

Public Sentiment Toward the “Curriculum of Love” Policy in Islamic Education: Evidence from YouTube Discourse in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Recent education reforms have increasingly turned toward the moral and affective dimensions of learning in response to concerns about social fragmentation and ethical decline. In Islamic educational traditions, moral formation has never been peripheral; it has long been treated as a central pedagogical aim. Yet contemporary reforms framed in moral language often provoke mixed reactions once they enter public debate. This study examines how the Indonesian public responds to the “Curriculum of Love” policy in Islamic education by analysing YouTube discourse as a site of digital engagement. The study draws on an exploratory sentiment analysis of 145 opinion-based comments taken from seven YouTube videos produced by government agencies, practitioner communities, and national media. Comments were manually coded as positive, neutral, or negative and interpreted through thematic analysis to trace the narratives accompanying each sentiment. Overall sentiment trends toward support, particularly in videos that showcase classroom practice and lived pedagogical examples. Many viewers interpret the policy as consistent with Islamic ethical values and character formation. At the same time, a sizeable portion of responses express skepticism, focusing on the gap between symbolic rhetoric and institutional capacity, as well as anxieties about ideological boundaries. Sentiment patterns vary markedly across communication formats, indicating that public reception depends not only on the policy itself but on how it is communicated. Rather than signaling simple acceptance or rejection, online reactions reveal an ongoing negotiation over the meaning and credibility of reform. The findings suggest that digital discourse functions as a space where Islamic education policy is publicly tested, contested, and interpreted. By combining sentiment analysis with qualitative interpretation, this study offers a framework for understanding how value-based education reforms gain or struggle to gain legitimacy in contemporary digital environments.

Keywords: Islamic education; moral education; public sentiment; curriculum reform; YouTube discourse; Indonesia

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, education systems across the world have increasingly emphasised the moral and affective dimensions of learning in response to social fragmentation, declining civic trust, and growing concerns about students’ ethical development. This shift reflects a broader recognition that education is not merely a process of cognitive transmission but also a formative endeavour shaping values, character, and social responsibility (Biesta, 2010; OECD, 2021). Within this context, moral and character education has re-emerged as a central concern in

policy discourse, particularly in societies where education is closely intertwined with religious and cultural identity (Halstead, 2007; Sahin, 2018; UNESCO, 2021).

In Islamic education, moral formation has long been regarded as a core educational objective. Classical Islamic educational thought conceptualises education as a holistic process encompassing *ta'lim* (knowledge transmission), *tarbiyah* (nurturing), and *ta'dib* (moral cultivation), where values such as compassion (*rahmah*), empathy, justice, and responsibility are foundational to the tradition rather than auxiliary components (Abdalla, 2025; Lafrarchi, 2020). Recent scholarship on Islamic pedagogy further emphasises that *tarbiyah* must adapt to contemporary social realities, including pluralism, cultural diversity, and the influences of digital culture on youth moral development (Abdalla, 2025; Azhar et al., 2025). At the same time, theoretical work on integrated Islamic curricula highlights the necessity of rethinking the relationship between faith, knowledge, and values to ensure that moral and spiritual dimensions are genuinely integrated into curriculum design, not merely appended as themes or add-ons (Isaac, 2025; Azhar et al., 2025). This ongoing reinterpretation reflects the dynamic nature of moral education in Muslim educational settings, where educators and scholars negotiate tradition and modernity in order to maintain both religious authenticity and social relevance.

Against this backdrop, the Indonesian government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, introduced the “Curriculum of Love” policy as part of its effort to strengthen moral and character education within Islamic educational institutions (Directorate General of Islamic Education, 2025). The policy emphasises love, compassion, and human dignity as guiding principles of teaching and learning, aiming to foster harmonious social relations and ethical awareness among students. Scholarly analyses interpret the Curriculum of Love as a strategic framework for promoting religious moderation, ecological awareness, and civic responsibility within Islamic schooling (Khairani et al., 2025; Arham, 2025). As a normative initiative, the Curriculum of Love therefore seeks not only to reaffirm the moral mission of Islamic education but also to respond to contemporary concerns such as intolerance, bullying, and social polarisation (Directorate General of Islamic Education, 2025). However, education policy initiatives grounded in moral discourse often generate diverse and contested public responses. While value-oriented reforms may resonate with educators and practitioners, they can also provoke skepticism regarding their conceptual clarity, ideological boundaries, and practical implementation. Previous studies on education reform suggest that public reception of moral and character education policies is shaped not only by their stated goals but also by public trust in institutions, experiences with past reforms, and broader socio-political dynamics. In religious education contexts, these dynamics are further complicated by debates over doctrinal authenticity, pluralism, and the role of the state in defining moral values.

In the digital era, public engagement with education policy increasingly unfolds through social media platforms, where policy narratives are debated, reinterpreted, and contested in real time (Burgess & Green, 2018; KhosraviNik, 2020). YouTube, in particular, has become a prominent space for policy dissemination, pedagogical showcasing, and public commentary in Indonesia, functioning not only as a broadcasting platform but also as a participatory arena for civic discourse. User comments on YouTube videos provide a unique lens through which public sentiment, concerns, and expectations can be examined, as they capture spontaneous and affective expressions often absent in formal survey instruments (Thelwall, 2018; Zappavigna, 2021). Recent scholarship on social media in Islamic education further highlights how digital platforms reshape religious learning spaces and public pedagogical conversations, creating new forms of engagement between institutions and communities (Bujangga et al., 2025). Unlike survey-based opinion data, social media discourse reveals how education policies are interpreted and negotiated through everyday language, humour, critique, and ideological positioning in the public sphere.

Despite growing interest in moral education and Islamic education reform, empirical studies examining public sentiment toward specific Islamic education policies remain limited. Existing research has largely focused on curriculum design, pedagogical models, or theoretical discussions of Islamic moral education, with less attention given to how such policies are

received by the broader public (Sahin, 2018; Abdalla, 2025). Moreover, while sentiment analysis has been increasingly applied in education research, its use in exploring public responses to Islamic education policy is still underdeveloped, particularly in Muslim-majority contexts where education reforms are closely tied to moral and religious identity (KhosraviNik, 2020; Zappavigna, 2021; Bujangga et al., 2025).

To address this gap, the present study investigates public sentiment toward the “*Curriculum of Love*” policy in Islamic education by analysing YouTube discourse in Indonesia. By examining comments across government, practitioner, and national media channels, this study seeks to illuminate not only the polarity of public sentiment but also the narratives and concerns that accompany supportive, critical, and ambivalent responses. In doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how moral-oriented education reforms are publicly perceived and contested in digital spaces.

This study offers a novel contribution by examining public sentiment toward an Islamic education policy through digital discourse analysis, rather than institutional or practitioner perspectives alone. By integrating sentiment analysis with thematic interpretation of YouTube comments, the study illuminates how moral-oriented education reform is publicly negotiated, contested, and legitimised in online spaces. Unlike existing studies that focus on curriculum design or pedagogical models, this research foregrounds public engagement as a critical dimension of Islamic education reform.

Research Questions

Guided by these considerations, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the overall public sentiment toward the “*Curriculum of Love*” policy in Islamic education as expressed in YouTube discourse in Indonesia?
2. What dominant themes and narratives accompany positive and negative sentiments toward the policy?

How do public sentiments toward the “*Curriculum of Love*” policy reflect broader perceptions of Islamic education reform in Indonesia?

METHOD

Research approach

This study employed an exploratory sentiment analysis approach to investigate public responses to the “*Curriculum of Love*” policy in Islamic education in Indonesia. The study was designed to capture how members of the public express approval, concern, or skepticism toward a newly introduced educational policy through online discourse. Rather than treating sentiment as a purely computational outcome, sentiment was approached as a form of social and pedagogical meaning-making, reflecting affective responses, ideological positions, and expectations toward education reform (Pang & Lee, 2008; Liu, 2022). This approach aligns with educational research that views digital platforms as spaces where public understandings of policy are negotiated and contested (Burgess & Green, 2018; KhosraviNik, 2020).

Developments in research have shown sentiment analysis as an evolving technique in measuring large-scale online environments where sentiments of the general public are captured and analyzed (Birjali et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2022). In recent research studies, sentiment analysis has demonstrated that researchers can analyze user-generated data and discern the levels of support, opposition, and ambivalence sentiments (Tan et al., 2023; Mao et al., 2024). Researchers argue that sentiment analysis has value beyond numerical polarity (Cui et al., 2023).

This study has taken an interpretive approach towards sentiment analysis. Online comments were analyzed as discourse that has moral, cultural, and ideological significance, and thereby is more important than a mere indicator of a positive or negative expression. This is particularly the case in studies of Islamic education where the digital discourse presents an important evidence of the intricate interplay of religious norms, social values, and modernity in the reform (Wahid, 2024; Çömez-Polat & Tekdemir, 2023). In this light, and recognizing the intricate linguistic and cultural aspects of the Indonesian discourse on YouTube, sentiment analysis in this study is integrated with thematic interpretation.

Data source and video selection

YouTube was selected as the data source due to its prominent role in policy dissemination and public discussion in Indonesia. As an open platform, YouTube allows audiences to respond directly to institutional messages, making it a valuable site for examining public engagement with education policy (Burgess & Green, 2018). Recent studies further confirm that YouTube comment sections function as important spaces of digital public discourse where users articulate opinions, emotions, and evaluations toward social and policy issues (King & McCashin, 2022; Chunqiong et al., 2025). Interactional dynamics within YouTube discussions have also been shown to influence how sentiments are expressed and amplified (Shajari & Agarwal, 2025; Choi et al., 2025).

Videos were selected using purposive sampling based on their explicit focus on the “Curriculum of Love” policy within the context of Islamic education. Seven videos were included in the analysis. These videos represented a range of communication formats, including official policy explanations, showcases of pedagogical practice, live policy launch events, and national news reports. The inclusion of multiple formats was intended to capture variation in how public sentiment emerges across different modes of policy communication. Such an approach is consistent with recent research emphasising the importance of examining diverse digital communication contexts when analysing public responses to educational initiatives (Richter et al., 2022; Butler et al., 2024).

Data collection

As of October 2023, I have been trained on all publicly available comments related to the videos selected. Comments from both the main comments section as well as the reply threads were added to get a complete view of comment interactivity as well as to capture the breadth of short interactions across users. Manual collection of comments has been used in order to capture contextual and linguistic detail which is helpful in the analysis of culturally and religiously sensitive discourse (Mao et al., 2024; Cui et al., 2023). Approximately 278 comments were collected.

Each comment is treated as a unit of analysis due to the fact that the comments serve as a distinct manifestation of position or feeling directed to the policy (Thelwall et al., 2017). Such a focus is consistent with both the framing of the analysis as well as the most recent methodological literature that identifies social media comments as an important micro level building block of a sentiment and opinion ecosystem (Xu et al., 2022; Birjali et al., 2021).

Data cleaning and preparation

Prior to analysis, the dataset was cleaned to ensure that only comments relevant to public opinion were included. Comments that functioned solely as attendance markers, greetings, emoji-only expressions, or unrelated remarks were excluded. Such comments were particularly prevalent in live-streamed or webinar-style videos and did not reflect evaluative engagement with the policy. Comments were retained for analysis if they contained expressions of support, critique, doubt, reflection, or inquiry related to the *Curriculum of Love* policy or its broader implications for Islamic education. Following this process, approximately 145 opinion-based comments remained and formed the final analytical dataset. The filtering process was documented to enhance transparency and methodological clarity, consistent with recommendations in qualitative content analysis (Neuendorf, 2017).

Sentiment classification

Sentiment analysis was conducted through manual coding, using three broad sentiment categories: positive, negative, and neutral. Positive sentiment referred to expressions of support, optimism, or perceived alignment between the policy and Islamic or educational values. Negative sentiment captured criticism, skepticism, ideological concern, or rejection of the policy. Neutral sentiment included descriptive statements or questions that did not convey a clear evaluative stance. Manual coding was chosen to account for the contextual, religious, and cultural nuances present in discussions of Islamic education in Indonesia. Automated sentiment tools may struggle to accurately interpret such nuances, particularly when irony, religious references, or ideological language are involved (Mohammad, 2016). Sentiment decisions were based on the overall meaning of each comment rather than isolated keywords.

Interpretive thematic analysis

To complement sentiment classification, a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring narratives accompanying different sentiment categories. Themes were generated inductively through repeated reading of the comments and were used to contextualize why particular sentiments emerged. This interpretive step allowed the analysis to move beyond polarity counts and examine broader concerns related to education reform, religious values, governance, and implementation challenges. This combination of sentiment analysis and thematic interpretation is consistent with educational research that emphasizes meaning, context, and discourse in the study of public responses to policy initiatives (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Analytical strategy

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, sentiment distribution across all videos was described to provide an overview of public responses. Second, sentiments were compared across different types of video content, such as policy explanations, practice-oriented videos, live events, and news reports. Third, the findings were interpreted in relation to broader discussions on Islamic education reform and public trust in state-led moral education initiatives. The analysis prioritised interpretive depth over statistical generalisation, in line with the exploratory nature of the study.

Ethical considerations

The study relied exclusively on publicly available data. Usernames were anonymised, and comments were reported in aggregate or paraphrased form to protect individual privacy. No personal data beyond the content of the comments were collected, and the study followed ethical guidelines for research using online public data (Townsend & Wallace, 2016).

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The dataset reflects a limited number of YouTube videos and does not claim to represent public opinion in Indonesia as a whole. In addition, levels of engagement varied considerably across video formats, particularly between webinar-style content and short news reports. However, these variations are treated not only as limitations but also as insights into patterns of public engagement with education policy communication on digital platforms.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: What is the overall public sentiment toward the “Curriculum of Love” policy in Islamic education as expressed in YouTube discourse in Indonesia?

The analysis of YouTube comments indicates that public sentiment toward the “*Curriculum of Love*” policy in Islamic education is predominantly positive, although it is accompanied by a substantial proportion of neutral and negative responses. From a total of 145 opinion-based comments collected across seven YouTube videos, 77 comments (53.1%) expressed positive sentiment, 25 comments (17.2%) were neutral, and 43 comments (29.7%) conveyed negative sentiment. This overall distribution suggests that while the policy has been generally welcomed, it has also generated notable skepticism and critical engagement.

As shown in Table 1, positive sentiment was particularly dominant in videos that focused on pedagogical practice and implementation, especially those targeting educators and practitioners. In these contexts, the *Curriculum of Love* was frequently framed as an approach aligned with Islamic values, character education, and the moral development of students. Commenters often described the policy as relevant to contemporary educational challenges, including the need to foster empathy, social harmony, and ethical awareness within schools and madrasahs.

At the same time, negative sentiment accounted for nearly one-third of the total opinion-based comments, indicating that the policy also encounters considerable resistance and skepticism. Critical responses were most visible in videos published by official institutional channels and national media outlets, where commenters raised concerns about ideological boundaries, policy continuity, and the perceived gap between moral rhetoric and practical implementation. Rather than expressing simple rejection, many negative comments articulated

broader anxieties related to governance, religious authority, and the politicisation of education reform.

Neutral comments tended to take the form of questions, reflections, or descriptive observations. These responses did not clearly endorse or oppose the policy but instead reflected uncertainty or cautious engagement, particularly regarding how the policy would be operationalised in diverse educational and religious contexts.

Importantly, the findings reveal that public sentiment toward the *Curriculum of Love* is not uniform across platforms or content types. As summarised in Table 1, videos showcasing successful implementation attracted overwhelmingly positive responses, whereas news-oriented videos and short-form media elicited fewer comments overall but a higher proportion of critical and ideologically framed reactions. This variation suggests that public sentiment is shaped not only by the substance of the policy itself but also by the format, framing, and institutional positioning of policy communication.

Overall, the results for RQ1 demonstrate that the *Curriculum of Love* policy resonates positively with a significant segment of the public while simultaneously provoking debate and contestation. Public sentiment, therefore, appears neither wholly supportive nor uniformly resistant, but rather ambivalent and dialogical, positioning the policy as an ongoing subject of negotiation within Indonesia’s digital public discourse on Islamic education.

Table 1. Public sentiment toward the “Curriculum of Love” policy on YouTube (Indonesia)

No.	Video title	Channel	Opinion-based comments	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Dominant character of responses
1	Gerakan Cinta - Alasannya	Direktorat KSKK Madrasah	21	9	5	7	Mixed support and early scepticism
2	LIVE Launching KBC	Direktorat KSKK Madrasah	19	13	4	2	Normative and loyal (webinar context)
3	Praktik Baik Implementasi KBC	Pendis Channel	49	45	4	0	Strongly positive (practitioner-oriented)
4	Mencetak Cendekiawan	Kemenag RI	36	7	6	23	Highly critical and politicised
5	Metro Hari Ini	METRO TV	5	0	2	3	Critical with low engagement
6	Kontan News	KONTAN TV	7	0	2	5	Ideological scepticism
7	Tribunnews Shorts	Tribunnews	8	3	2	3	Spontaneous and ideologically framed
Total			145	77	25	43	

Note. The table summarises sentiment distribution based on opinion-oriented YouTube comments. Differences across channels reflect variations in communication format and audience engagement rather than sentiment intensity alone.

RQ2: What dominant themes and narratives accompany positive and negative sentiments toward the “Curriculum of Love” policy?

Analysis of the opinion-based YouTube comments reveals that public sentiment toward the “*Curriculum of Love*” policy is accompanied by a set of recurring and contrasting narratives. These narratives help explain why the policy is embraced by some audiences while being questioned or resisted by others. Rather than reflecting a single line of argument, public discourse is characterised by thematic plurality, with distinct themes emerging alongside positive and negative sentiments.

Positive sentiment narratives

Positive sentiment was most commonly associated with narratives that framed the *Curriculum of Love* as a moral and character-based educational response aligned with Islamic teachings. Supportive comments frequently emphasised the importance of compassion, empathy, and ethical behaviour as foundational elements of education. In this narrative, the policy was perceived as reinforcing long-standing Islamic values rather than introducing a radically new educational paradigm.

Another dominant positive theme centred on the humanisation of education. Commenters highlighted the need to move beyond cognitive achievement and academic performance toward a more holistic approach that nurtures students’ emotional and moral development. In videos showcasing practical implementation, educators and practitioners expressed optimism that teaching grounded in love and care could reduce conflict, bullying, and emotional disengagement in schools.

A further supportive narrative framed the policy as a corrective response to social fragmentation. Some commenters viewed the *Curriculum of Love* as timely in light of increasing polarisation, intolerance, and moral anxiety within society. From this perspective, the policy was interpreted as a proactive effort to restore social harmony through education.

Negative sentiment narratives

In contrast, negative sentiment was primarily shaped by narratives of skepticism and ideological concern. One prominent critical theme questioned the policy as being overly symbolic or rhetorical. Commenters expressed doubt about whether introducing the language of “love” into curriculum discourse would lead to meaningful change, particularly in the absence of improvements in teacher welfare, educational infrastructure, and bureaucratic governance.

Another dominant negative narrative revolved around religious and ideological boundaries. Some commenters voiced concerns that the *Curriculum of Love* could dilute Islamic doctrine or blur distinctions between religious truth claims in the name of tolerance. These comments frequently framed the policy as potentially leading toward secularisation or relativism, reflecting deeper anxieties about the role of the state in shaping religious education.

A third critical narrative personalised the policy by linking it closely to political leadership. Rather than engaging with the curriculum as an educational framework, some commenters directed their criticism toward the Minister of Religious Affairs or the ministry as an institution. In this framing, skepticism toward the policy became intertwined with broader distrust of political authority and policy continuity.

Neutral and ambivalent narratives

Neutral comments were typically characterised by inquisitive and reflective narratives. These included questions about implementation, comparisons with previous curricula, and observations that refrained from explicit endorsement or rejection. Such comments suggest that a segment of the public remains open but cautious, awaiting clearer evidence of how the policy will be enacted in practice.

Thematic variation across communication formats

Importantly, the dominance of particular narratives varied across video types. Practice-oriented and pedagogical videos tended to foreground narratives of moral formation and educational humanisation, while news-oriented and institutional videos elicited stronger ideological critique and political skepticism. This pattern indicates that public narratives

surrounding the *Curriculum of Love* are shaped not only by ideological positions but also by the communicative context in which the policy is presented.

Overall, the findings for RQ2 demonstrate that public discourse on the *Curriculum of Love* policy is structured around competing narratives of moral renewal, practical skepticism, and ideological concern. These narratives reveal that public sentiment is not simply a reaction to the policy's stated goals, but a reflection of broader debates about Islamic education, state authority, and the role of values in educational reform.

RQ3: How do public sentiments toward the “Curriculum of Love” policy reflect broader perceptions of Islamic education reform in Indonesia?

The analysis indicates that public sentiments toward the “*Curriculum of Love*” policy reflect broader and long-standing perceptions of Islamic education reform in Indonesia, rather than isolated reactions to a single policy initiative. Supportive, critical, and ambivalent responses collectively reveal how the public interprets the role of Islamic education in addressing moral, social, and ideological challenges.

Positive sentiments largely reflect an expectation that Islamic education should play a transformative moral role beyond academic instruction. Commenters who expressed support for the policy often framed Islamic education as responsible for nurturing ethical sensibilities, empathy, and social responsibility. From this perspective, the *Curriculum of Love* was perceived as an attempt to reposition Islamic education as a humanising force capable of responding to contemporary social tensions. Such responses suggest that segments of the public view education reform not merely as curricular adjustment, but as a moral project aimed at restoring trust, harmony, and character formation.

At the same time, critical sentiments reveal persistent concerns regarding the credibility and consistency of education reform efforts. Negative comments frequently reflected skepticism toward symbolic policy language, particularly when unaccompanied by tangible structural change. Concerns about teacher welfare, bureaucratic inefficiency, and policy discontinuity indicate that public trust in reform initiatives is closely tied to perceptions of implementation capacity. In this sense, resistance to the *Curriculum of Love* does not necessarily imply rejection of its moral goals, but rather doubt about the state's ability to translate normative ideals into sustainable educational practice.

Ideological critiques further illuminate deeper tensions within Islamic education reform. Some commenters expressed anxiety that the emphasis on love, tolerance, and pluralism might compromise doctrinal clarity or blur religious boundaries. These responses reflect an ongoing negotiation within Indonesian society regarding how Islamic education should balance faith-based authenticity with the demands of pluralism and national cohesion. The emergence of such narratives suggests that education reform is interpreted not only pedagogically, but also as a site of ideological contestation.

Neutral and ambivalent sentiments, meanwhile, indicate a cautious public stance toward reform. Rather than expressing outright support or rejection, these responses reflect a wait-and-see attitude, shaped by previous experiences with curriculum changes. This ambivalence underscores the importance of demonstrable outcomes in shaping public confidence, particularly in a policy environment characterised by frequent reform initiatives.

Taken together, the findings suggest that public sentiment toward the *Curriculum of Love* policy functions as a mirror of broader perceptions of Islamic education reform in Indonesia. The policy is interpreted simultaneously as a moral opportunity, a symbolic gesture, and a potential source of ideological tension. Public discourse thus positions Islamic education reform as a complex and contested process, where aspirations for moral renewal coexist with skepticism toward governance and concerns about religious identity.

Overall, RQ3 highlights that public responses to the *Curriculum of Love* are less about the terminology of “love” itself and more about how Islamic education is expected to evolve in relation to social change, state authority, and religious values. These findings suggest that successful reform in Islamic education requires not only normative alignment with moral ideals, but also sustained institutional credibility and transparent implementation.

DISCUSSION

This study examined public sentiment toward the “*Curriculum of Love*” policy in Islamic education through YouTube discourse in Indonesia. The findings reveal that public responses are neither uniformly supportive nor uniformly resistant, but rather ambivalent, dialogical, and context-dependent. In this section, the findings are discussed in relation to existing literature on Islamic education, moral education, and public engagement with education reform.

The results of this study are consistent with the latest research developments in sentiment analysis. Recent literature reviews illustrate that sentiment analysis is much more than classifying opinions as positive or negative. Rather, sentiment analysis involves interpretation and requires consideration of the social context, as well as the language and discourse (Bordoloi & Biswas, 2023). The technique of manual coding and thematic interpretation used in this study illustrates this sentiment, facilitating an understanding of the complexity of the meaning the Indonesian audience assigns to the Curriculum of Love policy. The analysis went beyond simply scoring comments along a single continuum and captured the stories, issues, and hopes that public sentiment encompasses.

The different emotional responses to various video formats exemplify the role of various digital platforms in influencing public response to education reform. Most recent studies examine social media ecosystems as increasingly being “platformed” public spheres, where the messages from institutions, interpretations from users, and structure of algorithms converge to shape public discourse (Xie, 2024). To illustrate, YouTube is not just a (sometimes) neutral information repository, but a site where users engage with, interpret, and in some instances, dispute, educational policy. The current study substantiates this in regard to the Curriculum of Love, where the public responses are largely influenced by the communication format, framing and the comment section dynamics.

Moral education and the affective turn in Islamic education

The predominance of positive sentiment, particularly in practice-oriented and pedagogical videos, reflects a broader affective turn in education, where moral and emotional dimensions are increasingly emphasised alongside cognitive outcomes. In Islamic education scholarship, education has long been understood as a process of *tarbiyah* (holistic nurturing), *ta'dib* (moral cultivation), and *ta'lim* (knowledge transmission). Recent work on narrative and imaginative pedagogy in Islamic learning further highlights how affective engagement serves as a bridge between ethical formation and lived educational experience (Bin Muhammad Yusoff, 2023; Yusmaliana et al., 2023). Supportive public narratives that frame the Curriculum of Love as aligned with compassion, empathy, and character formation resonate strongly with these classical conceptions of Islamic education.

Previous studies on Islamic moral education highlight that affective values such as compassion (*rahmah*), care, and social responsibility are central to the educational mission of Islam, rather than peripheral additions (Halstead, 2007; Abdalla, 2025; Khairani et al., 2025). Contemporary scholarship further emphasises that Islamic pedagogy situates moral formation at the core of curriculum design, linking ethical development with social cohesion and religious moderation in plural societies (Sahin, 2018; Azhar et al., 2025; Maarif et al., 2024). The positive reception of the Curriculum of Love among educators and practitioners suggests that the policy is interpreted as reaffirming, rather than redefining, these foundational principles. This finding supports recent research indicating that education reforms grounded in culturally and religiously resonant values are more likely to gain acceptance at the grassroots level, particularly when they align with lived religious practices and community expectations (Khairani et al., 2025; Arham, 2025; Danil et al., 2025).

Symbolic policy language and public skepticism

Despite this positive reception, the substantial proportion of negative sentiment reflects persistent public skepticism toward symbolic or rhetorical policy initiatives. Critical comments frequently questioned whether the language of “love” would translate into concrete improvements in educational practice. This skepticism aligns with broader critiques in

education policy literature, which caution that value-laden reforms risk being perceived as superficial if not accompanied by structural change (Ball, 2015; Verger et al., 2019; Steiner-Khamsi, 2021). Recent research on policy reception further shows that stakeholders increasingly evaluate reforms through the lens of implementation credibility rather than rhetorical ambition, especially in contexts marked by repeated cycles of reform (Lingard et al., 2014).

In the context of Islamic education in Indonesia, such skepticism is amplified by historical experiences of frequent curriculum changes and inconsistent policy implementation. Research on institutional reform in madrasah and pesantren systems shows that educators often evaluate policy initiatives through accumulated experiences of administrative discontinuity and uneven support structures (Rohman & Muhtamiroh, 2022; Islamic et al., 2024). The findings of this study suggest that public trust in Islamic education reform is closely linked to perceptions of policy continuity, teacher welfare, and institutional capacity, rather than normative alignment alone. This pattern reflects a broader shift in how education reforms are judged globally, where legitimacy increasingly depends on demonstrable structural commitment rather than symbolic framing.

Ideological boundaries and contested understandings of tolerance

One of the most salient findings concerns the emergence of ideological critique, particularly in comments from national media channels. Negative sentiments often reflected anxieties that the *Curriculum of Love* could blur doctrinal boundaries or promote forms of tolerance perceived as incompatible with Islamic orthodoxy. This tension echoes longstanding debates within Islamic education scholarship regarding the balance between faith-based authenticity and pluralistic citizenship.

Scholars have noted that Islamic education operates within a dual mandate: preserving religious identity while preparing learners to coexist within diverse societies (Merry & Driessen, 2016; Sahin, 2018). Recent scholarship on Islamic moral philosophy further emphasises that ethical education must remain anchored in coherent theological epistemology to prevent fragmentation of moral meaning (Syaiful & Anam, 2024; Zaman, 2024). The ideological concerns expressed in public discourse suggest that reforms framed around universal moral language, such as “love,” may trigger suspicion when they are not clearly articulated within established religious frameworks. This finding reinforces arguments that moral education in Islamic contexts must be carefully grounded in religious epistemology to avoid misinterpretation or resistance.

Communication format and public engagement with policy

An important contribution of this study lies in highlighting how communication format shapes public sentiment. Practice-oriented videos attracted overwhelmingly positive responses, while institutional and news-oriented videos elicited more critical and ideologically charged reactions. This pattern aligns with recent digital policy communication research suggesting that audiences respond more favourably to concrete, experience-based narratives than to abstract institutional messaging (Burgess & Green, 2018; Zappavigna, 2021; KhosraviNik, 2020). Research in teacher education further shows that narrative pedagogy and practitioner storytelling function as powerful tools for building trust, emotional resonance, and professional legitimacy in educational communities (Dvir, 2024; Sarfati-Shaulov & Vedder-Weiss, 2025).

For Islamic education reform, this finding underscores the importance of pedagogical storytelling and practitioner-led communication in building public legitimacy. Studies on professional learning highlight that lived pedagogical narratives help translate abstract values into observable educational practice, making reform agendas more credible to broader publics (Dvir, 2024). Emerging research on ecological and humanist dimensions of Islamic education similarly demonstrates that value-based learning becomes persuasive when embodied in concrete pedagogical practice rather than abstract doctrine (Afifatun, 2025; Prasong, 2025). Rather than relying solely on official announcements, policy actors may benefit from foregrounding lived educational experiences that demonstrate how values are enacted in classrooms and schools.

Public sentiment as a reflection of reform legitimacy

Taken together, the findings suggest that public sentiment toward the Curriculum of Love functions as an indicator of reform legitimacy rather than mere public approval. Supportive sentiments reflect alignment with moral aspirations, while critical sentiments signal demands for accountability, clarity, and institutional trustworthiness. This aligns with contemporary scholarship that conceptualises public opinion in education reform as a form of deliberative feedback and democratic participation rather than passive acceptance (Biesta, 2010; Steiner-Khamsi, 2021; Lingard et al., 2014). Recent work on policy legitimacy further argues that reforms gain credibility when publics perceive opportunities to contest, interpret, and reshape policy meanings through dialogue (Verger et al., 2019).

In this sense, the ambivalence observed in public discourse should not be interpreted as policy failure, but as evidence of an engaged public negotiating the meaning and implications of reform. For Islamic education, such negotiation is particularly significant given the deep moral, religious, and social stakes involved. Recent work on ethics, leadership, and educational governance highlights that legitimacy in value-based reforms depends on the perceived integrity and accountability of institutions implementing them (Taamneh et al., 2024; Yahdi & Fadliyah, 2025). Studies of education governance increasingly highlight that legitimacy emerges from ongoing interaction between institutions and communities, rather than from top-down policy authority alone. The public negotiation observed in this study therefore reflects not resistance to reform *per se*, but an active process of co-constructing the moral direction of Islamic education in contemporary society.

The discussion highlights three key implications. First, moral-oriented education reforms in Islamic contexts are more likely to gain public support when they are clearly rooted in Islamic pedagogical traditions. Second, symbolic policy language must be accompanied by visible structural commitments, particularly regarding teacher welfare and implementation capacity. Third, effective communication strategies that foreground practice and lived experience can mitigate ideological resistance and enhance public trust.

This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how sentiment analysis of social media discourse can illuminate public perceptions of Islamic education reform in ways that extend beyond traditional survey-based approaches. By integrating sentiment classification with interpretive thematic analysis, the study moves beyond binary measures of support or opposition and reveals how moral education policies are actively negotiated in digital public spaces. In doing so, the research highlights the value of combining computational and interpretive perspectives to understand how educational reform is experienced, contested, and legitimised by everyday publics.

The findings of this study carry several implications for policymakers and educational stakeholders involved in Islamic education reform. First, moral-oriented education policies such as the Curriculum of Love are more likely to gain sustained public support when they are explicitly grounded in established Islamic educational traditions, including principles of *tarbiyah*, *ta'dib*, and *akhlaq*. Clear theological framing can reduce ideological misinterpretation and strengthen the perceived legitimacy of reform initiatives. Second, symbolic policy narratives must be accompanied by visible and consistent implementation strategies. Public skepticism toward the policy was closely tied to concerns about teacher welfare, administrative capacity, and policy continuity. Addressing these structural dimensions is essential for translating moral ideals into credible educational practice. Third, the study underscores the importance of communication strategies in shaping public sentiment. Practice-oriented and practitioner-led narratives generated far more positive engagement than abstract institutional messaging. Policymakers may therefore benefit from foregrounding lived classroom experiences, teacher voices, and concrete examples of implementation when communicating reform initiatives.

Finally, the use of social media discourse as a source of public feedback suggests that platforms such as YouTube can function as informal arenas for deliberative engagement with education policy. Rather than treating critical online responses as obstacles, policymakers may view them as valuable indicators of public concern, trust, and expectation — resources that can inform more responsive and dialogical reform processes.

Several methodological limitations should be stated for this study. Firstly, the study focused solely on YouTube comments as the only source of data. While you YouTube can be useful for gaining insight into unfiltered public reactions, comments on videos only consist of a self-selected group of users who may not represent the views of the majority of the Indonesian public. Additionally, the study is limited by the use of only seven purposefully chosen videos. Other videos may capture public sentiments that are expressed on social media, which may significantly differ than comments captured on videos.

The second limitation of the study is the use of manual sentiment analysis as opposed to some form of computational sentiment analysis. Although manual coding is more likely to shed some light into a context which is deeper than a mere religious and cultural abstraction, it may also serve to introduce a bias to some degree. Additionally, the analysis was limited to comments of a single time frame without consideration of other metrics of engagement and/or data that is temporally extended. The analysis is to be understood as a snapshot of the discourse of the public at a given time while not purporting to be a complete or a widely applicable analysis of the temporally extensive sentiments of the public, the analysis should be understood as being largely limited.

The limitations of this study can be addressed by future research that broadens focus and methodology concerns. For example, research that analyzes Twitter/X, Instagram, or TikTok would enhance understanding of public feelings surrounding Islamic education policy across social media platforms. Such a cross-platform comparison would allow for understanding of how varied digital settings public and constructively interpret.

The use of a mixed-methods approach and longitudinal studies would facilitate the understanding of the changing public attitudes over time. For example, more research that integrates computational sentiment analysis and qualitative thematic analysis is needed. Integration is needed to analyze larger datasets and still maintain the necessary context. Further research that involves interviewing or surveying teachers, students, and policymakers would further integrate the online discourse to the situational realities of policy enactment.

CONCLUSION

This study explored public sentiment toward the "*Curriculum of Love*" policy in Islamic education in Indonesia by analysing YouTube discourse across government, practitioner, and national media channels. The findings demonstrate that public responses to the policy are predominantly positive, particularly among educators and audiences exposed to practice-oriented content. At the same time, a substantial proportion of neutral and negative sentiment reveals ongoing skepticism, ideological concern, and uncertainty regarding policy implementation.

Rather than indicating simple acceptance or rejection, public sentiment toward the *Curriculum of Love* reflects an ambivalent and dialogical engagement with Islamic education reform. Supportive responses emphasise moral renewal, compassion, and character education as central goals of Islamic schooling, while critical responses highlight concerns about symbolic policy language, implementation capacity, and the boundaries of religious doctrine. Neutral responses further suggest that segments of the public remain cautious, awaiting clearer evidence of how the policy will be enacted in practice.

Overall, the findings suggest that public discourse surrounding the *Curriculum of Love* functions as a mirror of broader debates on Islamic education reform in Indonesia. The policy is interpreted simultaneously as a moral opportunity, a symbolic initiative, and a site of ideological contestation. This complexity underscores the need to view education reform not merely as a technical or curricular process, but as a deeply social and value-laden endeavour.

By integrating sentiment analysis with thematic interpretation, this study contributes to the growing literature on Islamic education reform, moral education, and digital public discourse. It demonstrates that public sentiment is not merely a measure of approval, but a reflection of deeper negotiations over values, authority, and the purpose of education in contemporary Muslim societies.

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