



Digital Piety among Generation Z: Representing Religious Identity through Instagram Visual Communication

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Abstract:

Social media has emerged as a significant digital space where Generation Z constructs, expresses, and negotiates religious identity through visual and audiovisual practices. The growing presence of religious content on Instagram highlights the need to understand how digital platforms shape contemporary forms of piety beyond traditional religious spaces. This study examines the construction of Generation Z piety in Instagram religious content using John Fiske's semiotic framework. Employing a qualitative descriptive case study approach, this research analyzed four Instagram Reels uploaded by @naisaalifiayuriza through observation, content analysis, and interviews with selected viewers. The findings reveal three interconnected patterns of digital piety construction: modest appearance and embodied expressions of religiosity, direct visual communication of religious messages, and religious self-reflection as a form of digital piety. The analysis shows that clothing, facial expressions, gestures, camera framing, narration, subtitles, Arabic script, and reflective messages collectively construct meaning at the levels of reality, representation, and ideology. This study contributes to a multilayered understanding of digital piety as an embodied, communicative, and reflective practice. The implications suggest that contemporary digital da'wah should integrate authentic visual representation with meaningful religious reflection to engage younger audiences effectively.

INTRODUCTION

Communication technology and social media have transformed how religious identity is expressed, interpreted, and recognized in contemporary society. Instagram, particularly, provides a visual environment where photographs, Reels, captions, clothing, and interactions communicate religious values beyond conventional preaching (Arim et al., 2024; Duraes et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024). This development matters because digital representations increasingly shape public perceptions of morality, Muslim identity, and acceptable expressions of piety. Generation Z, whose everyday experiences are closely connected to digital platforms, encounters religion through aesthetic and interactive content (Tanti et al., 2025; Yasin et al., 2024; Christina & Indra, 2025; Maulia et al., 2026). Consequently, religious communication is no longer limited to doctrinal messages but also involves visual performances. Understanding this transformation is essential for examining how contemporary society recognizes religious commitment through digital representations.

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The growing visibility of Islamic content on Instagram raises a social problem: religious devotion becomes associated with appearance, lifestyle, and public performance. Although clothing, gestures, expressions, and religious messages can communicate Islamic values, these visible signs do not necessarily represent the complexity of individual religiosity (Badria et al., 2024; Putri et al., 2025). Digital platforms encourage rapid consumption, aesthetic preferences, and recognizable identity markers, potentially reducing piety to attractive representations (Bashori et al., 2026; Ninoersy et al., 2025; Abdullah, 2025; Wadi et al., 2023). For Generation Z, religious messages frequently appear through short videos, photographs, quotations, and lifestyle narratives rather than extended theological discussions. Consequently, audiences may evaluate Muslim identity through visual expectations. This phenomenon raises concerns about authenticity, symbolic representation, and the social construction of ideal Muslim youth.

Previous studies have established important connections between social media, digital da'wah, religious learning, and identity formation. Rodríguez et al. (2021) and Shih et al. (2022) demonstrate the significance of mediated religious communication, while Boffone (2021) and Selkie et al. (2020) highlight social media's role in disseminating Islamic knowledge. Asrori et al. (2025) further discuss digital identity construction among younger generations. Meanwhile, Dwi et al. (2025) and Evolvi (2022) examine relationships between digital environments and religious identity. Nevertheless, these studies predominantly emphasize communication practices, audience engagement, or identity formation. Limited attention has been given to interpreting how visual and verbal signs construct recognizable meanings of piety.

Addressing this limitation requires moving beyond descriptions of digital da'wah toward a critical examination of how religious meanings are aesthetically produced. This study examines Instagram content as a representation of Muslim youth identity, where *syar'i* clothing, facial expressions, activities, captions, and visual arrangements communicate interconnected meanings. Unlike studies that emphasize message dissemination or engagement, this research uses a semiotic framework to examine reality, representation, and ideology (Alazzam et al., 2025; Zohaib et al., 2025). Its state-of-the-art lies in connecting visual aesthetics with the ideological construction of Generation Z piety. This approach matters because it shows how digital religious representations negotiate Islamic values, contemporary youth culture, and socially recognizable ideals of Muslim identity.

Based on these considerations, this study addresses two interconnected research questions: How is Generation Z piety represented through the visual and verbal signs in Naisa Alifia Yuriza's Instagram content? What ideological meanings do these representations of contemporary Muslim youth identity construct? These questions arise from the need to understand religious representation beyond identifying Islamic symbols or measuring digital engagement. By examining clothing, appearance, behavior, settings, captions, and visual techniques, the research investigates how individual signs acquire broader cultural meanings. The questions also position Instagram as a communicative space where religious identity is continuously interpreted, negotiated, and circulated among digitally connected audiences within contemporary society.

This study argues that Generation Z piety on Instagram is constructed through an aesthetic negotiation between Islamic values and contemporary youth culture. Using John Fiske's semiotic framework, it argues that clothing, behavior, visual composition, and captions function beyond decoration by communicating socially recognizable ideals of Muslim identity. Its originality lies in explaining how these signs interact across reality,

representation, and ideology to produce an image of modern, positive, and socially acceptable piety. The study contributes to digital communication, Islamic studies, and semiotic scholarship by demonstrating how religious devotion becomes visually meaningful within platform culture. It also encourages critical media literacy and more nuanced understandings of religiosity beyond appearances in contemporary digital environments.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a qualitative descriptive case study design, drawing on John Fiske's semiotic theory as its primary analytical framework (Kohn et al., 2024). A qualitative approach was selected because the research investigates meanings, symbols, and representations of religious piety rather than measuring numerical relationships. Qualitative inquiry enables researchers to interpret social phenomena within their cultural and communicative contexts. The case study design was appropriate because the investigation focused on a bounded digital phenomenon: the representation of Generation Z piety within the Instagram account @naisaalifiayuriza. This design facilitated an intensive examination of visual and verbal religious expressions. Fiske's framework guided interpretation through the levels of reality, representation, and ideology.

The research was conducted on the Instagram account @naisaalifiayuriza, selected purposively because its content presents Islamic values, religious practices, modest fashion, motivational messages, and digital da'wah relevant to Generation Z. The account provided a bounded digital setting for examining the construction of Muslim identity through visual communication. The primary research materials consisted of five Instagram posts uploaded between November 2025 and April 2026, selected according to their relevance to religious representation. The study involved no human informants because its analytical object was publicly accessible digital content rather than participants' experiences. Accordingly, the five selected posts served as purposively selected units of analysis, not respondents or informants.

Data were collected through non-participant digital observation, documentation, and literature review (Kekeya, 2023). Non-participant observation involved systematically examining the selected Instagram posts without interacting with the account owner or influencing audience activities. Attention focused on clothing, physical appearance, facial expressions, gestures, settings, visual composition, captions, and religious messages. Documentation involved preserving screenshots of the five selected posts, accompanying captions, publication dates, and relevant visual elements as an organized research corpus. The literature review provided theoretical foundations for interpreting digital religiosity, visual communication, and John Fiske's semiotic framework. These techniques complemented one another: observation identified relevant signs, documentation maintained traceable empirical materials, and literature supported contextual interpretation throughout the analytical process.

Data analysis followed an interactive process of data condensation, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing with verification (Cole, 2024). Data condensation involved organizing the collected materials by research question and identifying relevant visual and verbal signs. Data reduction subsequently excluded repetitive or unrelated elements while retaining meaningful evidence from the five selected posts. Data display presented the findings through descriptive narratives and analytical tables connecting signs with their interpretations. The study examined each

The study addressed data validity through source triangulation, theoretical consistency, and systematic verification of interpretations (Lee et al., 2024; Sarfo et al., 2021). Source triangulation involved comparing visual elements, captions, publication information, and contextual details within each selected Instagram post to establish consistency between the observed signs and their interpretations. The authors maintained theoretical consistency by applying John Fiske's three semiotic levels systematically across all analytical materials. The authors also reviewed interpretations against relevant scholarly literature to avoid unsupported assumptions and distinguish observable evidence from analytical inference. The audit trail included documentation of selected posts, categorization procedures, and interpretive decisions. Finally, the authors verified conclusions by revisiting the original materials and research questions, ensuring the findings remained grounded, coherent, and methodologically defensible.

expression. She raises her hand near her chest as she speaks, creating a natural conversational gesture. The background shows a simple indoor environment with limited visual elements. The subject occupies most of the frame, making her appearance, facial expression, and gesture the dominant observable signs. Text also appears over the video, presenting a religious reminder about human mistakes and the importance of Allah. Observable signs include modest dress, direct communication, a calm expression, and religious behavior. Figure 2 shows Naisa Alifia Yuriza wearing a brown hijab and modest clothing, holding a printed religious text, and speaking to the camera.



Figure 2. Naisa Alifia Yuriza presenting religious content.

Figure 2 presents the subject wearing a brown hijab and modest clothing in an indoor setting. She holds a printed text in front of the camera while maintaining eye contact with the audience. Her facial expression appears calm and focused, and her hand position suggests she is presenting or explaining the written material. The printed material contains religious text, adding another visible element to the video. The setting remains simple, with the subject and the text as the primary visual focus. Observable signs include modest appearance, direct interaction, a calm facial expression, and the physical presentation of religious material. Figure 3 shows Naisa Alifia Yuriza wearing a black hijab and black clothing while presenting a religious message about giving something up for the sake of Allah.



Figure 3. Religious reminder about sacrifice for Allah.

In Figure 3, the subject appears in a black hijab and black clothing while speaking directly to the camera. She holds an object near her chest and uses hand gestures as she speaks. Her facial expression remains composed, and the video is recorded in a simple indoor environment. The text displayed in the video contains a religious message about

being willing to give something up for Allah. The Instagram caption also contains a longer religious explanation and Arabic text. The observable signs combine modest Muslim appearance, direct communication, hand gestures, and religious textual content. Figure 4 shows Naisa Alifia Yuriza wearing a brown hijab and modest clothing while presenting a religious reminder about maintaining faith and evaluating one's actions.



Figure 4. Religious reminder about faith and self-reflection.

Figure 4 shows the subject wearing a brown hijab and modest clothing indoors. She faces the camera with a composed expression and gestures as she delivers the message. The Instagram caption presents several numbered points, including questions about whether an action is done for Allah, whether Allah is sincerely worshipped, and whether one maintains one's faith. Arabic text also appears within the video. The observable elements include modest clothing, direct eye contact, controlled gestures, a simple background, and religious written content.

Direct Visual Communication of Religious Messages

Across the four Instagram Reels, religious messages are constructed through direct-to-camera presentation, close framing, simple backgrounds, spoken narration, on-screen text, captions, and visual gestures. These representational codes organize observable signs into accessible religious communication. Figure 1 uses close framing that emphasizes Naisa's face and upper body, while the eye-level camera and direct gaze establish visual proximity with viewers. A religious reminder appears as on-screen text and is reinforced through spoken narration and the Instagram caption. The combination of facial expression, framing, gaze, and written language transforms the observable signs into an intimate communicative format that encourages viewers to engage with the religious message.

Figure 2 employs a medium close-up composition that simultaneously presents Naisa and the printed religious material she holds. The eye-level camera and direct gaze maintain interpersonal engagement, while warm indoor lighting produces a soft visual atmosphere. The printed text functions as an additional representational code because the religious material becomes physically visible during communication. Spoken explanation and the accompanying Instagram caption further extend the message beyond the visual frame. Rather than relying on elaborate graphic effects, the Reel organizes simple visual and verbal elements into a focused presentation. Consequently, framing, lighting, direct communication, and material text work together to construct a recognizable form of digital religious communication.

Figure 3 combines close framing, direct presentation, hand gestures, spoken narration, subtitles, Arabic script, and an extended Instagram caption. The camera emphasizes Naisa's face and upper body, keeping her gestures and expressions visually prominent throughout the Reel. Indonesian and Arabic religious texts appear within the video, creating a layered relationship between spoken and written communication. The caption further elaborates the religious message through explanatory Arabic text. The relatively simple visual composition minimizes decorative elements and concentrates attention on the speaker and message. These representational codes organize religious information into a concise audiovisual format that integrates contemporary social-media conventions with recognizable Islamic textual expressions.

Figure 4 uses a close vertical composition that places Naisa's face and upper body at the center of the frame. Direct presentation and a relatively simple background keep attention on the speaker, while Arabic writing adds religious code. The Instagram caption organizes the message into numbered statements addressing intention, worship, faith, and personal conduct. This structure turns an extended religious reflection into a clear, accessible digital message. The combination of close framing, direct gaze, spoken communication, Arabic script, and numbered textual statements demonstrates how Instagram's visual and verbal conventions organize religious meanings. Representation therefore operates through coordinated audiovisual codes rather than isolated religious symbols.

Religious Self-Reflection as Digital Piety

This study operationally defines religious self-reflection as the representation of piety through messages that encourage individuals to examine their intentions, actions, faith, mistakes, and relationship with Allah. The selected Instagram Reels show that piety is represented not only through modest appearance and explicit religious symbols but also through recurring reflective messages. These messages address human mistakes, reliance on Allah, sacrifice, intention, worship, faith, and personal conduct. The observed content combines facial expressions, controlled gestures, direct eye contact, spoken narration, on-screen text, Arabic writing, subtitles, and captions to communicate these themes. Thus, digital piety is represented as an ongoing process of self-evaluation, moral awareness, spiritual responsibility, and renewed commitment to Allah.

The first Reel shows that the religious message about human mistakes and remembering Allah is accompanied by a composed facial expression, restrained gestures, direct eye contact, and modest clothing. The close framing places the speaker prominently within the visual field, while the written message reinforces the spoken reminder. These elements connect an observable religious appearance with a reflective message concerning human imperfection and spiritual awareness. The second Reel similarly pairs religious material with a calm, focused delivery. The subject holds a printed religious text while explaining its content directly to the camera. The combination of physical religious material, verbal explanation, and controlled presentation emphasizes religious reflection as an accessible form of everyday digital communication.

The third Reel presents a religious message about the willingness to give something up for Allah. The subject appears in modest clothing, maintains a composed expression, and uses restrained hand gestures while communicating directly with the camera. Subtitles, Arabic script, and the extended caption reinforce the message concerning sacrifice and religious commitment. The fourth Reel presents a more explicit structure of self-evaluation through statements concerning intention, worship, faith, and

personal conduct. The numbered points in the caption organize these reflections into accessible questions related to religious responsibility. Arabic writing within the video further strengthens the Islamic framing. Across both Reels, piety is therefore represented through conscious evaluation of priorities, intentions, and spiritual commitment rather than appearance alone.

Overall, the observations demonstrate a consistent relationship between visible religious signs and reflective Islamic messages across the four selected Reels. Modest clothing and composed expressions establish recognizable signs of Muslim identity. At the same time, direct eye contact, restrained gestures, close or medium-close framing, narration, subtitles, Arabic writing, and captions transform these signs into structured religious communication. The recurring emphasis on mistakes, sacrifice, intention, worship, faith, and self-evaluation frames piety as an ongoing process rather than a fixed state. Within Fiske's ideological level, these representations connect everyday behavior with values of *taqwa*, sincerity, responsibility, and spiritual discipline. The findings therefore indicate that Generation Z piety is constructed through the interaction of embodied appearance, digital communication, and continuous religious self-reflection.

Discussion

The finding on direct visual communication aligns with studies showing that contemporary digital da'wah increasingly uses concise, interactive, and visually accessible formats for younger audiences. The selected Reels demonstrate this pattern through direct-to-camera presentation, close framing, eye contact, subtitles, narration, captions, and Arabic writing. Unlike formal sermon-based communication, these representational codes create an intimate and conversational form of religious messaging (Kholili, 2023; Mohiuddin, 2023). This finding theoretically reinforces Fiske's representation level by demonstrating how technological and audiovisual codes transform observable signs into meaningful religious communication. Practically, Instagram da'wah can benefit from concise narratives and familiar visual formats. The findings also suggest that platform conventions do not merely distribute religious messages; they actively shape how those messages are structured and experienced.

The third finding, religious self-reflection as digital piety, differs from approaches that primarily associate online religiosity with visible religious identity or the dissemination of religious information (Alazzam et al., 2025; Khusairi, 2025). The selected content repeatedly emphasizes mistakes, intention, worship, sacrifice, faith, and personal accountability. This pattern suggests that piety is an ongoing process of evaluating and improving one's relationship with Allah. At Fiske's ideological level, these messages connect individual behavior with broader Islamic values of *taqwa*, sincerity, responsibility, and spiritual discipline. Basically, the finding strengthens the ideological dimension of semiotic analysis by demonstrating how everyday digital messages reproduce particular understandings of religious selfhood (Anisaturrizqi et al., 2025; Yakubu et al., 2025).

Taken together, the three findings demonstrate that Generation Z piety is constructed through the interaction of reality, representation, and ideology rather than through religious symbols alone. Modest appearance provides recognizable visual signs; direct visual communication organizes those signs through Instagram's audiovisual conventions; and self-reflective messages connect them with Islamic values (Albucker et al., 2023; Peng, 2021). This integrated pattern extends previous semiotic studies that often emphasize individual signs or specific representational elements. Theoretically, the

study demonstrates the continuing relevance of Fiske's framework for interpreting religious meaning in short-form social media. Practically, it suggests that digital da'wah should integrate visual coherence, accessible communication, and substantive religious reflection. Such integration can strengthen authenticity while preventing aesthetic presentation from overshadowing religious meaning (Hamka et al., 2025; Raya, 2024).

The state of the art of this study lies in explaining piety as a multilayered digital construction shaped simultaneously by embodiment, communication, and self-reflection. Previous literature has examined digital religion, youth religiosity, social-media identity, and online da'wah, but often addresses these dimensions separately. The present study connects them through Fiske's three semiotic levels, showing that Generation Z piety is not merely displayed or transmitted but continuously produced through coordinated signs and cultural meanings. Its main contribution is therefore a dynamic understanding of digital piety as an interaction between Islamic values and platform-specific communication practices. This perspective provides a basis for comparative research across religious creators, platforms, and forms of contemporary Islamic digital expression.

Beyond its contribution to digital piety studies, this finding highlights the importance of examining religious expression as a dynamic process shaped by the relationship between personal devotion and digital media affordances. The observed Reels show that Islamic values are not presented independently of platform conventions but are embedded within visual aesthetics, audiovisual storytelling, and reflective messaging. This relationship suggests that contemporary religious communication requires attention not only to what religious messages convey but also to how digital forms construct their meanings. Theoretically, this perspective broadens semiotic approaches to digital religion by positioning platform-mediated expression as part of the meaning-making process. Practically, it encourages religious educators and content creators to develop digital da'wah that balances aesthetic appeal, communicative accessibility, and theological substance. Future studies could further examine how these patterns vary across creators, platforms, religious traditions, and generational contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Generation Z piety on Instagram is constructed through modest appearance, direct visual communication, and religious self-reflection. Using Fiske's semiotic framework, the study demonstrates that piety is not merely displayed through Islamic symbols but produced through coordinated visual, audiovisual, and ideological meanings. The study contributes to digital religion and communication scholarship by explaining how contemporary Muslim identity is negotiated through platform-specific practices. The findings also have practical implications for digital religious communication, suggesting that content creators, educators, and religious institutions should consider visual strategies, narrative authenticity, and reflective engagement when presenting religious messages on social media platforms. Effective digital da'wah should not only emphasize symbolic representation but also encourage deeper understanding and meaningful interaction among young Muslim audiences. However, the study examines a limited set of Instagram content; future research should compare creators, platforms, audiences, and cultural contexts.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

Generative AI tools, including ChatGPT and Grammarly, were used solely as language assistance tools to improve grammar, clarity, and readability. The authors carefully reviewed, verified, and edited all AI-assisted outputs. The authors retain full responsibility and accountability for the content, interpretation, and conclusions presented in this manuscript.

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