Generation Z's Reception of Bullying Representation in the Korean Drama "Pyramid Game": An Analysis from Stuart Hall's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The increasing popularity of Korean dramas as part of the Korean Wave has positioned them not only as entertainment media but also as a medium for representing various social issues, including bullying. This study aims to analyze Generation Z's reception of the representation of bullying in the Korean drama Pyramid Game using Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis. The research employed a qualitative approach with a reception analysis method involving six Generation Z informants aged 19–29 years who had watched all episodes of Pyramid Game. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model by classifying audience interpretations into dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional positions. The findings indicate that Generation Z generally interprets bullying in the "Pyramid Game" as a form of structural violence legitimized through social hierarchy rather than merely interpersonal aggression. Most informants occupied the dominant-hegemonic position by accepting the drama's primary message that bullying reflects systemic injustice. Several informants adopted a negotiated position by considering social risks before resisting bullying, while oppositional interpretations appeared only partially regarding bystander behavior and acts of retaliation. The study concludes that Pyramid Game functions not only as entertainment but also as a medium for social education that encourages critical awareness, empathy, and resistance toward systemic bullying among Generation Z.

Keywords: *Generation Z, bullying, reception analysis, Stuart Hall, Pyramid Game*

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of globalizing popular culture has expanded the flow of cross-border media consumption, including through the rise of the Korean Wave (Hallyu), which has made Korean dramas one of the most popular cultural products in various parts of the world. Not only offering entertainment, Korean dramas also present various social issues that are close to people's lives, such as social inequality, school violence, mental health, and bullying (Jin, 2016). The ability of

Korean dramas to represent social issues makes them not just a medium of entertainment, but also a space for the audience to construct meanings of social reality.

In mass communication studies, the audience is viewed as an active participant in interpreting media messages. The meaning constructed by the audience is not always identical to the meaning intended by the media creators because the process of meaning-making is influenced by the experiences, values, and social contexts of each individual (Balqis & Samatan, 2021). Therefore, a media text is polysemic and allows for the emergence of various interpretations of the same message.

Generation Z is a relevant group to study in this context because of their high intensity in accessing digital media. According to the report by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII, 2024), Generation Z is the largest group of internet users in Indonesia. Their characteristics as digital natives make them not only consumers of media but also active evaluators, discussants, and reproducers of various digital content they access (Twenge et al., 2018). Additionally, the We Are Social report (2023) shows that Generation Z is the group with the largest consumption of digital audiovisual content in Indonesia, thus having a greater opportunity to shape interpretations of various social representations presented by the media.

One of the Korean dramas that has garnered a lot of attention for addressing the issue of bullying is "Pyramid Game" (2024). The psychological thriller genre drama depicts bullying practices legitimized through a social ranking system in the school environment. Through an anonymous voting mechanism, students who receive the lowest rankings systematically become targets of physical, verbal, and psychological violence. The depiction shows that bullying is not only positioned as an individual act but also as a product of power relations and social systems that perpetuate injustice.

The phenomenon is interesting to study through the perspective of reception analysis because the meaning received by the audience regarding the representation of bullying can vary. According to Hall (1980), the audience is an active subject that engages in the process of decoding media messages based on their social experiences, ideologies, and values. Thus, the messages constructed by the media are not always dominantly accepted but can be negotiated or even rejected by the audience.

The reception theory developed by Stuart Hall explains that the audience is an active party in constructing meaning from media messages. Through the concept of *encoding-decoding,* Hall emphasizes that the meaning produced by media creators is not always identically received by the audience because the process of meaning-making is influenced by individual experiences, social backgrounds, culture, ideology, and life contexts. Therefore, media texts are polysemic, allowing for a variety of interpretations from the audience regarding the same message. This perspective then becomes one of the dominant approaches in contemporary media studies because it positions the audience as actors who have the ability to interpret, negotiate, and reconstruct meaning based on the social realities they experience (Hall, 1980; Batistuta et al., 2022; Yousman, 2022).

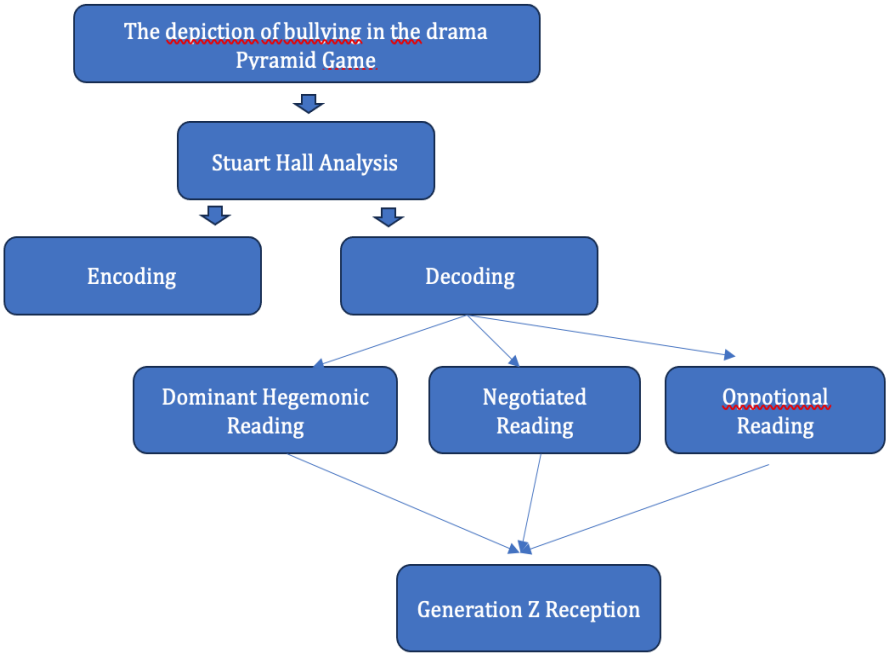
In reception studies, the analysis process is conducted by exploring how the audience understands, interprets, and responds to the representations presented by the media. Hall categorizes the results of these interpretations into three reception positions: (1) *dominant-hegemonic reading*, (2) *negotiated reading*, and (3) *oppositional reading.* These three positions indicate that the reception of media messages is not singular but is influenced by personal experiences, cultural values, social identities, and the environment in which the audience is situated. Several recent studies show that Stuart Hall's reception theory is still relevant for explaining how digital media users interpret various forms of representation in films, social media, and other digital platforms. Thus, this theory serves as a suitable foundation for analyzing how Generation Z interprets the representation of bullying in the drama *Pyramid Game*, considering this group has a high intensity of consuming digital media and brings diverse social experiences when interpreting a media message (Dittya & Rajagukguk, 2022; Wirawan & Munjid, 2022).

This approach becomes relevant to understand how Generation Z interprets the representation of bullying depicted in "Pyramid Game". Several previous studies have discussed the representation of bullying in Korean dramas and audience reception of dramas with similar

themes. Nurrekan (2024) examines the representation of bullying in the drama Pyramid Game, while Antasena (2024) studies audience reception of bullying in the drama The Glory using Stuart Hall's reception analysis. Putri's (2025) research also discusses teenagers' reception of peer conformity that encourages bullying in the Pyramid Game. However, studies specifically examining how Indonesia's Generation Z interprets the depiction of bullying in the drama Pyramid Game using Stuart Hall's reception analysis perspective are still limited. This condition indicates a research gap that needs to be filled.

Based on the description, this research aims to analyze Generation Z's reception of the depiction of bullying in the Korean drama "Pyramid Game" through the perspective of Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis. This study is expected to enrich communication studies, particularly audience studies and media reception analysis, while also providing an understanding of how Generation Z constructs meaning regarding the representation of bullying in popular media.

Picture Of Theoretical Framework



The theoretical framework is used to explain the position of theory in research and its implementation. That in analyzing the Korean drama "Pyramid Game," the process involves Stuart Hall's decoding-encoding.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with Stuart Hall's reception analysis method to understand Generation Z's interpretation of the depiction of bullying in the Korean drama Pyramid Game. The qualitative approach was chosen because it aims to understand the meanings constructed by individuals regarding a social phenomenon based on their experiences and contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An exploratory approach is used to deeply delve into the informants' interpretations of the bullying representation shown in the drama (Sugiyono, 2022).

The research subjects consist of six Generation Z informants aged 19–29 who have watched the drama Pyramid Game. The informants were selected using purposive sampling techniques with the criteria of having watched all episodes of the drama and being willing to provide information in accordance with the research objectives. The object of the research is the interpretation of Generation Z regarding the representation of bullying in the drama. The main instrument of the research is the researcher (human instrument) supported by semi-structured interview guidelines, observation sheets, and documentation. The interview guidelines were developed based on Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis concept to explore the informants'

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understanding of the drama's message, experiences related to bullying, and the process of reception and interpretation of media content.

Table 1. Informant Profile

No	Name	Age	Gender	K-Drama Watching Intensity	Experiences Related to Bullying
1	Fayme	20th	Female	Medium	Ever Watched
2	Nabila	23th	Female	High	Ever Watched
3	Fauzia	25th	Female	Medium	Ever Watched
4	Yasmin	23th	Female	High	Ever Watched
5	Agus	25th	Male	Low	Ever Watched
6	Rochma	23th	Female	Medium	Ever Watched

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations of scenes representing bullying in the drama Pyramid Game, and documentation in the form of interview transcripts, field notes, and supporting literature (Andalas & Setiawan, 2020). Data analysis uses the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which includes data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The interview results were first transcribed, then categorized based on the research themes and analyzed using Stuart Hall's three reception positions, namely dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional. The results of the analysis are then presented descriptively in the form of a narrative supported by interview quotes to explain the informants' interpretations of the representation of bullying. The validity of the data was ensured through triangulation techniques by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation, as well as peer debriefing with the supervising lecturer to enhance the credibility and accuracy of the research findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Representation of Bullying as a Social System in the Drama Pyramid Game

The research results show that the drama “Pyramid Game” represents bullying not as an individual act, but as a practice of violence legitimized by the social system. Through the mechanism of ranking students from category A to F, the drama builds a narrative that violence can become part of the social structure when it receives legitimacy from the group. The voting system that determines each student's position creates an unequal power relationship, so that participants with the lowest rankings become the target of collective bullying. These findings indicate that the playwrights constructed a preferred meaning in the form of a critique of the social system that normalizes injustice, rather than merely condemning the behavior of individual bullies.

All informants understand that the mechanism of the “Pyramid Game” is a form of legitimization of bullying practices. The informants explained that students in position F become victims not because of personal faults, but because of the system agreed upon collectively. Thus, bullying is understood as a consequence of the social structure that grants privileges to the dominant group while marginalizing those in the lowest positions.

The findings show that the representation of bullying in drama has shifted from the conventional form that focuses on the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim to a representation of the inequality in the social structure. Power is no longer understood as an individual attribute, but rather as a collective mechanism maintained through rules, consensus, and group compliance. This condition shows that violence can be produced and reproduced by a system that gains social legitimacy.

In the perspective of Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis, the encoding process is carried out through the arrangement of signs, narratives, characters, and conflicts that guide the audience toward a certain meaning (Hall, 1980). In the drama “Pyramid Game”, the dominant meaning is constructed through the depiction of a ranking system that makes bullying a part of school rules. As explained by Hall (1980), media never produces messages neutrally, but always carries a certain ideology that it wants to convey to the audience. This aligns with Morissan's (2013) view

that media is a space of representation that constructs reality based on certain interests and values.

Beside representing an unjust social system, the drama also depicts the school as a miniature society. Informants view the school setting in "Pyramid Game" as closely related to the experiences of teenage life, particularly concerning the presence of popular groups, seniority, exclusivity, and power relations among students. The similarity of these experiences makes the messages conveyed in the drama more easily accepted and understood by Generation Z. The contextual closeness strengthens the media's representational function. According to Hall (1980), representation not only reflects reality but also shapes the way the audience understands social reality. In this study, the school setting becomes a symbol of social space that illustrates how stratification, group dominance, and social pressure can develop into systematic bullying practices.

The research findings also indicate that the pyramid system is understood by informants as a metaphor for broader social inequality. The hierarchy from A to F is perceived as a representation of social stratification that determines access to power, social acceptance, and the treatment individuals receive. Thus, the system not only functions as a dramatic element but also as a critique of the mechanisms of reproducing injustice in social life.

These results reinforce previous research that states that the "Pyramid Game" not only presents conflicts among students but also raises issues of domination, power relations, and the normalization of violence within educational institutions. These findings also indicate that the representation of bullying in popular media can serve as a means of social reflection because it shows how injustice is maintained through collective participation, including by individuals who do not directly commit violence.

Another aspect that strengthens the social critique in the drama is the representation of characters. The character Baek Ha-rin is constructed as a figure with symbolic power through popularity, social status, and the ability to influence groups. In contrast, the character Sung Su-ji is represented as an agent of change who strives to fight the system through strategy, cooperation, and moral courage. The conflict between the two characters shows that the main conflict of the drama is not merely between the perpetrator and the victim, but between structural domination and the effort to build social justice.

Additionally, the research found that the culture of silence (*bystander)* is an important part of the representation of bullying. Informants view that students in middle positions choose not to act because they are worried about losing social status or becoming the next victim. This silence is understood as a survival strategy within a repressive system, thereby indirectly perpetuating the continuation of bullying.

These findings align with the concept of the bystander effect, which explains that individuals tend not to intervene in emergency situations due to social pressure, fear, or the belief that their actions will not change the situation (Kim & Lee, 2020). Thus, the drama Pyramid Game not only criticizes the behavior of the bullies but also shows how the passive attitude of society perpetuates injustice.

Overall, the research results show that the representation of bullying in the "Pyramid Game" is constructed through a hierarchical social system, imbalanced power relations, a culture of silence, and the courage to resist. The representation was successfully understood by the informants as a critique of systemic bullying practices, thereby demonstrating the success of the encoding process in conveying the dominant meaning desired by the media creators. These findings reinforce Stuart Hall's (1980) theory on the process of meaning production, while also demonstrating that media serves as a space for the formation of social awareness regarding issues of injustice and bullying.

2. The Meaning of Generation Z toward the Representation of Bullying in the Drama Pyramid Game

The research results show that Generation Z interprets the representation of bullying in the drama "Pyramid Game" not only as an act of violence among students but also as a reflection of injustice shaped by social structures. All informants understand that the A to F ranking system is a mechanism that legitimizes bullying practices through power relations and group dominance.

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Thus, bullying is perceived as a result of a system's construction that grants certain groups the authority to determine the social position of other individuals.

That interpretation shows that the audience is able to grasp the ideological message constructed by the playwright. In Stuart Hall's (1980) perspective, the meaning of media is not passively received, but formed through a decoding process based on the audience's experience, knowledge, and social context. Therefore, even though all informants consume the same media text, the process of meaning-making is still influenced by their respective social backgrounds. This emphasizes that the audience is an active audience that actively constructs meaning from media representations.

In addition to interpreting bullying as a social system, the informants also connect the content of the drama with the realities of today's youth. They believe that the practices of exclusion, seniority, discrimination, and group pressure depicted in “Pyramid Game” are similar to various bullying cases occurring in educational environments and widely reported thru mass media and social media. Some informants even relate the story in the drama to personal experiences or bullying cases they have encountered in Indonesia.

These findings indicate that media representation is closely related to the social reality of the audience. Hall (1980) explains that representation works through a process of meaning production that allows the audience to connect media texts with their life experiences. The proximity of the context makes the message conveyed by the drama easier to understand while also increasing the audience's emotional engagement with the issues raised. In this study, the informants do not view “Pyramid Game” merely as a work of fiction, but as a reflection of various forms of injustice still found in the educational environment.

The research also found that social pressure is an important aspect in the audience's process of meaning-making. The informants understand that the fear of losing social status and the threat of becoming the next victim are the main factors that make some characters choose to remain silent when witnessing bullying. Therefore, the bystander's attitude is perceived not only as a form of indifference but also as a survival strategy within a repressive system.

That interpretation shows that Generation Z has the ability to see the complexity of the bullying issue. The informants do not only address the main perpetrators but also understand that the silence of the surrounding environment contributes to the perpetuation of the bullying system. This finding aligns with the concept of the bystander effect, which is the tendency of individuals not to intervene when faced with a risky situation due to social pressure or concern about the consequences they might face (Kim & Lee, 2020). Thus, bullying is understood as a collective issue involving the perpetrator, the victim, and the social environment.

Another aspect that emerged in the research is the interpretation of the character Sung Su-ji as a symbol of courage and resistance against injustice. The informants view the main character not only as someone trying to escape the position of a victim but also as someone employing various strategies to stop the Pyramid Game system. The character is perceived as a representation of an individual with the moral courage to reject domination and invite others to build social change. From the perspective of media representation, the protagonist character serves as a symbol of resistance against oppressive structures. Hall (1980) explains that representation not only presents reality but also offers values, ideologies, and alternative actions to the audience. Therefore, Sung Su-ji is not merely understood as the main character in the storyline, but as a figure that represents the hope that an unjust social system can be changed through courage, solidarity, and collective action.

The research findings also show that most informants grasped the moral message that the playwright intended to convey. They believe that the “Pyramid Game” teaches the importance of empathy, the courage to reject bullying, and the social responsibility not to be a passive bystander when witnessing injustice. The informants believe that remaining silent will only strengthen the perpetrator's position and prolong the victim's suffering.

That interpretation shows that the drama “Pyramid Game” not only serves as a medium of entertainment but also as a medium of social education. According to Sobur, films have the ability to shape perspectives, values, and social awareness through the messages represented to the audience. In this study, the informants were able to grasp the moral dimensions contained in the drama while also connecting it to social responsibility in real life.

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Overall, the research results show that Generation Z interprets the representation of bullying in the Pyramid Game as a critique of the social system that perpetuates injustice, peer pressure, and a culture of silence. On the other hand, the drama is also interpreted as a call to build courage, empathy, and social awareness in addressing bullying practices. These findings reinforce Stuart Hall's reception theory (1980), which positions the audience as active subjects in constructing meaning based on their social experiences and life contexts. Thus, the meaning produced not only reflects the content of the media text but is also the result of the interaction between the message constructed by the media creator and the reality possessed by the audience.

3. The Reception Position of Generation Z toward the Representation of Bullying: A Synthesis of Stuart Hall's Analysis

Reception analysis shows that Generation Z's interpretation of the representation of bullying in the drama "Pyramid Game" does not occupy a single, fixed position. Based on Stuart Hall's reception theory (1980), the decoding process results in three possible audience positions: dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated position, and oppositional position. These three positions appear with different intensities among the six research informants, indicating that media meaning is formed through the interaction between the message constructed by media creators and the social experiences, values, and life contexts of the audience.

The research findings show that the most dominant position is the dominant-hegemonic position. The majority of informants accepted the main message conveyed by the drama that bullying is an unjustifiable act and that the Pyramid Game system represents a form of structural injustice. The informants understand that the violence in the drama is not merely a conflict between students, but rather a consequence of a social system that legitimizes the dominant group to oppress the weaker group. The acceptance of that dominant meaning shows that the encoding process carried out by the drama creators was successfully understood by the audience as intended in the communication goal.

In Hall's (1980) perspective, a dominant position occurs when the audience uses the same frame of reference as the media creators, so the meaning received is relatively in line with the preferred meaning. The results of this study show that the majority of informants have a high awareness of bullying issues, enabling them to identify moral messages, social critiques, and ideologies constructed in the drama. These findings also indicate that Generation Z has a fairly good media literacy in interpreting social representations presented through popular media.

Nevertheless, the research found that some informants did not fully accept the dominant message absolutely. Some informants were in a negotiated position, meaning they accepted the basic values conveyed by the drama but made adjustments based on their experiences and the social conditions they imagined if they were in a similar situation. The form of negotiation is evident when informants state that they will try to fight against the bullying system, but still consider their own safety, read the situation, or seek support from others before taking action.

The negotiation position shows a compromise between moral values and social reality. The informants acknowledge that bullying must be stopped, but they also understand that taking action against it is not always easy due to social threats, peer pressure, and the possibility of becoming the next victim. These findings show that the process of meaning-making is not only influenced by media content but also by life experiences and individual perceptions of the risks that may be faced. This condition aligns with Hall's (1980) view that audiences can accept the dominant ideological framework while simultaneously adapting it to the social conditions they experience.

The phenomenon is also related to the concept of the bystander effect. Kim and Lee (2020) explain that individuals often choose not to intervene when faced with situations that involve social or personal risks. In this study, some informants understand that remaining silent is not the right action, but in certain conditions, it is seen as a survival strategy to avoid becoming a target of bullying. Thus, the negotiation process carried out by the audience is the result of a consideration between moral idealism and social reality.

In addition to the dominant position and negotiation, the research also found a tendency toward an oppositional position, although it only appeared partially. No informants explicitly rejected the main message of the drama or considered bullying as a justifiable act. However, some

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informants provided alternative interpretations of certain aspects in the narrative, particularly regarding the bystander's attitude and the main character's acts of revenge. Some informants view that silence can be understood as a realistic choice in a threatening situation, while retaliatory actions are considered a justifiable consequence for the perpetrator of violence.

The findings indicate that the oppositional stance in this study does not lead to a rejection of the entire media message, but rather a reinterpretation of certain parts that are considered more in line with the informants' personal experiences and values. This reinforces Fiske's (in Eriyanto, 2021) view that media texts are polysemic, allowing for the emergence of various different meanings even when the audience consumes the same text. Thus, the meaning of media is not singular, but always open to processes of negotiation and reinterpretation.

Overall, the research results show that Generation Z is an active audience in interpreting representations of bullying. The informants not only understood the content of the narrative literally but also connected it with personal experiences, social realities, and values they believe in. This ability demonstrates that the decoding process occurs dynamically according to each individual's social context.

These findings reinforce Stuart Hall's reception theory (1980), which states that media communication is not a linear process from sender to receiver, but rather a process of production and reproduction of meaning involving interaction between media texts and the audience. In the context of this research, the drama Pyramid Game successfully constructed a dominant meaning regarding criticism of systemic bullying. However, that meaning was not uniformly accepted by all informants. Most received the message according to the media creator's intent, some negotiated based on realistic considerations, and others provided alternative interpretations of certain aspects in the story.

The research findings also reinforce previous studies on the reception analysis of Korean dramas with bullying themes. This research shows that the representation of bullying in the media not only shapes the understanding of violence but also encourages the audience to reflect on power relations, the culture of silence, and social responsibility in facing injustice. Thus, Pyramid Game not only serves as a medium of entertainment but also as a medium of social education capable of building critical awareness among Generation Z regarding bullying practices in real life.

Table 2 Mapping Informants Based on Stuart Hall's Reception Theory

Informants	Dominant-Hegemonic	Negotiated	Oppositional	Interpretation
Fayme	✓	✓	–	Receiving the message that bullying is wrong, but choosing to prioritize personal safety before resisting.
Nabila	✓	–	–	Fully accepting the dominant message and considering bullying as a form of injustice that must be stopped.
Fauzia	✓	–	–	Understanding bullying as a critique of social inequality and rejecting all forms of legitimizing violence.
Yasmin	✓	✓	–	Receiving the main message, but understanding the bystander's attitude as a realistic choice in a threatening situation.
Agus	✓	✓	–	Acknowledging the importance of fighting against injustice, but choosing to strategize before taking action.
Rochma	✓	–	–	Receiving the dominant message, but understanding the silence as a consequence of fear toward the repressive system.

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Based on that mapping, it appears that the dominant-hegemonic position is the main tendency of all informants. However, some informants also partially exhibit negotiated or oppositional characteristics. These findings affirm that the reception position is not rigid, but rather can change according to social experiences, values, and the context underlying the audience's meaning-making process. Thus, this research shows that Generation Z is not only media consumers but also plays a role as an interpretive community that actively constructs meaning regarding the representation of bullying in popular media.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that Generation Z interprets the representation of bullying in the Korean drama Pyramid Game as a critique of the social system that legitimizes injustice, rather than merely as an act of violence among students. Through the perspective of Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis, it was found that the process of meaning-making occurs actively and is influenced by the experiences, values, and social contexts of each informant. The majority of informants occupy a dominant-hegemonic position, indicating that they accept the main message of the drama regarding bullying as a form of structural injustice that must be rejected. On the other hand, some informants displayed a negotiated position by adjusting their interpretations based on realistic considerations of social risks, while a tendency toward an oppositional position appeared in a limited manner in the form of reinterpretations of certain aspects, particularly related to the bystander's attitude and the main character's resistance actions. The findings of this study reinforce Stuart Hall's theory that the meaning of media is not singular, but rather the result of the interaction between the message constructed by the media creators and the social experiences of the audience. In addition to serving as a medium of entertainment, Pyramid Game is perceived as an educational medium capable of building critical awareness among Generation Z regarding issues of bullying, power relations, bystander culture, as well as the importance of empathy and courage in facing injustice. Thus, this research contributes to the development of media reception analysis studies by demonstrating that the representation of bullying in popular dramas can serve as a space for social reflection, encouraging the audience to build critical interpretations of the reality around them. In future research, other theories such as semiotic theory or discourse analysis can be used to analyze film representations. Alternatively, one can also study other media platforms like TikTok or YouTube using reception theory.

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