

From Normative Propositions to Affective Screens: Algorithmic Architecture, Visual Femininity, and the Domestication of Sacred Texts in Islamic Pop Music

Carla Adiba^{1*}

¹UIN Sultanah Nahrasiyah Lhokseumawe, Aceh, Indonesia

Email: carlaadiba62@gmail.com

**Corresponding author*

Abstract

This study deconstructs the linear thesis of religious mediatization, which often equates digital commercialization with the secularization of sacred texts. Through a diachronic-comparative analysis of three key examples of Nusantara Islamic pop music—Raihan, Maher Zain, and Sabyan Gambus—this study argues that sacred texts are not abandoned but instead undergo structural taming. They shift from a normative propositional mode to a cyber-affective configuration. Applying Stuart Hall's framework to platform comments reveals audience fragmentation that fosters a communal-temporal, negotiated reading, thereby eroding deep theological internalization. Furthermore, an analysis of metric disparities highlights a radical transition from a substantive aesthetic to a visual-feminine aesthetic, a shift accelerated by platform algorithms. This study contributes to the theory of digital religion by demonstrating that, under cyber-metric governance, the deconstruction of authoritative media occurs when the interpretation of revelation is delegated to the visual performativity of non-clerical figures—giving rise to the characteristics of fluid religiosity.

Keywords: *Mediatization of Religion; Platform Algorithms; Islamic Pop Music; Reception Analysis; Religious Authority.*

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Introduction

The rapid growth of digital media—which has long been seen as linearly democratizing da'wah and expanding the reach of sacred texts into the global public sphere¹—often overlooks the risk of eroding the theological sovereignty of those texts.

¹ Heidi A. Campbell, "Introduction: The Rise of the Study of Digital Religion," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3.



Ideally, global digital platforms would serve as channels that amplify and deepen the public's doctrinal understanding across geographical boundaries. However, empirical evidence reveals a paradoxical trend: digitalization is actually contributing to a significant decline in religious literacy. Transcendental verses are increasingly reduced to mere aesthetic ornaments in the fierce competition for attention within the "attention economy."² This global phenomenon signals the emergence of a new religious landscape characterized by the adoption of symbols of piety without institutional ties or rigid doctrinal commitments—"believing without belonging." Consequently, religious texts undergo systematic functional desacralization; they are no longer engaged as a moral compass shaping profound piety, but are instead exploited as instruments that trigger fleeting emotional reconciliation under the control of platform algorithms.

The shift in the anchor of religious authority due to technological intervention can be clearly traced through the dynamics of popular Islamic music reception in the contemporary Indonesia. As the world's largest Muslim-majority country with rapid digital penetration, Indonesia offers a compelling microcosm for examining the "economics of attention" in the transformation of nasheed from the analog cassette era to digital streaming. The aesthetic evolution and digital distribution metrics of three iconic, cross-generational songs—*Iman Mutiara* (Raihan), *Forgive Me* (Maher Zain), and *Ya Maulana* (Sabyan Gambus)—represent a crucial phase in the compression of sacred texts into popular cultural products. By analyzing disparities in interaction metrics and the diversity of visual expressions across these three cases, this study aims to unravel how the locus of religious authority has structurally shifted: from the power of objective theological lyrical substance toward the power of visual-affective stimulation and audiences' emotional consumption of performative figures on mobile screens.³

Scholars have examined the functional transformation of religious texts through media technology from various perspectives. Broadly speaking, previous research falls into two main categories. The first focuses on the sociological and anthropological dimensions of Islamic pop music as a tool for negotiating identity and shaping alternative modernities—whether within plural neoliberal ecosystems,⁴ as a shaper of Islamic

² Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 54.

³ Birgit Meyer, "From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Style of Binding," in *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, ed. Birgit Meyer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁴ Jonas Otterbeck, *The Awakening of Islamic Pop Music* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

modernity in the Malay world,⁵ or as a site of contestation over the interpretation of contemporary Islam. The second trend adopts a textual-aesthetic approach, analyzing local religious texts through synchronic studies of traditional *qasidahs*⁶ and qualitative analyses of nasheed lyrics within *majelis dzikir* circles.⁷ Although both approaches have made significant contributions, a notable research gap remains: prior studies tend to be limited to synchronic analyses of single objects or specific communities. They rarely trace, diachronically, how the horizon of Muslim audiences' expectations has evolved alongside shifts in media technology. This study addresses that gap by offering a diachronic-comparative analysis that systematically compares the transformation of Qur'anic metaphors across three phases of mediatization in the Indonesian archipelago—the acoustic-substantive nasheed phase (Raihan), the cosmopolitan pop-religious phase (Maher Zain), and the digital-visual pop-religious phase (Sabyan Gambus)—thereby integrating literary reception theory with a critique of the digital attention economy.

This study examines, from a diachronic-comparative perspective, the mediatization of da'wah, the evolution of theological aesthetics, and the transformation of audience reception patterns in Islamic pop music across generations in the Indonesian archipelago. Specifically, it pursues three main objectives: first, to identify how the transcendental messages of the Qur'an undergo linguistic pragmatism and structural domestication as the medium changes; second, to map the fragmentation of cyber-audience reading typologies using Stuart Hall's framework (dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings) through an analysis of platform comments; and third, to analyze the relationship between metric disparities in digital distribution and the three aesthetic mechanisms (substantial, cosmopolitan, and visual-feminine) evident in the iconic works of Raihan (*Iman Mutiara*), Maher Zain (*Forgive Me*), and Sabyan Gambus (*Ya Maulana*). Through this hybrid analytical framework, the study unravels the deconstruction of religious authority in cyberspace—a process in which authority no longer shifts linearly

⁵ Bart Barendregt, *Sonic Modernities in the Malay World: A History of Popular Music, Social Distinction and Novel Lifestyles (1930s–2000s)* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

⁶ Mellinda Raswari Jambak, Indah Rarasati, and Arif Rahman Hakim, "Analisa Qashidah Nahdliyyah Karya M. Faisol Fatawi: Kajian Resepsi Sastra Prespektif Hans Robert Jauss," *Afshaha: Jurnal Bahasa Dan Sastra Arab* 1, no. 2 (November 24, 2022): 137–48, <https://doi.org/10.18860/afshaha.v1i2.17840>.

⁷ Alifullah Iqbal, "Analisis Tradisi Dzikir Nasyid Sekumpul Martapura," *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Jurisprudence, Economic and Legal Theory* 3, no. 1 (January 7, 2025): 51–60, <https://doi.org/10.62976/ijjel.v3i1.873>; Ahmad Sahlan Abdul Hatim and Mohd Nizam Sahad, "Nasyid Sebagai Wasilah Dakwah Dalam Kalangan Masyarakat Kontemporari," *E-Jurnal Penyelidikan Dan Inovasi* 16, no. 2 (September 27, 2020): 94–108, <https://doi.org/10.22373/JIIF.V16I2.1329>.

among clerical actors but is structurally delegated from the depth of objective doctrinal texts to the visual-performative, affective power of non-clerical figures operating within the digital attention economy.

This research argues that the expansion of religious discourse in digital spaces does not coincide with a deepening of theological literacy; rather, it facilitates the functional desacralization of sacred texts. The accelerated transition from analog media to the cyber ecosystem compels religious texts to undergo subtle linguistic pragmatism:⁸ the originally instructive function of revelation, which demanded cognitive compliance, is reduced to a mere affective stimulus. Furthermore, the shift in the locus of digital religious authority does not occur linearly among conventional actors. Instead, it involves a radical deconstruction of the medium of authority itself. Under the logic of the attention economy, the interpretation of sacred texts is delegated to the visual aesthetics and performativity of non-clerical figures.⁹ This structural shift from objective texts to the affective power of these figures ultimately transforms the landscape of public reception into a fluid, ephemeral form of cyber-piety oriented toward the affirmation of momentary communal existence.

Method

This qualitative study employs a comparative, cross-era case study design to examine the evolving functions of religious texts in cyberspace.¹⁰ The material objects, selected through purposive sampling, are three popular Islamic songs that represent distinct milestones in media technology: *Iman Mutiara* by Raihan (analogue cassette era, 1990s), *Forgive Me* by Maher Zain (early internet era, 2010s), and *Ya Maulana* by Sabyan Gambus (streaming algorithm era, late 2010s). These cases hold significant theoretical and sociological relevance, as each marks a shift in audiovisual formats and the geographical reach of Islamic discourse, thereby influencing how Muslim audiences engage with religion. The data sources are hybrid, combining textual data (song lyrics), visual-performative data (music video formats, facial expressions, and gender attributes), and

⁸ Stig Hjarvard, "The Mediatization of Religion: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Religious Change," *Northern Lights: Film & Media Studies Yearbook* 6, no. 1 (June 1, 2008): 9–26, https://doi.org/10.1386/nl.6.1.9_1.

⁹ Bouziane Zaid et al., "Digital Islam and Muslim Millennials: How Social Media Influencers Reimagine Religious Authority and Islamic Practices," *Religions* 13, no. 4 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040335>.

¹⁰ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2018), 32–35.

secondary digital data in the form of platform interaction metrics (view counts, comments, and engagement rates) extracted from the official YouTube channels of the three artists.

Data collection was conducted systematically through digital observation (cyber-ethnography) and cyber-text documentation.¹¹ The researcher performed an in-depth analysis of the audiovisual structures in the music videos and manually scraped audience comments, ultimately selecting a corpus of 60 relevant comments (20 per song) to represent the typology of audience interpretations. Data analysis proceeded in distinct stages using critical reception analysis techniques adapted from Hans Robert Jauss's "horizon of expectations" framework.¹² First, lyrical and visual data were deconstructed to map the "textual aesthetics" presented by the producers. Second, platform metrics were calculated and correlated with aesthetic mechanisms to examine the structural influence of new media. Third, audience comments were coded according to Stuart Hall's three reading typologies (dominant, negotiated, and oppositional) to identify shifts in the locus of religious authority.¹³ Finally, all findings were interpreted and compared sociologically to draw conclusions about the functional desacralization of religious texts under the control of the digital attention economy.

The Dialectic of Doctrine and Aesthetics: The Evolution of the Landscape of Islamic Pop Music Reception

The interpretation of faith within orthodox Islamic tradition is typically conveyed in a rigid and hierarchical manner through authoritative Islamic literature. In these texts, the concept of faith—which encompasses dimensions ranging from submission and repentance to *tawakul*—is strictly constructed by tracing of authentic chains of transmission (*isnad*) and comparing the opinions of earlier scholars. Efforts to preserve doctrinal purity result in highly precise theological understandings but simultaneously create barriers to accessibility for lay audiences lacking sufficient scholarly expertise. This disparity gives rise to the need for discursive mediation, wherein instruments of popular

¹¹ Ulun Akturan, "A Review of Cyber Ethnographic Research: A Research Technique to Analyze Virtual Consumer Communities," *Bogazici Journal* 23, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.21773/boun.23.1.1>.

¹² Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bathi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 22.

¹³ Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: University of Birmingham, 2005).

culture—such as music—serve as communicative bridges.¹⁴ Through Islamic pop music, religious doctrines that were originally elitist and rigid are transformed into popular aesthetic forms, allowing transcendental values to be experienced within the rhythm of everyday urban life.

The transformation of expression from rigid interpretive texts to the poetic language of popular music theoretically operates within what Hans Robert Jauss terms “aesthetic distance.”¹⁵ The gap between the boundaries of initial doctrinal understanding (the horizon of expectations) and the novelty of the artistic form serves as a key strategy for rendering theological complexity into an affective narrative that emotionally resonates with audiences.¹⁶ Nevertheless, compressing religious doctrine into metaphors and melodies carries the risk of reducing meaning. Simplifying religious language into song lyrics is not merely a sign of theological decline but rather a pragmatic adaptation that maintains the relevance of Islamic values in a pluralistic, neoliberal-leaning modern public sphere.¹⁷ Consequently, the central academic question shifts from whether theological simplification occurs to how the distinct aesthetic mechanisms of each era shape audience reception.

Empirically, the evolution of these aesthetic mechanisms reveals a clear shift from an analog-collective model to a digital-individualistic one. In the early phase, Raihan’s *Iman Mutiara* condenses complex doctrinal beliefs into a single culturally resonant metaphor—“the pearl”—aligned with the Nusantara collective memory. Through acoustic simplicity and ethical straightforwardness, Raihan transforms abstract theological constructs into accessible aesthetic objects. This pattern evolves significantly in Maher Zain’s *Forgive Me*, which frames repentance and surrender within a cosmopolitan cinematic aesthetic aimed at modern Muslims navigating existential crises amid global modernity.¹⁸ With its contemporary pop arrangements, the song bridges the theological horizon and the everyday experiences of a transnational audience, redefining faith as a warm emotional haven rather than a rigid system.

¹⁴ Jonas Otterbeck and Goran Larsson, “Islam and Popular Music,” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music*, ed. Christopher Partridge and Marcus Moberg (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 119.

¹⁵ Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, 25.

¹⁶ Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1984), 98.

¹⁷ Otterbeck, *The Awakening of Islamic Pop Music*, 68–69.

¹⁸ Abdulhamid Mohamed Ali Zaroum, Mohd. Abbas Abdul Razak, and Abdul Latif Abd. Razak, “Creativity in Islamic Entertainment: A Case Study of Malaysian Nashid Groups (Rabbani, Raihan and Hijjaz),” *Journal of Islam in Asia* 15, no. 2 (December 24, 2018): 500–519, <https://doi.org/10.31436/jia.v15i2.761>.

This transformation reaches its peak in the digital streaming era with Sabyan Gambus's *Ya Maulana*. Here, religious messages are no longer primarily conveyed through lyrics but are fully embedded in a visual-affective ecosystem. Through melancholic vocals, intimate close-up facial expressions, and the performative use of fashionable hijab attire, Sabyan constructs a "sensational" form that provides instant access to the transcendental. The resulting religiosity is highly fluid: audiences consume fragments of piety as part of a digital lifestyle, unbound by strict institutional ties. Algorithm-driven circulation within the attention economy fosters a horizon of passive expectations, in which audiences seek momentary emotional validation rather than theological depth. This functional mutation of morally contemplative texts into visual commodities that underscores the significance of the present comparative analysis.

The Mediatization of Da'wah and the Evolution of Pop Islam's Theological Aesthetics Across Generations

The transformation of religious messages in the popular music industry across generations reflects more than superficial changes in aesthetic tastes. Instead, this shift documents a systematic process of the mediatization of da'wah, wherein the structure of theological texts is renegotiated to align with the affordances of the dominant media technology of each era.¹⁹ The synchronization of Qur'anic-infused lyrics with musical arrangements is deliberately crafted not to diminish the value of revelation but to preserve the authority of the transcendental message and ensure its continued relevance amid evolving patterns of public consumption. As expressions of piety migrated from the analogue era's simplicity to the complexity of the cyber-screen ecosystem, media evolved from a passive channel into a hybrid space that actively reshapes how Islamic symbols are visually articulated.²⁰ This trajectory of medium change and evolving aesthetic strategies is empirically evident in the body of work produced by key Islamic pop musicians over the past three decades.

The empirical manifestations of these aesthetic strategies and medium shifts are visually evident in the evolving performance styles of iconic Islamic pop artists. The corpus of textual and audiovisual data from the three intergenerational songs reveals the systematic integration of Qur'anic texts with popular musical structures. Promotional materials and performance formats reflect the media technologies of their respective eras,

¹⁹ Hjarvard, "The Mediatization of Religion: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Religious Change."

²⁰ Nabil Echchaibi, "From Audio Tapes to Video Blogs: The Delocalisation of Authority in Islam," *Nations and Nationalism* 17, no. 1 (January 2011): 25–44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2010.00468.x>.

as demonstrated by the evolution of lyric typography and visual aesthetics in their music videos (see Figure 1).



Rayhan (1997)



Maher Zain (2009)



Sabyan (2018)

Source: Screenshot of Video Music from YouTube.

Figure 1. Visual Presentation and Performance Aesthetics of Raihan, Maher Zain, and Sabyan Gambus

Figure 1 illustrates the direct juxtaposition of religious themes with diverse audio and visual formats across different periods of Islamic pop music. The presentation transitions from Raihan's minimalist a cappella style—characterized by the absence of instruments and analog-style lyrics—to Maher Zain's cinematic, pop-orchestral music videos featuring bilingual subtitles, and finally to Sabyan Gambus's highly stylized contemporary digital aesthetic, which incorporates natural landscapes and a strong visual emphasis on hijab fashion trends. These audiovisual arrangements serve as the primary media framework, embedding theological messages within culturally accessible products.

The placement of these media elements is empirically aligned with the poetic diction of the song lyrics, which reflect both the literal and conceptual meanings of Qur'anic verses. Each lyric segment serves as a thematic anchor, reinforced by corresponding Qur'anic references and distinctive linguistic features (see Table 1).

Table 1. Mapping of Thematic Structure, Qur'anic References, and Linguistic Characteristics of the Lyrics

Dimension of Analysis	<i>Iman Mutiara</i> (Raihan, 1997)	<i>Forgive Me</i> (Maher Zain, 2009)	<i>Ya Maulana</i> (Sabyan Gambus, 2018)
Dominant Proposition Mode	Normative-theological: Statements about the nature of faith—that it cannot be inherited, bought, sold, or obtained through physical effort alone.	Psychological-personal: Narratives of inner conflict and pleas for forgiveness for universal human frailties.	Affective-liturgical: prayers addressed to Allah in two languages, expressing confession of sins and requests for blessings.
Lyric Language	Malay (100%)	English (100%)	Arabic + Indonesian (bilingual)

Repetition of Key Units	“If we do not return to God” (×6)	Chorus (×3)	“ <i>Maulana ya maulana ya sāmi’ du’ānā</i> ” (×12)
Identified Qur’anic References	QS. al-Mujādilah [58]: 22 (faith is instilled by Allah); QS. al-Taḥrīm [66]: 10 (faith is not biologically inherited); QS. al-Zumar [39]: 54 (returning to Allah).	QS. al-Zumar [39]: 53 (Allah forgives all sins for those who repent).	QS. al-Baqarah [2]: 286 (divine burden); QS. Ghāfir [40]: 60 (call to prayer); classical Islamic <i>munajat</i> tradition.
Number of Qur’anic References	3 verses (explicit-implicit)	1 verse (thematic)	2 verses + 1 prayer tradition

Source: Analysis of song lyrics.

The data in Table 1 indicate that song lyric fragments are intentionally aligned with the translation, thematic core, or conceptualization of Qur’anic verses. For example, the normative proposition in *Iman Mutiara* regarding the nature of faith—which cannot be inherited—echoes the exegetical warning in QS. At-Taḥrīm [66]:10.²¹ Similarly, the universal emotional conflict in Maher Zain’s *Forgive Me* is textually anchored in the assurance of divine forgiveness found in QS. Az-Zumar [39]:53.²² This relationship shifts significantly in Sabyan Gambus’s *Ya Maulana*, where the lyrics employ a hybrid intertextual adaptation by repeating the Arabic phrase *Maulana ya maulana ya sāmi’ du’ānā* twelve times, thereby linking the classical Islamic tradition of *munajat* (supplication) with the scriptural promise in Surah Ghāfir [40]:60.²³

The performance’s acoustic choices and visual aesthetics are fundamentally anchored in the song’s linguistic strategy, which provides a structured theological context for shifting audience segments. In *Iman Mutiara*, the use of formal Malay and a cappella arrangements strategically maintains theological purity within the post-revivalist Southeast Asian Muslim market.²⁴ In contrast, Maher Zain deconstructs local boundaries by adopting an English-language pop-orchestral formula to address the spiritual anxieties

²¹ ZatiRaihan96, “Raihan - Iman Mutiara,” YouTube, December 14, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oa-ndHohuVY&list=RDOa-ndHohuVY&start_radio=1&rv=Oa-ndHohuVY.

²² Awakening Music, “Maher Zain - Forgive Me, Official Lyric Video,” YouTube, November 15, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBif2s1SS1U>.

²³ Official Sabyan Gambus, “Ya Maulana - Sabyan,” YouTube, May 23, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=li1jvubIC8g>.

²⁴ ZatiRaihan96, “Raihan - Iman Mutiara.”

of the cosmopolitan global Muslim diaspora.²⁵ Meanwhile, Sabyan Gambus responds to the contemporary visual culture of Gen-Z Muslims by pairing modern pop-*gambus* rhythms with highly stylized YouTube presentations featuring warm lighting and fashionable hijab attire.²⁶ Through these evolving media formats, the artistic expression of da'wah is reframed from text-heavy, physically grounded moral imperatives into highly commodified, visually driven digital experiences. Modern Islamic music thus offers more than superficial pop entertainment; its mediated lyrics function as guiding signifiers, enabling various generations of Muslim audiences to negotiate sacred texts within the realities of contemporary public piety.

Periodic shifts in lyrical composition signify the reconfiguration of the operational boundaries of sacred texts as they enter the digital public sphere. As scriptural alignment transitions from normative propositions to fluid affective configurations, religious texts are not eliminated but have their theological influence adjusted to align with the logic of the new medium.²⁷ Although transcendental authority remains a constant anchor of meaning, the integration of Qur'anic verses—now embedded within rhythmic repetitions of prayer fragments and framed by contemporary visual aesthetics—subtly shifts the focus of public engagement. The text no longer functions primarily as moral instruction demanding deep cognitive compliance but rather as an aesthetic stimulus inviting momentary affective involvement. In this way, new media formats have fundamentally transformed the role of sacred texts in da'wah communication.

The integration of lyrics with Qur'anic texts across different eras reveals the operation of linguistic pragmatism within the framework of Islamic pop da'wah. This scriptural synchronization is not merely a form of cultural adaptation but a strategic discourse aimed at securing religious legitimacy amid industrialization and cultural change.²⁸ As rigid normative propositions soften into rhythmic repetitions of hybrid prayers; a systematic taming of the sacred text occurs. Revelation—originally confrontational and demanding moral transformation—is repackaged into soothing, aesthetically pleasing phrases that are compatible with modern urban lifestyles. Through this visual mechanization and linguistic reduction, the cultural industry exploits

²⁵ Awakening Music, "Maher Zain - Forgive Me, Official Lyric Video."

²⁶ Official Sabyan Gambus, "Ya Maulana - Sabyan."

²⁷ Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 18.

²⁸ François Gauthier, *Religion, Modernity, Globalisation: Nation-State to Market* (Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 110–11.

transcendental authority without imposing heavy doctrinal demands on audiences.²⁹ In this context, the lyrics function as instruments of spiritual solace, subtly sustaining the circulation of commodities under the guise of public piety.

This alignment of lyrics with the logic of the cyber market both confirms existing findings on the commodification of religion in the digital sphere and broadens the analytical scope. While many studies frame mediatization as a form of secularization that diminishes the sacredness of texts,³⁰ the cross-generational data presented here demonstrate that the sacred text is never abandoned. Instead, it is strategically preserved as the foundational anchor of the industry's legitimacy. This pattern aligns with the concept of a "third space" in digital religion, where religious authority is renegotiated to accommodate urban audiences.³¹ However, the shift from Raihan to Sabyan Gambus reveals a new locus of contradiction that has not been adequately explored in previous literature. While other studies tend to emphasize the visual commodification of fashion and lifestyle,³² the findings of this research show that the most radical theological reduction occurs at the textual level, where the instructive function of revelation is subtly transformed into a mere affective stimulus.

Typologies of Audience Reception Across Eras: A Comparative Analysis of Interpretation Patterns in Islamic Pop Music Audiences

Textual restructuring and shifts in the aesthetic function of religious preaching fundamentally reshape how audiences consume and interpret religious messages. The transformation from text-heavy instruments of indoctrination to dynamic, affective stimulation does not occur in isolation; it manifests within diverse reception frameworks

²⁹ Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 2021), 73, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501383311>.

³⁰ Krzysztof Stępnia, "Communicating the Sacred in Religious Advertising in Light of the Mediatization of Religion Theory and Research on Digital Religion," *Church, Communication and Culture* 8, no. 2 (July 3, 2023): 285–307, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2023.2244537>.

³¹ Steward M. Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi, "Media Theory and the Third Spaces of Digital Religion," in *The Third Space of Digital Religion*, ed. Nabil Echchaibi and Steward M. Hoover (London: Routledge, 2023).

³² Annisa R Beta, "Commerce, Piety and Politics: Indonesian Young Muslim Women's Groups as Religious Influencers," *New Media & Society* 21, no. 10 (October 10, 2019): 2140–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819838774>; Carla Jones, "Materializing Piety: Gendered Anxieties about Faithful Consumption in Contemporary Urban Indonesia," *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 4 (November 12, 2010): 617–37, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2010.01275.x>.

among audiences.³³ When sacred texts are deconstructed and mediated through screen technology, the decoding of theological authority also undergoes systematic fragmentation. Religious reception no longer follows a unidirectional path of uniform doctrinal compliance but intersects with personal memory, cosmopolitan identity, and the transient logic of cyber interactions.³⁴ To empirically map how the reconceptualization of lyrics shapes psychological and sociological responses across eras, this analysis examines audience interpretations recorded within the platform ecosystem.

The analysis of audience reception of the textual and visual elements of the three Islamic songs was conducted through the coding of 60 sample comments (20 per video). This approach illustrates how variations in medium and linguistic features influence the consumption of religious texts in digital spaces (see Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of Audience Reception Typologies Across the Three Songs (n = 20 per song)

Reception Typology	<i>Iman Mutiara</i> (Raihan)	<i>Forgive Me</i> (Maher Zain)	<i>Ya Maulana</i> (Sabyan Gambus)	Total (N=60)
Dominant reading (full acceptance of the theological message)	3 (15%)	5 (25%)	4 (20%)	12 (20%)
Negotiated reading (mediated by personal experience)	7 (35%)	4 (20%)	9 (45%)	20 (33%)
Oppositional reading (aesthetic appreciation outside of Islam)	0 (0%)	4 (20%)	2 (10%)	6 (10%)
Mixed / unclassified	10 (50%)	7 (35%)	5 (25%)	22 (37%)

Source: Analysis of YouTube Comments.

The data in Table 2 show that the “negotiated reading” category—acceptance mediated by personal experience or individual filters—is the most dominant typology overall, accounting for 33% (n=20) of the sample. The “dominant reading,” which reflects full acceptance of the original theological message, accounts for 20% (n = 12). The “oppositional reading”—primarily aesthetic appreciation detached from Islamic theology—represents the smallest share at 10% (n = 6). The remaining 37% (n = 22) of comments were mixed or unclassified, reflecting the fluid and fragmented nature of digital interactions on YouTube.

³³ Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” 128.

³⁴ Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 95.

A more detailed examination of reception patterns reveals shifts in audience motivations influenced by the aesthetic strategies and linguistic range of each song (see Table 3).

Table 3. Characteristics of Audience Reception Patterns Across the Three Songs

Typology	<i>Iman Mutiara</i> (Raihan)	<i>Forgive Me</i> (Maher Zain)	<i>Ya Maulana</i> (Sabyan Gambus)
Dominant reading	Theological internalization; emotional engagement with lyrics; normative call for broader <i>da'wah</i> .	Spontaneous prayer; notes on concrete actions (repentance); long-term active reception.	Mobilization of collective <i>da'wah</i> ; transnational Muslim solidarity; communal affirmation in worship contexts.
Negotiated reading	Filtered through nostalgia (childhood memories, Ramadan atmosphere, nasyid competitions, parents).	Faith validated as modern Muslim identity in multicultural/global diaspora.	Dominant temporal-communal function: markers of the current year ("still watching in 2025/2026") and situational prayers.
Oppositional reading	Not found (0%).	Non-Muslim aesthetic/spiritual appreciation; "Allah" repositioned as universal/interfaith divinity.	Reframing as symbols of interfaith tolerance; aesthetic appreciation without theological acceptance.
Dominant Pattern	Negotiated through personal nostalgia and family memories.	Dominant among transnational non-Muslim audiences.	Communal-temporal negotiation; weakest theological internalization.
Language Distribution	Indonesian, Malay (Nusantara regional).	≥ 7 languages (English, Indonesian, Arabic, Malay, Spanish, etc.) – global.	Indonesian, Malay, Arabic, English, Italian (regional-diaspora).
Significant Absences	No oppositional readings; few non-Nusantara languages.	Temporal markers ("still heard in 20xx") almost nonexistent.	Deep theological internalization almost nonexistent; minimal comments on lyrical substance.

Source: Analysis of YouTube Comments.

Table 3 shows that reception patterns for *Iman Mutiara* are predominantly shaped by interpretations influenced by personal nostalgia, family memories, and childhood recollections within the regional Nusantara (Malay-Indonesian) context.³⁵ This pattern shifts significantly in Maher Zain's *Forgive Me*,³⁶ which exhibits the highest rate of dominant theological reception (25%), reflected in spontaneous prayers and concrete, long-term acts of repentance. Simultaneously, Maher Zain's cosmopolitan approach provokes a notable oppositional reading (20%) among transnational, non-Muslim audiences. In contrast, *Ya Maulana* by Sabyan Gambus elicits a very high level of communal-temporal negotiation (45%), with comment sections primarily serving as annual markers ("still watching in 2025/2026") and as spaces for situational prayers.³⁷

The data on audience composition and language distribution in Table 3 reveal a clear empirical trade-off between the depth of theological internalization and the expansion of digital reach. During the analog phase represented by Raihan,³⁸ the complete absence of oppositional readings indicates that the highly normative and localized framing of religious texts limits accessibility beyond the Nusantara Islamic tradition. Conversely, the global reach achieved in the Maher Zain era creates space for hybrid interpretations, wherein non-Muslim audiences reframe Islamic eschatological concepts into universal notions of divinity.³⁹ However, in the peak digital streaming era exemplified by Sabyan Gambus,⁴⁰ the massive expansion of audience reach coincides with a significant weakening of theological internalization. The scarcity of comments addressing lyrical substance, combined with the dominance of temporal markers under the "Ya Maulana" video, demonstrates that sacred texts become vulnerable to functional desacralization within the new media ecosystem. Rather than serving as instruments for deep spiritual contemplation, the songs primarily function as aesthetic backdrops for social interaction and the marking of communal presence in cyberspace.

This cross-generational transformation in reception patterns reveals that the democratization of cyberspace does not necessarily deepen theological literacy; rather, it redefines the boundaries of sacredness itself. As communal-temporal negotiations overshadow dominant theological interpretations, religious texts shift from instruments

³⁵ ZatiRaihan96, "Raihan - Iman Mutiara."

³⁶ Awakening Music, "Maher Zain - Forgive Me, Official Lyric Video."

³⁷ Official Sabyan Gambus, "Ya Maulana - Sabyan."

³⁸ ZatiRaihan96, "Raihan - Iman Mutiara."

³⁹ Awakening Music, "Maher Zain - Forgive Me, Official Lyric Video."

⁴⁰ Official Sabyan Gambus, "Ya Maulana - Sabyan."

of existential contemplation to markers of ephemeral digital presence.⁴¹ The proliferation of annual markers and claims of communal belonging within contemporary aesthetic narratives suggests that digital-age audiences prioritize affirming their existence within a group over internalizing substantive doctrinal messages. Nevertheless, the resilience of these texts across generations—through nostalgic memory and cosmopolitan adaptation—demonstrates that transcendental authority remains a vital anchor of identity.⁴² Ultimately, platform logic has transformed the landscape of public reception not by dissolving piety but by shifting its center of gravity from cognitive-personal reflection to a fluid, visually driven, affective crowd.

The shift toward temporal markers and nostalgic memory signals a broader reorientation of religious texts within the digital ecosystem. As comment sections become spaces for annual reaffirmation, sacred texts are integrated into audiences' personal and communal identity narratives rather than being interpreted as rigid doctrinal references. This fragmentation away from lyrical substance does not necessarily indicate a loss of religiosity. Instead, it demonstrates that modern audiences treat these musical works as venues for social interaction.⁴³ New media structures have thus transformed the operation of revelation in the public sphere: from demanding deep cognitive understanding to facilitating collective emotional engagement. In this process, religious texts undergo pragmatic functional adaptation—shifting from exclusive moral doctrines to aesthetic anchors that unify diverse layers of cybercultural expression.

This typology of active reading supports contemporary reception theory concerning the flexibility of textual interpretation in virtual public spaces. Contrary to traditional views that depict audiences of religious music as passive recipients of doctrine, the cross-generational data confirm that cyber audiences function as autonomous producers of meaning.⁴⁴ The oppositional readings by transnational non-Muslim audiences broaden the thesis of universal spiritual appeal, wherein rigid theological boundaries dissolve when mediated through cosmopolitan aesthetics. However, the predominance of

⁴¹ McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, 209.

⁴² Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, trans. Simon Lee (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

⁴³ Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 129.

⁴⁴ Kesha Morant Williams and Omotayo O. Banjo, "From Where We Stand: Exploring Christian Listeners' Social Location and Christian Music Listening," *Journal of Media and Religion* 12, no. 4 (October 21, 2013): 196–216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348423.2013.845027>; Omotayo O. Banjo and Kesha Morant Williams, "A House Divided? Christian Music in Black and White," *Journal of Media and Religion* 10, no. 3 (July 29, 2011): 115–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348423.2011.599640>.

communal-temporal negotiation in today's streaming ecosystem introduces a dimension not fully anticipated by classical reception literature. While previous studies often associated negotiated readings with conflicts of class or political ideology, these findings suggest that negotiations in cyberspace are primarily driven by pragmatic needs to affirm individual existence and foster group solidarity.

The Digital Attention Economy and Metric Disparities: The Commodification of Visual Aesthetics and the Shift in Religious Authority

The integration of sacred texts into the digital popular music industry is no longer a naive expression of personal piety. Instead, it represents a deliberately crafted cultural strategy aimed at dominating the digital attention market through the competitive commodification of religious symbols. The intertextual alignment between pop song lyrics and Qur'anic verses is intentionally designed not to desacralize revelation but to harness transcendental authority as a stable anchor of meaning amid the chaotic flow of digital information.⁴⁵ By positioning these sacred texts—both typographically and visually—at the center of the screen across evolving media formats, visual anchoring captures the emotions of urban audiences and transforms profane aesthetic spaces into spiritually charged loci with high market value.⁴⁶ This hybrid pattern, which fuses the depth of the Qur'an's sacred message with the structures of commercial songs, manifests concretely in audience engagement within the platform ecosystem.

The empirical manifestation of this aesthetic strategy is evident in the dynamics of digital consumption. Distribution metrics for the three Islamic songs on YouTube reveal highly significant quantitative disparities that cannot be explained solely by differences in theological depth (see Table 4).

Table 4. Digital Distribution Statistics for the Three Songs on YouTube

Platform Metrics	<i>Iman Mutiara</i> (Raihan)	<i>Forgive Me</i> (Maher Zain)	<i>Ya Maulana</i> (Sabyan Gambus)
YouTube Channel	@ZatiRaihan96	@Awakening Music	@Official Sabyan Gambus
Number of Views	523,000	17,000,000	394,000,000

⁴⁵ Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 34.

⁴⁶ Hoover and Echchaibi, "Media Theory and the Third Spaces of Digital Religion," 13.

Total Number of Comments	302	4,456	134,440
Views-to-Comments Ratio	1 : 1,735	1 : 3,816	1 : 2,930
Video Format	Static image	Cinematic music video	Close-up vocals + hijab visuals
Geographic Reach	Regional (Archipelago)	Global-multinational (≥ 7 languages)	Regional-diaspora (≥ 6 languages)
Vocalist / Visual Figure	Collective (5 voices, no close-ups)	Maher Zain (solo)	Nissa Sabyan (solo, facial close-up)

Source: Official YouTube channels (data accessed during the research period).

Table 4 shows that *Ya Maulana* (Sabyan Gambus) achieved the highest cumulative engagement, with 394 million views and 134,440 comments,⁴⁷ yielding a strong views-to-comments ratio of approximately 1:2,930. This stands in stark contrast to *Iman Mutiara* (Raihan), which recorded only 523,000 views and 302 comments (ratio approximately 1:1,735).⁴⁸ *Forgive Me* (Maher Zain) occupies a middle position with a solid transnational reach of 17 million views and 4,456 comments.⁴⁹ These significant metric disparities empirically confirm that the expansion of religious discourse in contemporary digital spaces is driven less by the authority of doctrinal texts than by the effectiveness of audio-visual formats and platform algorithm optimization.

An analysis of the correlations among these distribution variables reveals the operation of three distinct aesthetic mechanisms that directly reshape the positioning of religious authority in the Muslim public sphere (see Table 5).

Table 5. Metric Relationships Among Distribution, Aesthetic Mechanisms, and Their Implications for Religious Authority

Dimension	<i>Iman Mutiara</i> (Raihan)	<i>Forgive Me</i> (Maher Zain)	<i>Ya Maulana</i> (Sabyan Gambus)
Primary Aesthetic Mechanism	Substantive aesthetics: purity of theological message; acoustic format; absence of visual distractions.	Cosmopolitan aesthetics: universal language, global pop arrangements, trans-cultural psychological narratives.	Visual-feminine aesthetics: gender performativity via facial close-ups; melancholic vocals; fashionable hijab.

⁴⁷ Official Sabyan Gambus, “Ya Maulana - Sabyan.”

⁴⁸ ZatiRaihan96, “Raihan - Iman Mutiara.”

⁴⁹ Awakening Music, “Maher Zain - Forgive Me, Official Lyric Video.”

Engagement Drivers	Theological quality of lyrics; nostalgic value for older audiences.	Studio production quality; cross-cultural accessibility; universal psychological relevance.	Close-up visual quality; mobile-optimized format; organic virality on social media.
Algorithmic Factors	Static thumbnails; not optimized for YouTube's recommendation system.	Cinematic music videos; strong transnational engagement.	Expressive facial thumbnails; high engagement rates; optimal duration; autoplay optimization.
Sources of Religious Authority	Theological messages (lyrics as text): authority based on doctrinal substance.	The singer as a figure of modern Muslim identity: authority based on psychological relevance.	Visual-performative figure (vocalist): authority based on visual affect and emotional consumption.
Reception Implications	Focused on lyrical substance; audience responds to theological content.	Theological messages accepted but open to recoding by non-Muslim audiences.	Text present in lyrics but largely neglected in reception; audience responds to affective-aesthetic experience.
Patterns of Audience Generations	Cassette-era generation (1990s–2000s); nostalgia as primary mode of access.	Urban Muslims of the internet generation; identity negotiation within global modernity.	Social media generation; fluid religiosity; “believing without belonging.”

During the analogue phase, represented by Raihan's nasheed,⁵⁰ the media approach relied on “substantive aesthetics” that prioritized the purity of the theological message and an acoustic format free from visual distractions. In this phase, the locus of religious authority was firmly anchored in the lyrics as an objective doctrinal text. This approach transitioned into a “cosmopolitan aesthetic” during the Maher Zain era,⁵¹ where universal language and global pop arrangements shifted authority toward the singer as the embodiment of modern Muslim identity and cross-cultural psychological relevance. In the digital streaming era, Sabyan Gambus exemplifies the rise of a “visual-feminine aesthetic.”⁵² Mass

⁵⁰ ZatiRaihan96, “Raihan - Iman Mutiara.”

⁵¹ Awakening Music, “Maher Zain - Forgive Me, Official Lyric Video.”

⁵² Official Sabyan Gambus, “Ya Maulana - Sabyan.”

engagement here is driven by expressive facial close-ups, gender performativity, and the commodification of fashionable hijab attire—all optimized for mobile consumption and YouTube’s autoplay features. Consequently, religious authority has undergone a radical transformation: it is no longer rooted primarily in doctrinal substance but in visual affect and audiences’ emotional engagement with performative figures.

Sociologically, this shift from substantive to visual-performative aesthetics reflects broader changes in how different generations engage with Islam through media. Raihan’s audience, shaped by the cassette era, interacted with religious content through a nostalgic mode that encouraged deep engagement with theological substance. In contrast, the social media ecosystem surrounding Sabyan Gambus’s listeners represents a new generation characterized by fluid religiosity. In this context, religious expression manifests as “believing without belonging,” where markers of piety and fragments of sacred texts are widely adopted as part of a digital lifestyle, yet remain detached from institutional affiliations or rigorous doctrinal commitments.⁵³ Through these comparative findings, the study concludes that the mediatization of Islamic pop music—driven by platform algorithmic attention economies—facilitates functional desacralization. It expands the visibility of Islam in global cyberspace while simultaneously reducing sacred texts to superficial aesthetic commodities that support fleeting forms of public piety.

These statistical disparities across eras empirically demonstrate how audiovisual formats and algorithmic optimization influence public engagement with religious discourse. The abundance of digital metrics reveals that the expansion of reach is driven less by the depth of doctrinal content than by the effectiveness of visual feminine aesthetic mechanisms.⁵⁴ The shift from lyric-based responses to affect-driven reactions centered on performative figures indicates that the new media ecosystem has structurally relocated the foundation of religious authority. This transition from substantive aesthetics to visual performativity does not eliminate sacred texts but repositions them functionally within the public sphere. The result is a new, fluid religious landscape in which fragments of sacred texts are incorporated into a digital lifestyle that prioritizes fleeting collective emotional bonds.

The dominance of digital metrics and the shift toward visual-feminine aesthetics underscore the personalization of religious authority mediated by screen technology. As

⁵³ Grace Davie, “Believing without Belonging: Is This the Future of Religion in Britain?,” *Social Compass* 37, no. 4 (December 1, 1990): 455–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003776890037004004>.

⁵⁴ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 279.

audience engagement increasingly centers on performative figures, sacred texts no longer function as autonomous doctrinal entities but are instead mediated through visual representations and gendered expressions. This shift of authority—from objective texts to the affective power of figures—suggests that modern audiences require relatable visual intermediaries to connect with religious messages.⁵⁵ Cyber platforms do not diminish theological content; rather, they repackage it into emotional stimuli compatible with the digital ecosystem. Ultimately, religious texts undergo a significant reconceptualization: they are no longer accessed primarily as instructive moral doctrines but as cultural resources that facilitate social connection within online communities.

These findings on the shift in authority from substantive texts to visual-performative affect enrich theoretical debates on religious authority in the digital age. Previous sociological studies often framed this shift as linear—from institutional scholars to digital celebrity clerics.⁵⁶ However, the cross-generational metrics and aesthetic data in this study offer a more nuanced perspective: the transformation involves not merely involve a change of actors but entails the deconstruction of the medium of authority itself. Interpretation of sacred texts is increasingly delegated to the visual aesthetics and performativity of non-clerical figures. These engagement patterns, driven by mobile-optimized formats and algorithmic logic, align with the emergence of a fluid, individualistic form of cyber-piety. Overall, the findings complement existing literature by demonstrating that, under the governance of the attention economy, religious authority increasingly rests on the capacity to mobilize communal emotional affect through visual means.

Conclusion

The linear view of digital mediatization—commonly understood as degrading public piety or dissolving sacred texts into commercial profanity—is challenged by this study. Cross-generational analysis reveals that sacred texts have not been abandoned; rather, they remain the foundational anchor of the industry’s legitimacy. However, these texts have undergone a profound functional repositioning—from instruments of

⁵⁵ Pauline Hope Cheong, “Religious Authority and Social Media Branding in a Culture of Religious Celebrification,” in *The Media and Religious Authority*, ed. Stewart M. Hoover (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2016), 81–102.

⁵⁶ Bryan S. Turner, “Religious Authority and the New Media,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 2 (March 1, 2007): 117–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407075001>; Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

theological contemplation to affective stimulants and markers of communal identity in cyberspace. The progression from the substantive aesthetics of the Raihan era, through the cosmopolitan aesthetics of Maher Zain, to the visual-feminine aesthetics of Sabyan Gambus illustrates that the extensive digital reach of Islamic pop music comes at the expense of diminished theological internalization. Under the influence of platform attention economies, the locus of religious authority has shifted from the depth of objective doctrinal texts to the visual-affective power of performative figures, fostering a new generation of Muslims characterized by fluid religiosity.

Methodologically, integrating reception analysis with the coding of platform circulation metrics has proven effective in uncovering the contradictions between textual structures and audience practices within cyberculture. However, this study is limited by its relatively small sample of 60 YouTube comments drawn from three specific songs. It does not capture the broader conversational dynamics on short-form platforms such as TikTok or Instagram Reels, which operate under distinct algorithmic logics. Future research should therefore expand the data corpus using computational (big data) methods to examine visual-performative reception trends across more diverse and dynamic social media ecosystems.

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Data Availability Statement:

The authors ensure that the datasets necessary to replicate the conclusions of this work are presented in their entirety within the article [and/or] its supplementary information.

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The author(s) declare no conflict of interest and confirm that all data were analyzed objectively and ethically, with proper citation of sources.

Ethical Approval:

Formal institutional ethical review was not required for this study as it relies entirely on secondary, publicly available digital artifacts and comments from public YouTube channels. Nevertheless, the research strictly adheres to the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) guidelines to protect digital privacy. All sampled comments were

completely anonymized prior to analysis by scrubbing all user handles, profile names, avatars, and specific timestamps. Data was harvested through standard platform features without bypassing any access-control mechanisms or privacy walls. Consequently, all illustrative data is presented without personal identifiers, ensuring full compliance with internet research ethics.

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