

When Intolerant Language Crowds the Feed: How Digital Discourses Reconstruct Religious Freedom in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study explores how intolerant language circulating on TikTok and Instagram reshapes public understandings of religious freedom in Indonesia. Although previous research has mapped hate speech forms or explored media–religion relations, few studies have integrated linguistic, pragmatic, and ideological analyses to explain how intolerance operates as symbolic power in digital environments. This research addresses that gap by analysing how intolerant expressions are produced, circulated, and interpreted within high-engagement online controversies. The study employs a descriptive qualitative design using Critical Discourse Analysis and social pragmatics. The dataset consists of 480 comment units from 130 public accounts on TikTok, Instagram, and X, complemented by 12 online news texts collected between January 2023 and August 2025. Analytical procedures include linguistic categorisation, pragmatic mapping of speech acts, and ideological interpretation of discursive power. The findings show, first, that intolerant language functions as a symbolic authority that reinforces moral hegemony and marginalises alternative religious viewpoints. Second, algorithmic amplification shifts religious freedom from a rights-based principle toward a visibility-driven performance shaped by emotional engagement. Third, counter-discourses promoting respect and equality receive limited circulation, indicating an asymmetrical discursive ecology. These results suggest that digital platforms not only host but also structure negotiations of religious freedom. The study concludes that strengthening critical linguistic literacy and improving content governance are essential for safeguarding pluralism in Indonesia’s digital public sphere.

Keywords: intolerant language, social media, religious freedom, digital space



Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana bahasa intoleran yang beredar di TikTok dan Instagram membentuk ulang pemahaman publik mengenai kebebasan beragama di Indonesia. Meskipun penelitian sebelumnya telah memetakan bentuk ujaran kebencian atau menelaah hubungan antara media dan agama, hanya sedikit studi yang mengintegrasikan analisis linguistik, pragmatik, dan ideologis untuk menjelaskan bagaimana intoleransi beroperasi sebagai kekuatan simbolik dalam lingkungan digital. Penelitian ini mengisi kekosongan tersebut dengan menganalisis bagaimana ekspresi intoleran diproduksi, disirkulasikan, dan ditafsirkan dalam kontroversi daring yang memiliki tingkat interaksi tinggi. Studi ini menggunakan desain kualitatif deskriptif dengan pendekatan Analisis Wacana Kritis dan pragmatik sosial. Dataset terdiri atas 480 unit komentar dari 130 akun publik di TikTok, Instagram, dan X, dilengkapi dengan 12 teks berita daring yang dikumpulkan antara Januari 2023 hingga Agustus 2025. Prosedur analisis meliputi kategorisasi linguistik, pemetaan tindak tutur secara pragmatik, dan interpretasi ideologis terhadap dinamika kekuasaan dalam wacana. Temuan menunjukkan, pertama, bahwa bahasa intoleran berfungsi sebagai otoritas simbolik yang memperkuat hegemoni moral dan meminggirkan pandangan keagamaan alternatif. Kedua, amplifikasi algoritmik menggeser kebebasan beragama dari prinsip berbasis hak menuju performativitas yang ditentukan oleh visibilitas dan resonansi emosional. Ketiga, wacana tandingan yang mempromosikan rasa hormat dan kesetaraan memperoleh sirkulasi yang terbatas, menandakan ekologi wacana yang tidak seimbang. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa platform digital tidak hanya menjadi ruang ekspresi, tetapi juga struktur yang membentuk negosiasi kebebasan beragama. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa penguatan literasi linguistik kritis dan peningkatan tata kelola konten sangat penting untuk menjaga pluralisme dalam ruang publik digital Indonesia.

Kata kunci: bahasa intoleran, media social, kebebasan beragama, ruang digital.

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X has transformed language into a central medium for shaping identity, ideology, and social power. In online environments, linguistic expressions no longer function merely as tools for communication but operate as symbolic resources that influence public morality and regulate social behaviour (Karimah & Hermilia Wijayanti, 2023). Religious issues, in particular, often trigger rapid emotional escalation, where short comments or phrases can provoke widespread debate, condemnation, and even legal consequences (Sapir, 2024). These global dynamics show that digital communication has become an arena where the boundaries between faith, freedom, and public judgment are continuously negotiated.

In Indonesia, this phenomenon is visible in several viral controversies that illustrate how everyday interactions can escalate into moral conflicts amplified by comment threads, reposts, and media narratives. The Sahara–Yai Mim dispute in Malang, the circulation of the phrase “IQ squatting,” and the viral video of an interfaith-prayer rejection demonstrate how meaning in digital spaces is shaped by collective interpretations rather than individual intent (Valencia, n.d.; Gantina, n.d.; Syahid et al., 2022). These cases reveal how language becomes a social weapon that constructs categories of them and us, reinforces emotional polarization, and

influences how religious identity is publicly evaluated. As the country with the world's largest Muslim population and high religious diversity, Indonesia's digital sphere becomes a critical microcosm where tolerance, pluralism, and Pancasila values are tested daily.

Although previous studies have mapped linguistic patterns of hate speech (Arango et al., 2019), examined the mediatization of religion (Leśniczak, 2023), and analysed public responses to tolerance content (Sutrisno, 2022), existing research remains limited in three ways. First, linguistic studies often focus on micro-level forms without analysing ideological and pragmatic operations. Second, media-oriented research highlights symbolic commodification but does not examine the concrete linguistic mechanisms that sustain intolerance. Third, Indonesian scholarship tends to emphasise sociological or legal implications rather than mapping how intolerant language constructs power relations in digital discourse (Kosasih, 2019; Ningrum et al., 2019). As a result, there remains a conceptual and methodological gap in understanding how linguistic choices function simultaneously as communicative acts, ideological instruments, and mechanisms of social power in online religious contexts. These gaps indicate the need for an integrated analytical approach that connects linguistic form, pragmatic function, and ideological effect in order to capture the complexity of digital intolerance.

This study aims to analyse how intolerant language on Indonesian social media shapes public understandings of religious freedom by examining linguistic patterns, pragmatic strategies, and ideological operations embedded in high-engagement online controversies. The analysis focuses on comment threads and viral posts related to the Sahara–Yai Mim dispute, the interfaith-prayer video, and the “IQ squatting” label as empirical sites where intolerance is produced, circulated, and contested.

The study offers several scientific contributions. First, it provides a novel integration of Critical Discourse Analysis and social pragmatics to explain how intolerant expressions function as symbolic power that shifts religious freedom from a rights-based principle toward a visibility-driven performance. Second, it advances theoretical understanding of digital discourse by demonstrating how algorithmic amplification and collective emotional responses normalise intolerance and marginalise counter-discourses promoting respect and equality. Third, the findings offer practical implications for strengthening critical linguistic literacy and improving content governance to support pluralism in Indonesia's digital public sphere.

METHOD

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and social pragmatics, a methodological combination selected because it enables a deep examination of how language, power, and ideology interact within digital expressions of intolerance. CDA provides the

analytical tools to uncover ideological structures embedded in online utterances, while social pragmatics allows the interpretation of speech acts and implicatures that shape social meaning but are not always explicitly stated (Triadi & Nur, 2024). This design was the most appropriate for addressing the research aim, which seeks to explain how intolerant expressions influence public understandings of religious freedom in algorithmically mediated environments. The qualitative orientation also aligned with the nature of digital discourse, where meaning emerges through interactional patterns rather than isolated linguistic forms.

The dataset consisted of public posts, comment threads, and online news texts collected from TikTok, Instagram, X, and major Indonesian news portals between January 2023 and June 2025. The population of interest includes publicly accessible digital interactions related to religious intolerance. From this population, the study purposively selected 480 comment units from 130 public accounts and 12 online news articles from CNN Indonesia and Kompas.com, ensuring relevance and interactional depth. Inclusion criteria required that data contain explicit or implicit references to religious intolerance, appear in high-interaction threads, and involve sustained comment-and-reply exchanges that reveal discursive negotiation. Posts or comments unrelated to religious issues, lacking interactional intensity, or not publicly accessible were excluded. This sampling strategy aligns with the study's focus on discursive events where intolerance is produced, circulated, and contested in real time, as illustrated in cases such as the Sahara–Yai Mim dispute and the circulation of the phrase “IQ squatting” (Valencia, n.d.; Gantina, n.d.).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hate Speech, Language, and Identity

Before presenting the linguistic analysis, this section briefly outlines the offline–online contexts of the cases discussed. The dataset comprises (1) a viral neighbourhood dispute in Malang (Sahara–Yai Mim) that escalated into mutual accusations and legal reporting and then generated extensive comment-chain debates; (2) a viral video related to an interfaith-prayer interaction that triggered polarised reactions in comment columns; and (3) a recurrent label (‘IQ squatting’) circulated in entertainment/news-related uploads and reposts that prompted moral evaluation and group targeting. These contexts explain why particular utterances emerged and how they were amplified through reposting, comment threads, and media coverage (see, table 1).

Table 1.

Intolerant speech in Indonesia's Digital space

Categories Of Utterances	Authentic Snippet/Exam ple	Platforms & References	Language Strategy	Word Of Mouth	Power Relations & Identity	Ethical & Context Notes
Intellectuall y based	"... I don't want to say IQ squatting or	Local entertainment videos/news,	Metaphors of degradation, evaluative	Illocution: degrading, cornering →	Speakers position themselves as	Netizens' comments showed moral

symbolic insults.	anything, but it is."	TikTok uploads, and reactions from national news portals.	hyperbole, and personification of the 'majority' as a homogeneous target.	Perlocution: provoking collective anger, expanding stigma.	Guardians of moral truth; the majority group is treated as a homogeneous entity.	condemnation and demands for an apology; public clarification served as a form of reputation restoration.
Moral-based delegitimation of collective identity	"You who blaspheme the Sahara shame religion" - the public response rejected the generalization.	Video snippets of the Sahara-Yai Mim conflict; social media Comment columns and online news.	The moral labelling of 'religious shame', the framing of 'US-them' binary opposition, and the use of emotional intensifiers.	Illocution: rebuke, judge → Perlocution: Harden polarization, normalize social punishment.	Internal solidarity is built through shared morality; the other party is framed as a pervert.	Some public comments try to balance messages of tolerance with a focus on the context of the behavior.
Religious sarcasm that brings order	"Shame on religion" is used as sarcasm against perpetrators of viral content.	Public reaction in the comments column on TikTok and X (Twitter).	Sarcasm, normative irony, claims of moral correctness.	Illocution: scold, discipline → Perlocution: expand symbolic obedience.	Language is used as a tool of social discipline; legitimacy comes from public emotional consensus.	Counter-comments highlight the importance of moderation and constructive criticism.
Generalization of identity stereotypes	"Other people do not know themselves" (from the reaction to the events of interfaith prayer).	Social media commentary and religious news portals.	Collective stereotypes, homogenization of targets, and simplification of identity.	Illocution: stigmatizing → Perlocution: reinforcing social distance and exclusion.	Language is used to assert social boundaries and identities of dominant groups.	The public corrects through narratives of equality and respect between believers.
Instrumentalization of religion for moral truth claims	Verse quotes are inserted to justify insults against other groups.	Social media utterances and online comments related to Sahara-Yai Mim issues.	Discursive authorization through sacred symbols and claims of purity of faith.	Illocution: legitimizing humiliation → Perlocution: normalizing social control.	Religious identity served as the basis of ideological legitimacy.	The public response encouraged a separation between behavioral criticism and contempt for the faith.
Shared norms-based corrective appeal	"Don't bring religion with you", "Respect other beliefs".	Public clarification comment field and apology upload.	Deontic modality, polite-assertive register, repositioning towards improvement.	Illocution: correcting → Perlocution: decreasing the escalation of conflict.	Language is used to recover the collective face and affirm the value of moderation.	Counterculture discourse demonstrates the ethical literacy capacity of the digital society.

Source: This table is compiled from online public data for 2023-2025, including social media uploads (TikTok, X/Twitter), news from CNN Indonesia and Kompas.com, and public clarification documents. The dataset draws on two widely discussed online controversies: (1) the Sahara-Yai Mim dispute in Malang, which escalated from a neighbourhood conflict into viral legal and moral debates, and (2)

the 'IQ squatting' statement by Siti Jumyanti, which circulated widely as a contested and allegedly derogatory label in online discussions.

The perlocutionary aspect of "mobilizing anger" is reflected through observable engagement metrics in digital interactions, such as increased comment volumes, clustering of emotionally charged responses (like condemnations and moral calls to action), and the emergence of posts or hashtags that echo initial sentiments. In notable cases, the perlocutionary effects have transcended digital platforms, evidenced by user reports and media references, indicating that "collective anger" is a tangible social reaction that can be traced within the dataset. Furthermore, the use of intolerant language on social media creates a binary worldview that affirms one's stance while dismissing others. Expressions like "Shame on religion" or "other people don't know themselves" promote an imbalanced moral narrative, depicting the speaker's group as the embodiment of truth while vilifying the opposition. Analyzing the linguistic structures reveals a consistent rhetorical pattern characterized by evaluative language, hyperbole, and demeaning metaphors meant to humiliate and control. This approach positions the speaker's beliefs as benchmarks for public morality. (Hefni, 2020). This process transformed language from a mere personal expression into a tool for establishing symbolic hegemony, particularly in social media contexts. It reveals that intolerant language not only reflects individual perspectives but also shapes power dynamics within digital public spaces.

The persistent use of hate speech and ridicule creates social divisions between "us" and "them," leading society to perceive the dominant group's opinions as the sole correct viewpoint, while alternative views are marginalized as threats to moral and social stability. Consequently, social media has evolved into a battleground for moral legitimacy, undermining equitable dialogue. This study contributes by specifying the recurring linguistic-pragmatic mechanisms through which 'us-us-them' divisions are produced and amplified in Indonesian social media discourse (2023–2025), and by linking these patterns via Fairclough's CDA to platform interaction and moral hegemony.

This practice exemplifies symbolic violence, where language enforces exclusive norms that suppress diversity. Intolerant users often fail to recognize that their speech normalizes discrimination, presenting dominance under the guise of moral righteousness (Drożdżowicz & Peled, 2024). In this context, hate speech is not just a matter of communication ethics, but an ideological issue that threatens the foundations of diversity and democracy.

The utterance's power is rooted in its capacity to utilize the digital space as a social amplifier. When disseminated, a comment, video snippet, or provocative statement extends beyond its original context, fostering a chain of interpretations. Social media users who engage with or reshare intolerant content participate in a discursive practice that amplifies its impact. Drawing on Fairclough's CDA, this

process can be understood as discursive circulation, where texts are continually recontextualised through social interaction. (Eriksson Krutrök & Lindgren, 2022). This passage examines how intolerant speech gains public acceptance despite lacking a strong logical foundation, primarily relying on emotional appeal rather than truth. It shows that such language persists in digital spaces by prioritizing moral sensations over factual accuracy.

A linguistic analysis reveals that the selection of words, sentences, and rhetorical styles is designed to create social distance, exemplified by insults like "squatting IQ," which simultaneously disparages intelligence and religious identity. This speech acts as an illocutionary act aimed at humiliation and asserting moral superiority, leading to public emotional consensus on condemnation versus defense. Furthermore, intolerant discourse often employs religious symbols and terminology to legitimize hatred and politicize identity, using scriptural references to embed cultural narratives into its messages.

Guided by Fairclough's CDA, the analysis links (1) textual patterns (evaluative labels like "IQ squatting", moral rebukes, sarcasm, and verse-based authorisation), (2) discursive practice (their recontextualisation through comment chains, reposts, and media framing), and (3) social practice (the normalisation of moral boundary-making that privileges dominant positions and marginalises alternatives). Across the cases, religious freedom is repeatedly reframed less as a rights-based principle and more as a moral performance and a site of public judgement, showing how intolerant utterances become tools for organising perception and legitimising exclusion."

The use of religious terminology to legitimize hatred not only endangers the objects of such speech but also distorts the essence of religion, reducing it to a tool for justification rather than a source of peace. Consequently, language loses its dialogical function, transforming into an instrument of domination. (Roshid & Chowdhury, 2024). Critical awareness of this phenomenon is important so that society can see that, behind every word, there is always an interest at work, and that rejecting intolerant speech means maintaining humanity in our communication.

Van Dijk asserts that power in discourse operates through control over knowledge and the values considered valid. When a group dominates the narrative of piety, the definition of "True Religion" will be constructed around the interests of that group. Language becomes a mechanism that monopolizes interpretations and marginalizes alternatives. (Dijk, 2024). In the context of social media, this phenomenon is amplified by algorithms that encourage extreme content visibility and narrow the diversity of perspectives. As a result, intolerance becomes a discursive ecosystem with its own vitality. The phenomenon Van Dijk describes confirms that language is never neutral; it always operates within a power field that determines who has the right to speak and who should be silent. When a group monopolizes narratives about piety, different interpretations of religion are easily

labeled heretical or deviant. Through repeated, disseminated utterances, this dominance creates “social truths” accepted without testing. It is at this point that language plays a role not only as a means of communication but also as an ideological control system that shapes how people think and respond to differences.

On social media, the power of this kind of discourse is amplified by algorithmic logic that prioritizes emotional engagement — not depth of meaning. Provocative, angry, and extreme content has more room to grow. (Macias Urrego et al., 2024). As a result, the digital public space becomes an ideological echo chamber that reinforces the views of certain groups and sidelines diverse opinions. Intolerance no longer exists as a deviation, but as part of an ecosystem of discourse that lives, grows, and normalizes itself. The linguistic strategy in intolerant speech is not always frontal. Often it comes in the form of irony, satire, or lightly packaged humor. On the surface, it appears to be a spontaneous expression, but at the ideological level, it serves as a form of normalizing insults. Sarcasm is an effective way to channel prejudice without losing social legitimacy, because humor protects the speaker from explicit accusations of hatred. (Schmid, 2023).

Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness helps to understand the dynamics of what is happening. Violating the principle of politeness is not always negative in the digital space; rather, it often becomes symbolic capital to gain attention and support. Conventional norms of politeness lose their effectiveness when the social distance between the speaker and the recipient is anonymous. When social responsibility weakens, extreme utterances go unchallenged. (Fathi, 2024). This is the reason why hatred can circulate unhindered in virtual public spaces. Netizens who write aggressive comments often do not just defend religion, but also seek a moral position before the public. This phenomenon marks a shift from substantive piety towards performative piety. Religion is presented not as an internal value system, but rather as an attribute of identity that can be displayed and valued. (Husein & Slama, 2018). Language becomes the stage on which morality is fought, not because of the substance of truth, but because of who is louder.

The relationship between language and identity in the digital space forms an almost ritualistic pattern of communication (Ajala & Alayinde, 2025). Whenever religious issues emerge, a cyclical pattern of anger, defense, and moral judgment ensues, indicating that intolerance is a product of social mechanisms rather than an anomaly. The use of language that is aggressive and condemnatory fosters group cohesion, transforming piety into a public spectacle rather than a personal quest. Individuals express their religious identities through loud, judgmental rhetoric, suggesting that vocal intensity equates to truth. Consequently, digital platforms shift from spaces for meaningful exploration to arenas for constructing moral self-images. This communication pattern establishes a ritualistic cycle where collective

anger surges, followed by defensive moral judgment, thereby reinforcing social habits that delineate boundaries between groups (Stolz et al., 2025). Through offensive or denouncing speech, the group's internal solidarity is strengthened, while the other party is increasingly marginalized.

A person becomes part of a community not because of shared theological beliefs, but because of shared anger towards the other party. In this context, intolerant speech becomes a tool of collective identity formation. This process aligns with the concept of group polarization in Social Psychology, in which interaction among members of homogeneous groups leads to increasingly extreme attitudes. (Durrheim & Schuld, 2025). This phenomenon shows that intolerance in social media is not only rooted in differences in beliefs, but also in the human need to build a sense of community through common emotions, which, in this case, is anger towards others (Tatala et al., 2024). When people feel angry together, they find solidarity and a collective identity that strengthens their group's position. In this context, hate speech serves as a social glue: it is not just an individual expression but a mechanism for forming a community based on opposition. (Rathje et al., 2021). What is defended, then, is no longer the value of theological truth, but the feeling of "We are against them," which is constantly reinforced through language and interaction.

Sometimes discourses of intolerance arise in response to feelings of threat or loss of moral authority. In many cases, demographically dominant groups feel excluded by social changes and use language to restore symbolic positions. (Verkuyten et al., 2018). Utterances indicating "threats to faith" or "moral damage from pluralism" illustrate a phenomenon of language-mediated identity anxiety, where power and vulnerability coexist. This analysis reveals that intolerance may stem not solely from hatred but from existential anxiety expressed through discourse. Emotions play a critical role in the propagation of intolerant speech, making such statements pragmatic speech acts that not only convey hatred but also engage the audience's emotions. (Ayeni, 2025). The perlocutionary effect is not merely an offense, but a symbolic mobilization against certain values.

The public that reacts becomes part of the speech's performance. When thousands of comments appear to condemn or defend, language turns into collective social action. This phenomenon underscores the relevance of Austin's Speech Act theory, which holds that speech not only describes reality but also creates it. (Reiland, 2024). Sentences like "you blaspheme religion " not only judge actions, but also change the social status of the person to whom they are addressed, from an ordinary individual to a moral offender. It is this performative power of intolerant language that makes it difficult to separate from power structures.

The visual and algorithmic dimensions of social media expand the operating space of intolerant language. Videos, memes, and screenshots often reinforce hate messages more effectively than long texts. The combination of image and Word creates a stronger semiotic effect because it attacks both cognitive and affective

aspects. (Gagrčin et al., 2024). This process makes intolerant language more than just hate speech; it becomes a social narrative that governs perceptions of who deserves respect and who deserves to be removed.

Furthermore, this power extends across the visual and algorithmic dimensions of social media. In the digital context, intolerant speech is no longer limited to text; it merges with images, videos, and memes that reinforce hate messages emotionally and aesthetically. The combination of words and visuals creates a much stronger semiotic effect, attacking both the rational (cognitive) and emotional (affective) sides of the audience (Syahid et al., 2022). The algorithmic mechanism in social media enhances the visibility of content that generates high engagement, such as emotionally charged and intolerant speech. This type of speech, characterized by hate and abusive language, gains wider reach due to its ability to provoke extreme reactions.

The prioritization of visibility over meaningful discourse fosters an environment where intolerance flourishes, showcasing that digital influence hinges not just on who speaks but on who is amplified. Consequently, intolerant speech aligns with the media's preference for fast, emotional, and confrontational communication, which further entrenches its presence in the digital landscape. (Maarouf et al., 2022). A critical analysis reveals that language structure in digital spaces is interwoven with the attention economy. The social dynamics of intolerant language are highlighted by how public perception transforms differences into perceived threats, leading to simplistic linguistic categorizations that limit dialogue.

Terms like “radical,” “liberal,” or “heretical” can deprive language of its communicative potency, turning it into a symbolic weapon. According to Fairclough's framework, these discourses embody power relations that reinforce the dominance of certain values, reducing language from a means of negotiation to a marker of identity alignment—who uses a specific term indicates their allegiance. This linguistically polarized environment mirrors broader societal fragmentation where public discourse, rooted in strict moral oppositions, undermines the deliberative aspect of free speech.

Nonetheless, a resistance pattern emerges, particularly in digital contexts, where some users employ linguistic tactics such as reverse irony or narrative reframing to counteract hatred, indicating that language remains partially free from dominant ideological control (Anas et al., 2025). Each utterance opens up the possibility of reinterpretation. But this strength of resistance often sinks beneath a torrent of aggressive utterances that attract more attention. The existence of counterculture discourse suggests that digital spaces still offer potential for dialogue, but that its success depends on the extent to which the public has a critical awareness of how language works (Khaerun Rijaaal, 2021). Without discourse

Literacy, Society is easily trapped in the illusion of morality shaped by momentary emotions.

A reading of this dynamic affirms that intolerant language cannot be understood only as a deviation from the ethics of communication, but rather as a social mechanism that structures collective perceptions and actions. Every utterance in the digital space carries an ideological burden that negotiates power relations between groups, reinforces certain identities, and regulates the distribution of meaning in society. (Linando et al., 2023).

As intolerant discourse recurs, it establishes a new social grammar that shapes discussions about religion and difference. Language is not merely reflective but actively creates reality. In the digital space, individuals can produce meaning but also face vulnerabilities due to underlying symbolic dominance. Language enforces social boundaries, where exclusionary speech transforms freedom of expression into moral surveillance. The stakes involve not just the interpretation of religion but the essence of humanity itself. Originally a space for free speech, the digital realm has become a moral theater where language acts as a weapon, and understanding its nuances is crucial to grasping power dynamics in a fast-paced, noise-intensive environment.

Language, collective perception, and the negotiation of Religious Freedom

Each society creates an imaginary space in which beliefs, language, and morality interact. This space makes language not just a mirror of the world, but also a tool that governs how the world is lived. The context of contemporary Indonesia presents a New Agora, a digital space where religions do not reign in dogmatic towers but are exchanged through algorithms, emotions, and representations. Every word about religion or religious identity can shift the boundary between freedom of speech and freedom of religion. (Zaluchu et al., 2025).

Language mediates between faith and public opinion, facilitating the coexistence of tolerance and intolerance. The digital public navigates religious issues through collective perceptions shaped by fragmented speech. Language mediates between faith and public opinion, enabling both tolerance and intolerance to circulate in the digital public sphere. Using Fairclough's CDA, the Sahara-Yai Mim controversy is examined across three linked levels. At the textual level, recurring lexical choices and evaluative moves in posts and comment threads, moral labelling, boundary-making pronouns ("us"/"them"), and piety-indexing expressions construct religious sensitivity as a moral test and position speakers as arbiters of legitimacy.

At the level of discursive practice, these utterances are repeatedly recontextualised through reposts, reply chains, and news coverage, stabilising particular framings of the conflict as either "defence of religion" or "deviation," while alternative readings receive less visibility. At the level of social practice, this

circulation shifts religious freedom from a substantive rights-based idea toward a publicly measured performance evaluated through language and affect, as collective perception is produced through repetition and emotional mobilisation in platform interactions. In this algorithmic ecology, emotionally charged content tends to be amplified, reinforcing moral polarisation and influencing collective perceptions of religion. (Barrot, 2022).

Language influences collective perception through the repetition of symbols, with terms like "blasphemous" and "faith-shaming" evolving into social codes that regulate behavior and create moral boundaries. This leads to horizontal surveillance enforcing conformity, creating an illusion of moral stability while restricting freedom of religious expression. The intertwining of religious and national narratives fosters a perception of religious freedom that is contingent and contentious, as intolerance is often justified through moral nationalism. In digital contexts, religious freedom is shaped by competing discourses vying for moral legitimacy. (Mu'ti & Burhani, 2019).

Spiritual content emphasizing piety often receives moral validation, while criticism of religious practices faces stigmatization. This dynamic reflects a social reliance on algorithms and mass emotions rather than reason or theology, with religious freedom influenced by majority visibility. Social Media serves as a testing ground for religious language, where statements can frame reality and promote ideologies, often associating openness with moral decay. The prevalence of emotionally charged and provocative content, driven by algorithmic recommendation systems, results in a diminishing space for reflective discourse, prioritizing sensationalism over substance.

Engagement patterns indicate that posts with morally evaluative language yield higher interaction rates, supporting the trend of algorithmic amplification of high-arousal content. (Barrot, 2022; Gagrčin et al., 2024). These observations indicate that intolerance discourse receives disproportionate visibility due to the design of online platforms, rather than solely communicative intent. The analysis spans from specific language choices to broader discursive practices and social implications, revealing how religious freedom is constrained by repetitive patterns that normalize limits. Table 1 summarizes categories related to speech forms, strategies, functions, and ideological impacts.

The asymmetry of religious freedom is highlighted by how online communities develop unwritten moral codes, where offensive expressions provoke action, while intolerant language cloaked in a religious context often escapes scrutiny. This illustrates symbolic dominance, as the powerful define public morality. Performativity of language further reshapes religious freedom, as accusations of disrespect transform individuals into norm violators, creating new social realities and hierarchies, making the discourse sensitive to linguistic manipulation (Ismail & Mujani, 2020).

In the context of religious discourse, there exists a counter-narrative advocating for 'mutual respect' and a rejection of hatred. This linguistic resistance to intolerance reflects a deeper moral discourse that champions humanity and the complexity of religious freedom, which transcends mere absence of pressure. The emotional memory captured in social media influences collective perceptions and sets new moral standards, while intra-faith disputes often highlight tensions within religious communities. Effective communication on tolerance must balance emotional resonance with rational clarity, ensuring that religious freedom discussions remain relevant and constructive. In Indonesia's multireligious society, linguistic agreement is crucial for coexistence, yet the proliferation of intolerance threatens these norms, urging a collective linguistic effort to uphold diversity and humanity.

Critical linguistic education plays a vital role in addressing the divisive nature of social media, where algorithms favor emotional content. This understanding influences how people discuss differences, shifting the discourse around religious freedom into a shared experience. Maintaining linguistic quality is viewed as an affirmation of human dignity amidst digital noise. Future methodologies should focus on cross-platform expansion, multimodal analysis, and tracking algorithmic changes with anonymized comments. Moderation on platforms needs linguistic indicators rather than just abusive word lists. Educational institutions should promote linguistic ethics as part of digital citizenship, fostering dialogic rather than condemnatory social control. Linguistic patterns, such as moral labeling, contribute to diminished social trust and intergroup solidarity, transforming online discussions into mere symbolic competition. To strengthen social harmony, there must be a combination of legal regulation and heightened linguistic awareness to build intergroup trust.

The findings highlight Indonesia's dual legal framework for religious freedom, as outlined in Article 28E of the 1945 Constitution and Law No. 39/1999 on Human Rights, alongside the restrictions imposed by the Electronic Information and Transactions Law regarding hate speech and defamation. Enforcement currently targets explicit profanity, overlooking subtler forms of intolerance such as moral labeling and degrading metaphors.

Taken together, these findings show that intolerant language in Indonesia's digital sphere is not an isolated communicative act but part of a broader discursive system that shapes public understandings of religious freedom. The study contributes to existing scholarship by integrating linguistic, pragmatic, and ideological analysis to explain how intolerance becomes normalized through interactional patterns and algorithmic amplification. This synthesis highlights the need for critical linguistic literacy and more responsive content governance to counteract the structural advantages enjoyed by intolerant discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that intolerant language circulating on TikTok, Instagram, and X functions as symbolic power that shapes how religious freedom is understood and negotiated in Indonesia's digital sphere. The analysis demonstrates that intolerant expressions reinforce moral hegemony, construct us-them boundaries, and marginalise alternative religious viewpoints. Algorithmic amplification further shifts religious freedom from a rights-based principle toward a visibility-driven performance, while counter-discourses promoting respect and equality remain structurally disadvantaged. These findings directly answer the research question by showing that digital discourse does not merely reflect intolerance but actively organizes public perception and moral judgment.

The limitation of this study lies in its reliance on purposive sampling of high-interaction threads, which may not capture quieter or less visible forms of intolerance. The dataset also focuses on publicly accessible posts, excluding private or semi-private interactions that may reveal different discursive dynamics. Future studies could expand the scope by incorporating longitudinal tracking of discourse circulation, comparative platform analysis, or multimodal examination of video-text interactions to deepen understanding of how intolerance evolves across digital ecosystems.

Building on these findings, future research may explore how counter-discourses can be strengthened through strategic communication or how platform governance can be redesigned to reduce the structural advantages of provocative content. Theoretically, the study contributes to discourse analysis by demonstrating how linguistic aggression interacts with algorithmic visibility to produce moral authority in digital spaces. Practically, the results highlight the need for critical linguistic literacy programs and more responsive content moderation policies to safeguard pluralism and support healthier public dialogue in Indonesia's digital environment.

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