

## Audience Decoding Position on the Use of Language and Humor in Gus Miftah's Lectures

Received: 16-02-2026 Revised: 04-05-2026 Accepted: 10-05-2026 DOI: 10.29240/jdk.v11i1.16385

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Keywords: Decoding,  
Language, Humorous  
Lectures, Gus Miftah.

### ABSTRACT

**Purpose** – The high average screen time and number of TikTok users in Indonesia indicate a change in the communication patterns of society. Da'wah practices in the contemporary era have also evolved. Da'wah is now delivered through digital access. The context of digital da'wah in the contemporary era requires not only visual beauty, but also the right strategy. This study departs from the strategy of using language and humor in da'wah, which is still a matter of debate, because not all circles accept the use of humor in da'wah in the same way. Gus Miftah is one of the preachers who receives mixed responses from his audience because of the language and humor he uses in his speech. This study aims to examine the audience's response to the use of language and humor in Gus Miftah's preaching, as well as the meanings that emerge from the audience's response to the language and humor in Gus Miftah's preaching.

**Method** – This research is a descriptive qualitative study using an audience reception approach. The reception approach refers to the understanding that the dynamics of message reception cannot be understood solely through the process of message production and delivery, but also through how the audience receives, understands, interprets, and negotiates the meaning of the message.

**Findings** – The results of the study show that based on the classification using Stuart Hall's reception model, the dominance of audience comments was in the opposition position, followed by the dominant hegemony position, and opposition.

Cite this article: Hamsiyah, S., Muhammad, F., & Nasriah, S. (2026). Audience Decoding Position on the Use of Language and Humor in Gus Miftah's Lectures. *Jurnal Dakwah Dan Komunikasi*, 11(1), 261–273.  
<https://doi.org/10.29240/jdk.v11i1.16385>

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## INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, the use of digital devices and social media is showing a very high trend, signaling a shift in people's communication patterns from face-to-face interactions to online media-based communication. Pratikno, the Coordinating Minister for Human Development and Culture, stated that the average screen time for Indonesians reaches 7.5 hours per day (Romadoni, 2025). This data indicates that people's activities are increasingly connected to the digital space as the primary

medium for obtaining information, interacting, and shaping public opinion. Similarly, a report by We Are Social and Meltwater, cited by Dataloka, noted that Indonesia has the largest number of TikTok users in the world, reaching 180.11 million users (Maheswara, 2025). This high level of digital media use has made TikTok not only an entertainment platform but also a discursive space where people respond to various social, cultural, and religious issues.

This situation indicates that the practice of da'wah in the contemporary era has also experienced a significant shift to digital and social media. Da'wah no longer occurs solely in person or offline between preachers and congregations, but also exists in the form of digital content that can be accessed, shared, and commented on widely by the public. Da'wah, as a socio-religious activity, is inherently dynamic and adaptable to the changing times (Khoiruz Zaman, 2025). In the context of digital media, da'wah patterns have become faster, broader, more interactive, and more open to diverse audience responses. The da'wah audience is no longer limited to a specific geographic space, but rather comprises a heterogeneous audience with different social, cultural, educational, and preference backgrounds.

However, it is important to understand that expanding da'wah into digital media presents not only opportunities but also new challenges, particularly in the use of language and humor as a da'wah communication strategy. Many preachers use a relaxed, direct, and humorous style to create rapport with their audiences, particularly the younger generation. Humor is seen as an effective communication strategy for capturing attention and narrowing the gap between preachers and congregations. However, in the open digital space, the use of humor is not always universally accepted by audiences. Language intended as a joke by a communicator can be interpreted differently by audiences, especially when it involves harsh language, personal sarcasm, or unequal social relationships.

This issue is a key point in this research. One example that sparked public debate was Gus Miftah's sermon, which featured humorous remarks about an iced tea seller using language deemed offensive. The remarks garnered a widespread response on TikTok, as some viewers considered the humor no longer a means of educating preaching, but rather a form of insult and symbolic domination of more socially vulnerable groups. These differing interpretations demonstrate that the primary issue lies not only in the preacher's intention in delivering humor, but also in how the language and humor are received, interpreted, and negotiated by audiences in the digital space.

In the context of digital preaching, the visual presentation of content plays an important role in increasing audience appeal. However, in addition to visual aspects, the use of language and humor also serves as a preaching strategy that can attract the audience's attention and create familiarity with the audience. Preaching with a linguistic approach means utilizing language as a tool to convey the message of preaching. The use of language is adapted to the culture and dialect of the community (Madakir, 2024). To attract attention and elicit understanding from the audience, preachers must have language skills and scientific capacity (Aldiansyah, 2024). This is especially true if da'wah is delivered through an open and heterogeneous communication space. In this case, language becomes the main instrument for conveying da'wah messages in a manner that is appropriate for the diversity of the audience. The language skills possessed by preachers not only function as a communication strategy but also as a determining factor in the success of preaching.

The use of language and humor in contemporary da'wah practices is often used as a diversion because it can lighten the mood, attract attention, and reduce audience boredom. However, the humor used must take into account Islamic law and communication ethics (Muhammad Ridwan, 2024). Humor in da'wah must also be adapted to the social and cultural sensitivities of the audience. Abdullah, quoted in Ali Murtadlo, said that a preacher must be able to understand the local culture of their audience in order to adjust their approach appropriately (Murtadlo, 2025). Dakwah with a humorous approach must pay attention to several things, namely that the humorous language used can be understood and accepted by the audience, the recipients of the humor can accept the context of the humor, and the humorist must be able to convey and present the humor well.

The practice of humor in interpersonal communication was exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, when he conveyed messages to his followers. In the Book of Sirah Nabawiyah, it is mentioned that the Prophet had a humorous nature. At that time, an old woman came to the Prophet and asked if she would enter heaven. The Prophet replied that old women would not enter heaven. Hearing the Prophet's answer, the old woman immediately began to cry. However, the Prophet asked someone to approach the old woman and tell her that she would enter heaven, only in a young state (as a girl), because in heaven Allah would restore them to girls like angels (Yusuf & Kasman, 2025). Therefore, Islam does not prohibit the use of humor in preaching, but it still pays attention to the limits of decency.

Previous research conducted by Muhammad Ridwan found that humor that is not in line with Islamic communication ethics can cause misunderstandings and even damage the credibility of preachers (Muhammad Ridwan, 2024). This means that preachers must be careful in choosing words or sentences and the right time to use humor. This perspective reflects that the use of humor in preaching remains a subject of debate, as not all circles accept the humorous approach in preaching in the same way.

One of the preaching practices that received mixed responses from the audience was Gus Miftah's preaching. His lecture, held in Magelang, Central Java, in 2024, was widely commented on by the public. In his preaching interaction, Gus Miftah showed that he was joking with an iced tea vendor. However, his joking remarks to the iced tea vendor became the focus of public and audience attention on TikTok (Prasetyo, 2025). The use of casual language accompanied by spontaneous humor wrapped in profanity elicited various responses from the audience in the public sphere, including acceptance, rejection, and negotiation of his message. This indicates that the audience plays an active role in interpreting the preaching messages they receive.

Previous studies, such as that conducted by Muhammad Ridwan in his research entitled *Ethics of Humor in Da'wah: Analysis of the Controversy of Gus Miftah's Lectures*, focused on the ethics and limitations of humor in da'wah. Meanwhile, research by Muh. Yahya Saraka in his study entitled *Analysis of Humorous Preaching on the Prohibition of Dating: A Virtual Ethnographic Study of the Instagram Account @nunuzoo*, focuses on examining the forms of humorous preaching carried out on the Instagram account @nunuzoo. These studies contribute to how good humor is used in preaching, but they do not specifically focus on the audience. Therefore, to fill this gap, this study attempts to examine the audience's response and reception of the use of language and humor in Gus Miftah's preaching.

This study aims to find out the audience's response to the use of language and humor in Gus Miftah's preaching, as well as the meanings that emerge from the audience's response to the language and humor in Gus Miftah's preaching. Thus, the novelty of this study lies in its focus on analyzing the reception of the public audience on TikTok. This study provides a perspective on how audiences understand language and humor in preaching practices as well as a communication process that involves meaning negotiation between preachers and audiences.

## **METHOD**

This research is a descriptive qualitative study using an audience reception approach. The reception approach refers to the understanding that the dynamics of message reception cannot be understood solely through the process of message production and delivery, but also through how the audience receives, understands, interprets, and negotiates the meaning of the message (Vera, 2024). In this context, the research focuses not only on what the communicator conveys but also on how the message is interpreted by the audience based on their social, cultural, and experiential backgrounds.

To strengthen the analysis of the use of language and humor in da'wah, this study also utilizes a language theory perspective, specifically Speech Act Theory developed by J.L. Austin and John Searle. This theory explains that language functions not only as a means of conveying information but also as a form of social action. Every utterance contains specific actions such as satire, joking, reprimanding, influencing, and even demonstrating power relations. In the context of Gus Miftah's sermon, the use of humor and harsh language can be understood not only as forms of joking but also as symbolic actions that generate specific social meanings for the audience. This approach helps explain how humorous utterances in Islamic preaching can be received differently depending on the context, the communicator's social position, and the audience's perceptions.

Furthermore, this study also considers humor theory as a basis for analysis, specifically aggressive humor proposed by Rod Martin. Aggressive humor refers to a form of humor that uses mockery, sarcasm, or insults toward others to create humor. In Islamic preaching, this type of humor can generate controversy when the audience perceives the joke as no longer educational but instead demeaning to certain individuals. Therefore, this theory is relevant to explaining why humor in Gus Miftah's sermons is not always received as entertainment but can also be interpreted as a form of symbolic domination.

The primary data in this study came from public comments on a video of Gus Miftah's sermon with an iced tea seller reuploaded by several TikTok accounts, such as @inilahcom, @duniapunyacerita\_, @hariankompas, @kang.so\_ra, and @xtra\_my. These accounts are creator accounts that upload video clips of sermons featuring humorous interactions between Gus Miftah and the iced tea seller. Comments were selected using purposive sampling, which involves deliberately selecting data based on their relevance to the research focus. Therefore, the comments analyzed were those that explicitly discussed the use of language, humor, social relations, and cultural aspects in the sermon.

This study aims to examine TikTok audience responses to the use of language and humor in Gus Miftah's preaching, specifically through comment patterns and audience reception. To obtain this data, the researcher used digital observation and documentation methods. Digital observation

allows researchers to observe various forms of digital data, such as text, audio, video, and screenshots (R. Gallagher John, 2024). In this study, researchers collected videos of Gus Miftah's lectures, took screenshots of audience comments on TikTok, and transcribed these comments to then classify them based on audience reception.

The data analysis steps were carried out in several stages, namely: (1) collecting videos and comments relevant to the research focus, (2) identifying language forms, humor, and audience response patterns in the comments, (3) classifying comments based on audience reception positions such as dominant reading, negotiated reading, and oppositional reading in accordance with Stuart Hall's reception theory, and (4) analyzing the social meanings that emerged from audience responses to the use of language and humor in Gus Miftah's lectures. With this approach, the study can explain how language and humor in preaching are not only produced by the preacher, but also negotiated by the audience as part of social communication practices in the digital space.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The video of Gus Miftah's sermon with an iced tea seller, which has been widely commented on and debated by TikTok users, is a clip from a sermon held at the drh. Soepardi Field in Magelang, during the Magelang Bersholawat event. On that occasion, Gus Miftah made a spontaneous joke with an iced tea seller, using language deemed offensive by some in the audience. According to his attorney, the joke was intended as an interlude or icebreaker during the sermon to lighten the mood and build emotional closeness with the congregation. The entire audience responded with laughter, so contextually, the remark was positioned as a joke aimed at fostering intimacy and a sense of brotherhood in preaching.

However, responses on social media, particularly TikTok, suggest a different interpretation. Digital audiences did not fully accept the joke as a normal joke, but instead assessed issues of linguistic etiquette, power relations, and social sensitivity. This difference in response sparked a debate that focused not only on Gus Miftah's remarks but also on the laughter of the congregation, which some members of the audience perceived as a lack of empathy for the iced tea seller, who held a lower social position.

One of Gus Miftah's most widely attended statements was: *"Oh, kon borong Es teh mu jik okeh ra? Masih? Yo kono didol, goblok! Dolen ndisek, nggo lak rung payu, wes takdir"* ("Oh, you still have a lot of your iced tea left, right? Still? Then go sell it first, stupid! Go walk around first, if it still doesn't sell, then maybe it's fate"). This remark was delivered in a relaxed atmosphere, accompanied by laughter from the congregation. Linguistically, this utterance not only functions as a message but also as a social act, as explained in Speech Act Theory by J. L. Austin and John Searle. Language in this context not only conveys information but also performs actions such as joking, sarcasm, reprimands, or even reproducing power relations. For example, the use of the word "stupid" was interpreted by some audiences not as ordinary humor, but as a form of speech containing symbolic dominance because it was directed at individuals in more vulnerable social positions.

Furthermore, from the perspective of Rod Martin's humor theory, this utterance can be categorized as aggressive humor, namely humor that uses mockery, sarcasm, or insults toward others to create humor. In the context of da'wah, aggressive humor becomes problematic when the

audience no longer sees it as an educational tool or communicative approach, but rather as a form of demeaning. This suggests that the boundaries of humor in sermons are determined not only by the communicator's intentions but also by how the humor is received and interpreted by the audience.

To understand these differences in interpretation, this study uses Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model. This model explains that the meaning of a message is not fixed and not entirely determined by the communicator, but rather negotiated by the audience through a decoding process based on their social background, culture, and individual experiences. In this context, Gus Miftah employed the encoding process with the intention of making humor a relaxed da'wah strategy and building closeness with the congregation. However, TikTok audiences decoded these utterances in diverse ways.

Therefore, the results and discussion in this study classify audience responses based on their decoding positions: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional. However, the analysis goes beyond simply classifying audience positions; it also examines how language and humor function as communication strategies that generate specific social meanings. By combining language theory, humor theory, and Stuart Hall's decoding model, this study seeks to explain how dominant audience hegemony is formed in interpreting the use of language and humor in Gus Miftah's sermons, as well as how the practice of da'wah in the digital space is increasingly required to pay attention to communication ethics, social sensitivity, and the power relations inherent in every utterance.

### Audience Response *Decoding* Position

This study analyzes the position of TikTok audiences' responses to the language and humor used in Gus Miftah's preaching, using Stuart Hall's reception theory. Audience reception in this study is understood as the process of media audiences interpreting preaching messages as reflected in audience responses in the comments section of TikTok social media. Based on the *decoding* model of Stuart Hall's reception theory, the process of encoding audience comments is grouped into three reception positions, namely the dominant hegemony position, negotiation, and opposition. To clarify the diversity of *decoding*, the researcher will present a categorization of audience responses in tabular form.

No.	<i>Decoding</i> Position	Comments
1.	Dominant Hegemony	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>"This Ustadz's words brought about a 100% change for this ice cream vendor!"</i> (Source: inilah.com)</li> <li>2. <i>"From this FYP video, it's proof that the father's prayers were answered"</i> (Source: @kang.so_ra, December 4, 2024)</li> <li>3. <i>"Check out the previous episode—Gus Miftah often bought in bulk, but yesterday, because he was anxious, he asked to be bought out, not like a normal sale"</i> (Source: @duniapunyacerita_, December 5, 2024)</li> <li>4. <i>"It's time for jokes, boss."</i> (Source: @hariankompas, December 9, 2024)</li> <li>5. <i>"Gus Miftah is still the best."</i> (Source: @hariankompas, December 10, 2024)</li> <li>6. <i>"Gus Miftah's Joking Nature"</i> (Source: @hariankompas, December 11,</li> </ol>

No.	Decoding Position	Comments
		<p>2024)</p> <p>7. <i>"If I always think positively, perhaps this is how God provides for ice cream vendors, through one word from Gus Miftah."</i> (Source: @hariankompas, December 13, 2024)</p> <p>8. <i>"Gus Miftah often jokes with the vendors, but in the end, he buys all their goods."</i> (Source: @hariankompas, December 9, 2024)</p> <p>9. <i>"The joke ended up winning sympathy. Thank you, Gus. Because of your words, the ice seller made a lot of money. There's a lesson in this for everyone who sells ice."</i> (Source: @hariankompas, December 10, 2024)</p>
2.	Negotiation	<p>1. <i>"I'm pregnant, sir. I swear that tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, Allah will elevate you to a successful person. May you always be healthy, sir, and may your sustenance always be protected by Allah SWT. Amen."</i> (Source: inilah.com, December 3, 2024)</p> <p>2. <i>"Sir, the ice seller, may you always be healthy and may your blessings flow like the never-ending Zamzam water, sir. May you always be under the protection of Allah SWT."</i> (Source: inilah.com, December 3, 2024)</p> <p>3. <i>"May Gus Miftah be mindful in his speech and preaching in the future."</i> (Source: @kang.so_ra, December 4, 2024)</p> <p>4. <i>"If only the words <sup>were like this</sup>"</i>  M: <i>How's your iced tea?</i>  E: <i>Still</i>  M: <i>"Yes, but you have to pay 1 million rupiah for the whole group."</i> (Source: @kang.so_ra, December 4, 2024)</p> <p>5. <i>"May we be made people who are careful in our actions"</i> (Source: @duniapunyacerita_, December 5, 2024)</p> <p>6. <i>"From this, we learn that manners are more important than knowledge."</i> (Source: @hariankompas, December 10, 2024)</p> <p>7. <i>"Let everyone stop criticizing Gus Miftah. The mistake has been atoned for by apologizing. Whoever apologizes should be forgiven, and the issue is resolved. Gus Miftah has learned a valuable lesson from this."</i> (Source: @hariankompas, December 9, 2024)</p>
3.	Opposition	<p>1. <i>"Oh my God, manners are more important than knowledge, sir. May the ice cream seller be healthy and may his status be elevated as high as possible."</i> (Source: inilah.com)</p> <p>2. <i>"I am a supporter of Gus Miftah, and I will continue to pray for him with all my heart. May Gus Miftah become an ice tea seller."</i> (Source: inilah.com, December 4, 2024)</p> <p>3. <i>"Gus, is that funny?"</i> (Source: inilah.com, December 3, 2024)</p> <p>4. <i>"Is it appropriate to call him Gus?"</i> (Source: inilah.com, December 4, 2024)</p> <p>5. <i>"And I'm confused, why are so many people laughing? It breaks my heart to see the little smile on that man's face."</i> (Source: inilah.com, December 4, 2024)</p> <p>6. <i>"Having good manners is more important than having a wealth of knowledge but no ethics"</i> (Source: inilah.com, December 3, 2024)</p> <p>7. <i>"That's no joke, long hair"</i> (Source: inilah.com, December 4, 2024)</p>

No.	Decoding Position	Comments
8.		<i>"Habib Zaidan, how dare you laugh so hard?"</i> (Source: inilah.com, December 3, 2024)
9.		<i>"If manners are below knowledge"</i> (Source: @xtra_my, December 4, 2024)
10.		<i>"How many good people don't laugh? Those are the ones with hearts"</i> (Source: @xtra_my, December 4, 2024)
11.		<i>"What's so funny for them to laugh lol"</i> (Source: @xtra_my, December 4, 2024)
12.		<i>"This isn't even funny"</i> (Source: @xtra_my, December 4, 2024)
13.		<i>"The fact that this happened in a sacred place, a gathering of knowledge, makes me feel so sad. Please everyone, be kind, watch our words and our thoughts."</i> (Source: @xtra_my, December 4, 2024)
14.		<i>"The fact that everyone was laughing along with him. I feel so bad. I wish I was there and stood up for the young man selling tea. It hurts so much."</i> (Source: @xtra_my, December 4, 2024)
15.		<i>"Understanding religion does not guarantee one can treat others with humanity."</i> (Source: @kang.so_ra, December 4, 2024)
16.		<i>"Was that a mistake or his true nature?"</i> (Source: @kang.so_ra, December 4, 2024)
17.		<i>"I'm sad because Gus ii and others also laughed at Habib Zaidan"</i> (Source: @kang.so_ra, December 4, 2024)
18.		<i>"This is how people in this gathering think—how can they all laugh?"</i> (Source: @kang.so_ra, December 4, 2024)
19.		<i>"Not all of your jokes are accepted by others."</i> (Source: @kang.so_ra, December 4, 2024)
20.		<i>"Oh my goodness, why are you talking like that, Gus Miftah? The person next to you is laughing so hard they have to clarify and apologize too."</i> (Source: @duniapunyacerita_, December 4, 2024)
21.		<i>"How come all his friends are laughing?"</i> (Source: @duniapunyacerita_, December 4, 2024)
22.		<i>"Gus, be careful when you speak. You're in front of them. The person next to you seems genuinely happy, Gus."</i> (Source: @duniapunyacerita_, December 4, 2024)
23.		<i>"May Allah grant abundant blessings to this tea seller. Aamiin, hopefully the president will evaluate this person soon."</i> (Source: @duniapunyacerita_, December 4, 2024)
24.		<i>"This is the kind of assistant minister we need."</i> (Source: @duniapunyacerita_, December 4, 2024)
25.		<i>"To the ice cream seller, be patient and sincere, sir. Behind all of Allah's tests, there is surely wisdom. Allah SWT will raise your status, sir. Aamiin."</i> (Source: @duniapunyacerita_, December 4, 2024)
26.		<i>"Maybe it's just a joke to him, but what about his father's feelings?"</i> (Source: @duniapunyacerita_, December 5, 2024)
27.		<i>"His joke was too hurtful, in my opinion."</i> (Source: @duniapunyacerita_, December 4, 2024)

No.	<i>Decoding Position</i>	Comments
		28. <i>"Out of so many people, everyone laughed. Ugh."</i> (Source: @duniapunyacerita_, December 4, 2024)
		29. <i>"Trying to be funny but ending up insulting"</i> (Source: @duniapunyacerita_, December 4, 2024)
		30. <i>"Your jokes are truly amazing."</i> (Source: @duniapunyacerita_, December 5, 2024)
		31. <i>"But Hasan Hasbi also laughed the hardest."</i> (Source: @hariankompas, December 9, 2024)
		32. <i>"Be careful when speaking, consider the situation."</i> (Source: @hariankompas, December 11, 2024)
		33. <i>"It is inappropriate for a religious leader to say such things."</i> (Source: @hariankompas, December 10, 2024)
		34. <i>The clarification is that it was a "spontaneous remark." Is it appropriate to laugh at it? Is this how a 'Gus' should speak? Is his knowledge higher than his manners?</i> (Source: @duniapunyacerita_, December 4, 2024)

From the categorization of the audience's comments above, it can be seen that out of the 50 comments analyzed, there were 9 comments in the dominant hegemony position, 7 comments in the negotiation position, and 34 comments in the opposition acceptance position.

### 1. Dominant Hegemony Comments

The dominant hegemonic position is a condition in which the media audience accepts the messages produced by the message producers in their entirety, without criticism, and effectively reinforces and legitimizes the ideology of power instilled by the message producers (Patma et al., 2025) . The TikTok media audience in this position shows a tendency to fully accept the meaning of Gus Miftah's preaching. This tendency to accept is evident in their responses to the language and humor used by Gus Miftah. The audience comments on Gus Miftah's humor as part of his distinctive preaching style.

Several comments also show a tendency to accept Gus Miftah's speech as words that bring blessings and benefits to iced tea vendors. Thus, in a position of dominant hegemony, the audience fully accepts the meaning of Gus Miftah's preaching. There is no criticism in the form of negotiation of meaning or opposition to the use of language and humor in Gus Miftah's preaching.

### 2. Negotiation Comments

The negotiation position is a condition in which the media audience accepts the message produced by the message maker, but with certain notes and exceptions (Riskiy & Hapsari, 2022) . In this position, the audience's comments do not necessarily reject the meaning of Gus Miftah's preaching discourse, but they do not accept it entirely either. They negate the focus of Gus Miftah's preaching discourse on more religious and ethical values. The comments that appear do not necessarily reject the meaning of Gus Miftah's preaching

message.

Several comments expressed hopes and prayers for the iced tea vendor. This shows a negotiation of meaning in the discourse of preaching: they place manners and morals as the main values and shift preaching from verbal authority to a practice that must prioritize morals and humanity. Other comments also show a negotiating attitude by offering alternatives to Gus Miftah's speech as a correction, indicating that there was not complete acceptance of the language and humor used by Gus Miftah in his speech.

### 3. Opposition Comments

The opposition position is *a counter* to hegemony that shows the audience's rejection of the communicator's message. The audience has a different meaning from the message creator. They reject and shift the meaning of the message from the message creator according to their own views and understanding (Damayanti, 2025). Rejection here does not mean that the message recipients do not understand the message intended by the message creator, but rather that they know exactly what the message creator means, only that they oppose it because they consider it incompatible with their personal circumstances or experiences (Wahid, 2024). The audience's opposition comments generally show criticism, rejection, and the invalidation of Gus Miftah's legitimacy as a discourse producer.

The audience's comments not only addressed Gus Miftah's humor and style of language, but also the power relations depicted in his preaching discourse, ethical and moral issues, and the socio-cultural dimensions behind the discourse. Some audience members commented on the appropriateness of his authority and status as a state official. They considered the language and humor in his preaching to be inappropriate in the context of preaching, especially to ice tea vendors.

### Meanings that Emerged in Audience Responses

The audience's interpretation of Gus Miftah's language use can be further understood through humor theory and language ethics in da'wah communication. Based on the responses in the comment section, most audiences placed themselves in Stuart Hall's oppositional reading position, where they rejected the intended humorous meaning and instead interpreted the sermon as inappropriate, degrading, and ethically problematic. Although Gus Miftah may have encoded the speech as a form of relaxed and contextual preaching style, the audience decoded it differently because the harsh jokes directed at an iced tea seller were seen as violating social sensitivity and politeness norms. Hall explains that meaning is not determined solely by the speaker's intention, but by how audiences interpret messages according to their social and cultural background. This is also supported by research on Gus Miftah's preaching reception, which found that audience responses vary between dominant, negotiated, and oppositional positions depending on their moral and ideological perspectives (Inun et al., 2025).

From the perspective of humor theory, this phenomenon can be explained using Martin's Humor Styles Theory, which distinguishes humor into affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor,

aggressive humor, and self-defeating humor. In this case, the audience interpreted Gus Miftah's humor as aggressive humor, namely humor used by mocking, ridiculing, or lowering others to create laughter. Aggressive humor often creates symbolic violence because laughter is produced through the humiliation of another person. Research on Gus Miftah's humor construction also found that he frequently combines affiliative humor and aggressive humor in his preaching style, and controversy tends to emerge when aggressive humor exceeds ethical boundaries and no longer fulfills the educational function of da'wah (Nurudin, 2025). This explains why the audience did not perceive the statement as humor, but rather as symbolic domination.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence also strengthens this analysis. Symbolic violence occurs when domination is exercised subtly through language, symbols, and social legitimacy without physical coercion. As a preacher, public figure, and religious authority, Gus Miftah occupies a higher symbolic position compared to an iced tea seller who represents an economically marginalized group. Therefore, when harsh language is directed downward socially, audiences interpret it not as harmless joking, but as an unequal power relation being publicly displayed. The laughter produced in such a context becomes problematic because it reflects domination rather than equality. The audience perceives that the preacher's authority should protect dignity, not reproduce social humiliation.

In terms of language politeness, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory also becomes relevant. Their theory emphasizes the importance of maintaining the "face" or social dignity of others in interaction. Harsh jokes directed personally at someone threaten negative face and positive face simultaneously because they reduce personal dignity in front of a public audience. In da'wah, politeness is especially important because the preacher is not only delivering information but also representing moral authority. Previous studies on Gus Miftah's rhetoric show that his preaching style is often appreciated for being contextual, direct, and humorous, especially in marginal communities such as nightlife workers, because the humor creates closeness and reduces social distance (Inun, 2025). However, when humor shifts from contextual familiarity into personal humiliation, the audience no longer interprets it as inclusive preaching but as ethical failure.

This also relates to the ethical function of humor in Islamic preaching. Humor in da'wah should ideally function as educational humor reducing tension, opening emotional closeness, and helping moral messages be accepted more effectively. Humor loses legitimacy when it shifts into ridicule that weakens human dignity. Studies on public communication ethics in Gus Miftah's controversial content also emphasize that virality in digital preaching requires stronger ethical awareness because digital audiences are more sensitive to issues of social justice, authority, and representation (Masruroh & Mahmudi, 2025). In the digital era, preachers are no longer evaluated only by their religious message, but also by how they perform moral consistency in public communication.

The audience's rejection shows that the limits of humor in preaching are not determined by the preacher's intention alone, but by the social consequences produced by that humor. Humor becomes unacceptable when it reinforces inequality, humiliates vulnerable groups, and weakens the moral credibility of the preacher. This case demonstrates that contemporary da'wah must be

adaptive not only in style but also in ethics. Contextual preaching does not justify symbolic domination. Instead, humor must remain proportional, humane, and aligned with the core values of Islamic preaching: compassion, dignity, and justice.

## CONCLUSION

Based on an analysis of media audience reception of audience comments on TikTok regarding the language and humor used in Gus Miftah's lectures, it can be concluded that the majority of audience comments found by the researcher were oppositional. Oppositional audience comments criticized ethical, moral, and social issues in Gus Miftah's preaching discourse, which tended to be accepted as lacking in ethics and empathy. Meanwhile, comments in the dominant hegemonic position do not question the language, humor, and collective aspects such as ethical issues, power relations, and social sensitivity in Gus Miftah's preaching discourse. Meanwhile, comments in the negotiation position did not fully agree with Gus Miftah's preaching discourse, but they did not reject it either. They shifted it to ethical demands and social empathy towards others that must be fulfilled by preachers.

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