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Faith-first Fandom: A Māturīdī Middle Path Analysis of Malay-Muslim Women on K-Pop Fan Spaces

NUR KAREELAWATI ABD KARIM*
Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia

ABSTRACT

K-Pop fandom in Muslim-majority Malaysia is often framed as either a threat to Islamic values or dismissed as harmless leisure. This article challenges this binary by foregrounding the nuanced ethical reasoning of Malay-Muslim women in fan spaces. It introduces the concept of 'faith-first fandom' as a lived ethic in which entertainment is secondary to religious commitments and is continually negotiated through reflective boundary-work. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 16 Malay-Muslim women who engage with the virtual idol group PLAVE on *X* (formerly *Twitter*), the study examines how participants regulate their attention, emotions, time, spending, and online conduct. Analysis employs a Māturīdī-influenced framework—*ʿaql* (discernment), *naql* (Islamic values as moral anchoring), and *mīzān* (balance as praxis)—to illuminate how reason, revelation, and moderation intersect in everyday digital practices. Findings reveal that fandom is actively managed through selective consumption, ethical distancing, moderation, and *adab* (proper conduct) online. Rather than passively accepting or rejecting K-Pop, participants demonstrate agency by integrating faith-based values into their engagement with K-Pop idols. The article reframes parasocial attachment as an ethically governed relationship and highlights how digital religion operates within ordinary entertainment spaces, contributing to communication scholarship on Muslim women's agency in global popular culture.

Keywords: *Korean Wave, Hallyu, K-Pop fandom, Malay-Muslim women, ethical reasoning.*

INTRODUCTION

The global spread of Korean popular culture, known as *Hallyu* (the Korean Wave), has generated new forms of cultural engagement among young people. In this context, 'K-Pop fandom' refers specifically to the community of supporters and the practices—such as coordinated streaming, fan art, and online discussions—that sustain Korean pop music and its idols. These developments are notable even in Muslim-majority societies, where entertainment, faith, and identity intersect. In Malaysia, K-Pop fandom is now part of everyday youth digital culture. It is sustained by platforms such as *TikTok*, *YouTube*, *Instagram*, and *X* through clips, memes, fan translations, reposts, and constant updates. Yet K-Pop's public meaning is rarely treated as ordinary leisure. Scholarship on the Korean Wave in Malaysia highlights that social media influencers, fan accounts, and cultural agents mediate Korean popular culture and local values (Badrul Hisham et al., 2021; 2025). This mediation makes K-Pop more than just imported music. It becomes a platform for communication, where young Malaysians use it to negotiate belonging, taste, and moral visibility.

This article focuses on Malay-Muslim women. Their leisure practices are often read through the lens of gendered expectations of respectability (Kretschmer & Leszczensky, 2025). Through public and religious commentary, K-Pop—the genre of Korean popular music and its associated entertainment products—is framed as either a corrosive foreign influence

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or a harmless secular pastime (Mujani et al., 2022). This binary flattens everyday practice and overlooks how Malay-Muslim women may enjoy Korean popular culture while regulating attention, affect (emotional engagement), time, spending, and online interaction. K-Pop is positioned as permissible entertainment, not a lifestyle, with faith remaining the primary orientation. Such statements articulate a method of calibration, rather than simply defending fandom. The article conceptualises this as faith-first fandom: a style of fan engagement that prioritises religious commitments over entertainment. It is understood as a lived, gendered mode of mediated piety in which religious self-discipline is practised in digital and media spaces. In this mode, entertainment remains secondary to religious commitments.

The concept of faith-first fandom connects three areas of communication research. First, it contributes to digital religion studies by showing that ethical reasoning appears not only on explicitly religious platforms but also in mainstream entertainment spaces (Bunt, 2018; Campbell, 2013). Second, it extends the study of fandom and parasociality—one-sided emotional attachment to media figures—by asking how attachment to mediated personas is governed rather than merely formed (Baym, 2015; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Liebers & Schramm, 2019). Third, it speaks to scholarship on Muslim women, piety, and agency by treating self-discipline and moral reasoning as socially situated practices rather than merely as resistance (Jouili, 2015; Mahmood, 2005).

The theoretical contribution of the study is a Māturīdī-influenced reading of the 'middle path.' This tradition associates reasoned judgement and reveals commitments. In this context, *ʿaql* refers to reason or intellect, *naql* means transmitted revelation, and *mīzān* denotes balance or scale; all are interdependent in ethical deliberation (al-Māturīdī, 1970, pp. 21–34; Rudolph, 2015, pp. 55–63). Here, *ʿaql* recognises revelation, *naql* (Quran and Sunnah) guides, and *mīzān* balances the two (Cerić, 1995; Rudolph, 2015). The study does not claim that participants consciously invoke Māturīdī theology. Rather, the article uses a Māturīdī-oriented sequence—*ʿaql* (discernment), *naql* (Islamic values as moral anchoring), and *mīzān* (balance as praxis)—to interpret how their narrated strategies combine judgement, religious priority, and moderation. This framework clarifies how balance is enacted through specific digital platform practices.

The Malaysian context makes this argument important. Debates about *Hallyu* are shaped by histories of Islamisation, media governance, and moral regulation. Entertainment can serve to defend national identity and Islamic values. Malay-Muslim women are positioned as symbolic bearers of communal morality. Their tastes and emotional attachments are read as signs of piety or moral decline (Mujani et al., 2022). Recent work on *hijab*-wearing Malay-Muslim K-Pop fans shows that identity is negotiated through careful self-positioning, rather than cultural surrender (Isa & Reissner-Roubicek, 2024). Building on these, this article argues on how women reason ethically in platform environments. These environments intensify visibility, intimacy, and consumption.

Building on these arguments and the Malaysian context, this study pursues the following objectives: Firstly, to investigate how Malay-Muslim women reason ethically in their engagement with K-Pop. Secondly, to analyse how platform affordances reshape parasocial attachment and the strategies Malay-Muslim women use to moderate these connections. Finally, to develop and apply a Māturīdī-informed analytical sequence of *ʿaql*, *naql*, and *mīzān* for interpreting Malay-Muslim women's fandom practices, while critically examining the gendered moral labour and expectations placed on them in regulating media consumption, emotional expression, and religious conduct.

To achieve these objectives, the study is guided by three research questions. First, how do Malay-Muslim women narrate faith-first ethical reasoning in K-Pop engagement, particularly regarding attention, content boundaries, time, and religious obligations? Second, how do platform affordances, especially in virtual idol fandom on X, reshape parasocial attachment and its moderation? Third, how can a Māturīdī-influenced sequence of *ʿaql*, *naql*, and *mīzān* illuminate these practices, while remaining critical of the gendered moral labour placed on Malay-Muslim women?

By posing these questions within communication scholarship, the article offers a culturally grounded vocabulary for analysing mediated entertainment in Muslim societies. Rather than asking whether fans are permissive or conservative, it examines how they make communicative choices in algorithmic spaces that reward visibility, emotional investment, and participation. This focus is important for Malaysian communication research, as it links media and religion, digital identity, youth popular culture, and platform governance. The study treats fandom as a site where ethical reasoning is spoken, performed, and revised in everyday digital life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hallyu has been widely analysed as a transnational cultural flow. This flow is enabled by entertainment industries, state cultural policy, digital distribution, and fan labour (Jin, 2016; Ju, 2018; Kim, 2013). In Malaysia, research shows that participation in the Korean Wave is mediated by youth culture, social media, fan communities, and cultural intermediaries (Badrul Hisham et al., 2019; 2021; 2025). The Malaysian case is important because the Korean media does not circulate in a neutral space. It enters a society shaped by religion, ethnicity, gender, and language. These factors influence reception and public debate. Studies of Malaysian fans show patterns of online identity-building and social media use. Participatory practices include fan art, bilingual communication, charting activities, and fan projects (Mat Yassin et al., 2024; Maros & Basek, 2022; Roslan et al., 2025).

Badrul Hisham et al. (2019; 2021) demonstrate the value of ethnographic and mediatisation approaches to Malaysian Korean Wave fandom. This is especially true when investigating Gen Z experiences and fan practices during periods of intensified online interaction. Menawati and Putri (2023) further show that K-Pop identity is shaped through virtual ethnographic processes. The cultural industry's management of idols turns them into emotionally meaningful products. These studies foreground the communicative and industrial dimensions of fandom. The present article extends this line of inquiry by placing Islamic ethical reasoning, gendered respectability, and virtual idol intimacy at the centre of analysis.

K-Pop fandom should be understood as a platformed practice. It is not merely a taste community, but a set of interpretive, curatorial, translational, remixing, and circulatory activities conditioned by platform infrastructures, affordances, metrics, and commercial models (Duffett, 2013; Jenkins, 2006; Park et al., 2023; Yin & Xie, 2024). Fans generate cultural visibility by translating lyrics and posts, producing edits and fancams, organising hashtags, circulating updates, and strategically interacting with platform metrics. On *TikTok*, algorithmic recommendation occupies a central position in the user experience, while reusable sounds, hashtags, duets, dance challenges, and short-form editing tools facilitate imitative and participatory fan practices (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Petrovic, 2023). On *X*, hashtags, reposting, relational networks, and public commentary enable collective knowledge

production and critical fan counter publics, but may also reproduce gatekeeping, conflict, and toxic fan norms (Lee, 2023; James, 2024). Participatory culture is therefore organised within platform economies that convert fan attention, data, emotional investment, and consumer activity into economic value (Park et al., 2023; Bollmer & Tillerson, 2025). Visibility is shaped by recommendation systems, popularity metrics, and datafication, creating incentives for frequent, repetitive, and emotionally intensified participation (Yin & Xie, 2024). Fandom consequently becomes woven into everyday routines of checking, viewing, liking, reposting, commenting, streaming, and purchasing. For Muslim subjects, ethical questions are therefore structurally, rather than merely individually, salient. Studies of Muslim K-Pop fans demonstrate continuing negotiations over religious identity, modesty, cultural and religious offence, emotional attachment, and the compatibility of intensive fandom with Islamic values (Mulya, 2021; Jung, 2024). This platform ecology makes the management of attention and time, the boundaries of acceptable lyrics and visuals, expenditure on merchandise and subscriptions, and conduct during fan conflicts central matters of ethical reflection and self-regulation.

In Muslim-majority contexts, K-Pop often sparks moralised debate. Issues include sexuality, gender performance, hedonism, distraction from worship, and foreign cultural influence. These concerns can resemble moral panic. In these debates, a cultural object carries wider anxieties about youth and modernity (Cohen, 2002; Mujani et al., 2022). However, the threat-versus-triviality framing fails to capture how fans evaluate content or adapt fandom to religious priorities. Malaysian studies on Korean Wave fans show that engagement is often selective and reflexive rather than total (Badrul Hisham et al., 2021; Isa & Reissner-Roubicek, 2024; Mat Yassin et al., 2024). This article, therefore, shifts the focus from permissibility debates to everyday ethical reasoning.

Gender is fundamental to understanding faith-first fandom. Feminist media scholarship on Islamic piety demonstrates that women's agency extends beyond resistance or liberal autonomy and may be expressed through disciplined practice, ethical self-fashioning, and moral cultivation (Jouili, 2015; Mahmood, 2005). However, this scholarship primarily addresses embodied religious practice, institutional piety, and everyday moral formation, rather than the platformed dynamics of contemporary digital fandom. Consequently, it provides only a partial account of how Muslim women navigate pleasure, attachment, visibility, and religious responsibility within algorithmically organised spaces that promote constant participation, emotional intensity, public commentary, and measurable engagement. Digital fandom introduces additional pressures, as women's leisure is not only morally scrutinised, but also rendered visible through likes, reposts, comments, fan accounts, and participation metrics. Malay-Muslim women may therefore feel obligated to demonstrate that their enjoyment remains controlled, modest, and non-excessive. Faith-first fandom should be interpreted both as an expression of ethical agency and as a response to gendered expectations that require women to perform piety in publicly recognisable ways. This dual perspective enables the analysis to take women's religious reasoning seriously without idealising the moral labour involved in maintaining respectability within highly visible and commercially intensified fan cultures.

Parasocial interaction offers another important lens. Horton and Wohl (1956) defined parasociality as mediated intimacy at a distance, and later work shows that such relationships can be intensified by frequency, perceived authenticity and platform interaction (Baym, 2015; Giles, 2002; Liebers & Schramm, 2019). K-Pop industries institutionalise intimacy through fan service, livestreams, behind-the-scenes material and direct address (Mat Yassin et al., 2024).

PLAVE, the virtual idol group, complicates this further. Recent research on PLAVE notes that technical glitches and identity 'seams' can make fans negotiate the relationship between virtual personas and real performers (Ahn et al., 2025). For Muslim women, virtuality may reduce some anxieties about embodied celebrity attraction while producing new forms of closeness through constant updates, translations and fan interaction.

Digital religion research helps explain why these negotiations matter. Religious life online is not confined to sermons, Quranic reminders, or Islamic forums; it is also embedded in ordinary digital routines, where users decide what to watch, how to speak, and when to stop (Bunt, 2018; Campbell, 2013). Islamic ethical vocabularies such as *wasatiyyah* (moderation) and *adab* are often invoked in contemporary debates about media conduct, but they may be used either for moral policing or for self-governance (Kamali, 2015). This article adopts the latter approach. It uses such Islamic concepts as *ʿaql*, *naql*, and *mīzān* to understand how participants identify risk, anchor judgement in faith, and practice balance under the pressures of algorithmic entertainment.

Māturīdī's Epistemology: Reason, Revelation, and Balance

A central source for the article's conceptual framework is Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī's *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* (1970, pp. 21–34), which provides foundational insight into the integration of reason (*ʿaql*), revelation (*naql*), and balance (*mīzān*) in Islamic theology. Al-Māturīdī establishes the primacy of human reason as the means by which people recognise the existence of God and fundamental truths. He argues that intellect is essential for authenticating revelation, yet also insists that reason alone cannot yield comprehensive knowledge of God's will—specific guidance and moral injunctions are the domain of revelation. Al-Māturīdī's approach is thus one of harmonisation: he conceives *mīzān* (balance) as the principle by which reason and revelation are held in productive tension, each correcting and complementing the other. This epistemological model rejects both rigid literalism and detached rationalism, advocating instead for a balanced methodology.

Knowledge of God and ethical life, al-Māturīdī argues, are grounded in a process that begins with rational inquiry and is completed by acceptance of transmitted guidance. This framework underpins the article's use of the *ʿaql-naql-mīzān* sequence, linking classical theology to contemporary questions of digital ethics and Muslim women's agency in media participation. The Māturīdī orientation is especially helpful because it enables the study to distinguish among three related yet distinct moments of ethical action. *ʿAql* refers to the participant's capacity to assess content and context: whether a lyric, visual, fan argument or spending practice is becoming harmful. *Naql* refers to the moral anchoring that gives this assessment direction: obligations, modesty, *adab* and the priority of faith. *Mīzān* refers to the practical arrangements that follow, such as skipping, limiting, distancing, reposting moderately, or choosing safer communities. This three-part sequence does not turn participants or researchers into theologians; rather, it makes the moral logic of their everyday communication practices visible.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a two-phase qualitative design to examine faith-first fandom across everyday K-Pop engagement and virtual idol participation on PLAVE site on *X* (https://x.com/PLAVE_official). The design is appropriate because the study seeks to understand meaning-making, moral reasoning and narrated practice rather than measure

attitudes at scale (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Both phases focus on Malay-Muslim women aged 20 to 25, a group for whom fandom, higher education, early adulthood and digital participation often overlap. Table 1 summarises the two-phase qualitative research design:

Table 1: Summary of research phases

Phase	Participants	Focus	Methods	Key Themes
1	10 Malay-Muslim women; university students aged 20-25	K-Pop consumption in general, conscious filtering, religious and social boundaries	Semi-structured interviews via online platforms such as *Google Meet*, and/or voice notes on *WhatsApp*; reflexive thematic analysis	Faith-first hierarchy; selective consumption; friction moments; bounded fandom participation
2	6 Malaysian Muslim women aged 20-25 active engaged with PLAVE, a virtual idol platform on *X*	Virtual idols, parasociality, ethical boundary-making and *adab* in fan communities	Written semi-structured interviews via Google Forms; contextual observation of PLAVE fan practices on *X*.	Mediated intimacy; moderation of affect, time and spending; privacy and respectful speech

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling from online K-Pop and PLAVE fandom communities, including fan networks and interactions on *X*. Purposive sampling was used because participants needed to meet specific inclusion criteria. They had to identify as Malay-Muslim women, aged between 20 and 25, and have direct experience of engaging with K-Pop or PLAVE-related fandom activities. Recruitment messages briefly explained the purpose of the study, eligibility requirements, the voluntary nature of participation, and the interview process. Interested participants contacted the researcher directly and were screened according to the inclusion criteria before interviews were arranged.

Phase 1 draws on semi-structured interviews with 10 Muslim university students who self-identified as engaging with K-Pop to varying degrees. The interview prompts invited participants to discuss how they consume K-Pop, whether they experience tension with religious or cultural values, and what strategies they use to manage boundaries. Meanwhile, Phase 2 comprises interviews with six Malaysian Muslim women who actively engage with PLAVE on *X*. Questions addressed routes into fandom, perceptions of the virtual idol format, attachment, authenticity, time and spending, conflict, and understandings of *adab* online.

The total sample of 16 participants was guided by the principle of information power rather than statistical representativeness. Information power suggests that a smaller qualitative sample may be sufficient when the study has a focused research aim, a specific and relatively homogeneous participant group, theoretically informed interview questions, and in-depth data collection (Malterud et al., 2016). The sample was therefore considered appropriate for examining how a clearly defined group of Malay-Muslim women narrated faith negotiation within two related but analytically distinct forms of fandom. The division between 10 participants in Phase 1 and six participants in Phase 2 reflects the narrower and more specialised nature of virtual idol fandom. The interviews generated sufficiently detailed and recurring accounts of ethical reasoning, attachment, boundary-setting, and religious responsibility to support thematic analysis, although the study does not claim that the findings represent all Malay-Muslim K-Pop fans.

Data Analysis

Data were prepared by transcribing voice notes, exporting written responses and anonymising all materials. Participants are identified only through codes (P1-P16). The study employs reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterned meanings within and across datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, responses were coded inductively for recurring boundary practices, including content filtering, time limits, distancing, selective social participation, and avoidance of conflict. Second, the two phases were compared to identify how platform context altered ethical challenges. Third, themes were re-read through the Māturīdī-oriented sequence of *ʿaql*, *naql* and *mīzān*. This final stage was interpretive rather than doctrinal. The framework helped organise how participants described judgement, religious priority and practical balance.

The cross-phase design also served an analytic purpose. Phase 1 established how participants manage conventional K-Pop fandom as part of everyday leisure, while Phase 2 tested how these patterns shift when idols are virtual and when interaction is concentrated on *X*. Reading the phases together made it possible to identify continuities in faith-first reasoning while also recognising platform-specific pressures, especially constant updates, fan translation, repost cultures and conflict-prone visibility. The analysis, therefore, treats the platform not as background but as part of the ethical environment in which fandom is practised.

Ethical Considerations

Several strategies supported trustworthiness. The analysis maintains a clear chain of evidence by connecting claims to representative excerpts; negative or ambivalent cases are retained to avoid romanticising fandom as automatically empowering, and the discussion distinguishes between participants' own language and the author's conceptual interpretation (Tracy, 2010).

Ethical procedures were observed. Participants gave informed consent, were assured confidentiality, and could omit questions or withdraw. The study avoids usernames, traceable posts and identifiable fandom details. No screenshots are reproduced. Because the research involved human participants and data, the manuscript should be read together with the relevant institutional ethics approval statement and reference number supplied by the authors at submission.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are organised through the interpretive sequence of *ʿaql*, *naql* and *mīzān*. Phase 1 shows how participants demote K-Pop to secondary entertainment, manage friction moments and practise bounded sociality. Phase 2 shows how PLAVE fandom on *X* reorganises mediated intimacy while intensifying the need for moderation and *adab*.

Phase 1a: K-Pop as Secondary Entertainment and Faith-first Boundary Work

The most consistent Phase 1 finding is discursive demotion. Participants enjoy K-Pop but resist allowing it to become an identity or moral orientation. One participant state, "K-pop is just entertainment, not a lifestyle to follow" (P7). This is an act of *ʿaql* because it classifies fandom as leisure and places limits on its authority. Participants also differentiate between appreciation and imitation. As P9 explains, "It is not wrong to have an interest in something, as long as we don't really follow the culture or idol life." The object of evaluation is therefore

not music alone but the possibility that fandom may reorganise aspiration, behaviour and self-presentation.

Naql appears when participants explicitly connect these distinctions to religious obligations. One participant state, "My faith always comes first. K-pop is something I enjoy, but it doesn't define me" (P2). Another describes the hierarchy as a practical filter: "I always prioritise my religious obligations first, and K-pop is just a form of entertainment" (P4). Faith is not presented as outside media life; it is the criterion through which media practices are ranked.

Mīzān is enacted through selective consumption. Participants avoid content that conflicts with faith, reduce exposure to visuals, or refuse excessive attachment. P2 says, "I enjoy K-pop with clear boundaries, focusing on the art, avoiding content that conflicts with my faith." P1 reports listening to music without watching videos, suggesting that balance may involve reconfiguring modality rather than withdrawing entirely. P6 frames time as a moral resource: "I like K-Pop, but not to the point I would sacrifice any other activity for it. They can wait, but some activities and responsibilities can't." These practices show balance as a routine, not an abstract value.

The participants' boundary-work also reveals how religious identity is protected through ordinary media choices. Rather than treating every song, video or idol appearance as equally problematic, they differentiate between artistic enjoyment, embodied performance, fan imitation and emotional excess. This layered differentiation is important because it shows that faith-first fandom is neither a total rejection of Korean culture nor a passive acceptance of platform flow. It is a selective and revisable practice in which the fan remains answerable to a moral hierarchy.

This pattern also clarifies why the term 'fan' does not carry a single moral meaning in the dataset. Some participants identify with fandom lightly, through songs and friendship talk; others distance themselves from the label because it implies obsession, public visibility or uncritical loyalty. The distinction between listening, liking, following, supporting and belonging becomes ethically significant. Participants use these differences to create graded forms of proximity, allowing them to remain near the pleasures of K-Pop while avoiding the identities and practices they consider excessive.

Phase 1b: Friction Moments and Ethical Repair

Participants rarely describe K-Pop as a permanent crisis. Instead, they identify friction moments linked to particular lyrics, performances, behaviours or fan practices. P4 notes that "certain K-pop content conflicted with my religious or cultural beliefs," while P2 says, "At times I've felt conflicted." This situational language matters. It shows *ʿaql* in action: the ethical issue is not K-Pop as a category, but the need to repeatedly evaluate mixed-media content.

When friction occurs, participants reaffirm moral anchoring. P2 describes the response as "reminding myself to always prioritise my faith and values over entertainment." P8 similarly states that she became 'more selective' and reminded herself of faith and cultural principles. These accounts show *naql* as a stabilising reference point amidst platform pressure. The participant does not need to abandon enjoyment, but enjoyment is re-ordered when it appears to conflict with religious values. Repair practices include skipping, ignoring, distancing and limiting time. P4 says, "I choose to ignore or skip that content." P3 describes slowly distancing herself from a particular group when boundaries feel compromised. P5 links withdrawal to withholding support: "We ignore and try not to support the group or movie anymore." These practices are modest, but significant because they turn balance into a set of

repeatable techniques. *Mīzān* is achieved through small acts of refusal that interrupt algorithmic continuity.

These repair strategies also suggest that ethical judgement is temporal. Participants do not always decide once and for all whether a fandom is permissible; they revisit that judgement when new controversies, lyrics, images or fan behaviours emerge. This ongoing re-evaluation is central to the article's argument. Faith-first fandom is sustained through periodic ethical repair, not through a static boundary drawn at the moment of becoming a fan.

Phase 1c: Fan Publics, Belonging and Selective Participation

Participants also evaluate fandom spaces as social environments. P3 describes online fandom as 'very toxic' and avoids it because of unnecessary drama but finds offline conversations with friends 'refreshing' because they involve simple sharing without argument. This shows that discernment applies not only to content but also to infrastructure: where fandom happens, with whom, and under which norms.

Belonging is therefore conditional. P2 says she engages in spaces that are "respectful and don't compromise my values," while P7 keeps 'healthy boundaries' so fandom does not define her sense of belonging. Some participants avoid fandom communities altogether and listen privately; others treat K-Pop as a controlled social resource for friendship and small talk. The key finding is that social participation is calibrated. *Mīzān* includes taking advantage of connections while avoiding fan publics that intensify conflict, comparison, or excessive visibility.

Phase 2a: PLAVE on X and Mediated Intimacy

Phase 2 participants describe attraction to PLAVE through evaluated cues that include vocal ability, creative autonomy, novelty, glitches and a sense of growth. P11 refers to "exceptional vocal talent" and self-produced music, while P12 says she stays because of "their growth and interactions." Participants are not merely captivated by virtual spectacle; they justify their attachment through talent, sincerity, and narrative development.

The virtual idol format also reshapes moral perception. Because PLAVE are mediated through avatars, some participants experience the relationship as less physically charged than conventional idol culture. However, virtuality does not remove intimacy. Fan translations, live updates and community circulation create repeated contact. P11 describes fan-mediated translations as turning updates into a shared experience. P14 likens the updates to "one friend that always has random facts." The relationship becomes ordinary, routinised and socially distributed.

This finding resonates with recent research on PLAVE, which argues that technical seams and the movement between virtual and real identities can deepen fan engagement rather than weaken it (Ahn et al., 2025). In this study, participants do not simply ask whether PLAVE are 'real'; they assess whether the relationship remains emotionally proportionate and morally manageable. The virtual form therefore changes the texture of parasociality, where attraction is mediated through voice, humour, technical novelty, glitch moments and community interpretation rather than only through the idol's physical appearance.

Naql appears less as a direct theological citation than as anticipatory boundary awareness. Participants recognise that attachment may become excessive, emotionally consuming, or conflict-prone on *X*. This anticipatory caution serves as a moral anchor: PLAVE

can be enjoyed, but not allowed to overtake religious duty, study, family responsibilities, or dignity in communication. In this sense, *mīzān* is not a later correction, but part of how attachment is narrated from the beginning.

Phase 2b: Moderation of Affect, Time, Spending and Content

Participants explicitly identify platform risks such as sensationalism, *fitnah* (sedition), fan wars and obsessive behaviour. P11 says she practises self-control when encountering arguments that may cause *fitnah* and scrolls past to avoid being carried away by strong emotions. P16 names the risk as being 'too fanatic' to the point of forgetting religion. These statements show *ʿaql* as risk recognition because participants read the platform as an environment that can escalate emotion.

Naql is expressed through restraint and priority. Islamic values serve as the basis for anger management, the avoidance of slander or conflict, and the rejection of fanaticism. Participants do not position faith as anti-fandom; rather, faith sets the conditions under which fandom remains acceptable. This finding complicates the assumption that religious boundary-making is simply prohibition. In these accounts, religion enables a vocabulary of proportion.

Mīzān is measured through posting, screen time, spending, and genre avoidance. P13 says she interacts and reposts "moderately to maintain self-control." P12 keeps "fangirling in moderation" by appreciating PLAVE without neglecting what matters. P15 provides a self-monitoring checklist: "I make sure not to become too obsessed, spend too much money, or use excessive screen time on *X*." On the other hand, P14 avoids romantic shipping content because she considers it inappropriate. These examples show how moderation is operationalised through everyday digital routines.

Phase 2c: Adab as Communicative Ethics in Fan Publics

Participants recognise that *X* can provoke hostile interaction, privacy violations and emotional slippage. Their accounts treat communication as morally consequential. *ʿAql* appears in the decision to avoid escalation; *naql* appears in the use of *adab* as a religiously grounded ethic of speech. P11 explains that *adab* requires "polite and respectful language" even during disagreement because good speech is fundamental in Islam.

Balance (*mīzān*) is enacted through non-escalation, privacy protection and dignity-preserving interaction. Participants reject fighting, insults and doxxing, while acknowledging that self-control is imperfect. One participant admits that anger can lead to forgetting boundaries before attempting to correct herself. This admission is important because it prevents *adab* from being reduced to moral display. It is a discipline negotiated under the pressures of platform conflict.

Privacy also becomes part of communicative ethics. In fan publics, personal information, screenshots and rumours can circulate rapidly. Participants' rejection of doxxing and hostile exposure indicates that adab is not only about being polite; it also involves protecting others from harm in networked spaces. This widens the meaning of faith-first fandom from personal consumption to relational responsibility. Table 2 maps the findings against the Māturīdī middle path.

Table 2: Summary of findings against the Māturīdī middle path

Concept	Analytical Meaning	Empirical Pattern	Illustrative Practice
ʿAql (discernment)	Reasoned judgement in everyday media use	Participants evaluate content, fan spaces, platform risks and virtual idol intimacy	Skipping unsuitable content; assessing PLAVE through talent, growth and novelty
Naql (Quran and Sunnah as moral anchoring)	Religious values as the primary orientation	Faith, obligations and adab provide criteria for limits	Prioritising worship, study and family; avoiding fitnah and vulgar speech
Mīzān (balance as praxis)	Moderation enacted through routine techniques	Participants regulate time, affect, spending, reposting and social proximity	Setting screen-time limits; reposting moderately; avoiding shipping and fan wars

The findings move beyond a polarised Malaysian moral binary that frames K-Pop either as a threat to Islam or as morally neutral leisure. Across both phases, participants present fandom as an arena of ethical self-governance. Their accounts present faith-first fandom as a hierarchy of values: religion remains primary, while entertainment is allowed only when filtered, bounded, and kept in proportion. This does not mean that participants reject Korean popular culture. Rather, they translate participation into an ethical routine.

Phase 1 shows that demoting K-Pop to secondary entertainment is not a casual disclaimer. It is a communicative strategy that protects the participant from both excessive attachment and social judgement. The phrase "entertainment, not identity" performs boundary-work. It permits enjoyment while refusing the idea that fandom should define lifestyle, obligation or moral aspiration. This finding extends Malaysian scholarship on Korean Wave fans by showing that identity negotiation is also ethical reasoning (Badrul Hisham et al., 2021; Isa & Reissner-Roubicek, 2024).

The results also show that platformed fandom is not governed only by belief, but by attention infrastructures. Algorithms, repost cultures, translations and fan publics continually invite repetition and emotional escalation. Participants respond through micro-governance: skipping, muting, limiting, distancing and choosing safer contexts. These small acts matter because digital ethics often operates at the level of routine decisions rather than grand declarations. In this sense, *mīzān* is not a state of harmony, but ongoing labour under platform pressure.

Phase 2 adds a distinctive contribution to parasociality research. PLAVE's virtual format recalibrates rather than removes intimacy. Participants find the format novel and, at times, less morally troubling than embodied celebrity culture, yet attachment is intensified by constant updates and community circulation. Their moderation of reposting, screen time, spending and shipping suggests that parasocial attachment can be religio-ethically governed. This is especially relevant as virtual idols, VTubers and AI-mediated celebrities become more central to entertainment culture (Ahn et al., 2025).

Adab further demonstrates that faith-first fandom is not only about consumption. It is also about communicative conduct in digital publics. Participants' concerns with respectful speech, non-escalation, and privacy protection reframe fandom as a moral communication environment. The admission of slippage is equally important. It shows that ethical conduct is practised in conditions of provocation, speed and visibility; therefore, balance is fragile and must be repeatedly restored.

The analysis remains critical of gendered moral conditions. Faith-first fandom may express agency, but it may also reflect the unequal burden placed on Malay-Muslim women to demonstrate piety and respectability. Their careful positioning can be read as moral accountability talk that protects them in a judgemental environment. Thus, *mīzān* registers both agency and constraint. This tension should remain visible in communication research on Muslim women, digital religion and Korean popular culture.

The article contributes to communication scholarship in three ways. First, it expands the definition of digital religion beyond explicitly religious spaces by showing how Islamic reasoning appears in entertainment routines. Second, it reframes parasocial attachment as a relationship that can be ethically governed under platform conditions. Third, it integrates a Māturīdī-influenced interpretive sequence into empirical analysis, treating moderation as a method of discernment, anchoring and practice rather than a rhetorical appeal.

These contributions also have implications for media literacy and cultural policy. Moral debates about K-Pop often focus on whether young people should be allowed to consume particular content. The findings suggest that a more useful approach is to strengthen reflective capacities: recognising platform risks, setting time and spending boundaries, evaluating lyrics and visuals, practising respectful disagreement, and understanding how algorithms intensify attachment. Such an approach does not deny religious concerns; it translates them into practical media literacy strategies that young Muslim audiences already partly practise.

For communication educators and researchers, this means that popular culture should not be treated only as a distraction or deviance. It can be a productive entry point for discussing algorithmic literacy, digital wellbeing, religious identity, affective labour and online civility. The participants' strategies show that young audiences already possess vernacular ethics; scholarly analysis can make those ethics visible and assess where they are enabling, burdensome or insufficient.

Several limitations shape the claims. The sample is qualitative and age-bounded, and Phase 2 focuses on one virtual idol fandom on *X*. Participants' answers may also reflect self-presentation dynamics common in moralised topics. Future research could combine interviews with diary methods, longer digital ethnography or comparative analysis across drama fandoms, boy groups, girl groups, virtual influencers and gaming idols. Such work would clarify how class, locality, education and life stage shape the moral labour of fandom.

CONCLUSION

This article argues that K-Pop fandom in Muslim-majority Malaysia is inadequately understood through a binary of cultural threat versus harmless leisure. Drawing on two phases of qualitative data, the study shows that Malay-Muslim women often narrate fandom as an arena of ethical self-governance. They enjoy Korean popular culture, but they also evaluate, filter and limit it through a faith-first hierarchy.

Interpreted through the Māturīdī-influenced sequence of *ʿaql*, *naql* and *mīzān*, the findings show how ethical reasoning operates under platform conditions. In Phase 1, participants use discernment to classify K-Pop as secondary entertainment, draw on religious anchoring when friction arises, and practise balance through selective consumption, distancing and bounded sociality. In Phase 2, virtual idol fandom on X intensifies mediated intimacy while prompting explicit moderation of affect, screen time, spending, posting and online speech. *Adab* emerges as a communicative ethic that shapes respectful engagement and privacy protection in conflict-prone fan publics.

Conceptually, faith-first fandom offers a vocabulary for analysing Malay-Muslim women's participation in globalised entertainment without reducing them to victims of cultural influence or rebels against religious precepts. It recognises agency while keeping the gendered moral burden of respectability visible. By shifting attention from abstract permissibility debates to lived ethical reasoning, the article contributes to communication studies of digital religion, Korean popular culture and women platformed agency. Future research should examine how such boundary practices change across age, class, region, fandom genre and platform architecture as entertainment becomes increasingly virtual, interactive and algorithmically intimate.

The central finding is therefore not that K-Pop is simply compatible or incompatible with Islam. Rather, the finding is that Malay-Muslim women develop communicative techniques for keeping entertainment in proportion. Their practices of filtering, limiting, distancing, reposting carefully and speaking with *adab* reveal the everyday work of balance. This work is imperfect and socially pressured, but it provides a richer account of Muslim women's engagement with Korean popular culture than moral panic or celebration alone can offer.

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BIODATA

Nur Kareelawati Abd Karim is an Associate Professor in Communication and Media Studies at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). Email: kareelawati@usim.edu.my

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