RELIGIOUS DRAMA CONTROVERSY: The Impact of *Bidaah* on Islamic Pedagogy and Media Literacy

Nur Hanifansyah

Universitas Islam Internasional Darullughah Wadda'wah
Jl. Raya Raci No. 51, Bangil, Pasuruan, Jawa Timur, 67153, Indonesia
e-mail: nurhanifansyah@uiidalwa.ac.id

Ahmad Arifin

Universitas Islam Negeri Jurai Siwo Lampung
Jl. Ki Hajar Dewantara No. 15 A, Iringmulyo, Lampung, 34112, Indonesia
e-mail: arifin@metrouniv.ac.id

Zulpina

Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri Mandailing Natal
Jl. Prof. Dr. Andi Hakim Nasution, Panyabungan, Sumatera Utara, 22978, Indonesia
e-mail: zulfina88@stain-madina.ac.id

Menik Mahmudah

Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Al-Yasini Pasuruan
Jl. Pesantren Terpadu Al-Yasini Dusun Areng-areng Pasuruan, Jawa Timur, 67151, Indonesia
e-mail: menikmahmudah.pba.alyasini@gmail.com

Syarif Muhammad Syaheed

Maktab Mahmud Yan
Kampung Acheh, Darul Aman, 06900 Yan, Kedah, Malaysia
e-mail: syaheed@lmm.gov.my

Abstract: This study explores audience reception of the Malaysian drama *Bidaah* through the perspectives of pedagogy and media literacy, focusing on how cinematic depictions of religious manipulation shape perceptions in Malaysia and Indonesia. Using a descriptive-exploratory qualitative method supported by quantitative data, the research analyzed social media discourse, surveyed 100 respondents, and interviewed 20 Islamic educators from both countries. Findings show divided responses: Indonesian audiences tended to value the film's artistic critique of spiritual abuse, while most educators expressed concern about its potential to distort views of Islamic leadership. Thematic analysis highlights issues of charismatic dominance, symbolic language, and emotional religious rhetoric in media. The study argues that educators should move beyond binary judgments and instead foster critical, ethical media engagement. *Bidaah* thus becomes not only a cinematic controversy but also a pedagogical opportunity to nurture discernment, compassion, and media-literate faith.

Keywords: Pedagogy, media literacy, spiritual manipulation, religious authority, digital media reception

Introduction

Controversial films on Islamic education often act as a double-edged sword, inspiring critical awareness yet risking misrepresentation of religious values.[1] Such narratives require not rejection or celebration but thoughtful engagement rooted in ethical clarity and pedagogical wisdom. Films today shape collective consciousness more powerfully than texts.[2] When confronting issues like religious authority and spiritual manipulation, they provoke polarized responses. *Bidaah*, a recent Malaysian drama, exemplifies this tension: through its emotional appeal and embedded Islamic educational values, the film questions the limits of religious leadership, the dangers of blind obedience, and the role of Islamic education in resisting spiritual exploitation.[3] As the film went viral across Malaysia and Indonesia, it sparked a wave of discourse that extended far beyond entertainment, delving deep into the ethics of representation, the risks of misinterpretation, and the urgent need for critical religious literacy.

As powerful cultural products, films often reflect or challenge dominant narratives within society.[4] In Muslim-majority contexts such as Malaysia and Indonesia, the recent discourse around *Bidaah* illustrates how religious-themed cinema can provoke strong public reactions ranging from appreciation to sharp criticism particularly regarding religious authority and Islamic pedagogy.

The film centers on Walid Muhammad, a charismatic religious figure who exploits spiritual authority for personal gain by manipulating religious teachings. His followers including his wives, Hambali, and Baiduri illustrate the complex dynamics of devotion and resistance within manipulative religious structures. Baiduri, an alumna of Egypt, strides with clear reasoning though at times appearing somewhat impulsive; while Hambali, an alumnus of Yemen, embodies wisdom, goodwill, and careful deliberation. Both serve as symbols of truth affirming the values of Islam. In contrast, Walid is manipulative in language yet weak in Arabic, as seen in his awkward pronunciation. The film thus underscores an essential principle: fluency and precision in the Arabic language are gateways to knowledge and since Arabic is the source of religious sciences, mastery of it ensures a firm foundation of scholarship. The film's controversial scenes quickly went viral, sparking intense discourse across Malaysia and Indonesia.[5]

Despite its viral recognition, the film raised concerns among religious scholars about reinforcing negative stereotypes of Islamic figures, highlighting the need to critically examine the educational and ethical dimensions of religious portrayals in media. *Bidaah* has ignited extensive discourse concerning its portrayal of religious authority[6] and the potential implications for public perceptions of Islamic leadership.[7] This aligns with research indicating that media representations significantly shape societal attitudes toward Islam including, as seen in Hollywood films, through persistent negative stereotypes that associate Muslims with violence and extremism.[8] Such portrayals contribute to a monolithic and distorted understanding of Islamic teachings and Muslim communities.[9]

In the context of *Bidaah*, the dramatization of a charismatic leader who manipulates religious doctrine for personal gain raises critical questions about the ethical responsibilities of media creators. The series' portrayal of the sect leader, Walid Muhammad, reflects real-world concerns about the exploitation of religious authority, catalyzing discussions on the need for critical media literacy within Islamic education frameworks. Media education scholars advocate for integrating media analysis into educational curricula to equip individuals with the skills to assess and interpret media content critically. This approach enables audiences to discern and challenge misrepresentations, fostering a more nuanced and informed understanding of religious narratives. The series' strong resonance in Malaysia and Indonesia underscores its regional relevance. Viral scenes from *Bidaah* demonstrate the emotional power of visual media to shape public discourse,[10] reflecting how sensitive narratives influence cultural debates. This aligns with cultivation theory, which argues that repeated exposure to media content gradually shapes viewers' perceptions and attitudes.[11] Thus, the portrayal of religious figures in *Bidaah* requires critical examination of its impact on societal views of religious leadership and authority.

In light of these considerations, Islamic educational institutions must proactively engage with contemporary media narratives. By incorporating media literacy into their pedagogical approaches, educators can empower students to critically analyze media content, understand representation's complexities, and appreciate storytelling's ethical dimensions. In addition, cinematic narratives can subtly shape religious interpretations.[12] Islamic-themed films often embed selective religious paradigms within their stories, influencing how audiences perceive faith, authority, and practice.[13] This strategy not only enhances students' critical thinking skills but also promotes a more comprehensive[14] and authentic understanding of Islamic teachings and the diverse experiences of Muslim communities.[15] Previous research on Islam and media representation highlights growing interest in how Islamic identities are constructed and mediated through visual storytelling. Khan et al. found that media significantly shapes perceptions of Islam across Western, Muslim-majority, and multicultural contexts, impacting policies and social well-being.[16] Similarly, Richter and Paasch-Colberg observed that German newspapers often frame Islam within conflict narratives, reinforcing public suspicion.[17] In Malaysia, Ghani and Rahman argued that Islamic entertainment can promote unity and moral education when grounded in authentic values.[18]

Meanwhile, Hew explored how urban Muslim men's fashion in Malaysia reflects evolving identities, linking aesthetic choices to debates on piety and modernity.[19] Rafiq and Dianto explained the relevance of fashion in preaching activity in Indonesia.[20] Latif noted that American and Indian cinema contributed to Islamophobia and theological distortions.[21] Aqababaee and Razaghi, examining Iranian cinema, found that despite liberal efforts, gender portrayals remained tied to fundamentalist ideologies.[22] Raj and Suresh similarly found that Bollywood often incorporates Muslim identities into nationalist

and Partition narratives, framing Muslim characters through stereotypical verbal, ritualistic, and visual codes aligned with political agendas.[23]

Despite a growing body of research on media representation and Islamic education, few studies have explored how controversial religious-themed films from Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia are received across culturally related audiences, particularly between Malaysia and Indonesia. Moreover, the intersection of spiritual manipulation, visual symbolism, and Islamic pedagogy remains underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by analyzing *Bidaah*, examining how its reception reveals tensions in religious authority, audience bias, and psychospiritual pedagogy. This paper addresses two critical questions: First, how does the public reception of *Bidaah* reflect broader biases or beliefs regarding religious representation and authority? Second, how can Islamic pedagogy constructively engage with controversial portrayals in popular media, transforming them into teachable moments rather than sources of division?

The study draws on three theoretical frameworks to approach these questions: media literacy theory, Islamic pedagogy, and spiritual manipulation theory. Media literacy theory provides the lens for analyzing how audiences interpret and emotionally respond to mediated religious representations. Islamic pedagogy offers principles for ethical engagement and educational transformation, focusing on *ta'dîb* (moral training), *ta'aqqul* (critical reflection), and *tazkiyah* (spiritual purification). Meanwhile, theories of spiritual manipulation help deconstruct the misuse of religious symbols and authority within media narratives. Accordingly, using these theoretical perspectives, the paper first analyzes social interpretations and biases emerging from audience reactions. It then shifts toward pedagogical reflections, proposing strategies grounded in Islamic educational values to responsibly address ethical and educational challenges posed by controversial media representations.

Method

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive-exploratory approach supported by quantitative data to investigate the psychospiritual and pedagogical implications of *Bidaah*.[24] Grounded in Islamic pedagogy, media literacy, and spiritual manipulation theories, the film was selected for its viral and controversial themes in Malaysia and Indonesia, analyzed through audience reception, expert insights, and thematic analysis.

Data collection combined qualitative and quantitative methods.[25] First, a content analysis of Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter used purposive sampling with keywords such as "spiritual manipulation," "brainwashing," and "religious deception," distinguishing Malaysian and Indonesian audiences. Second, a survey of 100 respondents (40 Malaysia, 60 Indonesia) assessed perceptions of the film's narrative and portrayal of Islamic values. Third, semi-structured interviews with 20 Islamic educators (10 from each country) provided expert insights on the film's theological framing, implications for Islamic

education, and influence on public perceptions of authority.[26] This triangulated design ensured a comprehensive understanding of the film's reception across demographic and professional groups. The data were analyzed through thematic coding, with survey results identifying response patterns and qualitative data revealing themes in religious discourse, pedagogy, and media ethics. This triangulated approach comprehensively views visual media's impact on public religious understanding and Islamic pedagogical responses.

Results and Discussion

Bias, Belief, and The Social Interpretation of *Bidaah*

The reception of *Bidaah* revealed a complex landscape of public responses, profoundly shaped by individual beliefs, religious sensitivities, and sociocultural backgrounds. Many general audiences praised the film for courageously highlighting the dangers of spiritual manipulation and encouraging critical reflection on safeguarding religious integrity. Nevertheless, concerns arose among religious scholars and educators who, with great care, noted that certain portrayals might unintentionally reinforce stereotypes against Islamic figures, particularly those associated with traditional religious symbols. While the film seeks to critique deviations from authentic spiritual leadership, its powerful visual language might be interpreted differently depending on viewers' prior experiences and emotional lenses.

The film's viral resonance, particularly in Indonesia, was amplified by emotionally charged scenes such as the widely circulated phrase "*Walid nak Dewi, boleh*?" ("Walid wants Dewi, may he?"), evoking intense public engagement. This phenomenon underscores the need for a thoughtful, ethical, and critical engagement with media narratives. In this light, *Bidaah* invites Islamic education not to retreat from contemporary challenges but to equip learners with ethical discernment, critical analysis, and a compassionate understanding of how faith can be represented and sometimes misunderstood through modern storytelling as society increasingly relies on digital platforms for information and entertainment.[27] Digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok in people's daily lives raise serious concerns about the accuracy and reliability of the information they absorb.[28] The role of algorithmic exposure must not be underestimated. Social media algorithms, designed to maximize engagement, often flood users' feeds with repetitive and emotionally charged clips such as scenes involving Walid in *Bidaah,* which, over time, can subtly shape the audience's perception of religious authority. This repetition, mainly when consumed without contextual or theological guidance, risks instilling distorted representations of Islam in the subconscious.

Cognitive psychology suggests that repeated exposure to emotional content fosters familiarity-based acceptance, even if misleading.[29] Thus, algorithmic amplification of *Bidaah* scenes on TikTok and Instagram can erode nuanced understanding and create bias toward religious figures, underscoring the need for critical media literacy in Islamic

education. Galal notes three cinematic approaches to Islam history, daily positive traditions, and critiques of political expressions framing religion as ethical reflection.[30] From this perspective, educators must balance narrative appreciation with vigilance, upholding justice ('adl), critical thinking (ta'aqqul), and compassion (ra<u>h</u>mah).

A striking paradox in Bidaah is the line, "I cannot let her return, because her family will brainwash her," where fear of external manipulation justifies internal control. Such portrayals call Islamic education to respond empathetically, critically reflecting on how visual narratives shape perceptions of religious truth while safeguarding ethical faith leadership. An interview with a Malaysian Islamic educator revealed that *Bidaah* sparked controversy in Malaysia due to its portrayal of charismatic manipulation. At the same time, Indonesian audiences viewed it more positively as a critique of religious misrepresentation. The educator warned that such dramatizations risk fostering "spiritual brainwashing," highlighting the importance of media literacy in Islamic education. One of the respondents from Malaysia, a 17-year-old student, shared a thoughtful perspective regarding how her peers and their families perceive the film *Bidaah*. She explained:

> "According to my friend, who watched the film, some parents became afraid to send their children away to study religion after watching it. But that's from the perspective of the parents themselves. For parents who already possess a solid foundation in religious knowledge, it's not a problem. However, those who lack sufficient religious understanding are more likely to believe in such things if they are not clearly explained."

She also added her reflection: "In my opinion, this film can also serve as a valuable lesson for parents with limited knowledge of Islam, encouraging them to deepen their understanding of the Faith." This testimony reveals two key insights: *Bidaah* can evoke fear among under-informed parents when religious authority is portrayed without context, yet it also offers an opportunity to encourage deeper religious literacy. Thus, depending on the viewer's background and perspective, the film serves as both a source of anxiety and a catalyst for educational reflection. Another layer of complexity lies in the psychological impact of visual media. A Malaysian scholar of psychology and Islamic spirituality criticized the film, warning it may distort perceptions of sincere religious figures, especially Sufis. He noted that emotionally charged scenes risk indoctrinating audiences with weak foundations, fostering distrust of Islamic institutions. This underscores the need for critical analysis of media's psychological effects on perceptions of religious authenticity.

Digital Media, Youth Perception, and Faith Navigation

Interviews with 17–18-year-old students showed that their reception of Bidaah was generally moderate, with most rating it 7/10. Many considered the pacing slow and admitted that their impressions came less from watching the full film and more from viral

clips on TikTok and Instagram. This reflects the dominance of fragmented media consumption, where audiences engage with snippets rather than full narratives. As Dai and Wang note, strong emotions and platform-driven elements are key drivers of online attention.[31]

The Media Use Model (MUM), as described by Hoewe and Ewoldsen,[32] provides a useful framework here: repeated exposure to emotionally charged content can reinforce perceptions, sometimes creating coherence but often leading to fragmented interpretations. In the case of *Bidaah*, viral clips especially those centred on Walid risk gradually shaping young audiences' views of Islamic authority if not critically mediated. Such algorithmic amplification makes the controversy more a product of circulation and repetition than of the film's narrative depth. This trend was further illustrated by how memes and short video edits turned controversial scenes into entertainment, circulating Walid's character as both parody and performance. In doing so, deeper pedagogical meaning was sidelined, as algorithm-driven culture rewarded virality and visibility over reflection. Internet memes, now a cornerstone of digital expression, contributed to blurring the line between critique and glorification, reducing religious narratives to fleeting spectacles. For Islamic education, these patterns highlight the urgency of integrating critical media literacy into pedagogy. Students need to be trained not only in discerning digital content but also in preserving faith identities amidst fragmented, emotional, and viral narratives. Embedding critical reflection alongside spiritual resilience ensures that media does not merely become a spectacle to be consumed but a learning moment that nurtures discernment, justice and compassion.

The Educational Implications of Religious Representation in Media

The film *Bidaah* demonstrates the urgent need for Islamic education to address contemporary media narratives. As films shape public perceptions of religion, educators must equip learners with textual knowledge and critical media literacy. In Islamic tradition, education (*ta'lîm*) encompasses both information transmission and the cultivation of moral discernment (*ta'dîb*), intellectual reflection (*ta'aqqul*), and spiritual integrity (*tazkiyah*). These values are crucial when charismatic figures exploit followers under the guise of sacred authority, as depicted by Walid who builds blind obedience through claims of divine instruction.

Media portrayals like *Bidaah* offer opportunities to reinforce *ijtihâd* and *maqâsid al-sharî'ah* in religious education. Learners need training to interpret texts contextually, embrace scholarly diversity, and uphold justice, compassion, and accountability. Islamic pedagogy must build youth resilience by teaching them to question authority wisely, detect spiritual manipulation, and recognize ethical limits of leadership. The depiction of *nikah batin* (pseudo-religious marriage), forced marriage, and emotional coercion in *Bidaah*, though fictional, reflects real-world abuses that underscore the need for Islamic education

to integrate safeguarding principles and ethical vigilance. The film also provides a striking domestic scene when Baiduri observes Walid's children living in a state of neglect. Their unkempt condition reflects the consequences of a father absorbed in pursuing multiple marriages and worldly pleasures under the guise of religious justification. Here, *Bidaah* underscores a recurring social problem: when leaders prioritize personal desire (*nafs shahawât*) and exploit pseudo-religious practices such as *nikah batin*, the most vulnerable children and women suffer the heaviest impact. This portrayal resonates with Islamic pedagogical concerns, as it highlights how misused authority distorts family responsibilities, undermines the ethical function of leadership, and betrays the prophetic model of care, justice, and compassion. The film raises crucial pedagogical questions: How can religious education maintain fidelity to tradition while addressing modern challenges? How can it nurture Islam's living values, truth, mercy, and justice beyond external forms? Critical and reflective engagement with such media is essential to build Islamic pedagogy that is not only doctrinally sound but also morally transformative.

A religious educator viewed *Bidaah* as a potential wake-up call, acknowledging that the film could encourage more rational thinking among the Muslim community while warning that it might deepen resentment among those already skeptical of religious practices. He noted, *"Positively, the Muslim community may become more rational, while negatively, existing distrust could worsen*." This highlights the film's dual impact: fostering critical discernment yet risking further erosion of trust in religious authority, a tension also reflected in Imam al-Ghazali's warning about the consequences of corrupt scholars:

وَبِالْجُمْلَةِ: إِنَّمَا فَسَدَتِ الرَّعِيَّةُ بِفَسَادِ الْمُلُوكِ، وَفَسَادُ الْمُلُوكِ بِفَسَادِ الْعُلَمَاءِ، فَلَوْلَا الْقُضَاةُ السُّوءُ وَالْعُلَمَاءُ السُّوءُ لَقَلَّ فَسَادُ الْمُلُوكِ خَوْفًا مِنْ إِنْكَارِهِمْ. [33]

"In sum: the corruption of the subjects stems from the corruption of the rulers, and the corruption of the rulers stems from the corruption of the scholars. Were it not for the wicked judges and corrupt scholars, the rulers' wrongdoing would have been rare out of fear of their censure."

This suggests that the corruption of rulers stems from the corruption of scholars. Framed with pedagogical caution, his view sees *Bidaah* as reflecting societal issues that Islamic education must confront through honest discourse rather than denial. When Sacred Words Become Weapons: Reclaiming Religious Authority in the Digital Age In an era where viral content can reshape religious discourse overnight, the Indonesian film *Bidaah* forces us to confront an uncomfortable question: How do we distinguish authentic religious authority from its sophisticated counterfeit when both employ identical sacred language and institutional frameworks?

Today's educators navigate uncharted territory where traditional religious authority intersects with digital narratives reaching millions instantaneously. This challenge

demands fundamental reckoning with how sacred discourse can be both distorted and reclaimed in our media-saturated world. Rather than dismissing troubling portrayals as mere entertainment, educators must engage critically, guiding students to scrutinize not just media representations, but the underlying mechanisms of spiritual authority itself. Contemporary religious education must confront uncomfortable realities within the ummah: spiritual manipulation, systematic abuse of power, and institutionalized injustices that persist by cloaking themselves in religious legitimacy. The educator's role transcends doctrinal transmission, demanding cultivation of courage (*shaj'ah*), wisdom (*ḥikmah*), and empathy (*raḥmah*) qualities essential for nurturing critical discernment in an age where religious authority can be constructed and weaponized through digital platforms.

Bidaah's manipulation of religious language proves particularly instructive. The film presents followers reciting "Doa Ya Walid": *"Ya Allah… Ya Rasul… Dengan berkat guru kami Walid Muhammad Mahdi Ilman. Jadikan kami hambamu yang taat padamu… pada Rasulmu dan pada murshid kami. Sucikan hati kami sesuci air Zam-zam-Mu"* ("O Allah… O Messenger… By the blessings of our teacher, Walid Muhammad Mahdi Ilman, make us Your obedient servants obedient to You, Your Messenger, and our guide. Purify our hearts as pure as Your Zamzam water"). This prayer appropriates the revered tradition of *tawassul* seeking divine closeness through righteous individuals (*al-sâliḥûn*) yet weaponizes it for psychological manipulation. The invocation of Zamzam's purity, traditionally symbolizing spiritual cleansing, is redirected to reinforce dependency upon Walid's charismatic authority rather than fostering genuine divine connection. The corruption occurs not through obvious blasphemy, but through subtle redirection of sacred intention.

Institutionally, authentic *pesantren* traditions center on strengthening Islamic jurisprudential foundations (*sharî'ah*), with the *kyai* serving as scholarly guide through classical texts (*kitab kuning*).[34] But, of course, the pesantren itself is in constant changing and transformation due to so many complicated factors. Walid systematically subverts this by crafting pseudo-scriptural doctrine while falsely invoking mystical concepts of *ḥaqîqah* and *ma'rifah* to legitimize authority rooted in personal ambition rather than divine guidance.This manipulation reveals profound institutional vulnerability: even sacred educational spaces can be co-opted when foundational missions become subordinated to individual charisma. Educators must therefore teach not merely theological content, but develop students' critical faculties the capacity to recognize authentic intention, assess contextual appropriateness, and evaluate ethical consistency between religious claims and lived practice.

Such an approach aligns with al-Ghazalî's conception of the ideal Islamic educator as comprehensive guide in *khuluqiyah* (character formation), *'ubûdiyah* (worship), *tauḥîdiyah* (monotheistic understanding), and *tazkiyat al-nafs* (spiritual purification) a

holistic philosophy essential for contemporary Islamic education seeking to preserve authentic spirituality while fostering critical consciousness necessary to navigate our complex media landscape.[35] One of the most striking rhetorical strategies employed by Walid and his followers is the appropriation of truthful Islamic statements to justify illegitimate or egotistical agendas, a classic example of the principle, as Sayyidina Ali said: كَلِمَةُ حَقٍّ أُرِيْدَ بِهَا بَاطِلٌ

(a truthful statement used for false purposes).[36] A striking example is the line: "*Cerai itu bukan suatu dosa jika untuk kebaikan…*" ("Divorce is not a sin if it serves a greater good."). While theologically valid, since Islam permits divorce to prevent harm, the film uses it manipulatively to justify coercive separation and deepen emotional dependency on the cult leader. Walid's teachings often echo fragments of Islamic ideals but are stripped of ethical sincerity for personal gain. This underscores the need for Islamic educators to teach religious truths and their context, intention, and moral application.

One of the most reflective moments in *Bidaah* is when Baiduri tells her mother, "Mother, seeking religious knowledge is not wrong, but it becomes deeply problematic when Walid is placed above Father." This highlights the ethical imbalance when religious authority eclipses familial respect. While seeking knowledge is noble, the film warns against blind reverence that distorts social and spiritual priorities. Baiduri emphasizes that religious learning must be anchored in ethics, with no figure placed above justice, compassion, and family bonds.

Baiduri and Hambali serve as the film's moral anchors, embodying the spirit of authentic Islamic education rooted in ethical and spiritual integrity. Returning from Egypt and Yemen, two renowned centers of Islamic scholarship, they reflect how sound education fosters resilience against manipulative authority. Nevertheless, some concerns emerged among viewers, fearing that the film's controversial portrayal might unintentionally tarnish the reputation of Yemen, despite the narrative's true intention to honor, not criticize, such centers of learning. Hambali's denied wish to visit his mother's grave, sacrificed to loyalty toward Walid's sect, further reveals how familial compassion can be distorted within cult-like structures. His inner conflict mirrors believers' broader struggle: distinguishing genuine religious devotion from exploitative practices. Through this arc, *Bidaah* reminds Islamic education to nurture emotional sincerity and critical discernment, ensuring that sacred symbolism remains firmly anchored in justice, compassion, and accountability.

Cultural Receptivity in Malaysian Society: A Fertile Ground for Islamic Pedagogy

Drawing on extensive teaching experience in Malaysia, it is evident that the Malaysian community exhibits a pronounced emotional sensitivity and openness toward Islamic narratives. The intense emotional receptivity in Malaysian society, particularly

among women responding to narratives about the Prophet and vivid depictions of the afterlife, reflects a culture deeply attuned to Islam's ethical and spiritual dimensions. Rather than a liability, this sensitivity offers a unique pedagogical opportunity. Educators can integrate rigorous theology with culturally resonant narratives to foster intellectual engagement and heartfelt reflection. Thus, Malaysia's emotional openness highlights the need for adaptive strategies that channel this strength into transformative Islamic education. One hundred respondents were surveyed regarding their opinions on the film *Bidaah*, consisting of 40 respondents from Malaysia and 60 from Indonesia. The survey aimed to capture their attitudes toward the film's cinematography, storytelling, and portrayal of Islamic themes, particularly examining whether viewers appreciated the film's artistic strengths or expressed concern over its religious messaging.

Table 1. Distribution of Responses on *Bidaah* by Country

Response Category	Malaysia (n=40)	Indonesia (n=60)	Total (n=100)
Positive	12 (30%)	45 (75%)	57 (57%)
Negative	24 (60%)	9 (15%)	33 (33%)
Neutral	4 (10%)	6 (10%)	10 (10%)

Positive responses were primarily driven by the film's successful cinematography and compelling storytelling. Many respondents from both countries praised the portrayal of the lead character, Walid Muhammad, for its emotional depth and artistic delivery. However, despite these strengths, Malaysian respondents expressed more reservations, particularly concerning the film's portrayal of religious authority and potential to misrepresent Islamic figures.

Negative responses primarily reflected fears of distortion in public perceptions of religious teachings. Many Malaysian viewers, especially those with a background in Islamic education, worried that the depiction of charismatic spiritual manipulation might unfairly reinforce existing stereotypes about Islamic clerics. Although Indonesian viewers were generally more positive, some critical voices still emerged, citing concerns about the film's oversimplification of religious issues. The overall reception of *Bidaah* was polarized: 57% positive and 33% negative. Differences between Malaysian and Indonesian audiences reflect cultural, educational, and emotional lenses shaped by traditions, religious literacy, and prior trust in religious figures. Understanding these dimensions is vital for developing context-sensitive Islamic pedagogy that transforms controversial media into opportunities for critical reflection and ethical growth.

Table 2. Cross-Country Comparison of Educators
Agreement Levels Regarding *Bidaah*'s Religious Portrayal

Country	Educators	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Malaysia	10	9	1	0	0	0
Indonesia	10	5	4	0	1	0
Total	20	14 (70%)	5 (25%)	0	1 (5%)	0

In addition to the general audience, 20 Islamic educators, 10 from Malaysia and 10 from Indonesia were consulted for expert opinion. The results show a clear consensus of concern. In Malaysia, 9 out of 10 educators *strongly disagreed* with the film, expressing worries over its misrepresentation of Islamic leadership and its potential to damage the public perception of religious education. The remaining one *disagreed*, albeit with slightly less intensity. Although the reaction was slightly more varied in Indonesia, 90% of educators either *strongly disagreed* (5) or *disagreed* (4). Only one educator agreed, suggesting that the film could be a reflective tool if adequately contextualized.

The findings show that while public reception of *Bidaah* was mixed but generally positive, religious educators remain critical, especially regarding its portrayal of charismatic authority and spiritual manipulation. Although many viewers, particularly Indonesians, praised the film's artistic and vital strengths, it poses a pedagogical risk: depicting deviant leaders in Islamic attire may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes or normalize manipulation under the spiritual guise. Thus, *Bidaah* serves both as a critique and, unintentionally, a model of what it seeks to warn against. A balanced, critical interpretation is essential, urging Islamic educators to use such narratives as catalysts for deeper reflection on ethics, leadership, and faith without censorship. In doing so, films like *Bidaah* can serve as cautionary tales and pedagogical tools for cultivating discernment, media literacy, and moral clarity.

Conclusion

This study examines the divergent perceptions of the film *Bidaah* among Malaysian and Indonesian audiences and explores its implications for Islamic pedagogy in addressing religious manipulation in visual media. Findings reveal a significant interpretive divide: while lay audiences praised the film's artistic merit and social critique, particularly its condemnation of blind spiritual obedience, religious scholars expressed concerns about its potential to reinforce negative stereotypes of religious authority. Bridging gaps in prior literature, this research integrates audience reception theory with Islamic pedagogy, demonstrating how cinematic narratives, such as *Bidaah*, embodied by Walid, a symbol of charismatic spiritual abuse, can simultaneously provoke critical reflection and perpetuate biases. Notably, Indonesian audiences exhibited greater emotional engagement with the film's message than their Malaysian counterparts, a disparity shaped by differences across cultural, educational, and emotional lenses. The study underscores the necessity of media literacy in Islamic education, advocating for a nuanced pedagogical approach that avoids polarized reactions (e.g., outright condemnation or uncritical celebration) and equips learners to critically interpret media narratives through ethical, doctrinal, and critical frameworks. Despite limitations, including a constrained sample size and potential interpretive biases, *Bidaah* emerges as a catalyst for essential dialogue on religious trust, spiritual distortion, and the evolving role of Islamic education in countering mediated extremism. Rather than being divisive, the film may serve as a pedagogical tool to foster ethical awareness, intellectual integrity, and a resilient faith in the face of media-saturated societies.

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