

Streaming Heritage: Digitalisation and the Glocalisation of Malaysian Genres

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100700887>

Received: 21 April 2026; Accepted: 25 April 2026; Published: 14 August 2026

ABSTRACT

Digitalisation has transformed how music is produced, distributed, and consumed, but its effects on culturally rooted genres remain underexplored. This study examines how Irama Malaysia and Nasyid practitioners use streaming platforms while preserving cultural, linguistic, and ideological identity. Using a qualitative design informed by ethnographic principles, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with 20 participants through 20 semi-structured interviews comprising artists, producers, and industry practitioners with direct experience in digital production and distribution. The data were analysed thematically through iterative coding and interpretation guided by glocalisation theory. Three themes emerged: digital platforms as cultural gateways, selective adaptation of sound and identity, and the unequal opportunities created by streaming visibility. Although streaming services expand transnational reach and support niche audiences, algorithmic curation, genre classification, and platform metrics can limit the visibility of local music. The findings show that practitioners respond through selective adaptation: they modernise production, branding, and distribution while retaining local language, musical structures, values, and narratives. The study extends glocalisation theory by showing that digitalisation is not simply a tension between preservation and change, but an ongoing process of strategic cultural negotiation. It also offers practical implications for artists, policymakers, platforms, and music-industry organisations seeking to sustain Malaysian musical heritage in digital environments.

INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies and streaming platforms have restructured the global music industry. Spotify, YouTube, Apple Music, and related services now shape how music is circulated, discovered, valued, and monetised. These platforms offer artists wider access to audiences, yet they also organise visibility through algorithms, playlists, metadata, and commercial metrics. Research on digital music has often centred on Western popular-music markets and has frequently described platforms as forces of cultural homogenisation. This view highlights the dominance of Anglo-American aesthetics and the difficulty faced by local genres within global systems. However, it can understate the agency of artists and producers who adapt digital tools to local cultural purposes. This study addresses that gap through two Malaysian genres: Irama Malaysia and Nasyid. Irama Malaysia combines traditional Malay elements with contemporary popular styles and is closely associated with national and cultural identity. Nasyid is rooted in Islamic values and combines faith-based messages with changing musical forms. Both genres occupy culturally important but commercially specialised spaces. Digitalisation creates a double condition for these genres. It enables transnational circulation, diasporic engagement, direct audience interaction, and long-term digital archiving. At the same time, it subjects local music to genre categories, recommendation systems, and success indicators that may not reflect Malaysian cultural contexts. Using glocalisation as its theoretical lens, this article asks how Malaysian music practitioners adapt to global digital platforms while preserving local identity. It makes three contributions. First, it provides evidence from an underrepresented Southeast Asian context. Second, it develops glocalisation as a process of strategic decision-making rather than merely cultural hybridity. Third, it reframes digital success to include cultural continuity, loyal niche audiences, and symbolic value alongside reach and visibility.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Digitalisation has shifted music from physical distribution to platform-based ecosystems built around subscriptions, data analytics, and algorithmic recommendations (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Morris & Powers, 2015). Platforms are therefore not neutral channels. They act as cultural intermediaries by influencing what listeners encounter and what artists perceive as commercially viable (Morris, 2015; Prey, 2020). For local and culturally embedded genres, this platform environment is contradictory. Digital distribution lowers entry barriers, supports niche audiences, and enables circulation beyond national borders (Hracs et al., 2016). Yet platform systems may privilege dominant languages, genres, and production conventions. Local music can therefore be available globally without becoming easily discoverable. Earlier globalisation theories often emphasised cultural homogenisation and Western media dominance (Tomlinson, 1999). In music studies, this position raised concerns that local traditions would be weakened by standardised production and consumption patterns (Negus, 1996; Taylor, 2016). Later scholarship challenged this determinism by showing that local actors selectively interpret and reshape global cultural resources (Kraidy, 2005). Glocalisation explains this interaction between global structures and local practices. Robertson (1995) argues that the global and local are mutually constitutive rather than opposing forces. Appadurai (1996) similarly describes global cultural flows as multidirectional resources that local actors can appropriate and reinterpret. Applied to music, glocalisation therefore concerns how artists use global technologies while retaining locally meaningful language, values, sounds, and social functions. This study advances the theory in two ways. First, it treats glocalisation as a sequence of practical choices about what to change, what to preserve, and what to resist. Second, it shows that glocalisation occurs within unequal platform infrastructures. Local agency matters, but it operates under algorithmic, classificatory, and commercial constraints (Srnicke, 2017). The resulting framework links three dimensions: platform conditions, practitioner strategies, and cultural outcomes.

Table 1. Analytical framework for digital glocalisation

Dimension	Key question	Indicators in this study
Platform conditions	What opportunities and constraints do platforms create?	Reach, discoverability, metadata, playlists, metrics, algorithmic visibility
Practitioner strategies	How do local actors respond?	Selective adaptation, direct audience engagement, branding, niche targeting, archival use
Cultural outcomes	What is preserved or transformed?	Language, values, lyrical themes, musical structures, identity, continuity

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research design informed by ethnographic principles. The design was appropriate because the research examined how practitioners interpret digitalisation, make creative decisions, and negotiate cultural identity in their professional lives (Creswell, 2013). The study focused on Irama Malaysia and Nasyid practitioners with direct experience of music production, performance, recording, distribution, or platform use. Participants and sampling. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 20 participants comprising artists, producers, and music industry practitioners associated with Irama Malaysia and Nasyid. The participants represented the 20–25 age range. Eligibility required sustained involvement in Malaysian music production, performance, distribution, or digital-platform use and sufficient experience to discuss contemporary digital practices. The sample was fixed at 20 participants to provide a range of informed, information-rich perspectives rather than statistical generalisation (Patton, 2015).

Data collection. The researchers conducted 20 semi-structured interviews over a two-month period. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through email, depending on participant availability and preference. The interview questions addressed platform use, changes



in production and distribution practices, streaming visibility, audience engagement, and strategies for maintaining cultural identity. Face-to-face interviews were documented with participants' consent, while email interviews provided written responses for analysis. Informal observations and reflective field notes supplied additional contextual evidence and supported triangulation.

Data analysis. The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers first familiarised themselves with the transcripts, generated initial codes, compared recurring patterns, and grouped related codes into candidate themes. Themes were then reviewed against the full dataset and interpreted through glocalisation theory. The analysis combined inductive coding with theory-informed interpretation. Rigour, ethics, and positionality. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of interviews, observations, and field notes; reflexive memoing; and detailed contextual description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The lead researcher's insider position supported access and rapport but also required continued reflection on assumptions and power relations (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, participation was voluntary, and anonymity and confidentiality were protected throughout the research process.

Table 2. Participant and interview profile

Item	Details to Report
Total participants	20 participants
Participant roles	Artists, producers, and music industry practitioners
Genre representation	Irama Malaysia and Nasyid; participants represented the 20–25 age range
Number of interviews	20 semi-structured interviews
Interview period	Data collection was completed over a two-month period
Interview duration	Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes
Interview mode	Face-to-face interviews and email interviews
Sampling endpoint	A fixed purposive sample of 20 information-rich participants

FINDINGS: DIGITALISATION AND GLOCALISED PRACTICES IN MALAYSIAN MUSIC

Three connected themes emerged from the interviews: digital platforms as cultural gateways, selective adaptation of sound and identity, and unequal streaming visibility. Together, they show that digitalisation is negotiated rather than passively accepted.

4.1 Digital Platforms as Cultural Gateways

Participants described Spotify, YouTube, and social media as essential routes to audiences after the decline of physical distribution and the reduced influence of conventional gatekeepers. These services were especially valuable for niche genres because they enabled circulation beyond national borders and supported engagement with Malaysian diasporic communities. One producer explained that digital platforms allowed culturally rooted music to “travel without needing permission.” Participants interpreted this reach as cultural affirmation rather than dilution. However, they also noted that global metadata and genre categories often failed to represent local classifications accurately. As one artist stated, Malaysian genres were sometimes “forced into categories that don’t fully describe what the music is.” Thus, platforms expanded access while narrowing how local music was labelled and discovered.



4.2 Selective Adaptation of Sound and Identity

Practitioners reported adjusting song length, arrangement, mixing clarity, visual branding, and promotional timing to suit digital listening habits. These changes were shaped partly by perceptions of algorithms and shorter audience attention spans. Adaptation did not extend equally to all aspects of the music. Participants repeatedly identified language, lyrical themes, melodic structures, spiritual values, and cultural narratives as core elements that should remain intact. A Nasyid practitioner noted that production had become “more modern,” while the genre’s ethical and spiritual foundations remained unchanged. Irama Malaysia practitioners likewise updated sonic textures without abandoning traditional rhythmic and melodic features. Digital change therefore produced selective hybridity rather than wholesale standardisation.

4.3 Opportunities and Constraints of Streaming Visibility

Participants valued play counts, follower numbers, and playlist placements but questioned whether these metrics adequately represented culturally specific genres with smaller audiences. Algorithmic recommendation was described as opaque and more favourable to globally dominant popular styles. One practitioner observed that cultural music often “exists on the platform, but not in the spotlight.” Practitioners responded by targeting niche communities, combining streaming with direct social-media engagement, and using platforms as archives as well as commercial channels. They defined success through audience loyalty, cultural continuity, and long-term relevance, not only through virality. These practices demonstrate local agency within unequal digital structures.

Table 3. Summary of findings and practical implications

Theme	Evidence	Interpretation	Practical implication
Cultural gateways	Wider reach, diasporic audiences, reduced dependence on traditional gatekeepers	Platforms enable circulation but classify local music imperfectly	Improve metadata, genre tagging, and culturally informed playlists
Selective adaptation	Changes to song length, mixing, arrangement, branding, and promotion	Practitioners modernise form while protecting core identity	Support production and platform-literacy training without prescribing cultural standardisation
Unequal visibility	Opaque algorithms and metrics favour dominant styles	Availability does not guarantee discoverability	Develop public-interest curation, local genre hubs, and alternative cultural-impact indicators

DISCUSSION: STREAMING HERITAGE THROUGH GLOCALISATION

The findings challenge the assumption that digital platforms produce either cultural preservation or cultural loss. Malaysian practitioners operate between these outcomes. They use global infrastructures while making deliberate local choices about sound, language, values, audiences, and measures of success. This study adds to glocalisation theory by identifying selective adaptation as an operational process. Glocalisation is not only visible in hybrid musical products; it occurs in repeated decisions about what can change, what must remain, and what should be resisted. These decisions are shaped by cultural responsibility, audience expectations, platform requirements, and economic limits. The study also shows that agency and inequality coexist. Practitioners can redirect digital tools towards local purposes, but they cannot fully control algorithmic recommendations, metadata standards, playlist systems, or platform metrics. Glocalisation therefore takes place within unequal infrastructures rather than outside them. A further contribution is the distinction between technical adaptation and ideological continuity. Participants accepted changes in production quality, song structure, branding, and distribution more readily than changes to language, values, lyrical messages, or culturally meaningful musical features. This distinction explains how heritage can remain recognisable even when its modes of presentation evolve. Finally, the findings broaden the meaning of digital success. Virality and high stream counts are useful but insufficient for culturally embedded genres. Audience loyalty, diasporic



connection, archival continuity, educational value, and sustained cultural recognition are also important outcomes. This culturally sensitive view of success is particularly relevant to music industries in the Global South.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

For artists and producers. Retain a documented set of non-negotiable cultural elements—such as language, lyrical values, melodic features, and traditional instrumentation—before adapting arrangements, song length, mixes, or visual branding for platforms. Use audience analytics as evidence, not as the sole basis for creative decisions.

For music-industry organisations. Provide training in metadata, digital distribution, rights management, audience development, and platform analytics. Create curated Malaysian-genre playlists, digital archives, and cross-border campaigns aimed at regional and diasporic audiences.

For policymakers and cultural agencies. Fund digitisation, high-quality recording, documentation, and discoverability programmes for culturally significant genres. Evaluation should include cultural reach, continuity, educational use, and community engagement rather than stream counts alone.

For streaming platforms. Expand local genre taxonomies, consult Malaysian music experts, strengthen editorial curation, and make recommendation and metadata systems more responsive to culturally specific music.

For educators and researchers. Develop digital-platform literacy within music curricula and conduct audience-based studies to examine how listeners interpret authenticity, identity, and heritage in streamed Malaysian music.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This study shows that Irama Malaysia and Nasyid practitioners do not simply submit to or reject digitalisation. They use platforms strategically, adapting production and distribution while preserving culturally important meanings, values, and musical features. The article contributes to digital-music scholarship by placing Southeast Asian experience at the centre of theory-building. It extends glocalisation from a description of hybridity to a model of strategic cultural negotiation under unequal platform conditions. The study is limited by its qualitative focus on selected genres and practitioner perspectives. Its claims are therefore analytical rather than statistically generalisable. Future research should compare additional Malaysian genres, include listener perspectives, and examine how platform data and editorial practices affect discoverability over time. Malaysian musical heritage can be streamed without being surrendered, but its sustainability depends on informed artistic choices, supportive industry structures, culturally responsive policy, and more inclusive platform design.

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