

Between Faith and Film: A Comparative Reception Analysis of Mentega Terbang among Malaysian and Indonesian Students

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

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The Malaysian film *Mentega Terbang* has generated significant debate due to its portrayal of religious questioning, interfaith exploration, and sensitive theological themes. While previous discussions have largely focused on doctrinal critiques and institutional responses, limited attention has been given to how audiences themselves interpret the film. This study employs a reception analysis to examine how university students from Malaysia and Indonesia interpret and respond to the religious narratives presented in *Mentega Terbang*. Using purposive sampling, participants were first asked to watch the full film before participating in in-depth interviews that explored their interpretations, emotional reactions, and perceived implications for faith and religious identity. Guided by Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework, the study identifies dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings among participants from both countries. The findings reveal that while many students expressed concern over themes perceived as challenging Islamic orthodoxy, responses varied according to socio-religious context, religious education, and cultural background. Malaysian participants tended to emphasise institutional and doctrinal boundaries surrounding *aqidah*, whereas Indonesian participants displayed relatively more varied interpretations influenced by Indonesia's diverse Islamic traditions and pluralistic environment. Despite these differences, participants from both contexts largely interpreted the film through a moral and religious lens, reflecting the continuing significance of faith-based frameworks in shaping audience reception. The study contributes to scholarship on religion and media by demonstrating how socio-religious environments influence the interpretation of controversial media texts in Southeast Asia.

1. Introduction

The intersection of religion and media has long attracted scholarly attention, particularly in societies where religion plays a central role in shaping identity and moral frameworks (Sofian et al., 2025; Sabri et al., 2025; Annisa et al., 2025). In Muslim-majority countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, film functions not merely as a form of entertainment, but also as a site of ideological negotiation where questions of faith, authority, and identity are continuously constructed and contested (Hamayotsu, 2022; Sofian et al., 2025; Annisa et al., 2025).

Despite sharing a Muslim-majority demographic, Malaysia and Indonesia differ significantly in how Islam is institutionally and socially organised. In Malaysia, Islam is constitutionally embedded

as the religion of the Federation and is closely regulated by state religious authorities, shaping public discourse and reinforcing doctrinal boundaries, particularly in matters related to aqidah and moral conduct (Krishnan, 2025; Sofian et al., 2026). In contrast, Indonesia, while also deeply influenced by Islam, operates within a pluralistic and officially secular framework (Pancasila), where multiple religious expressions coexist and Islamic discourse is often more diverse and decentralized (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2010). These differences create distinct socio-religious environments that influence how media texts, especially those addressing sensitive religious themes, are received and interpreted.

Within this context, the film *Mentega Terbang* has emerged as a controversial cultural text. Its narrative, which engages with themes of religious questioning, interfaith exploration, and personal belief, has generated considerable public debate, particularly in Malaysia (Al Bakri, 2023). Existing discussions have largely centred on doctrinal concerns, institutional responses, and the perceived threat to Islamic orthodoxy (Sofian et al., 2026). However, such discourse often overlooks a crucial dimension—how audiences themselves interpret and make meaning of the film.

Audience reception is not passive; rather, it is actively shaped by individuals' socio-cultural backgrounds, religious education, and lived experiences. Drawing on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework, audiences may adopt dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings when engaging with media texts (Hall, 1980). This framework is particularly useful for examining how Muslim audiences respond to religiously sensitive content, where meaning is often negotiated within the boundaries of faith and cultural norms.

A dominant reading occurs when viewers accept the intended meaning of the text, aligning with its underlying ideological message. In contrast, a negotiated reading reflects a partial acceptance, where audiences recognize the intended message but reinterpret it within their own belief systems, often imposing moral or religious boundaries. Meanwhile, oppositional reading arises when audiences reject the preferred meaning altogether, interpreting the text through an alternative framework that may view it as problematic or contradictory to their values. In the context of religiously sensitive content, such as *Mentega Terbang*, these interpretative positions are often shaped by faith-based considerations, where audiences negotiate meaning within the limits of doctrinal beliefs and socio-cultural expectations.

This study aims to examine how university students in Malaysia and Indonesia interpret *Mentega Terbang*, with a focus on their emotional responses, interpretative frameworks, and perceptions of its implications for faith and religious identity. By analysing these responses, the study seeks to understand how differing socio-religious contexts shape audience reception, particularly within two neighbouring Muslim-majority countries where Islam is both socially influential and institutionally embedded, albeit in distinct ways.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative reception analysis approach to examine how university students engage with controversial religious cinema, foregrounding the notion of the "active audience." The study is theoretically grounded in Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, which enables a nuanced categorisation of audience interpretations into three positions: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. A dominant reading reflects acceptance of the film's intended message, a negotiated reading indicates partial acceptance shaped by personal beliefs and contextual considerations, while an oppositional reading involves the rejection of the film's underlying narrative as incompatible with one's value system.

To explore these interpretive dynamics, purposive sampling was employed to select twelve university students (N=12), comprising six participants from Malaysia and six from Indonesia, all of whom were enrolled in Islamic universities. Participants were drawn from diverse academic backgrounds to capture a range of perspectives, while maintaining a shared context of higher education, a setting often associated with critical engagement and reflective thinking.

Data collection was conducted in two phases. First, participants were required to watch *Mentega Terbang* in its entirety to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the narrative. This was followed

by semi-structured, in-depth interviews aimed at eliciting detailed insights into their emotional responses, interpretative frameworks, and reflections on the film's religious themes. The data were then analysed using thematic analysis, where interview transcripts were systematically coded to identify recurring patterns and interpretive positions. Particular attention was given to how differing socio-religious contexts in Malaysia and Indonesia shaped participants' perceptions of religious beliefs, boundaries of faith, and attitudes towards pluralism and spiritual inquiry.

3. Result and Discussion

The findings reveal both notable similarities and important contextual differences in how Malaysian and Indonesian students interpret *Mentega Terbang*. Across both groups, respondents predominantly adopted a negotiated reading, indicating an active engagement with the film rather than passive acceptance of its intended message. Participants from both contexts acknowledged the film's attempt to provoke reflection and discussion, while simultaneously interpreting it through a religious and moral lens, with clear concern for maintaining faith-based boundaries.

However, the nature of this negotiation differs significantly. Malaysian respondents tended to adopt a more restrictive and protective stance, strongly anchored in concerns over *aqidah*, institutional religious authority, and clearly defined doctrinal limits, often emphasising the potential risks of religious ambiguity. In contrast, Indonesian respondents demonstrated a relatively more flexible and dialogic approach, showing greater openness towards interfaith engagement and interpreting the film within a broader framework of pluralism and cultural diversity, while still maintaining core religious principles. These differences suggest that while religion remains central in shaping audience reception in both contexts, the manner in which it is socially and institutionally structured plays a crucial role in influencing how meaning is negotiated.

The findings of this study demonstrate that while university students in both Malaysia and Indonesia predominantly adopt a negotiated reading of *Mentega Terbang*, their interpretations are shaped by the distinct socio-religious architectures of their respective national contexts. This divergence resonates with macro-level insights from the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2010) Muslim Youth Survey, which highlights fundamental differences in how youth in both countries perceive religious authority, identity, and pluralism.

The relatively restrictive and protective stance observed among Malaysian respondents—particularly their emphasis on *aqidah* and institutional religious boundaries—reflects the state-centric configuration of Islam in Malaysia. As noted in the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2010) report, religious authority in Malaysia is highly institutionalised and centralised, with state bodies playing a key role in defining and regulating “correct” Islamic practice. This structural condition shapes how religious discourse is consumed and internalised by young Muslims.

Consequently, Malaysian participants did not engage with *Mentega Terbang* solely as a narrative text, but as a representation with potential implications for the integrity of officially sanctioned religious norms. Their negotiated readings were therefore marked by caution, where partial acceptance of the film's reflective intent was accompanied by a strong emphasis on safeguarding doctrinal boundaries. In this sense, interpretation becomes not merely an individual cognitive process, but a socially conditioned act aligned with the preservation of communal faith and religious orthodoxy.

In contrast, the more flexible and dialogic responses exhibited by Indonesian participants reflect the pluralistic socio-religious environment in which Islam operates in Indonesia. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2010) findings suggest that Indonesian Muslim identity is less rigidly tied to a singular ethnic or institutional framework and is instead embedded within a broader national philosophy of diversity. Islamic discourse in Indonesia is shaped by multiple civil society actors,

including organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, which contribute to a more decentralised and discursive religious landscape.

Within this context, Indonesian students appear more accustomed to engaging with a diversity of perspectives, including those that challenge or complicate established norms. This is reflected in their willingness to interpret the film's portrayal of interfaith exploration as a form of intellectual and spiritual inquiry rather than an outright theological transgression. Their negotiated readings thus take on a more dialogic character, where engagement, reflection, and contextual interpretation are foregrounded alongside the maintenance of core religious principles.

The contrast between Malaysian and Indonesian respondents may also be understood through differing orientations toward religious boundaries and external influences. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2010) report identifies a more protectionist outlook among Malaysian youth, particularly in relation to safeguarding Islam from perceived external challenges. This orientation is evident in the participants' concerns over the film's potential to create confusion or weaken religious conviction.

Conversely, Indonesian respondents demonstrated a relatively more inclusive orientation, aligning with findings that suggest a greater openness toward interfaith engagement and cultural diversity. Rather than perceiving the film primarily as a threat, these participants were more inclined to approach it as a platform for discussion and reflection, even when they did not fully agree with its representations.

4. Conclusion

Taken together, these findings reinforce Hall's (1980) assertion that audience reception is deeply embedded within broader socio-cultural and ideological contexts. The "active audience" does not operate in isolation, rather interpretative practices are shaped by historically situated structures of authority, identity and belief. In this study, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2010) data provides a crucial contextual lens for understanding why Malaysian respondents tended to adopt a more protective stance toward faith, while Indonesian respondents were comparatively more inclined toward dialogic engagement.

Beyond these empirical insights, this study contributes to the scholarship on religion and media by demonstrating that shared interpretative categories such as negotiated readings can manifest differently across socio-religious contexts. By comparatively examining two Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia, the study highlights the importance of moving beyond categorical classifications of audience reception to consider the qualitative nature of interpretation as shaped by institutional and cultural frameworks. In doing so, it extends Hall's model into a comparative Islamic context, offering a more context-sensitive understanding of how audiences engage with religiously sensitive media texts.

Ultimately, the differences observed are not indicative of stronger or weaker religiosity but rather reflect distinct modes of negotiating faith within differing national and institutional frameworks of Islam.

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