



Constructing Religious Tolerance in Popular Digital Discourse: A Barthesian Semiotic Reading of Interfaith Representation in Indonesian YouTube Podcasts

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ABSTRAK

This study examines how religious tolerance is constructed and articulated within popular digital discourse through a semiotic analysis of interfaith representation in Indonesian YouTube podcasts. The purpose of this research is to explore the layers of meaning embedded in a widely circulated podcast episode featuring six religious leaders from different faith traditions who engage in public dialogue during a shared religious celebration. Grounded in a qualitative descriptive approach and informed by a constructivist paradigm, the study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to analyze denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings conveyed through visual symbols, verbal interactions, and narrative structures within the selected digital content. Data were collected through non-participant observation, transcription of audiovisual material, and document analysis, allowing for an in-depth interpretation of signs and symbols that shape the representation of interfaith relations. The findings reveal that, at the denotative level, religious tolerance is signified through the visible presence of diverse religious attributes and equal participation among faith representatives. At the connotative level, tolerance is constructed through dialogic exchanges characterized by mutual respect, openness, and acknowledgment of difference without antagonism. At the mythical level, these representations reproduce and reinforce the national ethos of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* as a unifying cultural narrative that frames religious diversity as a shared moral and social ideal. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to scholarship on religion and digital media by demonstrating how popular platforms function as sites of meaning production where religious identities and values are symbolically negotiated and normalized. By situating interfaith representation within the dynamics of popular digital discourse, this research offers insight into the role of media in shaping contemporary understandings of religious coexistence in multicultural societies.

Keywords : *Barthesian semiotics, digital discourse, interfaith representation, religious tolerance, YouTube podcasts*

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of popular digital media has significantly reshaped the ways religious meanings, identities, and interfaith relations are communicated in contemporary societies, particularly through widely accessible platforms such as YouTube. In recent scholarship on religion and media, digital spaces are increasingly understood not merely as channels of

dissemination but as arenas where religious values are symbolically produced and culturally negotiated (Ding et al., 2025; Haq & Kwok, 2024). This shift is especially relevant in plural societies, where religious tolerance must be continuously articulated and made socially intelligible across diverse audiences. Indonesia provides a compelling context for examining this phenomenon due to its high level of religious diversity and its long-standing cultural narrative of unity in difference. While tolerance has often been addressed through legal frameworks, educational programs, and institutional initiatives, popular media offer a distinct space where tolerance is displayed, performed, and normalized through everyday discourse (Krzyżanowski & Ekström, 2022). YouTube podcasts, in particular, have emerged as influential cultural texts that blend informal dialogue with mass circulation. These formats allow religious leaders to engage the public beyond formal institutional boundaries, reaching audiences who may not otherwise encounter interfaith dialogue. As a result, podcasts function as meaningful sites for examining how religious tolerance is constructed within popular digital discourse.

Despite the growing body of research on digital religion, much of the existing literature prioritizes normative evaluations of tolerance or focuses on attitudinal measurement through surveys and policy analysis (Güleç, 2026; Indelicato & Martín, 2025). Such approaches often treat tolerance as a predefined value to be promoted, rather than as a meaning that is socially constructed through representation. Other studies emphasize conflict, online hostility, or radicalization, particularly in relation to religious minorities in digital spaces (Govers et al., 2023). While these perspectives are important, they risk obscuring how digital media also facilitate narratives of harmony and mutual recognition. In the Indonesian context, interfaith relations are frequently framed through the cultural ideology of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which positions diversity as a foundational social principle rather than a problem to be resolved. Popular digital content that visually and narratively stages interfaith interaction thus plays a crucial role in reproducing this ideology. Podcasts featuring religious leaders from multiple faith traditions offer a unique lens for examining how tolerance is enacted as a public and mediated practice. Understanding these representations is essential for capturing how religious coexistence is culturally sustained in the digital era.

The rationale of this study lies in the need to move beyond institutional and normative approaches to religious tolerance by examining how tolerance is symbolically constructed within popular digital media. Existing studies on religious moderation in Indonesia have largely focused on formal education, policy-driven programs, or organizational initiatives (Zaluchu et al., 2025). While these studies provide valuable insights, they tend to overlook how tolerance is communicated through informal and entertainment-oriented media formats. Popular YouTube podcasts operate within the logic of popular culture, where meaning must be accessible, relatable, and emotionally resonant. Analyzing such content requires an approach that can unpack layers of meaning embedded in signs, narratives, and visual symbols. Barthesian semiotics offers a suitable framework for this purpose, as it allows researchers to examine denotative meanings, connotative associations, and the broader cultural myths that naturalize social values (Chen & Hur, 2025). By applying this framework, the study foregrounds the processes through which religious tolerance becomes culturally legible and taken for granted. This approach positions tolerance not as a moral prescription but as a mediated cultural construct. Consequently, the study contributes to religion and media

scholarship by highlighting the symbolic dimensions of interfaith representation in popular discourse.

A growing number of Scopus-indexed studies have examined religion and tolerance within digital and social contexts, though with varying analytical emphases. Muzayanah et al., (2025) investigate how digital spaces are utilized to strengthen religious moderation narratives among younger generations in Indonesia. Hermawan et al., (2025) focus on enhancing religious literacy in higher education as a means of promoting tolerance, emphasizing pedagogical design rather than media representation. Piper et al., (2025) adopt a quantitative perspective to analyze determinants of tolerance among university students, prioritizing attitudinal variables over symbolic meaning. Yunus et al., (2025) explore tolerance within specific socio-political contexts, particularly examining the role of religious authority in communal responses. Cesari, (2025) situates discussions of religious freedom and tolerance within global debates on recognition and resistance. Although these studies contribute important insights, they largely conceptualize tolerance as a social outcome or institutional objective. The representational processes through which tolerance is constructed in popular media remain relatively underexplored. This suggests the need for analytical approaches that attend to meaning-making rather than solely to policy or attitudes.

Other strands of scholarship have examined digital religion as a site of activism, moderation, and identity formation. Mahzumi et al., (2025) analyze cyber-based Islamic moderation through digital activism, highlighting ideological positioning and audience engagement. Nurhayati et al., (2025) explore the integration of digital citizenship and religious moderation in open and distance education, focusing on character development frameworks. In contrast, Nadeem & Ali, (2025) examine online hostility toward religious minorities, emphasizing exclusionary dynamics in digital news spaces. While these studies demonstrate the ambivalent role of digital media in shaping religious discourse, they tend to privilege textual or ideological content over symbolic form. Moreover, research on popular media formats such as podcasts remains limited despite their growing influence in shaping public discourse. Few studies explicitly employ Barthesian semiotics to analyze interfaith representation in digital contexts. As a result, the myth-making processes through which tolerance is normalized in popular discourse remain insufficiently theorized. Addressing this gap requires a focused examination of signs, symbols, and narratives embedded in widely consumed digital media.

The reviewed literature reveals a clear gap in understanding how religious tolerance is symbolically constructed within popular digital discourse rather than institutional or educational settings. While tolerance has been widely examined as a policy concern, moral value, or educational objective, its semiotic production in everyday media consumption has received limited scholarly attention. Existing research on digital religion often prioritizes conflict, activism, or formal moderation initiatives, leaving harmonious interfaith representation underexplored. Furthermore, studies that engage with digital media rarely focus on entertainment-oriented formats such as podcasts, which operate according to distinct cultural logics. The lack of semiotic analyses grounded in Barthesian theory further limits understanding of how tolerance becomes naturalized as a cultural myth. In the Indonesian context, this gap is particularly significant given the central role of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* in framing religious diversity. Without examining how this ideology is reproduced in popular media, analyses of

tolerance risk remaining abstract. This study addresses these limitations by foregrounding symbolic meaning-making in popular digital discourse.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how religious tolerance is constructed through interfaith representation in popular Indonesian YouTube podcasts using a Barthesian semiotic framework. The study seeks to identify denotative meanings, connotative associations, and mythological narratives embedded in visual symbols, verbal interactions, and narrative structures. It aims to understand how interfaith dialogue is framed as a cultural performance rather than a doctrinal debate. The research also examines how national ideological narratives are reproduced and normalized through popular digital discourse. Rather than testing causal relationships, the study adopts an interpretive approach to explore meaning-making processes. By situating religious representation within the logic of popular media, the study contributes to broader discussions on religion and digital culture. The findings are expected to advance theoretical understanding of religious tolerance as a mediated cultural construct. Ultimately, the study offers insights into how popular media shape contemporary understandings of interreligious coexistence.

METODE

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design grounded in an interpretive paradigm to examine the symbolic construction of religious tolerance in popular digital discourse. Qualitative design was chosen because the study aims to explore meaning-making processes rather than measure variables or test causal relationships, as emphasized in interpretive media and religion studies (Matos et al., 2024). The research was specifically informed by Barthesian semiotics, which enables systematic analysis of signs across denotative, connotative, and mythological levels (Uso Domenech et al., 2024). The selected design allows digital media texts to be treated as cultural artifacts that produce social meaning through representation. Rather than focusing on audience reception or institutional intent, the study concentrates on the mediated content itself as a site of symbolic production. The unit of analysis was a publicly accessible YouTube podcast episode featuring interfaith dialogue among religious leaders. This approach aligns with scholarship that positions digital media as active agents in shaping religious discourse (Rohid et al., 2025). By integrating semiotic analysis within a qualitative framework, the research design supports an in-depth examination of how religious tolerance is culturally constructed in popular media formats.

Participant

The participants in this study were six religious leaders representing different faith traditions who appeared as speakers in the selected YouTube podcast episode. These individuals were not recruited directly by the researcher but were already present as public figures participating in an interfaith discussion broadcast through a popular digital platform. In qualitative media research, such participants are understood as symbolic actors whose representations carry cultural meaning beyond individual intent (Yeasmin et al., 2024). The selection of this podcast episode was based on purposive sampling, emphasizing its explicit interfaith composition and wide public accessibility. Each participant was treated analytically

not as a subject of evaluation but as a representational figure within a mediated narrative. Their verbal statements, visual attributes, and interactional positioning were analyzed as semiotic signs rather than personal testimonies. This approach avoids biographical interpretation and focuses instead on the discursive construction of tolerance. By situating participants within the logic of media representation, the study remains consistent with ethical standards for analyzing publicly available digital content (Gliniecka, 2023; Zimmermann et al., 2022).

Instrument

The primary research instrument was the researcher as the main analytical interpreter, consistent with qualitative and semiotic research traditions where meaning is derived through systematic reading of texts (Carradini et al., 2025). Supporting instruments included a structured observation guide developed to capture visual symbols, verbal expressions, and narrative sequences within the podcast episode. The audiovisual content was transcribed verbatim to enable close textual analysis, while screenshots were used to document significant visual signs such as religious attire, gestures, and spatial arrangements. These materials functioned as analytical artifacts rather than measurement tools. The semiotic framework guided the identification of denotative elements, connotative associations, and mythological narratives embedded in the content. To enhance analytical rigor, the observation guide was aligned with established semiotic categories drawn from Barthesian theory. This instrument structure ensured consistency across different segments of the podcast. The use of multiple data forms supports methodological triangulation in qualitative media analysis (Schlunegger et al., 2024).

Table 1. Semiotic Analytical Framework Applied in the Study

Analytical Level	Focus of Analysis	Example Indicators
Denotation	Literal meaning	Religious symbols, verbal references
Connotation	Cultural associations	Tone of dialogue, gestures
Myth	Ideological narrative	Unity in diversity, national harmony

Table 1 illustrates the analytical structure used to systematically interpret the podcast content across three levels of meaning. This framework ensured that analysis moved beyond surface description toward deeper cultural interpretation.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis followed a multi-stage semiotic procedure grounded in Barthesian theory to ensure analytical depth and transparency. First, the podcast episode was repeatedly viewed to identify salient visual and verbal signs relevant to interfaith representation. At this stage, denotative meanings were documented through descriptive coding of observable elements. Second, connotative analysis was conducted by interpreting how these signs conveyed cultural values such as mutual respect and openness, drawing on shared social codes (Li et al., 2023). Third, mythological analysis examined how representations of tolerance were naturalized through broader ideological narratives, particularly the cultural ethos of unity in diversity. Throughout the process, analytical memos were used to document interpretive decisions and reflexive considerations. Data segments were continuously compared to maintain internal consistency and thematic coherence. This iterative process reflects best practices in qualitative discourse analysis (Ankeny & Leonelli, 2024). By structuring analysis across these stages, the

study provides a rigorous account of how religious tolerance is semiotically constructed in popular digital discourse.

RESULT AND DISCUSION

Results

The analysis at the denotative level reveals that religious tolerance is first constructed through the visible co-presence of religious leaders representing different faith traditions within a shared media space. Observable signs include distinct religious attire, symbolic accessories, and verbal references that explicitly identify each participant's religious background. These signs function to mark difference without hierarchy, as no single religious symbol dominates the visual frame. The spatial arrangement of participants further reinforces equality, as seating positions and camera angles distribute visual attention evenly. Verbal interactions at this level are characterized by neutral greetings and reciprocal acknowledgment of religious diversity. Such denotative elements establish tolerance as a factual condition of coexistence rather than an abstract ideal. The podcast format allows these signs to be presented in a relaxed and conversational tone, reducing the formality typically associated with interfaith dialogue. As a result, tolerance is initially framed as an ordinary and observable social reality within popular digital discourse.

At the connotative level, religious tolerance is constructed through patterns of interaction that communicate mutual respect, openness, and symbolic recognition. Linguistic choices such as inclusive pronouns, affirming responses, and humor signal an affective dimension of tolerance that extends beyond mere acknowledgment of difference. Gestures, facial expressions, and turn-taking practices reinforce a sense of dialogic balance, suggesting an ethic of listening rather than debate. These connotations align tolerance with civility and emotional restraint, framing interfaith engagement as cooperative rather than confrontational. Visual editing techniques, including reaction shots and sustained camera focus during sensitive moments, further amplify this interpretation. The absence of interruptive speech or polemical language contributes to a narrative of harmony and shared moral ground. Through these semiotic cues, tolerance is associated with everyday communicative competence rather than theological consensus. Consequently, the podcast constructs tolerance as a socially desirable mode of interaction embedded in popular culture.

At the mythological level, the representation of religious tolerance is linked to broader cultural narratives that naturalize diversity as a defining characteristic of national identity. The repeated visual and verbal emphasis on unity amid difference resonates with the ideological myth of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which frames plurality as an inherent social virtue. This myth operates by presenting interfaith harmony as self-evident and culturally authentic rather than politically constructed. The podcast's narrative structure positions religious leaders as moral exemplars who embody this ideal through symbolic performance. By embedding tolerance within familiar cultural references, the content transforms ideological values into common sense. The mythological dimension thus masks the complexity of interreligious relations by rendering harmony as natural and unproblematic. This process aligns tolerance with collective identity rather than individual belief systems. As a result, the podcast reinforces tolerance as a shared cultural myth sustained through popular digital discourse.

Table 2. Summary of Semiotic Findings on Religious Tolerance

Semiotic Level	Dominant Signs	Constructed Meaning
Denotation	Religious attire, equal seating, greetings	Coexistence without hierarchy
Connotation	Inclusive language, respectful gestures	Mutual respect and dialogic openness
Myth	Unity narratives, national symbolism	Tolerance as naturalized cultural ideology

Table 2 summarizes how religious tolerance is constructed across three levels of meaning. The table demonstrates a progression from observable signs to deeper ideological narratives, reinforcing tolerance as both a social practice and a cultural myth.



Figure 1. Semiotic Construction of Religious Tolerance in Popular Digital Discourse

Figure 1 illustrates a layered semiotic process beginning with observable interfaith symbols at the denotative level, moving through interactional meanings at the connotative level, and culminating in the mythological framing of tolerance as a national cultural ideal. The diagram emphasizes how popular digital discourse integrates visual, verbal, and narrative elements to transform tolerance from a social interaction into a naturalized ideology. This visual representation clarifies the analytical logic underlying the findings and demonstrates the coherence of the semiotic framework applied in the study.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that religious tolerance in popular digital media is not merely communicated but actively constructed through semiotic processes that operate across multiple levels of meaning. Consistent with Barthes’ theory of myth, the podcast transforms culturally specific values into taken-for-granted truths that appear natural and universally acceptable (Donison, 2024). This aligns with broader scholarship on media representation, which emphasizes the role of popular media in shaping social norms through symbolic repetition rather than explicit instruction (Megantari et al., 2025). Unlike studies that frame tolerance as a policy outcome or educational objective, the present findings highlight tolerance as a performative and mediated practice. The emphasis on harmony and mutual respect reflects patterns identified in research on digital religious moderation in Indonesia (Muzayanah et al., 2025). However, the semiotic approach reveals how these values are embedded in everyday communicative acts rather than formal discourse. By focusing on representation, the study extends existing understandings of tolerance beyond institutional frameworks. This contribution situates popular media as a central arena for the cultural production of religious coexistence.

The denotative and connotative findings resonate with previous studies that emphasize the importance of visibility and interaction in promoting interfaith understanding. Research on religious literacy and moderation has shown that exposure to diverse religious actors can foster

inclusive attitudes, particularly when framed positively (Alhouti et al., 2025). However, the present study adds a representational dimension by demonstrating how equality and respect are visually encoded through media design choices. Unlike quantitative studies that measure tolerance as an attitudinal variable (Piper et al., 2025), this analysis reveals how tolerance is communicated symbolically before it is cognitively processed. The use of inclusive language and balanced interaction echoes findings on dialogic ethics in digital religious engagement (Mahzumi et al., 2025). At the same time, the absence of conflict suggests a selective framing that prioritizes harmony over tension. This framing aligns with cultural expectations of civility in Indonesian public discourse. As such, the findings contribute to debates on how media aesthetics shape moral interpretation.

At the mythological level, the study demonstrates how national ideology operates as a powerful semiotic resource in the construction of religious tolerance. The invocation of unity narratives reflects patterns identified in studies of religion and national identity, where diversity is often framed as a moral asset (Cesari, 2025). By embedding interfaith dialogue within familiar cultural myths, the podcast renders tolerance as an unquestioned social norm. This process parallels observations in development and peace studies that highlight the role of narrative in sustaining social cohesion (Adan, 2025). However, the naturalization of tolerance also risks obscuring underlying power relations and structural inequalities. Studies on online hostility remind us that harmonious representations coexist with exclusionary practices in other digital spaces (Nadeem and Ali, 2025). The present findings therefore suggest that popular media representations offer an idealized version of interfaith relations. This idealization functions less as a reflection of social reality than as a normative cultural aspiration. Understanding this distinction is crucial for interpreting the social impact of such media content.

The use of Barthesian semiotics enables a deeper engagement with the symbolic mechanisms through which tolerance is made meaningful. Previous research on digital religion often emphasizes content or ideology without fully addressing the semiotic form through which meaning is conveyed (Hurley & Elyas, 2024). By contrast, this study foregrounds how signs, gestures, and narrative structures operate together to produce cultural meaning. The findings support arguments in media studies that popular formats such as podcasts play a significant role in shaping public discourse precisely because of their informality and accessibility (Nee & Santana, 2022). This insight extends research on religious moderation by situating tolerance within the logic of popular culture rather than institutional messaging. The study also complements work on digital citizenship by highlighting symbolic representation as a form of civic education (Nurhayati et al., 2025). Through this lens, tolerance emerges as a mediated practice learned through observation rather than instruction. Such an approach broadens theoretical conversations across religion, media, and cultural sociology.

Taken together, the findings suggest that popular digital discourse functions as a site where religious tolerance is both normalized and idealized. While this aligns with research emphasizing the positive potential of digital media in promoting social cohesion (Yunus et al., 2025), it also raises questions about the limits of representational harmony. The absence of disagreement or contestation may simplify complex interfaith dynamics. Nonetheless, the study demonstrates that symbolic representations play a crucial role in shaping collective imagination. By framing tolerance as culturally authentic and emotionally resonant, popular

media contribute to its social legitimacy. This insight complements global discussions on religion and public life, where mediated representations increasingly influence social attitudes (Cesari, 2025). The study therefore underscores the need to analyze not only what is said about tolerance but how it is symbolically constructed. Such analysis provides a nuanced understanding of religion in contemporary digital societies. In this way, the research advances interdisciplinary dialogue across religious studies and media scholarship.

Implications

The findings have important implications for scholarship on religion, media, and social cohesion. The study demonstrates that popular digital formats such as podcasts play a significant role in shaping public understandings of religious tolerance. This suggests that media analysis should be integrated more fully into research on interfaith relations. For practitioners, the findings highlight the potential of popular media to model respectful interfaith interaction without relying on formal instruction. Policymakers and educators may draw on these insights to design communication strategies that resonate with broader audiences. The study also contributes theoretically by reframing tolerance as a mediated cultural construct rather than a static moral value. This perspective encourages interdisciplinary engagement between religious studies and media studies. Moreover, the findings underscore the importance of symbolic representation in sustaining pluralistic ideals. As such, the study aligns with the focus and scope of journals concerned with religion and social dynamics.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The analysis focuses on a single podcast episode, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The study does not examine audience reception, leaving questions about interpretive variability unanswered. Additionally, the emphasis on harmonious representation may not capture the full spectrum of interfaith discourse in digital media. The qualitative and interpretive nature of semiotic analysis involves a degree of subjectivity. While methodological rigor was maintained, alternative readings of the same signs are possible. The study also concentrates on Indonesian cultural context, which may differ from other plural societies. Future research could address these limitations through comparative analysis. Acknowledging these constraints strengthens the credibility of the findings.

Suggestions

Future research should expand the scope of analysis to include multiple podcast episodes or platforms to enhance comparative insight. Studies could also incorporate audience reception analysis to examine how representations of tolerance are interpreted by different groups. Comparative research across national contexts would deepen understanding of cultural specificity in interfaith representation. Methodologically, combining semiotic analysis with discourse or narrative analysis could provide richer insights. Researchers might also explore representations of conflict to balance the focus on harmony. Longitudinal studies could examine how representations of tolerance evolve over time. Such approaches would strengthen the empirical basis of digital religion research. Ultimately, continued exploration of popular media is essential for understanding contemporary interreligious dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that religious tolerance in popular digital media is not merely articulated through explicit messages but is semiotically constructed through layered processes of representation. By applying Barthesian semiotics to interfaith representation in Indonesian YouTube podcasts, the research shows how tolerance emerges from the interaction of denotative signs, connotative meanings, and mythological narratives. At the denotative level, tolerance is framed through the visible co-presence and equal positioning of religious actors within a shared media space. At the connotative level, communicative practices such as inclusive language, respectful gestures, and dialogic balance associate tolerance with civility and moral competence. At the mythological level, these representations naturalize tolerance as an inherent cultural value aligned with broader narratives of unity in diversity. This layered construction transforms tolerance from a normative ideal into a culturally intelligible and emotionally resonant social reality.

The findings advance scholarship on religion and media by reframing religious tolerance as a mediated cultural construct rather than a static ethical principle or policy objective. By situating popular digital discourse as a site of symbolic production, the study extends existing research that has largely focused on institutional, educational, or conflict-driven perspectives. The use of popular podcast formats highlights the role of everyday media consumption in shaping public understanding of interfaith relations. This approach underscores the analytical value of semiotics for uncovering ideological processes that operate beneath seemingly harmonious representations. While the study is contextually grounded in Indonesia, its conceptual implications are relevant for plural societies where media increasingly mediate religious coexistence. Overall, the research contributes a nuanced framework for analyzing how tolerance is culturally produced and normalized in contemporary digital environments.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Diva Raisa Zananda conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, and conducted the semiotic analysis of the digital media content. She was responsible for data interpretation, drafting the original manuscript, and integrating theoretical perspectives related to Barthesian semiotics and religious representation. Ade Masturi contributed to the refinement of the research design, supported data analysis, and provided critical revisions to strengthen the analytical depth and conceptual clarity of the manuscript. He also contributed to the literature synthesis and ensured coherence between the theoretical framework, findings, and discussion. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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