

STUDENTS AND HALAL CINEMA: LEISURE TIME, NEGOTIATION, AND HALAL AWARENESS



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Abstract

This study explores how Muslim students utilize their leisure time to enjoy entertainment at Cinépolis, a halal-certified cinema in Yogyakarta. The research focuses on value negotiation, moral flexibility, and the construction of religious identity amidst the dynamics of modernity. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and direct observation of students visiting the cinema. The findings reveal that students' choices are not merely driven by entertainment preferences but also reflect efforts to uphold religious values, including the selection of films, the management of prayer times, and interactions with the opposite gender. Halal entertainment options like Cinépolis illustrate the complex negotiation between the desire for recreation and the commitment to religious principles. Students demonstrate moral flexibility by considering the halal aspects of entertainment while navigating dilemmas such as films with adult scenes or schedules that conflict with prayer times. Furthermore, halal entertainment serves not only as a medium for relaxation but also as an expression of an adaptive religious identity, blending Islamic traditions with modernity. Halal cinemas provide a space for compromise where Islamic values can be preserved without disregarding the need for modern entertainment. This study contributes to the understanding of the role of halal entertainment in shaping the religious identity of Muslim youth and offers insights into how halal regulations in Indonesia influence entertainment choices. By highlighting the interplay between social and religious dimensions, the research underscores the dynamic interaction between religion, culture, and modernity in the lives of Muslim students.

Keywords: Muslim Youth, Leisure Time, Halal Cinema, Religious Identity

INTRODUCTION

The halal regulations in Indonesia have become an intriguing topic to explore, particularly in the context of their application in entertainment sectors such as cinemas. Law Number 33 of 2014 on Halal Product Assurance mandates that all products, including food, beverages, and services circulating in Indonesia, must obtain halal certification. (Priantina and Mohd Sopian 2023). This regulation reflects the Indonesian government's efforts to provide assurance to Muslim consumers that what they consume complies with Islamic law. This contrasts with Malaysia, which, despite being known as the country with the best halal standards in the world, has more flexible regulations compared to Indonesia (Fatonah, Trihartono, and Hara 2023). In Malaysia, halal certification is more optional and not mandatory for all products and services, making the entertainment sector, such as cinemas, less inclined to adopt halal certification as a primary appeal.

This difference in approach has a significant impact on the choices of Muslim consumers in Indonesia. For instance, the halal-certified Cinépolis cinema not only serves as a place of entertainment but also reflects a commitment to regulations and sensitivity to local cultural values. The halal certification in these cinemas covers the food and beverages sold, providing a sense of security for Muslim consumers. On the other hand, this strict policy positions Indonesia as a pioneer in integrating Islamic values into modern sectors like entertainment. However, a question arises: how do Muslim students, particularly in Islamic campus environments, perceive and respond to this phenomenon? This study aims to explore the moral ambivalence, value negotiation, and flexibility of Muslim students in choosing halal entertainment amidst the dynamics of modernity.

In their daily activities, students often face feelings of fatigue and boredom. In addition to the heavy academic workload, many of them are also preoccupied with work demands to sustain their lives away from home. As young individuals, many students view entertainment as a necessity that must be fulfilled. They treat entertainment as a means of shifting activities to temporarily relieve fatigue and boredom. Among them, some seek enjoyment by visiting cafes around campus, while others go to cinemas to watch the latest film series in their preferred genres.

Asef Bayat, in his research on entertainment and pleasure in countries with dominant religious control, concluded that entertainment and pleasure are spontaneous and unorganized in nature, which can lead to resistance against religious authority (Hanafi 2015). Bayat argues that Islamists do not entirely reject entertainment and pleasure;

however, they strive to regulate and control these activities to align with Islamic doctrines, ensuring that they do not provoke resistance against religious authority (Hanafi 2015).

Bayat's conclusion appears less relevant to countries with weaker religious control, such as Indonesia. The diversity of Islamic interpretations in Indonesia often leads to entertainment and pleasure organized by Islamists being negotiated with modern and local cultural aspects. Therefore, this study aligns more closely with Samuli Schielke's conclusions, which critique Saba Mahmood for overly focusing on piety as the primary motivation behind every activity of Muslim youth (Saba Mahmood 2005). Samuli Schielke critiques Mahmood for seemingly overlooking the complexity of Muslim youth's lives. According to Schielke, it is not only piety that underlies the activities of Muslim youth who may not be fully pious, but they also have other ambitions driving their actions, such as career advancement, social status, entertainment, and other factors that reflect the complexity of their lives (Schielke 2009c).

In his research on Muslim youth in Egypt, Schielke also concluded that they often experience ambivalence and inconsistency in their lives (Schielke 2009a). This study seems to align with Schielke's conclusion, where Muslim students' choice to visit cinemas to fill their leisure time reflects that ambivalence and inconsistency. Although Cinépolis is a halal-certified cinema, the regulations implemented are no different from those of other conventional cinemas. This situation forces Muslim students to negotiate and demonstrate flexible responses to religious values. This research will analyze the aspects that trigger them to engage in negotiations and flexibility, such as the types of films they watch, which sometimes feature adult scenes, the cinema environment that may encourage interaction with the opposite sex, or the scheduling of movie times that may force them to perform prayers at the end of their designated time.

Moreover, the aspect of identity plays a crucial role in understanding Muslim students' entertainment choices, particularly in the context of halal entertainment. The decision of Muslim youth to visit halal-certified cinemas like Cinépolis not only reflects adherence to religious values but also illustrates how their religious identity is constructed and negotiated amidst modernity. As Stuart Hall explains, identity is dynamic and is formed through social practices (Bhandari 2021). In this context, Muslim students present an adaptive identity, blending Islamic traditions with the need for modern entertainment. Thus, identity becomes not only a reflection of religiosity but also a response to the ongoing social changes.

Previous studies on Muslim youth and pleasure have been widely discussed, such as research linking them to music (Saefullah 2022), hanging out at cafes (Dhaehasti Agustina Saputri, Novia Budi Lestari, and Rolika Firinanda 2023), playing online games (Woltermann 2023) and other similar activities. Although Akhmad Rajabiyantor et al. discuss the attractions and factors influencing youth to visit cinemas, this study critiques their conclusion, which emphasizes the influence of external factors such as the service provided by cinema management, soundproof studios, high-quality speakers, clear images, and large displays (Rajabiyantor, Bagus Nyoman Udayana, and Diansepti Maharani 2022). It seems to overlook the influence that comes from within the youth themselves, such as knowledge capital or culture, as discussed in this study. This research argues that knowledge capital also significantly affects the choices of youth, particularly Muslim youth, in filling their leisure time by visiting cinemas (Weems 2021).

In Islam, there are differing views on the concept of enjoyment. Some perspectives permit a Muslim to use their leisure time for a brief period of enjoyment, engaging in activities for self-entertainment. On the other hand, there are views that prohibit a Muslim from spending their leisure time on activities that are deemed unproductive and lack any benefit for the hereafter (Ismail 2020). In turn, the debate about the use of leisure time demands criteria for cinemas that can blur negative views about wasting time and foster a positive perspective on their choice to spend their leisure time there.

Not far from UIN Sunan Kalijaga, there is Plaza Lippo, which offers several cinemas. As an entertainment industry that is adept at recognizing market demand, and as a prominent international cinema chain, Cinépolis has obtained halal certification from the Badan Penyelenggara Jaminan Produk Halal (BPJPH) (Shaid 2024). The application of the halal logo at Cinépolis Plaza Lippo Yogyakarta can be seen in the image below.

Halal Logo at Cinépolis



Some students concentrating on Halal Industry and Business Studies who choose to spend their time watching films at the cinema tend to prefer Cinépolis, a cinema that holds a halal certification. In addition to being graduates of Islamic boarding schools, their choice to visit a halal-certified cinema is also influenced by the halal industry program they are currently enrolled in. The religious knowledge they gained while studying at the pesantren and their strong awareness of halal principles significantly determine which cinemas they deem appropriate to visit. Besides filling their leisure time, their decision to visit the cinema also serves as a platform to express their identity and lifestyle, which will become a topic of debate in Islamic discussions, much like the debate on leisure time.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to analyze how students from the Halal Industry and Business Studies program at UIN Sunan Kalijaga spend their leisure time enjoying entertainment at Cinépolis, a cinema that holds halal certification from BPJPH. The aim of this study is to explore the reasons behind the students' choice to visit a halal-certified cinema and how they interpret leisure time in the context of religion. To collect data, this research utilizes in-depth interviews with students who visit halal cinemas, as well as direct observation in the campus environment and the halal cinema. In-depth interviews are conducted to gain an understanding of the students' personal perspectives on halal entertainment, as well as their views on the concept of leisure time, which often sparks debate in Islam.

The informants in this study consist of four individuals with diverse backgrounds. Informant A is a student from Aceh with a background in Islamic boarding school education. His awareness of halal is very high, especially regarding the halal status of food and supporting facilities such as prayer rooms and bathrooms. Informant B, also from Aceh, has a more flexible approach to halal. He often chooses halal-certified cinemas due to invitations from friends, but he also considers the halal aspects, especially food. Informant C is a student who places special attention on the comfort of facilities that support religious practices. He believes that halal certification should cover comprehensive aspects, not just food. Informant D, a graduate of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, has a more practical perspective. He chooses halal cinemas primarily because of promotional factors, such as discounts, although he still respects Islamic values.

The data obtained will be processed thematically, identifying patterns and key themes that emerge from the interviews and observations. This analysis aims to explore the complexity of students' motivations in choosing entertainment they consider halal, as well as how this choice reflects the ambivalence between adherence to religious values and the desire to enjoy modern entertainment. To ensure the accuracy of the findings, this study will use data validation steps through source and technique triangulation. Source triangulation will be carried out by comparing information gathered from interviews with students with data obtained from direct observations at the campus and halal cinema locations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The research findings indicate that Muslim students have various reasons for choosing halal cinemas. For example, Informant A stated, *"I feel more at ease watching in a halal cinema because the food is guaranteed to comply with Sharia."* This shows that religious aspects are a primary priority for some informants. On the other hand, Informant D has a more practical perspective, as he mentioned, *"I choose cinemas that often offer discounts, although halal is still important."* This difference reflects the flexibility in interpreting religious values according to individual needs.

In addition, the phenomenon of moral negotiation is also evident in the type of films watched. For instance, Informants A and B show tolerance towards adult scenes in films, with the understanding that they try to avoid focusing on those scenes. On the other hand,

Informants C and D view this as something that is common in cinemas, but still consider it a minor sin that can be addressed with good intentions. This demonstrates that moral flexibility allows them to enjoy entertainment while not entirely violating religious values.

In terms of prayer times, all the informants demonstrated adaptation to film schedules that conflicted with prayer times. They chose to delay their prayers until the last moment, but never abandoned them entirely. As stated by Informant C, *“I often catch up on my prayer after watching and head straight to the mosque.”* This attitude shows how Muslim students prioritize worship, even if it means negotiating with their leisure time.

Discussion

Leisure Time and Entertainment

The choice of graduate students at the State Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga, concentrating in Halal Industry and Business Studies, to seek entertainment at a certified halal cinema is intriguing to examine, as there is a connection between this choice of entertainment and their religious identity and social status. The concept of leisure and entertainment in this context can be further analyzed by considering the theory put forward by Thorstein Veblen in his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. He argued that entertainment can serve as a symbol of social class status (Veblen and Mills 2017). In a fragmented society, the ability to “waste time” intentionally, such as by visiting luxurious entertainment venues, becomes a symbol of status and wealth, signaling that an individual has the time and money to participate in such activities.

For Muslims, the concept of leisure time considered as “waste” can be seen as contrary to Islamic values, which emphasize simplicity and avoiding excess. According to Martin and Mason, although the Qur'an and Hadith generally present a positive view of entertainment and recreation, the idea of “waste” may conflict with Islamic values related to simplicity (Martin and Mason 2004). Entertainment and recreation are permitted as long as they do not violate the values of simplicity, morality, and usefulness. Conflict arises when leisure activities are seen as wasteful and do not contribute positively to the purpose of a Muslim's life. In the modern context, leisure time deemed “excessive” is often criticized as a form of hedonism that can distract individuals from their spiritual and social responsibilities (Munawaroh 2022).

Muslim students in Indonesia, particularly those studying halal industry studies,

view entertainment not only as a form of relaxation but also as an expression of their identity and social status. The presence of Cinépolis, a halal-certified cinema near the UIN Sunan Kalijaga campus, highlights a leisure market that caters to the spiritual needs of students (Kholida and Rodiah 2023). This choice is not only based on comfort or personal preference but is also influenced by a strong religious understanding and awareness of the halal concept. This phenomenon aligns with the argument made by Deeb and Harb, who assert that in some Muslim communities, there is tolerance towards consumption and entertainment, as long as it does not lead to excessive wastefulness or violate religious values (Deeb and Harb 2013).

Informant C, when faced with the choice between visiting a halal-certified cinema or one that is not, prefers the halal-certified one. He argues that although the viewing experience is the same as any other cinema, at least the halal-certified cinema guarantees halal food. With his awareness of halal, he avoids anything that might raise concerns about its permissibility. A similar sentiment is expressed by Informant A; however, in addition to the halal food aspect in the cinema, he also considers how the bathroom facilities in the cinema are less accommodating for Muslims (Hilma Regita Syaharani and Farih Fahmi 2024). According to him, the term halal associated with cinemas should not only refer to the food but also facilitate the religious practices of Muslims, ensuring that the environment supports their ability to perform their worship comfortably.

Unlike informant D, despite studying at Al-Azhar University in Cairo during his undergraduate years, he views Cinépolis more as a cinema that often offers discounts during certain occasions. Based on the accounts of informants C, A, and B, he is also known to share information about ticket discounts in their class group chats. According to him, the halal aspect is indeed important, but he does not want to be overly skeptical about halal. In the interview, he also expressed his agreement with the regulations at MUIS (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura). His visit to MUIS in August 2024 significantly influenced his perspective on halal, as he found the MUIS regulations to be simple, with many of their policies based on positive assumptions (Hasyim 2022).

Informant B is a student from Aceh. During the interview, he mentioned that he often spends his leisure time visiting Cinépolis, primarily at the invitation of informant A. Although his visits to Cinépolis are motivated by his friend's invitation, he is quite conscious of the importance of halal, particularly when it comes to considering the halal status of the food available at the cinema. There is something interesting that emerged during our interview with informants A and B, which will be elaborated in the next

chapter.

Negotiation and Flexible Choices

A. Type of Film

Informants A and B are both students from Aceh. A is almost always up to date with the movie schedules at Cinépolis and often visits the cinema to spend his leisure time. According to him, spending leisure time on entertainment is not at all a waste; for him, a Muslim truly needs entertainment as a balance in life, especially for a young Muslim. “Youth only comes once, it’s a waste not to enjoy life, there are many things we need to explore,” he added. Meanwhile, B often receives invitations from informant A to watch movies at Cinépolis. One interesting aspect that emerged when both were interviewed about the types of films shown is that, despite their strong religious understanding, both of them come from Aceh, a place known for its very conservative Islamic culture (Sihidi, Roziqin, and Suhermanto 2020). Informant A expressed that a Muslim's intention significantly influences their choices. No matter what type of movie is shown at the cinema, it could have sinful implications if the intention of going to the cinema is already impure. However, if the intention of going to the cinema is simply for entertainment, and one happens to see inappropriate scenes, such as adult content, it does not necessarily lead to sin (Busro 2022). A indeed appears to be more tolerant toward the types of films offered, but he admitted that he always diverts his attention and focus whenever adult scenes appear in front of him.

Informant B, with his strong religious knowledge, demonstrates a more flexible attitude towards religious rules. He explained some of the opinions of scholars he remembers from his time at the pesantren, which he believes justify his viewing of adult scenes in films, even if unintentionally. He quoted the opinion of Abū Bakr ‘Uthmān bin Muḥammad Shattā from the book **Ḥāshiyat I‘ānatu al-Ṭālibīn**, saying, “I forgot the exact wording, but what I remember is that he did not prohibit seeing the aurat reflected in a mirror or water.”

Unlike informants C and D, both of whom view adult scenes in movies as a consequence of the environment in the cinema, they do not see it as a major sin. While both believe that watching adult scenes, whether directly or through the cinema screen, is a sin, they regard it as a small sin, which is strongly influenced by one's desires. According to informant D, who based his opinion on his religious understanding during his time at Al-Azhar University, there are different opinions among scholars, one of which

emphasizes the role of desire (nafsu) in determining the severity of the sin (Kurniawan 2018). According to informant D, if the adult scenes do not provoke desire (nafsu), then for him, the scene is just part of the film and does not carry any implications of sin. He believes that the impact of watching such scenes depends on the viewer's internal reaction, particularly whether the scene awakens or triggers desires. If it does not lead to any immoral thoughts or actions, he considers it as merely a scene within the movie, not something that would contribute to sin.

B. Interaction Between Genders

Cinemas are often viewed by young people as places to invite their partners to enjoy entertainment together. Romantic film genres and the dark ambiance of the cinema seem to represent the intimate feelings between the two. In Islamic teachings, it is not permissible for individuals to engage in excessive relationships with the opposite sex before marriage (Fatmawati 2021). Although none of the informants stated that they went to Cinépolis with a special someone, several times they went to Cinépolis with classmates of the opposite sex, and according to them, the interactions were merely conversations typical of friends. However, for Informants A and B, the phenomenon of excessive interactions between the opposite sex in the cinema made them feel uncomfortable. Both of them expressed a desire to respond to what they observed by giving verbal admonitions. Their desire to do so was based on the religious teachings they had learned, and they referred to a Hadith regarding the obligation of a Muslim to respond to wrongdoing in three ways: with their hands or actions, if not possible with words, and if unable, then at least by disapproving in their hearts (Abu Daud Sulaiman ibn al-Asy'as al-Sijistani al-Azdi 1994).

In contrast to Informants C and D, both of whom do not view excessive interactions between the opposite sex as something wrong in Islam, for them, such interactions are a personal right as long as they do not harm others. While both of them do wish to respond, their response is limited to disapproving in their hearts, as mentioned in the Hadith they referred to earlier.

In Islam, interactions between the opposite sex are indeed regulated quite strictly. However, there are certain interactions that trigger debates, such as shaking hands with the opposite sex. There are differing opinions on this matter, with some scholars prohibiting it and others permitting it (kurniawan 2018). Young people, who tend to have a flexible character, often negotiate religious values at these debated points. In addition to religious values, shaking hands also carries social values. Young people often face

situations that require them to negotiate religious values and choose social values that have legal backing in religion, even though that backing may be weak.

C. Prayer Times

The five daily prayers in Islam are obligatory acts of worship. Islam has specified when a Muslim must perform these prayers. There are consequences if a Muslim prays outside the designated times, as outlined in the primary sources of Islam the Quranic verses and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, which are recorded in thousands of narrations.

Films in cinemas are sometimes scheduled at times that overlap with prayer times. For instance, the animated movie *Moana*, on December 9, 2024, at Cinépolis, is set to start at 5:20 PM, and with its 100-minute runtime, it will likely extend past the Maghrib and Isha prayer times. The informants in this study do not tolerate missing prayer simply for entertainment. However, they negotiate praying on time by performing their prayers toward the end of the designated time period. This choice to delay prayer until the final time slot in Islam results in varying levels of worship quality. Performing prayers on time holds the highest merit, especially when done in congregation. In contrast, performing prayers toward the end of the allotted time is categorized as a less ideal practice in Islam (Hadrawi 2014).

Informants D and C mentioned that on several occasions, they had to walk quickly to the prayer location after watching a movie in order to catch the prayer time before it ended. "I've had to rush to perform the prayer just before it was about to end after watching a film, and I ended up performing two prayers with just one wudu (ablution)," they explained with a laugh. When it comes to the punctuality of prayer, all informants demonstrated their flexibility, opting to enjoy entertainment while still managing to perform their prayers, even if it meant doing so at the very end of the prayer time.

Identity and Halal Entertainment

Identity is part of a social construct that is continuously shaped by various factors, including religion, culture, and social environment. In the context of Muslim students choosing the halal-certified Cinépolis cinema, their religious identity manifests through concrete actions that reflect their religious values. The decision to consume halal entertainment is not merely about individual preference but also about the effort to display and strengthen their identity as devout Muslims.

According to Stuart Hall, as mentioned in the introduction, identity is not something

fixed; rather, it is a dynamic and ever-evolving process of "becoming," shaped by social interactions and life experiences (Weems 2021). In this context, Muslim students face a negotiation between religious values and modern lifestyles. Halal cinemas become a space of compromise, where they can enjoy entertainment without feeling conflicted with their religious principles.

Lara Deeb and Mona Harb, in **Leisurely Islam**, highlight how the Muslim community in Beirut blends piety with recreational activities, creating a form of entertainment that remains within the boundaries of Islamic values. This integration of faith and leisure allows for the enjoyment of leisure activities while maintaining adherence to religious principles, a dynamic that mirrors the experiences of Muslim students in halal cinemas, where entertainment is experienced without compromising religious beliefs (Deeb and Harb 2013). This phenomenon aligns with the reality of Muslim students attending halal cinemas, where they strive to maintain piety while responding to the demands of modern entertainment. By choosing halal-certified spaces, they navigate the balance between religious observance and the desire for leisure, creating a space where both can coexist without compromising their values.

On the other hand, religious identity is often marked by ambivalence and inconsistency, as concluded by Samuli Schielke, as discussed in the introduction. The students who choose halal cinemas may not entirely abandon conventional entertainment, but they are attempting to create a space where religious awareness remains intact. This choice demonstrates how religious identity is not always monolithic, but involves a flexible negotiation.

Thus, the identity of Muslim students, reflected in their choice of halal entertainment, mirrors the complexity of the relationship between religion, culture, and modernity. The halal cinema becomes a medium through which they can negotiate various aspects of their identity, integrating traditional values with modern realities. This provides valuable insight into how identity continues to evolve and adapt within the dynamic context of social change.

CONCLUSION

This research provides new insights into the role of halal entertainment in shaping the religious identity of Muslim students in the modern era. Entertainment, such as cinemas and other activities, for Muslim youth, particularly students, often becomes a

point where tradition and modernity intersect. As Samuli Schielke has pointed out, the lives of Muslim youth are more complex than simply the motivation to become more pious (Schielke 2009b). This phenomenon can be seen in the way they spend their leisure time, which is not only driven by a search for spirituality but also by other desires, such as the desire to enjoy life by visiting entertainment venues like Cinépolis halal cinemas. This creates a blurred line between piety and pleasure, offering a broader reflection on how Muslim youth navigate the moral demands of religion alongside the freedom of expression in their lifestyle.

The concept of entertainment in Islam cannot be assessed in a singular and normative way, as there are various interpretations regarding the use of leisure time. As mentioned in the introduction, there are viewpoints that allow for light entertainment, such as watching movies in cinemas, as part of life's balance, while other views regard it as a futile activity unless it provides spiritual or social benefits. In this context, it is important to consider the emerging debates around leisure time and how halal cinemas play a role in accommodating the entertainment needs of students without violating the moral boundaries set by religion.

On another aspect, the attention to halal entertainment also reflects a new phenomenon in the lives of Muslim students, namely a shift in the paradigm from secular entertainment to entertainment that is more controlled and aligned with religious norms. This is in line with the opinion expressed by Lara Deeb and Mona Harb, who state that local religious authorities are more likely to organize entertainment rather than restrict it (Deeb and Harb 2013). Thus, the entertainment choices made by students in halal industry and business studies not only reflect personal preferences but also indicate the significant influence of social and religious awareness in shaping their lifestyle. By visiting Cinépolis halal cinema as a form of entertainment, they are not merely negotiating a space for entertainment that aligns with religious guidelines but also showcasing their identity as individuals striving to maintain a balance between religious demands and aspects of modernity.

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