Islamic horror films and adolescents' religious behaviour: A study in Sukabumi

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ABSTRACT

Background: Islamic horror films have emerged as an increasingly popular genre in Indonesia, combining supernatural horror narratives with Islamic religious elements such as rituals, symbols, and theological concepts. Although previous studies have examined the influence of Islamic films on social and religious dimensions, no study has specifically investigated how Islamic religious horror films influence the religious behavior of adolescents. **Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to examine whether horror films with Islamic themes have an influence on the religious behavior of 720 high school students in Sukabumi City, Indonesia. **Methods:** This study used a quantitative design involving 720 high school students in Sukabumi City who were selected through cluster sampling. Data were collected using a Likert scale questionnaire and analyzed using path analysis, which was based on cultivation theory. **Results:** The results of this study indicate that Islamic religious horror films significantly influence students' religious behavior in five variables, belief/*aqidah* (30.3%), worship practices (8.5%), appreciation (4.5%), knowledge (5.6%), and experience (8.2%). The content of the message is the most influential variable, while viewing intensity does not significantly influence belief, worship practices, and knowledge. **Conclusion:** The content of Islamic religious horror films is the most influential factor in shaping students' religious behavior, particularly beliefs/ *aqidah*. Contrary to cultivation theory, viewing intensity alone does not determine the cultivation effect; it is the quality of the message content that plays a central role. **Implications:** These findings suggest that filmmakers and educators should prioritise the quality of religious messages embedded in horror film content, as message substance rather than viewing frequency drives the formation of adolescents' religious behaviour.

Keywords: Adolescents; cultivation theory; horror films; Islamic films; religiosity

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INTRODUCTION

The film industry in Indonesia has undergone changes in recent years, one of which is the rise of horror films. These horror films not only explore conventional horror themes but also integrate religious elements, particularly those of Islam. The phenomenon of Islamic horror films is not merely a trend in the film industry but also a manifestation of something that previously did not exist in Indonesian society and culture, where most of the population is Muslim. As a medium, film inherently has the power to shape, reinforce, and even change the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of its audience, including their views on religious matters. For this reason, Islamic-themed horror films are an interesting phenomenon to study, because they combine two contradictory elements: horror and religious belief. The combination of these two elements raises interesting, complex, and profound questions about whether a film with horror elements can influence the religious values of its audience.

The Indonesian film industry is dominated by horror films, which are a favorite genre among Indonesian audiences. In 2023, the 10 highest-grossing films were dominated by horror films, with *Sewu Dino* in first place with 4,886,406 viewers, *Di Ambang Kematian* in second place with 3,300,000 viewers, *Waktu Maghrib* in sixth place with 2,409,112 viewers, seventh place was *Suzanna Malam Jumat Kliwon* with 2,189,363 viewers, eighth and ninth place were

the films *Sijjin* and *Kisah Tanah Jawa: Pocong Gundul* with 1,903,901 and 1,613,780 viewers, respectively (Anwar, 2023). In addition, data from the same year shows that 39 horror films were produced and screened almost every month, indicating that this genre is very productive and exists to enliven Indonesian cinema (Bahana, 2023). Therefore, based on the above data, this indicates that horror films, including those with Islamic religious content, have become a cultural product that is in demand by the Indonesian public and even consumed on a large scale by the public as a form of entertainment.

Horror films with an Islamic religious theme have unique and distinctive characteristics that set them apart from conventional horror films or those with religious themes that are not Islamic. The horror film genre with an Islamic religious theme explicitly combines various Islamic elements such as jinn, demons, devils, clerics, students, and religious practices such as prayer, reading the Quran, *ruqyah* (spiritual healing in Islam), and symbols such as the *mukena, tasbih, peci, sarung, baju koko*, and other symbols related to Islam as tools to fight ghosts that threaten or disturb humans. Stories in religious horror films generally present two different sides, namely good and evil, where the protagonists in the film are religious characters who face threats or disturbances from demons, jinn, or supernatural beings, which they overcome with the power of faith and religious practices that are synonymous with Islam. This

story or plot is not only meant to entertain but also serves as a medium or tool to convey the moral messages and values of Islam to the audience or viewers.

Film is a powerful mass media tool in shaping the cognition, affection, and behavior of the audience. Bandura, in his theory, said that individuals do not learn only through their direct experiences but also through their observations of behavioral models presented by the media. With its ability to present vivid, colorful, realistic visuals and interesting stories, film has the potential to be a source of learning for individuals, not only in social issues but also in the religious sphere. Furthermore, with the powerful nature of film as mentioned above, repeated and consistent exposure to film as a medium will shape the audience's perception of reality, which can be considered real. Heavy viewers will adopt their perspective on something based on what they see and what is presented in the media. This can develop their view that a world filled with supernatural threats from demons or jinn, for example, is real and that religious practices believed in this context, Islam, are a solution and may be different from what has been taught before. Therefore, in the context of Islamic religious horror films, this implies that media exposure that displays Islamic religious practices, the concepts of jinn and ghosts associated with Islam, and how to resolve supernatural conflicts in an Islamic manner and linked to religious obedience can influence the understanding, attitudes, and

religious behavior of the audience watching. Furthermore, the effect of media on high school students who grow up in a religious environment such as Sukabumi is that the practices depicted in films can be in line with what they learn at home or school, thereby strengthening the effect of the media.

Several studies state that films have an influence on the religiosity and religious behavior of their audience. Films can effectively influence the religious practices and behavior of their audience, especially when the film's narrative presents models of religious behavior that can be identified by the audience (Tresnawaty & Risdayah, 2023). Films also play an important role in shaping a person's religious behavior through character identification and the internalization of religious values conveyed (Choirin et al., 2023).

Films can positively educate audiences about religious and social themes, complex issues such as cultural values and trauma, which may be highly relevant to viewers' religious beliefs and experiences. Films that incorporate religious stories often convey empathy, understanding, and morality, which can then enhance viewers' religious sensibilities. Secondly, in a negative context, Dappa and Stevanus see that horror films can change the understanding and behavior of Christian teenagers regarding supernatural beings, such as demons, which are often depicted in films. The tendency to watch horror films can foster a misunderstanding of evil forces and their impact

on the daily behavior of teenagers (Dappa & Stevanus, 2024).

However, studies on horror films in Indonesia are still quite limited and only cover certain aspects. There has been no comprehensive study discussing Islamic-themed horror films and their impact on religious behavior, especially among teenage audiences. Previous studies have been more numerous and focused on examining the depictions and discourse in religious films. For example, research conducted by Lukman Hakim analyzed gender perspectives on the issue of polygamy in five Islamic religious films, which reproduce and challenge gender norms in a religious context (Kusumaningtyas, 2020), Research conducted by Ifkar and Narny (2022) examined the role of Rhoma Irama films as a medium for preaching during the New Order era, showing how films were used as a tool to spread religious values at that time, Then, research conducted by Sokowati and Nurnisya looked at the representation of Islam and the West in Indonesian religious films. Although these studies make an important contribution to understanding the ideology in Islamic religious films from a cultural perspective, the focus of the research is more on text analysis rather than on the effects or influence on the audience (Sokowati & Nurnisya, 2022).

Based on the above explanation, the researcher sees that there has not been an in-depth and specific study of Islamic religious horror films on the religious behavior of adolescents,

especially high school students. This research gap needs to be filled because horror films with Islamic religious themes are perceived to be different from conventional horror films, where horror films that integrate religion can create greater emotional intensity and have the potential to produce different psychological effects. Furthermore, adolescents, especially high school students aged 15-18 years, are individuals who are in the phase of searching for and developing their identities, one of which is based on religion. During this phase, adolescents actively question, explore, and shape their religion. Adolescents are also heavy consumers of popular media, including films. Based on data from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII), 98.2% of adolescents aged 15-19 years in Indonesia are active internet users with an average screen time of 7-8 hours per day, where watching entertaining content, including movies, is the most frequent activity (Haryanto, 2024). Therefore, exposure to the content they see, and watch can have a significant influence on the process of searching for and forming their religious concepts.

Therefore, this study aimed to examine the extent to which the intensity, attractiveness, and message content of Islamic religious horror films influence five dimensions of religious behaviour, beliefs/*aqidah,* worship practices, religious appreciation, knowledge, and spiritual experience, among high school students in Sukabumi City, Indonesia.

High school students in Sukabumi City were selected as research subjects for two interrelated reasons. First, late adolescence is a critical phase in religious development: individuals at this stage transition from inherited religious beliefs toward a more independent and personally constructed commitment to religion, actively drawing on media including films as references in that process. Second, Sukabumi provides a particularly relevant research context, as a city with deep Islamic roots, known locally as the "city of *santri*", and a strong network of Islamic boarding schools, while simultaneously experiencing rapid growth in digital media access. High school students in Sukabumi thus live at the intersection of a religiously grounded social environment and an increasingly media-saturated one, making them an ideal population for examining how Islamic religious horror films interact with adolescent religious behaviour.

In this study, religious behaviour encompasses five dimensions: beliefs/*aqidah,* worship practices including prayer, Quranic recitation, *dzikir,* and *shalawat,* religious appreciation, knowledge of Islamic teachings, and spiritual experience as expressed in daily life. These dimensions are shaped through the viewing experience itself. Furthermore, horror films themselves often integrate elements such as tension, fear, and supernatural threats combined with Islamic narratives and symbols, where resolving tensions or issues related to this will involve Islamic practices and values. This focuses on how films and their various variables will influence the religious behavior of high school students.

Academically, this research is expected to contribute to the study of mass communication, media, and religion by examining the influence of media such as films on religious aspects, in this case in Indonesia. The findings of this research can then provide an overview or perspective for stakeholders in the field of education, parents, and policy makers on how media such as films interact with and shape the religious dimension of adolescents, thereby enabling the formulation of appropriate media literacy strategies. For the film industry, this research is expected to provide an understanding of the industry's responsibility in producing horror film content that is not only entertaining but also contributes positively to the formation of character and values, including religious dimensions.

This research is considered important because of the increasing production of Islamic religious horror films and their reach to a wider audience, including teenagers. In this digital era, access to media content such as films has become easier, no longer relying solely on cinemas or other viewing venues, but can be accessed personally through streaming platforms, the internet, and social media, thereby potentially increasing the influence of films. Therefore, understanding the influence of Islamic religious horror films on the religious behavior of high school students is very important to observe because in the future it may have an impact on the formation

of their religious identity. Based on the above description, the researcher attempts to fill the existing research gap by comprehensively examining the influence of Islamic religious horror films on the religious behavior of high school students in the city of Sukabumi.

RESEARCH METHOD

The method used in this study is a quantitative method with a survey approach. Quantitative methods are research methods that describe or explain a problem whose results can be generalized, thus not placing too much emphasis on data depth or analysis (Kriyantono, 2024). Researchers place more emphasis on the breadth of data so that the data or research results are representative of the entire population. The method used in this research is the survey method, which is a research method that uses questionnaires as data collection instruments (Kriyantono, 2024).

The type of survey method used is explanatory. The explanatory format is intended to explain a sample generalization to its population or to explain the relationship, differences, or influence of one variable on another. Therefore, explanatory research uses samples and hypotheses. The theory used in this study is cultivation theory. This theory assumes that the mass media shapes the way of thinking and makes connections in our society (West & Turner, 2017). This theory explains that the more time people spend watching television, the more likely they are to believe that social reality is the same as the reality they see on television, a reality that is misrepresented but repeatedly shown, gradually dominating the views of viewers who rely on television as a source of beliefs and values. Even though the effects of watching television can increase or decrease anytime and anywhere, the effect remains, and television is essentially capable of shaping the way society thinks, even though the effect is limited (Cangara, 2024) .

The subjects of this study were high school students in Sukabumi City, and the object of this study was the influence of religious horror films. The research activities were carried out from January to February 2025 for data collection and March 2025 for data analysis. The research activities were conducted in Sukabumi City.

This study used questionnaires as a technique for collecting data. Questionnaires were used because the number of respondents for this study is quite large. The measurement scale used in this study is the Likert scale. This scale was used because the researcher wanted to measure people's behavior regarding social phenomena.

In this study, the sampling technique used was probability sampling with cluster sampling. Probability sampling is a sampling technique that gives equal chances to each member or element. Meanwhile, cluster sampling is used to determine samples when the objects being studied, or data sources are very broad.

The population of this study consisted of all high school students (SMA/SMK/MA) in Sukabumi City. Using the Slovin formula with a margin of error of 5%, a sample of 720

students was drawn through cluster sampling across representative schools. Operationally, the variables in this study were defined and measured as follows. Intensity (X1) refers to the frequency and duration of watching Islamic religious horror films, measured through a self-report questionnaire on viewing habits. Attractiveness (X2) refers to viewers perceived appeal of Islamic horror films, encompassing visual aesthetics, narrative engagement, and emotional impact. Message content (X3) refers to viewers' perception of the religious messages, symbols, and values conveyed in the films. The dependent variables encompass five dimensions of Islamic religious behaviour: Beliefs/Aqidah (Y1), measuring the strength of students' faith and theological convictions; Practice/Worship (Y2), assessing the frequency of religious practices such as prayer, Quran recitation, and dhikr; Appreciation (Y3), measuring positive attitudes toward Islamic values; Religious Knowledge (Y4), assessing students' understanding of Islamic teachings; and Religious Experience (Y5), capturing subjective spiritual experiences. All variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The questionnaire was validated through construct validity testing and reliability was confirmed with Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha > 0.70$) for all dimensions. The path analysis assumption is whether Islamic religious horror films (X) influence Islamic religious behavior (Y).

The analysis technique used in this study is *path* analysis. This analysis technique was developed by Sewall Wright with the aim of finding the extent to which the variation in the given effect is determined by each cause. Additionally, it explains the direct and indirect effects of a set of variables, as causal variables (exogenous variables), on another set of variables that are dependent variables (endogenous variables). The analysis in this study used inferential statistics. With these statistics, researchers can draw conclusions that apply to the population. In data analysis, researchers tested hypotheses for each variable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of respondents, providing an overview of the sample

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Respondents

Characteristics	Category	Sample (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	298	41,4
	Female	442	58,6
Age	15 years old	91	12,6
	16 years old	273	37,9
	17 years old	235	32,6
	18 years old	121	16,8
school	MA	122	16,9
	SMA	224	33,9
	SMK	354	49,2

Source: Author, 2025

characteristics including gender, age, and school.

Simultaneous hypothesis testing using the F-test in Table 2 shows indicates that intensity (X1), appeal (X2), and message content (X3) of Islamic religious horror films collectively have a significant effect on all aspects of Islamic religious behavior. The highest F-value was found in the effect on belief/faith (Y1) at 103.878 with a coefficient of determination (R^2) of 30.3%, followed by the effect on practice/worship (Y2) with an F-value of 22.243 and R^2 of 8.5%, the influence on experience (Y5) with an F-value of 21.308 and R^2 of 8.2%, the influence on religious knowledge (Y4) with an F-value of 14.098 and R^2 of 5.6%, and the influence on religious understanding (Y3) with an F-value of 11.242 and R^2 of 4.5%. All F-test results indicate a significance level of less than 0.001, meaning that all simultaneous hypotheses are accepted at the 5% significance level.

These findings align with the main assumption of cultivation theory, that continuous media exposure will gradually shape viewers' perceptions of social reality. This theory states that excessive media consumption will cause audiences to align their beliefs and assumptions with the repetitive and consistent messages presented in media content (Morgan et al., 2016). The simultaneous effects of the three independent variables reinforce the notion that horror films set in an Islamic context function as agents of cultivation: the combination of viewing intensity, content appeal, and the substance of the messages collectively shapes how adolescents perceive and internalize Islamic religious values. From the data, we see that the strongest cultivation effect is on beliefs/*aqidah* (30.3%), followed by spiritual experiences (21,3%); This indicates that horror films have a significant influence on cognition—more specifically, on aspects that, according to cultivation theory, are easily influenced by media exposure.

Partial hypothesis testing using the t-test produced diverse findings for each sub-variable. Regarding beliefs/faith (Y1), only film appeal

Table 2 Results of F Test on the Simultaneous Effect of Intensity (X1), Attractiveness (X2), and Message Content (X3) of Islamic Horror Films on Aspects of Islamic Religious Behavior

Aspects of Islamic religious behavior	F-count	R^2 (Coefficient of Determination)	Significance	Hypothesis Decision
Beliefs/Aqidah (Y1)	103,878	30.3%	<0,001	Accepted
Practice/Worship (Y2)	22,243	8,5%	<0,001	Accepted
Appreciation (Y3)	11,242	4,5%	<0,001	Accepted
Religious Knowledge (Y4)	14,098	5,6%	<0,001	Accepted
Experience (Y5)	21.308	8,2%	<0,001	Accepted

Source: Author, 2025

(X2) with a t-value of 2.971 and film message content (X3) with a t-value of 12.654 were significantly influential, while viewing intensity (X1) was not significantly influential with a t-value of 1.860. A similar pattern emerged in practice/worship (Y2), where film appeal (X2) with a t-value of 2.383 and film message content (X3) with a t-value of 5.128 were significantly influential, while viewing intensity (X1) was not significant. Different findings were found in appreciation (Y3), where watching intensity (X1) had a significant positive effect with a t-value of 4.122, while film appeal (X2) and film message content (X3) had significant negative effects with t-values of -2.268 and -2.266, respectively. Regarding religious knowledge (Y4), only film message content (X3) had a significant effect with a t-value of 4.254, while intensity (X1) and appeal (X2) were not significant. Meanwhile, regarding religious experience (Y5), viewing intensity (X1) had a significant negative effect with a t-value of -2.598, while film appeal (X2) and film message content (X3) had significant positive effects with t-values of 3.660 and 3.916, respectively.

Films use compelling narratives and visuals to immerse viewers, making them more susceptible to the messages conveyed. This emotional and cognitive engagement reduces counterarguments and increases the perceived realism of the content, thereby influencing beliefs and behaviour. In this regard, Cultivation theory provides a robust framework for understanding how films impact audience perceptions of reality. By presenting repetitive and engaging narratives, films can shape beliefs, attitudes, and even cultural norms, often aligning viewers' perceptions with the mediated reality rather than actual societal conditions (Till et al., 2021).

Among the three independent variables mentioned above, message content is the most influential variable affecting religious behavior. This finding aligns with Gerbner's Cultivation Theory, which posits that media messages exert a powerful influence when they resonate with the audience's existing values and beliefs. In the context of Islamic religious horror films, content depicting rituals, symbols, and Islamic religious concepts reinforces the pre-existing religious structures within Muslim adolescent audiences in Sukabumi, resulting in a stronger cultivation effect. The significant influence of message content surpassing the variables of intensity and attractiveness underscores that the quality and depth of the message are the primary drivers in shaping behavior.

A particularly noteworthy finding is that viewing intensity (X1) did not significantly influence beliefs/*aqidah* (Y1), worship practices (Y2), or religious knowledge (Y4). This challenges the classical cultivation theory articulated by Gerbner and Gross, in which cumulative viewing duration is the primary mechanism through which television shapes audience perceptions of social reality. The present study demonstrates that for Islamic religious horror films, heavy viewing alone

Table 3 Partial Hypothesis Test Results

Aspects of Islamic religious behavior	Independent Variables	t-Count	Significance	Hypothesis Decision
Beliefs/ Aqidah (Y1)	Intensity (X1)	1,860	> 0,05	Not Significant
	Attraction (X2)	2,971	< 0,05	Significant
	Message Content (X3)	12,654	< 0,05	Significant
Practice/ Worship (Y2)	Intensity (X1)	0,524	> 0,05	Not Significant
	Attraction (X2)	2,383	< 0,05	Significant
	Message Content (X3)	5,128	< 0,05	Significant
Appreciation (Y3)	Intensity (X1)	4,122	< 0,05	Significant
	Attraction (X2)	-2,268	< 0,05	Significant
	Message Content (X3)	-2,266	< 0,05	Significant
Religious Knowledge (Y4)	Intensity (X1)	1,632	> 0,05	Not Significant
	Attraction (X2)	1,287	> 0,05	Not Significant
	Message Content (X3)	4,254	< 0,05	Significant
Experience (Y5)	Intensity (X1)	-2,598	< 0,05	Significant
	Attraction (X2)	3,660	< 0,05	Significant
	Message Content (X3)	3,916	< 0,05	Significant

Source: Author, 2025

does not necessarily cultivate deeper religiosity. This may be attributed to the fact that adolescents in Sukabumi, raised in a strongly Islamic social environment, already possess stable religious beliefs that are not easily displaced or reinforced merely through repeated exposure. Instead, it is the substantive content of the film—its religious messages, symbolic representations, and theological narratives—that penetrates and shapes specific dimensions of religious behaviour. This finding extends recent critiques of cultivation theory that call for greater attention to content specificity rather than exposure volume.

The partial analysis in Table 3 further refines this cultivation effect. Islamic horror films differentially influenced religious behavior. As a mass media, films have advantages and power in influencing people's behavior, one of which is their ability to convey complex narratives that leave a lasting impression on the audience. As Liao said, mass media has the ability to disseminate knowledge and raise awareness of critical issues, which ultimately shape a person's behavior and attitudes (Liao, 2023). The media can influence social norms through the process of knowledge sharing and dissemination to the public (Arias, 2019). In religious horror films,

these influences become more complex because they combine several elements, such as intense emotional elements with spiritual content.

Specifically Kubrak (2020) identifies significant changes in the attitudes of young people after watching films, indicating that exposure to films can result in psychological changes. In the context of religious horror films, this can occur in the form of an increase or decrease in religious knowledge, changes in religious practices, and changes in the interpretation of existing religious teachings. Bushman and Whitaker (2017) emphasizes that the media could influence behavior through various psychological processes, including learning through observation and the formation of cognitive frameworks.

Film, as a medium, has advantages in disseminating information, one of which is providing information about religious understanding. The difficulty of individuals in accessing information about religion from authoritative sources has made film a shortcut to understanding the reality of religion (Andok, 2024). Horror films often explore religious themes as their foundation, and these themes are not merely superficial but are explored in depth. Religious horror films exploit shifts in the meaning of religious traditions. In this way, horror films not only subvert but also reflect and depend on religious narratives, making film a powerful medium for exploring and questioning beliefs or faith (Linze & Mat Desa, 2024).

Every individual has a deep-seated orientation toward spirituality, as issues of faith lie beyond their reach. When film is used as a medium for religious outreach, it seems to address this need by offering a framework for understanding the core realities and engaging in these practices (Müller & Friemel, 2024). Thus, when individuals face confusion within a spiritual context, they naturally seek guidance and direction from accessible and credible sources. Therefore, media such as films can influence viewers.

Religious horror films are essentially built on a combination of psychological tension and religious messages, which create emotional conditions that facilitate the absorption, understanding, and adoption of the religious values presented in the film. Kaltwasser et al. (2019) says that viewing experience produces a socio-emotional process that can deepen the psychological impact of a film or content on the viewer. Furthermore, Armstrong and Cutting (2016) dentify that physical variables such as visual composition, lighting, and editing used in filmmaking can enhance the impact on viewers, particularly in the context of religious horror films, where these elements are utilized to reinforce the religious messages conveyed in the film, thereby influencing the audience of such horror films. Emotional expressions in religious horror films often reflect the spiritual journey of the main character. This can create space for viewers to rethink their beliefs or faith and their religious values (Xue et al., 2024).

Audiences of horror films experience changes in religious practices. Not only that, but audiences are also influenced in terms of their understanding of religion and religious values. This is supported by Majestya and Irwanto (2025) in the research, they said that the influence of films is not only a change in basic or superficial behavior, but more than that, it reaches a deeper level of change. This phenomenon is supported by research conducted by Mustaffa, who found that experiences depicted in horror films have the potential to trigger changes in the religious behavior of adolescents at that time, as evidenced by a re-examination of their beliefs or an increase in their religiousness (Mohd Mustaffa et al., 2021). Thus, Islamic religious horror films with themes such as fear, morality, and the supernatural can encourage them to re-examine their religious values and practices.

Research conducted by Döring and Hillbrink (2015) shows that films have the power to change existing values among teenagers through experimental exposure. This provides a theoretical basis that religious horror films have the potential to influence and change religious values in individuals. Religious horror films not only feature frightening supernatural elements, but also contain religious symbolism, religious rituals, and strong moral narratives to create a profound viewing experience. The power of narrative to persuade the audience in films is conveyed by (McCormack et al., 2021) which shows that religious horror films can use dramatic elements and emotional elements in films to convey profound spiritual messages.

The content of religious horror films is the variable that has the greatest influence on religious behavior. Therefore, horror films could influence the religious behavior of audiences through complex psychological processes. Stone (2025) shows that the relationship between religion and horror cinema creates deep spiritual dimensions in a person's viewing experience. This is reinforced by the fact that religious horror films can strengthen religious beliefs and practices (Laycock & Harrelson, 2023). The concepts of religion, ghosts, and spirituality in horror films significantly influence society's views on traditional religious practices (Pandanari et al., 2024). The horror elements in films create an experience that combines fear with spiritual references, ultimately strengthening commitment to religion (Saldarriaga, 2024). The content of religious horror films, which consists of a mixture of fear, spirituality, and religious narratives, creates an intense emotional experience that encourages viewers to question religion, weaken religion, strengthen religion, and even influence their beliefs.

Horror films can influence behavior by confronting viewers with fear as a central element and essential questions about death, the supernatural, and morality. Horror themes and the addition of religious symbols are often used as themes in films, reflecting that people are concerned with issues of good, evil, sin, and redemption. This can influence viewers

to reflect and affect their beliefs. These horror films highlight the thin line between beauty and terror, ultimately triggering a re-examination of viewers' spiritual and moral frameworks.

Historically, religious horror films often combine fiction with religious events such as the hunting of demons or resistance against demons. In practice, there are scenes in horror films that depict practices such as exorcism performed by religious leaders, panic or fear shown by actors towards ghosts, and moral issues related to the media. These elements in horror films can influence religious behavior by creating a cycle where horror films are inspired by religious beliefs and practices. Ultimately, this influences and shapes the beliefs and experiences portrayed in the films. The symbolic narratives create an interaction between films and religion, thereby strengthening or weakening existing religious frameworks and experiences (Laycock & Harrelson, 2023).

Religious themes can strengthen the narrative in horror films, as the source of horror in films often lies in religious contexts. This connection gives rise to understanding and reconstruction of beliefs. By placing elements of horror in the context of religion, individuals may be influenced in how they view and engage in their faith or spirituality (Kusumadinata, 2023).

Scenes in horror films are dominated by fear, death, otherworldly realms, and evil, prompting viewers to believe in the scenes depicted and the emotions they evoke.

Therefore, horror films can serve as a medium for introducing religion and as a facility for interfaith dialogue, enabling individuals to connect with their beliefs about other realms and their understanding through film. Cinematic depictions of religious experiences in horror films can evoke strong emotions, providing a place for connection between viewers and religion. This connection leads to a reimagining of religious narratives and a renewed interest in spiritual matters.

The depiction of rituals and religious symbols in horror films can cause viewers to evaluate their religious beliefs and practices. Films like *Makmum, Qodrat,* and *Munkar,* which depict rituals such as *ruqyah,* prayer, and night prayer, transform symbols of faith and worship into tools of terror or frightening instruments, thereby prompting viewers to reconsider the importance of these rituals in their own lives (Nakamura, 2024).

The most influential dependent variable in this study is the variable of faith. Religious horror films have the strongest influence on faith compared to other dependent variables because they explore themes related to spirituality, religion, and beliefs. Religious horror films often rely on religious beliefs, religious symbols, and religious narratives in films to create content, as seen in several religious horror films shown in Indonesia. These horror films often incorporate Islamic themes and symbols, reflecting Islamic teachings and utilizing Islamic teachings while simultaneously

distorting and contradicting Islamic teachings (Stone, 2025). This phenomenon is reinforced by research conducted by Martin (2019) which states that psychological responses to horror films can profoundly influence the structure of an individual's beliefs or faith. This interaction between horror films and religion can profoundly influence the beliefs of the audience.

Several horror films with a religious theme have a profound impact on religious beliefs and practices. Religious horror films often draw on real experiences of religion or supernatural, ultimately creating a cycle that inspires religious beliefs in the making of horror films, which in turn influence a person's beliefs or creeds and religious practices (Laycock & Harrelson, 2023). Research from Rahman et al. (2025) emphasizes that how religion is represented in the horror genre can shape people's understanding of religion in society.

The ambiguity or vagueness in religious horror fiction films can convince viewers to consider the credibility of supernatural horror and religious ideas, at least temporarily. This can encourage viewers to reexamine their religious beliefs and faith (Johnston, 2023). Horror films can reflect and influence cultural anxieties and beliefs. Horror films reflect deep religious beliefs and convictions, which then influence how those beliefs are perceived and maintained by society (Lee, 2016).

The depiction of horror films with religious themes can reflect broader social and cultural dynamics, such as Indonesian horror films that use the concept of jinn or demons originating from Islamic beliefs and Indonesian traditions to construct stories about good and evil. The formation of this culture makes religious horror films a powerful medium for influencing a person's religious beliefs and convictions (Şakrak, 2016). Exposure to violent and threatening content in horror films, including religious themes, can have a negative impact on social behavior through a decrease in empathy (Han & Carlo, 2021). Religious horror films can cause avoidance behavior in viewers who feel a high level of threat and have negative coping mechanisms (Zukerman et al., 2016).

An interesting finding in this study is that the intensity of watching religious horror films does not significantly affect the faith, religious practices, and knowledge of viewers. Respondents in this study were divided into three categories of religious horror film viewers: high intensity (41.2%), moderate intensity (49.2%), and low intensity (9.6%). Horror films, including those with religious themes, are appealing to watch because they offer a unique blend of fear, enjoyment, and excitement. These films evoke emotional responses such as fear, anxiety, and joy at the same time, as well as a sense of anticipation (Kiss et al., 2024)people watch horror movies in pursuit of excitement and enjoyment. However, we still do not know what traits make people seek out this type of increase in arousal (excitement. Several viewers watched horror films, including religious-themed ones, to prove their emotional strength

and endurance against fear. This became a way for them to face and show their fear and frightening situations (Wesselmann et al., 2025). In horror films, the main themes presented are trauma, death, and supernatural phenomena. These themes explore deep fears and anxieties, making the horror genre appealing. People with high self-esteem, due to their activities in creative fields, feel more capable of dealing with the continuous emotions presented by horror films (Yang & Liu, 2024).

The high number of people interested in watching horror films does not necessarily mean that they are influenced by them. This may be because religious horror films or horror films that do not involve religion are designed to evoke emotional responses such as fear and excitement. These emotions are often sought after by audiences due to their thrilling and extraordinary nature, rather than the narrative or religious content being the focal point (Fukumoto & Tsukino, 2015). The main motivation for watching horror films, whether religious or not, is to gain an emotional experience, not to respond to the religious beliefs contained within them (Nummenmaa, 2024).

Viewers of religious horror films see that frequent viewing does not make them believe everything that is shown in the film. Religious attributes in religious horror films often appear in a critical or sensational manner that may not be in line with the beliefs or religious practices of the audience (Ahmadi et al., 2025). This can lead to cognitive dissonance, where viewers can enjoy the film but not allow it to influence their religious behavior.

Although frequently watching religious horror films does not necessarily change an individual's beliefs significantly, because audiences could separate what is consumed in the media from their spiritual beliefs. Therefore, it can be concluded that the intensity of watching religious horror films does not significantly influence religious behavior, as the consumption of such films is primarily for entertainment and serves as a limited means of exploring emotions within the context of the viewing experience.

Overall, the findings of this study provide further support for cultivation theory. The original formulation proposed by Gerbner and Gross emphasized total viewing duration as the mechanism underlying cultivation theory. However, this study shows that for horror films set in an Islamic context, the content of the message is the most influential variable regarding the five variables of religious behavior, whereas viewing intensity itself does not significantly influence religious beliefs, worship practices, or religious knowledge. Thus, this indicates that within the religious context, the quality of a message plays a more significant role than the quantity of viewing. This enriches the current literature focusing on the cultivation effects of more specific content (West & Turner, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that horror films with an Islamic theme significantly influence the religious behavior of high school students in Sukabumi City across five dimensions, with belief/*aqidah* being the most affected dimension, followed by spiritual experience, religious knowledge, religious practice, and religious appreciation. Message content emerged as the most dominant factor, while viewing intensity did not significantly influence beliefs, worship practices, or religious knowledge, suggesting that excessive exposure to horror elements can be counterproductive. Theoretically, these findings refine cultivation theory by demonstrating that, in the context of Islamic religious horror films, the depth and strength of religious values embedded in the content, rather than viewing frequency, drive cultivation effects. This suggests that media presenting consistent and substantive religious messages can shape adolescent religiosity more effectively than mere repetitive exposure. These findings have practical significance for filmmakers, who should prioritize meaningful religious messages over the quantity of production, as well as for educators and parents, who are encouraged to guide adolescents in critically evaluating the media content they consume.

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