

## Reception Analysis of the Bullying Issue in the Korean Drama Series *Boyhood*

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### ABSTRACT

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This study aims to understand how audiences perceive bullying scenes depicted in the Korean drama series *Boyhood*. The drama portrays various forms of bullying experienced by the main character, Jang Byeong Tae, which reflect social phenomena that also occur in Indonesia. This research employs a qualitative approach using reception analysis based on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with nine informants who had watched the entire series.

The findings reveal that audience reception falls into three categories: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings. Most informants expressed empathy toward the bullying victim and regarded the drama as a reflective medium to raise awareness about bullying issues. However, some informants felt that the physical violence scenes were exaggerated and less relevant to the Indonesian context. This research is expected to serve as a reference for media scholars and content creators in presenting social issues more responsibly.

### INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of global media, particularly the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*), has had a profound impact on popular culture worldwide, including in Indonesia. Korean dramas, once known primarily for romantic narratives, have increasingly become a platform for exploring complex social issues such as bullying, school violence, and social inequality.

Bullying, in particular, is a pressing issue of both global and local significance. In Indonesia, the Child Protection Commission (KPAI, 2024) reported that 35% of child violence cases occurred in schools, with bullying as the most prevalent form. Beyond physical harm, bullying often leads to long-term psychological trauma, including anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and even suicidal ideation. These consequences highlight the urgent need for media not only to entertain but also to raise awareness and foster critical reflection on the issue.

A recent example is the Korean drama *Boyhood* (2023), which portrays the life of Jang Byeong Tae, a student who experiences relentless bullying before undergoing a dramatic transformation. The series not only provides suspense and emotional depth but also presents a critical depiction of the psychological and social impacts of bullying, inviting audiences to reflect on systemic issues of violence and power in educational institutions.

From a communication perspective, audience reception is central to how such media texts are interpreted. Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model emphasizes that audiences are active interpreters who may adopt dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings of media messages. This theoretical lens is crucial for understanding how Indonesian audiences interpret *Boyhood*'s bullying narratives, as cultural differences between Indonesia

and South Korea may shape the way moral messages and character actions are perceived.

While bullying has been widely studied in psychology and education, research on how Indonesian audiences receive and interpret bullying depictions in global media remains limited. This study addresses that gap by examining Indonesian viewers' reception of *Boyhood*, thereby providing insights into how cross-cultural media content intersects with local social realities. Ultimately, the research contributes to communication studies by positioning entertainment media not only as a cultural product but also as a site of social discourse, offering implications for content creators, educators, and policymakers seeking to leverage media as a tool for social awareness and youth empowerment.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Audience Reception

Audience reception refers to the way individuals interpret, internalize, and respond to messages conveyed through media. This process is influenced by various personal factors, such as social background, culture, and life experiences. Each person perceives media content differently, depending on their knowledge and individual experiences. As a result, two people watching the same media content may have differing interpretations of the same message due to the diversity in their life experiences, which shapes how they perceive and understand the media.

### 2.2 Bullying

Bullying is an aggressive behavior deliberately directed toward someone perceived as weaker, with the intention to hurt, dominate, or demean the victim. Bullying can take various forms, such as physical violence, verbal insults, or social exclusion, and is usually repetitive in nature. The most visible form is physical aggression, such as hitting or kicking, but it may also take the form of verbal abuse involving hurtful language. Additionally, social bullying can involve spreading gossip or excluding someone from a group. In today's digital era, bullying also occurs online, known as cyberbullying, where perpetrators use social media to harass or humiliate others.

The severity of bullying can vary, ranging from mild teasing or social bullying to serious physical violence. At more extreme levels, bullying can cause significant psychological harm to victims, including anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders. These psychological effects can be profoundly damaging, leading to a decline in quality of life or even increasing the risk of suicidal behavior. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the social and emotional

impacts of bullying, as media portrayals of this phenomenon may shape how audiences perceive and respond to such social issues.

### 2.3 Korean Drama (K-Drama)

Korean drama refers to audiovisual entertainment produced in South Korea, known for portraying stories that focus on emotional, social, and cultural themes relevant to everyday life. These dramas often explore universal themes such as friendship, family, love, and various challenges individuals face in society, including social problems like bullying. Korean dramas are widely recognized for depicting complex life dynamics and presenting well-developed characters, enabling viewers to connect emotionally with the storylines.

Beyond providing entertainment, K-Dramas also serve as a platform for discussing real and relevant social issues, such as school violence or interpersonal conflicts. Through compelling storytelling, Korean dramas offer moral insights and raise awareness about social challenges like bullying.

#### 2.3.1 Bullying in K-Dramas

Bullying, defined as repeated aggressive behavior involving a power imbalance, is a recurring social issue depicted in Korean dramas. Many dramas illustrate the emotional and social impacts of bullying on both victims and perpetrators. *Boyhood* is one such example that highlights this issue, offering a nuanced portrayal of how bullying affects adolescent life.

Korean dramas often function as a mirror to society, allowing audiences to reflect on and engage in discourse surrounding pertinent social issues. By depicting bullying scenarios, these dramas not only entertain but also foster greater social awareness among viewers. Research suggests that media representations of bullying can shape viewers' perceptions of the issue and encourage a deeper understanding of its harmful consequences.

### 2.4 Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Theory

Stuart Hall (1980) developed a communication model known as encoding/decoding, which explains the process of media message production and reception. The model identifies three different positions of audience reception:

- |   |            |          |
|---|------------|----------|
| a.  | Dominant   | Position |
| In this position, the audience accepts the media message as intended by its producers. In the context of <i>Boyhood</i> , viewers in this position would interpret bullying as unacceptable and harmful behavior. |            |          |
| b.  | Negotiated | Position |
| Viewers in this position accept some parts of the   |            |          |

message but interpret other parts differently. For example, they may understand the context of bullying portrayed in *Boyhood* but have alternative views on how the situation should be addressed or resolved.

c. **Oppositional Position**  
Audiences in this position reject the intended message. They might feel that the portrayal of bullying in *Boyhood* does not align with their personal experiences or is not relevant to their social context.

This model provides a useful framework for analyzing how audiences of *Boyhood* respond to bullying and how they interpret the messages delivered through the drama.

## 2.5 Emotional Response

In communication studies, emotional response refers to affective reactions triggered by communicative stimuli. These responses reflect an individual's emotional state and can be expressed through various forms, both verbal and nonverbal. Examples include facial expressions, body movements, vocal intonations, and spoken language. Emotional responses play a crucial role in communication, influencing how messages are received and understood, and shaping the quality of interpersonal relationships.

According to Aysah, Rahmat, and Suratini (2025), effective interpersonal communication significantly contributes to one's ability to regulate emotions. Through warm and open communication, individuals are better able to manage both positive and negative emotions. This capability is essential for developing healthy and adaptive social interactions.

In general, types of emotional responses in communication can be categorized as follows:

1. Joy  
A feeling of happiness or contentment, often expressed through smiling, laughter, and open body gestures.
2. Sadness  
An emotion arising from loss, rejection, or disappointment, usually accompanied by a gloomy facial expression, teary eyes, or crying.
3. Anger  
A feeling of frustration or disagreement, marked by a raised voice, tense facial expressions, and confrontational body language.
4. Fear  
An emotional reaction to perceived threats or danger, which may manifest as avoidance

behavior, physical tension, or anxious facial expressions.

5. Surprise  
A spontaneous reaction to unexpected events, often shown through widened eyes, an open mouth, or a brief pause before responding.
6. Empathy  
The ability to deeply understand and share the feelings of others, typically leading to helping behaviors, active listening, and expressions of concern.
7. Sympathy  
A feeling of compassion and care for others' situations, even without fully experiencing the same emotions. It is often shown through comforting words and supportive gestures.
8. Disgust  
A reaction to something perceived as unpleasant or repulsive, usually indicated by a wrinkled nose or a desire to distance oneself.
9. Aggression  
An emotionally driven response marked by hostility or dominance, often seen in confrontational or belittling communication styles.
10. Passivity  
A response characterized by emotional disengagement or withdrawal from communication, often seen in silence or avoidance.

Research by Aysah et al. (2025) indicates that these emotional responses not only directly influence interpersonal communication but are also closely linked to emotional regulation and the development of social skills. Furthermore, in the context of mass communication, emotionally charged content can trigger complex emotional reactions among audiences. This is evident in how viewers respond to digital media content, which often evokes emotional involvement and fosters interaction within online communities (Auliani & Nuswantari, 2025).

## METHOD

### 3.1 Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study design. The case study method was chosen because the research focuses on a specific phenomenon, namely how Indonesian audiences interpret and respond to bullying as portrayed in the Korean drama *Boyhood*. According to Creswell (2009) and Denzin & Lincoln (2009), the case study approach is appropriate when the goal is to

obtain a detailed and contextual understanding of a bounded system—in this case, the reception of one particular drama series by a selected group of viewers.

By using a case study approach, the researcher aims to capture the depth and complexity of audience interpretations, emphasizing their subjective experiences and cultural contexts. This design allows the study to go beyond general descriptions and instead explore how different audiences negotiate meaning through their personal backgrounds, values, and lived experiences.

### 3.2 Research Location and Subjects

The research was conducted in three cities in East Java—Surabaya, Malang, and Sidoarjo—selected based on their high levels of media activity and exposure to Korean culture. The informants consisted of nine individuals aged 20–24 who had watched the entire *Boyhood* drama and had either direct or indirect experiences related to bullying.

### 3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted both online and offline. In addition, the researcher gathered secondary data, including comments on social media platforms (TikTok, Instagram, and X/Twitter), online forum reviews, and literature related to bullying and media reception.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This systematic approach was applied to interpret the results of in-depth interviews and documentation related to the reception of bullying scenes in the Korean drama *Boyhood*. In addition, the analysis was guided by Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding framework, which classifies audience reception into dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional positions.

a.	Data	Reduction
Interview transcripts and documentation were carefully reviewed to identify relevant information. Irrelevant statements were eliminated, while meaningful responses were grouped into thematic categories such as:		

1. Empathy toward victims – expressions of emotional connection with bullied characters.
2. Perceptions of bullying behavior – condemnation of bullying as a negative and unacceptable act.

3. Reactions to revenge – differing opinions regarding the protagonist's retaliatory actions.

b.	Data	Display
The reduced data were then organized into narrative descriptions supported by tables and direct quotations from participants. This presentation aimed to clarify recurring patterns and highlight the diversity of audience responses.		

c.	Conclusion	Drawing/Verification
The final stage involved interpreting the findings by mapping them onto Hall's reception categories: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings. This process enabled the researcher to demonstrate that audiences are active interpreters of media content, influenced by personal experience, cultural background, and social values.		

Through this approach, the study concludes that *Boyhood* not only evokes empathy and social awareness about bullying but also generates critical and oppositional readings depending on the audience's perspective. This analytic process ensures that the findings are grounded in both qualitative rigor and theoretical relevance.

## RESULT

This study aims to examine audience reception toward the representation of bullying in the Korean drama *Boyhood*. Using a qualitative case study approach and in-depth interviews, the researcher involved nine informants between the ages of 20 and 24. The participants were selected because they had either direct or indirect experiences with bullying—whether as victims, witnesses, or even former perpetrators—and had watched the entire series.

The analysis shows that audience responses to the bullying scenes in *Boyhood* fall into three decoding positions based on Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding theory: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings.

In the dominant-hegemonic reading, most participants fully accepted the drama's intended message. They regarded bullying as an unacceptable act under any circumstances, expressed empathy toward the victim Jang Byeong-tae, and recognized the severe psychological harm caused by bullying. These participants also viewed *Boyhood* as an effective medium to raise social awareness about the importance of creating safe and supportive school environments.

In the negotiated reading, some participants generally agreed with the anti-bullying message but offered critical reflections on specific aspects of the

storyline. They especially highlighted the conflict resolution, arguing that the revenge scenes involving the protagonist were unrealistic or oversimplified. While they supported the overall message against bullying, they remained cautious about the credibility of the way it was portrayed.

In the oppositional reading, a smaller group of participants rejected much of the intended message. They perceived the depiction of bullying in *Boyhood* as exaggerated and overly dramatized, making it less reflective of real-life conditions in Indonesia. Some also questioned the effectiveness of the solutions offered in the drama, suggesting that the representation was detached from their lived experiences.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that audience reception is far from uniform. Instead, it is shaped by viewers' social backgrounds, personal experiences with bullying, and individual value systems. The diversity of interpretations highlights the active role of audiences in constructing meaning from media content, affirming Hall's view that audiences are not passive consumers but active participants in the communication process.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that audience reception of the representation of bullying in the Korean drama *Boyhood* is diverse and non-homogeneous. Viewers' interpretations of the drama were strongly shaped by their social backgrounds, personal experiences with bullying, and individual moral values. The majority of participants occupied the dominant-hegemonic position, fully accepting the anti-bullying message and recognizing bullying as a serious social problem that must be opposed. Others were positioned in the negotiated category, agreeing with the main message but critiquing elements of the narrative, particularly the conflict resolution, which they perceived as oversimplified. A smaller group adopted the oppositional position, rejecting the drama's intended message and considering the depiction of bullying to be exaggerated and less relevant to their lived realities.

These findings reaffirm the concept of the active audience in mass communication studies, showing that audiences do not simply absorb media messages but actively construct meaning through processes of negotiation and resistance.

Practical implications can be drawn from this study. For content creators, the findings highlight the importance of portraying sensitive social issues such as bullying in a more realistic and culturally sensitive way to ensure stronger audience engagement. For educators, the drama can serve as a useful teaching tool to stimulate empathy and encourage critical discussions about bullying prevention in classrooms. For policymakers, the study demonstrates the potential of popular media to be integrated into national campaigns aimed at reducing bullying and promoting safer educational environments.

Suggestions for future research include expanding the sample size to capture a wider range of perspectives, conducting cross-cultural comparisons between Indonesian and Korean audiences, and employing digital ethnography to explore how online communities interpret and respond to media portrayals of bullying.

## Author contribution

Bilbina Alifia Maghfiruha was responsible for the entire process of preparing this thesis, including: topic conceptualization and research design, literature review, development of research instruments, conducting in-depth interviews, data collection and analysis, as well as the full drafting and editing of the manuscript. The author also integrated Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory into the analytical framework and conducted a deep interpretation of audience perceptions regarding bullying scenes in the Korean drama *Boyhood*.

Latif Ahmad Fauzan, S.I.Kom., M.A, as the academic advisor, provided guidance, input, and significant academic corrections in refining the theoretical framework, research methodology, and the clarity of structure and arguments in the writing. All parties involved have approved the final version of this thesis.

## Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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