

Decoding Diversity: Indonesian Student' Reception of Religious and Multicultural Themes in 'Mentega Terbang' Using Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Framework

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history</p> <p><i>Received: March 12, 2025</i></p> <p><i>Revised: March 24, 2025</i></p> <p><i>Accepted: May 13, 2025</i></p> <p>Keywords</p> <p><i>Reception analysis</i></p> <p><i>Encoding/decoding</i></p> <p><i>Religious pluralism</i></p> <p><i>Multiculturalism</i></p> <p><i>Stuart hall</i></p>	<p>This study explores the reception of the controversial Malaysian film <i>Mentega Terbang</i> among Muslim university students in Indonesia, applying Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model to examine how religious and multicultural themes are interpreted across cultural borders. Drawing on focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with five Malay-ethnic informants from Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, the research reveals diverse audience responses shaped by intersecting factors of faith, cultural identity, and national context. While some informants align with the film's encoded message of interfaith dialogue and pluralism, others negotiate or oppose its representations of religious taboos, including depictions of veiling, dietary laws, and symbolic acts such as the befriending of dogs. These decoding positions—dominant, negotiated, and oppositional—illustrate the heterogeneity of reception within a shared religious tradition and highlight the role of national ideology and institutional background in shaping interpretation. The findings underscore the pedagogical potential of controversial media to foster critical reflection in Islamic academic environments, and contribute to broader debates on freedom of expression, religious orthodoxy, and cross-cultural media literacy in Southeast Asia. This research affirms the contextual embeddedness of media reception and extends Hall's model by foregrounding ambivalence and the ethics of representation in postcolonial, multicultural societies.</p>



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INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian film *Mentega Terbang* offers a multifaceted and intricate representation of contemporary Malaysian society, addressing critical themes such as multicultural weddings, racism, political dynamics, and gender issues. The film explores these topics with a profound and nuanced perspective, effectively reflecting the complexities of Malaysian cultural and social frameworks. In the context of multicultural weddings, the title *Mentega Terbang* encapsulates the essential spirit of diversity and inclusivity, elements that are emblematic of Malaysian culture. The film thoughtfully portrays the diverse customs, rituals, and celebratory practices of Malaysia's multi-ethnic communities, thereby underscoring the nation's cultural richness and vibrancy. This representation celebrates and affirms the harmonious coexistence of diverse



cultural elements that constitute the foundation of Malaysian society.

The title *Mentega Terbang* directly translates from Bahasa as “butter that flies,” but it is explicitly understood as “butterfly” in English. This choice of title holds particular significance within the context of the film, aligning with the concept of reincarnation and the cyclical nature of life. It symbolizes the profound transformation from one state of existence to another, akin to a caterpillar’s metamorphosis into a butterfly. This metaphor captures the essence of life’s continual renewal and rebirth, reflecting the film’s exploration of cultural and spiritual transitions. Directed by Khairi Anwar and released in 2020, the narrative follows the poignant journey of Aisha, a young Muslim girl in Malaysia, as she navigates profound questions of faith and existence amidst her mother’s struggle with terminal pancreatic cancer. Raised in a household characterized by devout Islamic practices and an openness to democratic dialogue about religious beliefs, Aisha encounters diverse perspectives on Judaism, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

As her mother’s health deteriorates, Aisha’s existential questions about the afterlife intensify, driving her to contemplate theological concepts such as heaven and reincarnation. Her exploration is further deepened by the Hindu and Buddhist philosophies of rebirth, which challenge her understanding of faith. In a moment of emotional and intellectual awakening, Aisha shares with her mother and peers her desire to embrace Hinduism, driven by the hope of maintaining her mother’s presence, albeit in a transformed state, such as a butterfly. The film, through Aisha’s journey, deftly engages with themes of religious pluralism, personal identity, and the intersection of faith and cultural practices, offering a profound commentary on the human condition and its connection to belief systems.

The film introduces several pivotal characters who contribute to its exploration of religious and cultural diversity. Easter, a former Hindu who has converted to Christianity, represents the complexities of religious identity and transformation. She provides Aisha with a Bible, and Aisha finds solace in reading passages about the afterlife, which she later shares with her parents during dinner. Easter’s presence also challenges cultural and religious conventions, as Aisha forms an affectionate bond with Easter’s dog, Milo, thereby defying traditional Muslim reservations about handling dogs. Suresh, Aisha’s school friend, practices a distinctive form of Hinduism that includes the consumption of beef, a practice typically eschewed by Hindus. Describing himself as a “Hindu apostate,” Suresh reveals his family’s dismissal of the Vedas as mere folklore, reflecting alternative interpretations of religious texts within Hinduism. Kasim, Aisha’s neighbor, is portrayed as an overweight, simple-minded individual with staunchly fundamentalist Islamic views. He frequently warns Aisha and her family against interacting with Christians, whom he accuses of harboring ulterior motives to convert Muslims.

As the narrative progresses, Aisha’s mother succumbs to her illness, leaving the family in a state of profound grief and introspection. In a pivotal moment, Aisha’s father demonstrates compassion and open-mindedness by allowing her the autonomy to change her religion, should she choose to do so, while maintaining his own Muslim faith. The film concludes with a poignant scene at her mother’s grave, where a butterfly perches on the gravestone, symbolizing both her mother’s enduring presence and Aisha’s transformative journey through faith, grief, and self-discovery. Additionally, the film offers a thoughtful critique of gender dynamics within Malaysian society by portraying strong, independent female characters who challenge traditional gender norms and advocate for gender equality. This progressive representation highlights evolving gender roles and relationships, contributing to a broader discourse on gender parity.

Nonetheless, *Mentega Terbang* has been a topic of contention, especially among Malaysian Muslims. Numerous sequences in the film have faced criticism for purportedly opposing Islamic principles as observed in Malaysia, especially those consistent with the Shafie school of thinking (Al Bakri, 2023). The film’s honest discourse on Christianity and Hinduism, and Aisha’s examination of different religious views, has elicited apprehensions regarding its possible impact on the religion of Muslim audiences. Certain religious authorities and community leaders have classified the video as unsuitable for Muslim viewers, contending that it could incite religious scepticism or even apostasy. Historically, Malay Muslims in Malaysia have had little exposure to films that directly and introspectively address religious pluralism due to governmental censorship (Azmi, 2024). Consequently, *Mentega Terbang* has ignited discussions over the limits of artistic expression, religious sensitivity, and the influence of media on religious discourse.

The need to conduct a reception analysis using Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding framework among Indonesian students in relation to the themes depicted in *Mentega Terbang* is particularly compelling. The film not only serves as a narrative portrayal of Malaysia’s cultural, social, and political complexities but also provides a platform to examine cross-cultural interpretations. Given Indonesia’s significant Muslim population and shared cultural and religious ties with Malaysia, exploring Indonesian students’ reception of the film offers an opportunity to uncover unique perspectives shaped by their historical and social contexts. Such an analysis can elucidate differences and similarities in interpretations, revealing how religion and culture intersect to shape the values and beliefs of young Muslims in these neighboring Southeast Asian nations (Carothers & O’Donohue, 2020; Hamayotsu, 2002). Malaysia’s increasing ethnic and religious tensions and incidents of violence since 2007 underscore contradictions within the country’s constitutional and institutional frameworks, further emphasizing the relevance of these themes (Hamayotsu, 2013). As Furlow (2013) notes, the long-standing conflicts between Malaysians and Chinese have contributed to a conservative shift in Malaysian society.

While numerous studies have explored religious representation in Southeast Asian media, they often fall short in addressing the nuanced intersection between religious pluralism and state-imposed censorship, especially within the Malaysian context. Existing literature tends to focus on films that align with dominant religious ideologies or reinforce majoritarian narratives, overlooking how films like *Mentega Terbang* challenge these norms through alternative theological engagements. Moreover, the framing of interfaith discourse has typically been approached in a way that avoids theological contradictions, thus failing to interrogate how youth audiences, particularly in neighboring countries like Indonesia, interpret such portrayals in light of their own socio-religious frameworks. This research addresses this critical gap by situating *Mentega Terbang* as a site of ideological negotiation, where reception is shaped not only by religious identity but also by generational, political, and cultural contexts. The contrast between Malaysia's increasingly conservative religious climate and Indonesia's more pluralistic yet ambivalently secular setting offers fertile ground for rethinking how young Muslim audiences engage with media that defy conventional religious binaries. As Homi Bhabha's concept of ambivalence describes the postcolonial subject as split and doubled, simultaneously shaped by both colonial and native cultures, creating a complex identity. However, his framing is critiqued for overlooking the nuanced, often agonizing moments of uncertainty and gradual understanding experienced by such subjects in real life (Dimitrijevska-Jankulovska & Denkovska, 2023; Lee, 2016). By adopting Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, this study aims to foreground the contested meanings produced in transnational receptions and to critique the limitations of state-regulated religious narratives in media studies (Hall, 1997).

Islam is regarded as a guiding force in every aspect of life, and in the context of Indonesian and Malaysian societies, it significantly influences political, social, and cultural issues. Studying Islamic films in these countries is crucial for understanding Southeast Asian social changes and religious debates (Heryanto, 2011). In Indonesia, research on the reception analysis of Islamic-themed media, such as the *Saliha* documentary program, has been explored in the Fauzi et al. (2022) paper. This study investigates the relationship between media and audience, focusing on portraying modern Muslim women's identity in *Saliha*, a program aired on Indonesia's NET TV. Using a qualitative approach and Stuart Hall's Encoding-Decoding theory, the research highlights how audiences create meanings based on their personal experiences with the program. The findings show a shift in the portrayal of Muslim women on television, contributing to the ongoing mediatization of modern Muslim identities. The novelty of this research lies in its exploration of how television programs influence audience perceptions of religious and gender identities, reflecting broader societal changes. In previous research that employed the encoding/decoding approach to study films with Islamic themes and their audiences, scholars have emphasized the intersection of gender within the imagination of the middle class engaging in global travel to Islamic sites. These studies primarily focused on television audience reception, using the concept of the imagined community as a key analytical framework.

Latifah's (2016) study examines audience responses to religious representations in three Indonesian films: *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (2008), *3 Doa 3 Cinta* (2008), and *Perempuan Berkabung Sorban* (2009). The research emphasizes how these films, through their Islamic labels, function as media for religious dialogue among various societal groups, including the public, the state, faith communities, and filmmakers. The study argues that the representation of Islam in these films sparks public debates, providing a platform for discussions on religious values and beliefs. The novelty of this study lies in identifying Islamic films as a profitable genre that not only attracts audiences for entertainment but also fosters religious and cultural engagement. The emphasis on a gender approach and female audiences becomes the focal point of the research, revealing how women interpret religious identity, cultural values, and resistance to patriarchal norms portrayed in the films. This interpretation serves as a central strength of the study.

This research employs reception analysis (Annisa et al., 2023), engaging Indonesian students as informants to delve into their interpretations of *Mentega Terbang*. The study will select four students from Indonesia to examine how they decode the film's themes in light of their cultural and socioeconomic contexts. By applying Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, the research aims to foster critical thinking skills, enabling students to analyse and interpret the film's content and its relevance to their lived experiences. Furthermore, this approach facilitates a nuanced critique of the film's portrayal of gender roles and multiculturalism, contributing to an inclusive and informed societal dialogue. Analysing the reception of *Mentega Terbang* also provides students with tools to critically assess media content, fostering an understanding of the intricate relationship between media messages, cultural contexts, and audience interpretations. Ultimately, this research aims to enrich the discourse on cultural and religious pluralism in Southeast Asia while promoting a deeper understanding of media literacy and cross-cultural engagement. Previous studies have primarily focused on Islamic-themed films produced and broadcast within the context of Indonesian society. In contrast, this study shifts the focus to a Malaysian cinema that presents a controversial interpretation of religion within the Malaysian context. The researcher aims to explore how this film is constructed and interpreted by Indonesian university students. The intersection between Malaysian cultural norms and religious taboos makes it particularly compelling to investigate how Indonesian students respond to such representations. Although both countries have Muslim-majority populations, Indonesia's comparatively more secular public sphere may lead to different interpretations and responses, highlighting the contextual divergence between Malaysia and Indonesia.

However, there are several research gaps that could be explored to further deepen the understanding of audience reception, especially in Southeast Asia's complex media landscape. One potential research gap is the comparative analysis of audience reception across different cultural and religious groups within Indonesia and Malaysia. While this study focuses on Indonesian students' interpretations, it would be valuable to investigate how Malaysian audiences, or audiences from different regions of Indonesia, perceive the same film. This could help identify cultural and regional variations in the interpretation of sensitive religious themes, shedding light on broader regional debates about religion and media. Another gap could be the examination of the long-term impact of controversial films on public discourse and social attitudes, particularly in countries where religion plays a central role in shaping societal norms. A longitudinal study could explore how the reception of *Mentega Terbang* evolves over time and whether it contributes to changes in religious and cultural perceptions among young audiences. Additionally, expanding the scope to include other forms of media, such as social media reactions and online discourse, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how controversial media is discussed and interpreted in contemporary Southeast Asian society.

Central to Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis is the premise that communication is constituted through the processes of encoding and decoding. Encoding refers to the construction of meaning by media producers, encompassing choices related to language, visual representation, and narrative structure. Decoding, conversely, pertains to the audience's interpretation of these mediated messages. Hall (as cited in Bødker, 2018) emphasized that these processes are neither linear nor uniform, but are instead mediated by the audience's cultural and social contexts. He delineated three primary positions within the encoding/decoding model: the dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated position, and the oppositional position. This framework underscores the fluid and dynamic nature of meaning-making in communication (Castleberry, 2013).

Decoding, as Hall argued, is the counterpart to encoding and involves the interpretation and reception of the message by the audience. Here, the audience's understanding of the message is not predetermined but is shaped by their own cultural and social contexts. Hall identified three primary positions in the decoding process: the dominant-hegemonic reading (accepting the encoded message as intended), the negotiated reading (interpreting the message with some degree of resistance or reinterpretation), and the oppositional reading (challenging and rejecting the encoded message). One of the central contributions of Hall's theory is its emphasis on the negotiation of meaning. He highlighted that the interpretation of media messages is not fixed but contingent on the audience's position within a given culture or society. This negotiation reflects the ideological power dynamics at play in media and culture (Durham & Kellner, 2006). The way audiences decode messages can reinforce or subvert the dominant ideologies present in society. Hall's theory thus unveils the complexities and nuances of communication, demonstrating how media can both reflect and challenge societal norms and values.

Reception analysis is a critical method in media and cultural studies that aims to understand how audiences interact with and perceive various forms of media content, such as television, film, literature, and digital media. Reception analysis, at its core, investigates the complex and dynamic relationship between media producers, their intended messages, and the various ways in which audiences receive, interpret, and make meaning from those messages (Livingstone, 2008). This theoretical paradigm challenges the traditional notion of media as a one-way transmitter of meaning and instead acknowledges the audience's active engagement in defining the ultimate significance of media texts.

The notions of encoding and decoding are central to reception analysis. Encoding is the process by which media producers build messages using language, pictures, and narrative elements. Decoding, on the other hand, is concerned with how audiences perceive and comprehend these encoded messages. Stuart Hall's influential encoding and decoding model identifies three primary positions: dominant-hegemonic reading, in which audiences accept the intended message; negotiated reading, in which they interpret it with some resistance or reinterpretation; and oppositional reading, in which they challenge or reject the encoded message. These viewpoints demonstrate that interpretation does not follow a set pattern and differs according to individual, cultural, and social circumstances. Cultural and contextual elements are important in affecting audience interpretations, according to reception study. Audiences apply their own experiences, values, and cultural backgrounds to the decoding process, resulting in varied and sometimes unexpected readings of media information. Furthermore, the social and ideological climate of a given era can have a substantial impact on how communications are received and accepted or questioned by the audience (Branston & Stafford, 2010).

Literature, cinema, and other forms of representation function as ideological instruments that project or construct a society's cultural identity (Emelobe, 2009). Within postcolonial discourse, particular attention is given to the representation of characters, highlighting how power and identity are articulated (Sawant, 2012). The concept of the "self" is associated with dominant societal power, whereas the "other" is positioned as subordinate or inferior (Dimitrijovska-Jankulovska & Denkovska, 2023). Culture plays a central role in assigning meaning to both the self and the other through systems of classification, a process articulated by Hall (1997). As Marcos and Colón (2016) observed, in contemporary contexts, the representation of the other increasingly serves as a mechanism to affirm the position of the self. The construction of self and other is thus shaped by judgments and group classifications, yet the other primarily emerges in contexts of confrontation or opposition (Eberhardt, 2018).

METHOD

The analysis in this research follows a two-step approach, focusing first on media text analysis and then on audience analysis. This structure is essential for understanding the full spectrum of meaning production and interpretation within media studies, particularly when using Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model, which emphasizes the dynamic relationship between media producers and audiences.

The first step involves selecting and analyzing the media texts themselves. In this case, the film *Mentega Terbang* was chosen as the primary text for its rich socio-cultural and political themes, making it an ideal candidate for encoding-decoding analysis. This step requires researchers to carefully select texts that align with their research objectives and can reveal the complexities of message encoding. Media texts, such as films, television programs, or advertisements, are constructed using a combination of language, visuals, narrative structures, and cultural references. These elements are purposefully crafted by producers to convey specific messages, reflect cultural norms, and resonate with intended audiences.

Once the media text is selected, researchers proceed with a detailed textual analysis, examining how the filmmakers have encoded their intentions within the narrative. This includes studying the use of language, visual symbolism, character dynamics, and plot structures to identify the ideological messages embedded in the text. Researchers should also consider the cultural and historical contexts in which the film was produced, as these significantly influence the encoding process. For *Mentega Terbang*, this means paying attention to themes like multiculturalism, identity, and political commentary, which are deeply embedded in the film's structure. The analysis should focus on how these elements shape the film's overall message and reflect the filmmakers' perspectives on contemporary Malaysian society.

The second step involves understanding how audiences decode these encoded messages. This research uses purposive sampling, a non-random sampling technique that involves selecting participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research question (Rai & Thapa, 2015). In this case, the sample consists of young people with Malay descent, reflecting the cultural context of the film and its potential resonance with this demographic. Ten students were selected for this study, participating in focus group discussions (FGDs) followed by in-depth interviews.

Purposive sampling is particularly suitable here as it allows researchers to engage with individuals who have the cultural background necessary to interpret the film's messages accurately. This approach helps uncover how these audiences negotiate meaning, considering their unique cultural experiences, social backgrounds, and personal perspectives. The FGDs provide a platform for collective meaning-making, revealing shared interpretations and cultural insights, while the in-depth interviews offer more personalized responses, capturing individual interpretations in greater depth (Kaba, 2024).

During the audience analysis, researchers pay attention to the three primary reading positions identified by Hall: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings. These positions reflect the spectrum of possible audience responses, from complete acceptance of the encoded message (dominant-hegemonic) to partial acceptance with modifications (negotiated), and outright rejection or reinterpretation (oppositional). This layered approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how different audience segments make sense of the media text, highlighting the diverse ways in which cultural messages are decoded.

The final stage of the analysis involves comparing the findings from the media text analysis with the audience responses. This comparative step is crucial for identifying the extent to which the filmmakers' encoded messages align with or diverge from the audience's interpretations. It reveals the gaps, overlaps, and potential misinterpretations that can occur in the communication process, shedding light on the power dynamics and cultural negotiations at play. For *Mentega Terbang*, this may involve exploring how the film's complex themes are understood differently by various audience groups, reflecting broader social and cultural tensions within contemporary Malaysian society.

This two-step approach provides a robust framework for analyzing the intricate relationship between media producers and audiences. It captures the dynamic process of meaning-making, highlighting the ways in which cultural context influences both message encoding and decoding, thereby contributing valuable insights to the field of media and cultural studies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Encoding Analysis

In *Mentega Terbang*, the collaborative efforts of the producer, director, and editor are evident in constructing a narrative that sensitively explores religious diversity and portrays Malaysia's multicultural society through various thematic and stylistic approaches. Directed by Khairi Anwar and written by Khairi Anwar, Arjun Thanaraju, Visshnu Varman, and Ti Teng-Hui, the film was produced by Tan Meng Kheng and Cassandra Lew and features a cast that includes Syumaila Salihin, Shyamala Kandapper, Arjun Thanaraju, Firdaus Karim, Nik Waheeda, Jesebel Lee, and Khairunazwan Rodzy. This independent 2021 Malaysian film delves into the theological and existential turmoil of Aisyah, an adolescent Muslim grappling with questions about life after death. Her journey of religious exploration engages with theological perspectives from various major faiths, offering a profound commentary on interfaith dialogue and religious identity.

Khairi Anwar's personal background and ideological stance significantly inform the film's narrative and thematic construction. In a YouTube interview, Khairi shared that his upbringing in a religious household, coupled with his mother's emphasis on social and cultural open-mindedness, profoundly influenced his worldview. His mother's role as a political and social journalist, alongside her encouragement of intellectual freedom, inspired Khairi to tackle sensitive themes in *Mentega Terbang*. He views the act of questioning religious beliefs not as subversive but as a necessary exercise in intellectual engagement. This perspective is embodied in the film, which challenges societal taboos surrounding interfaith discourse and the exploration of theological concepts, resulting in its restriction to private screenings in Malaysia due to its controversial nature. According to Khairi, his desire to share this provocative yet thoughtful concept stems from his personal experiences and his mother's influence, as he mentioned in the interview: "Questioning all religions shouldn't be a big deal, but I think that still happens in Malaysia and Indonesia."

1. Encoding Religious and Cultural Themes in *Mentega Terbang*

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model provides a valuable framework for analyzing how the ideological beliefs of media producers shape the content and delivery of films. As the director of *Mentega Terbang*, Khairi Anwar encoded the film with specific ideological messages rooted in his belief that interfaith dialogue is essential and that Islam, as a robust and intellectually resilient faith, can withstand scrutiny and comparison. This ideology is manifest in the film's narrative structure, symbols, and character interactions. For instance, the portrayal of Aisyah's engagement with religious texts from multiple faiths serves as a deliberate narrative device to promote religious tolerance and understanding, aligning with Khairi's ideological stance.

Encoding also anticipates potential reactions from audiences, particularly in culturally and religiously sensitive environments like Malaysia. The filmmakers' choice to explore topics such as interfaith dialogue, theological questioning, and multicultural relationships reflects a conscious effort to provoke thought and discussion while challenging prevailing norms. By including scenes that openly depict discussions about religious texts and practices, the film conveys a message advocating for empathy, inclusivity, and the importance of understanding diverse belief systems. The filmmakers' decision to limit the film's screening to private venues further underscores the careful encoding of the film's message to navigate Malaysia's conservative socio-political environment.

2. The Role of Controversy in the Encoding Process

The production and distribution of *Mentega Terbang* illustrate how controversy can become an integral component of the encoding process. By addressing contentious issues such as interfaith dialogue, the filmmakers anticipated backlash from conservative segments of Malaysian society. This foresight shaped their strategic approach to distribution, opting for limited screenings in controlled environments. Khairi's decision to proceed with the film despite its contentious nature reflects his commitment to his ideological principles, which include fostering open discourse on religion and multiculturalism. The film thus serves as both a cultural artifact and a statement of resistance against societal constraints, embedding these layers of meaning into its encoded message.

3. Contrasting Reception in Malaysia and Indonesia

Hall's model also emphasizes the variability of audience reception, influenced by cultural, social, and political contexts. In Malaysia, where religious conservatism heavily influences public discourse, the encoded messages of *Mentega Terbang* were met with skepticism and controversy. The decision to screen the film privately, with the filmmakers present to contextualize its themes and mitigate potential backlash, highlights the careful navigation of a restrictive media landscape.

In contrast, the film's reception at the Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival in Indonesia reveals a different decoding process. Presented in the Asian Perspective category, *Mentega Terbang* was received in a more inclusive and liberal environment, allowing its themes to resonate more closely with the filmmakers' original intentions. The festival provided a platform for open discussion and appreciation, reflecting Indonesia's relatively pluralistic approach to cultural and religious dialogue. This disparity in reception underscores Hall's assertion that while media texts are encoded with specific meanings, their decoding by audiences is shaped by distinct socio-cultural and political contexts.

4. Implications of Encoding/Decoding for Media Discourse

The application of Hall's encoding/decoding framework to *Mentega Terbang* highlights the dynamic interaction between media producers, their ideological messages, and audience interpretations. Khairi Anwar's encoding of the film with messages of religious tolerance and open dialogue aims to challenge societal norms and stimulate critical engagement. However, the diverse responses to the film in Malaysia and Indonesia illustrate the complexities of audience decoding, shaped by varying cultural and contextual factors.

This analysis emphasizes the significance of media texts as both cultural products and agents of societal change. By encoding themes that challenge orthodoxies and promote inclusivity, filmmakers like Khairi Anwar contribute to a

broader discourse on cultural and religious pluralism. At the same time, the reception of such films provides insights into societal values, tensions, and the potential for transformation. Through this interplay of encoding and decoding, *Mentega Terbang* serves as a case study for examining the role of media in shaping and reflecting the socio-cultural dynamics of Southeast Asia.

Furthermore, the difference in reception and distribution between Malaysia and Indonesia highlights how media can be encoded in a way that anticipates and responds to local norms and potential censorship, yet still finds avenues like international film festivals to reach broader or more receptive audiences. This strategy reflects a nuanced understanding of the “negotiated” or “oppositional” readings Hall described, where audiences do not merely accept messages as intended but reinterpret them based on their own cultural frameworks and experiences. The encoding strategy by “Mentega Terbang’s” creators, therefore, not only encapsulates their ideological stance but also a pragmatic approach to overcoming barriers to communication in diverse media environments.

In Stuart Hall’s framework of encoding in media communication, the visual representation of the tattoo on the character Abah in *Mentega Terbang* serves as a potent example of how symbols are imbued with complex meanings that can influence audience decoding. The tattoo, depicting a butterfly with a clock at its center, is intentionally encoded by the director, Khairi, to signify the character’s past experiences and ideological journey. The butterfly, symbolizing transformation and the film’s title, and the clock, representing the concept of time from the Quranic verse Al-Ashr, are merged to convey a narrative of personal evolution and the inevitable passage of time. This symbol is not merely aesthetic but is laden with ideological significance, suggesting a blending of beliefs and personal growth over time. Khairi’s choice to encode this complex symbol into Abah’s character directly impacts how the film is received, particularly by Muslim audiences in Indonesia and Malaysia, where the depiction of tattoos and the exploration of multiple religions can be controversial. The tattoo symbolizes Abah’s rebellious past and his exploration of various religions, including those not traditionally aligned with Islam. This can provoke a range of decoding responses from audiences—some may see it as a rich, narrative-enhancing symbol of personal development and religious tolerance, while others may view it negatively due to the cultural and religious connotations associated with tattoos and the endorsement of religious pluralism.

The encoded message within the tattoo thus engages with cultural sensitivities and religious doctrines, highlighting Hall’s notion of negotiated and oppositional readings. For some viewers, the tattoo may resonate as a symbol of life’s journey and the personal quest for meaning, aligning with more liberal or interpretative views of Islam that accommodate personal expression and interfaith dialogue. For others, the explicit connection to religious themes through the imagery of the tattoo could be seen as controversial or even disrespectful, reflecting a more oppositional decoding. This variance underscores Hall’s argument that the encoding process is not merely about the transmission of information but is also about anticipating and interacting with the audience’s potential interpretations based on their cultural and ideological backgrounds. Overall, the encoding of Abah’s tattoo in *Mentega Terbang* exemplifies how filmmakers can use visual symbols to embed complex ideologies and personal narratives within a film, which then interact dynamically with diverse audience perceptions and cultural contexts, influencing the film’s interpretation and reception in multifaceted ways. In essence, the producer, director, and editor of “Mentega Terbang” would collaborate to construct a narrative that celebrates Malaysia’s religious diversity while addressing the challenges and opportunities it presents. Their collective goal would be to portray a nuanced, authentic depiction of multiculturalism that fosters empathy and dialogue among audiences.

In the context of Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model, the strategic screening choices for the film *Mentega Terbang* offer an intriguing case study in how directors encode their media products based on anticipated audience interpretations. Khairi, the director, elected to screen the film primarily in urban areas, operating under the assumption that urban audiences are more open-minded and educated, thus more likely to engage positively with the film’s themes. This decision to target urban areas can be seen as an encoding strategy, designed to align the film’s complex and potentially controversial messages with an audience perceived to be more receptive to its ideological underpinnings. This encoding choice reflects a deeper understanding of the sociocultural divide between urban and potentially more conservative rural audiences. By screening in urban centers, Khairi likely aimed to minimize backlash and maximize understanding and acceptance of the film’s narrative, which discusses themes that might be viewed as contentious. This strategy indicates an anticipation of the decoding process among different demographics, suggesting that urban viewers would not only grasp but also appreciate the film’s exploration of sensitive topics, reflecting an 80% approval assumption by the director. Such a strategy exemplifies Hall’s notion of the “negotiated code,” where the message is tailored to align with an anticipated, more favorable audience response, yet is aware of broader societal sensitivities.

Further, the evolution of *Mentega Terbang* from a competition entry to a festival film underscores the film’s encoding for broader appeal beyond mere competition parameters. The producer’s decision to elevate the film to festival status reflects a recognition of its potential to resonate on a larger scale, navigating away from solely profit-driven motives that dominate much of the Malaysian film industry. This move aligns with Hall’s discussion of how media can serve as a form of resistance against dominant economic and ideological forces. In this case, it challenges the normative practices of an industry driven by financial interests, highlighting the struggle for creative and passionate filmmaking within a commercially constrained environment. Khairi’s commentary on the Malaysian film industry further enriches the analysis

of encoding within *Mentega Terbang*. Describing the industry as “a bit sick” due to its prioritization of profit over content, Khairi’s insights reveal a broader critique encoded within his filmmaking approach. This critique is not merely of the film’s narrative but of the industry’s structural limitations, influencing how filmmakers like himself choose to create and distribute their work. By encoding the film in a way that deliberately seeks out alternative spaces and audiences (e.g., film festivals, urban screenings), Khairi and his peers actively challenge the prevailing commercial dynamics, leveraging the encoding process to align with smaller, like-minded communities and international platforms, which are more conducive to artistic expression and ideological dissemination. This layered approach to encoding demonstrates a strategic and ideological use of media as both a communicative tool and a cultural artifact, capable of navigating and contesting the prevailing economic and cultural currents within the Malaysian film industry.

B. Program as Meaningful Discourse

In “*Mentega Terbang*,” the study of religious diversity and multiculturalism in Malaysian culture constructs and facilitates meaningful debate. These are some of the main points of this discussion, which is such a significant message from the movie maker. The celebration of diversity comes first. The movie shows the beliefs, customs, and daily lives of several Malaysian religious sects. It draws attention to the presence of many religions within the same social fabric and celebrates the richness of cultural variety. Scenes that encourage empathy and understanding are used to illustrate this. This principle is further demonstrated by *Mentega Terbang*’s plot and character interactions, which encourage empathy and understanding amongst individuals of all religious backgrounds. It depicts instances of communication, collaboration, and respect for one another, showing how people can cross religious and cultural barriers.



Fig.1. Scene in continuity depicting Aisha in discussion with her parents regarding the Bible verse John 3:16, which she borrowed from Esther and her Indian aunt.

Mentega Terbang would like to portray the Aisha family, who are worshiping together and living in great harmony, in picture 2. Following that moment, a continuity scene shows Aisha reading from the Bible while her parents talk about it and quote a passage explaining how much God loves the world; “He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. that John is emphasizing both the degree to which God loved the world as well as the manner in which He chose to express that love”. From this scene the discourse about religion is not taboo, otherwise questioning the God depicts as natural human being take. This viewpoint is undoubtedly distinct from what the majority of Malaysians think. This sequence demonstrates how the film’s controversy stems from the fact that it deviates from standard discourse by keeping religious discussions inside the family somewhat closed off.

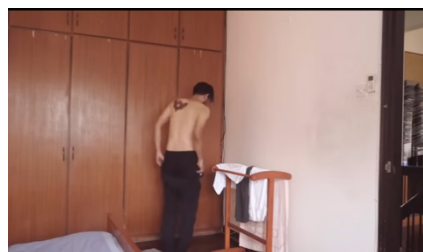


Fig.2. Scene depicting Abah, Aisha’s father, changing his clothes, revealing a tattoo on his back.

Abah as Aisha’s father in this scene, he had changed into new clothes and had a tattoo on his back. In Islam, Tattooing is considered a deviation from God’s creation, tantamount to body torture, mutilation, and unnecessary embellishment. Nonetheless, this image seems to indicate that Aisha’s father is permitted to have one. The movie discusses the difficulties—like miscommunications or disputes—that result from religious difference. It shows characters overcoming these obstacles and coming to agreements through shared freedom of choice, compromise, and visual aids, including getting tattoos.



Fig.3. Aisha overcomes the common Muslim aversion to keeping dogs as pets when she befriends Esther's dog, Milo.

In many Muslim-majority cultures, there is a general reluctance or disapproval towards owning dogs due to religious interpretations that consider dogs ritually impure (najis). This belief stems from interpretations of hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) that caution against keeping dogs except for specific purposes like guarding livestock or crops. The portrayal of Aisha befriendng Esther's dog, Milo, challenges these cultural and religious norms. It confronts the stereotype that all Muslims universally hold the same beliefs about dogs. Aisha's action could be seen as progressive or liberal within her community, advocating for a more inclusive view towards pets and animals.

Aisha's decision to befriend Milo could create internal and external conflicts within the storyline. Internally, she might struggle with reconciling her newfound affection for Milo with her upbringing or religious teachings. Externally, she could face judgment or criticism from her family, friends, or community members who hold more traditional views.



Fig.4. Aisha expresses curiosity about the flavor of chashu, a pork-based ingredient prohibited in Islam, while she and Suresh are eating meat buns.

The scene could also symbolize broader themes such as tolerance, empathy, and breaking stereotypes. It can depict Aisha's personal growth, as she challenges and evolves beyond the boundaries set by her cultural and religious background. The scene involving Aisha and Milo would likely provoke varied reactions from audiences. Some viewers might appreciate the portrayal of diversity of thought within Muslim communities, while others might find it controversial or even sacrilegious depending on their beliefs. In conclusion, Aisha overcoming the distaste for owning dogs and befriendng Easther's dog, Milo, in "Mentega Terbang" is a significant scene due to its potential to challenge cultural and religious norms, depict character development, and spark discussion about diversity of beliefs within Muslim societies.

In the film "Mentega Terbang," the scene where Aisha expresses interest in trying chashu, which is made from pork (a meat forbidden for Muslims to consume), while she and Suresh are eating meatbun, could indeed be controversial and impactful for several reasons. Pork is considered haram (forbidden) in Islam, and Muslims are instructed not to consume it based on religious teachings. Aisha's curiosity about chashu and her willingness to taste it despite knowing this prohibition can be seen as a direct confrontation with her religious beliefs. Aisha's desire to try chashu creates a conflict between her personal curiosity and her adherence to religious dietary laws. This internal conflict can be compelling for audiences as they witness her grappling with her own identity and values. The scene can serve as a pivotal moment for Aisha's character development. It may showcase her openness to exploring other cultures and cuisines, as well as her willingness to challenge norms and traditions. At the same time, it highlights the complexities of navigating cultural and religious boundaries. The scene could affect Aisha's relationship with Suresh or other characters who may react differently to her decision. It could lead to discussions or disagreements about cultural sensitivity, religious observance, and personal choice.

Viewers from diverse backgrounds may react differently to this scene. Some may appreciate Aisha's curiosity and willingness to engage with different cultures, while others may view it as disrespectful or insensitive to her religious beliefs. The inclusion of such a scene adds depth to the narrative by exploring themes of identity, multiculturalism, and the intersection of personal desires with religious obligations. It prompts viewers to reflect on how individuals navigate their beliefs within a multicultural society. In summary, the scene in "Mentega Terbang" where Aisha considers tasting chashu despite its pork content while eating meatbun with Suresh is controversial due to its exploration of religious dietary restrictions, personal curiosity, cultural sensitivity, and character development. It challenges viewers to contemplate the

complexities of identity and belief systems in a multicultural world.

The responses to *Mentega Terbang* highlight how media texts are not passively consumed but are actively interpreted by audiences within specific cultural and ideological contexts, as Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model suggests. Hall (1980) argues that audiences may decode media messages in dominant, negotiated, or oppositional ways, depending on their social positions and cultural experiences (Bødker, 2018). In the case of *Mentega Terbang*, some viewers may adopt a dominant reading by embracing the film's call for interfaith dialogue and pluralism, while others may engage in oppositional readings, viewing it as a challenge to Islamic orthodoxy.

The film's portrayal of Aisha questioning religious taboos—befriending a dog, showing interest in eating pork, or discussing the Bible—can be interpreted through Bhabha's (1994) theory of ambivalence in postcolonial identity (Lee, 2016). Bhabha argues that the postcolonial subject is never fully inside or outside cultural norms but inhabits a "third space" of hybridity, where meaning is negotiated and unsettled. Aisha's actions, therefore, do not necessarily indicate a full break from her Muslim identity but reflect an ambivalent negotiation of selfhood in a multicultural society. This ambivalence is not a sign of confusion or weakness but rather of critical agency—what Hall (1996) might describe as the capacity of subjects to reposition themselves through cultural practices.

Moreover, the controversy around *Mentega Terbang* can be seen as a struggle over the boundaries of cultural legitimacy in Malaysia's public sphere. Media studies scholars like David Morley (1992) emphasize that viewers' responses to media texts are shaped by their ideological positioning within structures of nation, religion, and ethnicity. In a predominantly Muslim society, where public discourse on religion is often tightly regulated, *Mentega Terbang* opens space for "agonistic pluralism" (Mouffe, 2000)—a productive tension that invites debate rather than consensus.

Thus, *Mentega Terbang* functions as a site of cultural negotiation where ambivalence, far from being pathological, becomes a mode of engagement. It allows viewers to confront inherited norms and question the boundaries of religious and cultural belonging, resonating with Hall's vision of identity as always in process, and Bhabha's insistence on the generative power of hybridity.

C. Encoding Analysis

This section will provide an explanation of the researcher's process for deciphering data and analysis involving five informants, including students who belong to the middle class and who were raised in Melayu culture. The informants are all Muslim and enrolled at Yogyakarta's University Muhammadiyah. This history is a key factor in the selection of particular informants. Students who come from middle-class families and from a Malay background will probably find "*Mentega Terbang*'s" themes, situations, and cultural subtleties to be extremely relatable. Their familiar familial dynamics, cultural norms, and personal experiences may find resonance in the picture. This has to do with representation in movies as well. Films that feature characters and situations reflecting their own cultural and religious identities can provide a sense of representation and validation. Students from Melayu backgrounds may appreciate seeing their culture portrayed authentically on screen, especially in a narrative that explores complex themes relevant to their community.

This research also choose students studying in Muslim universities are often more attuned to discussions surrounding Islamic principles, cultural sensitivity, and ethical considerations in media. They may approach "*Mentega Terbang*" with a critical eye towards how it portrays issues such as religious beliefs, intercultural interactions, and personal values. Given the socio-political context in many Malay-majority regions where discussions about identity, tradition, and modernity are prevalent, "*Mentega Terbang*" can serve as a catalyst for conversations about these topics. Students may engage deeply with the film's commentary on societal norms, gender roles, and individual choices within their cultural framework. Beyond cultural and social relevance, students studying in universities often have an interest in cinema as an art form. They may appreciate the film's cinematography, storytelling techniques, and character development, contributing to a more nuanced analysis of its thematic content.

Within university settings, discussions about popular culture, including films like "*Mentega Terbang*," can be influential. Students may be more inclined to watch and analyze films that their peers and instructors find noteworthy or culturally significant, enhancing their understanding and appreciation of the film. In essence, the reception and analysis of "*Mentega Terbang*" by students from middle-class backgrounds, studying in Muslim universities, and with a Malay background are shaped by their cultural affinity, educational environment, and the film's relevance to their personal and communal identities. These factors contribute to a deeper engagement with the film's themes and messages, making it a meaningful and thought-provoking experience for them.

This study involves five informants, each with a unique background but sharing common themes of Malay ethnicity and strong Islamic faith, providing a rich context for exploring religious beliefs and practices.

1. Informant 1 is a male student from an Islamic university in Yogyakarta, originating from a Malay family with strong Islamic convictions. Within his family context, discussions on religious differences are deemed inappropriate, reflecting a homogeneous religious environment that likely shapes his perceptions and engagements with religious diversity.

2. Informant 2, also a male, resides on the island of Kalimantan and is of pure Malay descent. His family's strong adherence to Islamic practices is evident in their emphasis on obligatory mosque prayers. Furthermore, his familial connection to Malaysia through an adopted father contributes to a more complex cultural and religious identity, potentially influencing his perspectives on religious and cultural integration.
3. Informant 3, another male student from the same Islamic university in Yogyakarta as Informant 1, is a migrant of Malay ethnicity. His family's rigorous religious practices—such as mandatory congregational prayers at home and strict observance of religious norms—reflect a highly disciplined religious upbringing that likely informs his personal religiosity and social engagement with religious matters.
4. Informant 4 is a female student enrolled in the international class at the Islamic university in Yogyakarta. Sharing a Malay heritage, she was raised within a strict Islamic educational environment, where deviation from Islamic teachings is perceived as a grave transgression. This background likely shapes her attitudes toward religious tolerance and informs her sense of personal and religious identity.
5. Informant 5, also a female student in the same international program, comes from a devout Malay Muslim family. Although her family demonstrates a degree of tolerance in broader social interactions, they maintain stringent personal boundaries—for instance, refraining from consuming food prepared by non-Muslim neighbors, even if the food is halal. This illustrates a nuanced expression of religiosity that combines outward social openness with strict personal observance.

These five informants provide a spectrum of perspectives on Islamic practices and Malay cultural identity, offering a comprehensive view of how deeply ingrained religious and cultural values can shape individual behaviors and attitudes toward religious diversity when they “read” the media such as film *Mentega Terbang*.

In this study, the five informants, all sharing Malay ethnicity and strong Islamic backgrounds, responded to the film “Mentega Terbang” with diverse perspectives, reflecting their individual contexts and the broader sociocultural environments of Indonesia and Malaysia. Generally, upon viewing the film, the informants immediately drew comparisons between the conditions and cultural climates in Indonesia and Malaysia. Some informants felt that the controversial nature of the film was expected, considering the sensitive subject matter of interfaith discussions and the differing levels of religious tolerance and media freedom between the two countries. These informants recognized that in regions where religious conservatism is more pronounced, such as in certain areas of Malaysia, a film that openly discusses religious differences could easily ignite controversy and provoke strong reactions.

On the other hand, other informants saw the film as a vehicle for promoting greater tolerance toward religious and cultural differences. They appreciated the film's attempt to engage with taboo topics and viewed it as a means to encourage dialogue and understanding among diverse religious communities. This group perceived the film not just as a reflection of societal tensions but also as an opportunity for societal healing and advancement by challenging viewers to reconsider their own views on faith and coexistence. This mixed response among the informants highlights the complex interplay between media representations and societal values, illustrating how cultural products can simultaneously be seen as controversial and transformative, depending on the viewers' backgrounds, beliefs, and the sociopolitical context in which they are consumed.

Table 1. Categorization of Informants Based on Their Opinions of the Mentega Terbang Film

Informant 1	Informant 2	Informant 3	Informant 4	Informant 5
Dominant	Opposite	Negotiation	Negotiation	Opposite

Using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, the responses of the informants to the film *Mentega Terbang* can be analyzed to reveal how viewers interpret the same media text through their distinct cultural and personal lenses. According to Hall, encoding refers to the process by which media producers embed specific meanings and values into a text, while decoding denotes the audience's interpretation of these messages, which may vary based on social and cultural positioning.

Informant 1 corresponds to what Hall identifies as the “dominant” or “preferred” reading. This informant interprets the film in alignment with director Khairi Anwar's intended message—viewing it as a medium for fostering peaceful interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance. Khairi encoded the film with the hope that audiences would perceive the depiction of interreligious engagement as constructive rather than threatening to Islamic teachings. Informant 1's interpretation reflects a full acceptance of this encoding, indicating congruence between the filmmaker's intent and the viewer's decoding.

In contrast, Informants 2 and 5 exhibit what Hall would categorize as “negotiated” or potentially “oppositional” readings. Informant 2 acknowledges the film's intended message but critiques it as unrealistic, suggesting that the narrative is overly dramatized and fails to represent the lived experiences of Malay youth, particularly regarding sensitive issues

such as the consumption of pork. His familial connection to Malaysia informs a decoding process shaped by a nuanced understanding of cultural and religious norms, leading him to partially reject the film's portrayal.

Informant 3 adopts a more explicitly oppositional stance, interpreting the film not as a narrative of religious tolerance but as a portrayal of adolescent selfishness and instability. This reading diverges significantly from the encoder's intent, reframing the film within a personal and psychological context rather than a socio-religious one. Similarly, Informant 4 focuses on the personal motivations and behaviors of the characters, rather than engaging with the broader thematic content embedded by the filmmaker.

Table 2. Categorization of Informants Based on Their Responses to Interfaith Dialogue Scenes in *Mentega Terbang*

Informant 1	Informant 2	Informant 3	Informant 4	Informant 5
Dominant	Opposite	Negotiation	Negotiation	Opposite

These varied responses underscore the complexity of the encoding/decoding process, demonstrating how personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and individual perspectives shape the interpretation of media messages. While the director encoded *Mentega Terbang* with specific intentions, each informant's decoding reflects a unique interaction between the text and their sociocultural contexts, resulting in a range of interpretations and reactions. This analysis reinforces the dynamic nature of media communication, wherein meaning is not simply transmitted from sender to receiver but is actively constructed and reconstructed through audience engagement.

The findings reveal nuanced interpretations among Indonesian Muslim students regarding a particularly controversial scene in *Mentega Terbang*—a dinner sequence in which Muslim characters are shown reading books from various religious traditions. This scene serves as a focal point for analyzing informants' decoding processes within the framework of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model.

Informants 2, 3, and 4—who maintain strong ties to the Malay community and identify closely with Malay ethnicity—exhibit what Hall terms a “negotiated” decoding. These informants interpret the depiction of interfaith discussion as acceptable and even intellectually enriching, acknowledging the potential value of engaging with other religious perspectives. Nonetheless, they articulate clear boundaries when such dialogue appears to encroach upon religious practice. Informants 3 and 4, in particular, express discomfort with scenes involving joint prayer with adherents of other religions, viewing this as a breach of Islamic worship boundaries, which they consider non-negotiable.

In contrast, Informants 1 and 5—who also share Malay heritage but are less immersed in a Malay-majority environment—demonstrate an “oppositional” reading of the film's portrayal of inter-religious dialogue. Their interpretations are shaped by apprehension and concern that such representations may mischaracterize Islamic teachings or contribute to social friction. For these informants, the film's portrayal of religious interaction evokes a perceived threat to religious purity and community cohesion.

These contrasting readings highlight the significant role of cultural and religious identity in shaping media interpretation. Informants embedded within Malay community contexts—where interfaith interaction is more visible or normalized—tend to adopt negotiated readings, reconciling the film's message with broader discourses on tolerance and coexistence. Conversely, informants situated outside these social environments interpret such representations as problematic, producing oppositional readings rooted in concerns over doctrinal integrity and societal tension.

Table 3. Categorization of Informants Based on Their Responses to the “Take Off the Hijab” Scene in *Mentega Terbang*

Informant 1	Informant 2	Informant 3	Informant 4	Informant 5
Dominant	Opposite	Negotiation	Negotiation	Opposite

The findings above indicate a significant divergence in the interpretation of a specific scene from the film *Mentega Terbang*, in which the protagonist, Aisyah, removes her hijab while inside a mosque. This act—particularly provocative within the Malaysian socio-religious context—is interpreted in varied ways by the informants, revealing nuanced perceptions influenced by gender and individual religious practices.

The male informants—Informants 1, 2, and 3—demonstrate what Stuart Hall categorizes as a “dominant” or “preferred” decoding of this scene. They do not interpret Aisyah's removal of the hijab as a renunciation of Islam or a sign of religious conversion. Rather, they situate the act within the broader context of adolescent identity exploration or emotional distress, particularly following the death of her mother. This interpretation reflects a general understanding of the scene as a portrayal of youthful rebellion or psychological turmoil, rather than a direct challenge to Islamic values.

By contrast, the female informants—Informants 4 and 5—who personally observe the practice of wearing the hijab, engage in what Hall terms a “negotiated” decoding. While they acknowledge that the removal of the hijab may be interpreted as an emotional or existential response, they also emphasize the symbolic and religious weight of such an

act. These informants contend that any decision potentially signaling a change in religious identity should be grounded in deliberate reflection rather than impulsive reactions to grief or internal conflict. Their readings reveal a heightened sensitivity to the religious and cultural implications of veiling, and to the broader sociocultural expectations surrounding Muslim women's embodiment of faith.

This analysis underscores how personal identity and lived experience shape media interpretation. The male informants' responses may be informed by their distance from the embodied and symbolic significance of the hijab, leading them to prioritize psychological over religious readings of the scene. In contrast, the female informants, through their direct engagement with hijab-wearing, articulate a more layered and contextually grounded interpretation—recognizing both the personal and communal dimensions of veiling practices.

Overall, these divergent readings illuminate the complex interplay between gender, religious practice, and cultural identity in shaping audience responses to symbolic acts in media. They also point to the broader socio-religious stakes of representation in multicultural societies, where religious symbols function as powerful markers of identity and ideological boundary.

This study examines the reception of *Mentega Terbang* among five informants—Malay Muslim students from middle-class backgrounds studying at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta. Their interpretations of controversial scenes—particularly those involving interfaith dialogue and symbolic religious gestures—reveal how media reception is embedded in intersections of personal belief, religious ideology, and sociocultural discourse. Framed within Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model and informed by theories of media ambivalence and multicultural media discourse (Ang, 1982; Nakamura, 2014), this research illustrates the multiplicity of audience readings shaped by cultural positioning, lived experience, and ideological frameworks.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model posits that media texts are encoded with particular meanings by producers, yet are decoded by audiences through interpretive frameworks shaped by their cultural, ideological, and experiential contexts. Hall (1980) outlines three principal decoding positions: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional. These positions are exemplified in the informants' varied engagements with *Mentega Terbang*, particularly regarding its portrayal of interfaith dialogue, religious practice, and personal identity struggles.

Informant 1 demonstrates a dominant-hegemonic reading, closely aligning with the filmmaker's intended message. He interprets the film as an endorsement of peaceful interreligious dialogue and pluralistic understanding, resonating with Khairi Anwar's encoded vision of challenging exclusivist interpretations of Islam without undermining its foundational values. This alignment suggests an ideological congruence likely influenced by his academic setting, which promotes moderate Islamic thought and religious inclusivity.

In contrast, Informants 2 and 5 adopt negotiated readings. They accept certain aspects of the film's liberal stance on interfaith dialogue while critiquing elements they perceive as culturally inauthentic or socially unrealistic—particularly the depiction of Malay-Muslim behaviors. This aligns with Hall's (1980, p. 137) assertion that negotiated readings occur when audiences "acknowledge the legitimacy of the hegemonic definition" but modify it "to reflect their own local conditions." Informant 2, who maintains familial ties to Malaysia, displays heightened sensitivity to issues of cultural representation and challenges the film's applicability to real-life Malay-Muslim experiences.

Informant 3 articulates an oppositional reading, rejecting the filmmaker's intended message and instead framing the protagonist's actions as manifestations of adolescent selfishness and moral instability. His interpretation—shaped by a strict religious upbringing and a conservative moral framework—subverts the encoded narrative, illustrating Hall's (1980) notion of oppositional decoding, wherein the audience resists and reinterprets the dominant ideology embedded within the text.

Reception is further complicated by gendered perspectives, particularly in relation to the scene where the protagonist, Aisyah, removes her hijab inside a mosque. Female informants, who wear the hijab themselves, engage in gendered negotiated readings. They empathize with Aisyah's grief but express discomfort with what they perceive as the trivialization of a deeply symbolic religious practice. Their responses reflect an ambivalent stance, balancing emotional understanding with religious commitment. Drawing on ambivalence theory (Bhabha, 1994; Probyn, 2004), these readings illustrate the informants' "in-between" positioning as they navigate competing discourses of personal agency, religious piety, and societal expectations.

Similarly, the dinner scene in which Muslim characters read from non-Islamic religious texts highlights the range of decoding strategies employed by informants. Informants 2, 3, and 4 articulate cultural ambivalence—accepting interfaith dialogue as a form of intellectual engagement, yet rejecting any implications of religious syncretism. These negotiated readings reflect a tension between Islamic exclusivism and multicultural coexistence, echoing Ang's (1982) argument that media audiences are often situated within "cultural dilemmas" wherein they must reconcile conflicting ideological and cultural values during the consumption of global media texts.

Furthermore, these findings reflect broader ideological contestations within Malay-Muslim societies in Southeast Asia, where modernity, religious orthodoxy, and pluralism coexist in a state of ongoing tension. The informants' responses

demonstrate that media reception is not merely an expression of personal taste or individual preference, but a culturally embedded practice shaped by ideological orientation, socio-political context, and institutional influences (Livingstone, 2004).

This study also highlights the critical role of educational institutions in shaping interpretive frameworks. Students enrolled in Islamic universities, while grounded in religious doctrine, are simultaneously exposed to discursive environments that encourage critical engagement with complex and controversial media. Their responses to *Mentega Terbang* underscore the dynamic interplay between religious pedagogy and media literacy, wherein faith-based values are not simply internalized but are actively negotiated and contested.

In conclusion, the diverse audience responses to *Mentega Terbang* among Malay-Muslim university students reveal the ambivalent and contested terrain of multicultural media reception. Through the application of Hall's encoding/decoding model and the lens of critical ambivalence theory, this study demonstrates that media texts are not consumed in ideological vacuums; rather, they are interpreted through culturally situated frameworks shaped by race, religion, gender, and national identity. The film's controversial elements—its depictions of interfaith dialogue, symbolic religious gestures, and moral ambiguity—function as discursive triggers that catalyze broader reflections on Islamic identity, youth agency, and the limits of cultural representation in contemporary Southeast Asian societies.

CONCLUSION

This study employs Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis to investigate the complex interplay between media encoding and audience decoding in the context of the Malaysian film *Mentega Terbang*, as interpreted by Muslim university students in Indonesia. Hall's model elucidates the dynamic nature of media communication, emphasizing that audience interpretation is significantly shaped by social, cultural, and ideological positioning.

The findings of this research are articulated through several key observations. First, *Mentega Terbang* exhibits a range of encoding strategies employed by the filmmakers, including deliberate uses of language, visual imagery, and narrative structure designed to provoke reflection and dialogue on themes of religious and cultural diversity. The audience's decoding of these messages, however, varies considerably, reflecting Hall's tripartite model of dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings.

Second, the five informants—each of Malay ethnicity and grounded in strong Islamic traditions—express a spectrum of responses. These range from interpreting the film as a straightforward portrayal of religious discourse to viewing it as a transformative medium capable of initiating broader societal change. Their interpretations are deeply embedded in personal histories and communal affiliations, illustrating the differentiated ways in which cultural texts are received and made meaningful.

Third, the responses emphasize the critical influence of socio-cultural environments—namely, the comparative contexts of Indonesia and Malaysia—in shaping the decoding process. Informants frequently juxtaposed the film's content with their own lived experiences of religious tolerance, media regulation, and ideological pluralism, drawing attention to how national context mediates audience reception.

Fourth, the film's engagement with sensitive issues—such as interfaith dialogue and symbolic religious acts—elicited contrasting reactions. While some informants viewed these portrayals as provocative or inappropriate, others interpreted them as valuable contributions to the discourse on religious pluralism. This tension underscores the dual role of media as both a mirror of societal anxieties and a potential catalyst for cultural dialogue and transformation.

Fifth, the study highlights the necessity of recognizing the diverse interpretations that emerge when media circulates across cultural and national boundaries. It also underscores the imperative for media producers to be attuned to the multiplicity of audience perspectives—particularly in multicultural, multi-religious societies—where messages may be recontextualized or contested.

In sum, the decoding of *Mentega Terbang* is not reducible to individual viewer preference; rather, it reflects a complex negotiation between the film's encoded meanings and the cultural, social, and religious contexts of its audience. The implications of this study extend beyond theoretical inquiry into the domain of media practice, intercultural dialogue, and education. One key implication is the responsibility of filmmakers and content creators to acknowledge the heterogeneity of their audiences, especially when addressing sensitive subjects such as religion, identity, and belief. Although *Mentega Terbang* was produced within a Malaysian sociocultural framework, its reception among Indonesian Muslim students—who brought distinct religious, national, and cultural sensibilities—demonstrates the transnational nature of media consumption. This underscores the importance of anticipating diverse readings and the potential for reinterpretation or contestation when media texts traverse cultural borders.

Moreover, the study underscores the pedagogical potential of controversial media as instruments for fostering critical thinking and interreligious dialogue. Within academic environments—particularly Islamic universities—such films can serve as valuable entry points for engaging students in nuanced debates surrounding faith, pluralism, and moral ambiguity. The diverse responses among the informants suggest that exposure to challenging narratives does not

inherently undermine religious values; rather, it can catalyze deeper introspection regarding the meaning and application of those values within a pluralistic society. This finding invites educational institutions to consider integrating media reception into curricula aimed at cultivating intercultural literacy, ethical reasoning, and dialogic engagement.

The findings also bear significant implications for media policy and governance in religiously sensitive societies. The persistent tension between safeguarding freedom of expression and upholding respect for religious orthodoxy remains a delicate issue in both Malaysia and Indonesia. The divergent audience reactions to *Mentega Terbang* indicate that blanket censorship may inadequately address the complex and layered ways in which viewers engage with media. A more constructive and contextually grounded approach—encompassing community dialogue and targeted media literacy education—may offer a more effective framework for addressing controversial content in diverse societies.

From a theoretical perspective, this research affirms and extends Stuart Hall's reception theory by illustrating that decoding is not merely an individual cognitive act but a socially situated and ideologically embedded process. Informants did not interpret the film in isolation; their readings were mediated by collective discourses, institutional affiliations, religious instruction, and broader national narratives. This supports the argument that audience reception studies must remain attentive to macro-contextual forces—including media politics, educational systems, and cultural histories—that shape and constrain interpretive possibilities.

Finally, this study contributes to broader scholarly conversations on multiculturalism and the ethics of representation. The ambivalence expressed by informants toward particular scenes—such as interfaith scripture reading or symbolic acts like the removal of the hijab—reflects ongoing tensions within Muslim societies as they negotiate the boundaries between tradition and modernity, orthodoxy and pluralism. In this regard, *Mentega Terbang* functions not only as a cultural artifact but also as a mirror reflecting internal contestations and a catalyst for reimagining the intersections of faith, freedom, and cultural belonging in contemporary Southeast Asia.

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