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## Reception analysis of Indonesian audience towards physical and verbal violence on series *Squid Game* (2021) by Hwang Dong-Hyuk

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History:	Korean film has been rampantly surging all over the world, particularly in Indonesia.
Received	Moreover, Squid Game (2021) by Hwang Dong-Hyuk is popular in the country due to its
03 January 2022 Approved	plot and settings which present the real condition of the gap between upper-class and lower-
29 April 2022	middle class urban people in South Korea. It becomes intriguing for Indonesian audience
Published	because it shows the happening fact not only in South Korea but also similarly in Indonesia.
30 April 2022	The research was aimed at investigating Indonesian audience's responses on physical and
Keywords:	verbal violence depicted on Squid Game series (2021) by Hwang Dong-Hyuk. The research
Indonesian audience,	used the qualitative approach with reception analysis method by Stuart Hall. There are four
Korean film, Physical and verbal violence,	audiences who become the informants of this research coming from urban workers and Korean film enthusiasts. The data collection technique was done through interviews as well
Reception analysis,	as document analysis. The result showed that the informants' reception towards the scenes
Squid Game	are varying due to the situation and context that set the scenes which present different uses
	of physical and verbal violence.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In today's era, all countries are prominently competing in order to get the recognizable position among others in the world. Many strategies have been carried out to penetrate into one nation's society. In addition to the cultural penetration that every nation does, South Korea has been well-known to be very rampantly promote its culture to the targeted nations. Moreover, it is defined as the soft power which enables one country to influence others to gain the wanted results by using some attractions, one of which comes from the cultural sector (Suryani, 2015).

Further, Suryani (2015) states that the soft power owned in cultural manners is divided into

two types, such as high culture and pop culture. The former is pertaining to literatures, arts, and education that are attracted to a certain group of elites. Meanwhile, the latter corresponds to the mass culture that can be enjoyed by most of people in the nation. In South Korea alone, pop culture lies on the essential aspect to perform the soft power or attractive power to the global stage. What is more, this power is indicated as Korean Wave, most of Koreans call it as *Hallyu* taking K-Pop, K-Drama, K-Beauty, K-Fashion, K-Food, and so on. Besides, it reinforces the exportation of Korean pop culture all over the world spanning from cuisine, films, fashion, and music (Pramadya & Oktaviani, 2016).

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In respect of the surge of Korean wave, Pramadya and Oktaviani (2016) contend that the diplomacy has been taken into consideration since South Korea has been involved in the world's marketing development in terms of pop culture. It signifies the power that the nation has over the economic dignity in the globe. Appadurai (1990) explicates five scapes of global cultural flow consisting of ethnoscapes (human migration), technoscape (technology), financescapes (money and business networks), mediascape (cultural industry networks), and ideoscape (ideas). Additionally, the wave takes the mediascape as the important point in penetrating its culture into the today's borderless world.

In fact, it historically started in 1999 with the first wave appearing in the East Asia, and it continued to the United States, the Middle East, and Europe. Its beginning developed with the airing of television drama titled "Winter Sonata" in NHK channel in 2003-2005 (Suryani, 2015). The airing event of the program was called the *Yon-Sama* Syndrome which portrays the phenomenon of fanatism towards the main male character in the film, namely Bae-Yong Joon.

In South East Asia, the culture was first coming to the society in Vietnam whose influence began in 1990's altogether with Taiwan and China. In 2000's, K-pop is vastly admitted by the nation in the area. For instance, the Korean drama, "Dae Jang Deum", was a famous drama watched by many people at that time. In addition to the drama, it tells a story of 16th-century Korean kingdom (Suryani, 2015). Moreover, Thompson (2020) explains that film is categorized in mediated quasi-interaction which denotes that one's interaction is as if mediated through the media. Its characteristic is monological or one-way which allows the audience to interact with the messages conveyed through the film.

With regard to the Korean film, the series titled "Squid Game" (2021) by Hwang-Dong Hyuk is known to be the latest and the most popular series among other Korean shows in Netflix. In actuality, Pallotta (2021) contends that it is the biggest Korean series ever in Netflix's history which have been watched by more than 111

million accounts in the entire globe since its first debut in September 17th, 2021. The plot begins in the dystopian framing when the participants are recruited to play several prize-winning child games in which they need to encounter many deadly shots. In fact, the shots are the punishment in case they violate the rules of games made by the committees (Pallotta, 2021).

Through the playing, they experience physical and verbal violence coming from the fellow contestants and the committees. In actual practice, this strengthens the tension in the quarantine because they have not been introduced the regulations yet since the beginning of the game. Moreover, the scenes have also shifted to their reallife condition when they demand to end the games due to the unintroduced rules and harsh punishments (Pallotta, 2021). Most of the scenes depict the lower-middle class people's debt crisis which has reached the highest peak of over 100% of South Korea's GDP which create a huge gap and inequality between elites and the proletariat groups with the reasons of overpriced housing, the rising number of unemployment, and global pandemic (Son, 2021).

What is more interesting is that the series incorporate representation also the of disadvantaged minorities who are struggling for living in the country. As they are burdened with the much amount of debt, they are forced to join the game in order to win the big price of 45.6 billion Won (Son, 2021). What is controversial from the series is that it integrates the violence. As a matter of fact, the violent messages consist of physical and verbal forms which have gained many complaints from parents who are afraid of the impacts on their children inasmuch as there have been many video games and online platforms which make use of this series as the main theme. Hence, it is considered a hyper-violent show (Balanzategui, 2021).

Ultimately, since it has obtained many protests all over the world concerning the film's hyper-violent scenes, some Australian schools have warned their students to not watch the series and play a Squid-Game-themed video games. Moreover, A council in Southern England has sent an email to parents whose children go to school in

the area in order to call for vigilance over the series and series-related online platforms (Balanzategui, 2021).

Not only does it affect the children's psychology, the violence also influences the adults relative to the past trauma and anxiety that are experienced in their emotional states when watching the series (Nariswari, 2021). Since it has got many complaints due to involving the violent scenes, it is very important to know the perception of the audience, particularly Indonesians. In fact, Indonesian audience also play an important role in giving their perception over the film because Indonesia is significantly positioned to be the second country with the highest *Hallyu* fans all over the world (Handayani, 2021).

Following the introduction that has been explicated previously, the research question is" How is the perception of Indonesian audience towards the physical and verbal violence in series "Squid Game" (2021) by Hwang Dong-Hyuk?". Moreover, formulated from the aforementioned research question, the research objective of this research is to examine the perception of Indonesian audience towards the physical and verbal violence in series "Squid Game" (2021) by Hwang Dong-Hyuk".

## **METHODS**

## Research Design

This research incorporates qualitative approach. In addition, it involves documents analysis, observation, and interviews to explicate the social phenomenon (Cresswell, 1998). Moleong (2018) also states that qualitative research is used to explicate the phenomena on what is experienced by the subject of the research, such as attitudes, motivation, perceptions as well as acts which are holistically carried out. It is descriptively done in languages on scientific contexts.

## Research Sample

Furthermore, the selection of the respondents in qualitative research takes the method of purposive sampling. Additionally, purposive sampling method is defined as the

method which the researchers can determine the respondents based on their opinion, and they can contribute some information to the research as desired in regard with the research problem (Moleong, 2018). Four respondents shared Their perception towards the series. They are the millennial workers living in Jakarta, Tangerang, and Bogor and have watched "Squid Game".

#### **Data Collection**

In qualitative research, there are several techniques in collecting the data. In-depth interviews are conducted to obtain further and deeper information regarding the object's being analysed (Cresswell, 1998). In actual practice, this research made use of in-depth interviews to gain the deeper understanding concerning the perception of the audience over the physical and verbal violence in the series. The process was carried out on November 16th – 20th, 2021 utilizing Google Meet online platform.

#### **Data Analysis**

The content analysis is importantly conducted to reinforce the analysis of the qualitative research that utilizes media in its appearance (Prasanti, 2018). In fact, this research used the analysis to explain and examine the selected scenes from the series.

This research applied the reception theory by Stuart Hall. As a matter of fact, Fathurizki (2018) contends that this analysis is done to compare the interaction between the media and the audience. Hall (1973) also states that audience is positioned to be the producer of the meanings appearing in the media. In other words, they are not a passive audience who accepts all ideology created in the media, but they are an active audience or producer of meanings. There are three positions explained through the study comprising dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional positions taken by the audience's viewing the scenes.

Furthermore, the semiotics analysis on denotative and connotative meanings by Roland Barthes was also utilized to help dismantle the meanings from the chosen scenes. The semiotics

analysis was done at the first stage to interpret the scenes. Furthermore, the scenes that contain physical and verbal violence were selected. There are six scenes which fullfil the criteria since they are significant with the issues that have happened recently on immigrants, cross-cultural understanding, gender bias, and power imbalance.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In order to conduct the research, the first phase done is to determine the preferred readings. In fact, Jensen (1999) contends that this analysis is the beginning step of the reception analysis. The preferred readings are taken from the scenes appearing in the movie involving physical and verbal violence in order to grasp the meanings created by the encoder of the messages in the film. In this research, Saussure's semiotics was used to analyse the aforementioned preferred readings of physical and verbal violence in the series. Furthermore, the result was compared to the transcripts of the interviews with the respondents. In addition, the audience are divided, later, into three positions, such as dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional positions. There are three scenes incorporating physical abuses and three other scenes taking verbal abuses.

#### Physical Violence



**Figure 1**. Debt Collector's Illegal Act Involving Physical Violence

The result of preferred reading in Figure 1 portrays that Seong Gi-hun is chased by a debt collector after he wins some money from betting on a horse-racing competition. He is pursued and is escaping. In the end, he is caught in the toilet. The

debt collector is threatening him by pointing a knife in front of his face and intimidating to take out his one eye if he does not pay the debt as soon as possible.

However, his money is picked by a woman whom he runs into in the building. Then, he is forced to sign a letter of agreement. Meanwhile, the result of the interviews done to the informants shows that two of the interviewees stand at the oppositional position. Hall (1973) states that the oppositional position is taken by those having the conflicting ideas with the preferred readings. In addition, they shared that this scene is not allowed to do since there must be another alternative way of collecting the debt. In fact, because it is about money loans, it is included in the civil law, and this needs to be finished through the condition established in the civil law too. In Indonesia alone, loan sharks who collect the debt making use of the violent elements are considered a crime and must be sentenced to jail, yet the court is not affordable to reach, and most law enforcement results in the failure and dissatisfaction (Sumarsono. et al, 2021).

On contrary, one informant takes the negotiated position since there must be a humane way of doing such an activity, yet it is still permitted if the party who borrows the many has not paid the debt in a very long time. Lastly, the respondent who stands at the dominant-hegemonic position permitting such a violent action done by the debt collector as it is a common thing among the debt collectors and debtors in the circle of loan sharks. As a matter of fact, she encourages not to borrow money from the illegal money lenders.



Figure 2. The Unexpectedly Gun-Shooting

Furthermore, the result of preferred reading in Figure 2 presents the participants of Squid Game gather in the field to start playing 무궁화 꽃이 피었습니다 (Moo Goong Wha Ko Chi Pih Uh Seum Ni Dha) which is equivalent to "Red Light, Green Light 1...2...3." In actual practice, it is a child game with a full of joy and excitement, yet the participants do not know if they will be shot by shotguns as a sort of punishment. The first victim is shot, and the one standing right behind him is shocked and runs to the back of the field. Nonetheless, he is also shot and dies in front of other players. The victim's blood splashes all over another player's face, and she is screaming out loud followed by the running of other players backwards.

In accordance with the analysis of the interviews, the four informants state that they do not agree with the elimination system of shooting the participants. It violates the consent from that the players have signed in the beginning of the game. In actuality, it is unfair if the rules of a game or competition are not clearly introduced to the participants. All respondents have come up with one shared perception of changing the punishment into something more humane as it should be in children's games. Hence, they are all in the oppositional position.



**Figure 3**. Fraud towards the North Korean Refugee

The physical violence in Figure 3 depicts that a woman, namely Kang Sae-byeok, is a North Korean defector who has a mission to bring her brother out of the orphanage and her mother out of North Korea. Further, she is deceived by her agent

inasmuch as she has paid a lot of money, yet the service does not result in a successful way as desired. What is more, her agent asks more money to make it happen, so Sae-byeok is mad at him and is pointing a knife on his neck by intimidating him. In regards with the reception analysis through the interviews with the informants, they do take the negotiated position. Additionally, they are not in agreement to the knife-pointing action done by Sae-byeok.

Since she is unskilled and has nothing to do in order to get her right back, she is compelled to do it for bluffing the agent. In other words, it is the only way that she has got to make the agent do what she wants inasmuch as she has felt being tricked by him. Besides, one respondent conveys her opinion through the lens of gender, she states that the strong woman also has a weak state that has need of another one's help to straighten the problem. This case occurs since the refugee is unskilled and a woman surrounded by the patriarchal society which places the woman in a weaker position (Kim, 2020).

#### Verbal Violence



**Figure 4**. The Gangster's Fight

The result of preferred reading over the verbal violence in Figure 4 points out that Jang Deok-su, the leader of street gangster, meets Kang Sae-byeok in the quarantine barrack of Squid Game. They are fighting with each other watched by all the game participants. He says a swearing word to her, 씨탈 (Ssi-bal) which is equivalent to "Fuck" in English. Based on the reception analysis from the interviews, the two informants take the negotiated position. As a matter of fact, the swear

words can signify the linguistic punctuation in modern society as the language progresses and is dynamic among youngsters.

Further, it is also unplanned which expresses the anger and annoy over someone or something that comes to one person. However, it is negatively uttered as it does not respect women, not only Sae-byeok in particular, but also all women in the same situation. On the other hands, the other two respondents stand at the oppositional position. What is more interesting is that the word contains the racist element of the South Korean people to the North Korean people.

It is known that Sae-byeok is North Korean who takes a refuge and avoids persecution in North Korea. In reality, South Korea has lived with the homogenous population since then, so the government has introduced the term 다문화 (damunhwa) or multiculturalism towards the families, descendants of foreign workers, immigrants, mixed-race Koreans, and North Korean refugees.

Nonetheless, the *damunhwa* communities are not considered to be the part of the nation. Instead, they experience othering, so this regulation is a blunder to reintroduce the cultural hierarchy in South Korea and to question the identity of "Koreanness" (Kim, 2020). Besides, the utterance also involves power imbalance which shows that Deok-su wants to situate himself in a higher position than Sae-byeok as he is a man and also a leader of a gangster. In actuality, there is always a gap between abusers and victims when it comes to bullying and violence. In patriarchal surroundings, the women are often positioned inferior compared to the man (Khasanah & Sirodj, 2019).



Figure 5. Immigrant Injustice

The next preferred reading analysis towards the verbal abuse in Figure 5 depicts Ali Abdul, a Pakistani migrant worker, who asks and begs for his postponed salary to his boss. The boss refuses to give the salary to him and decides to avoid him by walking out of his room. Eventually, Ali pulls his boss' hand while continuing begging the money. However, the boss still rejects Ali's begging and utters a swear word,  $7\|\lambda\|\eta\|$  (gae-sae-ggi) which means "Son of bitch" in English.

It happens until they are fighting with each other. In terms of the reception analysis through the interviews, there are three informants taking the oppositional position. In fact, they do not agree with the word uttered by the boss to his worker inasmuch as there is a racist attitude towards the Pakistani migrant worker or even the other immigrants in many companies in South Korea. In actual practice, South Korea has been well-known to successfully develop it economic condition which turns out to attract the foreigners coming to the nation which transform its population's multiculturalism (Kim, 2020).

Also, Ali is an illegal immigrant so that he has no much protection over his employment right. As a matter of fact, this case has broken the employment act and should be reported to the police. What is more, the recruitment of Pakistani low-skilled labors have been protected in the international labor act, yet the problem emerges when its practice in the company is violated by the employers, and it is not reported to the government due to the power imbalance between employers and employees (Wells, 2020).

Regardless of the racist issue, it can be wellcommunicated between a boss and an employee in case the boss is transparent on the financial state of the enterprise. It indicates that there must be an effective means in communicating something from the boss to the workers in terms of the working performance and problems (Osborne Hammoud, 2017). Importantly, Osborne and Hammoud (2017) argue that the employers can have program and policy evaluation within the company to gain satisfaction and improvement. Nonetheless, one informant stands at the dominant-hegemonic position because the swearing word is deemed to be the expression of pique. Additionally, it is uttered as the boss is really annoyed to Ali Abdul's begging for the money without putting the company's financial condition into account.



Figure 6. The Gangster's Turmoil

Lastly, the result of preferred reading on the verbal violence in Figure 6 portrays that Jang Deok-su's gang steals the participants' food while being shared by the game committees. In addition, there are five players who have not got the food yet, and they do not eat by perforce. Deok-su is accused, and the man is approaching him while scolding and yelling at him right away. Deok-su is drinking a bottle of water, and the man is intentionally grabbing the bottle. They are quarrelling, and the bottle is falling apart. Deok-su is mad at the man while saying 가세게이 (gae-sae-ggi-ya) which signifies "Son of bitch" in English.

It is another profanity uttered by Deok-su to another weaker person in the game. Corresponding to the reception analysis, all the respondents have come up with one agreement which condemns the use of the curse word towards weaker ones. The situation wants to show that Deok-su is positioned to be higher and more masculine by doing such an attitude to others. In reality, the power imbalance happens to be inserted from the superior ones to the inferior ones. The former is willing to express the power by exhibiting it to not only the latter, but also all people surrounding the person (Khasanah & Sirodj, 2019). Thus, the informants take the oppositional position.

Ultimately, from the interviews process to the four informants, most of whom understand that the physical and verbal violence happen due to the intimidated attitudes, racist sentiment, and power imbalance among the characters in the series. Moreover, the socio-cultural background of the people is also significant in explaining the physical and verbal abuses that they have got involved. For instance, the debt collector from the illegal money lending agency tries to force Seong Gi-hun to pay his debt quickly as instructed by the loan sharks. The attitude is considered to be a power imbalance.

Another example is that Deok-su performs abuses physically and verbally to the inferior participants in the game because of the power imbalance and toxic masculinity that have been rationalized. Furthermore, Kang Sae-byeok and Ali Abdul encounter racist sentiments from the authorities. The former is from her agent, and the latter is from his boss as the illegal migrants coming to South Korea. All in all, physical and verbal abuses occur not only by purpose but also by accident due to the psychological and situational manners in the series "Squid Game" (2021) by Hwang Dong-Hyuk.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the result of the research through the interviews on the reception of audience toward three scenes of physical violence in the series "Squid Game" (2021) by Hwang Dong-Hyuk, the reception is really diverse. In fact, there are two informants with the oppositional position, one informant with the negotiated position, and

another one with dominant-hegemonic position toward the first physical violence scene.

Further, the second scene shows the oppositional position taken by all four informants. Besides, the third scene results in the informants' negotiated position. On the other hands, the interviews taking verbal violence scenes also presents the varying results. To begin with, the first scene of verbal violence results in two informants with the negotiated position and two other informants with the oppositional position. Moreover, the interviews done to the second scene depicts the three informants with the oppositional position and another one with the dominant-hegemonic position. Lastly, the third verbal abuse scene portrays the oppositional position taken by all informants.

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