

Constructing Sacred Meaning through Music, Language, and Imagery: A Semiotic Analysis of *Qolbi fi al-Madinah*

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Abstract : Islamic devotional music has become a transnational medium of spiritual expression, resonating across cultures and generations through emotional, lyrical, and symbolic depth. This study aims to analyze the semiotic structures embedded in the song *Qolbi fi al-Madinah* by Maher Zain, applying Louis Hjelmslev's metasemiotic framework. This qualitative research uses a descriptive-interpretative method, drawing data from the song's lyrics, melody, and official music video. The primary data sources are audiovisual materials published by Awakening Music, and the analysis involves segmenting expression and content into four levels: expression form, expression substance, content form, and content substance. Results show that the melody forms a progressive spiritual journey, while the lyrics encode themes of longing, submission, and devotion using ritualistic language. The music video further enhances the narrative through symbolic visuals of journeying toward Madinah, culminating in emotional and theological resolution. The study concludes that *Qolbi fi al-Madinah* constructs a multidimensional sign system where music, language, and imagery converge to produce mediated religious meaning. These findings contribute to the study of Islamic popular culture, digital da'wah, and semiotic-based religious communication.

INTRODUCTION

How does a song evoke spiritual reflection in the age of streaming? In recent years, Islamic popular music has emerged not merely as entertainment but as a powerful medium for expressing spiritual longing and shaping collective Muslim identity in the digital era. One prominent example is "*Qolbi fi al-Madinah*" by Maher Zain, featuring Harris J, which has garnered over eighty-four million views across two official video releases on the Awakening Music channel. The song has achieved viral status in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and even among Muslim communities in Europe and the United Kingdom, illustrating the global resonance of devotional content.

This widespread reception reflects a larger cultural phenomenon wherein Islamic music transcends linguistic and national boundaries, fostering emotional connection and a sense of shared belonging among listeners. As platforms like

YouTube and Spotify become digital sanctuaries for faith-based expression, Islamic music today functions as spiritual nourishment and a dynamic agent of transnational religious identity in a rapidly converging media landscape. Yet little attention has been paid to how these digital sanctuaries encode religious meaning structurally through the music itself.

Despite growing interest in Islamic music's aesthetic and emotional dimensions, prior research has seldom engaged in rigorous semiotic analysis of its textual and musical structures.¹ Theories from semioticians such as Barthes² and Saussure³ have been used to examine popular song lyrics. However, there is a gap concerning formal semiotic frameworks applied to contemporary Islamic devotional music. Similarly, while studies on Harris J song lyrics focus on signification from a Saussurean perspective,⁴ an in-depth structural analysis remains unexplored.

While prior scholarship has investigated the lyrical content and emotional impact of Islamic devotional music, there remains a conspicuous gap in rigorous semiotic studies of these songs, particularly those applying Louis Hjelmslev's metasemiotic framework. This study seeks to fill that gap by employing Louis Hjelmslev's semiotic model, which differentiates between expression form, expression substance, content form, and content substance.⁵ This four-tier analytical approach allows for a more systematic examination of how lyrical repetition, melodic motifs, and religious lexicon intermingle to produce layered spiritual meanings. Applying Hjelmslev's model to "*Qolbi fil Madinah*," the research offers a formal semiotic interpretation that has been very rare in studies of Islamic popular music.

Barzah and Ilmiawan's use of Hjelmslev in analyzing "*Huwa Ahmadun*" affirms the model's analytical value, showing how semiotic layers reveal deeper theological coding.⁶ Their study demonstrated how lexical repetition, metaphorical structuring, and rhythmic phrasing jointly formed a layered

¹ Rika Widawati, "Reading Text Popular Song Indonesia: Study Semiotic-Heuristic," *EDUTECH* 14, no. 1 (February 10, 2015): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.17509/EDUTECH.V14I1.936>.

² Muhsin Ahmad et al., "Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis of the Lyrics of the Song *Hājah Mistakhbiyah* by Muḥammad Ḥamāki (Denotation, Connotation and Myth)," *AURELIA: Jurnal Penelitian Dan Pengabdian Masyarakat Indonesia* 4, no. 1 (December 30, 2024): 1090–1102, <https://doi.org/10.57235/AURELIA.V4I1.4651>.

³ Christopher Yudha Erlangga, Ichsan Widi Utomo, and Anisti Anisti, "Konstruksi Nilai Romantisme Dalam Lirik Lagu (Analisis Semiotika Ferdinand de Saussure Pada Lirik Lagu "Melukis Senja")," *Linimasa: Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi* 4, no. 2 (2021): 149–60.

⁴ I Nurjaman, "Signification and Interpretation of Islamic Signs in Harris J's Song Lyrics in *Salam Album* (2015)," 2018, <https://digilib.uinsgd.ac.id/10125/>.

⁵ Louis Hjelmslev, "Prolegomena to a Theory of Language, Trans," *Francis J. Whitfield (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961)*, 1961, 47–60.

⁶ Ahmad Zahrowii Danyal Abu Barzah and Amal Nur Ilmiawan, "Religiuous Forms and Meanings in the Song *Huwa Ahmadun*: Louis Hjelmslev's Metasemiotic Analysis," in *Proceedings of the 4th Annual International Conference on Language, Literature and Media (AICOLLIM 2022)*, vol. 725 (Springer Nature, 2023), 93.

semantic system that encoded theological references within a musical context. This precedent affirms the analytical potential of Hjelmslev's model for exploring similar structures in widely circulated devotional songs such as "*Qolbi fi al-Madinah*," thus reinforcing the relevance and novelty of this present research.

The song's integration of Middle Eastern melodic contours with modern pop orchestration, alongside ritualistic lexical choices, makes it an ideal case for semiotic deconstruction.⁷ Lexically, the lyrics repeatedly invoke religious signifiers – *qalb*, *sakinah*, *Madinah*, and *Shalawat* – thus creating ritualistic semantic patterns. Meanwhile, repetitive musical phrasing and melismatic singing function as symbolic mechanisms that transcend mere aesthetic appeal to evoke a sense of spiritual intimacy.

The digital transformation of Islamic practice has not only expanded devotional spaces but also highlighted the importance of mediated spiritual content in shaping religious identity among Millennials and Gen Z.⁸ Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok now function as virtual sanctuaries where believers engage with devotional music and digital discourse.⁹ Despite this growth, existing studies predominantly address religious identity and preaching methods,¹⁰ leaving a critical gap in examining how contemporary Islamic songs semantically encode spiritual experience through semiotic structures. Yet these spaces are rarely examined for their internal semiotic structures that encode faith, ritual, and belonging through musical forms.

Addressing this shortfall, our research employs Hjelmslev's semiotic framework to interrogate the internal dynamics of "*Qolbi fil Madinah*." Where previous literature often describes Islamic music from sociological or ethnographic lenses, this study focuses on textual-mythical sign systems. It offers a novel, structuralist perspective by dissecting how lyrical repetition, melodic motifs, and ritualized invocation (e.g., *shalawat*) synergistically express spiritual longings and communal belonging through the interplay of form and meaning.

This methodological application not only adapts a structuralist model to religious content but also fills a disciplinary void between semiotics, religious communication, and media studies. While studies on Western popular music have

⁷ Dwi Anggraini, Muhammad Walidin, and Ulil Albab, "Analisis Semiotika Rolland Barthes Pada Lagu Qaliilu Aqlin Karya Band Alfarabi Musik," *Tamaddun: Jurnal Kebudayaan Dan Sastra Islam* 24, no. 2 (December 20, 2024): 77–86, <https://doi.org/10.19109/TAMADDUN.V24I2.26912>.

⁸ Muhammad Sofyan Sauri and Farhah Farhah, "Komunitas Islam Digital: Identitas Sosial Dan Perubahan Abad Ke-21," *Mozaic: Islamic Studies Journal* 3, no. 02 (2024): 20–28.

⁹ Damian Guzek, Jan Słomka, and Emma Cieslik, "Digital, Hybrid and Traditional Media Consumption and Religious Reflection.," *Central European Journal of Communication* 17, no. 3 (2024); Lailatur Rofidah and Abdul Muhid, "Media Dan Hibrid Identitas Keagamaan Di Era Digital," *Jurnal Dakwah Dan Komunikasi* 7, no. 1 (2022): 81–94.

¹⁰ Abd Hannan, "Rethinking Indonesian Muslim Youth's Religious Identity in Popular Islam: Hanan Attaki's Preaching on Social Media.," *Al 'Adalah Journal* 27, no. 1 (2024).

employed similar frameworks,¹¹ Islamic music—especially globally consumed productions like Maher Zain's—remains understudied in academic semiotics. The expected outcome is a text-music semiotic model adapted for religious content, with significant implications for media literacy and religious communication.

Understanding the semiotic architecture of "*Qolbi fil Madinah*" matters for religious educators, content creators, and media platforms. As Muslim navigate identity in secular public spheres, spiritually charged songs—structured semiotically—provide a form of mediated devotion that contributes to collective belonging.¹² This has direct applications for digital da'wah strategies and underscores the need for critical content design that balances emotional resonance, liturgical tradition, and cultural authenticity.

Introducing Hjelmslev's structural approach to analyzing Islamic pop extends methodological horizons, enabling future research into semiotic structures within religiously themed songs. Furthermore, given "*Qolbi fil Madinah*"'s cross-cultural popularity, this research addresses urgent questions about how digital media facilitates spiritual experiences and collective identity formation. This study opens pathways for future semiotic analyses of devotional media. Given the transnational reach of Maher Zain's music, understanding its encoded meanings becomes crucial in mapping global Islamic identity flows.

In sum, this research fills a theoretical void and responds to urgent questions about digital Islam's evolution in our era of global media convergence. By unveiling the semiotic layers of one of the most widely viewed Islamic songs, the study provides actionable insights for academics, media professionals, and da'wah practitioners. Given the song's transnational reception and symbolic depth, "*Qolbi fil Madinah*" exemplifies how modern Islamic pop constitutes a critical site of identity-making, spiritual innovation, and cultural diplomacy in a diversifying global *ummah*.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with a structural semiotic analysis method based on Louis Hjelmslev's framework. This approach was chosen because it is interpretive and allows for an in-depth exploration of the meaning structured in the text and context of the song *Qolbi fi al-Madinah*. Hjelmslev's semiotic model maps the process of meaning production through two main axes: expression and content, each with dimensions of form and meaning,

¹¹ Fadhil Maulana Rais and Dani Fadillah, "Semiotic Analysis of Roland Barthes on the Lyrics of 'HOPE' by XXXTENTACION," *Jurnal Audiens* 6, no. 1 (2025): 1–10; Mohammad Kanzunnudin et al., "Roland Barthes' Semiotic Codes in the Song Lyrics of the Album 'Dua Warna Cinta' by Virgoun and Budi Doremi," *ICCCM Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2, no. 5 (2023): 54–60.

¹² Abd Hannan and Ach Fatayillah Mursyidi, "Social Media and the Fragmentation of Religious Authority among Muslims in Contemporary Indonesia," *Digital Muslim Review* 1, no. 2 (2023): 84–104. <https://doi.org/10.32678/dmr.v1i2.10>

resulting in four levels of analysis: form of expression, form of content, meaning of expression, and meaning of content. This framework is suitable for application to multimodal texts such as religious songs that combine linguistic, musical, and symbolic elements in a complex manner. Hjeltmslev emphasizes the importance of "semiotic functions" in understanding the relationship between signs and meanings that are not merely arbitrary but structured in an internally interrelated system.¹³

Data collection techniques were carried out through documentation and non-participatory observation of the two official versions of the song *Qolbi fi al-Madinah* released by Awakening Music on the YouTube channel, including song lyrics, musical arrangements, and visual elements as a form of digital reception. Lyric data were obtained from official sources of music publishers, while audio and visual data were analyzed using descriptive-interpretive principles. Data collection also included literature studies from scientific articles, semiotic theory books, and contemporary Islamic music studies as secondary data.¹⁴ The selection of *Qolbi fi al-Madinah* as the object of study was based on its high popularity in various Muslim countries and its distinctive thematic presentation—raising longing for the holy city and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad—which is rich in spiritual symbols and repetitions.¹⁵

The data analysis technique used the close reading method with the Hjeltmslevian matrix, which was carried out in three stages: identification of linguistic and musical sign units, such as repetition of keywords (e.g. *qalb*, *sakinah*, *salawat*) and melodic motifs; classification of these elements into four semiotic categories according to Hjeltmslev; and interpretation of the function of spiritual meaning based on the structure formed. The validity of the results is analyzed by triangulating through comparison with similar studies, such as Susanto J et al. or Barzah and Ilmiawan, who used the Hjeltmslev model to analyze semiotics in songs.¹⁶ With this method, it is hoped that a systematic picture will be obtained regarding how spiritual meaning is produced through lyric texts and the interaction between musical expression and the underlying semiotic structure.

¹³ Hjeltmslev, "Prolegomena to a Theory of Language, Trans."

¹⁴ Kathryn A. Davis, "Qualitative Theory and Methods in Applied Linguistics Research," *TESOL Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 427, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3588070>.

¹⁵ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, vol. 1 (U of Minnesota Press, 1996).

¹⁶ Jennifer Susanto et al., "Intergenerational Communication in Song 'Saat Kau Telah Mengerti' with Hjeltmslev's Semiotic Perspective.," *International Journal of Visual & Performing Arts* 6, no. 1 (2024); Barzah and Ilmiawan, "Religious Forms and Meanings in the Song Huwa Ahmadun: Louis Hjeltmslev's Metasemiotic Analysis."

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study investigates the semiotic architecture of Maher Zain's *Qolbi fil Madīnah* using Louis Hjelmslev's four-tiered metasemiotic model. The analysis reveals that the song operates within a complex sign system where lyrical repetition, melismatic vocalization, and symbolic religious lexicon intertwined to convey layered spiritual meanings. Repeated invocations of key terms such as *qalbi* (my heart), *sakinah* (serenity), *Madīnah*, and *Salawat* generate ritualized semantic fields that reflect the listener's internalization of longing for the Prophet and the sacred geography of Islam. These expressions are reinforced musically by Middle Eastern scales, slow rhythmic phrasing, and melodic ascension, which simulate a spiritual ascent together.

The study identifies a patterned correspondence between sonic and semantic structures by applying Hjelmslev's distinction between the form of expression and content. For instance, the emotional melismas on *your Habibi* and the ascending motifs on *Salawat* serve as sonic mirrors to spiritual elevation, while the consistent return to the chorus line *qalbi fi al-Madinah* anchors the song's affective core in a stable religious identity. When analyzed semiotically, these patterns do not merely reflect aesthetic choices but form a structural grammar that expresses devotion, reverence, and transnational Muslim unity.

Furthermore, the song's performative and digital dimensions function as extended expressions of its semiotic core. The visual imagery in the official video—featuring symbolic elements such as the Prophet's Mosque, traditional clothing, and diverse global Muslim audiences—translates content substance into mediated signifiers. This aligns with Hjelmslev's metasemiotic perspective, where the substance of content is seen as ideational or theological depth made accessible through formal structures. In this case, the affective intensity of longing (*syauq*) and peace (*sakinah*) is made perceivable across linguistic and national boundaries through a deliberate organization of sign forms.

The findings address the central research question by unpacking how the musical, lyrical, and visual elements of *Qolbi fil Madīnah* collaboratively construct a spiritual narrative within the context of globalized Islamic media. Musically, the song's minimalist arrangement and meditative tone evoke a contemplative mood that supports a nonverbal form of devotion. Lyrically, it articulates a transnational longing for the Prophet and the sacred city of Madinah, offering a personalized expression of piety that resonates with Millennial and Gen Z Muslims across borders. Visually, the video clip enhances this narrative by presenting aestheticized images of Madinah, enabling a form of virtual pilgrimage through symbolic and affective cues. Together, these three layers function as entertainment and mediated devotion, demonstrating how digital Islamic pop culture facilitates new modes of religious engagement. This study affirms the applicability of

Hjelmslev's structuralist semiotics in decoding such layered religious expressions and extends the analytical scope of Islamic music studies beyond ethnographic and thematic approaches.

Hjelmslev's Semiotic Dimensions in the music elements of *Qolbi fi al-Madinah*

Music can function as an aesthetic experience and a symbolic medium for articulating religious sentiment. It communicates beyond linguistic boundaries, invoking affective resonance through structural components such as pitch, rhythm, tone, and timbre. As emphasized, essential musical elements include rhythm, tempo, and tone, each contributing to a composition's expressive and emotive power.¹⁷ These elements carry artistic and spiritual connotations in Islamic devotional contexts, particularly in *nasheed*-based pop such as Maher Zain's *Qolbi fi al-Madinah*.

This study applies Louis Hjelmslev's semiotic framework to analyze the melodic structure of *Qolbi fi al-Madinah* by identifying the semiotic dimensions embedded in its musical form. Rather than examining note intervals or harmonic theories common in Western musical analysis, this study focuses on melodic fragments distributed across four key segments of the song: the opening, the refrain (chorus), the pre-conclusion (bridge), and the ending. Each section exhibits distinct tone movements, tempo shifts, and rhythmic emphasis corresponding to emotional and theological layers of meaning.

Within this framework, the analysis maps each melodic segment onto Hjelmslev's four semiotic levels: expression form (melodic structure), expression substance (auditory texture and instrumentation), content form (musical narrative and affective flow), and content substance (underlying spiritual significance). For instance, the upward progression in the chorus aligns with the emotional crescendo of spiritual longing, while the calm decrescendo near the song's conclusion reflects surrender and inner peace.

By examining these fragments, the study demonstrates how music functions not merely as background accompaniment to religious lyrics but as an active semiotic system that encodes and communicates devotion. Table 1 presents the semiotic breakdown of tone elements across selected melodic passages in *Qolbi fi al-Madinah*, showing the systematic relationship between musical form and spiritual content.

¹⁷ Qian Zhu, Achyut Shankar, and Carsten Maple, "Grey Wolf Optimizer Based Deep Learning Mechanism for Music Composition with Data Analysis," *Applied Soft Computing* 153 (March 1, 2024): 111294, <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.ASOC.2024.111294>.

Table 1. Semiotic Dimensions in the Music Elements of "Qolbi fi al-Madinah"

No	Song Section	Expression Form	Expression Substance	Content Form	Content Substance
1	Beginning of the Song	Descending minor tone, slow interval, short and melancholic phrases.	Low tone, soft daff instrument, dominance of <i>Nahawand maqam</i> .	The tone structure shows introspection and the beginning of an inner journey.	Deep longing for the Prophet, a symbol of a lover's tears and prayers.
2	Chorus	Circular rising tone (modulation), melodic repetition of <i>qalbi fi al-Madinah</i> .	Melismatic, high, and wide vocals, supported by string instruments and light drum pads.	Repetitive and rising patterns create ritual effects and spiritual affirmation.	Inner peace (<i>sakinah</i>) as the climax of religious meaning that comes from love for Madinah.
3	Before the End	The tone tends to be flat and descending, with longer silent pauses.	The timbre becomes quieter, there are minimal instruments, and the singer's voice is calmer.	The tone pattern leads to contemplation and sedimentation of the message.	A sense of submission, total submission, and gratitude in the heart after the spiritual climax.
4	End of the Song	The ending, with a slight rise and then a sharp fall, gives a calming effect.	Soft vocals, light friction of string instruments, melancholic echoes.	The tone structure forms a "complete circle" - from longing to resignation.	Acceptance and surrender symbolize the end of <i>dzikr</i> and a calm spiritual connection.

The melody of this song forms a progressive and gradual spiritual narrative from deep longing, emotional climax, and inner contemplation to peaceful surrender. Each part of the song contains a tone pattern that is aesthetic but also ritualistic and symbolic, in line with Hjeltmslev's semiotic structure. The descending tones at the beginning, the upward modulation in the chorus, and the calmness at the end indicate a dramatic musical flow that reflects the inner journey of a lover of the Prophet, from hope to surrender. This reflects what Tagg calls a "musogenic narrative," where musical syntax evokes narrative direction without verbal language.¹⁸

¹⁸ Philip. Tagg, "Music's Meanings: A Modern Musicology for Non-Musos," 2012, 692.

In addition, the musical expressions used (such as the *nahawand maqam*, soft daff timbre, and melismatic vocals) are forms of substance of expression that build a spiritual atmosphere and emotional depth. When associated with content form, these melodic patterns reveal structured emotional trajectories that mirror devotional experiences. As per Jean-Jacques Nattiez's tripartite model (poietic-neutral-esthetic), this musical structure operates not only as a form of production (poietic) but also as a neutral trace that carries spiritual semiotic weight and enables aesthetic interpretation by devout listeners in diverse contexts.¹⁹

One of the most interesting findings is the spiritual symmetry embedded in the melodic structure: the song does not only rely on lyrics to convey religious meaning but constructs tonal patterns as a parallel system of signs, resonating with what Philip Tagg identifies as "anaphones," or culturally coded sonic triggers. The repetitive chorus acts almost like a liturgical refrain—an audible *dzikr*—which creates affective entrainment and invites the listener into a meditative state. The emotional transposition into tonal gesture (e.g., longing, surrender, gratitude) demonstrates how modern Islamic pop music expands the domain of ritual semiosis, where even melody becomes a ritualized form of meaning.²⁰

This analysis reinforces the idea that religious meaning in digital Islamic music is not only verbal but also constructed through a systematic sound-based semiotic logic. Hjeltmslev's model allows us to see the tonal architecture of the song as a multidimensional sign system, comprising not only expressive aesthetics but also structured theological symbolism. This insight is consistent with recent studies in religious media semiotics, such as those by Massimo Leone, who argues that media-mediated spirituality emerges when emotional atmospheres, sacred signs, and musical forms converge.²¹ As a result, *Qolbi fi al-Madinah* exemplifies how religious pop music functions as a hybrid of art, ritual, and digital da'wah, bridging personal emotion and communal spiritual imagination in the global Muslim cultural landscape.

Hjeltmslev's Semiotic Dimensions in the song lyrics of "Qolbi fi al-Madinah"

Song lyrics are a powerful communicative medium that enables artists to embed symbolic meanings, personal emotions, and collective beliefs into verbal expressions. As Frith argues, song lyrics function as cultural texts that "naturalize" ideological positions, framing how listeners emotionally relate to what is sung.²²

¹⁹ Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music* Translated by Carolyn Abbate *TT - Musicologie Générale et Sémiologie*, ed. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691027142/music-and-discourse>.

²⁰ Umberto Eco, "A Theory of Semiotics," 1979, 354.

²¹ Massimo Leone, "Signs of the Soul: Toward a Semiotics of Religious Subjectivity," *Signs and Society* 1, no. 1 (March 2013): 115–59, <https://doi.org/10.1086/670169>.

²² Simon. Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Harvard University Press, 1998/1996), <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674661967>.

In religious music, particularly in Islamic devotional genres, lyrics serve as artistic expressions and vehicles of da'wah (religious outreach), spiritual reflection, and communal bonding.²³

In *Qolbi fi al-Madinah*, Maher Zain and Harris J utilize lyrical composition to express deep emotional longing (*shawl*) for the Prophet Muhammad and the sacred space of Madinah. The lyrics employ repetition, ritualistic invocation (*shalawat*), and poetic address to engage the listener in a personal spiritual journey. Terms such as *qalbi* (my heart), *sakinah* (serenity), and references to Abu al-Zahra's (a title for the Prophet) are embedded with rich theological and cultural connotations. These word choices are not arbitrary; they are structurally organized to create emotional resonance and spiritual intimacy, which is further reinforced by the melodic and performative layers of the song.

Using Louis Hjelmslev's semiotic model, this study analyzes the internal structure of the song lyrics through four dimensions: the form of expression (linguistic structure), the substance of expression (phonetic and stylistic delivery), the form of content (thematic and discursive patterning), and the substance of content (theological and emotional meanings). This framework allows us to uncover how verbal signs—repeated phrases, names, and metaphors—are organized for aesthetic effect and to invoke sacred emotion and reaffirm spiritual identity.

The analysis of lyrics in this study focuses on how the song constructs a narrative of devotion through symbolic naming, emotional language, and formulaic religious phrases. As Van Leeuwen noted, such forms of linguistic semiotics often operate within "legitimation discourses," grounding emotional expression in culturally sanctioned codes.²⁴ Table 2 presents the semiotic mapping of selected lyric fragments from *Qolbi fi al-Madinah*, highlighting how form and content interact to produce spiritual meaning across linguistic and cultural contexts.

²³ Jonas Otterbeck, *The Awakening Of Islamic Pop Music* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press and The Aga Khan University, 2021); lilik untari, "Islamic Hip Hop Music : A Translation of Muslim Identity Under Western Political Culture," January 1, 2014, https://www.academia.edu/99768456/Islamic_Hip_Hop_Music_a_Translation_of_Muslim_Identity_Under_Western_Political_Culture.

²⁴ Theo van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Analysis*, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Analysis* (Oxford University Press, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ACPROF:OSO/9780195323306.001.0001>.

Tabel 2. Semiotic Dimensions in the song lyrics of "Qolbi fi al-Madinah"

No	Lyric Fragment	Expression Form	Expression Substance	Content Form	Content Substance
1	"سَال دَمْعِي شَوْقًا" My tears flowed in longing	alliteration of the sounds "s-d-sy"	soft and melodious nuance; slow and emotional stress pronunciation	Personal inner confession pattern; introverted emotional expression	Symbolization of deep longing for the Prophet Muhammad and sadness in separation
2	"طَارَتْ رُوحِي حُبًّا" My soul flew in love	Metaphorical phrase with <i>majaz</i> structure, the dynamic verb <i>ṭhārat</i> (fly) indicates vertical movement towards the divine dimension	A soft voice, full of breath, signifies ecstatic spiritual expression	Sufi imagery is a combination of divine love and spiritual experience in dreams	Longing that transcends space-time, a symbol of the release of the soul from the world towards the presence of the Prophet as a transcendental inner experience
3	"رَامَ كُلِّي قُرْبًا" My whole being seeks nearness	Poetic sentences; grammatical inversion for poetic effect	The soft flow of sound, contemplative vocal tempo	Total unification of self with spiritual purpose	Seriousness to approach the Apostle and God existentially, meaning ephemeral and total surrender
4	"قَلْبِي فِي الْمَدِينَةِ" My heart is in Madinah	Direct nominal sentences; phrases central to emotional identity	Stable and repetitive tone of recitation; repetition in each refrain	Identification of spiritual location; emotional attachment to holy place	Medina symbolizes Islamic sacredness, a center of love and spiritual longing for the Prophet and the holy city
5	"صَلِّوَاتُ اللَّهِ وَسَلَامُهُ عَلَيْكَ" May God's prayers and peace be upon you	Standard doxological sentence in classical Arabic; fixed pattern	Read in recitative tone, almost like dhikr; vocal melismatic in execution	Recurring liturgical pattern; formulaic structure familiar to Muslims	Prayer of safety and reverence for the Prophet as an expression of love, obedience, and worship

6	"يا أبا الزهراء... جئتُ أُصَيِّ عليك" O Abu al- Zahra... I have come to pray for you	<i>Nidā'</i> style (exclamation) and expression of intentionality (I come to pray for blessings)	Emotional diction with stress on the exclamation word "yes"; high-low intonation as spiritual emphasis	Direct communication structure with the Prophet; expression of intimate personal relationship	Spirituality as a pilgrimage of the heart; statement of spiritual presence before the Prophet as a form of respect
7	"يا جَدَّ الحَسَنِينِ" O grandfather of Hasan and Husayn	Respectful address structure (<i>nidā'</i>); mentioning lineage as a sign of the Prophet's honor	High intonation full of affection and flattery; <i>madīh</i> (praise) style in classical Arabic poetry	Spiritual identification through holy lineage reinforces the historical and symbolic meaning	Affirmation of love and cultural connection with the Prophet as the central figure of the community, showing devotional intimacy

Hjelmslev's Semiotic Dimensions in the video clip of "Qolbi fi al-Madinah"

The official music video for *Qolbi fi al-Madinah*, released by Awakening Music on its verified YouTube channel, serves not only as a visual representation of the lyrical narrative but also as a semiotic structure that amplifies the spiritual themes embedded in the song. Unlike verbal or musical elements, the video introduces a *multimodal discourse* where facial expressions, bodily gestures, lighting, framing, and spatial dynamics become integral signs. This medium invites viewers into a transnational devotional imagination – connecting believers emotionally and spiritually to the sacred city of Madinah and the Prophet Muhammad.




Visually, the video juxtaposes serene landscapes, intimate expressions of worship, and multicultural representations of Muslims from various ethnicities, ages, and backgrounds. These elements are not coincidental; they function as what Hjelmslev would consider expression substances, organized within a broader expression form of visual narrative and aesthetic design. For instance, frequent close-up shots of tearful eyes, lifted palms in prayer, and slow-motion movements during moments of *Salawat* construct a cinematic language of humility, longing, and submission. The camera does not merely document the performer; it co-forms the spiritual journey alongside the music and lyrics.



Through the semiotic lens of Hjelmslev, the video communicates layers of meaning that go beyond what is verbally articulated. The visual content form in the clip is structured around repeated themes: spiritual yearning, communal identity, and sacred geography. These converge into a content substance rooted in

Islamic theology and affective religiosity. As depicted in the video, Madinah is not only a physical city but a metaphor for inner peace (*sakinah*) and a spiritual destination. The recurring imagery of people gazing toward the mosque, walking barefoot, or crying silently before the Rawdah evokes powerful theological associations with presence, longing, and love.

The integration of visual semiotics into the overall narrative underscores how modern Islamic pop culture employs audiovisual modalities as part of mediated devotion. The *Qolbi fi al-Madinah* video is not merely a supplement to the song, it is an interpretive text in itself, constructing a spiritual experience through the strategic alignment of form and meaning. In this context, Louis Hjelmslev's metasemiotic theory enables a deeper analysis of how sacred emotion is encoded in the grammar of image, gesture, and space. Table 3 presents the semiotic mapping of selected visual elements from the video clip, illustrating the interaction between visual signs and spiritual substance across four semiotic dimensions.

Tabel 3. Hjelmslev's Semiotic Dimensions in the video clip of "Qolbi fi al-Madinah"

No	Scene	Expression	Content
1	 <p>Scene 1 (minutes 00:00-00:12) Maher Zain & Harris J look pensive imagining the journey to Medina</p>	Medium close-up; framing of two hopeful faces; soft lighting. The gesture is looking at the sky; it has a calm atmosphere with the accompaniment of the song's beginning.	Spiritual imagination; readiness of the heart to make a pilgrimage. The beginning of the inner journey: longing for the Prophet and the holy city of Medina.
2	 <p>Scene 2 (minutes 01:10-01:20) Both ask an old woman about the direction of Medina</p>	Interpersonal interaction with two-way framing; soft shot. Woman's smile; gesture pointing in a direction.	Spiritual guidance through a wise man. Wisdom comes from an unexpected figure, a symbol of guidance toward truth.
3	 <p>Scene 3 (minutes 01:23-01:57) Maher and Harris take a boat across the sea to Medina</p>	There is a wide shot of the water and sunlight shining on the face. Calm water waves, atmosphere full of optimism.	Transition of the journey: pilgrimage through nature. Water symbolizes life and purification, a phase of spiritual closeness.

4	 <p>Scene 4 (minutes 01:59–02:24) A camel ride through the desert and mountains</p>	<p>Long shot; vast desert landscape; warm desert colors. The movement of the camel up and down, soft sounds of the desert.</p>	<p>Perseverance in walking the holy path. It is a spiritual journey full of challenges and happiness because it is close to the destination.</p>
5	 <p>Scene 5 (minutes 03:22–03:45) Entering the gate of Medina with the Nabawi Mosque and green dome in the background</p>	<p>Panning from the gate to the green dome, the atmosphere is full of light and emotion, the natural lighting of dusk and facial expressions full of gratitude and happiness.</p>	<p>The climax of the spiritual journey. Medina symbolizes tranquility and the answer to the heart's longing: a peaceful spiritual ending.</p>

The opening scene of the music video shows Maher Zain and Harris J standing in silence, staring at the horizon. Their faces do not speak but are full of hope and contemplation – as if imagining a journey to Medina that is physical and spiritual. In Hjelmlev's framework, this scene is a form of expression of deep longing, while the substance of its expression is reflected in the warm morning sunlight and calm body gestures. This initial silence becomes the starting point of the inner journey; as Meyer mentioned, "spiritual longing is often first expressed in silence before it is sung or spoken."²⁵ In the following minutes, the two main characters meet an older woman who shows them the way to Medina. Although only through hand gestures and a smile, this woman becomes a symbol of spiritual guidance. In Hjelmlev's semiotics, this reflects the form of content in the form of a narrative structure about finding the direction of life, and the substance of its content is the symbolic value of women as guardians of wisdom and the path. This is in line with Mattijs van de Port's study, which emphasizes the role of local figures in symbolizing spiritual wisdom in Islamic media narratives.²⁶

The journey continues with them taking a boat across the river and then riding a camel across the desert and mountains. Their progress is visualized with peaceful cinematography: no noise, only music and nature. This is a visual metaphor for the spiritual journey, full of obstacles but lived with joy. Hjelmlev would read this as an expression substance that creates a content flow in the form of inner progression toward a meeting point.

²⁵ Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors, *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005), <https://iupress.org/9780253111722/religion-media-and-the-public-sphere/>.

²⁶ Mattijs van de Port, "Visualizing the Sacred: Video Technology, 'Televisual' Style, and the Religious Imagination in Bahian Candomblé," *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 3 (2006), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3805333>.

The visual climax of the video occurs when Maher and Harris enter the city of Medina through the iconic large gate. The camera focuses on the green dome of the Prophet's Mosque, the emotional smiles on their faces, and the soft and warm lighting, which are expressions of spiritual resolution. The substance of its content is the peace of mind that finally arrives at its goal, a union between inner meaning and sacred space. In Barthes' framework, this is a mythical signification where Medina is not just a geographical location but a symbol of the peak of Islamic spirituality.²⁷

Overall, this video clip does not convey the story through dialogue or verbal narration but through a visual structure rich in meaning, symbols, and gestures. This is the excellence of visual semiotics in Islamic popular music, because it can speak universally beyond language.²⁸

Triangulation of Music, Song Lyrics, and Video Clips

To strengthen the data's validity and deepen the research's meaning, this study triangulates three main aspects of the song *Qolbi fi al-Madinah*: musical elements, song lyrics, and visualization in the video clip. Louis Hjelmslev, in *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, states that semiotics works systematically by analyzing the relationship between the form and substance of expression and the form and substance of content. This framework provides an opportunity for analysis both linguistically and multimodally, especially in complex popular religious texts such as this song.

In terms of music, the song's melodic structure is read as a form of expression that conveys emotional and spiritual transformation from longing to surrender. This is reinforced by the substance of its expression – *maqam nahawand*, melismatic sound, and slow tempo – which symbolically form a path of spiritual experience. Meanwhile, from the song lyrics, phrases such as *qalbi fil Madinah, ya Rasulallah*, and *sakinah* are read as forms of content that represent love for the Prophet and longing for the holy city. Repetition, doxological diction, and spiritual metaphors form the substance of content-rich in affection and religious symbols. The three mutually support and strengthen the semiotic dimensions embedded in this song.

Meanwhile, in the video clip, the visual representation of Maher Zain and Harris J's journey to Medina reflects the inner journey. Images such as the gates of Medina, the green dome, and the faces of Muslims from various countries become the substance of visual expression that frames the content through search, spiritual pilgrimage, and tranquility. Using theoretical and methodological triangulation,

²⁷ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (Fontana Press, 1977), https://muarasuara.id/buku/image-music-text_roland-barthes/.

²⁸ Kamal Salhi, "Music, Culture and Identity in the Muslim World: Performance, Politics and Piety," *Music, Culture and Identity in the Muslim World: Performance, Politics and Piety*, January 1, 2013, 1-303, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315867236>.

these three aspects show the coherence of spiritual signs that complement each other and strengthen the digitally mediated religious message. As stated by Meyer and Moors,²⁹ the presence of media in modern religious practices forms a symbolic space that can be accessed across languages and cultures through audio-visual-devotional signs.

The integrated semiotic construction found in *Qolbi fil Madīnah* reflects what Hjelmslev calls the connotative semiotic system, where signs operate on multiple levels of meaning through interrelated expression planes – here, musical tonality, lyrical content, and visual aesthetics. By employing a structuralist lens, the song's symbolic architecture emerges not merely as representational, but as performative; it engages listeners in an experiential devotional act rather than a passive consumption of religious symbols. This aligns with what Stokes calls the “affective labor” of music in religious performance – where music shapes belief, feeling, and atmosphere.³⁰

When compared with existing scholarship in Islamic popular music, such as Rasmussen's ethnographic study of *nashid* culture³¹ or Frishkopf's exploration of Sufi sonic ecologies,³² this study diverges methodologically by offering a formal, sign-based analysis rather than relying primarily on ethnographic testimony or audience interpretation. While those studies illuminate how Muslim communities engage with Islamic music culturally, this research foregrounds how meaning is structurally constructed and delivered through multimodal strategies in the digital age. This semiotic focus provides a critical complement to thematic analyses, helping to bridge the gap between form and content, medium and message.

Furthermore, the immersive quality of *Qolbi fil Madīnah* is best understood through the lens of sonic atmosphere. As Eisenlohr emphasizes,³³ contemporary Muslim devotional practices often rely on voice and ambient sound to cultivate a sensory field in which piety can be felt rather than merely articulated. The song's slow tempo, soft vocal timbre, and spacious production construct an emotional landscape conducive to introspection and reverence. This illustrates how mediated soundscapes can facilitate affective religiosity among digital-age

²⁹ Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors, *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*.

³⁰ Martin. Stokes, *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2010).

³¹ A. Rasmussen, “The Sound of Islam: Music in the Muslim World,” in *The Cambridge Companion to: Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 293–311, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521780582>.

³² M. Frishkopf, “Mediated Qur’anic Recitation and the Contestation of Islam in Contemporary Egypt,” in *Music and the Play of Power in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia*, ed. John Morgan O’Connell (University of Illinois Press, 2010), 75–114, <https://doi.org/10.5406/ETHNOMUSICOLOGY.54.2.0347>.

³³ Patrick Eisenlohr, “Sounding Islam: Voice, Media, and Sonic Atmospheres in an Indian Ocean World,” *Sounding Islam: Voice, Media, and Sonic Atmospheres in an Indian Ocean World*, January 1, 2018, 1–175, <https://doi.org/10.17132/2377-231x.1199>.

Muslims, particularly in non-ritual contexts where music becomes a continuous spiritual presence.

In terms of its multimodal composition, the song reflects what Tagg defines as “interdependent symbolic systems,” where musical structure, lyrical text, and visuals are tightly woven to generate coherent meaning.³⁴ Chion’s concept of audio-vision is instrumental here: the experience of the video clip is not simply an addition of sound and image, but a fusion that creates a new semantic unit.³⁵ The soft lighting, contemplative facial expressions, and slow-motion footage of Madinah’s sacred spaces synchronize with the musical tone to construct a spiritually immersive virtual pilgrimage. These frameworks underscore the layered construction of religious meaning and show how devotional affect is encoded in lyrics or melody and in the totality of the sensory message.

The novelty of this study lies in its repositioning of Islamic popular music not just as a site of cultural production, but as a domain of mediated spirituality that demands close textual scrutiny. It proposes that contemporary Muslim religiosity, especially among younger generations, is increasingly shaped by multisensory symbolization facilitated by global media. In this light, *Qolbi fil Madīnah* does not simply reflect religious sentiment; it actively mediates and constructs it. By decoding this process through Hjelmslevian semiotics, the study opens up new pathways for analyzing religious meaning-making within Islamic media, marking a theoretical expansion in Islamic media studies.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the song *Qolbi fil Madīnah* constructs a layered spiritual narrative through the interplay of lyrics, melody, and visual elements. Using Hjelmslev's three-dimensional semiotic model, the research reveals how each mode—musical, lyrics, and visual—functions as a sign system that expresses a deeply affective and symbolic devotional experience. The melody evokes emotional transformation, the lyrics embed sacred meaning through ritualistic repetition, and the video clip visualizes the spiritual journey through symbolic imagery of the holy city and diverse Muslim identities. These elements construct a mediated form of religious engagement that resonates with contemporary audiences.

These findings reinforce the argument that Islamic popular music, when analyzed structurally, reveals more than cultural representation, because it reveals a systematic spiritual architecture. Applying Hjelmslev's semiotic framework in this context offers a novel contribution to the study of Islamic media by moving beyond ethnographic accounts toward formalist interpretation. Furthermore, this

³⁴ Philip. Tagg, “Music’s Meanings : A Modern Musicology for Non-Musos,” 2012, 692.

³⁵ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (Columbia University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.7312/CHIO18588>.

research underscores the potential of Islamic music as a meaningful medium of da'wah, not just emotionally but also semiotically, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how religious meaning is encoded and circulated in globalized Muslim culture.

However, this study also has its limitations. It focuses solely on one case study and primarily engages in textual and semiotic analysis without direct audience reception data or production-side interviews. Future research could explore how different audiences across regions interpret the spiritual narrative of the song, or how artists conceptualize their religious messages during the creative process. It would also be valuable to examine how other songs or visual media follow similar semiotic patterns in constructing religious experiences. By expanding both the corpus and methodological scope, future studies can deepen our understanding of mediated devotion in the age of digital Islamic culture.

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