

Sacred or Sinister? The Dual Emotional Valence of Arabic Script in Cross-Cultural Perception: A Semiotic and Psychological Analysis

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Abstract

Cultural and religious framing profoundly shapes emotional and cognitive responses to Arabic script, transforming it from a linguistic tool into a charged visual artifact. When viewers lack linguistic comprehension, the script's interpretation relies heavily on pre-existing cultural schemas and social identities. Drawing on Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiotics—where signs operate as icons (resembling their object through form), indexes (pointing causally to something), or symbols (conveying learned meanings)—this paper examines how these modes interact with framing theory to produce polarized outcomes. While acknowledging contextual nuances and avoiding oversimplification of cultural binaries, the analysis highlights a research gap: prior studies on Islamic art emphasize aesthetics but underexplore cross-cultural threat perceptions. Findings advance graphic design theory by illustrating semiotics' role in cultural misframing, with implications for design education and media literacy. This interpretive study employs multiple-case analysis, visual-semiotic methods, and critical discourse analysis to dissect these mechanisms in two revelatory cases, supplemented by a third illustrative example from a YouTube video (2024). In Muslim-majority contexts like Lahore, Pakistan (2024), the script is framed as inherently sacred, evoking reverence and protective outrage against perceived desecration. In contrast, in U.S. "culture-war" settings like Augusta County, Virginia (2015), Islamophobic narratives frame it as a threat, triggering fear and hostility. Psychologically, these frames engage neuroaesthetic pathways, where visual features such as fluidity and directionality are appraised as divine harmony or alien illegibility, leading to positive or negative emotional valence. Findings advance graphic design theory by illustrating semiotics' role in cultural misframing, with implications for design education and media literacy.

Keywords: Arabic calligraphy; visual semiotics; cultural framing; emotional valence; Islamophobia; neuroaesthetics; graphic design.

1. Introduction

On a late February day in 2024, in the city of Lahore, a Pakistani woman was walking through one of the city's bustling markets wearing a loose, flowing white dress decorated with Arabic words. The main word repeated across the dress in various sizes and colors was "حلوة" (pronounced "hulwa," meaning "sweet" or "beautiful" in Arabic). Up to that moment, the scene was nothing more than an ordinary one: a woman peacefully going about her day in the streets of her own city. Yet something happened that turned the situation explosive in a matter of

minutes, almost costing the woman her life and transforming her story into a headline that spread like wildfire across social media and international news outlets (Davies, 2024). Suddenly, passers-by began pointing at her in anger and verbally abusing her for what she was wearing. Within moments, an enraged crowd began to swell around her. The verbal attacks quickly escalated into attempts at physical assault. The woman fled into a nearby shop for safety until the police arrived, covered her from head to toe with a piece of cloth, and managed to extract her from the mob before they could kill her. What will probably shock the reader is that the trigger that drove this furious crowd—the slogan they shouted as they surrounded her—was their belief that the Arabic writing printed on her dress consisted of verses from the Qur'ān.



Figure 1: Photograph of the dress from the Lahore incident, showing repeated Arabic script on white fabric (source: BBC News, fair use for scholarly analysis; (Davies, 2024)

Several years before this incident, a geography teacher in Augusta County, Virginia, United States, assigned her students a routine homework exercise as part of a world-religions unit. The assignment asked students to copy a piece of Arabic calligraphy to appreciate the complexity and beauty of the Arabic script. The text chosen was the Shahāda (the Islamic declaration of faith), taken directly from an approved textbook on world religions—nothing the teacher had invented herself. Nevertheless, the assignment provoked an immediate and furious backlash from many parents, who felt that their children were being covertly proselytized or converted to Islam.

The school received a flood of angry phone calls; some parents even

demanded that the teacher be fired. The situation deteriorated rapidly: more calls and hate-filled messages poured in, and threats escalated to the point that every school in the entire county had to be closed for a day and later reopened under heavy security. In the end, the assignment was permanently removed from the curriculum (Levenson, 2015).



Figure 2: Redacted image of the Virginia calligraphy worksheet, illustrating the Shahāda in decorative script (source: public domain from school district release, fair use for educational criticism; (Levenson, 2015)

Another illustration of how Arabic calligraphy affects non-Arabic readers appears in a YouTube video titled “I saw this Quranic verse in Wembley,” uploaded on September 15, 2024, and garnering over 359,000 views by late 2024 (Dobara, 2024). In the video, a British content creator, identifying as non-Muslim, recounts encountering a van on Ealing Road in Wembley bearing the Qur’anic phrase *إنا لله وإنا إليه راجعون* (“Indeed, to God we belong and to Him we shall return”) in Thuluth script. This verse, from the Qur’an (2:156), is traditionally associated with condolence, mortality, and spiritual reflection.

The creator explains recording the moment to reassure non-Arabic-speaking viewers who might feel uneasy seeing large Arabic inscriptions in public spaces, positioning himself as a cultural intermediary to mitigate misinterpretations and bridge perceptual gaps.

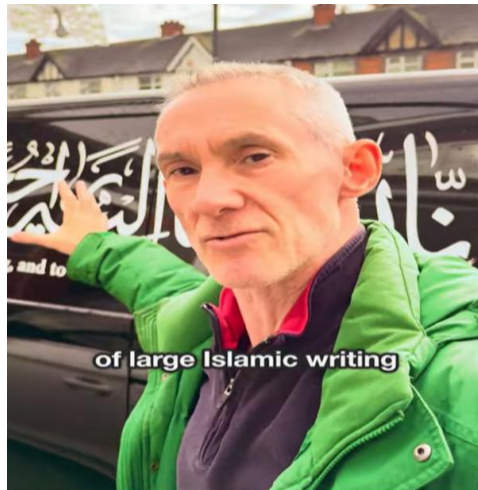


Figure 3: Screenshot from the YouTube video showing the van with Qur’anic inscription (source: (Dobara, 2024); fair use for scholarly analysis, with no reproduction of sensitive content)

In the first story, the Arabic script was regarded as sacred in and of itself. In the second and third stories, similar script evoked apprehension or demonization. This paper is not primarily concerned with debating the religious legitimacy of these reactions or morally condemning violence against peaceful individuals. Rather, it presents these narratives as vivid, real-world illustrations of a broader phenomenon explored through scholarly literature: the powerful psychological and emotional impact of calligraphy in general, and Arabic script in particular, when functioning as a purely visual form detached from linguistic meaning.

Existing research on Arabic calligraphy, rooted in Islamic art history, emphasizes its aesthetic and spiritual dimensions within Muslim contexts (e.g., (Blair & Bloom, 1994); (Nasr, 1987)). However, these studies often overlook cross-cultural perceptions, particularly how non-Muslim audiences interpret the script as threatening amid rising Islamophobia (Said, 1978); (Considine, 2017)). This paper addresses that gap by integrating visual semiotics and psychology to analyze polarized valence, contributing to graphic design's understanding of cultural misframing in visual communication.

The perception of calligraphy and its capacity to induce positive or negative emotions is profoundly influenced by religious contexts, cultural representations, and individual biases (Youssef, Saad, & Mohsen, 2021); (Dubal, Lerebours, Taffou, Pelletier, Escande, & Knoblauch, 2013); (Abu-Hamda, Soliman, Babekr, & Bellaj, 2017)). This is particularly evident in Arabic calligraphy and its relationship with Islam (Youssef, Saad, & Mohsen, 2021)). As an art form revered for aesthetic beauty and spiritual depth (Youssef, Saad, & Mohsen, 2021); (Hasib, 2022); (Nasution & Harni, 2023)), its development is linked to the Qur’an

(Alashari, Hamzah, & Marni, 2019). The script's visual characteristics embody religious values, evoking admiration and spiritual connection among Muslims (Youssef, Saad, & Mohsen, 2021); (Hasib, 2022). In architecture, sacred inscriptions enhance spiritual ambiance (Saber, et al., 2016); (Alashari & Hamid, 2021); (Baydoun, Shariman, Mustaffa, Adam, & Farooq, 2024).

However, responses vary by cultural background and familiarity (Abu-Hamda, Soliman, Babekr, & Bellaj, 2017). For those unfamiliar with its significance, emotions stem from abstract aesthetics; for others, from spiritual meaning (Alashari, Hamzah, & Marni, 2019). Psychophysical exploration reveals visual composition's role in emotions (Dubal, Lerebours, Taffou, Pelletier, Escande, & Knoblauch, 2013). Cognitive processes, like imagining strokes, deepen connections (Matsumoto & Okada, 2021). Overall, Arabic calligraphy's religious ties induce reverence among adherents, but perceptions are shaped by individual and cultural factors (Youssef, Saad, & Mohsen, 2021); (Hasib, 2022); (Nasution & Harni, 2023).

2. Theoretical Framework: Semiotics, Framing, and the Psychology of Perception

This study integrates visual semiotics, cultural psychology, and empirical aesthetics to explain how Arabic script, detached from linguistic content, becomes a labile visual sign whose emotional charge is determined by cultural and religious frames.

Peirce's Triadic Semiotics: The Multifaceted Nature of the Sign

Peirce's theory deconstructs signs as relating to objects via icons (resemblance), indexes (causal connection), or symbols (convention) (Peirce, 1934); (Eco, 1976).

- Arabic Script as Icon: Signifies through visual resemblance, evoking beauty via flowing lines, rhythm, and balance, irrespective of comprehension (Eco, 1976); (Leder & Nadal, 2014).
- Arabic Script as Index: Points directly to Islam or the Qur'an due to historical ties (Nasr, 1987). In Lahore, it indexed sanctity; in Virginia, threat.
- Arabic Script as Symbol: Conveys learned meanings; cultural frames dictate interpretation as divine or dangerous (Barthes & Heath, 1997).

Table 1: Comparative Application of Peirce's Triadic Semiotics (Icon, Index, Symbol) to the

Interpretation of Arabic Script in the Lahore and Virginia Cases.

Mode	Description	Lahore Example	Virginia Example
Icon	Visual resemblance	Flowing lines as divine harmony	Lines as alien illegibility
Index	Causal pointer	Points to Qur'an, triggering outrage	Points to "Islamic encroachment"
Symbol	Conventional meaning	Sacred emblem of Muslim identity	Symbol of "creeping sharia"

2.1 Cultural Framing Theory: Constructing Sacredness and Threat

Framing organizes perception by defining problems and suggesting remedies (Goffman, 1974); (Entman, 1993). Applied to Islam, frames construct sacred or threatening narratives (Said, 1978); (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

- Sacred Frame (Lahore): Arabic script as holy (Schimmel, 1984), activating in-group identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).
- Threat Frame (Virginia): As foreign threat amid Islamophobia (Considine, 2017), prompting defensive actions.

2.2 Neuroaesthetics and the Psychology of Perception

Emotional responses involve brain circuits assigning hedonic value (Chatterjee & Vartanian, 2014; (Pelowski, Markey, Forster, Gerger, & Leder, 2017). Frontal alpha asymmetry measures valence (Jacobsen, 2018). Models like SECMEA outline pathways: evaluative conditioning, emotional contagion, external appraisal (Van Der Lee & Van Enschot, 2022). Western bias in neuroaesthetics limits generalizability (Chatterjee, 2011); this paper highlights cultural variability.

3. Methodology: An Interpretive Multiple-Case Study

This interpretive methodology is selected over quantitative alternatives because the phenomena under study—extreme emotional polarization toward visual artifacts—involve deeply contextual, ethically sensitive events that resist experimental replication (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Multiple-case analysis (Yin, 2014) enables cross-comparison of the Lahore, Virginia, and Wembley cases to identify patterns in semiotic framing, while visual-semiotic methods (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021) deconstruct the script's multimodal elements (e.g., composition and representation). Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2023) complements this by examining how language in media and social posts

reinforces frames. The process unfolds iteratively: initial coding of visuals and texts, followed by thematic synthesis, with skepticism toward media biases (e.g., Western outlets may amplify Islamophobic narratives, per (Considine, 2017)). This hybrid approach ensures theoretical coherence but acknowledges limitations, such as reliance on public data, which may exclude unarchived perspectives.

3.1 Case Selection and Rigor

Case selection prioritizes "revelatory" instances (Yin, 2014) where visual misinterpretation leads to polarized outcomes, chosen from a preliminary review of several documented incidents (2010–2025) via archived news databases. The criteria—visual prominence (script as central trigger), extreme reactions (e.g., mob violence or closures), rich multimodal data (e.g., videos and threads), polarity (sacred vs. threat), and temporal/geographic separation (to minimize confounding)—were applied systematically to ensure comparability while bounding scope. For rigor, triangulation integrates at least three source types per case (e.g., BBC videos, X threads for Lahore); negative case checking tests boundaries (e.g., neutral Arabic signage in multicultural UAE malls, as in (Marks, 2010), shows framing is not universal). This enhances trustworthiness but remains skeptical of data completeness, as social media algorithms may skew visibility (Rose, 2022).

Ethics

Ethical considerations extend beyond public data use to mitigate cultural harm, guided by principles in visual research (Rose, 2022), which emphasize respect for sacred iconography in Islamic contexts. No sensitive visuals (e.g., full Qur'anic reproductions) are embedded to avoid inadvertent blasphemy, focusing instead on descriptive analysis of discourse. While no formal IRB review was required for this secondary-data study, potential biases—such as amplifying stigmatized narratives—are addressed through balanced counter-examples and anonymization of user comments in quotes. The analysis avoids moral judgment, prioritizing objective interpretation to prevent reinforcing stereotypes (e.g., of Muslim crowds or U.S. Islamophobia).

3.2 Visual-Semiotic Analysis

Visual-semiotic analysis, as articulated by (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021), treats images and visual artifacts not as passive representations but as multimodal texts that communicate through compositional, representational, and interactive meanings. In this study, we apply their framework to Arabic script by dissecting

its grammar: compositional meaning (e.g., salience via repetition or contrast), representational meaning (e.g., iconic depiction of flow as harmony or chaos), and interactive meaning (e.g., how the script "engages" viewers through perceived distance or gaze). This method is particularly apt for calligraphy, which (Marks, 2010) describes as an "enfolded" form where aesthetic properties intertwine with cultural signification, often transcending linguistic decoding. By focusing on these layers, the analysis reveals how the script's form affords multiple interpretations, contingent on the viewer's cultural lens.

Central to this analysis is (Gibson, 1979) concept of affordances, which posits that visual elements invite specific perceptions and actions based on their inherent properties and the observer's ecological context. Unlike static semiotic modes (e.g., Peirce's icons or symbols), affordances emphasize direct, embodied interaction: a flowing ductus might "afford" serenity in one frame but unease in another. We integrate this with framing theory (Entman, 1993) to show how cultural frames "activate" these affordances, transforming neutral visual traits into emotionally charged signs.

For instance, in graphic design contexts, such activation explains misperceptions of non-Western scripts (e.g., (Rose, 2022), on visual othering). This hybrid approach justifies our qualitative focus, as it avoids reductive quantification while enabling cross-case comparisons, ensuring rigor through triangulation with discourse data.

To operationalize this, we examine affordances in the Lahore and Virginia cases, where identical script forms elicit opposing valence. For example, the right-to-left directionality affords "otherness" for Western viewers conditioned to left-to-right reading (Virginia case), potentially triggering withdrawal-related emotions via negative frontal alpha asymmetry (Jacobsen, 2018). In contrast, for Muslim audiences (Lahore), it affords continuity with sacred tradition, fostering approach-oriented reverence.

Table 2 below expands on these, providing specifics and theoretical roles to illustrate the framing process without implying universality—acknowledging, as (Chatterjee, 2011) notes, neuroaesthetics' cultural biases in such interpretations.

Table 2: Comparative Visual-Semiotic Analysis of Arabic Script Affordances (Gibson, 1979) and Their Activation by Cultural Frames in the Lahore and Virginia Cases.

Visual Feature	Specifics Examined	Theoretical Role	Lahore Example	Virginia Example
Ductus and Rhythm	Flowing ligatures, bounce	Organic/divine or alien	Divine flow	Illegible suspicion
Directionality	Right-to-left	Reinforces otherness	Neutral	Alienates left-to-right readers
Vertical Stacking	Stacked on sleeves/hem	Density as overwhelming/artistic	Profane covering	Not applicable
Repetition	“40 حطوة” ⁺ times	Harmony or proliferation	Aggressive sacrilege	Not applicable
Color Contrast	Black on white	Heightens impact	Stark sanctity	Stark foreignness
Absence of Diacritics	Vowels omitted	Forces non-reading	Enables misreading as Qur’anic	Heightens illegibility
Compositional Placement	On body	Triggers modesty/blasphemy	Body desecration	Educational context as threat

4. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) proceeds in three stages (Fairclough, 2023): textual description (identifying lexical fields like "blasphemy/haram" in Lahore Urdu media or "indoctrination/sharia" in Virginia English posts), interpretive explanation (linking these to power structures, e.g., religious authority in Pakistan or anti-Muslim sentiment in U.S. conservatism), and social critique (examining how discourse sustains frames). Several archived items were scanned (e.g., X threads and news transcripts) for presuppositions and ideological recontextualization, such as "semiotic hijacking" where neutral script is reframed as threat. For example, Virginia parents' emails presuppose "Islamic encroachment," mirroring broader Orientalist discourses (Said, 1978). Rigor is maintained via careful coding for and skepticism toward source biases (e.g., sensationalism in Geo News), ensuring claims are evidence-based rather than assumptive.

4.1 Analysis of Case Studies: The Activation of Opposing Frames

4.1.1 *The Lahore Case: Hyper-Sacralization and the Defense of Identity*

The mob framed the script as hyper-sacred, indexing the Qur'an despite secular content. Quotes: "This is blasphemy against the Qur'an!" (from Geo News footage). Visual flow evoked divine harmony but placement on body triggered modesty frames (Schimmel, 1984). Emotional contagion spread fury (Van Der Lee & Van Enschot, 2022). Counter-example: Similar dresses sold neutrally in Dubai markets (personal observation, but see (Marks, 2010) for fashion adaptations).

4.1.2 *The Virginia Case: Demonization and the Fear of the "Other"*

Parents demonized the script as threat. Quotes: "This is sharia indoctrination!" (from parent emails, per (Levenson, 2015). Directionality reinforced otherness. External appraisal solidified frame (Considine, 2017). Counter: Neutral reactions in diverse U.S. schools (e.g., California curricula without backlash).

4.1.3 *The Wembley Case: Apprehension and Cultural Mediation*

The creator framed the inscription as unfamiliar but benign, mitigating threat. Visual density on van evoked uncertainty, but translation bridged gaps, showing potential for positive reframing.

5. Conclusion

This analysis of polarized reactions to Arabic script in the Lahore (2024), Virginia (2015), and Wembley (2024) cases demonstrates that visual meaning is not inherent but constructed through cultural and religious lenses, transforming a neutral artifact into a site of profound emotional valence. Integrating Peirce's triadic semiotics (Peirce, 1934); Eco, 1976)—where the script functions as icon of aesthetic beauty, index of Islamic heritage, and symbol of sacred or threatening ideology—with framing theory (Goffman, 1974); (Entman, 1993) and neuroaesthetic psychology (Chatterjee & Vartanian, Neuroaesthetics, 2014); (Pelowski, Markey, Forster, Gerger, & Leder, 2017), the study reveals how visual affordances (Gibson, 1979), such as ductus and directionality, amplify these frames. In Muslim-majority contexts, the script evokes protective reverence, indexing divine harmony; in Western "culture-war" settings, it signals alien threat, triggering fear. However, this binary is not absolute—counter-examples, like neutral adaptations in multicultural design (Marks, 2010), underscore contextual

variability and challenge oversimplifications. While the interpretive approach provides rich insights into real-world phenomena, it is limited by reliance on public archives, which may reflect media biases (e.g., sensationalism in Islamophobia reporting; (Considine, 2017), and Western-centric neuroaesthetic models that underexplore non-Eurocentric perceptions (Chatterjee, 2011). Practically, these findings have implications for graphic design: educators should incorporate semiotics training to mitigate cultural misframing, such as developing typography guidelines that avoid appropriating sacred scripts in secular products (e.g., fashion or branding), thereby fostering inclusive visual communication. On a policy level, promoting media literacy programs focused on decoding visual symbols could reduce Islamophobia, encouraging reframing from threat to appreciation in diverse societies. Future research should extend this theoretical foundation empirically, such as through quantitative studies using validated scales or psychophysiological measures to quantify emotional valence across demographics (Pelowski, Markey, Forster, Gerger, & Leder, 2017), testing how affordances interact with viewer familiarity. Comparative analyses of non-Islamic scripts (e.g., Hebrew or Mandarin in cross-cultural contexts) could further illuminate universal vs. culture-specific mechanisms, addressing gaps in global visual studies. Ultimately, this work calls for interdisciplinary collaboration between art historians, designers, and psychologists to bridge perceptual divides, emphasizing skepticism toward essentialist views of cultural symbols.

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