Misinterpretation of Arabic Music as *Salawat*: A Study of Cultural Representation in Indonesian Music

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how cultural representation and digital media practices shape the reinterpretation of non-religious Arabic music as *salawat* in Indonesian society. In this context, Arabic cultural elements are often strongly associated with Islamic identity, leading to the perception that Arabic-language music is inherently religious. This phenomenon reflects the dynamic nature of meaning construction within cultural and media environments. This study employs a qualitative approach within cultural and media studies, using a case study design. Data consist of six non-religious Arabic songs and 60–90 related digital media contents from TikTok and YouTube collected between 2023 and 2025. Data are gathered through ethnographic observation and analyzed using qualitative content analysis and semiotic analysis, guided by representation theory and the encoding/decoding model. The findings show that reinterpretation is a structured process. Cultural representation establishes a dominant code linking Arabic culture with Islam. Musical elements and visual imagery reinforce religious associations, while digital media practices frame and amplify these meanings. Audience interpretation further consolidates the reinterpretation. The study concludes that musical meaning is socially constructed through cultural symbols, media practices, and audience interpretation, highlighting the role of digital media in shaping contemporary religiosity.

1. Introduction

Music is not merely an aesthetic expression, but also a social and cultural practice through which meaning is produced, negotiated, and transformed[1]. Within the framework of cultural studies, music functions as a system of signs whose meanings are not inherent in the text itself, but are constructed through social interaction, cultural conventions, and interpretative practices[2]. This perspective emphasizes that musical meaning is dynamic and context-

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[1] Janice Protopapas, 'Music, Education, and Diversity: Building Cultures and Communities', *Ethnomusicology*, 69.1 (2025) <https://doi.org/10.5406/21567417.69.1.09>; Anita Prest, 'Cross-Cultural Understanding: The Role of Rural School–Community Music Education Partnerships', *Research Studies in Music Education*, 42.2 (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X18804280>.

[2] K Baeskov, *Music as Social and Cultural Practice*, *Music as Social and Cultural Practice*, 2007 <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781846155772>.

dependent, shaped by the ways audiences interpret symbolic elements such as language, sound, and visual representation[3]. Consequently, the same musical text can generate different meanings when it is received within different socio-cultural contexts[4].

In the Indonesian context, Arabic culture occupies a significant symbolic position in the construction of Islamic identity[5]. The historical process of Islamization has contributed to the strong association between Arab cultural elements and religious expression, resulting in the widespread perception that Arabic language, aesthetics, and cultural symbols are inherently linked to piety[6]. As noted by Rustandi et al. (2022)[7], cultural symbols can be over interpreted due to deeply embedded social associations, leading to the conflation of cultural identity with religious meaning. In this context, Arabic is often regarded as the "language of religion," while Middle Eastern visual and musical aesthetics are interpreted as markers of Islamic devotion. This socio-cultural construction has produced a dominant perception in which "Arab" is equated with "Islam," thereby shaping how cultural products originating from Arab contexts are understood by Indonesian audiences[8].

This condition has given rise to an increasingly visible phenomenon, namely the misinterpretation of Arabic music as *salawat*[9]. Many Arabic songs that are originally non-religious particularly those belonging to popular music genres such as love songs—are frequently interpreted by Indonesian listeners as religious chants or devotional expressions. This interpretation is not based on an understanding of the lyrical content or the intention of the creators, but rather on the presence of symbolic elements such as the Arabic language, the use of musical modes associated with Middle Eastern traditions (e.g., the Hijaz scale), and visual

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[3] Trisnasari Fraser, 'Cultivation of Global Consciousness through Intercultural Music Engagement', *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 28.3 (2025) <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajsp.70022>.

[4] Kim Boeskov, 'The Community Music Practice as Cultural Performance: Foundations for a Community Music Theory of Social Transformation', *International Journal of Community Music*, 10.1 (2017) <https://doi.org/10.1386/ijcm.10.1.85_1>; Jack Webster, 'Music On-Demand: A Commentary on the Changing Relationship between Music Taste, Consumption and Class in the Streaming Age', *Big Data and Society*, 2019 <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951719888770>.

[5] Pujiati Pujiati, Adri Lundeto, and Ikmal Trianto, 'Representing Arab-Indonesian Identity: Language and Cultural Narratives on Social Media', *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 14.3 (2025) <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v14i3.78286>; Mohamad Zaka Al Farisi and others, 'Investigating Arabic Language Teaching Materials Based on Indonesian Folklore: An Ethnographic Study on the Folktale of "Bandung"', *Asian Education and Development Studies*, 13.2 (2024) <https://doi.org/10.1108/AEDS-07-2023-0082>.

[6] Amarqaila Meilisa and others, 'Adaptasi Bahasa Dan Budaya Arab Dalam Masyarakat Muslim Indonesia: Kajian Antropolinguistik Kualitatif', *Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat Dan Riset Pendidikan*, 4.2 (2025) <https://doi.org/10.31004/jerkin.v4i2.3769>; Endah Nur Tjendani, Imam Ghozali, and Mohammad Iqbal Muhajir, 'Contributing Traditional Class Communication Culture of Arabic Language Teaching at Pesantren to Higher English Education Classroom in Indonesian Contexts', *English Learning Innovation*, 6.2 (2025) <https://doi.org/10.22219/englie.v6i2.40968>.

[7] Dudi Rustandi, Dindin Dimyati, and Roro Retno Wulan, 'Post-Semiotics of Da'wah Communication in Interpreting Signs of Religious Culture', *Ilmu Dakwah: Academic Journal for Homiletic Studies*, 16.2 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.15575/idajhs.v16i2.21521>.

[8] Adi Rahmat Kurniawan, 'Simbol Dan Ritual Dalam Tradisi Tabut Di Bengkulu: Kajian Antropologis Dengan Pendekatan Teori Ruang Henri Lefebvre Dan Teori Simbolik Clifford Geertz', *Journal of Comparative Study of Religions*, 5.1 (2024) <https://doi.org/10.21111/jcsr.v5i1.13058>.

[9] 'Harmonizing Identities: Language's Role in Shaping "The Sounds of Islamic Identity" - Salawat Dulang Alam and Qodratullah (Harmonisasi Identitas: Peran Bahasa Dalam Membentuk "Suara Identitas Islam" - Salawat Dulang Alam Dan Qodratullah)', *Gramatika STKIP PGRI Sumatera Barat*, 9.2 (2023) <https://doi.org/10.22202/jg.2023.v9i2.7365>.

representations linked to Islamic culture. As argued by Osborn et al. (2020)[10], musical elements can function as signifiers that evoke particular social associations; in the Indonesian context, these signifiers are often decoded as indicators of religiosity. As a result, musical meaning becomes detached from its original context and reconstituted within a new framework of religious interpretation.

The emergence of this phenomenon is closely related to the increasing role of digital media in shaping cultural meaning. Social media platforms such as TikTok and YouTube have become important sites for the circulation and reinterpretation of music, where content is often framed through hashtags, captions, and visual aesthetics that influence audience perception. Arabic songs are frequently categorized under labels such as "Islamic music," "*salawat*," or "soothing religious songs," regardless of their original meaning or function. Through mechanisms of virality and algorithmic recommendation, these representations are continuously reproduced and amplified, leading to the normalization of particular interpretations. In this sense, digital media does not merely distribute cultural content, but actively participates in the production of meaning and the construction of religious understanding in contemporary society.

The misinterpretation of Arabic music as *salawat* reflects a broader issue of cultural meaning construction in which symbolic elements are prioritized over textual content. When a song is transferred from its original cultural context to a different socio-cultural environment, its meaning may shift significantly according to the interpretative framework of its audience. In Indonesia, the association between Arabic cultural symbols and Islamic piety leads to a process in which non-religious music is reinterpreted as part of religious practice. This phenomenon not only blurs the boundary between popular culture and religious expression, but also raises critical questions regarding the transformation of religious meaning in the digital age. It suggests that religious understanding is no longer solely shaped by traditional religious authorities, but is increasingly influenced by media practices, popular culture, and collective interpretation.

Previous studies have explored various aspects of Islamic music, cultural representation, and the relationship between culture and religious identity in Indonesia[11]. Research on Islamic music has primarily focused on traditional forms such as *qasidah* and *salawat* as expressions of religious devotion, while studies in cultural representation have examined how meaning is constructed through symbols, media, and social practices. However, these studies have largely overlooked the phenomenon of misinterpreting non-religious Arabic popular music as religious expression, particularly within the context of digital media culture. Moreover, the role of social media in shaping and reproducing such interpretations has not been sufficiently addressed. This indicates a significant gap in understanding how cultural symbols, musical structures, and media practices interact in the formation of religious meaning in contemporary Indonesian society.

To address this gap, this study is situated within the fields of cultural studies and media studies, focusing on the intersection of popular culture, religion, and digital media. It employs Stuart Hall's theory of representation to analyze how meanings are constructed through language, symbols, and cultural practices. In addition, Toledo et al. (2024)[12] concept of music as a social product is used to understand how musical meaning is shaped by social context,

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[10] Brad Osborn, Emily Rossin, and Kevin Weingarten, 'Content and Correlational Analysis of a Corpus of MTV-Promoted Music Videos Aired Between 1990 and 1999', *Music and Science*, 3 (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059204320902369>.

[11] Nanda Dzikrillah Pelealu and others, 'Semantic Dimensions of Modern Arabic Music: A Case Study of Humood Alkhudher's Falasteen Biladi', *Al-Irfan : Journal of Arabic Literature and Islamic Studies*, 8.2 (2025), 268–82 <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120940697>.

[12] Cristina Victoria Toledo and others, 'Musical Perception and Social Context in Emotional Memory Consolidation', *SCT Proceedings in Interdisciplinary Insights and Innovations*, 2 (2024) <https://doi.org/10.56294/piii2024282>.

while Elders (2019)[13] notion of musical signifiers is applied to examine how specific musical elements trigger religious associations. These theoretical frameworks enable a critical analysis of how Arabic language, musical modes, and visual symbols are encoded as cultural signs and decoded by audiences as expressions of religiosity.

Based on the theoretical and empirical considerations above, this study is guided by the following research question: How do cultural representation and digital media practices shape the reinterpretation of non-religious Arabic music as *salawat* in Indonesian society? This question aims to capture the complex interaction between cultural symbols, social perception, and media practices in the construction of religious meaning.

This study argues that the misinterpretation of Arabic music as *salawat* is not merely the result of individual misunderstanding or limited linguistic knowledge, but rather a form of cultural meaning production shaped by historical associations, symbolic representation, and digital media practices. The dominant construction of "Arab = Islam," combined with the influence of musical signifiers and algorithmic media systems, contributes to the formation of new meanings that transform non-religious music into perceived religious expression. In this sense, misinterpretation should be understood as a socially constructed process that reflects broader dynamics of cultural negotiation and power in the production of meaning.

Based on this perspective, this study aims to analyze the representation of Arabic culture in music within the Indonesian context, to identify the social, cultural, and religious factors that contribute to the misinterpretation of Arabic music as *salawat*, and to examine the role of digital media in shaping and reproducing these interpretations[14]. By doing so, this research seeks to contribute to the development of cultural and media studies[15], particularly in understanding how musical meaning, religious identity, and digital culture intersect in contemporary Indonesian society.

2. Research Method

2.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design[16] situated within the framework of cultural and media studies to examine how meanings are socially constructed and transformed across cultural contexts[17]. The research adopts an interpretive approach, focusing on processes of representation and meaning-making rather than measurement or generalization. This approach is particularly appropriate for addressing the research question, which seeks to understand how cultural representation and digital media practices shape the reinterpretation of non-religious Arabic music as *salawat* in Indonesian society.

A qualitative case study design is used to enable an in-depth exploration of specific instances where reinterpretation occurs. The case study focuses on selected Arabic songs that are originally non-religious but are recontextualized as religious expressions in Indonesian

[13] Williem Elders, 'The Number Seven as Signifier of Symbolism in the Sacred Music of the Renaissance', *Sacred Music*, 146.2 (2019).

[14] Bouziane Zaid and others, 'Digital Islam and Muslim Millennials: How Social Media Influencers Reimagine Religious Authority and Islamic Practices', *Religions*, 13.4 (2022), 335 <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040335>.

[15] Rinda Eka Mulyani and others, 'Misreading the Sacred? A Netnographic Analysis of Youth Reception of Arabic Songs in Shalawat Majlis', *DINIKA : Academic Journal of Islamic Studies*, 10.1 (2025), 58–82 <https://doi.org/10.22515/dinika.v10i1.11255>.

[16] Cheryl N. Poth John W. Creswell, 'Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches', in *4*, 4th edn (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2018), p. 8.

[17] Janna Joceli Omena, Elaine Teixeira Rabello, and André Goes Mintz, 'Digital Methods for Hashtag Engagement Research', *Social Media + Society*, 6.3 (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120940697>.

digital media[18]. This design allows the researcher to analyze the interaction between musical structures, cultural symbols, and media practices within a real-world context.

2.2. Operational Definitions

To ensure analytical clarity, several key concepts in this study are operationally defined. First, non-religious Arabic music refers to Arabic-language songs whose lyrical content does not explicitly contain religious themes, references to Islamic teachings, or devotional expressions such as praise to the Prophet[19]. These songs are typically categorized as popular music, including love songs or mainstream entertainment music, based on their original production context[20].

Second, *salawat* interpretation refers to the process by which non-religious songs are framed, labeled, or understood as religious expressions[21]. This is operationalized through observable indicators in digital media, such as the use of religious hashtags[22] (e.g., #*salawat*, #*musikislami*), captions that frame the content as spiritual or devotional, visual elements associated with Islamic practices (e.g., prayer scenes, mosques), and audience comments that interpret the music as religious[23].

Third, cultural representation refers to the use of symbolic elements—such as language, visual imagery, and musical style—that carry culturally constructed meanings. In this study, it specifically includes Arabic language, Middle Eastern musical characteristics, and visual cues associated with Islamic identity.

Fourth, digital media practices refer to the ways in which content is produced, categorized, circulated, and interpreted on social media platforms, including the use of hashtags, captions, algorithmic visibility, and user interaction.

2.3. Data Sources and Sampling

The data consist of both primary and secondary materials. Primary data include: A selection of Arabic songs that are originally non-religious in content. Digital media content from TikTok and YouTube in which these songs are used, including videos, captions, hashtags, and user comments. While secondary data include scholarly literature on cultural representation, Islamic music, and digital media in Indonesia, which are used to support theoretical and contextual analysis.

This study uses purposive sampling to select data that are directly relevant to the research question. The sampling is conducted in two stages.

First, a total of 6 Arabic songs are selected based on the following criteria:

1. The song is in Arabic and widely circulated internationally
2. The lyrical content is non-religious (verified through translation)
3. The song is popular or recognizable in Indonesian digital contexts

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[18] Pujiati Pujiati, Adri Lundeto, and Ikmal Trianto, 'Representing Arab-Indonesian Identity: Language and Cultural Narratives on Social Media', *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 14.3 (2025), 653–66 <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v14i3.78286>.

[19] Pelealu and others.

[20] Pelealu and others.

[21] Pelealu and others.

[22] Philipp A. Rauschnabel, Pavica Sheldon, and Erna Herzfeldt, 'What Motivates Users to Hashtag on Social Media?', *Psychology & Marketing*, 36.5 (2019), 473–88 <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21191>.

[23] Zaid and others.

Second, for each selected song, 10–15 digital media contents are collected from TikTok and YouTube, resulting in a total of approximately 60–90 media items. The selection criteria include:

1. The content frames the song as religious or *salawat*
2. The content has significant engagement (e.g., views, likes, comments)
3. The content is accessible publicly

The data are collected within a defined time frame, namely January 2023 to December 2025, to capture recent digital media practices.

2.4. Data Collection

Data are collected using a ethnographic approach, which enables the study of cultural practices in online environments. The research adopts a non-participant observational role, meaning that the researcher does not engage directly with users but systematically observes publicly available content.

The data collection process consists of several steps. First, relevant songs are identified and verified as non-religious through lyrical analysis and contextual information. Second, searches are conducted on TikTok and YouTube using keywords and hashtags such as "Arabic song," "*salawat*," and "Islamic music." Third, relevant content is selected based on the predefined criteria.

All selected data are documented through digital archiving, including downloading videos where possible and capturing screenshots of captions, hashtags, and comments. Each data item is coded and organized systematically to facilitate analysis.

2.5. Data Analysis

This study employs qualitative content analysis combined with semiotic analysis to examine how meanings are constructed and transformed. The analysis is guided by Stuart Hall's theory of representation, particularly the encoding/decoding model, as well as Tagg's concept of musical signifiers.

The analysis is conducted in four stages.

1. Analysis of Original Meaning (Encoding)

The first stage examines the original meaning of each selected song by analyzing its lyrics, context of production, and intended theme. This step aims to establish the encoded meaning of the musical text as non-religious.

2. Analysis of Cultural Representation

The second stage focuses on identifying cultural symbols present in both the music and its digital representation. These include:

a. Linguistic elements (Arabic language)
b. Visual elements (Islamic imagery, clothing, religious settings)
c. Cultural markers associated with Middle Eastern identity
d. These elements are analyzed as signifiers that may influence audience interpretation.

3. Analysis of Musical Signifiers

The third stage examines musical elements that may evoke religious associations, such as:

a. Melodic structures (e.g., maqam Hijaz)
b. Vocal styles resembling recitation or devotional singing
c. Rhythmic patterns associated with Middle Eastern music

d. These elements are interpreted as semiotic resources that contribute to meaning-making.

4. Analysis of Digital Media Framing and Decoding

The fourth stage analyzes how digital media practices shape interpretation. This includes:

a. Hashtags and captions that categorize the music as religious
b. Visual framing in videos
c. Audience comments reflecting interpretation

The encoded meaning (original context) is then compared with the decoded meaning (audience interpretation) to identify processes of reinterpretation.

2.6. Analytical Framework

To ensure systematic analysis, the study uses the following coding categories:

Category	Indicators
Linguistic Representation	Use of Arabic language
Musical Signifiers	Scale, melody, vocal style
Visual Representation	Islamic symbols, religious imagery
Media Framing	Hashtags, captions, titles
Audience Interpretation	Comments indicating religious meaning

2.7. Trustworthiness and Researcher Position

To ensure the rigor of the research, several strategies are applied. First, data triangulation is conducted by combining multiple types of data, including musical texts, visual content, and audience responses. Second, theoretical triangulation is employed by integrating concepts from cultural studies, music studies, and media studies. Third, thick description is used to provide detailed contextual analysis, allowing readers to understand the interpretive process.

As a qualitative study, the researcher acknowledges that interpretation is influenced by cultural and academic perspectives. The researcher adopts a critical cultural studies perspective, which views meaning as socially constructed rather than fixed. To minimize bias, the analysis is grounded in observable data, including textual, visual, and audience-generated content, and is guided by established theoretical frameworks.

2.8. Ethical Considerations

This study uses publicly available data from digital platforms and does not involve direct interaction with participants. However, ethical considerations are maintained by anonymizing user identities and focusing on content rather than individuals. Given the sensitivity of religious interpretation, the study approaches the topic with respect and aims to provide critical analysis without undermining religious beliefs or practices.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Original Meaning of Arabic Songs: The Encoding of Non-Religious Content

The first stage of analysis focuses on establishing the original meaning of the selected Arabic songs. Based on lyrical examination and contextual analysis, all selected songs were identified as non-religious in their original form. The lyrics predominantly revolve around themes of love, longing, emotional expression, and everyday experiences, without explicit

references to Islamic teachings, worship practices, or devotional expressions such as praise to the Prophet.

For example, several songs contain romantic narratives addressing a lover, expressing affection, heartbreak, or desire. These themes are consistent with popular music conventions in the Arab world and position the songs within the domain of entertainment rather than religious expression. In their original cultural context, these songs are consumed as part of mainstream popular culture.

From the perspective of representation, these meanings constitute the encoded meaning of the musical texts, as conceptualized in Hall's encoding/decoding model. The songs are produced with specific intentions and cultural contexts that define their primary meaning as non-religious. This initial analysis is crucial, as it establishes a baseline from which shifts in meaning can be identified.

However, when these songs circulate beyond their original context, particularly within Indonesian digital media, their meanings undergo significant transformation. This indicates that musical meaning is not fixed but subject to reinterpretation depending on the socio-cultural framework of the audience.

3.2. Cultural Representation: The Dominant Code of "Arab = Islam"

The reinterpretation of non-religious Arabic music cannot be separated from broader cultural associations within Indonesian society. The analysis reveals the existence of a dominant representational code in which Arabic cultural elements are strongly associated with Islamic identity. This association is historically rooted in the process of Islamization, where Arabic language and cultural symbols became central to religious practice.

As a result, Arabic is widely perceived not merely as a linguistic system, but as a marker of religiosity. This perception extends to cultural products, including music. The use of Arabic language in songs often leads audiences to assume that the content is inherently religious, regardless of its actual meaning.

This phenomenon reflects what Hall describes as the construction of meaning through cultural representation. Symbols do not carry inherent meanings; rather, they acquire meaning through shared cultural frameworks. In the Indonesian context, Arabic language functions as a signifier of Islam, leading to an overgeneralization in which "Arab" is equated with "Islam."

Consequently, when Indonesian audiences encounter Arabic songs, they tend to interpret them within a religious framework, even when the original content is secular. This dominant code shapes the decoding process, predisposing audiences to interpret Arabic music as religious expression.

3.3. Musical Signifiers and the Construction of Religious Meaning

Beyond linguistic representation, musical elements also play a significant role in shaping interpretation. The analysis shows that certain musical features commonly found in Arabic songs function as signifiers that evoke religious associations among Indonesian listeners.

These features include melodic structures associated with Middle Eastern musical traditions, such as the use of maqam (e.g., Hijaz), which produces a tonal quality often perceived as "Islamic" or "spiritual." Additionally, vocal styles characterized by melismatic singing and ornamentation resemble forms of Qur'anic recitation or devotional chanting, further reinforcing religious associations.

From a semiotic perspective, as suggested by Tagg, these musical elements operate as signifiers that trigger culturally specific meanings. In the Indonesian context, these sounds are often associated with religious practices such as *salawat*, Qur'anic recitation, or Islamic

devotional music. As a result, listeners may interpret the music as religious, even in the absence of religious lyrics.

This demonstrates that musical meaning is not solely derived from textual content, but also from sonic characteristics that carry culturally embedded associations. The sound of the music itself becomes a powerful medium for the construction of religious meaning.

3.4. Visual Representation and Multimodal Meaning Construction

The reinterpretation of Arabic music is further reinforced through visual representation in digital media. The analysis of TikTok and YouTube content reveals that many videos using Arabic songs incorporate visual elements associated with Islamic identity.

These include imagery such as mosques, prayer scenes, individuals wearing modest or religious clothing, and activities related to worship. In some cases, videos depict individuals engaged in acts of devotion while the music plays in the background, creating a strong association between the audio and religious practice.

This combination of audio and visual elements results in multimodal meaning construction, where meaning is produced through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources. As Hall emphasizes, representation operates across different modes, including visual and auditory signs.

The presence of Islamic visual cues reinforces the interpretation of the music as religious, even when the lyrics do not support such an interpretation. In this way, visual representation amplifies the religious framing initiated by linguistic and musical elements.

3.5. Digital Media Practices and the Production of Meaning

Digital media plays a central role in shaping and reproducing the reinterpretation of Arabic music. The analysis shows that platforms such as TikTok and YouTube function not merely as channels of distribution, but as active sites of meaning production.

One of the key mechanisms is the use of hashtags and captions that explicitly frame the music as religious. Hashtags such as #*salawat*, #musikislami, and #sholawatmerdu categorize the content within a religious domain, guiding audience interpretation. Captions often include phrases that emphasize spirituality, devotion, or emotional connection to religion.

In addition, algorithmic systems contribute to the amplification of these interpretations. Content labeled as religious is more likely to be recommended to users interested in similar themes, creating a feedback loop that reinforces the association between Arabic music and religiosity. Through repeated exposure, these interpretations become normalized.

This process reflects the role of media in constructing social reality. Meaning is not simply transmitted but is actively produced through practices of categorization, circulation, and repetition. Digital media thus plays a crucial role in transforming the meaning of musical texts.

3.6. Audience Interpretation: The Decoding of Religious Meaning

Audience responses provide further evidence of reinterpretation. The analysis of user comments reveals that many listeners interpret the songs as religious expressions, despite their non-religious origins.

Comments frequently describe the music as *salawat*, express feelings of spiritual calmness, or relate the music to acts of worship. Some users explicitly state that the music helps them feel closer to God or enhances their religious experience.

This pattern of interpretation can be understood as a form of dominant decoding, in which audiences interpret texts according to prevailing cultural codes. In this case, the dominant code

of "Arab = Islam," combined with musical and visual cues, leads audiences to decode the music as religious.

Importantly, this interpretation is not necessarily based on an understanding of the lyrics, but on symbolic and affective associations. This highlights the role of cultural context in shaping meaning, as audiences rely on familiar signs to interpret unfamiliar content.

3.7. The Process of Reinterpretation: From Popular Music to *Salawat*

The findings indicate that the reinterpretation of Arabic music as *salawat* is not a random or isolated phenomenon, but a structured process involving multiple interacting factors.

This process can be understood in several stages. First, a non-religious Arabic song is introduced into the Indonesian context. Second, cultural representation frames Arabic language and aesthetics as inherently Islamic. Third, musical signifiers evoke religious associations through sound. Fourth, visual representation reinforces these associations through imagery. Fifth, digital media practices categorize and amplify the content as religious. Finally, audiences decode the content within this framework, producing a new meaning.

Through this process, the original meaning of the song is transformed, and a new meaning is constructed. This demonstrates that reinterpretation is a socially mediated process, shaped by cultural codes and media practices.

3.8. Blurring the Boundary between Religion and Popular Culture

The reinterpretation of Arabic music reflects a broader transformation in the relationship between religion and popular culture. The findings suggest that the boundary between religious expression and entertainment is becoming increasingly blurred.

Popular culture, particularly through digital media, has become a significant site for the production of religious meaning. Music that was originally intended for entertainment can be recontextualized as a form of religious expression, challenging traditional distinctions between sacred and secular domains.

This shift also indicates a change in the sources of religious authority. Rather than being defined solely by religious institutions, meaning is increasingly shaped by media practices and collective interpretation. Digital platforms enable users to participate in the construction of religious meaning, leading to more fluid and dynamic forms of religiosity.

3.9. Implications for Cultural and Religious Understanding

The findings of this study have several important implications. First, they demonstrate that misinterpretation is not simply a result of misunderstanding, but a process of meaning production shaped by cultural and media contexts. This challenges the assumption that meaning is fixed and highlights the importance of examining the social conditions under which meaning is constructed. Second, the study reveals the potential for symbolic reduction, in which complex cultural expressions are simplified into singular meanings. The association of Arabic language and musical style with religiosity may obscure the diversity of Arabic culture and limit understanding of its artistic expressions. Third, the findings highlight the growing influence of digital media in shaping religious understanding. As media platforms become central to everyday life, they play an increasingly important role in defining what is considered religious or non-religious.

This study set out to examine how cultural representation and digital media practices shape the reinterpretation of non-religious Arabic music as *salawat* in Indonesian society. The findings demonstrate that this reinterpretation is produced through the interaction of multiple factors.

Cultural representation provides a dominant interpretive framework in which Arabic symbols are associated with Islam. Musical signifiers evoke religious associations through sound, while visual representation reinforces these associations through imagery. Digital media practices further shape meaning by categorizing, circulating, and amplifying content within a religious framework. Finally, audiences interpret the music based on these combined influences, resulting in a shift from non-religious to religious meaning. Thus, reinterpretation is not a passive misunderstanding, but an active process of meaning construction. It reflects the dynamic interplay between culture, media, and audience interpretation, highlighting the socially constructed nature of meaning in contemporary society.

4. Conclusion

This study examines how non-religious Arabic music is reinterpreted as *salawat* within Indonesian society, emphasizing the role of cultural representation and digital media practices in shaping this phenomenon. The findings demonstrate that such reinterpretation is not merely the result of individual misunderstanding, but a structured process of meaning construction. Cultural representation establishes a dominant interpretive framework in which Arabic language and aesthetics are strongly associated with Islamic identity, leading audiences to perceive Arabic cultural symbols as inherently religious. This perception is further reinforced by musical signifiers, such as melodic structures and vocal styles that evoke associations with Islamic devotional practices, as well as visual representations in digital media that incorporate religious imagery. In this context, digital media platforms function as active agents in meaning production, using hashtags, captions, and algorithmic circulation to frame and normalize the interpretation of Arabic music as religious content.

The reinterpretation process is completed through audience decoding, where listeners interpret the music within existing cultural frameworks and symbolic associations, often without reference to the original lyrical meaning. As a result, non-religious songs are transformed into perceived expressions of religiosity, illustrating the fluid and socially constructed nature of meaning. This study contributes to cultural and media studies by demonstrating that musical meaning is shaped not only by textual content, but also by cultural associations, media practices, and audience interpretation. It also highlights the growing influence of digital media in redefining the boundaries between religion and popular culture, suggesting the emergence of mediated forms of religiosity in contemporary society. While limited in scope and context, the study underscores the importance of critical awareness in interpreting cultural symbols and calls for further research on the role of media and algorithms in shaping cultural and religious understanding in the digital age.

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