

Negotiating Faith, Authority, and Meaning: Malaysian Students' Reception of Mentega Terbang

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the controversial reception of the Malaysian film *Mentega Terbang* within the Muslim community, with particular attention to how its religious themes are interpreted by Malaysian students. Originally released in 2021, the film attracted heightened public attention after becoming available on the streaming platform Viu in early 2023, before being subsequently removed. The inclusion of scenes engaging with sensitive religious ideas generated widespread unease and debate, particularly regarding their perceived implications for Islamic beliefs and practices. As film constitutes a powerful medium capable of shaping social meanings and influencing audience perceptions, it is crucial to examine how such messages are understood and negotiated by viewers. Against this backdrop, this study aims to explore students' comprehension, interpretation, and reception of the film's content, especially in relation to issues of *aqidah* and religious sensitivity. Employing a qualitative research design, the study utilises in-depth interviews to capture the active role of audiences in constructing meaning. By foregrounding audience reception, this research contributes to broader discussions on religion, media, and interpretation within Malaysia's socio-religious context.

Keywords: *Mentega Terbang*, Malaysian film, Islam, in-depth interviews, reception analysis

INTRODUCTION

In the Malaysian socio-religious landscape, *aqidah* (Islamic creed) signifies more than a matter of individual belief; it constitutes the foundational pillar that defines Muslim identity and spiritual integrity. Conceptually, *aqidah* has been described as a “knot” or “bond”—an epistemological certainty marked by unshakeable conviction and heart-centred assurance, grounded in the sincere acceptance of truth through sound argumentation (Sa’id, 1996, as cited in Opir et al., 2021). As the cornerstone of a Muslim’s existence, *aqidah* occupies a protected and sacrosanct position within Malaysian society. As argued by Yusof et al. (2012), challenges to *aqidah* in Malaysia particularly those associated with apostasy (*riddah*), are not viewed merely as personal spiritual crises, but as threats to social cohesion, religious authority, and the moral order of the Muslim community. Consequently, any medium perceived to interrogate, relativise, or challenge this foundation—particularly film—often attracts intense scrutiny and provokes strong reactions among conservative segments of the Muslim community.

Cinema functions as a powerful agent of socialisation, possessing the capacity to shape collective consciousness, reflect societal values, and influence attitudes and behaviour (Opir et al., 2021; Al-Bakri, 2023). Filmmakers who engage with Islamic themes must therefore navigate a complex interplay of narrative construction, visual symbolism, sound, and audience interpretation. A prominent and controversial example within the Malaysian context is *Mentega Terbang*, written by Khairi Anwar, Arjun Thanaraju, Vishhnu Varman, and Ti Teng Hui. Premiering at the Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival, the film portrays a Muslim family engaged in open conversations about religious plurality (*Mentega Terbang* flies into Jogja-Netpac, 2021). This narrative approach has drawn considerable criticism from Malaysian scholars and religious authorities, who argue that the film contravenes established Islamic principles by implying moral permissibility for practices traditionally deemed prohibited and by raising sensitive questions surrounding faith continuity (Al-Bakri, 2023).

Understanding the societal implications of such a film requires moving beyond the intentions of its creators to examine the interpretive role of the audience. Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding model (1980) provides a useful theoretical lens, emphasising that media communication is not a linear transmission of meaning to passive viewers but a dynamic process in which meaning is actively constructed through “decoding” shaped by social position, religious orientation, and personal experience. In the case of *Mentega Terbang*, these decoding filters play a critical role in shaping audience interpretations of contentious scenes, such as the consumption of pork or the implicit suggestion of a child’s potential departure from Islam.

A dominant–hegemonic reading emerges when viewers accept the film’s preferred message of interfaith curiosity and openness. While this position may be difficult for traditionalist audiences to occupy, it remains plausible among certain segments of the Muslim population, particularly within urban and liberal settings. As Yusof et al. (2012) argue, such openness often correlates with modernist worldviews and exposure to pluralistic environments, rather than deliberate rejection of Islam. Alternatively, some viewers may adopt a negotiated reading, recognising the film’s artistic intent while remaining uneasy with specific representations, whereas others may engage in an oppositional reading, rejecting the film outright as an affront to Islamic belief and moral order.

These divergent modes of reception frequently come into tension with the *Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah* framework and the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence that underpin Islamic practice in Malaysia. Within the Malaysian context, the majority of Muslims adhere to the *Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah* tradition, which is grounded in the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad SAW, as well as the theological approaches of both the *salaf* and *khalaf*, particularly through the Ash'arī and Māturīdī schools of thought (Al-Bakri, 2020). This theological and jurisprudential orientation provides the normative foundation for religious belief, practice, and moral reasoning among Malaysian Muslims.

The controversy surrounding *Mentega Terbang* is also deeply rooted in the principles of *Maqasid Shariah* (the Higher Objectives of Islamic Law), particularly the preservation of the Five Essentials (*al-daruriyyat al-khams*), which comprise *Hifz al-Din* (the protection of faith), *Hifz al-Nafs* (life), *Hifz al-'Aql* (intellect), *Hifz al-Nasl* (lineage), and *Hifz al-Mal* (property). Within Islamic legal philosophy, *Hifz al-Din* is accorded primacy, as the safeguarding of religious belief and practice is understood to underpin moral order and guide the protection of the remaining essentials (Opir et al., 2017). In the Malaysian socio-religious context, this objective necessitates that public discourse and cultural production do not undermine the core tenets of Islam. From a *Maqasid* perspective, media content perceived to normalise apostasy (*riddah*) or trivialise religious prohibitions is viewed as posing a threat to the spiritual well-being of the *ummah*.

Nevertheless, the possibility of dominant acceptance of such themes by certain demographic groups points to evolving interpretations of *Hifz al-Din* within Malaysia's increasingly heterogeneous Muslim society. Against this backdrop, the present study employs reception analysis to examine how Malaysian students interpret and negotiate the religious themes presented in *Mentega Terbang*. By foregrounding audience reception, this research seeks to illuminate the complex relationship between film, faith, and meaning-making, while offering insights for policymakers, educators, and media practitioners concerned with balancing creative expression and the safeguarding of *aqidah* within Malaysia's evolving entertainment landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on a review of existing scholarship, this section examines key findings from prior studies on *fatwas*, *aqidah* (Islamic creed), and cinema, while identifying critical gaps in how religious regulation and cinematic representation have been addressed within the Malaysian context.

Previous scholarship on film and *aqidah* in Malaysia demonstrates a persistent concern regarding the capacity of cinematic narratives to influence religious belief, moral reasoning, and theological understanding. However, studies examining *fatwas* issued between 2005 and 2018 indicate that only a limited number of rulings directly address *aqidah*-related issues in films and artistic performances (Opir et al., 2020). The majority of these rulings instead focus on broader entertainment practices, such as the use of Qur'anic verses in song lyrics, the incorporation of religious elements in dance, or spiritual practices within traditional arts, rather than on film-specific narratives and representational strategies.

With only six *fatwas* identified as explicitly related to *aqidah* in film, Opir et al. (2020) suggest that although concerns surrounding cinema and belief are theoretically significant, they remain under-discussed at both national and state levels. This points to a regulatory tendency to address general entertainment practices while overlooking the specific genres, conventions, and modes of meaning-making unique to cinema. Furthermore, Opir et al. (2020) identify a critical gap in this body of work: the absence of audience-oriented analysis. While *fatwas* articulate normative religious positions, they rarely account for how audiences interpret, negotiate, or contest religious meanings presented on screen. As a result, existing research remains largely centred on institutional perspectives, leaving the lived religious and cultural experiences of viewers insufficiently explored.

Beyond *fatwa*-based research, content analyses reveal that even productions framed as Islamic or *dakwah*-oriented (missionary) may contain elements that contradict Shariah principles. For example, a study of *Munafik 1* identified multiple narrative and visual elements that conflict with Islamic creed, including representations of *syirik* (polytheism), *khurafat* (superstition), the attribution of supernatural powers to entities other than God, and the legitimisation of occult practices (Opir et al., 2021). These findings demonstrate that problematic *aqidah* elements are often structurally embedded within cinematic storytelling, manifesting through plot development, character construction, and symbolic imagery, rather than appearing merely as incidental or superficial visual effects.

Sofian et al. (2025) conducted more recent research that expands this critique through a qualitative analysis of *Mentega Terbang*, a film that sparked considerable controversy in Malaysia. Their research concludes that the film utilises theological ambiguity as a primary narrative mechanism, depicting themes such as religious pluralism and reincarnation as viable alternatives to Islamic eschatology. Sofian et al. contend that these deviations transcend abstract theological discourse, influencing representations of quotidian moral decisions, thus contesting prevailing Sunni interpretations within the Malaysian context. By incorporating alternative belief systems into relatable character narratives, such films may subtly undermine traditional religious interpretations.

Taken collectively, these studies indicate that research on film and *aqidah* in Malaysia remains largely normative and evaluative, with a primary focus on identifying violations of Shariah compliance. While content analyses have been effective in cataloguing such deviations, they often stop short of interrogating broader ideological implications or examining how audiences actively engage with and interpret these representations. There is therefore a clear need for research that moves beyond compliance-based assessments to examine film as a dynamic cultural site in which religious authority, belief, and identity are actively constructed, contested, and rearticulated.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a reception analysis to assess how Malaysian students comprehend, interpret, and respond to the content of the film *Mentega Terbang*. Reception analysis is a theoretical framework within media studies that emphasizes the ways audiences actively interpret and engage with media texts, rather than focusing solely on their production or broader

societal effects (Hall, 1980). According to this approach, media texts—whether films, television programmes, radio broadcasts, or news reports—are not passively consumed but are actively imbued with significance, filtered through the viewers’ social, cultural, and personal experiences. By applying this framework, the study seeks to examine how Malaysian students negotiate and interpret the film’s sensitive religious themes. By exploring the interpretive strategies employed by viewers, the study aims to illuminate how cinematic portrayals of faith and morality are received and internalized, providing insights into the complex relationship between media, belief, and cultural context.

A qualitative approach was adopted, utilizing in-depth interviews as the primary research method. Prior to the interviews, respondents were instructed to watch the entire film in full to ensure complete and informed engagement with the material. Subsequent interview questions were directly drawn from their observations and reflections on the film, allowing for a rich exploration of their interpretive processes and reception of key scenes.

The selection of respondents was conducted using purposive sampling, a technique that allows researchers to deliberately select participants who possess specific characteristics or experiences relevant to the research question. Purposive sampling emphasizes individuals whose perspectives are likely to provide meaningful insights into the study’s objectives. A notable challenge in this process was identifying respondents who were willing to commit the time to watch the full film prior to the interview. Despite this, five respondents were successfully recruited from four Malaysian universities—Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), and University of Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)—to reflect a diversity of educational and religious backgrounds. Two students from USIM and UiTM had prior education in religious schools and were currently studying in the biology and astronomy departments, respectively; a UKM student with a religious school background was enrolled in the Fakulti Citra; and two students from UiTM and UNIMAS, who had graduated from conventional high schools, were enrolled in the Faculty of Islamic Studies and the Faculty of Science, respectively.

In-depth interviews were chosen for their capacity to generate detailed and nuanced insights into individual perspectives, particularly on sensitive topics such as religious beliefs and moral reasoning. This method allows participants to articulate personal experiences and interpretations in a confidential and supportive setting, fostering trust and openness. The flexible nature of in-depth interviews also enables the researcher to probe emergent themes and follow up on responses, facilitating a thorough understanding of the respondents’ engagement with the film.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study and discusses the responses of the participants. The discussion is structured around three key thematic areas: perception of the film, attitudinal influence, and the broader impact of *Mentega Terbang* on the audience. The audience’s responses were analyzed and categorized under three primary themes: perception, attitudinal Influence, and impact. Each theme highlights how Malaysian students interpret and react to the religiously sensitive content in the film.

Perception of the Film

Malaysia is predominantly guided by the Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah tradition, particularly the Shafi'i school of thought (Al-Bakri, 2020). This framework underpins moral, religious, and social values in the country. Given this context, it is not surprising that the film elicited strong reactions from the participants. A significant portion of participants perceived the film negatively, particularly due to its depiction of religious pluralism and controversial themes such as reincarnation. For example, Participant 1 expressed:

"...The film contains many negative elements because it highlights the concept of reincarnation after death and issues related to religious pluralism, which should not have been shown."

Similarly, Participant 2 highlighted the film's potential to offend multiple religious communities:

"The film shows negative elements because there are many scenes touching on religious sensitivities—not only Islam but also other religions, such as Hinduism. For example, there is a scene where Suresh eats beef, which is forbidden for Hindus."

Participant 3 also emphasized concerns about theological misrepresentation:

"...The film has a very negative impact because it touches on religious sensitivities, especially Islam. It mixes religious teachings and customs and provides incorrect interpretations of Quranic verses using only human reasoning."

Collectively, these responses illustrate that the film contains elements that could misrepresent or undermine religious teachings. Concerns focus on sensitive themes such as interfaith exploration, reincarnation, and reinterpretation of sacred texts. However, some participants expressed a more balanced view, recognizing positive aspects of the film alongside its controversial elements. Participant 4 noted:

"...The film is not entirely negative; there are some scenes that convey positive values such as family love and harmony among different ethnic groups."

Participant 5 also acknowledged the film's merits while cautioning about religious sensitivity:

"...It is good, but it touches on religious issues, especially for Muslims. Films should avoid forbidden acts because everyone will watch them."

These perspectives reflect a nuanced reception, where participants appreciate the film's artistic and moral messages while remaining conscious of its religious implications.

Attitudinal Influence

The film influenced participants' emotions, attitudes, and ethical reflections. Three sub-themes emerged: anger, confusion and curiosity, and disappointment.

Anger

Many participants reported feeling anger due to the film's portrayal of sensitive religious issues. Participant 1 stated:

"...I feel very angry and embarrassed because the director is a Muslim. Many scenes raise religious sensitivity issues, such as Aisyah holding a dog and questioning why Hindus cannot eat beef, as well as comparing mineral water to holy water taken from a church."

Participant 2 highlighted violations of religious taboos:

"...It is understandable to feel angry about this film. For instance, there is a scene where Suresh buys two buns, one pork and one beef. Pork is forbidden for Muslims. Aisyah, being a Muslim, is not allowed to eat pork, yet she wants to try it. Watching the film again makes me angry because Aisyah's father encourages her to convert religions."

Confusion and Curiosity

The film also elicited confusion and curiosity regarding its theological and ethical implications. Participant 2 commented:

"...While watching this film, it felt very strange because I had seen the film before it was widely circulated. I wondered if a film like this could exist because statements were made without knowing if the intention was correct. When the statements were clearly articulated, I felt doubt because they dared to make such religious statements. Religion is not something to play with. So, I found it strange, especially the suspicious scenes in the film."

Participant 5 added:

"...I was curious because it is good to have a film about different religious beliefs, but it should not exceed limits, as it will be watched by young people. Over time, they might think that forbidden acts are normal, even though they are not allowed."

Disappointment

Several participants expressed disappointment at what they perceived as undermining of Islamic teachings. Participant 3 remarked:

"...I feel very disappointed and sad about the film's presentation. Firstly, the director is a Muslim, so what is the main purpose of making a film that can harm the thinking or even undermine the faith of Muslims? Secondly, it is sad that if such characters existed in Malaysia,

especially among teenagers, it shows a lack of religious guidance from parents, teachers, and schools.”

Impact on Faith and Knowledge

Two major impacts emerged: influence on faith and motivation to seek knowledge. Participants noted that their faith was tested but largely remained intact. Participant 1 expressed mild disruption:

“...As a Muslim with ordinary faith, I feel slightly challenged by these issues because the film plays with religion, such as questioning why we cannot touch a dog.”

Participant 5 shared similar concern:

“...I feel that my faith weakened slightly because the film made us question things we should not. This could lead to apostasy if one lacks religious knowledge but still wants to speak on it.”

Meanwhile, Participant 4 highlighted the resilience of their faith:

“...I feel this film is somewhat problematic in its main themes, especially regarding beliefs and religion. However, it did not make me feel my faith was shaken or question the truth of Islam, as I remain steadfast in my Islamic beliefs.”

Motivation to Seek Knowledge

A positive impact was an increased motivation among participants to deepen their religious understanding. Participant 1 remarked:

“...After watching the film, I feel the need to increase my religious knowledge so that I am not easily led into forbidden acts in Islam.”

Participant 5 also noted:

“...It makes us feel curious to study more deeply, so we will try to research and find the answers.”

This theme demonstrates that the film, despite controversial content, can encourage critical engagement with religious knowledge and ethical reflection. Overall, the findings reveal a complex and nuanced reception among Malaysian students. The film evoked anger, confusion, and disappointment due to perceived violations of religious sensitivities, but it also inspired curiosity, reflection, and motivation to deepen religious knowledge. Audience interpretation was influenced by prior religious education, personal beliefs, and awareness of interfaith sensitivities. These results illustrate Stuart Hall's reception theory, showing that audiences actively decode media content according to their own social and religious contexts.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how Malaysian students interpret and respond to the religiously sensitive themes presented in *Mentega Terbang* within Malaysia's socio-religious context, where Islam guided predominantly by the Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah and the Shafi'i school of thought, functions as a central moral, legal, and institutional framework. The controversy surrounding *Mentega Terbang* reflects broader societal anxieties concerning media representations that appear to challenge religious authority, doctrinal boundaries, and established norms of belief. The findings demonstrate that such anxieties are not abstract or externally imposed, but are actively negotiated by audiences through emotional, cognitive, and ethical responses.

These responses closely align with the arguments advanced by Yusof et al. (2012), who conceptualise apostasy (*murtad*) in Malaysia not merely as an individual matter of belief, but as a collective socio-religious concern deeply intertwined with Malay identity, Islamic authority, and constitutional arrangements. Within this framework, representations that normalise religious doubt, relativise Islamic truth claims, or portray interfaith fluidity tend to be perceived as threatening, even when articulated through fictional or artistic narratives. This perspective helps explain why many participants interpreted *Mentega Terbang* as problematic despite recognising its status as a film rather than a theological text.

Consistent with scholarship on religion and film, participants demonstrated a strong tendency to evaluate the film through a religiously informed moral lens. Previous studies have shown that films engaging with themes such as religious pluralism, apostasy, or alternative belief systems often provoke resistance in societies where religion is closely tied to national identity and social order. The predominantly negative perceptions expressed by participants, particularly regarding reincarnation, interfaith exploration, and reinterpretations of Qur'anic verses support earlier findings that audiences do not consume religiously themed media passively (Hall, 1980). Instead, *Mentega Terbang* was decoded not merely as a cinematic narrative, but as a text perceived to challenge Islamic orthodoxy and religious authority.

At the same time, the presence of more balanced evaluations among some participants reflects the polysemic nature of media texts. While many respondents rejected the film's theological implications, others acknowledged its positive moral messages, including its emphasis on family relationships and ethnic harmony. Such responses illustrate negotiated readings (Hall, 1980), in which audiences selectively engage with certain aspects of a text while rejecting others. This capacity to distinguish between artistic or social values and religious boundaries indicates that audience engagement operates on multiple interpretive levels.

Participants in this study also frequently positioned themselves as religiously informed viewers who were not personally shaken by the film, yet expressed concern for more vulnerable audiences, particularly younger viewers who might lack sufficient religious knowledge to critically assess such content. This perceived vulnerability closely mirrors Yusof et al.'s identification of inadequate religious education as a key internal factor contributing to faith instability, reinforcing the view that audience responses are shaped by broader educational and social structures rather than by media exposure alone.

Importantly, the impact of *Mentega Terbang* extended beyond immediate emotional reactions to deeper reflections on faith and knowledge. While some participants reported feeling challenged, the majority emphasised resilience rather than destabilisation of belief. This complicates common assumptions in public discourse that exposure to controversial media inevitably leads to moral or religious decline. Instead, the film appears to function as a catalyst

for self-reflection, prompting participants to reaffirm their beliefs or recognise the importance of strengthening religious understanding. Such responses support arguments in media and religion studies that controversial texts can stimulate critical engagement rather than passive acceptance, particularly among audiences with prior religious grounding.

The motivation to seek further religious knowledge, identified by several participants, is especially significant. It suggests that exposure to challenging representations does not operate in a linear cause-and-effect manner but interacts with existing belief systems in complex ways. In the Malaysian context, where Islam functions both as a personal faith and an institutionalised system, such responses reflect an ongoing process of meaning-making shaped by cultural, educational, and religious structures.

Overall, *Mentega Terbang* emerges as a contested cultural text within Malaysian society. Audience reception is characterised by resistance, negotiation, and reflection rather than uniform acceptance or rejection. These responses can also be understood as a communal protective reflex aimed at *Hifz al-Din* (the protection of faith), a central objective within Islamic ethical thought. The negative perceptions expressed by participants are rooted not merely in aesthetic judgement, but in deeply embedded theological, legal, and cultural boundaries surrounding apostasy in Malaysia. By situating audience responses within both reception theory and the Malaysian socio-religious framework, this study highlights the importance of examining audience perspectives when analysing religiously sensitive media texts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the reception of *Mentega Terbang* among Malaysian students is shaped less by the film's artistic form than by the socio-religious structures through which meaning is interpreted and evaluated. Audience responses reveal an active process of negotiation in which religious identity, institutional authority, and moral responsibility intersect.

Rather than indicating passive consumption or doctrinal fragility, the findings suggest that students engage critically with religiously sensitive media, often reaffirming established beliefs while expressing concern over broader societal implications. By situating audience reception within the Malaysian Islamic framework, particularly in relation to apostasy discourse and the protection of *Hifz al-Din*, this study contributes to scholarship on religion and media by highlighting how faith-based interpretive boundaries continue to shape meaning-making in plural and mediatized societies.

Future research may extend this inquiry by examining intergenerational differences or comparative receptions across religious communities, thereby enriching understanding of how religious authority and media representation interact in evolving cultural contexts.

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