Surabaya Gen Z Reception of Transactional Relationships in Michelle Halim's Instagram Tagline

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ABSTRACT

The increasing visibility of transactional relationship narratives on social media has generated diverse interpretations among audiences, particularly Generation Z. One of the most discussed examples in Indonesia is Michelle Halim's Instagram tagline, "Besides Donors, No One Gets to Decide," which sparked debate regarding the role of finansial contribution in romantic relationships. This study aims to analyze how Generation Z in Surabaya interprets transactional relationships represented in the tagline using Stuart Hall's reception analysis framework. Employing a qualitatitve approach within a constructivist paradigm, this study involved seven Generation Z participants selected through puprosive sampling. Data were collected through Focus Group Discussion (FGDs), interviews, observation, and documentation, and analyzed using the Miles adn Huberman model combined with Stuar Hall's encoding decoding framework. The findings reveal two audience reception positions, dominant reading, and negotiated reading. Participants in the dominant position accepted financial contribution as a legitimate basis for influence within romantic relationships, while participants in the negotiated position acknowledged the importance of financial support but emphasized emotional support, reciprocity, communication, and mutual respect. No participants occupied the oppositional reading position. The study concludes that audience reception is shaped by family background, economic conditions, cultural values, personal principles, and relationship experiences, which influence how transactional relationship narratives are interpreted in digital media contexts.

Keyword: *Reception Analysis, Generation Z, Transactional Relationships, Instagram, Stuart Hall*

INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships have traditionally been understood as interpersonal bonds based on emotional intimacy, affection, and commitment (Wibowo, 2025). However, social changes and the rapid developement of digital media have transformed the way individuals perceive and experience romantic relationships. Contemporary romantic relationships are no longer viewed solely as emotional connections but also as spaces where emotional, social, and practical needs are exchanged (Khairunnisa & Nur Iman, 2024). This transformation has contributed to the emergence of transactional relationships, which involve the exchange of resources, benefits, or support between partners (Alfiani, 2020).

The notion of transactional relationships has become increasingly visible on social media, where financial support is often portrayed as an expression of care, responbility, and commitment within romantic relationships. Various online discussions have highlighted practices such as providing allowances, financial assistance, and monetary gifts as representations of affection and seriousness in a relationships (Hapsari, 2025). According to (dhankar, 2024) transactional relationships refer to relationships in which partners consciously or unconsciously exchange resources or services, including financial support, emotional intimacy, and attention. Although such relationships may be mutually beneficial, they may also create unequal power dynamics when the exchange of benefits become imbalanced (Juni Widyananda & Ashfaq, 2023).

One of the most widely discussed examples of this phenomenon in Indonesia is the tagline "Besides Donors, No One Gets to Decide," popularized by influencer Michelle Halim through her Instagram content. The tagline quickly gained public attention and generated diverse reactions among social media users. Some audiences interpreted financial contribution as a legitimate basis for influnce within a relationships, while others criticized the idea, arguing that romantic relationships should not be measured by material contributions. These contrasting responses indicate that media massages are not interpreted uniformly by audiences.

In this context, Generation Z represents an important audience group due to its high level of digital literacy and intensive engagement with social media platforms. Previous studies have shown that differences in massage reception are influenced by individuals communication and information technology competencies, which are particularly prominent among Generation Z (Bencsik & Machova, 2016, as cited in Rahmania et al., 2024). Furthermore, Surabaya was selected as the research setting because Generations Z constitutes a significant proportion of the city's population (Pradipta, 2020). East java is also recognized as the province with the second largest Generation Z population in Indonesia, with Surabaya contributing the largest share within the province (Suminar, 2021). In addition, Surabaya's local culture is often characterized as expressive, assertive, and opinionated, which may influence how young people interpet social issues and digital content (Priyanto, 2013).

This study employs Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis framework, which conceptualizes audiences as active interpreters of media massages. According to Hall (1973), audiences may adopt dominant, negotiated, or oppositional positions when decoding media content. Rather than passively consuming media messages, audience actively construct meanings based on their experiences, values, and sociocultural backgorunds.

Previous studies concerning the tagline "Besides Donors, No One Gets to Decide" have primarily focused on pragmatic feminism and women's empowerment (Equeena, 2025), while other studies have examined power relations and inequality within romantic relationships (Juni Widyananda & Ashfaq, 2023). However, limited attention has been given to how Generation Z audiences interpret the implicit representation of transactional relationships embedded in the tagline. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining the reception of Generation Z in Surabaya toward transactional relationships narratives represented in Michelle Halim's Instagram content.

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Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how Generation Z in Surabaya interprets transactional relationships represented in Michelle Halim's Instagram tagline "Besides Donors, No One Gets to Decide" using Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis framework.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach within a conctructivist paradigm. A qualitative approarch was used to explore the meanings constructed by individuals based on their experiences and social contexts (Sugiyono, 2023). The constructivist paradigm assumes that social reality is socially and historically constructed through human interaction and interpretation (Creswell, 2023). This paradigm was considered appropriate for examining how Generation Z in Surabaya interprets Michelle Halim's Instagram tagline "Besides Donors, No One Gets to Decide".

This study applied reception analysis as its research design. Reception analysis views audiences as active interpreters of media messages whose meanings are shaped by their experiences, values, and sociocultural backgrounds (Santoso, 2020). This study adopted Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model, which categorizes audience interpretations into three reading positions dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings (Avriyanty, 2012).

The research participants consisted of Generation Z individuals aged 17-26 years who resided in Surabaya, actively used Instagram, were familiar with Michelle Halim's content containg the tagline "Besides Donors, No One Gets to Decide", and had current or previous romantic relationships experience. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on these predetermined criteria.

Data were collected through Focus Group Discussion (FGD), interviews, observation, and documentation. FGDs served as the primary data collection technique to explore participants' interpretations of the tagline (Apriyani & Dewi, 2021). Interviews were conducted to obtain participants' demographic and background information (Ardiansyah et al., 2023). Observation was conducted on Michelle Halim's Instagram content containing the tagline as well as during FGDs and interviews. The researcher observed verbal and non verbal responses, including facial expressions, tone of voice, communication style, and participants' reactions throughout the discussion process. Documentation included screenshots of relevant Instagram content and records of the research activities.

Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, which consist of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024). The findings were then interpreted through Stuat Hall's reception analysis framework to identify dominant, negotiated, and oppositional reading positions. To ensure data credibility, source triangulation was employed by compairing information obtained from multiple participants and different data collection techniques (Sugiyono, 2023).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that Generation Z participants did not interpret the term donor uniformly. While some participants associated the term with financial contribution in a romantic relationships, other expanded its meaning to include emotional support, attention, presence, and moral support. Most participants agreed that contribution is an important aspect of a relationship however, they emphasized that such contribution should not be limited to financial assistance alon. Furthemore, the tagline was perceived as viral because it was consice, provocative, and closely related to contemporary discussions about romantic relationships on social media. These findings suggest that audiences actively construct meanings rather than passively receiving media messages, as proposed by Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model.

Based on Stuart Hall's reception analysis framework, three participants Sekar, Taufik, and Karisma were categorized within the dominant reading position. These participants generally accepted the preferred meaning conveyed by Michelle Halim's tagline. They viewed financial contribution as a legitimate basis for having greater influence within a romantic relationship. As stated by Taufik :

> *"If one partner contributes more financially, it is reasonable for their opinion to carry greater weight in certain situations."*

Similarly, Karisma emphasized that financial support reflects responsibility and commitment within a relationship:

> *"Providing financial support shows seriousness and responsibility toward a partner."*

For these participants, financial contribution was interpreted not merely as material assistance but also as a manifestation of care, commitment, and responsibility. Consequently, they accepted the idea that individuals who contribute more significantly to a relationship may possess greater legitimacy in influencing relationship decisions. This position was influenced by several factors. First, these participants generally came from relatively stable economic backgrounds and were accustomed to receiving support through material provision. Second, they were raised in family environments that emphasized traditional expectations regarding men's roles as providers in romantic relationships. Third, their long term relationship experiences reinforced the belief that financial contribution is a natural component of romantic commitment. These findings support Hall's (1973) argument that audiences are likely to occupy a dominant reading position when their social experiences and cultural values align with the preferred meaning encoded by media producers.

In contrast, four participants Aisyah, Okta, Mahesa, and Arthur occupied the negotiated reading position. Although they acknowledged the importance of financial contribution in romantic relationships, they rejected the notion that financial support should serve as the primary basis for authority or control. As explained by Aisyah :

> *"providing support is not only about money. Emotional support, attention, and presence are equally important."*

Likewise, Arthur stated :

> *"Financial contribution matters, but relationships should be buil ton mutual understanding and shared efforts, not only on who provides more money."*

This participants accepted certain aspects of the dominant message while modifying its meaning according to their personal experiences and values. They emphasized reciprocity, emotional intimacy, communication, and mutual respect as essential elements of healthy relationships. Their interpretations were influenced by family backgrounds, economic circumstances, and personal principles that encouraged independence and equality between partners. Several participants grew up in environments that required greater self reliance, while other experineced economic conitions that shaped a more balanced perspective regarding responsibilities within romantic relationships. As a results, they partially accepted the preferred meaning while simultaneously adapting it to their own social realities, reflecting Hall's negotiated reading positions.

Interestingly, this study did not identify any participants who occupied the oppositional reading position. According to Hall (1973), oppositional readers fully understand the intended meaning of a media message but reject i tan construct an alternative interpretation. Although participants expressed varying degrees of agreement with the tagline, none completely rejected the relevance of financial contribution in romantic relationships. Instead, disagreements centered on the extent to which financial support should influence relationship dynamics. These finding suggest that financial contribution has become a relatively accepted component of contemporary romantic relationships among Generation Z participants. Consequently, audience interpretations tende to remain within the spectrum of acceptence and negotiation rather than complete opposition.

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These findings support Stuart Hall's encoding decoding theory, which argues that audiences actively construct meanings based on their social experiences, cultural backgorunds, and personal values rather than passively consuming media messages. That differences between dominant and negotiated readings demonstrate that audience reception is shaped not only by media content but also by familiy upbringing, economic conditions, personal principles, and relationship experinece. Furthermore, the findings expand previous research conducted by Equeena (2025), which examined the tagline within the context of pragmatic feminism and women's empowerment. While earlier studies primarily focused on gender relations, this study reveals that Generation Z audiences also interpret the tagline as a representation of transactional relationships within contemporary romantic contexts. The findings are likewise consistent with the study of Juni Widyananda and Ashfaq (2023), which suggests that romantic relationships frequently involve exchanges of benefits and unequal power relations between partners. Overall, the study demonstrates that meanings attached to transactional relationship narratives are continuously negotiated through audiences' lived experiences and sociocultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Generation Z in Surabaya interpreted the transactional relationship narrative represented in Michelle Halim's Instagram tagline, "Besides Donors, No One Gets to Decide," using Stuart Hall's reception analysis framework. The findings revealed that participants occupied two reception positions, dominant reading and negotiated reading. Participants in the dominant position generally accepted financial contribution as a legitmate basis for influence within romantic relationships, whereas participants in the negotiate position acknowledge the importance of financial support but emphasized that healthy relationships should also be built upon emotional support, communication, reciprocity, and mutual respect.

The findings further demonstrate that audience reception is shaped by family background, economic conditions, cultural values, personal principles, and relationship experiences. These factors influenced how participants interpreted the meaning of financial contribution and transactional relationships. Interestingly, no participant occupied the oppositional reading position. This finding susggests that financial contribution is generally perceived as a realistic and relevant component of romantic relationships among Generation Z, although its role and significance are interpreted differently by individuals.

Based on these findings, content creators should be more aware of the diverse social and cultural backgrounds of their audiences when constructing messages related to romantic and financial relationships. Future studies are encouraged to involve participants from more diverse demographic and cultural backgrounds to explore broader variations in audience reception. Further research may also examine transactional relationships narratives across different social media platforms, communities, or generations to enrich the understanding of audience meaning makin in digital media contexts.

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