



# Beyond the jump scare: Sacred pedagogy, moral negotiation, and postmodern audience agency in Indonesian horror trailer discourse

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## ABSTRACT

Indonesian horror cinema is increasingly embedded in religious discourse, yet scholarly attention has focused predominantly on film texts rather than audience-generated meaning-making. This study investigates how Indonesian viewers engage with religious horror on YouTube, specifically how they construct moral and theological meanings through trailer comment sections. Drawing on an empirical dataset of 600 systematically sampled YouTube comments from the official trailers of *Siksa Kubur* (2024), *Kuasa Gelap* (2024), and *Qodrat 2* (2025), collected on 25 June 2025, the study employs inductive thematic analysis informed by audience reception theory, digital religion studies, and narrative persuasion theory. Five key themes emerged: (1) sacred pedagogy, in which audiences treat horror as a medium of moral and religious instruction; (2) digital access rituals, revealing tensions between content accessibility and authentic viewing; (3) emotional alchemy, whereby fear is reinterpreted as a catalyst for spiritual reflection; (4) critical audience posture, with viewers actively evaluating theological accuracy and cultural authenticity; and (5) the formation of "digital mosques/churches" as virtual spaces for collective identity and religious authority negotiation. Theoretically, this research advances audience reception theory by extending it to paratextual media environments and pre-consumption spaces, demonstrating that moral meaning-making can emerge from trailer fragments alone. Practically, it introduces "sacred pedagogy" as an empirically grounded, non-Western framework for horror analysis. The study contributes to media, religion, and cultural studies by showing how horror, digital platforms, and algorithmic mediation converge to produce community-level moral governance in Muslim-majority societies.

**Keywords:** *horror, Indonesian cinema, religious discourse, digital platforms*

## INTRODUCTION

The success of contemporary religious-themed horror films, both globally and in Indonesia, can be measured through several indicators, including box office performance, sustained audience engagement, and their capacity to generate public debate on religious and moral issues. In 2023, films such as *The Exorcist: Believer* and *The Pope's Exorcist* demonstrated strong commercial visibility and renewed global interest in faith-based horror narratives. Beyond financial metrics, their success is also reflected in the intensity of online discussions, critical commentary, and transnational circulation across digital platforms. Modern audiences no longer engage with horror as passive spectators; instead, they actively interpret and debate its moral and theological implications. In Indonesia—the world's largest Muslim-majority country—this phenomenon is particularly visible, as horror films increasingly integrate religious themes that resonate with local moral frameworks and stimulate public discourse.



The unique social environment of Indonesia makes horror movies serve as functional tools for religious studies and faith-based value preservation (Adiprasetyo, 2023). The directors have proven their expertise in creating spiritual educational horror content through their successful commercial releases of *Siksa Kubur* (Anwar, 2024), *Kuasa Gelap* (Prasetyo, 2024), and *Qodrat 2*, which combine authentic Islamic and Christian elements (Erdaği, 2024). These movies function as cultural artifacts that merge traditional religious beliefs with contemporary media elements to establish a "theology of fear" that profoundly impacts Indonesian viewers.

By "spiritual educational horror," this study does not suggest a formal pedagogical genre, but rather refers to horror narratives that embed explicit religious doctrines, moral consequences, and eschatological themes in ways that invite viewers to reflect on sin, repentance, divine justice, and ethical conduct. In the Indonesian context, such films frequently draw upon Islamic and Christian cosmologies—such as *barzakh*, judgment, demonic possession, or redemption—not merely as aesthetic devices but as moral frameworks. The term therefore describes a narrative configuration in which fear operates as a catalyst for spiritual contemplation and moral self-assessment, as evidenced in audience interpretations rather than solely in authorial intention.

The post-Suharto regulatory environment—including the 2009 Indonesian Film Law (Undang-Undang Perfilman No. 33 Tahun 2009) and censorship standards administered by the Film Censorship Board (Lembaga Sensor Film)—together with shifting cultural policies, created a distinctive space for Indonesian horror cinema that differs markedly from Western genre traditions (Imanjaya, 2024). These regulations required films to avoid overt sexual content and graphic violence while permitting, and often encouraging, narratives grounded in national religious and cultural values, effectively steering horror toward moral and spiritual storytelling. The Indonesian film industry operates under rules that protect both national spiritual elements and cultural standards, according to (Van Heeren, 2019). The directors of Indonesian films construct complex psychological and spiritual storylines instead of adopting Western gore and jump scares in their work (Praratya et al., 2024). The institutions of the country endorse horror movies because they fulfil two vital purposes by entertaining audiences while teaching moral lessons based on cultural rules and religious teachings (Mohammed, 2022). The Indonesian film industry produces successful movies that incorporate religious stories and local myths to create deep spiritual content, which appeals to both domestic cultural viewers and commercial audiences (T. Barker, 2019).

The intersection of horror studies, digital religion, and audience reception theory remains poorly mapped, particularly in non-Western contexts. Horror scholarship has largely theorized audiences through Western paradigms of transgression, abjection, and nihilism (Carroll, 2003; Kristeva, 2024), which presuppose secular or individualistic subject positions ill-suited to Muslim-majority societies. Digital religion scholarship, meanwhile, has documented how online platforms extend religious authority and community formation (Campbell, 2024; Hoover & Echchaibi, 2023), but has rarely engaged with popular entertainment—let alone horror—as a site of theological negotiation. Audience reception theory, originating with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model and extended through Morley's (1992) community-based analysis, has expanded into digital contexts but predominantly addresses news media



and political content, not cinematic paratexts. The result is a triple gap: (a) the absence of audience-centered, discourse-based approaches in Indonesian horror scholarship; (b) the lack of attention to entertainment media within digital religion studies; and (c) the failure of reception theory to account for pre-consumption meaning-making in algorithmically mediated platforms. This study addresses all three gaps simultaneously.

The decision to focus on trailers rather than full films is theoretically and empirically motivated. Trailers are not merely promotional fragments; in digital environments they function as autonomous paratextual objects (Genette, 1997) that circulate independently across platform ecosystems, generate immediate emotional responses, and invite rapid moral and theological interpretation. On YouTube, trailer comment sections attract some of the highest engagement volumes precisely because they appear before full film consumption, functioning as anticipatory spaces where audiences negotiate expectation, cultural legitimacy, and moral acceptability. Unlike full-film reception studies—which require audience exposure to complete narrative arcs—trailer reception captures the moment of first contact, revealing how communities mobilize pre-existing religious and moral frameworks to evaluate forthcoming cultural products. Studying this paratextual space thus extends reception theory beyond its conventional boundaries and offers a methodologically novel entry point into how horror operates as moral discourse in digital, non-Western contexts.

The Indonesian audience interacts with horror movies beyond basic viewing because they actively decode their content—that is, they do not simply accept the meanings encoded by filmmakers, but bring their own religious knowledge, cultural memories, and moral frameworks to bear in interpreting what they watch. Drawing on Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, viewers may adopt negotiated or oppositional readings of horror texts, particularly when religious representation is perceived as inaccurate or offensive. In the Indonesian context, where Islamic and Christian doctrines are deeply embedded in everyday life, audiences carry strong theological reference points that enable them to evaluate horror content not merely for entertainment value but for doctrinal fidelity and moral consequence. A scene depicting the afterlife, a supernatural entity drawn from Islamic eschatology, or a cross used as a weapon thus becomes a text requiring religious interpretation—subject to approval, correction, or condemnation in public digital discourse (Chambers, 2021). Modern movies employ their spiritual elements to construct vital narrative elements that help viewers bond with others while contemplating moral questions (Hitt & Lennerfors, 2022). The standardized storytelling approach in Indonesia merges frightening elements with religious content to establish public religious areas that share meaningful moral narratives. The cinematic experience allows viewers to face existential threats and moral challenges rooted in their cultural background, which transforms movie watching into a communal spiritual practice.

Academic studies of audience reception to these films enable researchers to identify their social effects and cultural impact. The research by (Adiprasetyo, 2023) shows that Indonesian horror movies use cultural and religious narratives to generate interpretation and emotional involvement, which requires audience reception studies to determine their social effects. Research across different social contexts shows how cultural elements influence communication approaches, narrative strength, and media reception patterns (Madianou, 2011). People can now connect with content through

digital means, but this new technology creates ethical dilemmas that need academic study.

Current state-of-the-art scholarship on Indonesian horror has primarily focused on textual analysis, historical development, political regulation, and representation of gender, religion, or folklore within films (Adiprasetio, 2023; Imanjaya, 2024). Studies in digital religion, meanwhile, have examined how religious authority and identity are negotiated online, but rarely in relation to popular horror media (Campbell, 2024; Hoover & Echchaibi, 2023). Audience reception research has expanded into digital contexts, yet it often centers on news media, activism, or short-form content rather than cinematic paratexts such as trailers. What remains underexplored is how audiences in a Muslim-majority society interpret horror trailers—before full film consumption—as moral and theological texts within algorithmically mediated platforms. There is therefore a gap at the intersection of horror studies, digital religion, and audience reception theory, particularly in non-Western contexts. This study addresses that gap by analyzing trailer comment discourse as a site of moral negotiation and religious meaning-making.

Research on religious media content in educational and docudrama formats has not thoroughly examined how Indonesian viewers interact with horror content that includes ambiguous and taboo themes through digital platforms. The existing research fails to provide enough studies about YouTube viewers who use comment sections to express their collective thoughts about cultural boundaries and multiple ethical perspectives when watching horror trailers. The lack of thorough audience research creates a significant information gap, which prevents scholars from understanding how people handle fear and ethical issues through social media interactions. The study of digital transformation audience participation needs attention because YouTube and other online platforms serve as fundamental spaces for religious dialogues and moral disagreements. People can expand their interpretive groups through dedicated online spaces, which enable them to continue theological discussions and moral debates after their first exposure to content. The platforms use algorithms to generate intricate user interactions that promote specific religious content while building feedback loops that reinforce moral systems (Salminen et al., 2020).

The theoretical architecture of this study is constructed at the intersection of three bodies of literature, each of which reveals a limitation when applied in isolation to the Indonesian digital horror context. Audience reception theory (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1992; Ademolu, 2023) establishes that media meanings are not fixed but interpreted by audiences within cultural, social, and religious contexts. However, classical reception theory was formulated around full media texts and broadcast-era audiences; it does not account for pre-consumption engagement with paratexts in algorithmically mediated environments. Digital religion studies (Campbell, 2024; Hoover & Echchaibi, 2023) illuminate how religious authority and identity are negotiated online, but have focused primarily on explicitly religious platforms and clerical actors, overlooking popular entertainment as a site of religious discourse. Narrative persuasion theory (Winkler et al., 2023) explains how fear and emotion in media catalyze moral and spiritual reflection, but remains anchored in Western secular frameworks. The convergence of these three theoretical strands—and their shared blind spots regarding non-Western paratextual reception—constitutes the

theoretical problem this study exits by introducing the concept of "sacred pedagogy": a framework in which horror, as received in digital comment culture, functions as a mechanism of communal moral instruction and religious identity consolidation.

While classical audience reception theory often assumes engagement with a complete media text, this study applies the framework to film trailers understood as paratextual media objects. Trailers are not merely promotional fragments; in digital environments they function as self-contained narrative units that circulate independently, generate emotional responses, and invite moral interpretation. On platforms such as YouTube, audiences frequently evaluate theological themes, narrative direction, and ethical implications based solely on trailer content. In this sense, reception occurs at the level of anticipation, speculation, and pre-consumption meaning-making. By analyzing trailer comments, this study extends reception theory to algorithmically mediated paratexts, where audiences actively construct moral and religious interpretations even before viewing the full film.

The research examines how Indonesian YouTube viewers use trailer comments to establish or defend moral values when watching religious horror content. It also analyses 600 YouTube trailer comments about *Siksa Kubur*, *Kuasa Gelap*, and *Qodrat 2* to track the development of horror content into sacred educational material on digital platforms. The YouTube algorithm creates an environment that enables moral discussions that make horror a cultural space for enforcing social rules and developing religious identities. The research combines audience reception analysis with digital ethnographic methods to create an innovative approach for studying contemporary horror movies in their social context. The study demonstrates that horror reception analysis provides essential knowledge about algorithmic ethics, religious nationalism, and the relationships of digital-era cinema. The research contributes to media and cultural studies through its findings, which show how religious traditions transform their practices to create digital-based modern spiritual networks through popular entertainment.

## **METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative interpretivist paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), grounded in the constructivist ontological position that social realities—including religious authority and moral meaning—are not given or pre-fixed but are actively constructed through human interaction. Rather than treating YouTube comment data as a window onto pre-existing attitudes, this study treats it as a site of meaning construction itself: a space where interpretive communities (Fish, 1980) collaboratively produce religious and moral knowledge through discourse. This single paradigmatic commitment—interpretivism—subsumes both the epistemological stance (meanings are context-dependent and co-constructed) and the methodological logic (analysis must be interpretive, not variable-based or predictive).

Within this interpretivist framework, the study employs a digital qualitative methodology that synthesizes digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016) and audience reception analysis (Morley, 1992). Digital ethnography provides the conceptual tools for treating online comment sections as authentic social spaces—akin to ethnographic field sites—where communities gather, form identities, and exercise discursive authority. Audience reception analysis orients the inquiry toward how meanings are



negotiated between media texts and culturally situated audiences. The synthesis of these two approaches is methodologically coherent because both share the interpretivist commitment to context-sensitive, participant-centered meaning-making; they differ only in their primary objects of analysis (online community practice versus media text interpretation), which in this study are inseparable.

This approach is needed for conducting this research since other forms, such as quantitative research, are not able to identify the use made by audiences of online discourse in gaining religious authority and developing moral interpretations. The process of religious meaning creation requires interpretive analysis because it involves intricate symbolic exchanges that statistical methods cannot measure. The performative aspect of religious authority in digital spaces demands qualitative research methods that show how users create credibility and influence through their language choices and community-based references and positioning.

The research combines digital ethnographic techniques from (Pink et al., 2016) with audience reception analysis from Morley (1992) to develop the new methodological framework of Digital Religious Ethnography. The research method analyzes YouTube comment sections as ethnographic locations where religious groups construct their identities and establish authority, thereby creating shared interpretations of entertainment content. The primary difference between traditional ethnographic research and this study lies in the fact that digital religious communities primarily exist through text-based interactions rather than physical presence. The research approach validates YouTube comment sections as authentic spaces where religious communities develop their structures and perform their authority roles.

One of the motivations for selecting the research site as YouTube is that it is an open public platform in which religious and moral debates come into being as a result of the natural interaction of the audience, and it also facilitates long-term networks of debates, which allow the subjects to exercise religious authority through discourse and not through institutional membership. Through the use of purposeful sampling, the research study will analyze the trailer comments of the movies *Siksa Kubur*, *Kuasa Gelap*, and the movie *Qodrat 2*, which are of different religious convictions and are very commercialized, and through which the audience is very engaged as it contains about 600 pieces of data taken through systematic sampling conducted at 25 June 2025, which is 25% of the present data of the trailer, and further analyzed through the procedure of Braun and Clarke's coding technique of thematic analysis, which uses the process of inductive and theory-driven coding in defining the theme which is "Sacred Pedagogy".

The number of 600 comments was determined through systematic sampling to ensure both breadth and thematic saturation. From each trailer's official YouTube upload, comments were sorted by "top comments" and "newest first," then selected at regular intervals to avoid overrepresentation of highly liked posts. Approximately 200 comments were collected from each trailer, resulting in a total dataset of 600 comments. Data collection stopped when thematic redundancy was reached and no substantially new moral or religious interpretive patterns emerged. The criteria for inclusion were: (1) comments that explicitly addressed religious, moral, or cultural interpretations of the trailer; (2) comments written in Indonesian or English; and (3) original comments rather than spam, emojis-only responses, or duplicated threads. This approach ensured analytical rigor while maintaining qualitative depth. Best

practices included anonymity and a respectful handling of religious points of view. Although only dealing with popular Indonesian religious horror videos on YouTube, the specific design enables a mere focus on how online viewers engage with religious authority and ethics on horror discourse.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From a postmodern theoretical perspective, the findings of this study challenge master narratives about horror as a genre of transgression and disruption (Kristeva, 2024; Carroll, 2003). Rather than destabilizing moral certainties—as postmodern horror theory predicts—Indonesian religious horror reinforces and re-inscribes them, but through decentralized, participatory, and non-institutional mechanisms. The YouTube comment section enacts what Lyotard (1984) would recognize as the collapse of grand narratives (here, the authority of a singular institutional religious voice) in favor of plural, locally performed "little narratives" generated by ordinary users. Yet unlike the moral relativism often associated with postmodernity, the discourse that emerges is not ethically indeterminate; rather, it is intensely normative, policing religious boundaries through community consensus. This suggests a distinctively non-Western postmodernism: one in which the fragmentation of authority does not produce nihilism but redistributes moral governance into digital publics.

The analysis of 600 YouTube comments about *Siksa Kubur*, *Kuasa Gelap*, and *Qodrat 2* trailers reveals that viewers utilize religious, moral, and cultural frameworks to process horror content, transforming it into educational content, social bonding, and cultural analysis. The research demonstrates how Indonesian viewers use horror movies to create sacred educational content that builds community bonds and enables them to analyze cultural values. The research findings present their results through five essential themes, which researchers identified during their analysis.



**Figure 1.** Indonesian Horror on YouTube: Religious and Moral Interpretation in Digital Public Space

Figure 1 visualizes how Indonesian audiences turn horror movie trailers on YouTube into a site of religious, moral, and cultural meaning-making. The central circle encapsulates the central process, and that is: interpreting horror in a religious and moral context. The five surrounding circles depict how that process takes place. 'Sacred Pedagogy' indicates horror as a medium of religious and moral instruction, while 'Digital Access Rituals' indicate that conflicts about online platforms, censorship, and authenticity condition and modulate their engagement with the religious; 'Emotional Alchemy' explains that the translation of horror and fear from fifteen to thirty minutes, from visual to verbal, from horror to a site of spiritual reflections and moral self-criticism; 'Critical Audiences' indicate that audiences serve as cultural critics who evaluate stories in terms of narrative quality and degrees of accuracy in their religious content; finally, 'Digital Mosque/Church' signifies that comments in a YouTube video translate a space of identity formation, religious discourse, and consecration of authority.

These findings position horror theoretically from a site of transgression, as evident in dominant Western horror theory, to a model of "sacred pedagogy" wherein fear serves as a conduit to moral and theological tutelage. A study that evidences audiences are not passive consumers of horror but, rather, active religious enactors through the correction of theological inaccuracies, judging moral messages, and scripturebased arguments-to extend Hall's encoding/decoding model into the digitally networked religious sphere. Evidence for this claim exists via 600 YouTube comments illustrating, time and time again, three observable patterns of (1) direct theological correction of film content (e.g., debates regarding barzakh, sin, and repentance), (2) emotional transformation narratives wherein fear is overtly tied to religiosity, and (3) a form of collective moral policing through accusations of blasphemy or Christianization. The repeated, foregrounded discursive patterns throughout multiple religious orientations and three films serve as evidence that horror does not function in an Indonesian digital ecology as entertainment but, rather, as an interactive mode of religious education, moral governance, and identity politics.

### **The audience uses religious and moral frameworks to interpret horror content as a form of sacred teaching**

The research demonstrates that Indonesian viewers conduct intricate religious assessments of horror films through their study. The audience members used their Islamic and Christian knowledge to study religious content and moral values in films, which made their movie experience an interactive theological study (Trihastutie, 2024).

The viewers analysed Islamic eschatological beliefs in *Siksa Kubur* through their written comments. The viewers demonstrated their active participation in the film experience by making statements that went beyond mere viewing, such as "The Islamic concept of barzakh shows incorrect depiction because the punishment should never be displayed in this way." The audience members operate as religious authorities in practice (Eliyanah, 2024) because they defend religious teachings and cultural traditions with complete dedication. The audience members show intense interest in religious depiction because they want to avoid both religious blasphemy and Christianization of their beliefs. The digital audience uses (Hall's 1980)



encoding/decoding model to interpret media content by uniting the text with their personal religious and moral perspectives.

These films enable the audience to transmit moral lessons directly to their audience. The stories contain hidden meanings that show how sin leads to divine punishment and how people must find forgiveness. The audience believes movies function as protective blessings for souls, which also serve as warnings to viewers who have left their spiritual path. The audience has developed a contemporary cultural practice that uses frightening moments to make viewers evaluate their moral conduct. The study shows that viewers developed sleep disorders after watching the film, which led them to practice their faith more intensely and reduce their sinful conduct. The concept of Indonesian horror as sacred pedagogy (Winkler et al., 2023) emerges because cinematic fear makes viewers think about their faith and build moral character through the movie experience, which functions as a moral development environment.

This finding necessitates a paradigm shift in horror theory, moving beyond Western concepts of transgression to introduce "Sacred Pedagogy" as a framework where horror functions primarily as a mechanism for communal moral and theological instruction.

### **The audience engages in digital access rituals while seeking genuine viewing experiences.**

The audience starts their engagement process before the movie begins through their comments, which demonstrate their complicated bond between digital accessibility and genuine content experience. The viewers inquired about content availability on different streaming platforms through their comments by asking, "Is this on Netflix?" and "When will it be available on Disney+ Hotstar?"

Users need to access digital platforms as their primary condition for watching content, according to research findings from Pelttari, (2023). The audience faces an interesting conflict because they need simple content access, yet they want to experience genuine material. Many viewers selected theater viewing with surround sound because they believed it would create a more intense horror experience. The audience follows a consumption hierarchy (Ameri et al., 2024) because they believe theatrical releases provide a more authentic, complete horror experience than streaming content.

The Malaysian audience demonstrates heightened interest in authenticity because they share cultural and linguistic ties with Indonesia, yet operate under different censorship systems. The Malaysian audience brought worldwide perspectives about content accessibility through their posted comments. They expressed two main interests through their comments, asking when the movie would be released in Malaysia and requesting that essential scenes remain unchanged during the release. Viewers want to watch the complete uncut story on digital platforms because they worry Malaysian censorship will remove crucial content, which makes the film meaningful. The distribution methods, according to Courtney Dreyer (2023), influence how audiences perceive horror authenticity by focusing on user engagement and promoting religious content, which generated many comments, thus altering the



recommendation geopolitical framework for assessment. The platform serves as a core component of this system.

The YouTube algorithm operates as a moral panic and cultural reinforcement content curator through its algorithmic operations (Neumann & Rhodes, 2024). The platform design features unite with religious content to establish a digital system that enforces traditional moral standards. This behavior underscores that the platform itself is a core component of the moral ecosystem; the YouTube algorithm functions as a curator of moral panic and cultural reinforcement, making access to uncut content a prerequisite for authentic religious engagement.

### **Emotional alchemy: weaving fear, spirituality, and moral evaluation**

The Indonesian horror audience undergoes an emotional transformation according to (Winkler et al., 2023), which converts their first fear into profound spiritual and moral understanding. The viewers begin with fear, which leads them to explore additional spiritual and ethical aspects. The viewers expressed their emotional responses through statements that connected their personal experiences to spiritual outcomes. A standard viewer shared their expertise by stating that the film frightened them, yet it showed them that Allah always monitors their actions. According to (Winkler et al., 2023) horror entertainment enables religious development through emotional power because it helps people discover spiritual value in their frightening experiences.

The YouTube comment section serves as the primary space where users share their frightening moments to spark theological discussions. People use digital space to share their fears, which then transform into theological discussions with others (Malik, 2024). Users who share their frightening experiences get confirmation from others who link their stories to religious teachings through statements such as "I also jumped! The experience serves as a warning about what happens when people engage in sinful conduct. Users gain self-awareness through digital platforms because they build collective stories that create mutual understanding about religious fear (Rossiter & Garcia, 2010). This process of "emotional alchemy" challenges the notion of fear as an end, demonstrating its instrumental value as a catalyst for religious devotion, moral self-reflection, and community formation in non-Western contexts.

### **Critical audiences: beyond consumption to cultural critique**

Research findings demonstrate that viewers actively participate in media content engagement throughout their entire viewing period. The Indonesian horror audience demonstrates sophisticated critical thinking skills through their analysis of artistic elements combined with religious and cultural perspectives (Adiprasetyo, 2023). The audience evaluates movies through three essential components, which include narrative coherence, character development, and directorial mastery. The viewers demonstrate their fascination with storytelling principles through their comments, which state, "The ghost's last act of forgiveness seemed illogical because it happened after a long period of anger." The viewers demonstrate strong interest in storytelling principles through their comments about narrative structure.

The viewers use their acquired cultural knowledge to develop their analytical skills. The audience rejects Western horror elements because they consider them to

be superficial. The audience rejects "weak jump scares" and "formulaic plots" in movies because they want stories that merge genuine cultural elements with meaningful moral content (Widagdo, 2021). The audience prefers horror films that feature traditional Indonesian spirits, pontianak and kuntilanak, while presenting complex moral themes rooted in their cultural heritage. The films entertain viewers through supernatural elements, which allow them to study human nature, ethics, and social norms that represent core Indonesian cultural values. Through supernatural elements, filmmakers construct an innovative narrative space that stimulates emotional and intellectual engagement while making viewers confront their fears and ponder moral questions rooted in their cultural heritage.

Horror movies that merge traditional folklore with contemporary storytelling methods produce an enriched cultural expression that enables viewers to examine moral subjects. The Indonesian film industry operates under specific business rules because it needs to fulfil commercial needs while preserving genuine spiritual and cultural aspects to achieve success (Adiprasetyo & Winda Larasati, 2025). The audience serves as the primary cultural authority that guides the creative direction of the industry. This active critique directly challenges Western horror theories that position the audience as seekers of transgression; here, the audience actively rejects superficial thrills in favor of narratives that reinforce religious boundaries and cultural identity.

### **Community and identity formation in the digital mosque**

The digital communities that form through comment sections enable users to express their religious identities, according to (Madianou, 2011). Users in this space declare their religious beliefs through statements that include "As a Muslim, I support this film's conclusion because it demonstrates how repentance works."

The theoretical framework of active audience analysis by C. Barker, (2006) describes how movies become cultural battlegrounds through their religious beliefs and their personal interpretation of the films. Indonesian audiences identify religious content that deviates, where different social groups compete for representation. Audiences perform a "scriptural analysis" of cinematic stories from their traditional beliefs through the terms *Kristenisasi* (Christianization) and *penistaan agama* (religious blasphemy). The labeling process described by (Van Heeren, 2019) shows religious organizations use it to preserve their authority over media portrayals of their beliefs.

People who accept or reject specific interpretations of horror content develop social groups that build complex social structures. Modern Indonesian society employs horror movies as fundamental tools to address its ongoing religious and cultural conflicts. The discussions show that horror movies serve as vital platforms for people to address religious and cultural disagreements that exist in contemporary Indonesian society. Through horror content-based discussions, people use horror media to discover life meaning and develop moral values and express religious beliefs together (Rossiter & Garcia, 2010), thus establishing "digital mosques" as virtual spaces for collective spiritual and moral dialogue through popular media. These interactions validate the concept of the "Digital Mosque/Church," a hybrid space where religious authority is negotiated and earned through public deliberation,



effectively challenging traditional hierarchies and creating new forums for collective spiritual dialogue.

Compared to previous scholarship on Indonesian horror—which has concentrated on textual analysis, historical development, and political regulation of film content (Adiprasetyo, 2023; Imanjaya, 2024)—this study performs a methodological inversion: rather than reading the film text for what it communicates, it reads the audience text (comment discourse) for what audiences do with horror. This shift from filmmaker intent to audience enactment marks a significant departure from prior Indonesian horror scholarship and aligns this study with the participatory turn in media research (Schmidt et al., 2022).

Compared to digital religion studies, which have examined online sermons, religious influencers, and faith-based communities on dedicated platforms (Campbell, 2024; Hoover & Echchaibi, 2023), this research demonstrates that religious meaning-making is not confined to explicitly religious digital spaces. It spills into entertainment paratexts—trailers—where it may be even more intense precisely because it is unprompted and community-generated rather than institutionally curated. This finding has implications for how scholars understand the reach of digital religion in everyday media consumption.

Compared to audience reception studies focused on news and political media (Schmidt et al., 2022), this study extends the reception framework into cinematic paratexts and pre-consumption spaces. It demonstrates empirically that reception does not require full narrative exposure: moral and theological meaning-making can emerge from a two-minute trailer circulated within an algorithmic platform ecosystem. This is a meaningful extension of Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, which assumed audiences had encountered the complete text.

The concept of "sacred pedagogy" proposed here reframes the theoretical function of horror beyond Western paradigms of transgression, abjection (Kristeva, 2024), and nihilism (Carroll, 2003). In the Indonesian context, fear is not an endpoint but a threshold: it catalyzes moral self-examination, theological deliberation, and communal identity reinforcement. This is consistent with Winkler et al.'s (2023) narrative persuasion framework—which posits that emotional engagement with narrative activates attitude change—but extends it by specifying the institutional form that change takes: not individual persuasion, but collective moral governance performed through public digital discourse.

Finally, the study contributes to postmodern media theory by demonstrating that the dissolution of traditional religious authority structures in digital space does not produce moral indeterminacy but rather redistributes normativity across participatory publics. The "digital mosque/church" that emerges is not a simulation of institutional religion but a new form of it—horizontally organized, algorithmically amplified, and discursively policed by community members. This model of distributed moral governance through horror discourse may be transferable to other non-Western religious media ecologies and warrants comparative cross-cultural investigation.



## CONCLUSION

Inasmuch as this research reveals that YouTube comments on Indonesian horror trailers are not only a location in which viewers respond in a nonsense manner but also serve as a “Digital Mosque/Church” in which viewers engage in discourses on themes of religion, morality, and culture; audiences do not passively consume but rather actively evaluate films in regard to accurate depictions of their faiths and their lessons on right and wrong, finding in terror a means to an end of spiritual enlightenment. This demands a “sacred pedagogy” that upends Western horror studies, in which terror is seen in regard to transgression, to imply that horror is a medium not of undermining but of affirming and reinforcing a sense of shared spirituality and values.

The study also reveals the role of YouTube itself. Its algorithms favor videos that attract large amounts of viewers’ engagement, and as such, it helps disseminate moral debates and religious ideas." This cycle where ideas continue to be reinforced is of great concern in terms of ethics and the way religious and cultural thoughts are shaped through technology.

However, this research is limited because it only focuses on the most viewed Indonesian horror pictures on YouTube and is based on data from one point in time because, on other sites or in other groups, the situation may be perceived differently, and opinions may shift with time.

Beyond academic implications, this study offers practical recommendations for multiple stakeholders. For filmmakers and producers, engaging with trailer comment discourse constitutes an under-utilized form of audience feedback that is morally, religiously, and culturally specific—attending to these conversations can improve narrative authenticity and reduce the risk of community backlash over doctrinal misrepresentation. For platform operators such as YouTube, the findings highlight the need for culturally informed content moderation frameworks that can distinguish between moral community-building discourse and harmful religious hate speech, which may be superficially similar in tone. For religious educators and community leaders, the "digital mosque/church" represents a legitimate, emergent space for theological engagement that formal institutions may wish to engage with rather than dismiss. For policymakers in Muslim-majority contexts, algorithmic amplification of moral and religious discourse through entertainment content raises urgent questions about platform regulation, digital literacy, and the role of commercial media in shaping religious identity—questions that current regulatory frameworks are ill-equipped to address.

From this research, there are several recommendations for future work. Audience discussions should be monitored for a longer period of time to verify changes in moral-religious arguments. There is also room for researchers to examine other platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X in order to analyze different technology-induced outcomes for religious discussions. Another significant area of research is focusing on filmmakers’ engagement with this morally engaged audience and how they might respond to it. Lastly, rather than “testing” these findings in a positivist sense, future research could undertake comparative qualitative studies in other religious and cultural contexts to explore the transferability of the “sacred pedagogy” framework. Multi-sited digital ethnography or cross-platform analysis may reveal



whether similar patterns of moral negotiation emerge in different media ecologies. Additionally, mixed-method approaches—such as combining discourse analysis with audience interviews or survey-based perception studies—could complement this interpretive model by examining how widespread such moralizing tendencies are across broader populations. These approaches would allow researchers to assess contextual variation without assuming universal generalization.

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