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A Research on the Pop Music Version” Versus “Vocals-Only”



Abstract: - Pop music has emerged as a significant phenomenon in the realm of ethnomusicology in the last two decades. This article examines the "music versions" and vocals-only "nasheed" recordings of songs from the music label Awakening, which has produced some of the most popular pop music in recent years. Using the case study method and drawing from the critical debates in jurisprudence about traditional nasheed, this study aims to explore the modern phenomenon of pop music from the perspective of consumer society aesthetics and marketing strategies. The study concluded that the vocals-only phenomenon is, in terms of both its aesthetic aspects and its manufacturing, an integral component of global consumer culture, while sending messages of nonconformist, conservative principles.

Keywords: popular music, vocal-only, nasheed, ethnomusicology, music business

Introduction of study:

The Introduction section is any research paper that has a purpose and it seems somewhat missing here. Much of the space has been utilized for background details. The introduction must build up arguments and rationale for the study. You can bring in details like the evolution of the nasheed in modern popular culture, social media impact, and the genealogy of the nasheed in Islamic traditions. Then bring your case and set objectives.

In the last twenty years, a new genre of Islamic pop music has emerged, sometimes referred to as pop-nasheed. The most successful artists are global superstars or at the least national icons. This study aims to investigate Islamic pop music with only vocals as a musical genre and examines the *nasheed* music production of Islamic media firms, *Awakening*. The videos on the official Awakening YouTube channel reached one billion views in 2016. Maher Zain, the company's biggest star right now, has almost 26 million Facebook fans and 3.7 million Instagram followers. In contrast, Metallica has 37 million Facebook likes and 4.1 million Instagram followers. Even though the vocals-only versions of Awakening's tracks aren't their most popular, the label nevertheless makes them often. It should be mentioned that vocals-only is a large genre within contemporary Islamic pop music with stars like Zain Bhikha (South Africa) and Omar Esa (UK) and groups like Rabbani and Raihan (both from Malaysia). The contemporary trends in Islamic *nasheed* cultures continue to be contested since there is no consensus on the religious and legal validity within Islamic jurisprudence. In this direction, it is important to know the nuances and requires an in-depth exploration to explicate the socio-religious and economic dynamics involved in it. This article discusses the new vocals-only pop music phenomenon and its identity as an Islamic phenomenon and to consumer society aesthetics and marketing strategies more generally, analysing it as both a music production and as a genre in its historical, political, and religious context. The exact examples investigated are from Awakening's song catalogue. We begin by discussing the background of Awakening's involvement in vocals-only recordings and then move on to discuss the lineage of the subgenre. Then we deal with the production of the songs. Finally, we analyse pop nasheeds in connection to Islamic legal principles, consumer culture, and aesthetics. We're interested in answering inquiries like these: If there aren't any musical instruments in Islamic popular music, then why is there a market for it? How and why do producers make vocals-only songs sound exactly like instrument tracks? How does the vocals-only phenomenon link with broader modern conceptions of Islamic ethics?

Awakening & Islamic Music

Awakening Music is a prominent record label based in London that deals with the production and marketing of high-quality Islamic music or nasheed. The music company was established in 2000 and since then has featured a variety of popular nasheed artists and gained worldwide popularity. The productions mostly featuring known Islamic nasheed singers are based on Islamic values and spirituality and involve compelling audio-visuals. The UK-based singer-songwriter Sami Yusuf hit it big in 2005 when Awakening convinced the Egyptian music channel Melody Hits to show his first music video, al-Mu 'allim (The Teacher - i.e. Muhammad). The timing

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was excellent. In 2005, a process of liberalisation of media rules in several Arab nations was bearing fruit, and the reach of commercially successful networks like Melody Hits had become extremely wide indeed (Kraidy and Khalil 58-62). Sami Yusuf shot to fame suddenly. Yusuf, who attended a London music conservatory, was the company's first musical artist and a friend of one of the four original founders. Yusuf and Awakening's album *al-Mu'allim* (2003) is destined to become a masterpiece of Islamic popular music. In this context, *nasheed* (pl. *anashid*) is a traditional, vocals-based music genre within Islamic culture, most typically a hymn of praise, but this record became the global breakthrough for a new wave of pop-*nasheed*. One of Awakening's primary aims was to create Islamic media that could compete with the production quality of mainstream media in the fields of books and records (interview with Awakening CEO Sharif Banna, 2014). The production of *al-Mu'allim* was relatively inexpensive, but it used the latest technology.

Al-Mu'allim was recorded utilising solely singing and percussion instruments, permitting the assertion at the time that this was in keeping with the principles of Islamic doctrine (Awakening 25). However, digital production techniques were also heavily utilised, resulting in a complicated production that the vast majority of listeners would be willing to swear comprises at least bass and synthesisers. Paradoxically, being able to play and record instruments like the guitar, keyboards, and bass is sometimes essential when creating vocals-only pop-*nasheeds*. This issue will be revisited later.

When Sami Yusuf finally hit it big in 2005, he had already released his second album, *My Ummah* (*My Muslim Community*) (2005), which had full instrumentation and featured Yusuf on violin and piano. However, to cater for consumers expected to want the album and its songs but not the full instrumentation, a "percussion version" was produced the same year. Some of Awakening's best-selling albums have appeared in two forms over the years, the "music version" and the "vocals-only version" or "percussion version." For this goal, the company has established its own iconography. The CD artwork for the "percussion version" of *My Ummah* features a little stylised drum, which serves as a visual indicator that no prohibited instruments were used during the recording process. Accordingly, later editions of the original CD were labelled with a stylised keyboard to show that they employed the complete spectrum of instruments.

Literature Review

The Music Industry and Consumer Culture:

The Music Industry and Consumer Culture: As we have already implied, the instrumentation, harmony, and structure of even the "cleanest" vocals-only productions are often influenced by Western pop music. This can make it difficult to tell that the songs have been produced without synthesisers and bass. Many aspects of the pop-*nasheed*'s style have been influenced by the commercial music business. The expected duration and structure of a song now frequently follow the norms of approximately three to five minutes in length with the approximate structure of intro, verse, refrain, verse, refrain, bridge/interlude, and refrain to fade. The marketing of pop-*nasheeds* follows the prevailing trends in covers, promotional films and pictures, stage names, and so on. Since the emergence of the first pop-*nasheed* artists (discussed further below), this phenomenon has mirrored or provided clear alternatives to other general developments and trends in consumer culture, including the promotion of these artists through media such as photographs and videos.

Avoiding overt sexualization of the artists and instead portraying them as current yet moral sends a message about the company's commitment to the ethical Islamic objective of the artists. This topic, which is the focus of Otterbeck's current research (see Otterbeck, "Sunni Discourse", Otterbeck, "Maher Zain"), will not be further dealt with here. Pop-*nasheed* often integrates elements of popular music, including cover versions of songs with new or different lyrics. Islamic orchestras hired for wedding parties in Egypt often perform modern hits with slightly altered lyrics to make them appropriate for religious celebrations (Nieuwkerk, "Popularising Islam"). Cover versions are also performed by some of the Awakening acts. In concert and on record, Raef has covered songs by popular artists like Rebecca Black's "Friday," which he reworked into a song about *Jum'a*, the Friday prayer, for example. Such cases are fascinating in their own right and need further study; nonetheless, the pop-*nasheed* canon is the primary topic of this piece.

Tracing the Genealogy of the Vocals-Only Ideal:

It would be easy to present a simplistic genealogy of vocals-only productions, describing Islamic pop-*nasheed* as a traditional genre sung without "instruments", save for the possibility of percussion accompaniment, which is sometimes specified as a duff, a frame drum, in normative theological writing. Since the term "instruments" is often met with controversy, it makes terminological sense to separate drums from the rest of the musical family. *Nasheed* has a lengthy history as one style of Islamic singing among others. Since the Arabic word means "song" in English, but the term "(pop)-*nasheed*" is widely used to refer to Islamic music in English-speaking countries and is well-established in modern Islamic discourse. Historically, in Egypt and other countries where Sufi rituals, family celebrations, *mawlid* (the celebration of the birthday of a holy person, including the Prophet Muhammad),

and rituals preceding morning prayers all feature prominently, the singers (al-munshidun) of traditional Islamic anashid have often been professional men. The *munshid* is supposed to improvise, thus they must be well-versed in poetry and familiar with traditional scales (maqamat). The ability to make each live performance feel fresh and exciting through improvisation is highly valued.

The goal of the *munshid* is rarely imitation of a composition or "work" in the Western sense, despite the fact that anashid always share semantic, melodic, and structural aspects. Much of the Islamic tradition's vocal music "blurs" the borders between re-creation and creation, between composition and improvisation, as described by Amnon Shiloah (61-62). During the twentieth century, anashid were not only recorded for documentation purposes but also for radio, and finally for commercial usage, although the new wave of pop-nasheed is in no self-evident way a straightforward continuation of this. We suggest that modern pop-nasheed is a distinct genre, influenced by the Foucauldian genealogical method (Foucault; Salvatore), which has allowed it to draw from both secular and religious musical traditions while also being moulded by technological and aesthetic developments.

Thus, to trace the ancestry of vocals-only pop-nasheeds, we must investigate multiple different processes coming together in the phenomena. One is the non-instrumental musical legacy of Islamic anashid, noted above, from which pop-nasheed has derived its name but also, to a certain extent, its lyrical content and at times even tonal expressions. One more is the Islamic perspective on music and, more specifically, popular music. The digitalisation of recording and production facilities, which is intrinsically linked to the expansion of the commercial music industry, is a third factor. The fourth is Islamist groups, especially Hamas and Hizbullah, using music as a political protest tool (Berg ; "The soundtrack of politics"). As a concluding trend, we can look at Islamic counterculture's pushback against the prevalent attitude in today's pop music, which glorifies sexuality, youth, and hedonism in its songs, videos, and album art.

Purposeful Art:

Due to a discourse within Islamic fiqh, or jurisprudence, that has been especially unfavourable regarding string and wind instruments, the types of instruments that can be used in traditional nasheed performances have been limited. Among the strictest interpretations of Islamic law, only the call to prayer and melodious recital of the Qur'an as well as songs for special occasions like family festivities, working songs, military music, and caravan songs are considered legitimate forms of tonal expression. *Halal*, or permissible, has also been applied to celebratory songs glorifying Allah and Muhammad. In addition, the content of songs, the use of instruments, and the level of refinement of tonal expression in Qur'anic recitation have all been deemed inappropriate by some legal authorities (al-Faruqi, Shiloah, Otterbeck, "Sunni Discourse"). The description "restrictive Islamic legal experts" is purposefully chosen to convey that there is no consensus in Islamic doctrine on music and other tonal expressions. Throughout Islamic intellectual history, music has been a contentious topic (Alagha; Otterbeck, "Sunni Discourse"). Vocals-only songs can be related to this continuous discourse through a development in the discussion about *al-fann al-hadif* (purposeful art) that started to emerge in the 1980s in both Sunni (mainly in Egypt; see Nieuwkerk, Performing Piety) and Shia circles (mainly in Iran and Lebanon; see Alagha).

The main purpose of the speech was to encourage a reappraisal of art and the employment of its potent expressions in the service of spreading the Islamic message. Up until that time, the "new" (in Muslim social contexts) forms of art (such as theatre, movies, paintings, novels, and recorded music) were often associated with Westernisation and the national, secular culture of Arab, Turkish, and Iranian urban elites, or perhaps with commercial mass culture (Armbrust; Nieuwkerk, Performing Piety; Siamdoust). Egyptian Sunni *wasatiyyah* (middle road) concepts, connected with moderate Muslim Brotherhood thinkers and supporting *al-fann al-hadif* and *al-fann al-nazif* (clean art), gradually had an impact, first among local activists and then in more commercialised forms. Gulf investors helped fund this movement, bringing Gulf sensibilities and demands (Nieuwkerk, Performing Piety) to the Egyptian art world. As we'll see below, the debate even made its way to Malaysia.

The purpose of *al-fann al-hadif* was to promote an Islamic lifestyle while adopting innovative kinds of expressiveness. But songs should have respectable lyrics, preferably praising Allah, Muhammad, or an Islamic way of life; at the absolute least, they should not be vulgar, hence the term "clean art." At first the use of instruments was a sensitive issue, causing musicians to develop a style using vocals and percussion only; consequently, the concept of nasheed was perfect, as it meant both "song" and, in a narrower sense, song that included religious praise while avoiding instruments (other than percussion). However, modern Arab or so-called "Western" style genres were formed, utilising the aesthetics and technology developed in the expanding commercial music business, rather than the old performance and improvisation-oriented nasheed.

Music and religious activism: Hamas and Hizbullah

Resistance songs and laments about slain comrades and leaders by Hamas and Hizbullah were among the early examples of a fresh perspective on nasheed. Mixing nationalist sentiments with Islamic principles, ethics, and praise, both organisations succeeded to develop politically potent music labelled as nasheed. From more or less unplanned beginnings arising from attempts by individuals in the 1980s, both organisations have established

cultural policies about art, not least music, and promote and even hire artists and bands, while possessing their own recording studios (Berg). Al-risalat is a Hizbullah cultural organisation that functions similarly to a minister of culture (Alagha). These anashid had an impact beyond the Sunni Palestinians and Shias of Lebanon because of certain particularly stirring songs and a few stars like Palestinian-Jordanian Mais Shalash, a girl of 12 who rose to stardom with the second Intifada (2000).

The anashid and laments of the resistance were recorded on cassette tapes and widely distributed among Muslims, but were rarely heard by Muslims outside of activist circles or radio broadcasts, and almost no one outside of Islam knew about them. The phenomenon might best be described as a globalised subculture: globalised in the sense that the songs were listened to, as we understand it, by activist Muslims in all corners of the globe (particularly among those who understood Arabic), and subculture in the sense that this was happening away from the central stages of consumer culture.

Both groups started out recording only vocals, with bass-heavy harmony sung by all-male groups and handclaps used primarily to signal the beat. Hamas took use of the classical nasheed genre but made it simpler, less intricate in the melody, more repetitive and belligerent. Instruments were used in some productions, however they were always played softly in the background. However, Hizbullah has succeeded in linking its political message of resistance through music to the Shia ethos of the Iranian revolution, citing the martyrology of Shia theology as an inspiration and incorporating, for instance, the *latmiyya* (lament) genre of the Ashura commemorations of the killing of Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussein. The twenty-first century has witnessed the introduction of instruments, and both Hamas and Hizbullah now have live bands during meetings (Berg).

The integration of music in Islamic religious activism is a multifaceted phenomenon and over the centuries has been a powerful socio-political tradition among socio-religious groups in Islam. The popular *nasheed* content was characterized by religious manifestation, sentimental messages, calls for resistance and cultivation of socio-religious harmony. Islamic songs locally known as *nasheed* were instrumental for religious groups and movements in mobilizing crowds for a particular cause. Especially these religious songs and laments were substantially used by religious militant organizations like Hamas and Hizbullah in fostering religious unity, support and mobilization for armed resistance in the Middle East.

Pioneers of Pop-Nasheed:

Some musicians began recording nasheed with a modern touch to them as a countercultural reaction to worldwide popular music and in response to the call for a current Islamic music culture, to be named *al-fann al-hadif*. British artist Yusuf Islam, Malaysian artist Raihan, Canadian artist Dawud Wharmsby, and South African artist Zain Bhikha are among the most well-known pop-nasheed forefathers. In the 1990s, they all released albums that featured simply vocals. After officially retiring the Cat Stevens moniker in 1979 (Larsson), British musician Yusuf Islam released his debut recordings in 1995. It was a double CD, *The Life of the Last Prophet*, including a religious interpretation of the Prophet Muhammad's life read by Yusuf Islam on CD1 and three "Nasheeds (songs)" on CD2. Yusuf Islam composed a new song and arranged two traditional songs for the album. There were male vocalists, a children's choral group, and drums on the tunes. These aren't your typical pop tunes; instead, "Tala'a al-Badru 'Alayna" (The Bright Moon Rose Over Us) is possibly the most well-known Islamic song, but hearing it sung in English is a fascinating experience in and of itself.

After his conversion to Islam, Yusuf Islam had taken a stand against music, thus the return to recording produced a stir, not least since Yusuf Islam's characteristic and well-loved voice sounded the same as before. Soon after, the Malaysian nasheed group Raihan asked him to join them onstage for "Seal of the Prophets" and "God Is the Light" from their sophomore album *Syukur* (Gratitude) (1997). The tunes feature singing and drums. Up until 2005 (21 April), when he performed with a guitar in Abu Dhabi, Yusuf Islam recorded nasheed, prayers, and children's songs in a vocals-only style. Since then he has proceeded to add instruments to his recordings and performances. Posters for Yusuf Islam's 2016 U.S. tour included both his current name (Yusuf) and his old name (Cat Stevens), and the singer performed songs from both catalogues with a full band. *Footsteps in the Light*, a compilation released in 2006 by Yusuf Islam, features his works from 1981 to 2004. It comprises what could be considered *al-fann al-nazif* versions of some of his 1970s pop-folk tunes, particularly "The Wind," "Peace Train," and an Arabic-Zulu English version of the huge smash "Wild World." This production method seeks to adapt pre-existing musical material into an Islamic setting without radically altering the original work, as demonstrated by these new arrangements of classic Cat Stevens compositions.

Many (if not all) of the harmonic, rhythmic, and structural aspects from the originals have been replicated through the use of technology and the extensive usage of the human voice in the 2006 album, which features hand drum and male voices in complicated arrangements in place of traditional rock instruments. *Puji-Pujian* (Praise) (1996), the debut album of Malaysian nasheed group Raihan, was an immediate success in the country. Raihan claims that more than 3.5 million copies of the album have been sold, making it the best-selling Malaysian album of all time. Five males formed the group, and they sang Islamic lyrical compositions in tight vocal-only arrangements with subtle percussion beats. Prior to their phenomenal success with Raihan, the band's core members were in

another group called the Zikr (1992–1996), which was also moderately popular for its voice-only recordings. The Malaysian voice-only nasyeed genre was influenced by Arab anashid of the Islamic movements in the Middle East and connected to al-Arqam, an Islamic movement in Malaysia outlawed in 1994.

To produce what Bart Barendregt has dubbed "the Arqam sound," the groundbreaking band Nadamurni released 31 CDs over the course of 10 years before disbanding in 1995. But it was Raihan who really popularised the genre, making both vocal and percussion arrangements more intricate, a move that proved an influence upon others. *Syukur* (1997), a follow-up album in the same vein, features a wider variety of rhythms and a greater number of pitched percussion instruments, many of which are of local origin. Songs sung in English on this CD helped spread their fame outside Southeast Asia. Although the basic style did not alter, more instruments were subtly included on Raihan's fifth album, *Demi Masa* (By Time, a reference to the first verse of Surah Al-Asr:103 in the the Qur'an) (2001). Since then, Raihan has gradually increased the number and variety of instruments it employs, culminating in 2005's fully orchestrated *Ameen* (Amen). It is remarkable that the two tracks on the album with the most detailed Islamic subject, "99 Names" and "Ameen," are vocals-only songs. In 2008, the trio created a pop-nasheed album called *The Spirit of Shalawat* (Songs of Praise), which celebrated the ideals of prayer and used only the singers' voices and some sparse percussion.

Canadian busker David Wharnsby converted to Islam in 1993, changing his name to Dawud Wharnsby-Ali before reverting back to his birth name. His first album following his conversion was not pop-nasheed (*Blue Walls and the Big Sky*, 1995). Heather Chappell, a female vocalist with whom Wharnsby had previously worked, provides vocals, guitar, and lovely harmonies, making this album sound more like a standard folk record. Next, in 1996, he released *A Whisper of Peace*, his first pop-nasheed album, which included the tracks "Takbir" (Days of Eid), (Say "Allah Is Great" [Days of Celebration]), "Al Khaliq" (The Creator), "Animals Love Qur'an," and "The Prophet." It consists entirely of male and juvenile voices, with some subtle drumming in the background. The album implements several different traditional ritual tonal expressions used in Islam, including the call to prayer (in the second track, "Azan/Qad Qamatis Salah" (Call to Prayer/The Prayer Has Begun) and the pilgrimage chant "Labayka" ("Here We Come"), combining these with a tonal language found in Irish folk songs. This trend continued year after year.

It was not until the release of *Vacuous Waxing* (2004) and *Out Seeing the Fields* (2007), after starting to cooperate with boyhood buddy Bill Kocher, that Wharnsby once again recorded with instruments other than percussion. Although the artist did not consider these albums to be pop-nasheed (interview, 2018), there are a few songs that sound very similar to his earlier nasheed compositions, such as "The War/La ilaha illallah" (There Is No God But Allah) from *Out Seeing the Fields*, which features scathing criticisms of commercialism and superficiality in its lyrics. South African musician Zain Bhikha's first album, *A Way of Life*, was published in 1994. Since then, he has become widely recognised as a pioneer of the pop-nasheed genre. He has published 11 albums, all of which include only vocals, and has collaborated with the aforementioned musicians. Instead, he employs intricate drum patterns, beatboxing, and choral arrangements. Like Wharnsby, he is quite fond of recording songs for youngsters. While all of Bhikha's albums feature solely percussion, beginning with 2010's *A Way of Life* (his second album of the same name), he has released alternate versions of several tracks, a "drum version" and a vocals-only version, without the percussion. Midway through the '90s is when the first recordings of the new pop-nasheed genre were made. At the turn of the century, some artists began experimenting with using musical instruments, albeit on a limited scale; however, something occurred around 2003–2005 that prompted three of the pioneers to record with full instrumentation in the years that followed. It was at this time that Sami Yusuf released both versions of his second album, *Awakening*. We don't know when or why it became common practice to release both an instrumental and a vocals-only version of the same song.

Dawud Wharnsby, in an interview with Jonas Otterbeck (2018), said that he and Yusuf Islam had talked about bringing guitars and other instruments to the Middle East in 2003. At that point, he had begun to tape his vapid ramblings. It is likely impossible to trace who influenced whom, given that Yusuf Islam, Dawud Wharnsby, and Zain Bhikha met during a recording session in London in 1999 and became fast friends, and that they were all familiar with Raihan and several others in the genre.

Awakening Again:

With the release of Sami Yusuf's debut album, *al-Mu'allim* (2003), *Awakening* took the initiative to begin making pop-nasheeds, as described above. At the time, neither the pioneers of the genre nor the Islamist groups had introduced any tonal/pitched instruments beyond percussion, with the exception of Raihan. However, many of Raihan's most well-known works included only vocals.

The concept of creating two variations first arose in 2005, during the production of Sami Yusuf's *My Ummah*. When Otterbeck brought this up to CEO Sharif Banna in 2014, Banna referred to it as an experiment. In the commercial spirit of *Awakening*, the two versions were developed in order to provide for two Islamic ethical perspectives, one that considers that music must be confined in instrumentation and one that does not. Probably, however, it is too basic to consider the audience as two distinct groups of individuals (or markets) constantly and

exclusively choosing one form of musical material over another due to religious sensitivities. It's possible that the listener has the freedom to decide on the spot which version of the song she prefers, with or without instrumentation, depending on the circumstances. Contemporary ordinary Muslim life is as changeable, ambivalent, and confused as any other, as Samuli Schielke puts it.

For example, one's perspective on music can shift depending on the season (Skjelbo 187). With that in mind, it is plausible to regard the vocals-only phenomenon very much as a consequence of modern consumerism, where self-expression often takes the shape of making decisions about what items to consume and when. Given the laws of supply and demand, it makes sense for a record company to avoid taking a firm stance on the question of whether or not certain types of music are acceptable. The artist is expecting that their audience would accept that they can satisfy two distinct tastes by recording with and without instruments other than percussion. The company runs the danger of being seen by some segments of its target market as insufficiently Islamic. In other words, Awakening's plan to pose as an Islamic media firm may be viewed as fake. To this day, such criticism has indeed been leveled against Awakening and its musicians, though, as far as we can tell, it has nothing to do with the generally more elaborate instrumentation of the album's recordings. Rather, the focus of criticism has been on concerts and the "rock star" reputations of the main musicians (Otterbeck, "What Is"). There is also the potential of being viewed as too conservative or as sycophantically bowing to Gulf sensibilities.

A Discourse of Self-Imposed Artistic Restrictions:

A Discussion on the Boundaries One Places on One's Own Creativity:

While there is a lot of research on the topic of censoring explicit lyrics in music (such as rap) by modifying, deleting, or bleeping them, there is surprisingly little on the topic of censoring musical material in popular music. In addition, the canonical literature typically portrays any alteration of lyrics or music for political or religious purposes as censorship and, hence, as unidirectional representations of political control over art. Perhaps it is too often thought, however, that self-censorship inevitably renders the artist a victim without agency with a watered down result (Solomon 37). Tom Solomon labels such assumptions a "victimology" approach, proposing that a more nuanced understanding of self-imposed artistic limits is sometimes warranted. It may be argued that all forms of cultural output fall under some form of oversight and control. As Judith Butler puts it, self-restriction (i.e. censorship) in its fullest sense is always part of meaningful speech. In addition, it is well-established that there might be a creative potential in limits, therefore there's no need to romanticize the working conditions of artists laboring under totalitarian systems. Without assuming that we are dealing with a simple causal relation, we explore several important characteristics of the vocals-only pop nasheed phenomena from the standpoint of a musician or producer. The making of such music cannot and should not be described as solely the consequence of an industry following rigid and basic theological doctrines or principles. There is more to it than that, we say. The "vocals-only" editions of Awakening display musical innovation and significant artistic flexibility on the part of the musicians and producers that worked on the project. As a result, we understand the creation of vocals-only pop-nasheeds to be an expression of the intricate interplay between market forces, artistic expression, and religious norms. In what follows, we go into the sonic architectures of a few chosen songs in order to have a more in-depth conversation about how some musical aspects function in this setting. To this end, we employ the idea of "versioning," which we borrow from the language of business and marketing to describe the method of increasing revenue through the staggered delivery of products with minor cosmetic changes. In that way, it may be argued that versioning is distinct from the common practice of remixing or covering the work of other artists. In these contexts, the line between "original" and "cover" tends to be more distinct than in the case of the vocals-only pop-nasheed phenomenon. (See Solis for a discussion on cover songs, alternate versions, and the legitimacy of the original recording.)

One type of vocals-only pop-nasheed, like most of the genre's earliest works, has only been released in a single version (and so was "born" vocals-only); the other, often more interesting from our perspective, is a recording that originally featured a full band but has been more or less radically altered to earn the designation of "no-music version," "vocals-only," or "percussion version." The relationships between the different versions should be discussed in order to gain a deeper comprehension of the vocals-only phenomenon. What has been modified and by what means?

We hypothesize that in a rap song with explicit semantics, the degree of explicitness can be changed by cutting out or modifying a fraction of a second of the song's audio. The F-word can easily be replaced with a bleep, for instance. In other words, the formal description of the distinction between the unaltered and altered versions is straightforward. This might be a rough example, but it helps to highlight that much cleaning of popular music in the Western music industry takes the form of merely modifying or eliminating specific undesired semantic parts while leaving most of the output unchanged. Producers need to get more inventive when covering Islamic pop nasheeds. For starters, he or she will need to determine what does and does not qualify as a musical instrument. Do you allow drums? Are pitched drums acceptable? The musical frameworks of the finished product will be influenced directly by the results of such factors.

Both advanced musical ability and cutting-edge production technology are essential to the process. The process of generating musically meaningful vocals-only pop-nasheed is not merely a job of removing the instruments. Maher Zain casually said that a studio wizard who has specialised in crafting vocals-only recordings worked on the vocals-only versions of his most recent album, *One* (in Arabic and a "international version," both from 2017). Zain did not present himself during the procedure (interview with Jonas Otterbeck). For the sake of analytical precision, the term transcription will henceforth be used. The term "musical transcription" is commonly used to refer to (1) any reproducible notation of a musical structure (i.e. a musical score) or (2) a faithful rendition of a work performed by another instrument than the one for which it was originally composed (the various piano transcriptions of Bach's lute or organ works being well-known examples). However, arrangement is a more general term for the process of reconstructing a musical piece, with the outcome often sounding very different from the original in terms of both its structure and its tone. The following discussion applies the principles of transcription and arrangement to two songs, each of which is also available in a "music version" and a vocals-only version.

– Maher Zain: “Always Be There”:

Swedish-Lebanese singer-songwriter Maher Zain fuses Arabic vocal techniques with the smooth tones of Western pop music. He has had a considerable impact on the market for religious pop music in the West and in many sections of the Islamic world (Otterbeck, "Maher Zain"). The listener has access to a wide variety of renditions of his favorite tunes. We've chosen "Always Be There" by Maher Zain from his 2009 album *Thank You Allah* (Vocals Only Version, 2012) to illustrate the production approach used by Awakening. The song follows a simple formal framework typical to pop songs: intro-verse chorus-verse-chorus-interlude-chorus-outro. Apart from the colloquial Arabic phrases *Allahu Akbar* (God is great) and *Subhanallah* (Glory be to God), the lyrics are in English. The song's main message is that if people feel lost, they may always come to Allah, since, as He has promised, He would never leave them. Say it with me: "Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar. The song's original 2009 recording features a wide variety of instruments, from guitars to keyboards to percussion. The original, with the exception of what might be a darbouka (an Arab hand drum; see Figures 1 and 2), is quite similar to a Western pop tune. Only male voices are used on the vocals-only release.

There is no percussion or instruments. The vocals-only version is obviously constructed around the same lead vocal track as the original, and in many other respects the two versions are identical. And so it follows that the tempo, lead vocal melody, harmonic progressions, and shape of the vocals-only version cannot be considered to be different from the original; the perceptible difference resides in the absence of instruments in the vocals-only version. Yet the producers have done much more than merely eliminating undesirable material. The introductory, interlude, and concluding sections of the vocals-only version are notated in Figure 3 (below). Male voices painstakingly recreate the phrases to imitate the guitar and bass lines of the original song. The lowest voice, the bass, is compressed and sung with a forceful attack on the consonant "d," which gives the dynamic structure of the notes some resemblance to that of a bass guitar. Notwithstanding that, it is, or so we say, clearly audible that all musical phrases are originated by (male) voices.

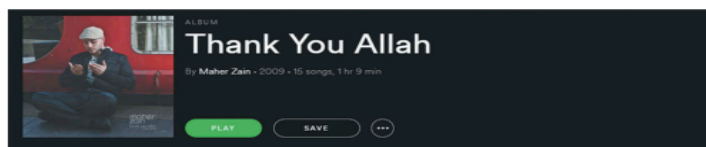


Figure 1. Maher Zain's album *Thank You Allah* as presented on Spotify in original version.

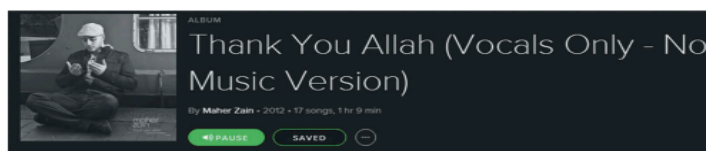


Figure 2. Maher Zain's album *Thank You Allah* as presented on Spotify in Vocals-Only–No Music version.

A musical notation excerpt from "Always Be There". It features two staves: a treble clef staff for "Male vox" and a bass clef staff. The treble staff has lyrics "Ah aah ah ah" and "ah aah etc...". The bass staff has lyrics "Duuh du du duuh" and "etc...". The notation includes various rhythmic values and accidentals.

Figure 3. An excerpt from "Always Be There."

There is a transcription of the guitar and bass tracks so that they can be played by another "instrument." Taking into mind a specific type of Islamic discourse, it becomes evident that this song is intended to be seen as performed by a "non instrument," despite the fact that it sounds remarkably like bass and guitar. Therefore, it is clear that the material on this album has been reworked (transcribed) in order to convey a certain message: the problematic musical instruments have been replaced with something acceptable, the masculine voice.

Discussion: The Islamic Ideal, Aesthetics, and the Market

The vocals-only pop-nasheed phenomenon is part of the worldwide music industry despite its obvious ties to more conservative views of Islamic ethics and theology. It is this relation that we explore in this final part of the article. We have argued that the vocals-only recordings are not traditional anashid; rather, they are the result of the music industry's understanding of how to market and produce music, giving preference to songs that are a few minutes long, with a repeated centrally placed chorus, composed and recorded, printed on CDs, available for download, and freely available as music videos. Singers are portrayed as idols in promotional materials such as photos, videos, album covers, and live performances for both secular and religious audiences. We have laid down the basic genealogy of vocals-only pop-nasheed leading up to the strategies of a commercial media corporation such as Awakening.

In addition, we've highlighted how Islamic (and particularly Islamist) theology is progressively beginning to embrace and absorb cultural manifestations like music (and theater, films, etc.) as part of measures to maintain or regain relevance in today's world. Initially, recordings that just featured vocals (often with percussion but no other instruments) were made in response to requests for more meaningful or uncluttered music. Some Muslims, such as those who believe that instruments are at best problematic and at worst the work of the Devil (Otterbeck, "Sunni Discourse"), and those who buy and listen to all music made by their favorite artists, have made vocals-only a production genre in pop-nasheed music.

Even though the performers have no qualms about using instruments in the studio, the label they're signed to also releases instrumental versions of several songs and entire albums. To paraphrase Awakening's CEO Sharif Banna, who made these comments to Otterbeck in 2014, "those who started listening to him because he did not feature instruments in his first record should not have to give up listening to him because instruments were introduced in the second album." Later musicians that debuted an album including a full band adapted their approach accordingly. Awakening as a corporation became a provider of vocals-only recordings, regardless of performer, requiring no. Modern digital production techniques and a vast library of sounds that are increasingly convincing as instruments have been extensively discussed in our discussions of the aforementioned recordings. Skjelbo has just learned that the bass lines in "Tabassam," for instance, are recorded with the male voice by breaking down the song using studio equipment. Since most listeners, presumably, lack such equipment, trusting recordings generated with advanced technology as vocals-only must be relied on confidence. Online Muslim debates have even broached the subject, revealing a wide spectrum of opinions on the matter.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to examine the modern phenomenon of Islamic pop music from the perspective of consumer society aesthetics and marketing strategies. It involved the case study of the Islamic music label Awakening and critical debates in Islamic jurisprudence about traditional *nasheed*. From the detailed discussion throughout the section, the study found that the vocals-only phenomena in Islamic music cultures complement global consumer culture. However, the study concluded that despite being integral to global consumer culture, the traditions continue to endorse nonconformist, conservative Islamic principles.

As could be predicted, the more restrictive believe that if music sounds like it contains an instrument it is illegal, while the more tolerant claim that as long as only the voice is utilized, and used for the correct objectives, the music is permitted. An increasingly popular and more liberal stance is to allow instruments, as seen above. Despite these debates, vocals-only pop-nasheed has become an intriguing new musical style. Pop nasheeds couldn't have come to fruition without the vocals-only ideal, but now that principle plays a secondary role in the genre. Musicians, singers, and producers face certain technical obstacles due to the constraints of the genre, yet these constraints also give exciting creative opportunities.

Finally, the vocals-only approach may have been imbued with an atmosphere of authenticity and Islamicity that artists can employ to demonstrate their sensitivity towards Islam and express their Muslimness to their audience. Recordings by Raihan, for instance, show a tendency in this direction (the band skips the instruments when they sing about religion on later albums), but the Awakening albums just offer alternate takes on the same songs. Whether one of these patterns will become dominant in the future remains to be seen. Further research in this direction can look into public perception of pop nasheed and the factors responsible for their popularity among Muslims. Moreover, it can delve into the instrumentality of social media platforms in popularizing the pop nasheed culture in the digital landscape.

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