

From Sacred Hero to Anti-Hero: The Deconstruction of *Ustadz* in Contemporary Indonesian Horror Cinema

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Abstract

This study examines the paradigm shift in the representation of the *ustadz* across five contemporary Indonesian horror films, tracing the figure's deconstruction from a sacred hero into a complex anti-hero. It argues this transformation is a key site of cultural negotiation in post-authoritarian Indonesia, where the anti-hero *ustadz* functions as a symptomatic figure embodying societal tensions between faith, media, and modernity. Using Julie D'Acci's "circuit of media" framework, the article analyzes the interconnected forces shaping this representation. The methodology combines an analysis of production dynamics, the socio-historical context of public skepticism toward religious authority, formal cinematic analysis of the films, and a multi-method audience reception study. The study finds this shift is a calculated production strategy driven by commercial logic and global aspirations. Textual analysis demonstrates how cinematic techniques construct the *ustadz* as either tragically vulnerable or corrupt. A reception study, using sentiment analysis and concordance lines, shows that audiences engage critically with these figures, primarily through moral judgment, participating in a mediated critique of institutional power. Ultimately, this study positions Indonesian horror not as mere entertainment but as a crucial cultural barometer where the meaning of religious authority is actively and publicly renegotiated.

Keywords: Indonesian horror, *ustadz*, anti-hero, heroism, narrative deconstruction, popular cinema

Introduction

In both Indonesian society and its popular culture, the figure of the *ustadz*—or Islamic religious teacher—holds immense cultural weight as a traditional symbol of piety, knowledge, and spiritual guidance. Traditionally, *ustadz* functions as a figure with moral authority and religious educator (Akmailah, 2020; Gultom & Hadi, 2021; Sebastian & Othman Alkaff, 2024). The presence of religious figure in Indonesia society signifies piety, knowledge, and spiritual guidance.

This phenomenon is noted in several studies, which find that the representation of *ustadz* mediates between state, society, and religious doctrine (Nasir, 2014; Raya, 2025). The role is often seen as a stabilizing force in moments of socio-political and moral uncertainty. Their symbolic authority extends beyond the mosque and *pesantren* in the context of contemporary Indonesian society, but also in the popular culture.

Indonesia cinema, especially in horror, has long drawn from Islamic archetypes. The presence of *ustadz* in earlier horror films embodies sacred resistance to evil (Schmidt, 2021). Previous research found that the narrative consistently frame *ustadz* and other Islamic religious figures as clerical heroism, unchallenged protectors of order. This heroism reflects deep-rooted spiritual hierarchies in Indonesia. Within horror narratives, *ustadz* serve as ritualistic and moral first responders. Their authority stems not only from religious knowledge but symbolic purity. Previous studies also noted that Indonesian horror cinema mostly use particular symbolism, *ruqyah* (Islamic exorcism) to amplifies the supernatural credibility of *ustadz* (Suroyya, 2022; Novianto & Mukhyar, 2024; Santabudi, Kurniawan & Moses, 2022). The *ustadz* thus symbolizes control, rationality, and divine alignment within the narrative. Such portrayals cement him as an unchallenged stabilizer of cinematic moral worlds.

This established archetype of clerical heroism, however, has been systematically deconstructed in recent years. Contemporary horror films signal a narrative shift in religious representation, especially in *ustadz* character. The cinema reconfigures sacred symbols with moral ambiguity, as *ustadz* portrayed as an anti-hero with flaws, uncertainty, and fragile authority. Academic engagement with this sacred hero thematic reversal remains scarce and scattered. The shift in *ustadz* portrayals lacks close narrative or ideological examination. Little is known about how horror destabilizes the clerical figure's cultural legitimacy.

This research investigates the emerging cinematic of *ustadz* representation that resembles the anti-hero value. The anti-hero is a central figure distinguished by a lack of conventional heroic attributes. Characterized by moral ambiguity, the anti-hero often embodies complex, conflicted, or subversive values (Koepsell, 2024; Ninivaggi, 2024). This alternative depicts religious figures grappling with the tensions between faith and skepticism. Moreover, this article argues that the deconstruction of the *ustadz* into an anti-hero is more than a generic trend. It functions as a key site of cultural negotiation in post-authoritarian Indonesia. Through an analysis of the character's ambiguity, failure, and fallibility, this study demonstrates how contemporary horror cinema has become a crucial symbolic arena where anxieties surrounding institutional religion, clerical authority, and the commodification of piety are made visible and contested. These films use the anti-heroic figure to challenge and reorder the nation's popular understanding of moral leadership.

***Ustadz* and (Anti-)Heroism in Indonesian Horror Cinema**

The Indonesian horror cinema has rooted in the binaries of divine versus demonic (Telle, 2023). The appearance of Islamic figures has become significantly important and also positioned

as a central heroic archetype (Adiprasetyo, 2023; Van Heeren, 2007). The character emerges as a cinematic warrior of the sacred, a religious agent who engages in direct confrontation with supernatural entities such as demons, ghosts, and restless spirits. Within this context, *Ustadz* as religious character also embodies "the hero institutions." The role figures whose authority stems from entrenched cultural systems of legitimacy, and whose actions symbolize collective moral expectations rather than individual character arcs. His authority is not merely charismatic or doctrinal, but institutionalized. *Ustadz* came with the form of *routinized charisma*, with an over-representation of sacred power domesticated into moral routine. The evolution of this heroic archetype is not static. It is rooted in the genre's historical development, which has seen religious discourse shift in response to Indonesia's changing socio-political landscape, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. The Development of Religious Discourse in Indonesian Horror Cinema

Religious discourse on Indonesia horror cinema	Period of cinema	Socio-historical background
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reflected religious discourse mainly as surface-level symbolism, such as recitations, prayers, and <i>Kyai</i> characters). 2. The <i>Kyai</i> or religious figures often appeared at the narrative climax to restore order, intertwined with elements of eroticism, and folklore. 	1970s until late of 1980s, with some of cinema box office such as <i>Beranak dalam Kubur</i> (1971), <i>Sundelbolong</i> (1981), and <i>Malam Jumat Kliwon</i> (1987)	Released on the era of New Order, most of the films are representing state-endorsed moral stability without challenging the dominant socio-political structures.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Horror films relied on sensationalism and less on substantive religious discourse. 2. Religion was marginalized into tokenistic rituals rather than meaningful engagement with moral or spiritual questions. 	During 1990s, with the appearance of several religious-horror movies such as <i>Godaan Perempuan Halus</i> (1993).	The economic crisis and the crumbling of New Order hegemony (<i>Reformasi</i>) created cultural uncertainties, but these were not immediately addressed through horror cinema, which during this period lacked both critical depth and audience interest.

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| <p>1. Supernatural horror films often blended mystical and spiritual elements. This likely reflected the society's worries about modern changes, the mix of different cultures, and various religious identities.</p> <p>2. Religious practices like Islamic <i>ruqyah</i> and prayers became more common in these movies, but they were frequently mixed with older, pre-Islamic beliefs about spirits, creating a combined spiritual world on screen.</p> | <p>Movie that released on 2000-2010. Some of the horror got box office title, such as <i>Jelangkung</i> (2001), <i>Kuntilanak</i> (2006), and <i>Pocong</i> (2008).</p> | <p>The early 2000s marked a revival of horror films alongside Indonesia's democratization and religious reawakening after Reformasi.</p> |
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| <p>1. Talking about religion has become more complicated and uncertain. There's a growing trend to criticize religious leaders, showing them as having flaws, being able to be corrupted, or not being helpful. Some stories even reflect a wider doubt in society about religious organizations.</p> <p>2. More plots that involve religious people acting hypocritically or where right and wrong are unclear.</p> | <p>Since 2010 until 2024. Several of horror movies has enlisted on the most viewed-list such as <i>KKN di Desa Penari</i> (2022), <i>Pengabdi Setan 2</i> (2022), <i>Sewu Dino</i> (2023), <i>Pengabdi Setan</i> (2017), and <i>Danur</i> (2017).</p> | <p>Reflecting Indonesia's post-Reformasi socio-political complexity and debates over socio-cultural issue, and also intersect with religious authenticity phenomenon.</p> |
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Source: Adiprasetyo & Larasati (2022); Imanjaya (2009); Praratya, Sukmauadi & Widjajanto (2024); Van Heeren (2007)

This trajectory reveals a clear movement from religion as a simplistic, order-restoring force in the New Order era to a more complex and contested element in the post-*Reformasi* period. The turn towards moral uncertainty and criticism of religious figures since 2010 directly sets the stage for the contemporary deconstruction of the *ustadz* that this article examines. This construction of clerical heroism in film, however, overrepresents the actual social positioning of religious preachers in everyday Indonesian society. As noted by several previous research, the term *ustadz* has undergone semantic narrowing in Indonesia (Abidin, 2018; Nugraha & Triwinarti, 2019). The figure become synonymous with religious piety and public moral guidance regardless of institutional credentials. The horror films often extend the honorific beyond its pragmatic use in communities, granting cinematic *ustadz* a disproportionate aura of sanctity, moral competence, and social stability. These representations ignore the more complex real-life perceptions of *ustadz*, particularly in cases where public figures bearing the title have been embroiled in legal and ethical scandals. Yet in the cinema, the *ustadz* is rarely subject to such ambiguities. The character depicted as the ultimate moral safeguard. This phenomenon is mirroring on what Thomas Carlyle termed “the Hero as Priest,” a figure who symbolizes divine order and whose authority remains unchallenged, even in secular and modernizing contexts (Comerford, 2024).

This research assumed that the heroism of *ustadz* is performative and symbolic, catering to cultural anxieties and the desire for certainty in an increasingly plural and contested religious sphere. Recent horror films begin to challenge this schema—dismantling the assumed moral superiority of the *ustadz* and instead constructing him as an ambivalent anti-hero, marked by fragility, doubt, and ethical contradiction. This study traces this narrative deconstruction across five key contemporary Indonesian horror films: *Pengabdi Setan* (Joko Anwar, 2017), *Pengabdi Setan 2* (Joko Anwar, 2022), *Qodrat* (Charles Ghozali, 2022), *Qorin* (Gianti Rona, 2022), and *Ruqyah: The Exorcism* (Jose Poernomo, 2017).

Table 2. List of Indonesia Horror Movies Discussed

Original Title	English Title	Year	Theme	<i>Ustadz</i> ' character
Pengabdi Setan	Satan's Slaves	2017	Horror, Drama, Mystery	<i>Ustadz</i> (unnamed)
Ruqyah: The Exorcism	Ruqyah: The Exorcism	2017	Horror, Supranatural	<i>Ustadz</i> (Unnamed)
Qorin	Qorin	2022	Horror, Thriller	<i>Ustadz</i> Jaelani
Qodrat	Qodrat	2022	Horror, Action	<i>Ustadz</i> Zafar
Pengabdi Setan 2	Satan's Slaves 2: Communion	2022	Horror, Drama, Mystery	<i>Ustadz</i> Mahmud

Source: Research sampling

These selected films reveal a recurring narrative strategy in *ustadz* character, as traditionally framed as paragons of moral and spiritual authority. The five movies reimagined this portrayal as conflicted individuals whose personal struggles and ethical lapses challenge the sanctity of their roles. This deconstruction of clerical heroism manifests in varied but recurring ways, primarily by framing the *ustadz* not as an infallible moral authority but as a figure grappling with profound vulnerability. Charles Gozali's *Qodrat* (2022), for instance, centers on its titular character, an exorcist whose faith is shattered after he fails to save his own son from demonic possession. This trauma transforms him from a confident spiritual warrior into a reluctant, grief-stricken anti-hero who must confront his own doubt before he can help others. Similarly, in Joko Anwar's highly successful *Pengabdian Setan* (2017) and its sequel, the *ustadz* is rendered tragically ineffective, representing a pious but ultimately powerless form of authority whose prayers are insufficient against an ancient, overwhelming evil. These films present the anti-hero as a failed protector, whose humanity and limitations are brought to the forefront.

Beyond mere failure, some narratives push this deconstruction further by portraying the *ustadz* as a corrupt or malevolent figure who weaponizes his sacred position. The most direct challenge to the heroic archetype appears in *Qorin* (Gianti Rona, 2022), where *Ustadz* Jaelani uses his respected position as a teacher at an all-girls boarding school to mask psychological abuse and sinister occult practices. His character subverts the ideal entirely, transforming the symbol of moral guidance into the source of terror itself. In these films, the anti-heroic *ustadz* is not just flawed but actively transgresses against the community he is meant to serve, reflecting deeper societal anxieties about hypocrisy and the abuse of institutional power.

The Circuit of Media in (Anti-)Heroism Construction

Julie D'Acci introduced "circuit of media" as an approach to explore how cultural meanings are generated through the dynamic interaction of four interconnected domains: production, cultural artifact, socio-historical context, and reception (Banks, 2014; Martin, 2020). This model foregrounds the connection of media within broader social, industrial, and ideological process, also challenging the model of closed-media ecosystem. Using this framework, the construction of cultural value must be seen as a product of institutional decisions, narrative and symbolic strategies, hegemonic cultural negotiations, and the audience's active role in meaning-making.

This research focus on (Anti-)Heroism representation in the Indonesian horror cinema. Previous research found that heroism is not a stable or universal concept but a discursive category that is constantly being reshaped through socio-cultural mediation and industrial logic (Chitwood, 2019; Korte et al., 2019). At the production level, the concept of heroism and anti-heroism is shaped by material and ideological conditions within the media industry. The industry has an authority on the creative choices of directors and screenwriters, institutional pressures, funding limitations, genre expectations, and market forecasts. In the context of Indonesian horror, these

industrial logics directly influence whether an *ustadz* is portrayed as a marketable, traditional hero who satisfies conservative expectations, or as a more complex anti-hero designed to appeal to audiences hungry for social commentary.

Based on the previous research, the production aspect in the circuit of media is not ideologically neutral (Ranjan & Umayanganie, 2018). The socio-historical perspective is encoded into narrative based on social and historical representational intent. These reconfigurations of heroism reflect an evolving understanding of what constitutes legitimacy, morality, and identification in the public imagination. The exploration on (anti-)heroism also considered through the cultural artifact in textual mechanism. It needs to analyze the narrative arcs and visual metaphors. This involves asking how the failure or death of an *ustadz* is framed cinematically to either critique or reinforce religious authority.

D'acci model also examine the hegemonic discourses and audience reception on the media production. The exploration of hegemonic discourses breaks the dominant ideologies, moral panics, socio-political values that relevant with the cinema. It also assumed that media texts are sites of ideological struggle in cultural production. The reception analysis is especially crucial, as audiences do not passively consume narratives but engage in processes of interpretation, affective investment, and resistance. Therefore, analyzing audience reviews reveals how the on-screen fallibility of an *ustadz* is either accepted as a realistic critique or rejected as an attack on faith. It portrays how viewers articulate emotional responses through judgment, appreciation, and graduation, whether they are amplifying or diminishing their alignment with the heroic or anti-heroic qualities represented.

This study have adapted D'Acci's model to map the specific forces shaping the representation of the *ustadz* (see Figure 1). Applying this model to the construction of (anti-)heroism, this study examines how the figure of the *ustadz* is shaped at each point of the media circuit. First, at the production level, the commercial and ideological pressures within the Indonesian film industry influence creative choices that are far from neutral . Whether an *ustadz* is depicted as a marketable, traditional hero or a controversial anti-hero is thus shaped by market forecasts and filmmakers' perceptions of audience desire. Second, these production decisions are encoded into the cultural artifact itself—the film text—through specific narrative arcs and visual metaphors . In turn, these cinematic portrayals do not exist in isolation but enter into a dialogue with the broader socio-historical context, engaging with dominant ideologies and moral panics about religion in contemporary Indonesia. Finally, the circuit is completed through reception, where audiences actively interpret, judge, and respond to these complex figures. Their reactions, articulated in reviews and online discussions, reveal how the on-screen fallibility of an *ustadz* is negotiated in the public sphere and can influence future production trends.

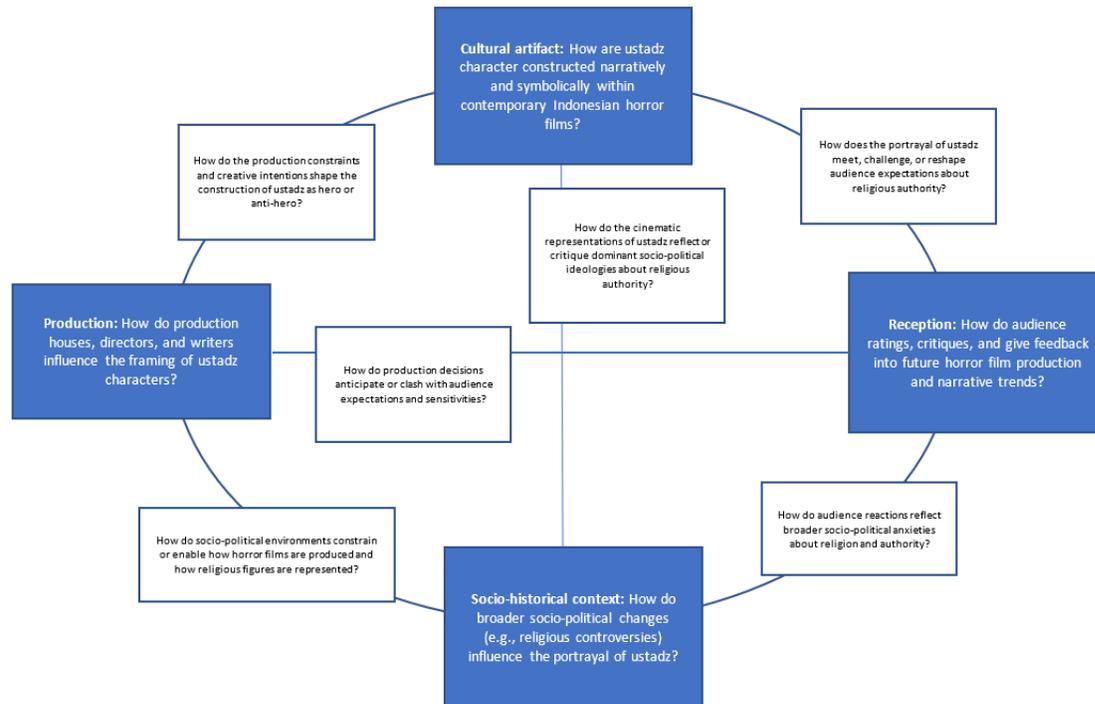


Figure 1. Circuit Model of *Ustadz* Representation in Indonesian Horror Cinema (Source: Research Analysis)

Production Dynamics

The Indonesian film industry has significant transformation over the past two decades. The political shifting, infrastructure development, and audience consumption patterns has been shaping this industrial change. Within this evolving industry ecology, the transformation of horror cinema has emerged as dominant force, both culturally and commercially. Recent data highlight the centrality of horror cinema to the domestic film economy. According to Indonesian Film Board, 60 percent of the 258 films produced in 2024 belonged to the horror genre, accounting for approximately 70 percent of total ticket sales (ET Brand Equity, 2024). Biggest cinema operator in Indonesia, XXI, similarly reported that five of its top ten highest-grossing films in 2024 were horror titles, drawing a combined 27.8 million ticket sales. From 2018 to 2023, the industry was dominated by a few major production houses, with studios like MD Pictures and MVP Pictures accounting for nearly half of all horror films produced, demonstrating the genre's commercial consolidation (Film Indonesia, 2024).

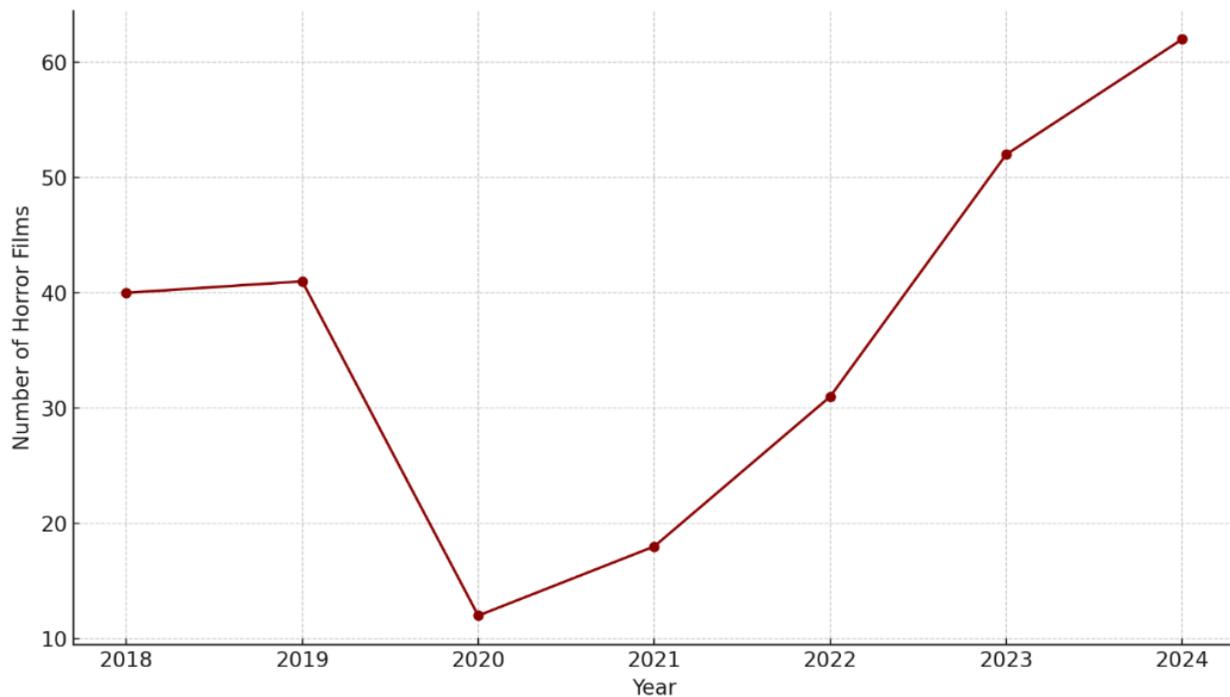


Figure 2. Number of Indonesian Horror Films per Year (2018-2024)

Source: Film Indonesia (2024)

The style of horror cinema produced within the industrial context is notably varied. In Indonesia, it is encompassing supernatural thrillers, psychological horror, religious horror, or other hybrid genres that integrate cultural folklore with modern issues and social anxieties. Directors recognize both the economic value and creative flexibility offered by horror. Charles Gozali, the director of *Qodrat* (2022), notes that horror has become “*a form of enjoyment and even a cultural practice for Indonesian audiences*” (VOI, 2022). The highlight is the horror cinema has integrated into everyday entertainment habits. This versatility allows filmmakers to appeal to diverse demographic segments while experimenting with narratives, tone, and thematic depth. Ruyah’s director, Jose Poernomo, reinforces the commercial intent behind these choices in horror movies development, stating “*We come big to get something also big* (Fimela, 2024),” a candid admission of the profit-oriented logic driving large-scale horror productions.

As economic viability has remains to be the central to horror film production, several directors emphasize the genre’s deeper entanglement with cultural commodification. The director of *Qorin* (2022), Ginanti Rona, frames horror as a rich narrative reservoir drawn from Indonesia’s vast traditions and spiritual beliefs. “Indonesia has many horror stories rooted in culture or religious aspects” Rona explains, pointing to how folklore and religious practices are recontextualized into cinematic material (Cineverse, 2023). Her perspective reveals how cultural elements, both oral tradition or ritual practice among Indonesian society, are being adapted into

consumable, reproducible forms that satisfy both narrative demand and market logic. This aligns with broader patterns of cultural commodification, where localized beliefs and symbols are transformed into genre content to meet industry needs. The director of *Satan Slaves*, Joko Anwar, similarly underscores the cultural capital embedded in horror but from a more globally aspirational lens. “*The momentum is already here... the level must be international,*” he asserts, suggesting that Indonesian horror can function as a form of cultural export (IDN Times, 2025). His vision positions horror as a site where national identity is constructed and packaged for transnational consumption, echoing trends in global genre cinema where local myths gain international prestige through strategic cinematic framing. Together, these viewpoints illustrate how the horror film ecosystem in Indonesia not only commercializes fear but also retools cultural narratives and religious heritage into marketable cinematic assets. Having a big economic potential, the horror ecosystem has significant implication on how cinema industry represented any cultural element within film narratives.

The persistent use of religious figures such as *ustadz*, *Kyai*, and priests across Indonesian horror films from 2017 to 2024 reflects a broader industrial strategy of commodifying religious rites as marketable cinematic elements. Within the production context, rituals like *ruqyah*, *dzikir* (recitation of specific phrases and verses from the Quran), and Qur'anic recitations are repeatedly deployed not only as narrative tools but as recognizable cultural signifiers that enhance a film's perceived authenticity. Production houses capitalize on these rituals to align horror stories with local spiritual beliefs, allowing for deeper audience engagement while mitigating potential backlash from religiously conservative viewers. This strategy turns spiritual practices into visual spectacle, transforming intimate religious acts into consumable and often dramatized moments of confrontation with evil. The recurrence of religious figures portrayals across studios demonstrates how religious symbolism has become a normalized, even expected, component of Indonesian horror. It also signaled the commodification within the genre's narrative and commercial logic.

Table 3. Indonesian Horror Films Featuring Religious Figures (2017–2024)

Year	Film Title	Director(s)	Production House(s)	Religious Figure(s) Portrayed
2017	<i>Pengabdian Setan</i>	Joko Anwar	Rapi Films	<i>Ustadz</i>
2017	<i>Ruqyah: The Exorcism</i>	Jose Poernomo	MD Pictures	<i>Ustadz</i>
2018	<i>Kafir: Bersekutu dengan Setan</i>	Azhar Lubis	Kinoi Starvision Plus	<i>Ustadz</i>
2018	<i>Sebelum Menjemput Iblis</i>	Timo Tjahjanto	Sky Media, Legacy Pictures	<i>Ustadz</i>
2019	<i>Makmum</i>	Hadrah Daeng Ratu	Blue Water Films	<i>Ustadz</i>
2021	<i>Ghibah</i>	Monty Tiwa	Blue Water Films	<i>Ustadz</i>
2022	<i>Qodrat</i>	Charles Gozali	Rapi Films, Magma Entertainment	<i>Ustadz, Kyai</i>
2022	<i>Pengabdian Setan 2</i>	Joko Anwar	Rapi Films, Sky Media, Legacy Pictures	<i>Ustadz</i>
2022	<i>Munkar</i>	Anggy Umbara	MD Pictures	<i>Ustadz</i>
2022	<i>KKN di Desa Penari</i>	Awi Suryadi	MD Pictures, Pichouse Films	<i>Ustadz</i>
2022	<i>Qorin</i>	Ginanti Rona	IDN Pictures	<i>Ustadz</i>
2023	<i>Hidayah</i>	Monty Tiwa	Pichouse Films	<i>Ustadz</i>
2023	<i>Khanzab</i>	Anggy Umbara	Dee Company	<i>Ustadz</i>
2023	<i>Jin Qorin</i>	Ubay Fox	RA Picture	<i>Ustadz</i>
2024	<i>Kuasa Gelap</i>	Bobby Prasetyo	Paragon Pictures	Priest

As Table 3 demonstrates, the trope of the clerical figure is not an outlier but a standardized, industry-wide strategy. Its presence across films from nearly every major production house signals that religious symbolism has become an essential and bankable component of the Indonesian horror genre's commercial formula.

The industry's reliance on religious figures does not fully explain the significant shift from heroic to anti-heroic portrayals. This development can be understood as a calculated production strategy rooted in several overlapping logics. First, in a crowded marketplace, the anti-hero offers

narrative novelty and psychological complexity, allowing a film to stand out from generic horror fare. Second, this complexity aligns with the industry's global aspirations, as articulated by directors like Joko Anwar. Morally ambiguous characters often possess a greater appeal in international genre circuits, which may favor nuanced character studies over straightforward piety. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the anti-heroic *ustadz* allows filmmakers to tap into real-world public skepticism toward institutional authority. By reflecting these societal anxieties, producers create a product that feels more relevant and resonant, turning social critique itself into a marketable commodity. The anti-hero is therefore not an ideological accident but a strategic choice that balances the commercial safety of a recognizable religious trope with the market appeal of narrative depth and cultural relevance.

Socio-Historical Context

The political and media liberalization of Indonesia's post-Reformasi era in 1998 triggered a boom in Islamic-themed content, fundamentally reshaping the public role of religious figures. This period saw the rise of the 'media *ustadz*,' a new kind of religious authority rebranded for mass consumption who, as scholars have noted, was expected to be charismatic and marketable rather than traditionally ascetic (Burhani, 2020; Hoesterey & Clark, 2012; Saat & Burhani, 2020). This shift parallels a broader commodification of Islamic symbols, where turbans, robes, and Qur'anic references began to function as aesthetic cues of religious identity rather than strictly theological signifiers (Haq, 2024; Saat & Burhani, 2020). Following this trend, the figure of the *ustadz* was easily developed into entertainment, particularly horror films, where their presence could evoke both spiritual gravitas and narrative tension. The 'cinematic *ustadz*' became a negotiated product, shaped more by audience demand and genre conventions than by strict doctrinal fidelity (Hasan, 2009).

This commodification inevitably led to a crisis of authority, as the line between spiritual guidance and commercial enterprise blurred. The rising popularity of practices like *Ruqyah: The Exorcism* (Jose Poernomo, 2017) brought figures such as the *ustadz* into the spotlight, not only as spiritual healers but also as figures of commercial interest. As research shows, this reflects a broader trend where religious practices intersect with market dynamics (Nabila, 2024; Salsabila et al., 2024; Mupida, 2020). Prominent figures like Ustadz Dhanu and Gus Samsudin have been criticized for navigating the tense space between faith and commerce. Public trust was further complicated by scandals tied to Islamic boarding schools, most notably the Pesantren of Az-Zaitun (Nadhifah & Rahayu, 2024; Sari et al., 2023), which faced accusations of unorthodox teachings that deviated from mainstream Islamic beliefs, leading to widespread criticism.

Indonesian horror films directly reflect these societal shifts, experimenting with more diverse and critical narratives. The figure of the *ustadz*, once a moral anchor, evolved into a more complex character portrayed as vulnerable, flawed, or even menacing (Angesty & Mukafi, 2024). In *Pengabdi Setan* (Joko Anwar, 2017) and its sequel, *Pengabdi Setan 2* (Joko Anwar, 2022) for

instance, the ineffectiveness of religious figures against evil underscores a growing public ambivalence towards clerical authority. Other films, like *Qodrat* (Charles Ghozali, 2022), place religious figures in morally ambiguous situations that blur the lines between sacred power and personal trauma. Most explicitly, films like *Qorin* (Gianti Rona, 2022) explore the potential for corruption within a religious boarding school, a narrative that directly channels the public's fears surrounding institutional integrity that controversies like *Az-Zaitun* inflamed. By integrating these issues, the *ustadz* is no longer simply a defender of order but a conduit through which audiences can explore societal tensions, reflecting a broader questioning of authority in contemporary Indonesia.

Cultural Artifact

In the shifting terrain of Indonesian popular cinema, horror films have long functioned as rich cultural artifacts, reflecting anxieties about religion, modernity, and social authority. Among the recurring figures within this genre is the *ustadz* representation. In viewing contemporary Indonesian horror films as cultural artifacts, we observe how the cinematic figure of the *ustadz* operates not simply as a religious authority, but as a narrative conduit for examining deeper socio-cultural tensions. Across films such as *Pengabdi Setan* (Joko Anwar, 2017), *Pengabdi Setan 2*, *Qodrat* (Charles Ghozali, 2022), *Qorin* (Gianti Rona, 2022), and *Ruqyah: The Exorcism* (Jose Poernomo, 2017), the *ustadz* character is variously depicted as a grieving father, a helpless bystander, a spiritual fraud, or a sinister manipulator. These recurring anti-heroic traits, as summarized in Table 4, reframe the figure within the realm of the anti-hero—a character who may strive for good, yet remains ensnared in personal flaws or systemic contradictions. These films construct the *ustadz* as a prism through which audiences confront the fragility of religious institutions and the dissonance between outward piety and inner morality.

Table 4. The Analysis of Anti-Heroic Traits of *Ustadz* Figures in Indonesian Horror Films

Film Title	<i>Ustadz</i> Character	No. of Scenes	Narrative Role	Moral Alignment	Contradiction/Anti-Heroic Traits
<i>Pengabdian Setan</i> (2017)	<i>Ustadz</i> (unnamed)	15 scenes	Religious mediator, spiritual guide	Virtuous but ineffective	Despite piety, fails to protect family; powerless against evil; symbolic impotence
<i>Pengabdian Setan 2</i> (2022)	<i>Ustadz</i> Mahmud	14 scenes	Protective figure, spiritual warrior	Virtuous but vulnerable	Dies brutally; divine protection rendered futile; exposes limits of religious strength
<i>Qodrat</i> (2022)	<i>Ustadz</i> Jafar	29 scenes	Spiritual elite, hidden antagonist	Corrupted/Complicit	Uses ruqyah for control; manipulates faith; anti-heroic in his betrayal of community
<i>Qorin</i> (2022)	<i>Ustadz</i> Jaelani	35 scenes	School leader, religious teacher	Villainous/Exploitative	Mask of piety hides abuse and occultism; subverts religious authority for demonic goals
<i>Ruqyah: The Exorcism</i> (2017)	<i>Ustadz</i> (unnamed)	9 scenes	Consultant, distant figure	Ambiguous/Detached	Symbolic presence only; unable to intervene meaningfully; reflects institutional detachment

Source: Research Observation

The films achieve this deconstruction not only through plot, but through specific cinematic strategies—from camera framing and sound design to editing—that visually and aurally underscore the character's compromised authority. By doing so, Indonesian horror films transcend didactic religious messaging and instead create a textured cultural dialogue about power and belief in the public imagination.

The Fragility of Faith

The recent wave of Indonesian horror cinema presents the *ustadz* not as an unshakable pillar of piety, but as a profoundly human figure whose faith is tested by fear, grief, and doubt. In *Pengabdi Setan* (Joko Anwar, 2017), for instance, the *ustadz* retreats from his duties after the tragic death of his son. The *ustadz*'s spiritual authority crumbles after he fails to protect his own son from the demonic entity. The film communicates his shattered faith not just through the plot, but through its quiet and somber formal choices. In the aftermath of his son's death, the director avoids dramatic horror tropes, instead using a series of static, observational shots. The *ustadz* is often framed in a medium shot, isolated within his own home, with the dim, naturalistic lighting creating a heavy, melancholic atmosphere. The actor's performance is restrained, conveying his grief and loss of confidence through a slumped posture and downcast eyes rather than overt emoting. The scene's power comes from its stillness and the quiet sound design, which cinematically represents the absence of divine comfort and the hollowing out of his spiritual conviction. This portrayal establishes him as a tragic, vulnerable figure long before he is manipulated in the film's climax, showing that his spiritual strength is not absolute but is subject to profound human loss. Similarly, the repeated failures of the exorcist in *Ruqyah: The Exorcism* (Jose Poernomo, 2017) reinforce this trend. These portrayals complicate the *ustadz*'s symbolic role, showing that their spiritual strength is not absolute.

Ustadz character showed as someone who reflects the ambiguity of real human experience. Rather than inspiring through perfection, anti-heroes connect with audiences through their vulnerabilities and capacity for change. When the *ustadz* is framed in this light, his wavering faith becomes a mirror to the audience's own spiritual uncertainties and ethical struggles. His fallibility and emotional depth position him not as a symbol of divine authority, but as a figure navigating the same existential dilemmas as those he aims to guide. This shift redefines religious leadership on screen, from idealized purity to relatable humanity, reinforcing horror cinema's capacity to explore both societal structures and individual psyches through complex character portrayals.

The Contradiction of Ideal Ustadz

Beyond portraying the *ustadz* as a fragile human, a more direct contradiction of the ideal emerges when films frame him as either tragically powerless or, more unsettlingly, as a corrupt antagonist. This is powerfully illustrated in *Pengabdi Setan 2* (2022), intensifies this theme of vulnerability through the brutal death of *Ustadz* Mahmud. The film underscores his fragility not just through the narrative outcome, but through its cinematic construction. As he is death in a small rented room, the camera shifts to a chaotic, handheld style, mirroring a fatality that bring him to death. The editing becomes rapid and violent, but it is the sound design that most powerfully conveys his helplessness: his overconfidence in prayers are almost entirely drowned out by the cacophony of the supernatural assault. By rendering his sacred recitations audibly impotent, the film cinematically stages the failure of his faith against an overwhelming evil. The genre

weaponizes this narrative structure to reveal the limits of spiritual authority when confronted with forces that defy doctrinal certainty. The death of *ustadz* are not merely plot points; they function as critiques of a religious figure's inability to resolve deep-rooted societal or supernatural crises.

More unsettling are the portrayals where the *ustadz* is not a helpless martyr but a complicit antagonist. In *Qorin* (Gianti Rona, 2022), *Ustadz Jaelani* is unmasked as the orchestrator of demonic rituals and abuse, a contradiction the film builds through its visual design. Early scenes frame him in the brightly lit, communal spaces of the school, presenting him as a respected senior teacher. However, as his true nature is revealed, the setting shifts to his private, dimly lit office. Here, the filmmakers use high-contrast, shadowy lighting—a classic horror trope—to visually equate his hidden actions with darkness and moral corruption. Close-ups on his face capture micro-expressions of menace, cinematically unmasking his pious facade to reveal the predator beneath. Similarly, *Ustadz Jafar* in *Qodrat* (Charles Ghozali, 2022) weaponizes *ruqyah* for personal gain. These figures reflect anxieties surrounding religious hypocrisy, where the unease arises not from external demons, but from the realization that the supposed guardian may in fact be the source of evil.

Audience Reception

The cinematic representation of *ustadz* figures as anti-heroes in contemporary Indonesian horror does not conclude its meaning within the frame of the film alone. It is further shaped, negotiated, and often contested through audience reception. The audience's engagement with these figures reveals affective responses and judgmental re-evaluations of religious authority in popular culture. To understand this dynamic, this section analyzes audience commentary on the five selected films. The analysis is structured around three key components. First, this study portrayed the mode of representation, with its distribution detailed in Table 5.

Table 5. Distribution of Mode and Content of Representation

Film Title	Direct Discourse	Indirect Discourse	Mixed Discourse
Pengabdi Setan	4	6	2
Pengabdi Setan 2	3	7	2
Qorin	5	5	2
Qodrat	6	4	2
Ruqyah: The Exorcist	4	6	2

The analysis of the mode of representation—how viewers engage with the film's text—reveals a strong correlation between the moral portrayal of the *ustadz* and the way audiences discuss it. The modes are categorized into three types: direct discourse, where viewers quote dialogue or describe scenes verbatim; indirect discourse, where they paraphrase events and infer

their own moral or thematic meaning; and mixed discourse, which combines both direct quotation and interpretive summary (Bullo, 2014).

As the data shows, indirect discourse dominates the commentary for films like *Pengabdil Setan 2* (Joko Anwar, 2022) and *Qorin* (Gianti Rona, 2022), where the *ustadz* is morally ambiguous. This mode enables reviewers to embed their own ideological stances, reconstructing the film's meaning through evaluative summary rather than direct quotation. Conversely, direct discourse is more frequent in commentary on *Qodrat* (Charles Ghozali, 2022) and *Pengabdil Setan 2* (Joko Anwar, 2022). Here, viewers often use explicit quotations of prayers or rituals, suggesting they perceive the religious representation as more authentic and credible. Mixed discourse, though less common, allows commenters to juxtapose admiration for a specific ritual with skepticism about the figure performing it, reflecting a complex engagement with the film's themes. The data also indicates a pragmatic use of representation mode that correlates with the moral polarity of the religious figure portrayed. *Qodrat* featuring *ustadz* as virtuous, tend to attract more direct and mixed discourse, whereas those portraying moral ambiguity (*Qorin*) are accompanied by higher instances of indirect discourse. The mode of representation selected by the commentator often signals not only the degree of textual fidelity but also the underlying stance toward the religious content. Every review evaluates the credibility, efficacy, or ethical positioning of *ustadz* figures within the cinematic narrative.

Beyond the mode of representation, the overall sentiment orientation of the audience commentary provides a quantitative measure of their reception. To determine this, the evaluative epithets used by viewers were coded into three polarity types. Positive epithets are those expressing admiration or approval, negative epithets convey criticism or disapproval, and neutral/evaluative epithets are primarily analytical or descriptive. The aggregate results of this coding, shown in Figure 3, reveal a contested reception.

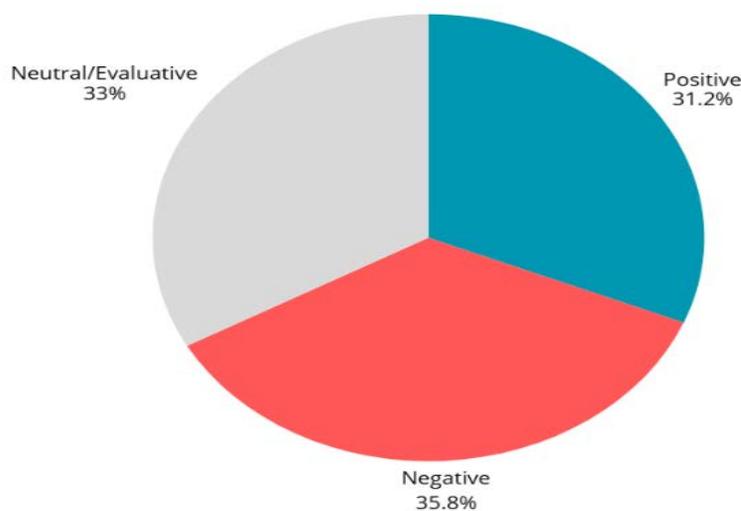


Figure 3. Overall Sentiment Orientation of Epithets Source: Research Analysis

Of the 109 total epithets identified, negative epithets were slightly more frequent than positive ones, suggesting that audiences engaged with these complex portrayals with a predominantly critical stance. However, the significant proportion of neutral/evaluative comments indicates that much of the reception was analytical rather than purely positive or negative. To conduct a more fine-grained analysis, a sentiment score was calculated for each film to measure the intensity of positive versus negative reception. Visualization on Figure 4 reveal that score closer to 1.0 indicates a more positive reception, while a score closer to 0 indicates a more negative one.

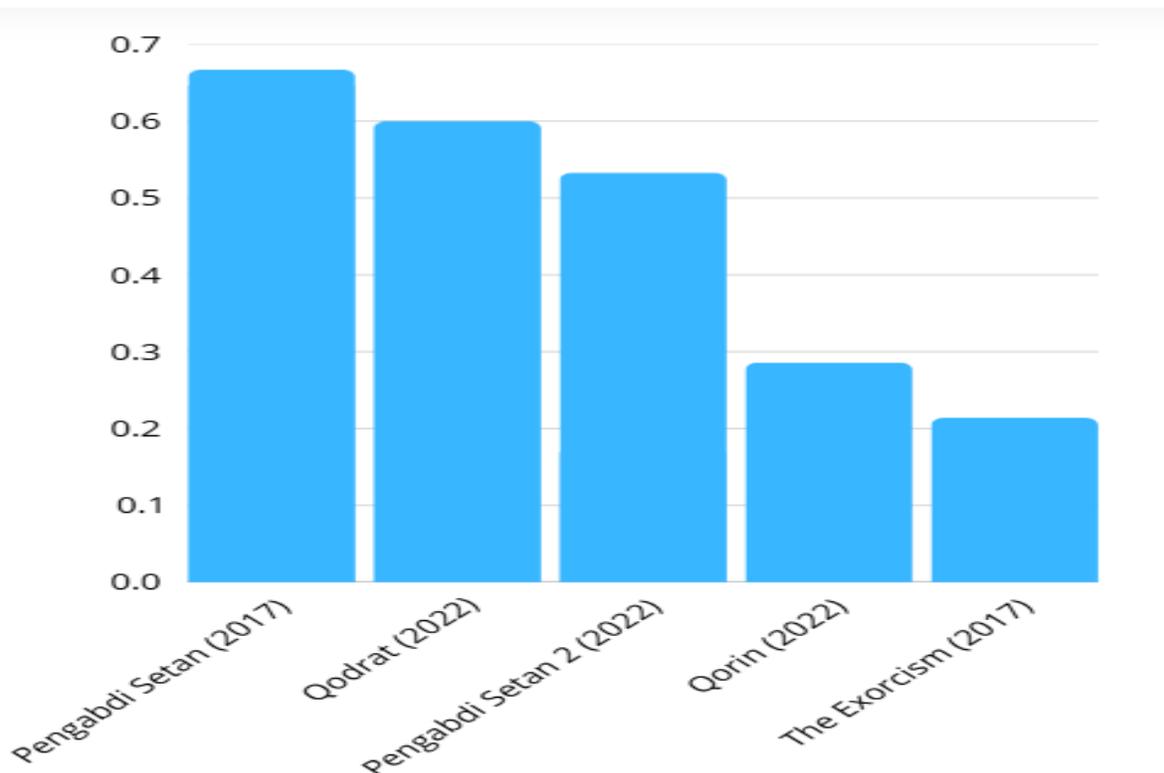


Figure 4. Sentiment Scores per Film Source: Research Analysis

A total of 109 evaluative epithets were identified across the dataset, revealing noteworthy asymmetries in polarity between the films. Films such as *Qorin* (Gianti Rona, 2022) and *Ruqyah: The Exorcist* (Jose Poernomo, 2017) show a significantly higher frequency of negative epithets. These predominantly characterize religious figures as “hypocritical,” “abusive,” “oppressive,” or “ritualistic,” reflecting a critical audience stance toward the moral conduct and institutional credibility of the *ustadz* figures depicted. In contrast, *Qodrat* (Charles Ghozali, 2022) and *Pengabdian Setan* (Joko Anwar, 2017) elicited more positive epithets, such as “powerful,” “faith-driven,” and “sincere,” highlighting a more affirming reception toward religious authority when it is portrayed as ethically resolute and spiritually effective. Interestingly, *Pengabdian Setan 2* (Joko Anwar, 2022)

displays a more balanced profile. This duality is often the result of the film's ambivalent portrayal of religious figures—simultaneously casting the *ustadz* in a protective role while also allowing moments of satirical or comic relief. Viewers commenting on these scenes frequently invoked epithets such as “well-intentioned” and “clueless,” revealing an engagement with both reverence and skepticism.

The asymmetrical distribution of sentiment score suggests differing degrees of ideological alignment or critique toward religious representation across the five films. The high concentration of negative sentiment in *Qorin* (Gianti Rona, 2022) and *Ruqyah: The Exorcism* (Jose Poernomo, 2017) corresponds to narratives that cast religious figures as complicit in violence or manipulation, thereby eliciting more condemnatory responses. Meanwhile, films such as *Qodrat* (Charles Ghozali, 2022), which portray the *ustadz* as a central heroic figure combating supernatural evil through Islamic rituals, attract a higher volume of positive evaluative language. This quantitative data strongly supports the qualitative finding that audiences are issuing negative judgments for morally compromised figures and more positive judgments for those who, despite their flaws, remain virtuous.

To understand the nature of these evaluations more deeply, the final layer of analysis categorizes the epithets by attitude. Moving beyond simple polarity, this examines how viewers express their stances. Following appraisal theory, attitude epithets are divided into three domains (Livingstone & Das, 2013): affect (direct expressions of emotion), judgment (assessments of ethics and morality), and appreciation (evaluations of aesthetic or cultural value). The distribution of these attitudes, detailed in Table 6, reveals the primary lens through which audiences evaluate the on-screen portrayal of religious authority.

Table 6. Frequency of Appraisal Epithets

Film Title	Affect (Emotion)	Judgment (Ethics)	Appreciation (Aesthetic)
Pengabdi Setan	5	7	6
Pengabdi Setan 2	4	8	7
Qorin	3	9	5
Qodrat	6	7	6
Ruqyah: The Exorcism	3	8	4

Source: Research Analysis

Across all five films, judgment epithets emerged as the most dominant category, particularly in *Qorin* (Gianti Rona, 2022), *Pengabdi Setan 2* (Joko Anwar, 2022), and *Ruqyah: The Exorcism* (Jose Poernomo, 2017). These epithets frequently functioned to assess the moral integrity or credibility of *ustadz* characters, with expressions such as “exploitative,” “manipulative,” and “irresponsible,” or conversely “dedicated” and “trustworthy.” In *Qorin*, for

instance, judgmental epithets such as “abusive” and “corrupt” are employed to critique the character of Ustadz Jaelani. In contrast, Ustadz Qodrat (in *Qodrat* by Charles Ghozali, 2022) displays an abundance of positive judgment epithets, where the character is evaluated as “righteous” and “resilient” in his quest to defeat the corrupt antagonist, Jafar, reinforcing the film’s redemptive religious narrative. Affect-based epithets, though fewer, were present in *Pengabdi Setan* (Joko Anwar, 2017) and *Qodrat* (Charles Ghozali, 2022), with terms like “moved” or “comforted,” suggesting viewers were more inclined to assess religious figures in terms of ethics rather than emotion. Finally, appreciation epithets, such as “atmospheric” or “superficial,” reveal the extent to which religion is also treated by audiences as a cinematic and cultural device to be evaluated on its aesthetic merits.

To illustrate the specific content of these judgments, Table 8 provides sample concordance lines from the audience commentary, centering on the keyword "ustadz" and related terms.

Table 7. Sample Concordance Lines for "Ustadz" from Audience Commentary

Left Context	Keyword	Right Context
...uses satire to portray	Ustadz	in a less powerful light compared to older films.
...emphasizes that	Ustadz	are ordinary humans susceptible to magic and spells.
...even seemingly strong figures like	Ustadz	can be vulnerable, enhancing the horror element.
...questioning why	Ustadz	always die in the film 'Pengabdi Setan'.
...misconception that all	Ustadz	can exorcise demons, as they have specific expertise.
...not all	Ustadz	are capable of handling supernatural matters, but they are brave.
...the character of	Ustadz	play a calming role, reminding people to pray for protection.
...the character of	Qodrat	is not well-explored, at least according to the reviewers.
...the conflict regarding	Jafar	who profits from <i>ruqyah</i> services, shows humans can be more evil than a Satan.
...brought her to a famous	Ustadz	to be exorcised and the demons came out.

Source: Research Analysis

The concordance lines reveal several recurring themes in audience judgments. Viewers frequently discuss the power and limitations of the ustadz, questioning their effectiveness against supernatural evil (lines 1, 4, 5, 6) while also acknowledging their role in providing spiritual comfort (line 7). The commentary also focuses on their humanity and vulnerability (lines 2, 3), a key component of their anti-heroic construction. Most critically, viewers pass direct moral judgment on the characters' actions, condemning figures like Jafar for their hypocrisy and corruption (line

9) while also evaluating their narrative construction as characters (line 8). This shows a deep and critical engagement with the shifting role of religious authority on screen.

The multi-analysis of audience reception demonstrates how horror cinema becomes a contested discursive space where religious figures are re-evaluated in light of contemporary anxieties. Production choices to frame *ustadz* as anti-heroes or compromised authorities are not only reflective of creative negotiation with religious sensitivities, but also serve as provocations that elicit complex audience responses. These responses, in turn, reflect broader concerns about the reliability, ethics, and symbolic function of religious leadership in Indonesian society. The evaluative language used by audiences, especially in films portraying corruption or powerlessness, illustrates how cinematic texts become mirrors to societal doubt, facilitating a mediated critique of faith, morality, and authority in the public sphere.

Horror Cinema as a Site of Symbolic Negotiation

The emergence of the anti-hero *ustadz* in contemporary Indonesian horror is not merely a reflection of societal change, but an active process of cultural construction. The result presents that the selected films are not as simple mirrors, but as dynamic arenas where the meaning of religious authority is actively built, negotiated, and contested. This process is not driven by a single authorial vision, but emerges from the complex interplay between the film industry, the filmmakers' creative choices, the socio-historical context, and the audience's interpretive labor. As the analysis have noted, contemporary filmmakers operate within a media landscape shaped by both commercial demands and sociopolitical sensitivities (Maharam, 2021; Rospitasari, 2021). Constraints such as censorship or the need to cater to a broad audience push creators toward more nuanced and subversive portrayals of religious figures, making direct critique difficult.

Within this constrained environment, the horror genre becomes an essential tool for symbolic construction due to its unique metaphorical elasticity (Coleman & Ritchie, 2011). Horror allows filmmakers to explore taboo topics, such as the fallibility of religious leaders, without direct confrontation (Brottman, 2004). The genre's conventions provide a crucial layer of allegory; the narrative metaphor of a haunting, for instance, can be used to suggest that unchecked authority or blind faith can become spiritually and socially dangerous. The contradiction of the *ustadz* thus lies in their narrative function: they are positioned as moral authorities yet are cinematically exposed as either powerless or corrupted. By dramatizing these anxieties in extreme forms, the horror genre pushes the *ustadz* figure into an ambiguous terrain where their piety is no longer a guarantee of righteousness, forcing a re-evaluation of what their role signifies. This process of construction is completed through the audience, as horror allows for a "democratization of critique" (Aureli & Giudici, 2016; Marini & Fuchs, 2024). By depicting the *ustadz* as a fallible human figure subject to doubt, desire, and failure, these films do not provide simple moral lessons. Instead, horror film invites the viewers to critically engage with the idealized image of clerical infallibility and to confront the complexities of belief, trust, and moral leadership in a changing society. The anti-

heroic construction is crucial here—the ustadz is neither wholly villainous nor purely virtuous, but a human figure whose struggles destabilize the sanctity historically afforded to his position. This opens a space for critical reflection, where audiences can question institutional power through the safe mediation of narrative subversion.

The anti-heroic ustadz should be understood as a fluid and contested cultural symbol, actively constructed rather than passively reflected. By framing the ustadz in this way, these cinematic texts contribute to a broader public discourse on religious authority, moral complexity, and the evolving role of Islam in Indonesia's cultural imagination. This analysis reveals contemporary horror cinema as a vital cultural site where a nation's anxieties are not just expressed, but where the very meaning of its most sacred symbols is actively negotiated and symbolically reordered.

Conclusion

This research explored the paradigm shift in the representation of the ustadz within contemporary Indonesian horror cinema, from a sacred hero to a complex anti-hero. The analysis demonstrates that this transformation is not an isolated generic trend but a complex cultural construct, produced at the intersection of multiple forces. The commercial imperatives of a booming film industry, which commodifies religious symbols for market appeal, converge with a socio-historical climate of public skepticism toward institutional religious authority. These forces are encoded into the films themselves through narrative and cinematic strategies that emphasize the ustadz's vulnerability, impotence, or corruption. The circuit is completed by audiences, whose reception, rich with moral judgment, confirms that these films function as a vital public arena for negotiating the meaning of religious leadership. The anti-hero ustadz thus emerges as a symptomatic figure, embodying the deep-seated tensions between faith, media, and modernity in contemporary Indonesia.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its illumination of the critical social function of popular horror cinema. Far from being mere escapist entertainment, the genre serves as a crucial site of symbolic negotiation, allowing for a "democratization of critique" on sensitive topics that are difficult to address directly. By framing the fallible ustadz as its central figure, Indonesian horror provides a metaphorical space for the public to question institutional power, confront anxieties about religious hypocrisy, and reimagine the terms of moral leadership in a rapidly changing society. Future research could extend this constructionist paradigm to other religious figures in Indonesian media or to the horror cinemas of neighboring Southeast Asian nations to explore regional trends. Ultimately, the rise of the anti-hero ustadz affirms horror's enduring power as a cultural barometer, uniquely capable of reflecting and shaping a society's most urgent conversations about itself.

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