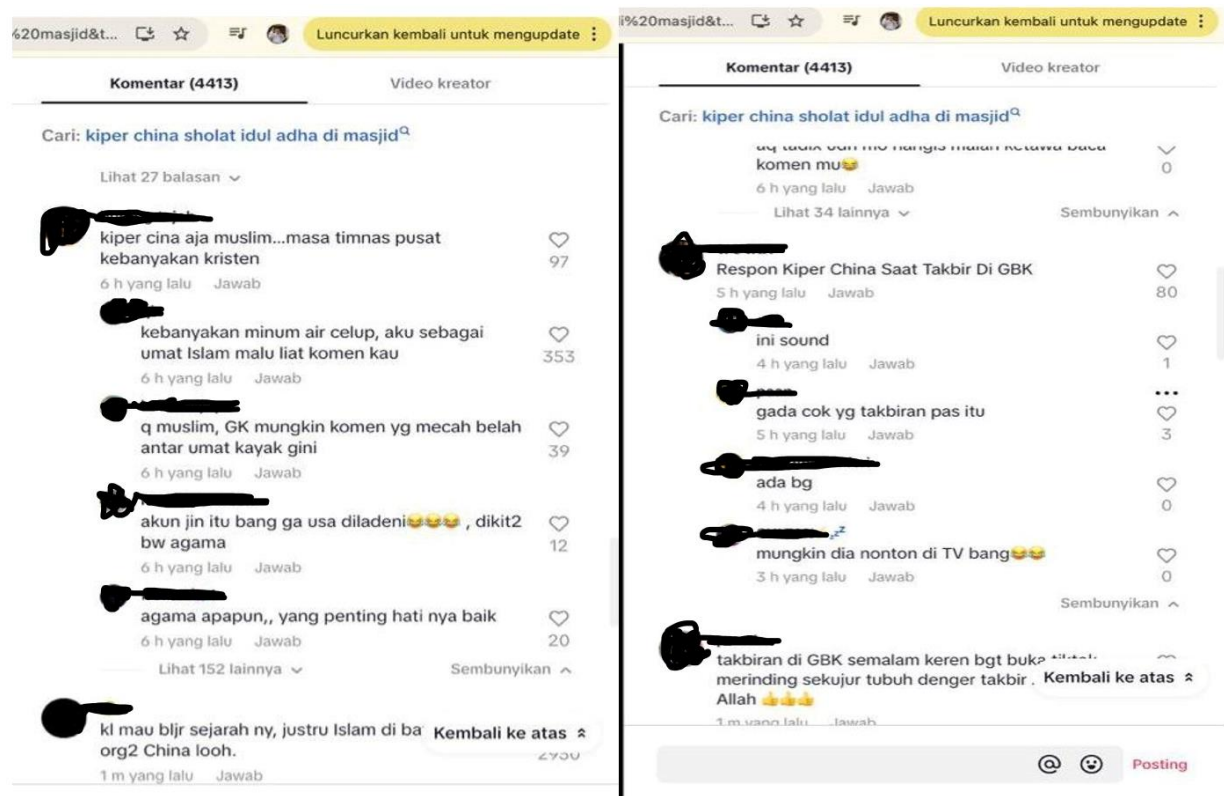
Picture 2 and 3: @lembu_petheng in Tiktok

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[37] Mark D Johns, "Ethical Issues in the Study of Religion and New Media," in *Digital Religion* (Routledge, 2021), 238.

[38] Oriel Thomas, "Promoting Cross-Cultural Engagement among the Pastors in the Greater New York Conference," 2014.

3. The Digital Amplification of Contested Beliefs

The phenomenon of Wang Dalei initially just occurred incidentally or temporarily in the stadium before the start of the football match. It was then just witnessed by limited people which came directly to the stadium and will remain in the memory of those attended if it was not streamed and uploaded to the online media such as YouTube, television, and social media. The emergence of social media and other online medias made the debated phenomenon above happened. What might be just a small event in a part of a football tournament became something exaggerated in the broader dimension of public media. As being explained above, the matter of belief which was supposedly be the private matter of Wang Dalei now has been contested in Indonesian public social media. Even more, the contestation regarding Wang Dalei now has been not only about his gesture and belief. The contestation also has been escalated because it has been exposed to the broader arenas of social media, meaning that millions of people will also see the debates within the chat columns and the video reactions which have been uploaded about that issue.

The digital echo chamber amplifies this phenomenon in both positive and negative ways. That is to say that the situation is getting complex. The new viewers might judge the gesture of Wang Dalei along with his belief based on what algorithm brought to them. Social media in this context is like two-edged sword, in a sense that it can bring to the big positive impacts to the people regarding their viral behaviors. But it can also trap to the forms of stigmatizations. In the case of Wang Dalei, many would respect and appreciate his gesture on football, but some also might judge his belief with many bad stigma if his identity someday can be validated [39]. As a sharp tool, it might also bring someone become very popular in a short time, then get rich with their virality as happened to many public figures today or content creators. In the way around, the public figures which did a small mistake, can be culturally canceled, impacting on their public images and careers. Furthermore, although social media with such phenomenon like Wang Dalei gesture can facilitate the intensification of interreligious engagement through media, its negative drawbacks must also be considered. Social media can alter the sentiments which occurred in the private spaces to become long lasting and continuing in the public media spaces.

As shown by Fatimah Husein and Lucia studies, the private regular activities of ibadah or piety which have a religiously positive vibes will be judged as riya' or flexing by some when those are uploaded in the social media. [40]. The algorithmic factors also something must be considered when engaging the social media. Social media activities for such likes, comment, and share. It consciously or not renders the form of polarization within social media and the contentious viewpoints. The prejudice of social media users might result from this algorithm. This is to consider that biases might attach to every activity of social media users, be it in social media or in the physical everyday life because they are trapped in such filter bubbles or echo

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[39] Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*.

[40] Fatimah Husein and Martin Slama, "Online Piety and Its Discontent: Revisiting Islamic Anxieties on Indonesian Social Media," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, no. 134 (2018): 81–82; Lucia Galvagni, "A Digital Spirituality for Digital Humans?," in *Religion in the Age of Digitalization* (Routledge, 2020), 144–54.

chamber [41]. The consciousness of the contingency of biases and being critical become parts of ethical conducts in doing social media activities.

Conclusion and the Implications for Interreligious Engagement in Indonesia

This study shows how a prayer-like gesture by the Chinese goalkeeper migrated from a brief stadium moment into everyday digital publics, where platform logics amplified visibility and favored signaling over sustained deliberation. In these metric-driven spaces, we observed small pockets of norm-negotiation—users articulating respect, sportsmanship, and restraint in labeling—yet the structural preconditions for prejudice-reducing contact are only partially present online. Interpreted through Public Value, most interactions resembled public-sphere signaling, with limited but meaningful instances of deliberation. Through the Contact Hypothesis, institutional support around sport was evident, while equal status, common goals, and cooperative interaction remained weakly instantiated in comment threads.

For Indonesia's interreligious engagement agenda, three implications follow. First, frameworks and programs should acknowledge intersectionality in public encounters—religion intersects with identity, culture, nationality, and politics—so dialogues must be well-prepared with clear goals and facilitation. Second, social media deserves focused attention: platform-aware strategies (contextual captions, explanations of pre-match rituals, and moderation that rewards reason-giving) can nudge exchanges toward deliberation and reduce escalation. Third, non-religious settings such as stadiums warrant inclusion in policy and educational initiatives: leagues, broadcasters, schools, and supporter communities can co-design codes of conduct and fan education that foreground cooperation and shared goals. In short, platformed sport moments can widen recognition of religious difference in Indonesia, but realizing constructive engagement requires intentional design to strengthen the missing conditions for contact.

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