

Gen Z's Perceptions of Masculinity and Violence in the Series "Weak Hero Class 2"

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ABSTRACT

The development of digital platforms has made it easier for audiences to access and watch Korean drama series, including the series "Weak Hero Class 2." This study aims to understand how Indonesian Gen Z responds to and interprets the portrayal of masculinity and violence in the series, as well as to explore their perspectives. The method used was descriptive qualitative, and data analysis was conducted through reception analysis based on Stuart Hall's theory. The results show that audiences interpret representations of masculinity and violence in various ways. The decoding process and audience interpretation reveal both positive and negative views of the depiction of violence, which is not straightforward. The presence of both acceptance and rejection among Gen Z viewers presents a paradox. Violence is viewed as part of social dynamics, and, on an individual level, masculinity is closely linked to violence, specifically physical aggression. Three types of meaning dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional emerge in how audiences receive representations of masculinity and violence in "Weak Hero Class 2." Audience background influences interpretation and affects how they accept or reject the portrayals of masculinity and violence in the series.

INTRODUCTION

Mass media is not only a source of information or entertainment, but also serves as an ideological source that shapes people's perceptions of gender roles and identities. Reception analysis questions methodologies in data-driven social research as well as humanistic exploration of media content because both often do not consider or override the ability of the people involved to understand the messages conveyed through the media. This method focuses on the way in which individuals or societies identify and construct meanings derived from media (McQuail, 1997 in (Jauhari & Arviani, 2023).

Media with its wide reach can serve as an effective tool to disseminate gender construction to society (Thabrani, 2022). The media creates images of masculinity and femininity to show the ideal male and female figures, despite the differences between the two genders (Mazzarella, 2013; Scarcelli & Farci, 2024). In this way, the media can influence society or audiences to have a more masculine perspective and be sensitive to issues related to gender or otherwise be affected by gender bias (Saputra & Albab, 2024).

Movies and television series are one type of mass media that affect gender representation. Film (Nurhakim & Haqqu, 2023) is a means of communication that uses media to connect between communicators and communicators and can be found everywhere. In addition to being ubiquitous, movies can also have an impact on the people who see them. Films can depict or reflect the realities of daily life that occur in society (Subardja & Arviani, 2021).

As a mass media product, movies will be enjoyed by a wide audience, and the meaning or message of the movies that have been watched will have different meanings for each individual. One type of spectacle that is popular with the Indonesian people is Korean series or dramas. In recent years, the popularity of Korean dramas in Indonesia has increased significantly due to the support of digital technology and easier access through streaming services. JakPat survey data shows that 72% of respondents in Indonesia are interested in watching Korean dramas, dominated by female audiences, and watching them through digital streaming platforms, surpassing local content and Hollywood productions. Each time they watch an average of about 2 hours and 45 minutes or an average of 4 times a week.

In Korean culture, masculinity is often displayed with a strong, cold, and brave character in the face of conflict, including physical violence. In this case, violence is considered a means to social existence and a form of self-vindication, especially among young men. In contrast to Indonesian culture, which emphasizes harmony, politeness, and self-control as a way of expressing masculinity. Although they are also strongly and strictly demanded, social norms and religious values limit acts of violence to be carried out openly. That is why, the masculinity values depicted in a Korean drama may differ from the construction of masculinity in the local Indonesian perspective. This allows for a diverse reception process among the audience, especially in terms of the interpretation of the relationship between masculinity and violence.

The novelty of this study is fivefold. First, it applies Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding theory specifically to a Korean drama series ("Weak Hero Class 2") that depicts complex, multi-layered masculinities (strategic, protective, hegemonic), analyzing how Gen Z decodes these representations. Second, it systematically maps three reception positions (dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, oppositional) across eight informants with diverse backgrounds (students and workers aged 20-22 from Jakarta, Surabaya, Bekasi, Gorontalo, Sidoarjo), identifying that 3 informants occupied dominant positions, 3 oppositional, and 2 negotiated. Third, it identifies a paradox in Gen Z reception simultaneous acceptance of violence as social dynamics and rejection of violence as an inherent masculine trait revealing generational ambivalence toward traditional masculinity norms. Fourth, it analyzes how family environment (e.g., informant 3's observation of male family members as conflict interveners) shapes acceptance of violence as a natural male response. Fifth, it connects empirical findings to Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, demonstrating how some Gen Z viewers challenge this hegemony while others reproduce it.

This study discusses the representation of masculinity and violence in the Korean drama series "Weak Hero Class 2" which depicts the dynamics of adolescent boys' lives through conflict, solidarity, and the formation of masculine identity. The series features various forms of masculinity, ranging from hegemonic and aggressive to alternative masculinity that is more strategic, emotional, and intelligent. Violence in the story is not only shown as a physical act, but also as a symbol of the struggle to maintain honor, dominance, and social position in the adolescent environment. Through complex characters and storylines, the series provides a space for viewers to understand how masculinity is constructed and maintained in men's social lives.

Previous studies have shown that people's perceptions of masculinity and violence are very diverse, especially among Gen Z. Some viewers still see masculinity as synonymous with

physical strength, courage, and dominance, while others are beginning to accept the concept of alternative masculinity that is gentler, expressive, and empathetic. In the Indonesian context, patriarchal culture and rigid masculinity standards are often associated with the emergence of violent behavior, bullying, fights, and psychological distress in adolescent boys. Meanwhile, the influence of Korean popular culture through K-dramas and K-pop began to introduce new models of masculinity that were more inclusive and open to emotional expression. This makes "Weak Hero Class 2" interesting to study because it combines two sides of masculinity, namely the hard side that is synonymous with violence and the soft side that prioritizes strategy and intelligence.

Based on these conditions, this study aims to find out how Gen Z in Indonesia interprets the representation of masculinity and violence in the series "Weak Hero Class 2" using Stuart Hall's reception theory. Through an encoding and decoding approach, this study will look at whether audiences are in a position of dominance, negotiation, or opposition to the message conveyed by the series. This research is also expected to fill the limitations of previous studies that still discuss Gen Z's perception of alternative masculinity in Korean dramas in the context of Indonesian culture. Thus, the results of the research are expected to be able to contribute to the study of popular media, gender, and culture, especially related to how the younger generation interprets the values of masculinity and violence in the digital media era.

METHOD

This research included descriptive qualitative research using reception analysis methods. According to Moleong (in Sobur, 2019), qualitative research aims to understand phenomena from the perspective of the research subject as a whole by using words and language in a natural context. The natural context of this study lies in the media text in the form of representations of masculinity and violence in the Korean drama series "Weak Hero Class 2" and the form of reception from informants to the focus of this research. Stuart Hall's theory is used as the basis for reception analysis which explains three positions of audience reading, namely the dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated position and the opposition position (Sobur, 2019). This study used a combined method of online and offline approaches to reach various informants from Gen Z who have different accesses, interests, and experiences with digital media, including watching the series "Weak Hero Class 2". The informants who were the subjects of the study were selected based on criteria (1) male and female Gen Z viewers who saw variations in reception by gender; (2) audiences with diverse social and educational backgrounds (communication students, K-drama lovers, etc.); (3) active viewers who have left reviews, comments, or discussions about "Weak Hero Class 2" on social media such as Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, or online forums; and (4) have the ability to articulate exactly what they see. Thus, the selection of informants is carried out purposively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Weak Hero Class 2 series is one of the Korean dramas that has managed to attract the attention of the public, especially the younger generation, because it shows the dynamics of the lives of teenage boys who are full of issues of violence, friendship, and the formation of self-identity. The series was released as a continuation of the first season of Weak Hero

Class, and garnered a huge response from audiences not only in South Korea, but also internationally. The popularity of the series has increased rapidly after being widely discussed on social media platforms, such as TikTok, Instagram, and X (Twitter), where footage of fight scenes, debates about characters, and psychological analysis of characters are disseminated by users.

This phenomenon shows that *Weak Hero Class 2* is not only an entertainment show, but also a subject of public discussion regarding the values of masculinity, power, and self-esteem among teenage boys. The main character in the series is Yeon Si-eun, a student who is known to be quiet, academic, and not the physically strong type, but uses intelligence and strategy as a form of self-defense. On the other hand, characters like Ahn Su-ho and Gotak are represented as men with physical strength and protective attitudes, while Baekjin appears as an aggressive and dominant figure who uses violence as a tool of social control.

The highly contrasting depiction of characters shows a multi-layered spectrum of masculinity, ranging from strategic masculinity, protective masculinity, to hegemonic masculinity. These three forms of masculinity are at the heart of the conflict in the series, as each character tries to build their own identity amid the pressure of a harsh school environment. The scenes in *Weak Hero Class 2* show that violence is not just a physical act, but a social language between men to gain recognition, maintain their self-esteem, and ensure their position in the group hierarchy.

The series also raises the issue of trauma and emotional wounds as part of the personality formation process, showing that physical strength is not the only benchmark of masculinity. The narrative captures the audience's attention because it offers a psychological perspective on the male characters' battles – not just showing who wins or loses, but what shapes the way they act. The relevance of *Weak Hero Class 2* to this research lies in how the series presents a complex, hard, yet vulnerable representation of masculinity at the same time.

This encourages the emergence of different meanings among the audience, especially generation Z who have a high affinity with Korean popular culture. Some viewers see the violence in the series as a realistic depiction of the world of teenage boys, while others think the series can normalize aggression as a problem-solving tool. This complexity of representation is the basis for examining how audiences, especially Gen Z in Indonesia, interpret masculinity and violence displayed in the series, according to the focus of this research analysis. The number of research informants was 8 people consisting of students and workers with an age range of 20-22 years, actively watching Korean dramas and domiciled in several cities (see Table 1).

Table 1. Research Informant

No. Infoman	Age	Status	Duration of watching Korean Dramas	Domicile
Infoman 1	22	Students	Once a week	Jakarta
Infoman 2	21	Students	Every day	Jakarta
Infoman 3	20	Students	Every day	Surabaya
Infoman 4	22	Students	Once a week	Bekasi
Infoman 5	21	Employees	Every day	Surabaya
Infoman 6	22	Employees	Three times a week	Gorontalo
Infoman 7	22	Students	Three times a week	Sidoarjo
Infoman 8	22	Employees	Once a week	Surabaya

Source: Research Results (2025)

Gen Z's Interpretation of Masculinity and Violence in the "Weak Hero Class 2" Series

Each informant has a different background of experience and personal values, so the process of meaning that is formed is diverse. Understanding the storyline and characters in "Weak Hero Class 2" is an important basis for seeing how Generation Z understands this show. The series not only shows various forms of masculinity, but also makes violence a key element in the development of the story. Violence is anything that prevents individuals from realizing their potential in a reasonable way. Violence serves as more than just a physical act but as a way for male characters to maintain position, show strength or express inner conflict.

The existence of these two aspects, namely masculinity and violence, makes the process of interpreting the audience more complex. Generation Z as a viewer not only pays attention to male depictions, but also evaluates how violence is understood, displayed, and contextualized in the relationships between characters. In general, films or series function as a means to convey ideology and form certain views. Background experiences, personal values, and expectations of modern men greatly influence the way they judge the show.

Gen Z's Acceptance of Masculinity and Violence in the "Weak Hero Class 2" Series

Most informants from Generation Z show mixed acceptance of depictions of masculinity and violence in the Weak Hero Class 2 series. They assessed that the male characters and conflicts shown in the series are quite relevant to the social reality of adolescent boys, especially in the context of environmental pressure, friendship relationships, and the dynamics of violence in the school classroom. This meaning is inseparable from the background of personal experience, the values adhered to, and the way each informant views the concept of men and the use of violence in daily life, thus forming different perspectives in interpreting the message conveyed by the series.

"The problem is that even though it's set in Korea, things like that still happen here. Well, for example, like school gangs, fights between students, they still appear very often in the news..." [Informant 1, October 30, 2025, Offline Interview]

"And for Gen Z now, many also feel pressure from the environment and social media. You have to be strong, you have to be strong, you have to be brave. It's very similar to the series, just a different level of intensity." [Informant 4, November 25, 2025, Offline Interview]

"Of course, it is not if violence is always identified with masculinity. Violence itself is a behavior that is done by anyone. Not seeing men, women, children, adults..." [Informant 6, December 12, 2025, Online Interview]

Based on the informant's understanding, the researcher concluded that the "Weak Hero Class 2" series contains pros and cons, especially related to the depiction of masculinity that is not entirely singular, so that it gives rise to acceptance as well as rejection from the audience. On the one hand, violence is understood as part of the social dynamics and environmental pressures faced by male characters, but on the other hand, it also triggers criticism because it is considered to reinforce the notion that masculine masculinity is always related to physical aggression.

"The problem is that men have always been associated with hard things. Like, "Guys have to be strong, they have to be able to fight, they have to be brave." So, it's kind of like it's just forming in people's heads that if a guy has to fight if he's being bullied. But in my opinion, that doesn't mean that guys really like violence. Sometimes it's even because they

were taught from a young age not to look weak, so they solve problems in a hard way..." [Informant 2, October 31, 2025, Offline interview]

"I agree, sir, I agree with that statement. You see, since I was a child, I often see it. Like in my family, if there is a fuss or there is a problem, the ones who intervene must be the guys. Either it's my father or my mas, so I consider him strong and have to move forward, man. It doesn't mean that all guys have to be like that, but I understand why people connect those two things. Because since childhood, boys seem to be "obligated" to appear strong. So if they're angry, the venting is often harder..." [Informant 3, November 10, 2025, Offline interview]

"I think yes, because since we were children, we were taught that if we were bullied, we had to fight, yes, fight with the conditions or rules if they were the perpetrators of this bullying, play physically first. So how do we survive and show our own masculinity..." [Informant 8, December 30, 2025, Offline interview]

Based on quotes from informants 2, 3, and 8, the informant shows that the meaning of masculinity is still very closely related to physical aggressiveness as a form of self-defense and proof of masculinity. The informant's statement that countering bullying through physical fights is understood as a way to "survive and show masculinity" indicates that violence is considered a natural and even necessary response when male self-esteem is threatened. This is in line with Raewyn Connell's theory that a man's masculinity will be doubted when he is unable to provide an image of a strong, brave, intelligent, powerful and heterosexual man (R.W Connell in the citation made and nur). This kind of masculinity is referred to by R.W Connell as hegemonic masculinity. This view reflects the instillation of traditional masculinity values, where men are taught from an early age not to show weakness and are obliged to face physical conflict. Added by the statement of informant 3 which shows that the meaning of masculinity that he has is greatly influenced by social experiences since childhood, especially through the family environment.

The informant revealed that in conflict situations in his family, male figures such as his father and brother are always the parties who "intervene" when there is a conflict or quarrel. Fathers reflect the values that exist in courage, responsibility, and sacrifice (Mifthul and Ririe 2025). This experience forms the assumption that men are the party who must appear strong and advance in the face of conflict, so that strength and courage are understood as the main attributes of masculinity. However, this interpretation actually triggers criticism because it shows a direct link between masculinity and physical aggressiveness or the potential for violence as a form of emotional vent. By placing jousting as the main way to maintain honor and identity as a man and stating that men are required to appear strong and men's anger tends to be vented in a harsher way, the informant indirectly affirms the notion that masculinity must always be proven through physical strength and dominance over opponents while showing the internalization of traditional masculinity norms that place men as protectors and also perpetrators of physical force.

Within this framework, aggressiveness is not seen as problematic behavior, but rather as an understandable consequence of men's social roles. Furthermore, the informant's family background plays an important role in shaping the normalization of the relationship between masculinity and violence. By constantly witnessing adult males resolve conflicts through direct confrontation, informants learn that male gender roles are synonymous with the courage

to face conflict physically. Although the informant states that not all men should behave this way, the understanding still shows how violence and aggressiveness are part of the framework of thinking about masculinity that is considered normal and acceptable. In the context of Weak Hero Class 2, the views of these informants are relevant to the depiction of male characters living in an environment full of pressure and violence. The series shows how social norms encourage men to retaliate against violence as the only way to survive. However, this view also opens up a space for criticism against the construction of masculinity that overemphasizes physical dominance, as it has the potential to ignore other more reflective and non-violent forms of masculinity that do not rely entirely on physical aggressiveness like Seo Jun-Tae's character. Thus, this informant's statement shows that there is a tension between the traditional masculinity values that are still held by some Gen Z and the more reflective and non-violent masculinity discourse that is beginning to develop.

Based on informants 2, 3, and 8, the position of these informants shows a dominant position. Informant 2 can be categorized as being in the dominant reading position even though the informant had given a response "it doesn't mean that men like violence" but, in general, the informant accepts and affirms the view that male masculinity is socially always associated with violence and physical aggressiveness. This can be seen from his statement which emphasizes that men have long been attached to the traits of "hard", "must be strong", "must be able to fight", and "must be brave". This expression shows that informants do not doubt the relationship between masculinity and violence, but instead consider it as a common thing and formed together by society. Although the informant stated that men do not like violence, the follow-up explanation he conveyed actually strengthened the acceptance of these traditional masculinity norms. The informant explained that men were taught from childhood not to look weak, so the use of a harsh approach in solving problems was considered a natural result of the process. In other words, violence is not something to be avoided, but is considered an understandable result of social demands on men.

"I also feel like sometimes they don't want to hurt people, but it's like it's automatic. For example, if a man is bullied and then he is bullied, he will be called a "cupu" or "chubby." So yes, they feel like they have to have the courage to fight to be considered a real man. [Informant 2, October 31, 2025, Offline interview]

This view of informant 2 shows that the informant accepts the logic that associates male nature with strength and aggressiveness, even though the informant tries to provide a moral reason for the behavior. Informants normalize this pattern as a result of upbringing and social demands. Thus, the informant receives a message of masculinity that applies in society and is also displayed in the Weak Hero Class 2 series which is in line with the way of thinking that the informant already has before.

As for informant 3, it can also be categorized in a dominant position because the informant accepts and justifies the assumption that male masculinity socially is always associated with strength, courage, and readiness to face physical conflict. This acceptance is formed through social experiences from childhood, especially in the family environment, where male figures such as fathers and brothers are always the front lines when conflicts occur. This experience builds an understanding that the role of men is as a strong and responsible party to intervene in problematic situations. The informant's agreement on the link

between masculinity and violence can be seen from his statement that men are "obligated" to appear strong since childhood.

"Yes, from experience and what I see, yes, from my opinion too..." [Informant 3, November 10, 2025, Offline interview]

"So, what makes up masculinity is the environment. So, when in that environment, it is considered that masculinity is that men must be strong, men are not allowed to cry. Yes, that's where masculinity is considered in the area. But not necessarily in other areas, masculinity is considered like that too, like that..." [Informant 3, November 10, 2025, Offline interview]

The statement shows that the informant does not consider the demand as something that needs to be questioned, but rather as a rule that should be carried out by men. Although the informant said that not all men should behave that way, he still understood and accepted the reasons why society associates masculine traits with physically aggressive attitudes, especially when they are angry or facing conflict. The dominant position of informant 3 is also seen from the way he interprets violence as a form of emotional outlet that is considered natural for men. Violence is not understood as deviant behavior, but as a consequence of environmental demands that require men to suppress vulnerability and not show weakness. Thus, the informant does not reject the construction of masculinity that associates masculinity with physical strength, but rather internalizes it as part of the male gender role that the informant has witnessed and learned since childhood.

Informant 8 can also be categorized as a dominant position because the informant directly accepts the view that physical violence is a legitimate and necessary way to show masculinity, especially in bullying situations. This can be seen from his statement that when experiencing bullying, men are taught to fight through physical fights, as long as the bully perpetrator commits violence first. This view shows that violence is not seen as an act that needs to be questioned, but as a mechanism of self-defense that is reasonable and in accordance with the norms of life.

"Here it seems that for men we need masculine traits that can dominate opponents because at the end of the day we will be used, we want to be tough and think logically about how to survive or survival mode..." [Interviewer 8, December 30, 2025, Offline interview]

"But at least you have to be able to hold on and be brave to move forward. Because basically guys have to be able to lead..." [Informant 8, December 30, 2025, Offline interview]

The informant's acceptance of the relationship between masculinity and violence can also be seen from the way the informant understands physical violence as a means to survive and show masculinity. A man's identity must be proven through tangible actions of a physical nature, especially when his self-esteem and social position are disturbed. The second statement mentioned by the informant also reflects the acceptance of the social construct that associates masculinity with the responsibility to move forward and face problems head-on. The dominant position of informants can be seen from the use of the phrase "must be able to survive" which shows that there is a moral and social obligation for men to show firmness and courage because it is in line with the meaning of masculinity that is generally applicable in society even when it is related to the potential use of physical force. The acceptance of this

norm shows how masculinity is still understood as an identity that emphasizes violence and domination and readiness to face conflict as part of the male role.

"So yes, masculinity doesn't have to be measured by how hard you can hit, but how much you can control yourself." [Interviewer 1, October 30, 2025, Offline interview]

"But the reality is that there are also many guys who are not comfortable with violence. I'm one of them. I'm more like, 'let's discuss it carefully,' even though sometimes the ending is stressful for me. So, in my opinion, men are not automatically related to violence. It's just the stereotypes that make it look like that..." [Informant 4, December 12, 2025, Offline interview]

"No, because it's different. Masculinity is a social theory or social reality, while violence is a social phenomenon. So, it's like all violence doesn't have to be about masculinity, like that..." [Informant 7, December 28, Offline interview]

Based on the quotations from informants 1, 4, and 7, there is an understanding of masculinity that does not link male traits to physical aggression or the use of violence. This informant argues that masculinity does not have to be measured by the ability to commit violence, but through self-control, emotional management, and how to respond to conflict in a more reflective way. The statement of informant 1 that masculinity is measured by the ability to self-regulate shows a rejection of the view that physical strength and aggressive actions are the main references in determining masculinity. The same view was also expressed by informant 4 who clearly expressed his discomfort with violence. This statement shows that avoiding violence does not mean that there is no impact, but it is still chosen because it is in accordance with personal values that do not involve masculinity with harsh actions.

The interpretation shown by informants 1, 4 and 7 shows a rejection of traditional masculinity norms that emphasize physical strength, dominance, and the courage to confront. In contrast to previous informants who interpreted violence as a form of self-defense and proof of masculinity, this group of informants actually places self-control and emotional awareness as important aspects in understanding masculinity. In this framework, violence is seen as an imideal choice and even contrary to the values of masculinity they embrace.

"So yes, masculinity doesn't have to be measured by how hard you can hit, but how much you can control yourself." [Informant 1, October 30, 2025, Offline interview]

"I think it's important for me to understand that masculinity is like 'how men look at themselves'. But it's not just about the muscles or the bravery. To me, being a guy is more about how you can be responsible, be self-regulating, and not easily follow your ego. I used to think that men should be strict, not cry. But as I grew older, I realized that it was cool for people to be honest with their feelings. Like, yes, if you're feeling sad, don't be so yourself. "It's so hard to be self-absorbed and self-absorbed..." [Informant 1, October 30, 2025, Offline interview]

"The problem is that if you say that men are synonymous with violence, falling is like limiting the role of men. Like, if you are a little soft, you will immediately be said to be weak. In fact, sometimes those who can hold themselves are stronger..." [Informant 1, October 30, 2025 Offline interview]

Based on the statement of informant 1, it can be seen that the informant occupies an oppositional position in interpreting the relationship between masculinity and violence. The informant emphatically rejects the notion that male masculinity must always be proven

through physical force or aggressive action. For her, masculinity is measured by men's ability to control themselves, take responsibility for actions, and manage emotions consciously. Statements such as "masculinity should not be measured by how hard you can hit, but how hard you can govern yourself" show a direct rejection of the hegemonic construction of masculinity that links masculinity to physical dominance.

The oppositional position taken by informant 1 is also based on his awareness of the impact of traditional masculinity stereotypes that limit the space to express the male self. According to the informant, the way of portraying men as figures who must be strong and aggressive actually causes harmful social pressure, especially for men who have emotional traits or are gentle. Furthermore, informant 1 interprets masculinity as a process that is rethought and develops along with his personal experience. The informant admits that her understanding of masculinity has changed from the old view that requires men to always be tough and hold back emotions, towards a more inclusive understanding, where honestly expressing feelings is considered a form of strength. The statement "the bigger I get, the cooler it is that men can be honest with their feelings" shows that according to the informant, masculinity is no longer based on the denial of emotions or aggressive attitudes, but on the ability to manage emotions maturely.

In the framework of Stuart Hall's reception analysis, the oppositional reading position arises when the audience consciously rejects the dominant meanings offered by the media text. In this context, informant 1 does not accept the idea of masculinity that is often associated with violence, both circulating in society and shown through male characters in the Weak Hero Class 2 series. Informants view or interpret violence as a result of the inability to manage emotions and pressures from the social environment. Thus, the oppositional position taken by informant 1 shows a disagreement with the form of hegemonic masculinity as explained by R.W Connell. The informant not only rejects the idea that physical strength is at the core of masculinity, but also provides another notion of masculinity that is more reflective, emotional, and non-violent.

Furthermore, there are 4 informants who also occupy an oppositional position, the informant explicitly expresses his disagreement with the notion that men must use violence. According to informant 4, this is not something that arises naturally, but is more influenced by social and social environmental factors. This statement shows that the informant rejects the interpretation that masculinity is a natural trait that is identical to physical aggressiveness.

"So, if you say that the guy must be harsh or must use violence, I don't agree. At best, there are many guys who have habits like that because of the environment or association..."
[Informant 4, December 12, 2025, Offline interview]

"But the reality is that there are also many guys who are not comfortable with violence. I'm one of them. I'm more like, "let's discuss it carefully," even though sometimes the ending is stressful for me. So, in my opinion, men are not automatically related to violence. It's just the stereotypes that make it look like that..." [Informant 4, December 12, 2025, Offline interview]

"The problem is that every violence appears, it always has an effect on the behavior of the character. At first, it seems like Si-eun is very calm, but it gets more and more "dark" because she is constantly being pressured. It feels like showing how people's mentality can change if their lives are violent" [Informant 4, December 12, 2025, Offline interview]

The counter-attitude of informant 4 becomes clearer when the informant asserts that many men are uncomfortable with violence and that he prefers to solve problems through talk. His statement that the informant chose to speak well, even though it made him feel emotionally distressed, shows that the informant realizes that violence is not an ideal solution. In this case, the informant positions masculinity as the ability to manage conflict rationally rather than through physical mastery. In addition, informant 4 also provides a critical explanation of how the violence depicted in *Weak Hero Class 2* is. Informants do not consider violence as a form of proof of masculinity, but as something that is destructive and negatively affects a person's mental state. The informant's statement about Yeon Si-Eun's character change from a calm figure to a darker figure due to the constant pressure and violence, shows that the informant views the narrative of violence as a mentally destructive process, not as a trait of masculinity to be emulated. Informants understand violence as a traumatic experience that shapes behavior, not as a masculine attribute.

Within the framework of Stuart Hall's reception analysis, the oppositional position of reading is characterized by a rejection of the dominant meaning offered by the media text. Informant 4 does not accept the hegemonic idea that is often attached to male characters in the *Weak Hero Class 2* series, namely that violence is a natural response or a form of masculine assertiveness, on the contrary, informants reconstruct this meaning with a critical point of view, that violence actually shows a negative impact on mental health and character development. Thus, the opposition position of informant 4 shows disapproval of dominant masculinity, which normalizes violence as part of male identity. The informant provides another understanding that shows that masculinity is a choice of way of behaving, not a social obligation that must be realized through violence. These findings show that a portion of the Gen Z audience challenges traditional masculinity stereotypes by emphasizing aspects of empathy, communication, and understanding and awareness of the psychological impact of violence.

Informant 7 also saw that the informant occupies an oppositional position to views that directly associate masculinity with violence. The informant firmly distinguishes between the concepts of masculinity and violence as two different things. Masculinity is defined as a construction or social reality related to how the male figure is formed and interpreted in society. Meanwhile, violence is positioned as a social phenomenon that can arise in a variety of contexts and is not always rooted in masculine identity. This conceptual separation shows the informant's rejection of the generalization that every act of violence committed by men is a form of masculinity.

"No, because it's different. Masculinity is a social theory or social reality, while violence is a social phenomenon. So, it's like all violence doesn't have to be about masculinity, like that..." [Informant 7, December 28, 2025, Offline interview]

"Masculinity is a form of social reality that describes or is matched with a male figure. So masculinity is actually formed because of the conditions or social environment around it, like that..." [Informant 7, December 28, 2025, Offline interview]

The counter-attitude of informant 7 becomes clearer when the informant emphasizes that masculinity is formed through existing social conditions and environments. By understanding that masculinity is the result of social construction, informants reject the notion that violence is an innate male trait. This view shows a relatively high level of theoretical

awareness, in which the informant sees masculinity as the result of a constantly changing and context-dependent social process, rather than as a fixed and inherent trait of male behavior. In the framework of Stuart Hall's reception analysis, the position of oppositional reading arises when the audience not only rejects the dominant meaning but also dismantles the basic assumptions that underpin that meaning. Informant 7 did not accept the dominant discourse that is often present in media texts and the wider community, namely that violence committed by men is a direct consequence of masculinity. Instead, the informant reconstructs meaning with an analytical approach, that violence must be understood as a stand-alone social phenomenon and can be influenced by many factors beyond gender identity. Thus, the oppositional position of informant 7 shows a critical reading of hegemonic masculinity as put forward by R.W Connell, who often associates masculinity with dominance and physical strength. Informants actually provide space for a more complex and contextual understanding of masculinity.

"If masculinity is maybe because he feels he is strong, there may be an end to violence..." [Informant 5, December 15, 2025, Offline interview]

"But I agree that hegemonic masculinity cultures often encourage or normalize violence as a way for men to prove dominance. Or his honor. Or his strength as a man..." [Informant 6, December 16, Online interview]

In contrast to the previous informants, informants 5 and 6 showed a negotiated reading position within the framework of Stuart Hall's reception analysis. Informant 5 stated that the strong sense inherent in masculinity may lead to violence. The use of this diction shows that violence is understood as a possible consequence of the social construction of masculinity, not as the core of male identity itself. Therefore, the informant does not fully accept that masculinity is synonymous with physical aggressiveness, but rather sees it as a situational relationship. Meanwhile, informant 6 explicitly mentions the concept of hegemonic masculinity as stated by Raewyn Connell, emphasizing that hegemonic masculinity culture often normalizes violence as a way to prove male dominance and honor. This statement shows a critical awareness of gender social construction. Violence is not understood as a male nature, but as a result of internalizing social norms that demand men to appear dominant and strong.

"Like a man, you always can't get far from the name masculinity in general, that's how it is..." [Informant 5, December 15, 2025, Offline interview]

"Violence is not always about masculinity, violence can start from, for example, the environment, then misunderstandings. Then in my own opinion, it's more towards the environment, if masculinity is maybe because he feels he is strong, there may be an end to violence..." [Informant 5, December 15, 2025, Offline interview]

"It could be that he started to be the one who saved people who were bullied, using violence because he was also bullied..." [Informant 5, 15 December 2025, Offline interview]

Based on the above statements, informant position 5 can be categorized as a negotiated reading in the framework of Stuart Hall's reception analysis because he does not fully accept or completely reject the relationship between masculinity and violence. Informants carry out a process of bargaining for meaning against the dominant discourse that associates men, masculinity, and aggressiveness. The informant's statement shows that the informant acknowledges the existence of a social construct that strongly attaches masculinity to male identity. The informant does not deny that in social reality, men are often positioned within a

certain masculine framework. This means that the informant accepts that masculinity is an almost inseparable part of male identity in the view of society. However, when discussing violence, informants do not necessarily equate masculinity with violence. The informant emphasized that violence can arise due to other factors such as the environment. Masculinity is only positioned as one of the possibilities that can lead to violence, not as the core or main feature of masculinity itself. The use of the word "maybe" stated by the informant shows that the informant does not see the relationship as absolute.

Furthermore, in the 3rd statement of the informant, the informant understands violence as a response to life experience, not as a form of proof of masculinity. Informants see acts of violence in the series as a consequence of their experiences of being victims, social pressures, or certain situations. In this case, violence is understood contextually and psychologically, not as a symbol of masculine dominance. When compared to the dominant reading informant who clearly considers physical fighting as a form of proof of masculinity, the position of informant 5 is different. The informant did not justify violence as a male obligation, but nor did it completely disconnect the link between masculinity and potential aggressiveness. Informants accept that in social practice, masculinity is often associated with power, and that power can lead to violence. However, he still gives room that environmental factors and personal experience are much more decisive. Within the framework of Stuart Hall, negotiated reading occurs when the audience accepts some of the dominant meaning offered by the media, but reprocesses it according to its own experience and understanding. Informants show this position because they do not fully follow the dominant discourse that associates masculinity with violence, but also do not reject the relationship totally. The informant adjusts the meaning by seeing violence as a situational possibility, not as a definition of masculinity.

"But I agree that hegemonic masculinity cultures often encourage or normalize violence as a way for men to prove dominance. Or his honor. Or his strength as a man..." [Informant 6, December 16, Online interview]

"I disagree with the portrayal of the only way to fight violence in extreme terms with violence as well..." [Informant 6, December 16, Online interview]

"This drama is caused by a school system and society that fails to protect adolescents in Korea. So, they are forced to use violence to survive..." [Informant 6, December 16, Online interview]

Based on the three quotes from the statement above, the position of informant 6 can be categorized as negotiated because it does not fully accept or completely reject the relationship between masculinity and violence displayed in the text. The informant acknowledges the existence of a social construct that links masculinity to violence, but at the same time criticizes and limits this meaning. In the first excerpt of the statement, it can be seen that the informant accepts the existence of a relationship between masculinity and violence, especially in the framework of hegemonic masculinity. Informants understand that socially, men are often encouraged to prove honor, dominance, and power through aggressive means. This means that the informant acknowledges the existence of a dominant discourse that associates male identity with violence as a form of self-proof. However, in the next excerpt of the informant's statement, it shows that the informant does not fully approve of violence as a solution. The informant accepts that violence is often normalized in a culture of masculinity, but rejects the idea that violence is the right way to deal with conflict. Here there is a critical distance to the

dominant narrative that considers retaliation against violence as a legitimate response. Furthermore, informants shift the focus from the individual and masculinity to social structures. Violence is understood as a consequence of the failure of the school system and society, rather than as a natural expression of masculinity. Informants see violence as a response to structural pressures and coercive situations, not as a form of domination voluntarily chosen to prove masculinity.

Thus, informant 6 accepted that in a culture of hegemonic masculinity, violence is often normalized as a means of proving male identity. However, the informant did not justify the violence as absolute or ideal. The informant also contextualized acts of violence in the series as a result of the failure of the social system. Thus, the informant does not read the text dominantly but also does not completely opposition. The meaning of informant 6 is in a negotiated position, which is to accept part of the discourse offered by the media about masculinity and violence, but at the same time correct and limit the meaning through a more structural and reflective perspective.

CONCLUSION

The display of masculinity and violence in the Korean drama series "Weak Hero Class 2" is basically a form of encoding of the social reality portrayed by the media. In the process of depiction, it is not always exactly the same as the real social reality that allows modifications, both additions and subtractions in the narrative of the film. This will be different when the reality in the film is watched by the audience and there is a decoding process of decoding the representation of masculinity and violence in the Korean drama series "Weak Hero Class 2". The results of this study conclude that audience acceptance as part of the decoding and interpretation process shows pros and cons. Where specifically the masculinity and violence depicted are not entirely singular, giving rise to a paradox in its acceptance, namely acceptance and rejection from the Gen Z audience who are the informants of this research. They view violence as part of social dynamics on the one hand. Meanwhile, on the other hand, there is a strengthening of the assumption that male masculinity is always related to violence which refers to physical attractiveness. Even some consider violence to be a natural response for a man to show his masculinity, especially in a threatened position and to survive. In general, the position of audience reading indicates a dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and opposition position. Although the position of the opposition does not fully show a total rejection of the *khlayak*. Interestingly, the audience's background influences their interpretation of the content viewed and their acceptance of the message represented. Therefore, further research can examine the relationship between a person's background and the meaning they construct. The background in question includes a person's education, economy, and experience in order to find out more comprehensively how the background affects the process of interpreting media content.

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