

Scrolling for Faith: The Influence of TikTok on Empathy and Islamic Identity Formation

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Keywords

Digital religious communication; Empathy; Islamic identity; Muslim youth; TikTok.

Abstract

This study explores the phenomenon of Scrolling for Faith, where TikTok's audiovisual format allows short videos to evoke empathy, spiritual reflection, and shifts in religious identity among young Muslim users. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach through interviews and observations, the research identifies three main findings. First, TikTok functions as an emotional and spiritual medium that can trigger religious contemplation through immersive content. Second, the platform serves as a space for identity negotiation, where users express and reshape their Islamic identity both online and offline. Third, TikTok fosters a sense of community and learning, as users feel supported by the Muslim TikTok network and motivated to improve their worship practices and daily habits, while also recognizing the importance of critical awareness to avoid misinformation. The study concludes that TikTok, beyond being a platform of entertainment, plays a significant role in empathy development and the dynamic construction of Islamic identity in the digital era.

Kata Kunci

Empati; Identitas Islam; Komunikasi keagamaan digital; Pemuda Muslim; TikTok.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini membahas fenomena Scrolling for Faith, di mana format audiovisual TikTok memungkinkan video singkat membangkitkan empati, refleksi spiritual, serta perubahan identitas keagamaan di kalangan pengguna muda Muslim. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif fenomenologi melalui wawancara dan observasi, penelitian ini menghasilkan tiga temuan utama. Pertama, TikTok berfungsi sebagai medium emosional dan spiritual yang mampu memicu perenungan keagamaan melalui konten yang imersif. Kedua, platform ini menjadi ruang negosiasi identitas, di mana pengguna mengekspresikan dan membentuk ulang identitas keislamannya baik secara online maupun offline. Ketiga, TikTok memfasilitasi rasa kebersamaan dan pembelajaran, karena pengguna merasa mendapat dukungan dari komunitas Muslim TikTok serta termotivasi untuk meningkatkan praktik ibadah dan kebiasaan sehari-hari, sekaligus menyadari pentingnya kesadaran kritis agar tidak mudah terjebak dalam misinformasi. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa TikTok, lebih dari sekadar media hiburan, memiliki peran signifikan dalam pengembangan empati serta konstruksi dinamis identitas Islam di era digital.

Introduction

The rapid development of social media has brought about a major transformation in the patterns of religious communication worldwide, including

among Muslim communities (Burhanudin 2021). In the traditional era, religious messages were primarily conveyed through mosque sermons, study circles, or face-to-face interactions practices that were deeply rooted in time, space, and communal presence. Today, however, the digital age enables these same messages to travel across vast audiences in just seconds, transcending geographical and social boundaries (Emeraldien et al. 2024).

Within this digital ecosystem, TikTok occupies a distinctive position as a platform designed for short, emotionally engaging visual content that circulates widely through its For You Page (FYP) algorithm (Rardin and Clement 2024). TikTok thrives on immediacy and interactivity, where a single swipe determines the flow of content. Users can easily move upward to explore the next video or downward to revisit the previous one, while exiting the app through the home or back button refreshes the feed with an entirely new selection of videos. This constant stream of algorithm-generated content creates both opportunities and challenges, while it amplifies access to religious narratives, it also makes the retrieval of specific videos difficult unless the creator's account or exact keywords are remembered (Zaid et al. 2022).

The video that appears automatically when users open TikTok, or those that are recommended based on algorithmic predictions, are displayed on what is known as the *For You Page* (FYP). This FYP is the central feature of TikTok, designed to provide a personalized stream of videos tailored to individual preferences, viewing history, and interaction patterns. Unlike a static feed, the FYP continuously adapts to user behaviour, making it both a dynamic discovery tool and a primary gateway for content engagement on the platform.

Previous study from Putra, Rizky Giansyah Yusri and Fauziah (2024), explored the role of social media in religious communication, focusing on how online platforms influence the dissemination of Islamic teachings, promote community engagement, and support religious learning.

Through TikTok, a recent phenomenon known as *Scrolling for Faith* has emerged. This phenomenon reflects a contemporary trend in which individuals can be emotionally moved or even experience a sense of spiritual awakening through short videos circulating on the platform. The strength of this experience lies in TikTok's audiovisual format, where narration, imagery, and sound combine to create an immersive and persuasive form of communication. Such exposure can evoke strong emotional responses, ranging from empathy to self-reflection, and in many cases encourages users to reconsider aspects of their faith and religious practices.

Furthermore, *Scrolling for Faith* can be understood through the shifting motives of TikTok use, both past and present, especially as influenced by the content appearing on the For You Page (FYP) (Messina 2021). As noted by Hartawan (2019), user motives frequently change according to what they see and hear on the platform. This dynamic suggests that TikTok serves not merely as a leisure space but also as an arena for identity negotiation, where faith intersects with everyday digital practices (Cotter et al. 2022).

Despite growing interest in the intersection between social media and religion, there is a lack of studies that explicitly link emotional engagement, particularly empathy generated by short form video content to the process of Islamic identity development among young Muslims. Most research emphasizes either theological correctness or digital communication strategies, overlooking how deeply emotional narratives can act as catalysts for spiritual self-discovery. Furthermore, while TikTok has rapidly become one of the most influential platforms among Muslim youth, its role in facilitating emotional connections that lead to lasting changes in religious identity remains underexplored (Santana, Kaamilah, and Wahyunengsih 2025).

This study aims to examine how TikTok content fosters empathy and influences the Islamic identity formation of young Muslims. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) identify the types of emotionally engaging content that resonate most with audiences exploring their faith, (2) analyze the ways in which TikTok facilitates emotional and spiritual reflection, and (3) assess the opportunities and challenges of relying on social media as a medium for religious identity development. Through this exploration, the research hopes to provide insights into how digital platforms can be harnessed for positive faith-based engagement in contemporary Muslim communities.

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of young Muslims who engage with religious content on TikTok. The phenomenological method is chosen to capture the subjective meanings, emotional responses, and identity-shaping processes that occur when individuals interact with empathetic and spiritually themed videos (Wirman et al. 2023). According to Saul McLeod phenomenological method emphasizes interpreting the meaning of lived experiences from the viewpoint of the individual. This design allows for a deep understanding of how digital media narratives influence the internalization of Islamic values and the formation of personal faith identity (Badil et al. 2023).

The primary data sources consist of two key components: (1) TikTok videos containing Islamic messages, personal stories, and emotional narratives that have been widely shared and engaged with by audiences, and (2) young Muslim users aged 18–25 who actively consume and reflect upon such content. The demographic range includes participants from diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, educational level, and geographic location, ensuring a variety of perspectives within the target audience.

Data collection is conducted exclusively through in-depth interviews, enabling the researcher to explore participants' emotional responses, interpretations, and identity-related experiences in detail. Participants are recruited through open calls on social media platforms and personal networks, ensuring that they are voluntary and willing to share their experiences. Each interview lasts between 45 and 60 minutes, is conducted either face-to-face or via online video conferencing, and is audio-recorded with the participants' consent.



Data analysis is carried out using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to empathy, emotional triggers, and the process of Islamic identity formation (Hikmat et al. 2024). The interviews are transcribed verbatim, then coded to highlight key themes. The coding process is guided by social identity theory, which helps interpret how participants’ interactions with online content influence their sense of belonging and self-definition as Muslims.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the key findings and data obtained from author’s qualitative research. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 10 participants from diverse demographic and spiritual backgrounds to explore how their daily religious practices are influenced by social media. The results show a complex and multifaceted transformation in participants’ spiritual behaviour, particularly in how they seek and apply religious content. The following discussion will elaborate on the main themes that emerged from the data, including the behavioural changes, challenges, and perceived benefits reported by the participants.

The table used to classify the phenomenological aspects of Scrolling for Faith was developed with reference to the research framework of Welly Wirman and Ringgo Eldapi, whose study served as a model for constructing the interview classification in this research (Wirman et al. 2023).

Table 1. Profile of TikTok Users Who Experience the Influence of TikTok on Empathy and Islamic Identity Formation

Informant Name	Age	Work	How long time using TikTok	The intensity of use of TikTok	Duration of opening TikTok	The number of videos that have been made following people
Eka Fitria Lusiana	22	Undergraduate Student	3 Years	>5 times a day	The longest can be 2-3 hours	+/- 10 videos
Hanna Nadhifa A'izza	20	Undergraduate Student	5 Years	>10 times a day	The longest can be 3 hours	+/- 20 videos
Indyra Puspita	22	Work	± 5 Years	>10 times a day	4-6 hours per day	+/- 20 videos

Ibtihal Maymanah	22	Undergraduate Student	± 5 Years	>15 times a day	The longest can be 2-3 hours	+/- 20 videos
Mochammad Alwi Hidayat	23	Work	± 3 Years	>5 times a day	The longest can be 2 hours	+/- 10 videos
Fadya Karima Shoffa	18	Senior High School Student	± 5 Years	>10 times a day	5-6 hours per day	+/- 20 videos
Fariz	22	Undergraduate Student	3 Years	>5 times a day	The longest can be one hour	+/- 10 videos
Randi Abdel Azizi	22	Undergraduate Student	3 Years	>5 times a day	The longest can be one hour	+/- 10 videos
Akbar Zaki Mubarak	22	Undergraduate Student	3 Years	>5 times a day	The longest can be one hour	+/- 10 videos
Ahmad Ghazi Al Faiz	25	Work	± 3 Years	>10 times a day	The longest can be 1-2 hours	+/- 20 videos

Source: Research Results, 2025

Through the study of Komala (2024), phenomenology in qualitative research provides a lens to understand the lived experiences of adolescents in navigating religious values within digital spaces. This approach highlights how personal encounters with TikTok content are not merely passive consumption, but rather active processes of meaning-making and identity negotiation (Siregar, Nursyamsi, and Dewi 2024).

The findings indicate that adolescents often experience changes in their perception and adaptation of Islamic values as they engage with TikTok's algorithm-driven content. Religious messages delivered in short, relatable, and emotionally engaging formats allow users to reflect on their personal faith while simultaneously participating in a broader online Muslim community.

Before presenting the complete findings, it is important to outline the predicted patterns that emerged from the interviews. The data shows that the initial motives for using TikTok among respondents were largely shaped by non-religious purposes, reflecting how adolescents engage with digital platforms primarily as spaces of entertainment and social connection. These past motives illustrate the

starting point of user behavior before the influence of Islamic content became significant.

Based on the analysis, six main categories of past motives were identified. First, TikTok was used mainly for entertainment and leisure, reflecting the platform's identity as a space for relaxation. Second, users were motivated by the appeal of following trends and viral content that circulate widely across the app. Third, TikTok functioned as a way to escape boredom or relieve daily stress. Fourth, some respondents sought general information or fun knowledge that the algorithm easily provides in short, accessible formats. Fifth, peer influence played a strong role, as many began using TikTok to connect socially with friends or follow group habits. Finally, TikTok also served practical purposes such as work-related access or important updates, showing that the platform could fulfill more functional needs alongside its recreational role.

These six categories are presented in the table below, offering a clearer overview of the respondents past motives for using TikTok. This classification becomes the foundation for understanding how shifts occurred after the introduction of Islamic content on the platform.

Tabel 2. The Results of the Past Motives in Using TikTok

The Past Motives	Informant Name									
	Lusi	Difa	Indyra	Ana	Alwi	Rima	Fariz	Randi	Zaki	Faiz
Mainly for entertainment and leisure.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Following trends and viral content.		✓		✓						✓
Escaping boredom or daily stress.		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Seeking general information or fun knowledge.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Using TikTok due to peer influence.	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓				✓
For Work and Important Access			✓	✓						✓

Source: Research Results, 2025

In the table, the overall results show that past motives for using TikTok were primarily for entertainment and leisure, with 100% of respondents agreeing. A similar trend was also observed in the past motive of seeking general information or fun knowledge. These two reasons reported by the interviewees align with the findings of Hussein, Alajlan, and Aljohani (2020), who identified the top three reasons for using TikTok as: following current events and staying updated on global happenings, relieving life and study pressures in a humorous way, and earning financial rewards by producing unique videos.

Hussein's research indicates that many people use TikTok based on the content provided, particularly as a means of relieving stress in their fast-paced lives. This background is also reflected in some respondents who reported using TikTok for work and important access. For instance, one interviewee, Ana (22), stated: *"TikTok has been my main social media because I do so many things to earn money here. I need to stay updated and prepare for important tasks in my office."*

Beyond practical purposes, TikTok has also fostered habits such as doomscrolling, a phenomenon where individuals continuously consume news and negative content on social media (Muhammad Munir and Moh. Taufiq 2024). The dominance of TikTok's For You Page (FYP) often shapes people's perspectives and habits, influencing not only their leisure activities but also their ways of interpreting everyday life. This shift in behavior is particularly significant when considering the phenomenon of *Scrolling for Faith*.

Faith, after all, does not emerge instantly; it often arises in moments when the heart is deeply touched, prompting reflection and change in one's perspective and actions. In the digital era, such experiences are increasingly mediated through online platforms and social media. The author personally reflects on this by questioning: why do I feel moved when encountering emotionally touching content? Is this a genuine search for meaning, or simply a fleeting reaction shaped by algorithmic exposure? Do others share the same experience I felt?

These questions serve as the foundation for exploring how new motives emerge when users encounter faith-related content on their FYP. The following table presents the reasons identified by respondents, illustrating the shift from general usage toward what can be understood as the experience of *Scrolling for Faith*.

Tabel 3. The Results of the After Motives in Using TikTok

The After Motives	Informant Name									
	Lusi	Difa	Indyra	Ana	Alwi	Rima	Fariz	Randi	Zaki	Faiz
As a source of Islamic learning and reminders.	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓				

Seeking daily spiritual motivation.	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Engaging with emotional and narrative content.		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reflecting on religious practices and personal growth.	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Interacting with Muslim community online.		✓	✓					✓	✓
Actively following Islamic accounts beyond FYP.		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓

Source: Research Results, 2025

In examining the after motives of using TikTok, the findings suggest a transformation in the way adolescents navigate faith within digital spaces. This shift is not only about a change in content preference, but also illustrates the broader dynamics of religious adaptation in the era of algorithm-driven media. Unlike the past motives that were largely recreational and socially driven, the after motives reveal a pattern of conscious engagement with faith-related content and community-building practices.

First, TikTok emerges as a source of Islamic learning and reminders. Indyra (22) as one respondent shared, *“I often find short religious videos on my FYP. They remind me to pray or reflect on things I had forgotten.”* This aligns with Campbell and Tsuria’s (2021) description of “everyday religion,” where faith is integrated into daily routines through continuous, accessible, and relatable content.

Second, users increasingly turn to the platform for daily spiritual motivation. Informants noted that repeated exposure to Qur’anic verses, hadith, or motivational speeches creates a rhythm of religious reflection. One respondent explained indirectly that these reminders gave her *“a sense of consistency, something I could hold on to throughout the day, even when I didn’t have time for formal study circles.”*

Third, respondent actively engage with emotional and narrative content, which resonates with their personal struggles and aspirations. Several respondents admitted to being moved to tears when listening to stories of the Prophet’s struggles or moral lessons wrapped in touching background sounds. As one put it, *“Hearing those stories with music that touched my heart made me feel closer to Islam in ways I didn’t expect.”* Such moments highlight how emotional storytelling deepens memory and strengthens attachment compared to abstract discourse.

Fourth, the platform enables reflection on religious practices and personal growth. Informants described moments where they reevaluated their habits—such as improving prayer discipline or making lifestyle adjustments after encountering moral cues online. One noted, *“Some videos really made me think about whether I was doing enough as a Muslim.”*

Fifth, TikTok fosters interaction with the Muslim community online, creating what respondents described as a “digital ummah.” Participating in comments, duets, or campaigns during Ramadan or Islamic holidays gave them a sense of belonging. As one teenager shared indirectly, engaging in these activities made her feel part of something larger than her local environment.

Taken together, these after motives demonstrate how TikTok has become more than a site of entertainment it has developed into a space where adolescents negotiate religious values, build spiritual discipline, and construct collective identity. The trajectory from initial leisure-driven use toward intentional religious engagement reflects a broader transformation: TikTok is not only shaping patterns of digital consumption, but also serving as an arena where faith, community, and personal growth are actively redefined.

Tabel 4. Values and Identity Formation on TikTok

Values and Identity Formation on TikTok	Informant Name									
	Lusi	Difa	Indyra	Ana	Alwi	Rima	Fariz	Randi	Zaki	Faiz
Feeling touched and empathetic through emotional content.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reflecting on life and faith after watching.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Changing behaviors in worship or daily habits.	✓		✓	✓		✓				✓
Expressing Islamic identity online vs. offline.		✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
Engaging through likes, comments, or shares.		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Feeling support from the Muslim TikTok community.			✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓

Comparing digital dakwah (accessible) vs. traditional (interactive).	✓	✓		✓	✓				✓	✓
Expecting more relevant and quality Islamic content.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Seeing TikTok as a future medium for youth Islamic identity.		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓

Source: Research Results, 2025

The findings of this study reveal that TikTok has become a significant platform where values and identity, particularly in relation to faith, are continuously shaped and negotiated. All informants agreed that emotional and religious content circulating on TikTok often left them feeling touched and empathetic. The immersive audiovisual format of the platform allows stories, recitations, and motivational messages to resonate deeply, evoking emotions that lead to self-reflection.

One of the most common responses was the tendency to reflect on life and faith after watching such content. Informants described moments of reevaluating their spiritual practices, moral decisions, and even daily habits, particularly in relation to worship routines.

In terms of religious exposure, Rima (18) explained that she first encountered Islamic content unintentionally through her *For You Page (FYP)*. She stated: “*I started to realize that my FYP was filled with religious content after I previously liked and searched for similar videos.*” This reflects how algorithmic personalization contributes to shaping spiritual engagement. These transformations highlight how TikTok serves not only as entertainment but also as a medium that influences the way young Muslims live out their faith.

Moreover, Lusi (22) highlighted that TikTok can even address sensitive topics, such as women’s health and the calculation of menstrual cycles in relation to worship practices. While she valued these insights, she also expressed caution, acknowledging that TikTok content is often fragmentary and cannot fully substitute for detailed religious learning available in mosques or formal study circles. She explained: “*Content on TikTok cannot be used as a full guide of faith because it only shows pieces of knowledge without complete details. It is not the same as attending sermons in the mosque.*”

The expression of Islamic identity was also reported as extending beyond offline spaces. Informants noted that they engaged in demonstrating faith online through digital practices such as liking, commenting, and sharing Islamic content. These seemingly simple interactions were perceived as forms of support for the

Muslim TikTok community, strengthening the sense of belonging to what can be considered a “digital ummah.” This sense of community support plays a role in reinforcing personal identity while simultaneously connecting users with a broader collective.

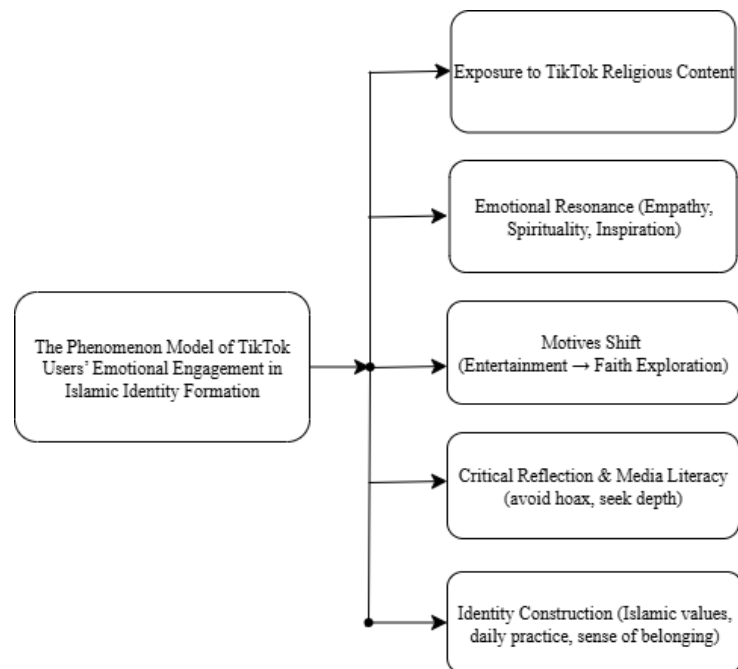
At the same time, the rapid development of media has also encouraged several informants to recognize the importance of critical reflection. They emphasized that while TikTok may provide motivation and religious inspiration, it is equally crucial not to accept content at face value without further verification. Misinformation or superficial interpretations were seen as potential risks that could distort religious understanding. As Alwi (23) explained, *“TikTok can remind us of Allah and motivate us, but we cannot take it all for granted without checking the real source.”* This awareness highlights that being wise in using social media is essential in preventing the spread of hoaxes and ensuring that the formation of values and identity remains grounded and authentic.

Another important aspect raised by all informants was the comparison between digital and traditional forms of dakwah. While TikTok was seen as highly accessible, relatable, and able to reach a large audience in a short time, traditional forms of religious teaching such as mosque sermons or study circles were valued for their interactivity, depth, and atmosphere of focus. Informants emphasized that while TikTok provides entry points to faith, it should not replace in-person religious learning but rather complement it.

Finally, all informants expressed an expectation for more relevant, reliable, and high-quality Islamic content in the future. They viewed TikTok as a potential medium through which the younger generation could continue to explore and construct their Islamic identity. In this sense, TikTok is not merely a site of consumption but also a platform of transformation one that allows youth to navigate between entertainment, spirituality, and identity formation in the digital age.

To provide a clearer understanding of the dynamics behind emotionally engaging content on TikTok, particularly in relation to faith and identity formation. The author summarizes the findings into a figure that identifies the main types of content resonating most with audiences. This visualization not only organizes the interview results but also highlights recurring patterns that emerged from the narratives of informants.

Figure 1. The Phenomenon Model of TikTok Users Emotional Engagement in Islamic Identity Formation



Conclusion

Based on the research conducted through interviews and observations regarding the phenomenon of *Scrolling for Faith* on TikTok, it can be concluded that the meaning of TikTok for users in relation to empathy and Islamic identity formation is divided into three main categories. First, TikTok serves as an emotional and spiritual medium, where short audiovisual content on the platform can touch users deeply, evoke empathy, and even trigger spiritual reflection. This shows that exposure to religious or value-laden content fosters not only emotional responses but also moments of self-awareness and contemplation about faith. Second, TikTok functions as a space for identity negotiation and expression. Young Muslims, in particular, use the platform both consciously and unconsciously to shape their religious identity. The process of watching, liking, commenting, and sharing religious content creates a digital practice of faith that complements or contrasts with offline expressions of Islam. This reflects how religious identity today is no longer confined to traditional spaces like mosques but also mediated through social media interactions. Third, TikTok emerges as a community and learning hub. Informants highlighted that they feel supported by the wider Muslim TikTok community, gain motivation for worship or daily habits, and expect more relevant and quality Islamic content in the future. At the same time, they also recognized the importance of being critical in consuming religious content online to avoid misinformation or hoaxes. In this sense, TikTok becomes not only a platform for entertainment but also a dynamic arena where values, empathy, and Islamic identity are continuously constructed, shared, and redefined.

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