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REIFICATION OF DAKWAH MEANING THROUGH MEDIA AMONG PRACTITIONERS OF THE "AZAB" SUB-GENRE RELIGIOUS SOAP OPERA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how behind-the-scenes practitioners of the "azab" (divine punishment) sub-genre religious television dramas perceive da'wah (Islamic proselytizing) through television media and the role of religious preachers within it, viewed through the lens of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. For Honneth, recognition is a fundamental human need in the process of identity and integrity formation. Conversely, misrecognition can lead to social pathologies. This misrecognition is what Lukács termed reification—the objectification of abstract values. Complex values are simplified and treated merely as tools or commodities for profit. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and in-depth interviews with those involved in the production of these dramas, the research found that while the shows are considered an effective means of da'wah and the media provides a platform for it, this recognition is superficial. Within this dynamic, spiritual values are reified into profit-oriented messages. The role of the preachers in the production serves only to provide religious legitimacy. At the same time, the content of the da'wah is subordinated to industrial interests, sacrificing the empowerment of spiritual messages.

1. INTRODUCTION

This research will explore the dynamics of meaning-making among the behind-the-scenes practitioners of the "azab" sub-genre of religious dramas, focusing on the use of media for *da'wah* (Islamic proselytizing) and the role of religious figures in production. This meaning-making will be examined through the lens of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition and its absence, or reification (Honneth, 2005; Honneth et al., 2008). This study holds significant importance, as the media serves as a battleground for the recognition of its workers and society at large (Maia, 2014). Typically, the representation of religious messages in media is analyzed through critical theory, aiming to expose the systematic commercialization and commodification of values for pure profit. By applying Honneth's theory of recognition, this study enables a deeper exploration of the moral foundations of this commercialization process.

As a background, we can observe the general landscape of religious television dramas in Indonesia. These television series (with an Islamic theme) are generally identified with *da'wah* activities through the media. Religious themes typically feature Islamic characters, scenes, terms, and phrases. The most prominent religious topic in Indonesian television series since around 2004 has been the

concept of "azab," often understood as divine retribution. This genre has become widespread and diverse, with themes such as sinners punished by God, patient believers who succeed, and repentant sinners. These themes are often legitimized through various signs, such as titles, story sources, and the appearance of religious figures at the beginning and end of the series (Nazaruddin, 2008).

Religious soap operas—refer to the understanding of genre as a way of categorizing films based on style and narrative—the "azab" sub-genre began to gain prominence around 2004 after *Rahasia Ilahi* filled the Ramadan slot of Televisi Pendidikan Indonesia (TPI). It garnered significant viewership and was emulated by other television stations (Nazaruddin, 2008, 2009). This program was reproduced under various titles. The individuals behind the scenes of these soap operas believe that the narratives within them not only exist in society and depict it through soap operas but also constitute a form of *dakwah* and learning.

Furthermore, the production of similar series between 2004 and 2007 resulted in hundreds of standalone episodes, such as *Rahasia Ilahi* (TPI), which accumulated high ratings, even in reruns (R. Suwardi, personal communication, 2022). During the same period, similar programs such as *Astaghfirullah, Kuasa Ilahi* (SCTV); *Istighfar, Hidayah* (TV Trans); *Pintu Hidayah, Hikmah* (RCTI); *Misteri Ilahi, Titipan Ilahi* (Indosiar); *Azab Dunia, Sakaratul Maut* (ANTV); and *Azab Ilahi* (Lativi) were also popular. More than 40 standalone series were categorized as mystic-religious during this period, distributed across seven television stations. Rating metrics indicate that religious series were popular and frequently ranked among the top ten programs with the highest ratings, with *Rahasia Ilahi* (first rank in 2005), *Takdir Ilahi* (third rank in 2005), and *Pintu Hidayah* (second rank in 2006) being notable examples (Nazaruddin, 2008).

Following a relative decline in the trend around 2018, a similar phenomenon emerged, sparking broader discussion due to the influence of social media, coinciding with the broadcast of *Zolim* (MNCTV) and *Azab* (Indosiar) on television. The series had reproduced a total of 194 titles by October 2018 (kumparanNEWS, 2018), comprising 131 *Azab FTV* titles (Indosiar) that aired since July 1, 2018, and 63 *Zolim* titles (MNCTV) that aired since August 13, 2018. Notably, both series were based on uploads from the two television stations on YouTube and vidio.com. Both series were publicly discussed, starting from the selection of titles such as "Pasangan Pengoplos BBM Mati Terbakar Bensin" (A Couple Who Squandered BBM Died Burning in a Car), "Perebut Suami Orang Mati Dengan Perut Membengkak Disengat Ribuan Tawon" (Husband Snatcher Died With a Swollen Stomach Stung by Thousands of Bees), "Keranda Jenazahnya Terkena Badai dan Terjebur ke Adukan Semen" (Her Coffin Was Hit by a Storm and Plunged into Cement Mixture), and various others. Subsequently, this soap opera genre continued to receive broad attention from audiences, as evidenced by its appearance at television award events (Hawari, 2018); By 2023, it was included in the curation list of the Indonesian Film Censorship Awards from the Film Censorship Board/FFI (Riandi, 2023).

From these foundational studies, the phenomenon is observably distinct in terms of the creative motifs behind the production and reproduction of television. This phenomenon can be understood as a form of creativity that conveys religious messages (Nasriah dkk., 2014), whereby religious soap opera broadcasts tend to commodify Islamic teachings and exploit sensationalist depictions often claimed to be "azab", at the end endanger faith or *akidah* (Hermawan, 2009), tend to distort religious values (Yusriah, 2013), are trapped in symbolic project commercialization that mimics film or serial successes in general (Rakhmani, 2014); and overexploit symbolic-Islamic symbols (Yasir, 2015). These religious soap operas often present irrational scenes and camera angles and are frequently narrated to viewers as reflections of allegedly actual realities, promoted as originating from true stories (Fitrianingrum & Suwarto, 2020; Mujiburrahman, 2015). Consequently, religion has been practically commodified at all levels, from production and distribution to exhibition and consumption, as seen in Indonesian television religious soap operas (Syahputra, 2016; Yusuf, 2016; Thadi, 2020).

Commodification, namely the process of transforming use value into exchange value (Mosco, 2009), occurs across various media fields. Through soap operas, noble cultural values or certain traditions become commodities, seemingly packaged attractively to generate profit. For example, when religious leaders and concerned families warn about the dangers of early marriage, television instead exploits this narrative because it is profitable (Rahayu & Syas, 2020). In this case, *dakwah* includes commodified strategic values. The production of religious television series is initiated and concluded with the goal of generating profit, where symbolic-religious capital is constructed and adapted to commercial interests. Alternatively, the representation of religion in media is solely the result of the economic motives of industry players.

Furthermore, research related to soap operas as a medium of *dakwah* generally relies on content analysis and semiotics to capture the messages offered (e.g., Alwi, 2018; Haqqi, 2024; Qudratullah et al., 2023), often focusing on normative arguments about how *da'i* or Muslim media practitioners should use or utilize television and religious programs within it (e.g., Andriyana & Adrian, 2024; Rafik, 2020).

Nevertheless, scholars generally agree that television, as a medium with significant influence today, cannot be viewed as a neutral tool or means of communication. Both theoretically and practically, television constitutes a form of mass media characterized by complex mechanisms and explanations in the conveyance and dissemination of information (Putranto & Syas, 2022).

I assume that the economic success of religious television series should not be examined solely within the context of market motivations and orientations. After all, the popularity of these religious dramas is a combination of key elements, including the series' inherent appeal, the support of the television industry, and the value assigned to them by the market. In their time, it was this combination of elements that made religious dramas of the "azab" sub-genre superior to other television programs (Selamun et al., 2019). Therefore, the phenomenon of such religious representation in media needs to be understood within a broad social ethical context, where behind-the-scenes production staff possess intrinsic understandings and values about the religion they bring into the production. These understandings and values then conflict with industrial interests, as the media is an arena of struggle (Maia, 2014).

To discuss this phenomenon, the study employs Axel Honneth's concept of reification, also referred to as the theory of recognition (Honneth et al., 2008). The term "reification" was previously introduced by Georg Lukács (1976) in *History and Class Consciousness* (1971), where he reinterpreted Karl Marx's concept of alienation, showing that inter-subjective relationships had taken on the character of "things," thereby creating a "phantom objectivity" for social actors (Fuchs, 2021). Lukács argued that, in Marx, the alienation of humans from themselves and their environment stems from a change in the essence of human relationships. This initially abstract essence must always be quantifiable, with clear profits and losses. Here, reification is viewed as a process in which the elite class separates individuals and society from their essence (Fuchs, 2016). The abstract nature of human relationships is often objectified, viewed solely as an objective-rational entity. Human souls, consciousness, abilities, social relations, and even one's experience of their history, nature, and environment are all reduced to objects or things. The concept of reification seeks to explain, describe, and critique various forms and processes of dehumanization in modern capitalist societies (Kavoulakos, 2019; Vandenberghe, 2015).

Axel Honneth offers an interpretation and development of the concept of reification that enables scholars to apply it within a broader scope and an analysis fully rooted in interpersonal relationships. By first outlining philosophical thought on human beings and human relationships from Heidegger and Dewey to developmental psychologists like George Herbert Mead, Honneth illustrates that reification is a form of misrecognition (Honneth et al., 2008). In contrast, recognition is defined as a fundamental human need for the formation of identity and the social affirmation of integrity.

Honneth's concept of recognition is based on the assumption that humans, as psychological beings, seek to build and maintain their self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as their overall happiness, and will suffer if these are neglected or disregarded. Based on his formulation drawing from Hegel and George Herbert Mead, Honneth divides recognition into three forms: love, rights, and solidarity. Honneth argues that the emotional support provided by family and friends, cognitive respect through legal rights, and social esteem from a solid community of values are three modes of recognition that are basic needs and can save people from social pathologies (Herzog, 2020; Honneth et al., 2008).

For Honneth, love is the primary level of recognition found in relationships with family, friends, partners, and others. From this, all physical and emotional needs such as security, confidence in the future, and self-esteem are met, forming the foundation for relationships created outside of it. The second level of recognition is moral respect. At the ethical and legal level, individuals become aware of their rights and are respected by others in society. Just as with expectations of justice, self-respect, dignity, and morality are developed through this process. The third level is recognition concerning solidarity, loyalty, and esteem. This need can be fulfilled when a person feels that their abilities and contributions to society are acknowledged and valued (Andersson & Punzi, 2024; Herzog, 2020). Therefore, in Honneth's view, reification occurs when the recognition of oneself, others, and the environment is forgotten due to various reasons or situations.

Recent research related to Honneth's theory of recognition generally addresses the existential human need for recognition in diverse contexts. For instance, studies have explored the importance of recognition and respect in the care of migrants (Andersson & Punzi, 2024);), the ambivalence of recognition for transgender groups in socio-political contexts (Wong, 2024), and issues concerning self-esteem and recognition related to work and education (Corbin & Flenady, 2024; Hancock, 2024; Mao & Xue, 2022; O'Neill, 2023; Oshodi, 2023; Välimäki & Husu, 2023). Belakangan, upaya integrasi kerangka teori Honneth ke dalam studi media juga gencar dilakukan. More recently, there have been intensive efforts to integrate Honneth's theoretical framework into media studies. In *Recognition and Ideology: Assessing Justice and Injustice in the Case of Child Domestic Labor*, Maia and Cal (2014: 73) discuss Honneth's concept of "ideological forms of recognition" using the prime example of media coverage of child domestic labor (CDL). They argue that while child workers affirm media recognition, it ultimately serves to reinforce exploitative economic interests rather than promoting positive empowerment.

In the context of social media, Campanella (2024) describes media recognition as "weak" because it does not generate a lasting sense of freedom or self-esteem. Social media functions as a channel for daily personal interactions, but at the same time, everything published is subject to evaluation and judgment through features like "like" and "share" buttons. Jansson (2015) argues that

social media recognition is merely a simulation designed to serve the industrial and commercial logic that operates through algorithms (Campanella, 2024; Jansson, 2015).

Therefore, through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, this study will examine whether the recognition experienced by behind-the-scenes workers of the "azab" religious drama sub-genre regarding *da'wah* and the role of preachers in production can be considered authentic, genuine, and sincere, or whether it has undergone reification—the objectification of abstract values. Misrecognition or reification can occur when abstract spiritual meanings are forcibly reduced to mere legitimacy for the sake of profit.

2. METHOD

This research endeavors to capture and interpret the meaning-making of behind-the-scenes actors in religious soap operas, relating to media production practices and the concept of religious soap operas, through a phenomenological approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Husserl (1931) conceptualized phenomenology as a means to understand the context and meaning of an individual's or a group of people's lived experiences. Phenomenology subsequently evolved into a qualitative research methodology that provides an in-depth understanding of the meaning of human experiences across various fields and life contexts (Moustakas, 2009, Sarantakos, 2013, Zahavi, 2021). One compelling finding related to the practice of *da'wah* through a phenomenological approach, for instance, can be observed in research concerning the experiences of *da'i* in providing spiritual guidance to former female sex workers (PSK) in the city of Padang (Roem et al., 2020). Interviews and participant data analysis are based on the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014, Van Manen, 2014, Alase, 2017, Kahija, 2017). Research data were obtained through interviews with subjects holding various roles, including television producers, directors, scriptwriters, and religious figures involved in the production of the ″azab″ sub-genre of religious soap operas. The following is a brief demographic description of the participants:

Table 1.
Participant Demographics

Name/Age	Profession	Education	Experience
MQM (55)	Preacher/Leader of Pesantren/Actor	Bachelor's/ S1	Religious consultant and actor in religious dramas since 2004
IS (60)	Scriptwriter, Journalist	Bachelor's/ S1	Religious drama scriptwriter since 2005
SWN (48)	Scriptwriter, Director, Lecturer	Bachelor's/ S1	Scriptwriter for mystery, religious, and horror films and TV dramas
AK (47)	Director	Bachelor's/ S1	Director of "azab," mystical, and other genre religious dramas
HB (53)	Director	Bachelor's/ S1	Director of religious and other genre dramas
RSI (60)	Producer	Bachelor's/ D3	Religious consultant and actor in religious dramas since 2004

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following the data processing stage, which employed the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method, the data analysis yielded one superordinate theme and three sub-themes, as depicted in the table below.

Table 2.
Superordinate Theme and Resulting Sub-themes

Superordinate-theme	Sub-theme
The Meaning of Da'wah Through	Soap Operas as a Medium of Da'wah

Media and the Role of Soap Operas as a Religious Medium	
	Compromise with Industry Demands
	Religious Figures Amidst Production

1. Soap Operas as a Medium of Dakwah

For participants uncovering the meaning of dakwah through the "azab" sub-genre of religious soap opera, this phenomenon indicates a shift in the practice of dakwah. Previously, dakwah referred to the way and means of disseminating Islamic teachings by religious figures. However, with the advancement of the times, soap operas have become one of the chosen arts for conveying dakwah. The dual function of soap operas in this research is to explore "azab" themes while also being a product enjoyed by the wider community.

From the experiences of those directly involved in producing religious soap operas, such as MQM, religious figures, or ustaz, the majority believe that soap operas are an effective medium for preaching. This is evident from the limited involvement of religious figures. The general recommendation is that their participation should serve only as a form of legitimacy, specifically for spiritual leaders who convey general messages.

"...Because, in essence, soap operas are a medium of Islamic dakwah. Even though they are aired on television, the content remains accountable. *Rahasia Ilahi* had high ratings. However, our primary goal is Islamic da'wah. How do we not only entertain but also provide guidance? Many viewers are moved inwardly, even though they are just entertained (MQM)."

MQM recounted how he, the late KH Arifin Ilham, and several ustaz were also involved in *Rahasia Ilahi* (2004). According to KH Arifin Ilham, the appeal of *da'wah* through soap operas is felt through various layers of acceptance from a broad audience. For the behind-the-scenes workers of the "azab" sub-genre of religious soap operas, their arguments are primarily with producers, directors, and scriptwriters. Soap operas are deemed effective as a medium of dakwah. Therefore, besides being the primary motivation, religious involvement in production also legitimizes the spiritual awareness conveyed.

To make media a medium of dakwah, being within the industrial realm ideally provides religious insight. However, this is not without its challenges. The presence of religious figures, such as Ustaz and scriptwriters, for example, sometimes creates awkwardness—they feel embarrassed if their group is deemed lacking in scholarly depth and feel like ordinary people who are merely showcasing appealing dakwah. Having a certain level of practice and respecting existing customs or norms within the dakwah in production and soap opera settings makes them feel comfortable or at home, with the desire to seek not only profit. Participants also hope that their presence can provide a more enriching learning experience and enhance the spiritual values of the production process.

In this context, the imagination of appreciation and the deepening of religious knowledge as a form of identity expression, as well as the potential for the commodification of religious media, can continuously emerge from biases and potential for commodification that are not always clearly visible.

2. Compromise with Industry Demands

In the context of industry demands, at least two interpretations were suggested by the behind-the-scenes actors of the "azab" sub-genre of religious soap operas. First, their *da'wah* accommodates the audience's reception of spiritual content. Thus, the concept of "azab," as represented in the soap opera, is packaged according to the beliefs of the viewing community, and visualization is deemed appropriate. Second, dramatic performances in the soap opera can be accepted and attract a large audience.

Participants revealed that high ratings are not only beneficial for the television business. However, there is an adjustment between the religious message conveyed by the soap opera and the audience's aspirations in terms of entertainment. Participants, especially directors, scriptwriters, and producers, often find it challenging to obtain strict approval for religious content in the "azab" sub-genre. According to them, viewers do not want to be bothered by stories that are too preachy or less entertaining. Therefore, viewers' tendency to be entertained by visualizations deemed excessive often becomes a dilemma for producers.

For MQM, his special task as someone involved in dakwah is to "humanize" scenes that do not follow religious law. Participants stated, "If there is a rating problem, I understand, Bang. If the producer and director make overly vulgar and excessive scenes, that is. If it does not follow *fiqh*, we remain silent. It is tough. As far as I remember, initially, there was no problem. But its appeal is still tolerable. As far as I know, Bang. If there is a complicated problem, but they believe their way is right, the original intent of the dakwah is lost."

When using the term "excessive," MQM's intention is a form of vulgar visual construct with intimate practices between men and women. Despite having sufficient knowledge of religious teachings that he acquired during his education at KH Arifin Ilham's *majlis*, MQM—as a participant—was often unable to avoid it.

Similarly, RSI participants are religious figures with strong religious backgrounds. IM conveyed the same conviction. Scriptwriter SWN mentioned that viewers' psychology is already saturated with dramatic soap operas, so religious soap operas must be packaged attractively. If ratings are already high, it is challenging to resist public demand.

For participants in somewhat different positions, who may feel awkward or even blame themselves for being involved in scenes deemed excessive, the story in religious soap operas is understood to be a real story, but packaged in a way that incorporates aspects of strangeness to serve as eye-catchers.

3. Religious Figures Amidst Production

The presence of ustaz in the "azab" sub-genre of religious soap opera is as advisors, or several of them are asked or involved by the soap opera actors who participate in the production process. In the soap opera, religious figures are often portrayed as consultants (even if not formally designated as such), the opening and closing narrators of the story, and even become actors with roles as themselves, such as being an ustaz.

In the case of *Rahasia Ilahi* (2004), MQM acknowledged that the presence of an *ustaz* or religious figure in the production originated from the producer of PT. Kep Media, Didi Ardyansyah. There is a desire to involve television and religious figures, especially Arifin Ilham. During that period, several religious figures produced religious soap operas; besides Arifin Ilham, notable figures included KH Musthofa Ya'kub, Wahfiudin, and Luthfiah Sungkar.

Through the descriptions provided by the participants, religious figures play three leading roles in religious soap operas: as consultants, content providers (delivering and concluding the story), and actors playing other characters. In direct production activities, religious figures are considered necessary, among other things, for correcting scenes or stories deemed not to follow religious values without being asked. Suggestions for using soap opera actors with close family relationships *(mahram)* for roles involving interactions between men and women are also given by religious figures close to producers and directors. On the other hand, religious figures are also referred to as "gurus" or temporarily

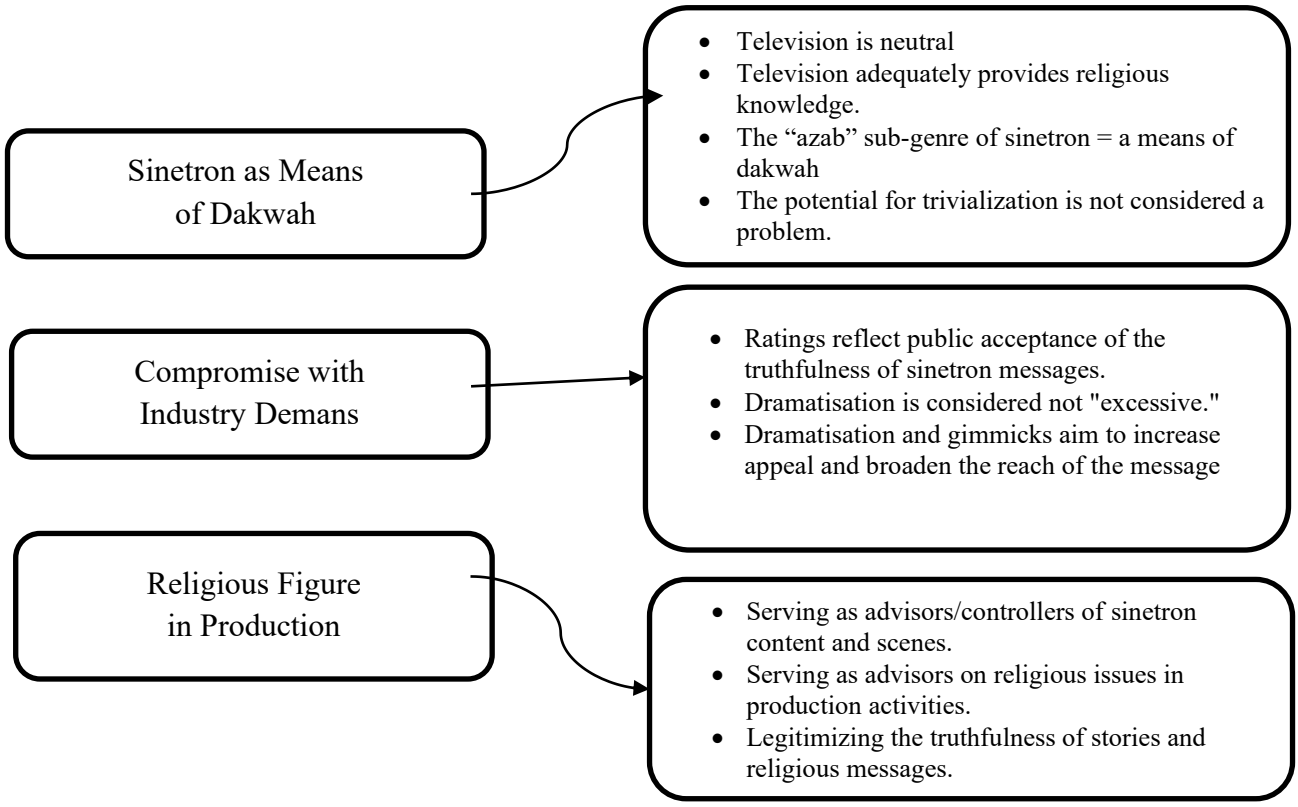
appointed as directors for crew members involved in shooting activities related to religious matters. Their presence at the shooting location makes the actors “more obedient in worship.”

There are three considerations for participants in playing the role: the presence of religious figures or ustaz. First, as controllers of the religious content to be displayed. Their presence is played from the beginning of the process and is anticipatory. Second, religious figures or ustaz are temporarily placed to address religious issues comprehensively, not only in the context of scenes. Third, the presence of religious figures or ustaz is sometimes a “burden” because it potentially alienates viewers, in terms of numbers, capacity, and the possibility of unresponsive responses is unpredictable. The presence of religious figures lends legitimacy to the “truthfulness” of the religious messages displayed.

4. Reification in the Meaning-Making of Dakwah in Media

The meaning-making of the research participants regarding the meaning of *da'wah* through media and the role of soap operas as a religious medium, as elaborated above, is interpreted in this research as a form of cognitive recognition for industry actors. These recognitions stem from each person’s individual experiences before entering the television industry, while simultaneously illustrating the influence of the industry’s working logic (see the diagram below).

Diagram Participants' Interpretation of the Meaning of Da'wah Through Media and the Influence of Television Industry Logic



The initial framework of the model, resulting from the analysis, aims to illustrate the relationship between media and the meaning-making of behind-the-scenes actors in the “azab” sub-genre of religious soap operas, which is functionally aligned with the messages of spiritual teachings. As a medium or instrument, the media are considered neutral. For tele-evangelists and preachers using it to convey religious advice and assess the world of information technology as inherently neutral, the media does

not carry the identity of a particular culture. Conversely, within essentialist circles, media is intrinsically believed to possess the identity and history of a specific culture, independent from an interactive perspective where media and religion are interactive and inseparable (Hosseini, 2008).

According to Hosseini, essentialists like Neil Postman believe that the media carries the essence of content. The fundamental element of media is spiritual and supernatural sanctity, while television—fundamentally—is worldly. Consequently, messages aimed at building spirituality, for instance, cannot be represented by television. Meanwhile, in the interactive approach, Stewart Hoover and colleagues depict media as a cultural phenomenon reduced to individual or private experiences. Religion is often limited to events occurring in sacred spaces, rather than being an integral part of culture; thus, religion and culture should not be separated. Religious messages gain meaning within the context of human existence and should be considered from that perspective (Hoover & Lundby, 1997). Hoover, when discussing the role of media in preparing the groundwork for religious rituals, believes that media carry and promote the reintegration of religious meaning (Hosseini, 2008; Hoover, 2002; Hoover & Lundby, 1997).

Given the belief that soap operas are a neutral medium and a strategic tool for conveying religious messages, participants consider it appropriate for religious figures to be involved in them. The view that belittles the existence of soap operas has surpassed the debate that soap operas are truly a quiet means of *da'wah*. Many scholars believe that soap operas are better avoided because they have more detrimental effects (see, for example, https://www.rumahfiqih.com/konsultasi/1750).

In the second part, a general picture emerges that the majority of the public is indeed sympathetic and supports religious-themed broadcasts, such as religious lectures, recitations, and other similar content. Still, they do not necessarily accept broadcasts deemed contradictory to religious teachings (Mujiburrahman, 2015). The Indonesian television industry capitalizes on this situation for economic gain by employing a strategy of religious commodification through broadcasts that are favored by the Indonesian public.

The success of religious commodification in the “azab” sub-genre of religious soap opera has long been indicated by academic research, as our literature review has shown in the introduction. Consequently, these programs or religious soap operas appear more as forms of Islamic symbolic exploitation and the practice of commodifying religious values with a counterproductive impact. Instead of providing a space for enlightening *da'wah*, they tend to demonstrate the potential for weakening the viewers’ faith.

Compromise towards public demands, which tends to prioritise sensation and horror to achieve dramatic effect, appears more dominant than the orientation towards rational religious teachings. Public enthusiasm is often rigidly interpreted as a form of legitimacy for the truthfulness of religious messages in soap operas.

Meanwhile, in the third part, there is a picture regarding participants’ experiences in interpreting the presence of religious figures or *ustaz* in the production. Religious figures serve as social capital, being accepted or even idealized as references in religious practices. Their presence is to maintain morals and be a guide for preachers or the *dakwah*. Several terms refer to figures considered authoritative in religious matters, such as *ulama*, *kyai*, and *ustaz*. A figure with a good understanding of religious teachings, social issues, and community problems is typically referred to as an *ulama* (Zulkifli, 2013).

Meanwhile, *kyai* is often addressed to community leaders who generally possess mastery of religious knowledge and can guide the community in matters of religion. A *Kyai* is also equivalent to the leader or manager of educational institutions, such as Islamic boarding schools (*pondok pesantren*).

At the same time, a *ustaz* refers to a figure or individual who provides daily religious lessons or knowledge (Wahid, 2012).

In the industrial world, *ustaz* are sometimes assessed as figures who hinder rather than help. The "strict" understanding of religious teachings can harm and disadvantage the television industry (Herniti, 2013). This research indicates that religious figures involved in producing the "azab" sub-genre of religious soap operas generally have a relatively low level of education and religious knowledge. They are often engaged as a routine formality to meet the production's religious elements.

The **meaning-making** of behind-the-scenes actors in the "*azab*" sub-genre religious soap opera results from individual struggles intensified through interaction with the television industry. Because they perceive television as providing a space for dakwah and religious scholars or figures are involved in it, they feel—in Ikäheimo's terms—they gain a space for vertical and horizontal recognition. According to Ikäheimo, these two forms of recognition are helpful in the context of religion, and their foundation lies in Honneth's three dimensions of recognition: love, respect, and appreciation. Vertical recognition involves a hierarchy, where an individual recognizes something higher, such as norms, institutions, or a higher power, like God. The subject in this hierarchical recognition is in a lower position.

Meanwhile, horizontal recognition refers to relationships between individuals of equal standing. This recognition is reciprocal and mutually respectful (Kahlos et al., 2019). Thus, the space for *da'wah* on television constitutes a worship space wherein its practitioners enter a relationship with God.

The problem is that when we link these three phenomena, television, as a neutral medium or tool, occupies the dominant position in the complex interplay between television institutions and commercial interests. Second, the intervention of industry instruments such as audience surveys (rating data), dramatization, and gimmicks based on market orientation has presented religious figures as merely fulfilling the function of legitimizing the broadcast. Third, the presence of religious figures or preachers is primarily involved in meeting the demands of the storyline rather than the essence of the *dakwah* itself.

According to Axel Honneth, when a subject is in a condition of forgetting or being forgotten in their recognition, they are experiencing reification. This is because he divides reification into three forms: self-reification, the reification of others, and the reification of the environment. Furthermore, the scope of recognition that enables humans to remain whole and happy consists of love, respect, and appreciation (Fuchs, 2016; Herzog, 2020; Honneth et al., 2008; Lazzeri, 2011).

The identity of a *da'i* is a recognition derived from the experience of studying religion and the journey of educating the community. This socio-religious role is generally based on the direct interpretation of God's commands through holy scripture and the teachings of the Prophet. Dakwah encompasses a variety of activities involving the systematic and continuous conveyance of messages and the provision of exemplary conduct to transform conditions for the better through divine guidance and teachings. (Ahmad, 1986; Anshari, 1991; Arifin, 1977). *Dakwah* encompasses various aspects of the Islamic perspective and is sourced from verses of the Qur'an, Hadith, the opinions of companions, the consensus of scholars, scientific findings, and the experiences of preachers, literary works, and artistic creations (Aziz, 2004; Ismail & Hotman, 2013; Munir & Ilaihi, 2015; Suparta & Hefni, 2015).

The presence of religious figures in the production of religious soap operas initially aimed to convey religious messages through the media. However, this involvement is often ill-defined and primarily situated within the context of *dakwah* as a blurred boundary between religious teachings and production dynamics. Researchers observe them as part of the artistic workforce in the industry with a working logic that differs from the activities of *dakwah* outside of media.

Therefore, from Honneth's perspective, practitioners of the "azab" sub-genre religious soap opera seem unaware of experiencing reification or the forgetting of recognition of themselves, namely the *da'i* who believes that someone cannot possibly interpret the meaning of *dakwah* in a commercially oriented media. The forgetting of recognition of others occurs in the horizontal interaction between fellow subjects who determine the direction of television broadcasts based on the surrounding environment that accommodates and justifies audience animo in the form of ratings as acceptance and legitimacy of the truth of broadcast content. Consequently, throughout its existence, the "azab" sub-genre of religious soap operas is assessed as problematic, especially in understanding the concept of *"azab."*

This concept of "azab" is not constructed based on the process of contemplation and religious understanding. In everyday language, the word "azab" only tends to mean "retribution" or "punishment" (directly from God or indirectly). Thus, with the many terms that have lost their original meaning, "azab" has become a topic strategically visualized as a medium for *dakwah* and entertainment. Ironically, this concept is not fully comprehended.

The concept of "azab" in practice is no longer fully an exegesis of religious teachings or the messages of the holy book, and the reference sources are constantly debated, with the possibility of multiple interpretations, even misinterpretations. When it has become a singular truth, many believe that "azab" has strengthened existing anxieties.

Logically, as a product aimed at generating profit, religious messages that evoke religious reasoning are not given much consideration there. For example, a study noted that the quotation of Qur'anic verses in soap operas often appears with a meaning adapted to the story's context rather than the verse's original context (Aji & Barokah, 2023). This occurs because soap operas, even those labeled as religious, are about efforts to gain the broadest possible attention from viewers or the audience. Subsequently, viewership surveys, public responses deemed positive, and the minimal substantive evaluation from broadcasting supervisors or religious stakeholders are believed to indicate acceptance of the validity of the religious messages.

Bringing the idea of "azab" which has undergone reification, as a *dakwah* theme into the television industry as an economic product, ultimately creates other reification conditions. Religious soap operas are a downstream product of multi-layered reification. Without addressing moral issues, Lukács's interpretation of reification is readily apparent in social interactions.

Meanwhile, Lukács asserts that the exchange of capitalist commodities is the sole cause of all forms of reification; Honneth is too fixated on or overlooks the necessary expansion of this concept to other aspects of social life. For example, he only narrates the existence of modern life as a realm of intersubjectivity, a form of the tendency towards recognition, and one that is intertwined with the conditions and paradoxes of reificatory consciousness.

In this economic understanding, the mediation of the "azab" concept in soap operas is a product of exchange value, dictated as a decision based on cognitive reification. What occurs is multi-layered reification or reification on top of reification. In the course of the commodification process, the antecedent of a person, for example, religious figures, feeling given space (depicted) by the television industry—as a commercial product—sooner or later becomes involved in the dynamics of relationships that make them entirely unaware of the primordial values of their *dakwah*. Honneth refers to this condition as a form of self-reification. The experiences of participants in this research indicate this.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This research concludes that the **meaning-making** of behind-the-scenes actors in the *"azab"* sub-genre of religious soap operas, regarding *dakwah* and da'i (preachers) in the media, is significantly influenced by industry logic and experiences bias. Referring to Honneth's concepts of reification and recognition, this meaning-making illustrates that practitioners seemingly gain recognition both vertically from God, with the conviction that what they do is not merely work but also worship *(ibadah)*. Horizontally, this recognition is received through the involvement of religious figures as preachers in the production. However, this recognition is unknowingly superficial and forgotten because, in practice, television as a commercial institution redefines the meaning and role of *dakwah* in line with industry logic. *Dakwah,* through soap operas, is a practice compromised by industry demands when preachers are hierarchically directly responsible to God and society.

Differing from prior research that analyzes the dynamics of religious soap opera production through the lens of media economics, this study introduces an alternative approach by employing Axel Honneth's concept of reification. This perspective enables an understanding of the process by which social aspects, including religion, are transformed into objects susceptible to manipulation, thereby eroding the intersubjective dimension and the intrinsic values inherent within religion itself. The concept of commodification, for instance, informs our understanding of the representation and underlying motives behind producing media programs that depict religious values. However, this concept alone is insufficient to elucidate the complexities of the social and psychological processes involved in reifying religion. Another limitation of this research pertains to the abstract and intricate nature of Honneth's theory of reification, which is rooted in the tradition of critical philosophy, thus posing challenges in its application to explain media production phenomena. The operationalization of Honneth's concept of reification in defining the cognitive experiences and interactions of media actors necessitates deeper reflection and exploration in future research. Consequently, researchers recommend more comprehensive, critical, and contextual studies with the potential to complement this theory with other relevant theoretical and methodological frameworks.

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