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Digital Responses to Qur'an Burning

Muslim Discourses and Collective Solidarity in English- and Indonesian-Language YouTube Publics

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Abstract:

This research examines digital responses to contemporary Qur'an-burning controversies and how the perceived sacredness of the Qur'an shapes collective identity and solidarity in digital spaces. It combines digital ethnography with distant and close reading of approximately 17,376 YouTube comments from five videos posted between 2022 and 2025. Three videos form the English-language corpus, while two BBC News Indonesia videos provide an Indonesian-language comparison. Distant reading identifies recurring lexical patterns across both corpora, while close reading examines selected responses from Muslim scholars, political leaders, state representatives, and Islamic organisations to contextualise these patterns. Findings show that responses frequently position the Qur'an as a sacred symbol, expressed through shared theological and moral terms such as Qur'an, Allah, Islam, agama, and umat. Close reading reveals varied Muslim responses concerning religious dignity, provocation, freedom of expression, diplomacy, and proper reaction. Indonesian institutional responses particularly condemn the act while promoting moderate diplomacy. Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities provides a framework for understanding how digital space becomes an arena where geographically separated communities articulate shared moral interpretations of Qur'anic desecration. The study shows how digital publics express religious identity and collective solidarity, contributing a combined distant–close reading framework for digital religion research.

Keywords: Qur'an burning, Muslim responses, Digital ethnography, YouTube comments, Imagined communities

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Introduction

Incidents of Qur'anic burning have occurred repeatedly in recent times, particularly in several European countries. Denmark and Sweden have become recent examples of these conflicts, with public Qur'anic burnings carried out by right-wing political parties (Sekretariat Jenderal MPR, 2023; BBC, 2023). Such acts are frequently defended on the principle of freedom of expression, which is legally justified within liberal democratic frameworks. Although proponents often defend such acts as an exercise of freedom of expression, this defence does not eradicate their religious and social consequences. For many Muslims, however, Qur'anic burning carries subtle symbolic and religious significance because the Qur'an is understood both as a sacred text and as God's revelation. Consequently, tensions at the global level—leading to street demonstrations and security concerns—are inevitable. These conflicts reveal a broader challenge in reconciling liberal principles of freedom of expression with religious sensitivities in increasingly plural societies. The issue raises important questions about how sacred objects, religious reverence and the limits of expression are negotiated in contemporary liberal contexts.

The burning of the Qur'an also raises questions, since it is accepted as a principal method of disposing of damaged or unusable copies. Muslim scholars throughout history have agreed that burning the Qur'an under the justification of Islamic jurisprudence is permitted, and even recommended, in order to erase the Qur'anic verses and prevent misuse. This makes the intention and justification of the act—rather than the act of burning itself—the important element in evaluating it. Although the Qur'an has been burned throughout the history of Islam, the phenomenon of burning it under the banner of freedom of speech has only recently emerged, making perspectives on Qur'anic burning increasingly polarised in the modern era.

In an age in which digital platforms are widely used, however, reactions to Qur'anic burning are no longer limited to direct physical responses. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have become new media through which Muslims express grief, rage, solidarity and moral unity, since these platforms are closely connected to the internet, linking people around the globe and diminishing geographical boundaries, including among Muslims (Anoraga and Zuhri 2024, 216). The digital world allows the rapid circulation of commentaries and responses related to Qur'anic desecration, enabling Muslim publics to respond collectively and emotionally in real time. Consequently, religious offence and defence are increasingly conveyed through online interactions.

Previous studies on this topic have mainly examined Qur'an desecration through legal and political conflicts over freedom of expression, media representations, and the discourse of Islamophobia. Although this scholarship has provided valuable insights into how Qur'an desecration is performed and justified in contemporary public discourse, it pays less attention to the lived responses of Muslims to Qur'an burning, especially how these responses are negotiated and expressed in digital spaces. Furthermore, less attention has been paid to comparing Muslim responses across different national and cultural contexts.

This limitation is particularly important in the case of Indonesia, one of the world's largest Muslim-majority countries, where digital platforms have become a significant field for religious expression, discussion and contestation. This study shifts the focus from the political and legal justification of Qur'an burning by examining Muslim digital responses comparatively. It therefore reveals how Muslims interpret, negotiate and respond to the desecration of the Qur'an in different contexts beyond legal-political debates.

This study therefore seeks to address this gap by investigating and comparing Muslim responses to Qur'an burning through digital ethnography combined with text mining of online comments. It collects comments from selected YouTube videos discussing major Qur'an-burning incidents and analyses them alongside digital ethnographic observations of Indonesian Muslim figures and online communities concerned with the issue of Qur'an burning on YouTube. Digital ethnography is applied to provide contextual insight into how these Muslim actors interpret, discuss and respond to Qur'an burning in their specific social and religious contexts, while text mining allows the identification of repeated themes and patterns in a larger corpus of YouTube comments. Combining these approaches enables the study to connect these interpretations with broader patterns of digital discourse, whether the two sets of findings converge or diverge. Although a text-mining approach cannot comprehensively capture the contextual and interpretative layers of individual comments, distant reading allows the identification of recurring patterns that may be difficult to identify through close reading alone.

This research shows that digital platforms function as a moral field in which Muslims collectively interpret incidents of Qur'an burning, acknowledge the sanctity of the Qur'an, and express a shared sense of belonging. It shows that Muslim responses in YouTube comment sections cannot be understood only as spontaneous expressions of outrage. The recurring references to the Qur'an, Allah, Islam, religion and umat suggest that these responses are also shaped by shared moral and theological understandings. In this sense, digital platforms not only become new forms of expression of Muslim solidarity but also provide a new medium through which existing religious identities and solidarities can be discussed, articulated and amplified across geographical boundaries. By reading this phenomenon through Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities, these digital responses illustrate how Muslims who may never encounter one another directly can participate together in a shared moral response to the desecration of the Qur'an. Although this shifts beyond the national community understanding in Anderson's work, it shares the same idea by using a common language to articulate shared sentiments. Therefore, this study situates the anthropology of Islam within the growing importance of digital spaces, considering how Muslim religious identity and collective solidarity are expressed and amplified publicly through digital spaces in response to contemporary conflicts.

This study makes three contributions. First, it moves beyond legal and political analyses of Qur'an burning by foregrounding the lived, digital responses of Muslims. Second, it develops a combined methodological framework that integrates distant reading of a large comment corpus with close reading of selected actors and institutions, addressing the gap

between macro-level pattern identification and micro-level interpretive analysis. Third, it extends Anderson's concept of imagined communities into the domain of digital religion, showing how shared sacred symbols and moral vocabularies function as resources for collective articulation across geographical boundaries. Together, these contributions position the study within the growing field of digital humanities approaches to religion, conflict and collective identity.

Furthermore, it is necessary to consider how Muslim unity can be understood despite the fact that Muslims are separated in the physical world. Benedict Anderson wrote *Imagined Communities* in 1983 to understand nationalism as a form of faith and subjective relatedness among people. Although his discussion concerns nationalism, it offers insight into how the unity of Muslim communities can be formed. According to Anderson, people can unite, in the context of nationalism, despite their differences because they constitute imagined communities: they never meet, talk, know or even hear one another, yet they regard themselves as belonging to one collective group. In this notion, imagination is not merely fictitious or false; rather, it is a shared mental representation (Anderson 1983, 6).

In this study, the concept of imagined community helps explain how Muslims who never meet or interact with one another can recognise themselves as belonging to a shared religious community. This shared feeling does not suggest that Muslims hold identical views; instead, they understand the Qur'an as an authoritative symbol of Muslim religious identity. When the Qur'an is publicly burned, the act can be interpreted not only as the destruction of an object but also as a violation of religious symbols shared across different geographical Muslim communities. This shared perception provides a basis for collective responses that extend beyond local or national contexts. Digital platforms are a significant element in this process, as they become spaces where different individuals can articulate their moral judgements, invoke shared religious references and express solidarity in public with others whom they have not met physically. In this understanding, digital interactions make aspects of Anderson's concept of imagined community observable in a Muslim context through repeated expressions of Qur'anic reverence, religious identity and shared moral concern, particularly in discourse on Qur'an burning.

To operationalise Anderson's concept for empirical analysis, this study identifies several observable indicators of imagined community in digital discourse. These include: (1) the use of collective pronouns and nouns such as *we*, *us*, *umat*, *Muslims* and *saudara*, which signal a shared sense of belonging; (2) the invocation of shared sacred references such as *Qur'an*, *Allah* and *Islam*, which function as common symbolic anchors; (3) expressions of shared emotional response, including grief, anger and solidarity, which indicate that the offence is perceived as collective rather than individual; and (4) references to Muslims in other geographical locations, which suggest an awareness of a community extending beyond national boundaries. These indicators guided the coding of recurrent patterns in the corpus and informed the interpretation of the close-reading cases. They do not by themselves prove the existence of a unified community; rather, they make visible the discursive mechanisms through which a sense of shared belonging is articulated in digital spaces.

Qur'anic Burning: Freedom of Speech or Blasphemy?

Current debates related to Qur'an burning are largely shaped by different understandings of the act as either a freedom of expression or a form of religious desecration and blasphemy. On the one hand, from a liberal perspective, Qur'an burning may be justified as an expression of individual freedom protected under principles of freedom of expression. From a religious perspective, on the other hand, the same act can be understood as an intentional desecration of a sacred object or an insult to religious dignity rather than solely an expression or personal opinion. This conflict is important to the existing literature, which has largely investigated Qur'an burning through its legal, political and normative implications. This scholarship is therefore important for identifying how the existing debate has framed the issue and what remains underexplored: Muslim interpretations and responses to Qur'an burning in digital spaces.

Gergely Ferenc Lendvai's *Sacred Flames: The Burning of the Qur'an in the Context of Free Speech* provides a significant legal and sociopolitical perspective on the incidents. Lendvai's study examines the difficulties of addressing Qur'an burning within current legal frameworks, especially where complex national legislation, outdated blasphemy laws and the absence of clear standards are intertwined with culturally and religiously sensitive problems (Lendvai and Gosztonyi 2025, 19). He shows that the controversy cannot be seen only through the principle of freedom of expression, as legal frameworks should also consider concerns about Qur'an burning and adopt culturally sensitive policy approaches to reduce tensions between freedom of expression and religion. However, his main legal and sociopolitical focus on the issue pays relatively less attention to how Muslims themselves consider and respond to Qur'an burning, especially in the digital sphere. The current study complements this perspective by shifting attention from the regulation and justification of Qur'an burning to how Muslim responses are expressed, negotiated and collectively articulated on digital platforms.

Furthermore, another study on this topic is titled *A Call for Respect: Analyzing Qur'an Burning, Human Rights, and the Islamic Law Perspective* by Yakub Kadir and others. In this article, the authors focus on the discussion of burning the Qur'an in Sweden. It raises a debate about the balance between freedom of expression and religious respect. It is widely believed that freedom of expression cannot depart from Western values. However, the Qur'an burning phenomenon raises a critical question as to whether these values are properly applied to the assault on a particular religiosity (Kadir et al. 2025, 3094). Therefore, this study contributes to the exploration of the crisis of Western-based human rights and finds that the Muslim world contributes less to the discourse.

The other study with the same method but a different focus is by Göran Larsson, *Rasmus Paludan, Burning the Qur'an and Swedish Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis*. The study focuses on the public debate on Rasmus Paludan, one of the right-wing politicians in Sweden, who burned the Qur'an in 2022 during Ramadan. Sixty public opinions are the subject of Larsson's observation to understand heated topics when the riot was taking

place. The public rally on the digital platform was argued to reveal the paradox between freedom of speech and freedom of religion (Larsson and Mattsson 2024, 131). The results of this media research are that the riots are mainly seen as the failure of multicultural policy in which Islam is perceived as a barrier to liberal authority.

The same author and other researchers have written another article connected to this topic. Göran Larsson wrote *A Burning Affair: Introducing a Special Issue on the Burning of the Qur'an*. In this work, the authors provide an analysis of Qur'anic burning in the Nordic context. The study mentions that Sweden and Norway have removed the blasphemy laws that protect religion from being persecuted and mocked, thereby encouraging Qur'anic burning to occur in the modern Nordic context (Larsson et al. 2024, 6). To understand the reason behind this phenomenon, the study emphasises historical awareness of how blasphemy against religion was understood and practised.

Another study of Qur'anic burning is written by Waseem Ahmad Qureshi, *Can the Burning of Holy Books Ever Be Justified?*. In this work, the author includes historical accounts related to the burning of holy books from China to Iran. Moreover, the study explores how modern Qur'anic burning in the name of freedom of expression is occurring in Europe and the United States from media and legal perspectives. The study finds that Qur'anic burning has ignited hate speech and the rise of Islamophobia on both continents, as covered by the media (Qureshi 2017, 78). Legally, this phenomenon cannot be intervened in by the government, as it is considered a private matter, although it can disturb national and social security.

A further study is a policy brief written by Bibi van Ginkel and Peter Knoope in 2023, *How to Respond to Qur'an Desecrations? What We Can Learn from Earlier Incidents*. The policy brief suggests that governments should react wisely to Qur'anic blasphemy. This phenomenon is argued to be dangerous and can lead to violence. Therefore, enforcing forceful measures can lead to a worse situation according to the paper. The study suggests an alternative approach by calming tensions between stakeholders, managing public responses and preventing violence and polarisation (Van Ginkel and Knoope 2023, 8). In short, the study offers an alternative solution to Qur'an blasphemy by promoting dialogue, mutual conversation and violence prevention.

The other study about the modern context of Qur'anic burning is written by Ahmed Al-Rawi, *The Online Response to the Quran-Burning Incidents*. This article has a similar topic to this study but uses a different method when reading the incidents and analysing the comments. While Al-Rawi argues that digital platforms such as YouTube have become a new medium to protest against the incidents, they also become the catalyst and amplifier of the controversy surrounding Qur'an-burning incidents. This also reveals new forms of solidarity that involve virtual platforms (Ahmed 2016, 105). This study provides an insight into the digital response, although it does not integrate close reading methods from Muslim figures to complement the analysis. Therefore, this study benefits from the combination of both distant and close reading in approaching the phenomenon.

Further study on this topic is *From Delegitimisation to Conditional Legitimacy: Media Slant and Multimodal Framing of Qur'an-Burning Protests* written by Sahar Rasoulikolamaki and others. The research analyses how selected news outlets construct the legitimacy and delegitimisation of Qur'an-burning protests in 2023 through different forms of media framing. It identifies differences between left- and right-leaning outlets, with the former presenting more restrained interpretations of the protests, while the latter more strongly associated Qur'an burning with threats to social and civilisational order (Rasoulikolamaki et al. 2025, 6). This study is important because it shows that the meaning and legitimacy of Qur'an-burning protests are not presented as a uniform framing across media but are shaped by ideological and institutional framings. However, the research primarily concerns how news organisations frame the controversy rather than audience response, especially Muslim audiences' interpretations on digital platforms. The current study builds upon these perspectives by shifting the object and analytical focus to the ways in which Muslim responses are shared, articulated and negotiated in digital spaces.

From Digital Ethnography to Text Mining in Understanding Virtual Unity of Muslim Communities: A Research Method

This research employs two complementary approaches: digital ethnography and text-mining analysis, or distant reading. These two methods are used to examine responses to Qur'an burning in digital spaces. The first method, digital ethnography, is employed to examine the cultural and contextual meanings of online responses, while the second enables the identification of recurring themes across a larger corpus of YouTube comments. The combination of these approaches allows the research to connect interpretations of digital interactions with wider patterns emerging across online platforms.

Digital ethnography deals with how people live in the digital world. It helps researchers understand the contemporary world, especially the digital lives of people and communities. It explores the consequences of digital media platforms for understanding lived value in the digital world, particularly the practical and theoretical discourse of ethnography in the digital sphere, which is increasingly prominent in modern scholarship (Pink et al. 2016, 20). Therefore, digital ethnography is important because it asks how digital environments, methodologies and methods are redefining ethnographic practice and research.

In doing so, digital ethnography offers a framework for examining the production, experience and negotiation of social and cultural practices within digital environments. One strand of literature emphasises that this method requires attention to the ways in which digital environments, technologies and methodologies reshape ethnographic practices and research (Pink et al. 2016, 20). This approach is relevant to the current study because responses to Qur'an burning are not limited to physical demonstrations or institutional statements but are also expressed through digital interactions on online platforms. In this study, therefore, digital ethnography is used to investigate how Indonesian Muslim figures and online communities discuss, interpret and respond to the Qur'an burning controversy

through digital platforms.

Although digital ethnography, which is closely tied to digitalisation, has offered scholars opportunities to easily collect, store and sort interactions among people in a group, utterances, messages, digital archives and other related materials, it might become problematic if the data are taken out of context. Varis argues that digital data taken from digital platforms, such as logs of communication and social media data, can serve as ethnographic data if understood within their context. He further argues that it is important to investigate context rather than assume it (Varis 2014, 4).

However, digital data cannot simply be treated as decontextualised textual material. Although digital platforms offer extensive records of interactions, messages and other means of digital communication, removing such material from its original context may obscure its social and cultural meanings. Varis argues that digital records, including social media communication, can function as ethnographic data when interpreted within the contexts in which they are produced (Varis 2014, 4). This consideration is methodologically important for the analysis of YouTube comments, which cannot be reduced to isolated textual material without context. Consequently, this study views online comments in relation to the videos, discussions and digital engagements in which they appear. This allows distant reading of textual patterns derived from computational processes to remain connected to the broader social and cultural context.

Furthermore, digital ethnography is not entirely new, as it combines traditional ethnography with adaptation to the central role of digital media in the modern era. One study divides digital ethnography into three distinctive paradigms: virtual ethnography, connective ethnography, and ethnographies of everyday media practices. The first deals with how the internet becomes cyberspace and focuses on online communities and identities, thereby enabling a wholly new medium. The second, connective ethnography, seeks to uncover meaning across multiple sites and their contexts. The third treats digital media as fully integrated into daily life, showing how agency can emerge from digital platforms (Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz 2013, 16). While these approaches offer ways to employ digital ethnography, the current study draws closely on the connective approach, as it examines Qur'an-burning responses across interconnected digital contexts. Instead of treating YouTube comments as isolated textual material, the study connects recurring patterns in online comments with digital ethnographic observations of Indonesian Muslim figures and online communities in order to understand these responses within broader social, cultural and religious contexts.

Beyond the discourse of digital ethnography, this research also utilises text mining to collect data, particularly comments from YouTube videos related to Qur'an burning on both overseas and Indonesian channels. The data were collected to understand the patterns that emerge in responses to Qur'an burning. This distant reading method can provide insight into a large-scale approach to how Muslims deal with so-called desecration. As argued by Jockers and Underwood, although the traditional approach closely related to close reading remains irreplaceable, the digitalisation of massive texts and the development

of computational tools enable the study of culture and human behaviour using quantitative approaches. The utilisation of text mining in the humanities allows researchers to explore previously unimaginable discourse, such as stylistic change from a large-scale perspective and broad patterns of cultural phenomena, including Qur'anic burning (Jockers and Underwood 2015, 10). However, one study claims that text mining cannot provide meaningful connections between dominant narratives shown, although it can trace subtle correlations (Ignatow and Mihalcea 2017, 18). It can also lead to misleading or biased interpretations if treated as representations of reality. Text mining cannot be completely claimed to represent reality, as it requires further investigation of culture, agency and institutions. That is why it is important to combine humanities research with text mining to analyse and avoid misleading or biased interpretations, as is done in this research.

It is also important to shed light on the concept of virtual unity by looking at *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson. According to him, in the context of religious cultural roots, sacred language and written script play an important role in creating an imaginable culture. While sacred language enables believers from different areas to imagine that they are involved in the same sacred order, even if they speak different languages, it has transcendent and divine meaning. For instance, the Qur'an is untranslatable except through interpretation, showing the authority of the divine being in the context of sacred language. Moreover, a written script in the context of a religious community does not merely transmit a message; it also has authority. Scriptural text creates the sense that its content shows fixed, eternal truth that cannot be reached by human interpretation (Anderson 1983, 13). It is crucial to maintain a large imaginable community with shared faith and doctrine, making the unity appear natural rather than socially constructed. This study considers this method suitable for understanding how online communities from diverse linguistic backgrounds can express equivalent responses, as will be seen in the discussion section.

Data Collection and Preprocessing

The corpus for this study was assembled from five YouTube videos selected through purposive sampling. The videos were chosen on the basis of three criteria: (1) they address a major Qur'an-burning incident; (2) they have substantial public engagement, indicated by high view and comment counts; and (3) they represent both English-language and Indonesian-language discourse. Three videos constitute the English-language corpus (The Sun, TRT World and BG On The Scene), while two videos from BBC News Indonesia constitute the Indonesian-language corpus.

Comments were collected on 29 December 2025 using YouTube Data API. A total of 17,376 comments were retrieved across the five videos. The raw corpus was then processed through several stages. First, comments in each video were separated by language. Second, stopwords were removed using standard stopword lists for English and Indonesian. Third, common spelling variants and informal abbreviations were normalised. Fourth, word frequency, collocation and concordance analyses were conducted using Voyant Tools with the term display set to 100.

The corpus includes comments written in mixed languages, particularly in the En-

glish-language videos where Indonesian terms such as *Yesus* occasionally appear. Such cases were retained and interpreted contextually rather than treated as errors. The analysis does not claim to represent the views of all Muslims or all YouTube users; rather, it examines patterns of discourse within the selected corpus. The findings are therefore indicative of discursive trends, not statistically generalisable.

This study treats YouTube comments as publicly available secondary data. No private or restricted content was accessed. Individual commenters are not identified by name or username, and quoted material is limited to public figures, institutional statements and anonymous comment patterns. Data were stored and managed in accordance with Indonesian International Islamic University (UIII). The study does not involve human participants in the sense of direct interaction, and no personal identifiers are disclosed beyond the names of public officials and institutional representatives whose statements were already published.

The Qur'an and Its Sacred Significance in Muslim Life

Within Islamic doctrine, Muslims regard the Qur'an as the Word of God, or Kalamullah, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad over a period of approximately twenty-three years through the angel Gabriel. It is held that this sacred object possesses a power unmatched by anything else. As mentioned in Al-Hasyr, verse 21, concerning the divine claim regarding the Qur'an's justification: "Had We sent down this Quran on a mountain, you would have seen it humbled, cracking and splitting from the fear of Allah" (59:21). Such representations contribute to understanding the Qur'an not only as a written text but as a sacred object inseparable from Muslim religious life. The Qur'an's importance lies both in the revelation itself, believed to be a miraculous event, and in its content, which regulates Muslims in their daily lives.

Muslim understanding of the Qur'an as divine revelation rather than a human-made text is central to the sacred status of this text. Islamic tradition holds that the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad in Arabic, and its wording constitutes the Word of God (Akbar 2019, 41). This understanding distinguishes the Qur'an from ordinary religious texts and contributes to its authoritative position for Muslims.

Besides the aspect of revelation, belief in Qur'anic teachings is considered an important factor in why Muslim communities emerged and existed (Amal 2005, introduction). As they believe the Qur'an to be the Word of God, Muslim communities form their identity through this belief. The Qur'an also becomes a source of Islamic identity itself, as explained by some scholars (Esposito 2002, 9). The very definition of Islam is conceptually defined by the Qur'an as accepting the monotheistic path that follows Muhammad as a messenger and a prophet. It also emphasises submission to God and devotion to the religion (Hasan 2022, 36).

This scripture has a central position in Muslim religious life, functioning not only as a source of religious guidance but also as a reference for many Muslims to understand

moral conduct, religious and communal identity. Its embedded authority, however, does not mean that Muslim practices or their interpretations are uniform. The meaning and application of Qur'anic verses differ across people, communities and historical contexts (Arkoun 1997, 9). Nonetheless, the Qur'an's position as divine revelation gives it a distinctive sacred status that extends beyond its texts. This status is important for understanding responses to Qur'anic desecration such as public burning. When the Qur'an is publicly burned, the act can be interpreted not simply as damage to an object but as a humiliation of a symbol associated with religious faith and dignity. The sacredness perceived by Muslims offers a significant context for examining why the desecration of this scripture can produce strong emotional and collective responses even in digital spaces.

The sacredness of the Qur'an is also expressed through its incorporation into Muslim everyday life. Recitation of the Qur'an forms an important part of Muslim religious life, including in daily prayer and in various formal and informal social activities (Watt and Bell 2021, xi). Many Muslims also memorise, study and recite Qur'anic verses as expressions of religious devotion. These interactions with the Qur'an extend across diverse social and intellectual backgrounds, showing that the Qur'an plays an important role as an embodied and socially shared element of Muslim religious life, not merely as a theological text (Esack 2008, 9). Its existence in both individual and communal practices allows us to understand why the Qur'an can function as a strong symbol of religious belonging and why violations of the Qur'an may trigger significant responses beyond the physical destruction of the material object itself.

The Qur'an's shared sacred status also provides an entry point for understanding Muslim collective identity by employing Anderson's concept of imagined communities. Muslims living in different national, geographical and cultural contexts may not personally recognise one another, but they know that the Qur'an is a common religious symbol. Its sacredness becomes a shared symbolic reference through which religious belonging can be expressed. Therefore, when the Qur'an is publicly burned, this shared reference can facilitate the perception that the act is directed at a sacred object. The act therefore concerns the wider religious community rather than isolated individuals. Digital spaces allow this process to become particularly visible by enabling users from dispersed geographical locations to articulate their expressions, emotional responses and claims of solidarity within a social media environment. This connection between the Qur'an as a symbol, imagined community and digital expression offers the conceptual understanding needed to examine the patterns of online responses to the controversy of Qur'an burning.

Responses in the English-Language Corpus

This section presents a distant reading analysis of three videos that discuss responses to Qur'anic burning in the English-language corpus. These videos were selected to capture different forms of presentation, including news reporting and footage of Qur'an-burning incidents. They are from The Sun, TRT World and BG On The Scene. The first two are

news channels that provide informative explanations of Qur'anic burning, while the third shows the occasion on which the Qur'an is burned. Although it is difficult to identify the commenters' religious identities, the dominant condemnation responses provide evidence of how the act was discussed and evaluated within these digital comment sections. Additionally, some responses include Christian-related terms such as Jesus, Christian and Bible, indicating the involvement of other religion-related terms in the comments. In general, the top five keywords can be identified through this table:

Table 1. Top Five Keywords Across the Five Videos

Rank	The Sun	TRT World	BG On The Scene	BBC (2023)	BBC (2022)
1	book (97)	Qur'an (141)	Allah (114)	Islam (207)	agama (491)
2	Qur'an (86)	Islam (136)	Qur'an (104)	Swedia (160)	Islam (487)
3	people (82)	book (125)	burn (102)	bakar (133)	Swedia (283)
4	burn (54)	burning (69)	Bible (63)	kebebasan (106)	Eropa (91)
5	Bible (43)	right (65)	Jesus (41)	Paulus (104)	Kristen (86)

The first video is from The Sun, titled *Shocking moment Texas election candidate BURNS Qur'an with a flamethrower*. The video is 1:27 minutes long and has over 3,033 comments worldwide. It was posted on 27 August 2025 and has over 58,000 views (The Sun, 2025). The video shows Valentina Gomez, a Republican Texas election candidate who burned the Qur'an as part of her campaign to "end Islam", igniting Islamophobia in Texas, despite the fact that Muslims make up only 1% of the population of Texas.

Analysis of the comments reveals 14,599 words, comprising 2,903 unique words. Several unique words are worth highlighting. The most common words are 'book', 'Qur'an' and 'people', mentioned 97, 86 and 82 times respectively, indicating strong concern with these terms. Words such as 'burn' and 'burning' appear quite frequently, 54 and 30 times respectively. The appearance of 'book' and 'Qur'an' demonstrates that commenters frequently refer directly to the object being burned. Meanwhile, the mention of 'people' suggests attention to the perceived effects on others. These frequencies, however, should be treated as indicators of discursive trends rather than direct evidence of intentions. Moreover, terms related to Valentina and women are mentioned 27 and 25 times respectively. It is also important to highlight words related to Christianity. Allah and Jesus are mentioned 35 and 33 times respectively, while Bible and Qur'an are mentioned 43 and 86 times respectively. The frequency of Christian-related keywords indicates that interreligious references are present in the responses. However, frequency alone is not sufficient to understand whether these references express interreligious hostility, comparison or defence of the Qur'an.

The second video is from TRT World, titled *Why do far-right groups burn the Qur'an?*. With more than 150,000 views, it has around 3,888 comments. The video explains why Rasmus Paludan and other far-right politicians burned the Qur'an. These acts are often legalised through police inaction, as they are treated as an expression of free speech, which raises questions of religious freedom (TRT World, 2022). The act is also seen as a political strategy used by far-right figures to gain electoral support by mobilising anti-Muslim sentiment. Generally, the text also highlights how Islamophobia has recently gained popularity among European countries.

The video has 18,304 words, with 3,486 unique words in the comment section. The most frequent words mentioned are 'Qur'an', 'Islam' and 'book', which appear 141, 136 and 125 times respectively. The concern lies with the Qur'an, Islam and the book in the video explaining the act, without mention of the perpetrator. The terms 'burning' and 'right', which might be related to the context of the act, are mentioned less frequently than the previous words, at 69 and 65 times respectively. Christian-related terms are not dominant in this comment section, as the only term mentioned is 'Yesus', which appears 30 times. The following word cloud extends the terms to 100:

The image is created by Voyant from the comments
Created on 7th January 2025, 9:08 AM)

The third video is titled *Anti-Muslim Protester Tries to Burn Qur'an in Dearborn, Michigan*, from BG On The Scene, with more than 200,000 views and 3,279 comments worldwide. It depicts Jake Lang, an Islamophobe and Senate candidate in Florida who tried to burn the Qur'an in public in November 2025 (BG On The Scene, 2025). Although the attempt was unsuccessful, the event generated strong responses in the surrounding context and provides another case for examining how Qur'an burning is debated in digital spaces.

In this video, the comments contain 17,060 words, with 4,243 unique words. The three most common words mentioned are 'Allah', 'Qur'an' and 'burn', which appear 114, 104 and 102 times respectively. Unlike a discussion centred mainly on the political actor in the controversy, the appearance of these frequencies places the divine reference, the sacred object and the act of burning at the heart of the comment discourse. This pattern suggests that people in digital spaces frequently frame the incident through religious and moral language rather than exclusively through the people involved. However, it is important to highlight that word frequency alone cannot be relied upon to establish the specific meanings attached to 'Allah'. The term may function in different ways, including references to divine authority, prayer, condemnation, religious identity or quotations from Islamic discourse. For this reason, this frequency becomes an indicator of a trend, not direct evidence of a particular interpretation.

The text mining also shows references to 'Bible', 'Jesus' and 'Christian', appearing 63, 41 and 28 times respectively. These terms show that some commenters place the Qur'an-burning incidents in the third video within a wider interreligious discourse. Although these frequencies cannot in themselves demonstrate religious tension or antagonism, such references may instead be used as comparisons between sacred texts, rhetorical questions concerning religious double standards, or even attempts to protect the sanctity of the Qur'an by invoking the perceived treatment of other religious scriptures. The frequency of these terms therefore highlights an important dimension of the digital discourse, but their significance still requires contextual interpretation of the comments in which they appear.

Responses in the Indonesian-Language Corpus

To provide a comparative analysis, this study examines Indonesian-language YouTube responses to Qur'an-burning incidents reported by BBC News Indonesia. The Indonesian-language corpus contains two videos focusing on Qur'an-burning incidents in Sweden in 2022 and 2023. Instead of treating these comments as a representative sample of Indonesian Muslims as a whole, the analysis examines how the controversy is framed within an Indonesian digital context. This comparison is especially important because it allows the study to assess whether patterns identified in the English-language corpus are reproduced, negotiated or reframed within the discourse in Indonesian-language videos.

The first video is titled *Pembakaran Al-Qur'an di Swedia, saat umat Islam rayakan Idul Adha*, with more than 50,000 views and 1,176 comments in June 2023. The video shows an Islamophobe, Salwan Momika, burning the Qur'an while Muslims were celebrating

one of their holy days (BBC, 2023). The comment section of this specific video provides an opportunity to investigate how the controversy was discussed by the Indonesian public and how the meaning of freedom of expression was negotiated in relation to religious awareness.

From the retrieved data, there are 19,074 words, with 4,348 unique words. The three most common words mentioned in this comment section are 'Islam', 'Swedia' and 'bakar'/ (burn), which appear 207, 160 and 133 times respectively. The appearance of these terms shows that the discussion is directed both towards the religious identity associated with the conflict and towards the geographical context in which the incident occurred. In addition, one important term in this video is 'kebebasan' (freedom), which is mentioned 106 times, quite frequently in this context. It indicates how freedom of expression is evaluated in relation to religious respect, although frequency alone should be further combined with the contextual meaning behind the term.

Moreover, it can be observed that terms related to Christianity are mentioned quite often. While 'Paulus' and 'Yesus' are mentioned 104 and 97 times respectively, 'Kristen' and 'Eropa' are mentioned 54 and 49 times, showing how commenters in this video connect this phenomenon within a broader interreligious or European context. Contextual analysis is important to determine whether such references can be understood as religious comparison, criticism of Europe, discussion of Christianity or attempts to defend the sanctity of the scripture. One important fact is that the name 'Salwan' appears 37 times, suggesting that discussion of the perpetrator appears less often compared to references to Islam, Sweden and religious terms. These recurring patterns may suggest that most commenters interpret the incident through a broader religious and geographical context rather than through the actor involved. The following is the word cloud created in Voyant with 100 terms:

The image is created by Voyant from the comments (Created in 7th January 2025, 8:50 AM)

The second video is titled *Pembakaran Al-Qur'an di Swedia: 'Kerusuhan seperti ini belum pernah terjadi'*. This video has the highest number of views among the others, with 1.2 million views and more than 6,000 comments. With a duration of only two minutes, the video captures the moment of riots in Sweden triggered by the Qur'an burning that occurred in 2022 (BBC, 2022). The riots caused several casualties among the police, and many people were arrested and jailed as a result of the violence.

The comment section contains a substantial number of religious terms. The three most common words are 'agama', 'Islam' and 'Swedia', which appear 491, 487 and 283 times respectively. These are the most frequently expressed words by commenters in this video, showing that the discussion frequently frames the controversy through explicitly religious terms, while references to 'Swedia' show attention to the geographical context of the event.

Furthermore, 'Eropa', 'Kristen', 'Kafir' and 'Barat' are also frequently mentioned in these comments, appearing 91, 86, 82 and 67 times respectively. These terms indicate that some commenters extend their concerns beyond the act of Qur'an burning towards more general questions of religion, geography and the West.

Taken together, the English-language and Indonesian-language corpora show both similarities and differences in the digital discourse on Qur'an-burning incidents. In both corpora, the Qur'an and associated religious terms remain dominant in the comments, showing that the conflict is frequently viewed through the sacred and symbolic significance of the Qur'an rather than through the act or the perpetrators. The comments on Indonesian-language videos, however, tend to display more locally prominent vocabulary, such as *agama*, *Islam*, *umat*, *kebebasan*, *Eropa* and *Barat*, which places the conflict within explicit religious, geographical and moral categories. This implies that Indonesian-language digital discourse does not necessarily mirror the English-language discussion but reframes it through local linguistic concepts.

The concept of freedom also offers an important consideration. In the English-language videos, freedom of expression appears as one of the frameworks through which Qur'an burning is justified or contested, although the term appears less frequently in the corpus. In the Indonesian-language videos, however, the frequency of the term 'freedom' suggests that this concept is also important to the discourse, but its meaning requires further contextual analysis to understand whether the term was used to defend or misuse the concept in this incident.

The repeated references to Christianity, Europe and the West offer important points of comparison. These terms are frequently expressed in both corpora, although this should not be interpreted directly as evidence of interreligious conflict. Instead, they suggest that some digital responses place Qur'an burning within a comparative framework involving different religions. Further contextual analysis of individual comments is crucial to understand clearly the appearance of these terms.

These recurring patterns are relevant to this study's argument about digital collective identity. The repetitive appearance of shared religious terms offers one visible process through which commenters express common moral evaluations of Qur'an burning, even if

they are geographically separated and do not know one another. Ultimately, the data show that digital solidarity is articulated not solely through a single voice claiming that Qur'an burning is offensive, but through repeated references to shared religious and moral terms.

Close Reading Analysis of Qur'anic Burning: English-Language and Indonesian-Language Contexts

To complete the distant-reading analysis, this section examines the selected responses more closely to see how individual actors and institutions articulate the meaning of the Qur'an-burning incidents, religious solidarity and their forms of response. Although distant reading provides a macro view of the topic and reveals symbolic priorities in Muslim responses to Qur'anic burning, it risks diminishing the complexity of individual expressions. To address this, the following section uses close reading to complement the previous analysis, observing how commenters articulate their voices. Instead of treating these responses as representative of all Muslims, the analysis uses them as illustrative examples through which different forms of Muslim and institutional response can be examined.

The first analysis examines Dr Shadee ElMasry of Safina Society in a YouTube response directly addressing Qur'anic burning (Safina Society, 2023). It is interesting that Shadee cited Haaretz, which he described as a Jewish newspaper, particularly Farid Hafez's writing on Qur'anic burning titled *Why Is the Far Right Obsessed With Burning the Koran?* (Hafez, 2023). According to Shadee, the article explores the political reasons for Qur'anic burning in Sweden. It emphasises the conflict between Sweden and Turkey, presenting geopolitical tension as the main reason for the Qur'anic burning carried out by Rasmus Paludan.

ElMasry is also concerned with responses based mainly on anger, outrage and boycotts. He believes that excessive reactions can unintentionally amplify the visibility and influence of the perpetrators, although responding is still important to prevent the normalisation of such acts. He therefore proposes responding by moving away from treating Qur'an burning simply as a matter of free speech and towards examining it as symbolic violence. His response shows that Muslim solidarity does not mean immediate confrontation; it can also involve strategic ways in which collective feedback should be directed and articulated.

A different form of response can be seen in the statement by Anwar Ibrahim, the Malaysian Prime Minister, concerning Rasmus Paludan's Qur'an burning. Anwar condemned the burning of the Qur'an and stated that Malaysia does not tolerate such acts. He described the burning of the Qur'an as an unnecessary assault on the Muslim community while allowing peaceful public protest against the controversy. This response demonstrates a state-level stance of religious solidarity (The Star, 2023).

Indonesian responses were represented predominantly by institutions such as the state, MUI and major Islamic organisations. They mobilise their responses and represent the Muslim community within the country. This section focuses on how Indonesians respond to Qur'anic burning.

The official response of the state is represented by the Ministry of State Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia. The article reported that the former vice president of Indonesia, Ma'ruf Amin, condemned the act and tried to mitigate possible forthcoming conflicts. For him, Qur'anic burning is an act of desecration of religion that cannot be tolerated. He emphasised that it could trigger wider conflict in many countries (Sekretariat Negara, 2023). Furthermore, the Head of the Regional Representative Council (DPD), M. Syukur, commented that Qur'anic burning is a humiliation of the symbol of religion that hurts the Muslim community. He suggested that the Indonesian government should encourage the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to influence Sweden and Denmark to prevent Qur'anic burning (Sekretariat Jenderal MPR, 2023).

Besides the official statements from the government, Indonesian Muslims voiced their responses through Islamic organisations. MUI, as the council of Islamic scholars, responded to the Qur'anic burning phenomenon. It regretted the Qur'anic burning in Sweden and condemned it as anti-Muslim. It emphasised that this act not only humiliated Muslim minorities in Sweden but also hurt Muslims worldwide (Aulia, 2023). In addition, MUI advised Indonesian Muslims to avoid responding to the act by burning other religious scriptures, emphasising the value of moderation. Finally, it supported the efforts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to deal with the issue diplomatically by summoning the ambassadors of the related states (Rozi, 2023).

Similar responses were seen from major Islamic organisations. Nahdlatul Ulama, through the head of its executive board, expressed regret over what happened in Sweden. Although it asked the government to resolve the issue through a diplomatic approach, it also asked Indonesian Muslims to avoid responding with violence, such as burning the scriptures of other religions (Faizin, 2023). Muhammadiyah provided its response through its Secretary-General, Abdullah Mu'ti, condemning the Qur'anic burning and emphasising that it is a hateful act against Muslims (Afandi, 2023).

These close-reading cases reveal several dimensions of Muslim responses that are less observable through distant reading. At the global level, Qur'an burning is interpreted through the concepts of symbolic violence, political provocation and moral responsibility. In the Indonesian case, state institutions and Islamic organisations similarly condemn the desecration of the Qur'an but place emphasis on diplomatic engagement and moderation, avoiding violent acts. This suggests that Muslim responses are not limited to expressions of anger and outrage; they also involve negotiations over political intention and appropriate forms of response.

The findings of this close reading add to the understanding gained from the distant-reading results. The analysis of recurring themes showed the frequent appearance of religious vocabulary, such as Qur'an, Islam, Allah and related terms, while close reading shows how these shared symbols are interpreted and organised in particular contexts. In the Indonesian context in particular, solidarity is expressed not only through a shared perception of the Qur'an as a symbol but also through shared expectations about how Muslims should appropriately respond to this act. Digital and institutional responses show different but

connected forms of collective expression, where digital spaces enable separate individuals to express shared moral judgements. Meanwhile, religious and political organisations attempt to channel those judgements into moderate forms of action.

Read together, the distant and close reading analyses reveal a layered relationship between aggregate patterns and individual articulations. The distant reading identified a consistent lexical core across both corpora — *Qur'an*, *Allah*, *Islam*, *agama*, *umat* — suggesting that the controversy is primarily framed through sacred and communal categories. The close reading shows how these shared symbols are activated in specific arguments: some actors treat Qur'an burning as symbolic violence, others as political provocation, and others as a test of diplomatic responsibility. In the Indonesian-language corpus in particular, the high frequency of *kebebasan* is echoed in institutional statements that explicitly negotiate the meaning of freedom of expression, condemning the act while rejecting violent retaliation. Conversely, the relatively lower frequency of perpetrators' names in the comment corpus aligns with the close-reading observation that institutional responses focus less on individual actors and more on the act's symbolic and political implications. These convergences suggest that the digital discourse is not merely a collection of isolated reactions but a field in which shared moral vocabularies are reproduced, contested and channelled into different forms of collective response.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the distant reading shows that responses in both the English-language and Indonesian-language corpora predominantly orient the Qur'an as a sacred symbol, generating a sense of shared wound rather than condemning individual political actors. Across the multiple datasets of comment sections, the frequent mention of terms such as Qur'an, Allah, agama and umat indicates that religious and moral interpretations are prominent, but they overlap with legal and political concerns. In addition, the repeated appearance of terms related to Christianity and Europe further reflects that Qur'anic burning is interpreted by some commenters within a broader interreligious or geopolitical context. In other words, this indicates that religious, moral, political and legal aspects overlap in the digital discussion of Qur'an burning.

At the same time, the close-reading analysis further shows that Muslim reactions cannot be reduced solely to anger or condemnation. The selected responses from Islamic scholars, political leaders, state institutions and Islamic organisations show different ways of interpreting and responding to Qur'an burning. Some figures emphasise the symbolic and political layers of the act, especially its potential use as a provocation. Others interpret the issue through religious dignity, diplomatic engagement, public order and the responsibilities associated with freedom of expression. Indonesian Islamic institutions respond by combining strong condemnation of Qur'an burning with moderation in rejecting violent acts. These responses show that Muslim solidarity is not articulated through a single action but is negotiated within different moral and political considerations.

It is also important to consider the application of Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities by broadening its relevance to a digital and transnational religious context. Anderson's framework helps to explain how individuals who do not personally recognise or meet one another can nevertheless see themselves as belonging to a broader community through shared symbols and meanings. In these cases, the Qur'an functions as a sacred and shared symbol. Qur'anic sacredness becomes a common reference irrespective of geographical location, as people can express shared moral concern when the Qur'an is publicly burned. Digital platforms in this context become a space in which this imagined community can be articulated through comments and shared moral discussions.

This study argues that digital environments offer a space where the meaning of reactions towards Qur'an burning is collectively articulated. While distant reading examines repeated symbolic and religious patterns in digital responses, close reading demonstrates how these patterns are converted into arguments about sacredness, provocation, diplomacy and proper forms of collective response. Digital media in this sense become a space where solidarity can be discussed and organised to address transnational issues. It is also worth noting that digital publics provide an arena in which Muslim religious identity and solidarity are negotiated.

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