

Decoding Masculinity: An Analysis of Stuart Hall's Reception Theory in BTS Music Videos and Its Impact of Consuming Buying on Indonesian Fans (2013–2021)

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Abstract. This study employs the Stuart Hall model to analyse masculinity representations in BTS music videos from 2013 to 2021, examining their impact on the purchasing behaviours of the band's predominantly female Indonesian fanbase. Through qualitative analysis involving five female fans, the research focuses on their perceptions of BTS's videos, especially from their debut until the latest release before their conscription. Despite the assumption that female fans significantly drive sales through impulsive purchases in support of their idols, findings reveal that the varied masculinities portrayed do not substantially influence their buying decisions. Instead, these decisions are needs-based, indicating a pragmatic approach to consumerism. This research contributes to discussions on media influence, gender representation, and consumer culture, challenging the prevailing belief that fan purchasing is mainly driven by media portrayals and idol loyalty. It underscores the complex interplay of fan engagement and economic contribution in global pop culture, offering new insights into the dynamics of media consumption and fan behaviour.

1 Introduction

The prevailing concept of masculinity, deeply ingrained in societal norms and cultural frameworks, is traditionally built upon the triadic characteristics of strength, toughness, and a robust, often sweaty physicality, epitomizing what is commonly referred to as 'macho' masculinity. This archetype is a product of a patriarchal system that not only supports but also justifies male dominance and superiority, as outlined by Gracia (2021). This stereotypical view of masculinity manifests vividly in various societal aspects, from expected behaviour and social roles to fashion choices and personal grooming, where 'macho' men are often depicted or expected to shun overt displays of vulnerability in favour of a hardened exterior (Ayodobó, 2021). Concurrently, femininity is cast as the antithesis

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of masculinity, characterized by softness, emotionality, communicativeness, and an affinity for makeup, reinforcing a societal dichotomy that is both restrictive and prescriptive (Barritt, 2021).

These entrenched stereotypes significantly shape public perceptions and expectations of gender roles, particularly in the entertainment industry, where the portrayal of masculinity can both challenge and reinforce these cultural norms. Korean boybands, especially BTS stand for *Bangtan Sonyeondan* which mean Bulletproof Boy Scouts, find themselves at the intersection of these conventional gender expectations and a more progressive, fluid representation of masculinity. The global success of BTS has not only challenged the traditional 'macho' stereotype by showcasing a range of emotional vulnerability and aesthetic choices that include elaborate makeup and fashion-forward styling but has also prompted a broader discussion about the flexibility of gender norms in contemporary society. BTS's approach disrupts the rigid boundaries traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity, suggesting a new paradigm where masculinity can coexist with traits traditionally deemed feminine (Wen, 2024), thereby questioning the very foundation of gender stereotypes perpetuated under patriarchal cultures.

In contemporary discourse on masculinity within the realm of pop culture, K-pop boybands, particularly BTS, have been pivotal in introducing and popularizing a new archetype known as "soft masculinity." This concept challenges the traditional, often rigid constructs of masculinity characterized by overt toughness, physical prowess, and a 'macho' demeanour. Instead, soft masculinity embraces a blend of both masculine and feminine traits, showcasing men who not only possess conventionally attractive physical features such as six-pack abs but also exhibit gentler, more expressive emotional states. Lee (2023) articulate that this emergent masculinity is a distinctive product of the Hallyu wave, amalgamating East Asian perspectives on gender roles, thus presenting an alternative masculinity that is both fashionable and androgynous, often blurring the lines between gender identities. The portrayal of masculinity in music videos by idols such as BTS can be seen as a strategic marketing tool (Kim, 2021), aimed at engaging and retaining a predominantly female fanbase. By crafting specific masculine images, these artists not only define their aesthetic and artistic narrative but also align with certain ideals that are appealing to their viewers. This alignment is not merely about visual appeal or entertainment but is deeply embedded in marketing strategies that anticipate and stimulate consumer behaviour. The representation of various forms of masculinity—ranging from rugged and rebellious to gentle and caring—serves to resonate with diverse preferences among female fans, thereby fostering a deeper emotional connection with the brand.

This emotional connection is pivotal as it translates into financial engagement where fans are more likely to purchase merchandise, fashion items, makeup, skincare products, and other commodities endorsed or represented by the idols (Oliver, 2020). The masculinity displayed in these videos often embodies traits that are culturally perceived as desirable, creating aspirational figures for fans. Women, who are statistically significant consumers in the retail sectors of fashion and beauty, find an additional layer of affinity with these idols through the products they endorse. As such, the idols' portrayals act not just as entertainment but as powerful endorsements that drive consumer choices, making each music video a multi-faceted marketing campaign. Moreover, the deliberate depiction of these masculinities extends beyond immediate merchandising to build long-term brand loyalty (Maclaran & Chatzidakis, 2022). By consistently engaging fans through these carefully crafted images, BTS and similar groups ensure a sustained interest in their broader array of offerings, including concert tickets, exclusive content, and direct artist engagements. This strategy not only enhances the perceived value of the products associated with them but also solidifies a consumer base that is economically beneficial and enduring. Thus, the

masculinity showcased in music videos is a critical element of a broader marketing strategy that seeks to capitalize on the complex interplay between cultural representation, fan engagement, and consumer spending.

The research into BTS's representation of masculinity, particularly through their music videos from their debut up to the pandemic period in 2021, seeks to delve deeper into these cultural shifts. By analysing the visual and thematic content of these videos, the study aims to elucidate how BTS and their management have navigated and shaped the discourse on masculinity. This involves a detailed examination of symbols and scenes that portray various facets of masculinity, from traditional to modern interpretations, and how these have evolved in response to changing cultural dynamics.

2 Literature Review

In this research, the authors will employ a multifaceted methodological framework that integrates cultural studies and reception analysis to explore and interrogate the complex interplay between media content, cultural context, and audience interpretation. The reception analysis will provide a broader contextual understanding, enabling the examination of media texts within the intricate web of historical, cultural, and political dynamics. This approach acknowledges the media's role in both reflecting and shaping societal norms and values.

2.1 Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies, often seen through a socio-cultural lens, examines how media content is interpreted by audiences, incorporating both dominant and oppositional readings while taking into account the cultural meanings embedded in media products. This field perceives society as a battleground where various ideas vie for dominance and interpretation, essentially making culture a dynamic arena of competing meanings. As Stuart Hall famously articulated, "words don't mean, people mean." This suggests that individuals create meanings based on their cultural referents and societal roles. Cultural Studies thus focuses on how these meanings are constructed, disseminated, and contested within the public sphere, highlighting the active role of audiences in interpreting media texts against the backdrop of their personal and collective cultural experiences.

According to Turner (1990; 11), Cultural Studies should be approached as an interdisciplinary field, blending diverse focuses and methodologies to foster a deeper understanding of phenomena that traditional disciplines might fail to address comprehensively. This interdisciplinary nature is crucial as it allows for a richer exploration of cultural phenomena by integrating insights from structuralism, semiotics, Marxism, and psychoanalysis. Each of these theoretical frameworks contributes unique perspectives and analytical tools, enabling scholars to dissect complex cultural interactions and the ways media influences and reflects societal norms and values. This convergence of disciplines enhances the analytical depth and breadth of research, providing a more holistic view of the cultural landscapes shaped by and shaping media content.

Cultural Studies, a field rich in diversity of thought and methodology, is broadly categorized into two distinct streams: structuralism and culturalism. Structuralists approach culture primarily as a textual system, where the analysis centers on the structures of texts and the underlying codes that govern meanings within cultural artifacts. This perspective emphasizes the formal properties of texts and the ways in which these structures communicate and perpetuate cultural values and norms. In contrast, culturalists, particularly those from the British tradition, place a greater emphasis on human agency and the role of history and ideology in shaping cultural practices. This approach insists on considering the historical context surrounding cultural phenomena, highlighting the dynamic interplay

between individual agency and the ideological frameworks that influence cultural production and interpretation.

The focus of this article leans heavily on British Cultural Studies, particularly the school of thought associated with the Birmingham Centre, as articulated by Stuart Hall. Hall emphasized the ideological analysis of media's power to frame political issues, shape social relations, and influence the creation and transformation of popular ideologies. According to Turner (1990; 25), this approach in Cultural Studies seeks to unravel how media representations serve ideological functions and contribute to the maintenance or transformation of existing social structures. The Birmingham School's approach is critical in understanding how media not only reflects but actively constructs and contests the political and social landscapes, thereby playing a pivotal role in the formation of public consciousness and popular culture.

2.2 Reception Analysis

Reception analysis, which has its roots in the cultural studies carried out at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, closely aligns with and sometimes overlaps the methodologies of cultural studies itself. This approach specifically examines the ways in which audiences interact with, interpret, and derive meaning from media texts. According to Frey and Krämer (2020), reception analysis requires a thorough observation of how audiences decode, interact with, and "read" media texts. Stuart Hall, a pivotal figure in the CCCS, emphasized that the production of meaning in media does not necessarily equate to its consumption as originally intended by the creators, due to the polysemous nature of signs and the multi-accentuated influences that construct them (Fuchs, 2023)). This led Hall to develop the encoding-decoding theory, which became a cornerstone in reception studies by illustrating that the relationship between the producers of texts and their audiences is not linear but is mediated by various socio-cultural factors. Hall's theory suggests that if the audience shares the cultural framework of the producer, the encoding-decoding process might align closely, resulting in a dominant reading of the text. However, differences such as class or gender can lead to alternative interpretations, producing negotiated or oppositional readings. This concept of polysemy in texts means that the reception of media can vary significantly, ranging from complete acceptance of the producer's intended message to partial agreement or outright rejection, depending on the audience's personal and cultural context.

Reception analysis not only intersects with cultural studies and media theory but also maintains a significant relationship with the discipline of political economy. This intersection is particularly evident in the context of text production, where political economy provides a framework for analysing the interrelated social and power relations that influence the processes of production, distribution, and consumption of media texts. By incorporating the principles of political economy, researchers can explore how economic conditions, market forces, and institutional power dynamics shape the content and dissemination of media texts. This approach emphasizes that media production is not merely a cultural or artistic endeavour but is deeply embedded in a complex matrix of economic and political structures, which inevitably impact the messages that media texts carry and the ways in which they are received by different audiences.

Beyond Stuart Hall's influential contributions, reception analysis is enriched by other theoretical frameworks, such as Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory of hermeneutical structuration. Gadamer's work, which spans philosophical hermeneutics, philosophical dialogue, literary engagement, and what he terms 'practical philosophy,' offers a profound method for textual analysis. However, while Gadamer's approach fosters deep philosophical dialogue and is particularly adept at analysing written texts such as poetry, it may not fully

encompass the analysis of other media forms such as film or visual imagery. Gadamer's focus on the interpretive processes primarily suits textual analysis, highlighting a limitation when approaching multimedia or audiovisual content which requires consideration of both visual and textual elements.

3 Methods

In this research, the methodology employed is a descriptive qualitative research method grounded in Stuart Hall's reception analysis. This particular analytical approach is aimed at examining the interaction between media texts and their audiences, emphasizing the role of the audience as active participants in the creation of meaning, rather than merely passive consumers. The focus of the study is on how these active audiences interpret and understand media texts through the lens of their own socio-cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. Specifically, this research exposes audiences to a series of BTS music video (MV) clips from the years 2013 to 2021, with the objective of analyzing how different viewers interpret the symbols of masculinity depicted in these videos. This method allows for a detailed exploration of the diverse interpretations that emerge from the audience's engagement with the media, highlighting the subjective nature of media consumption and the complex interplay between media content and viewer perception

4 Result and Discussion

In this study, we aim to explore the decoding process employed by five informants in interpreting the masculinity portrayed by BTS in their music videos. This analysis is centered on understanding how these portrayals are perceived and interpreted by viewers, particularly in relation to the cultural and individual contexts of the informants. The study focuses on the different dimensions of masculinity that BTS attempts to convey, examining whether these representations align with the traditional or contemporary notions of masculinity prevalent within the viewers' sociocultural environments. By analyzing the reception of these images, the research seeks to shed light on the complex process of media decoding, where individual backgrounds, cultural contexts, and personal beliefs intersect to shape the interpretation of media content.

Furthermore, this research will assess the impact of these masculinity portrayals on the purchasing decisions of the informants regarding merchandise and products endorsed by BTS members. Given the group's role as brand ambassadors for various consumer goods, such as fashion brand (Puma and Fila), electronic label (LG, Samsung and Coway.), skincare (Mediheal, and Innisfree), and marketplace (Tokopedia and Lotte Duty Free), it is crucial to examine whether the masculinities they embody in their videos influence fans' consumer behavior. This aspect of the study intends to explore the effectiveness of such media portrayals in marketing strategies, determining whether the displayed masculinity traits enhance the appeal of the products being promoted. By linking media representation theories with consumer behavior patterns, the study aims to provide insights into how effectively idol portrayals in media can serve as marketing tools, influencing the purchasing decisions of their audience. In this research, the selection of informants was strategically made to include a diverse representation of BTS fans, focusing on varying demographic factors such as age, educational background, employment sector, salary, and duration of fandom. The criteria for informant selection were structured to analyze the impact of socioeconomic status and fan

tenure on the reception of masculinity in BTS music videos and the subsequent influence on purchasing behavior.

1. Informant 1 is a 25-year-old woman with a bachelor's degree, employed in the private sector. She earns a monthly salary of 5 million rupiah and has been a fan of BTS since 2019. Her demographic profile represents young adult professionals who are relatively new to the BTS fandom.
2. Informant 2 mirrors the first informant in age, educational attainment, employment sector, and salary, also having become a fan of BTS in 2019. This replication aims to investigate if similar demographic profiles result in comparable perceptions and consumer behaviors.
3. Informant 3, while sharing the age and educational background with the first two informants, differs in her economic status with a monthly income of 6 million rupiah and a later fandom start in 2021. This variation serves to explore the influence of slightly higher economic capability and a shorter duration of fandom on merchandise purchasing decisions.
4. Informant 4 is a 42-year-old woman holding a master's degree and working in the private sector, with a significantly higher salary of approximately 25 million rupiah per month. She has been a fan since 2018, providing insights into the perceptions and behaviors of older and more financially established fans.
5. Informant 5 is a 37-year-old woman with a master's degree, employed in the government sector, earning a monthly salary of 15 million rupiah, and has been a BTS fan since 2019. Her profile is particularly relevant to understanding how employment in the public sector and mid-range salary levels correlate with consumer behavior in the context of BTS-related merchandise.

The diverse socio-economic backgrounds and different lengths of engagement with the BTS fandom among the informants are intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of how various factors influence the decoding of masculinity in media and its impact on consumer behaviour.

4.1 Audience Consumption Relations Among BTS Fans

Prior to inquiring about the purchasing behaviors of the informants, the research team conducted a thorough analysis of the masculinity portrayed by BTS in their music videos, scrutinizing various aspects such as attire, makeup, hair color, dance choreography, camera angles, and set decorations. This comprehensive evaluation aimed to discern how these elements contribute to the portrayal of masculinity and align with the themes and lyrics of the songs. The findings from the five informants indicate a consensus that the masculine expressions exhibited by BTS members are not merely personal artistic expressions or dictated solely by the producers. Instead, these portrayals are intricately aligned with the objectives and thematic content of the songs, suggesting a deliberate and cohesive strategy to convey specific messages through their visual and performance artistry.

Table 1. Grouping of Informants Based on Masculinity of BTS on Video Music

| Informant 1 | Informant 2 | Informant 3 | Informant 4 | Informant 5 |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Dominant | Dominant | Dominant | Negotiate | Dominant |

Among the informants of this study, Informants 1, 2, 3, and 5, who have been fans of BTS since 2019 and 2021, occupy the "dominant" position in Stuart Hall's

encoding/decoding model of communication. According to their perspectives, the representation of masculinity in BTS's music videos is intricately linked to the lyrics and intended messages of the songs, rather than being a mere fabrication by the members or their production team. These informants perceive that the task of the production crew in creating the music videos is primarily to execute the artistic vision as directed by BTS members themselves. This viewpoint aligns with Hall's concept of the dominant reading, where the audience decodes the message in the way that was intended by the encoder, here understood as the BTS members and their creative directives.

Conversely, Informant 4, who became a fan in 2018 and is older and earns a higher monthly salary compared to the other informants, exhibits a "negotiated" reading of BTS's portrayal of masculinity. From her standpoint, it is unlikely that the masculinity depicted in the music videos is devoid of commercial considerations. She believes that these portrayals likely involve discussions and compromises between BTS members and their producers, as well as marketing teams within the Korean entertainment industry. This perspective suggests a more critical engagement with the content, acknowledging the potential influence of market demands and industry trends on the artistic outputs of celebrity figures, aligning with Hall's notion of a negotiated code where the audience acknowledges the intended message but adapts it based on their own social context and beliefs.

Table 2 Grouping of Informants Based on Masculinity of BTS for Marketing Purpose

| Informant 1 | Informant 2 | Informant 3 | Informant 4 | Informant 5 |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Oppositional | Oppositional | Oppositional | Oppositional | Oppositional |

The analysis derived from the responses of all informants reveals a unanimous agreement that the representation of masculinity in BTS's music videos, from the onset of their career in 2013 through to 2021, aligns with what Stuart Hall describes as an "oppositional" reading. This perspective suggests that the audience—our informants in this case—believes that the portrayal of masculinity in BTS's music videos does not merely conform to conventional market expectations or commercial interests. The informants argue that it would be illogical for BTS to craft their songs or musical productions solely based on market demands. This interpretation indicates a critical and independent decoding of the content, where the viewers recognize potential market influences but ultimately see the artistic expressions as authentically derived from the artists themselves, rather than being heavily shaped by external commercial pressures.

Informant 4 provides a compelling example to support this view, citing the disparity in viewership between the songs "Dreamers" performed by Jungkook for FIFA 2022 Qatar, which garnered 229 million views, and "Seven," also performed by Jungkook a month later, which achieved over 404 million views. She argues that if BTS's creative output were predominantly market-driven, the song designed for a high-profile event like the FIFA World Cup should have attracted more views. However, the lesser commercial success of "Dreamers" compared to "Seven" suggests that BTS's influence on their audience is not primarily dictated by market forces. This observation reinforces the idea that BTS's creative decisions and their manifestations of masculinity in music videos are more significantly influenced by genuine artistic intentions rather than by a straightforward pursuit of market trends.

The research reveals that the masculinity portrayed by BTS in their music videos has a limited impact on the purchasing decisions of the informants concerning BTS merchandise. Informant 1, for instance, has purchased only one official BTS album, with a more frequent acquisition of unofficial merchandise such as photocards, notebooks, cell phone stands, sticky notes, and decoration stickers, primarily sourced through friends or

merchandise delivery services from South Korea. The motivation behind these purchases, as expressed by Informant 1, is partly to express fandom identity visibly and to enjoy the aesthetic appeal of the items. The spending on such merchandise varied from 10,000 to 1 million rupiah, indicating a moderate financial commitment influenced by the release of new BTS music videos, especially the "Proof" album, which holds a significant place in BTS's discography.

In contrast, Informant 2 exhibits more restrained purchasing behavior due to budgetary limitations, focusing spending on essential items like t-shirts, albums, or products from brand collaborations, with expenditures ranging from 10,000 to 300,000 rupiah. These purchases coincide with BTS comebacks or specific collaborations, driven by loyalty to the band and considerations of affordability and product appeal. Informant 3 also mirrors this selective buying, purchasing only one official album and a few photocards, engaging in social activities like unboxing and trading with other fans, which enhances the communal experience of fandom. Meanwhile, Informants 4 and 5, despite higher income levels, display a cautious approach to merchandise collection, prioritizing live experiences or official albums over accumulating physical merchandise due to personal and professional considerations.

These findings challenge the stereotype of fan culture as predominantly impulsive and market-driven, particularly among female fans. The data suggest that while the informants appreciate and support BTS, their engagement through merchandise purchases is measured and influenced by practical considerations, personal values, and social interactions, rather than solely by the group's portrayed masculinity or market manipulations. This nuanced fan behaviour underscores a more deliberate and thoughtful participation in fandom activities, highlighting the diverse ways fans choose to support and interact with their favourite artists.

5 Conclusion

The South Korean entertainment industry employs various strategic approaches to captivate and maintain its market share. These strategies range from forming bands that embody characters resonating with current market preferences, to tailoring album productions to mirror the prevailing market hype. Additional tactics include the creation of unique merchandise such as ARMY bombs, which foster a personal connection between fans and BTS, and the establishment of platforms like Weverse, developed by Big Hit Entertainment to facilitate easier communication between fans and the band. These initiatives are complemented by crafting a specific portrayal of masculinity in BTS's music videos, ostensibly aligned with market desires to maximize appeal and engagement.

However, the findings of this study reveal a different narrative among female ARMY fans, particularly those in the Jabodetabek (Jakarta, Bogor, Tangerang, Bekasi) area in Indonesia. Contrary to the often-portrayed image of "blind love" in fandom culture, these fans exhibit a discerning and selective approach to spending, carefully evaluating the utility and value of their purchases related to BTS. This prudence indicates that while the fans are enthusiastic supporters of BTS, their financial engagements with the band's merchandise are not impulsive but are rather informed by practical considerations and personal financial management. The study underscores that the masculinity displayed by BTS, though an integral part of their artistic expression and appeal, serves more as an element of entertainment rather than a direct influence on the purchasing decisions of their fans. This conclusion challenges the perception of fan engagement as merely transactional and highlights a more nuanced, reflective interaction with the commercial aspects of fandom.

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