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NEGOTIATING BTS' SOFT MASCULINITY IN A MALAY-ISLAMIC CONTEXT

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Abstract

*Globalization strengthens the interaction between local identities and global symbols through the exchange of popular culture, such as the Korean Wave (Hallyu), with BTS as its central icon. BTS represents soft masculinity characterized by feminine aesthetics, emotional expression, and empathetic communication. However, studies on perceptions of BTS's masculinity within the Malay-Islamic context of Bangka remain limited. This study explores how the ARMY community at Institut Pahlawan 12 interprets BTS's masculinity in negotiating between local and global cultural values. A qualitative descriptive method was employed using in-depth interviews, documentation, and literature study, with purposively selected active ARMY members as informants. Findings reveal that BTS is perceived as masculine despite adopting feminine attributes, interpreted through three stages: **selection** (initial exposure), **interpretation** (lyrical and attitudinal meaning-making), and **reaction** (support and imitation). The ARMY demonstrates selective acceptance, merging local values of politeness and empathy with flexible global expressions. This study concludes that BTS's soft masculinity is locally negotiated through glocalization and cultural hybridity. Practically, it recommends inclusive communication and character education strategies adaptive to local cultural dynamics.*

Keywords: Soft masculinity, Korean Wave, BTS, gender perception, local culture of Bangka.

Abstrak

*Globalisasi memperkuat interaksi antara identitas lokal dan simbol global melalui pertukaran budaya populer seperti Korean Wave (Hallyu), dengan BTS sebagai ikon utamanya. BTS merepresentasikan soft masculinity yang ditandai oleh estetika feminin, ekspresi emosional, dan komunikasi empatik. Namun, kajian tentang persepsi terhadap maskulinitas BTS dalam konteks budaya Melayu-Islam Bangka masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi bagaimana ARMY Institut Pahlawan 12 memaknai maskulinitas BTS dalam negosiasi antara nilai lokal dan pengaruh global. Metode yang digunakan adalah deskriptif kualitatif melalui wawancara mendalam, dokumentasi, dan studi pustaka dengan informan yang dipilih secara purposif. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa BTS dipahami sebagai figur maskulin meski mengadopsi atribut feminin. Persepsi ini terbentuk melalui tiga tahap: **seleksi** (paparan awal terhadap musik dan penampilan), **interpretasi** (pemaknaan lirik dan sikap), dan **reaksi** (dukungan serta peniruan gaya). ARMY menunjukkan penerimaan selektif yang memadukan nilai lokal seperti kesopanan dan empati dengan ekspresi global yang lentur dan reflektif. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa soft masculinity BTS dinegosiasikan secara lokal melalui proses glocalisasi dan hibriditas budaya. Secara praktis, temuan ini merekomendasikan pentingnya strategi komunikasi dan pendidikan karakter yang inklusif dan adaptif terhadap dinamika budaya lokal.*

Kata kunci: Maskulinitas lentur, Korean Wave, BTS, persepsi gender, budaya lokal Bangka.



A. Introduction

The phenomenon of globalization, as a major driving force behind cultural transformation in the contemporary world, generates intense interactions between local cultures and global symbols that represent new forms of identity at both individual and collective levels. The transnational circulation of popular culture reinforces this interaction, thereby creating an ongoing evolution in the meanings and perceptions of identity, including those related to gender expression. One of the most prominent manifestations of cultural globalization is *Hallyu* or the Korean Wave a surge of South Korean popular culture encompassing K-Pop music, television dramas, and lifestyle trends that have rapidly spread across the globe.¹ *Hallyu* has evolved not merely as a cultural export but also as a form of *soft power*

strategy supported by the South Korean government through cultural diplomacy and the creative industry.²

Initially emerging as a regional phenomenon in the late 1990s, *Hallyu* has expanded into a transnational force that penetrates markets in America, Europe, Asia, and beyond through the combined power of the creative industry, digital platforms, and cultural diplomacy.³ The South Korean government has actively facilitated the export of culture as part of its *soft power* agenda, providing institutional support for production, talent development, and international promotion.⁴

K-Pop, in particular, has not only achieved remarkable success in global music and entertainment markets but has also offered new narratives surrounding identity and gender expression that challenge traditional stereotypes of

¹ Geun Lee, "A Soft Power Approach to the Korean Wave," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 21, no. 2 (2009): p.123.

² Geun Lee, "A Soft Power Approach to the Korean Wave," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 21, no. 2 (2009): p.123.

³ Geun Lee, "A Soft Power Approach to the Korean Wave," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 21, no. 2 (2009): p.123.

⁴ Geun Lee, "A Soft Power Approach to the Korean Wave," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 21, no. 2 (2009): p.123.

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masculinity and femininity. BTS (*Bangtan Sonyeondan*), as the primary icon of the Korean Wave, embodies the phenomenon of *soft masculinity*—a gender expression that integrates feminine aesthetics, emotional openness, and empathy, thereby transcending the conventional boundaries of hegemonic masculinity. Consequently, this *soft masculinity* serves as an expansion of the masculine ideal, making it more inclusive, flexible, and adaptive to global cultural developments.⁵

Furthermore, BTS has emerged as a global icon that fuses commercial achievement, social influence, and digital communication practices. The group's global chart dominance, continent-spanning stadium tours, and appearances at international platforms such as the United Nations General Assembly illustrate how *Hallyu* has transformed from a cultural product into a non-state

diplomatic actor.⁶ Moreover, the global fandom known as ARMY demonstrates participatory practices, cultural militancy, and mobilized solidarity that amplify the dissemination and impact of BTS's messages worldwide.

Masculinity, in this context, is understood as a social construct produced and negotiated within relations of social power. Contemporary gender studies assert that masculinities are neither singular nor fixed; rather, they are plural, contextual, and continuously shaped through interactions among culture, media, and social structures.⁷ Within the realm of popular culture such as K-Pop, alternative forms of masculinity have emerged that challenge dominant norms—one of which is *soft masculinity*, integrating feminine aesthetics and emotional expressiveness as a mode of

⁵ Geun Lee, "A Soft Power Approach to the Korean Wave," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 21, no. 2 (2009): p.123.

⁶ Geun Lee, "A Soft Power Approach to the Korean Wave," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 21, no. 2 (2009): p.123.

⁷ Geun Lee, "A Soft Power Approach to the Korean Wave," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 21, no. 2 (2009): p.123.

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reconfiguring gender representation in a globalized cultural sphere.⁸

The concept of soft masculinity refers to a representation of masculinity that integrates elements of feminine aesthetics, emotional openness, and empathetic communication, thereby producing a model of masculinity that is more fluid and relational.⁹ This form of masculinity challenges rigid gender dichotomies by embracing traits traditionally associated with femininity, while simultaneously reconfiguring them as integral to contemporary male identity.

BTS serves as an empirical illustration of this representation through their consistent engagement in aesthetic practices—such as the use of make-up and androgynous fashion—and their willingness to display public vulnerability, including moments of crying and openness about mental health struggles.

Furthermore, their introspective lyrics often explore themes of self-love, anxiety, and generational uncertainty, while their warm interpersonal interactions among members embody emotional intimacy and collective care.¹⁰ These performative and communicative practices collectively construct an alternative masculinity that is grounded in empathy, authenticity, and affective connection rather than dominance or emotional restraint.

According to Jung (2011), the form of masculinity embodied by BTS constitutes a synthesis of three distinct cultural models: the *seonbi* masculinity of Korea, characterized by intellectual refinement and moral virtue; the Japanese *bishōnen* ideal, defined by aesthetic beauty and emotional sensitivity; and the globally emergent form of *metrosexuality*, associated with self-care, consumer sophistication, and expressive

⁸ Geun Lee, "A Soft Power Approach to the Korean Wave," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 21, no. 2 (2009): p.123.

⁹ Luo, S. (2023). The Research on the Portrayal of Soft Masculinity by K-pop Idols on Social Media. *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media*, 5(1), 705–710.

<https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7048/5/20221021>, p.45-47

¹⁰ Perwiradmoko, J. Q. A. (2023). Masculinity Reconstruction by K-Pop Idol BTS: BTS ARMY'S Reception Analysis Towards BTS's Musics and Contents. *Jurnal Komunikasi Indonesia*, 12(2). <https://doi.org/10.7454/jkmi.v12i2.1212>, p.7

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individuality. This synthesis produces a hybrid form of masculinity that is flexible, inclusive, and culturally transcendent—capable of resonating across diverse audiences and social contexts.¹¹

Furthermore, Luo's study (2020) demonstrates that BTS strategically construct this image of *soft masculinity* through social media performances that emphasize gentle visual aesthetics and character behaviors closely aligned with the sensibilities of contemporary youth. Through curated digital self-presentation, BTS members cultivate a persona that blends emotional intimacy, authenticity, and accessibility, thereby bridging the affective gap between celebrity and audience.

Luo further argues that such representations open up a discursive

space for more fluid and relational expressions of gender, particularly among younger generations who are increasingly receptive to the plurality and performativity of identity.¹² Consequently, BTS's articulation of *soft masculinity* functions not merely as an aesthetic or marketing strategy, but as a cultural intervention that challenges rigid gender binaries and promotes alternative understandings of masculinity within the globalized media environment.

Nevertheless, as Kim (2019) asserts, the *soft masculinity* represented by BTS still operates within the performative economy of the entertainment industry, which does not necessarily translate into deep or structural social transformation.¹³ While such representations may not signify a fundamental shift in gender

¹¹ Jung Sun. (2011). *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols*. Hongkong University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1xcrmm>, p.56

¹² Luo, S. (2023). The Research on the Portrayal of Soft Masculinity by K-pop Idols on Social Media. *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media*, 5(1), 705–710. <https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7048/5/20221021>, p.704-710

¹³ Kim, G., BTS, alternative masculinity and its discontents. In *The Soft Power of the Korean Wave: Parasite, BTS and Drama* (2021), Taylor and Francis Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003102489-11>, p.130

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relations at the institutional level, they nevertheless exert a significant cultural impact at the level of individual and community perception. In particular, these representations influence how fans interpret, internalize, and perform gender identities within transnational spaces where global and local cultural values intersect. Consequently, *soft masculinity* functions as a symbolic site through which audiences negotiate the meanings of gender and identity in the context of cultural hybridity and globalization.

However, the acceptance of flexible or hybrid masculinity is far from universal. In Indonesia—particularly in the Bangka region, where Malay-Islamic cultural traditions remain deeply rooted—the construction of masculinity continues to be shaped by patriarchal values and rigid social norms. Masculinity is commonly associated with attributes such as physical strength, assertiveness,

courage, and the dominant role of men as protectors and heads of the household. These normative expectations create significant cultural constraints on the acceptance of fluid or gender-blended expressions of masculinity, which are often associated with femininity or relegated to the private and domestic sphere.¹⁴

Masculinity within the Malay-Islamic culture of Bangka is often associated with assertiveness, leadership, and emotional restraint. Such attributes are perceived as essential components of male identity and are deeply embedded in the region's moral and social fabric. Consequently, fluid gender expressions—such as those embodied by BTS—may generate ambiguity or even resistance, as they appear to contradict local norms that emphasize a clear demarcation between male and female roles.¹⁵

¹⁴ Darwin Muhadjir, *Makulinitas : Posisi Laki-Laki dalam Masyarakat Patriarkis*. 1999, https://lakilakibaru.or.id/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/S281_Muhadjir-

[Darwin Maskulinitas-Posisi-Laki-laki-dalam-Masyarakat-Patriarkis.pdf](#), p.3-5

¹⁵ M. As'ad, Mubarak Al-Jauhari, ad, & Diyana Nur Karima Muzdalifah Fatimatul Marsukah, Mt. (n.d.). *Dominasi Maskulinitas Dalam*



In a society that upholds the value of *Marwah* a moral code signifying dignity, honor, and social respectability—the display of excessive softness or emotional expressiveness in men is often regarded as a potential disruption to social and moral equilibrium. Therefore, the *soft masculinity* performed by BTS may be interpreted not merely as an alternative aesthetic, but as a cultural provocation that challenges established gender hierarchies and the moral order that underpins Malay-Islamic conceptions of manhood.

Nevertheless, the young generation in Bangka now lives within a digital landscape that enables them to access, interpret, and recontextualize global cultural symbols in active and creative ways. Social media functions as a dynamic arena of identity negotiation, where local and global values continuously interact, conflict, and sometimes converge, producing new forms of cultural

hybridity.¹⁶ Within this context, the BTS fandom known as ARMY in Bangka emerges as a crucial cultural actor in reinterpreting the meanings of masculinity and gender identity.

Moreover, the rise of social media as a space for communication and self-expression has had a profound impact on Bangka's youth. They are no longer passive consumers of global culture; rather, they actively engage in the negotiation of meaning, particularly in reconstructing their understanding of masculinity within their own socio-cultural framework. Through online interactions, fan practices, and affective engagements, these young audiences reinterpret the *soft masculinity* performed by BTS in ways that both reflect and challenge local gender norms.

This study therefore departs from the need to understand how Bangka's young generation—particularly members of the BTS fandom (ARMY) at Institut

Islam: Merumuskan Tafsir Emansipatoris Adil Gender Dalam Konteks Islam Indonesia

¹⁶ Hayati, L., Saputra, P. P., Yulia, Y., & Ramadhani, T.. Pemanfaatan Media Sosial dalam

Melestarikan Budaya Lokal Bangka Belitung. *Dinamisia : Jurnal Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat*, 6(4) (2022), p.948-953

Pahlawan 12 Bangka perceive and negotiate the representation of *soft masculinity* within their local cultural framework. By situating this phenomenon at the intersection between global popular culture and local Malay-Islamic values, this research seeks to fill the existing gap in the literature concerning the reception of alternative gender expressions in Indonesian Malay-Islamic societies. Consequently, the study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how global cultural flows intersect with local moral orders in shaping contemporary notions of masculinity among youth in peripheral yet connected cultural contexts.

B. Literature Review

1. Perception

Perception constitutes a fundamental concept in understanding how individuals interact with their social and cultural environments. Within the field of communication studies,

perception serves as the initial stage of message reception, interpretation, and meaning construction. It represents not merely a biological process but also a cognitive and evaluative one, shaped by personal experience, values, and socio-cultural context. As such, perception functions as a mediating mechanism through which individuals construct subjective understandings of objective realities.

According to Bimo (2002), perception is a process that begins with the observation of an object through sensory input, which is subsequently organized and interpreted by the individual to produce meaning.¹⁷ This process is inherently active rather than passive, as it is influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include motivation, prior experience, and attention, while external factors encompass the intensity, contrast, and novelty of stimuli. Through this dynamic interaction, individuals form personalized

¹⁷ Bimo Walgito, *Psikologi Umum* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Andi, 2004), hlm. 89..



interpretations of their surroundings, thereby creating a subjective version of reality that may diverge from its objective form.

Meanwhile, Sarlito (2010) asserts that perception is an internal cognitive process occurring within the individual, through which external stimuli are mentally processed to generate an understanding of a particular object or phenomenon.¹⁸ This perspective suggests that perception is inherently subjective, as it is profoundly shaped by one's cognitive structures, emotional conditions, and the surrounding social context. Accordingly, perception is not a mere reflection of objective reality, but rather a reconstruction of that reality as filtered, organized, and interpreted through the individual's psychological framework.

In contrast to objectivist assumptions that regard perception as a direct correspondence between stimulus and response, Sarlito's view aligns with

the constructivist paradigm, which posits that individuals actively construct meaning based on their prior experiences, emotions, and cultural orientations. Thus, perception functions as both a cognitive and interpretive act transforming sensory data into meaningful representations shaped by subjective interpretation. This understanding underscores that what individuals perceive is not the world as it *is*, but the world as it *appears* through the lens of their mental and cultural schemas.

Within the context of this research, perception serves as a crucial analytical element for understanding how individuals respond to the interplay between local and global cultural representations, as well as the construction of gender within communication processes. Differences in perception among individuals or groups often lead to varying interpretations of cultural symbols, media discourses, and social practices. As prior studies have

¹⁸ Sarlito W. Sarwono, *Psikologi Umum* (Jakarta: PT RajaGrafindo Persada, 2000), hlm. 103.



shown, perception is not only shaped by personal cognition but also by the cultural frameworks that guide how people interpret meaning (Hall, 1997; Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Consequently, the diversity of perceptions reflects the multiplicity of meaning-making processes in societies increasingly mediated by transnational cultural flows.

Furthermore, perception plays a significant role in shaping attitudes toward social change, resistance to global cultural dominance, and the negotiation of meaning within public communication spaces. It mediates how audiences evaluate and internalize global media representations while maintaining local cultural identities.

Therefore, in this study, perception is conceptualized as a mediating variable between communicative stimuli and social response. It operates as an interpretive foundation for understanding how individuals and communities construct meanings related to culture and

gender. Moreover, it functions as an analytical tool for examining how different social groups produce divergent interpretations of media texts and cultural practices within the local-global continuum. In this sense, perception not only explains *what* individuals understand, but also *how* and *why* such understandings differ across contexts of cultural interaction.

2. Popular Culture

According to Koentjaraningrat (2009), culture can be defined as a system of ideas, values, actions, and creations acquired by human beings through social interaction and subsequently internalized through learning.¹⁹ Culture, in this sense, represents both a product and a process: it is collectively produced, socially transmitted, and continuously reinterpreted across generations. This understanding aligns with anthropological perspectives that view

¹⁹ Koentjaraningrat, *Pengantar Ilmu Antropologi* (Jakarta: Rineka Cipta, 2009), p. 180

culture as a dynamic and evolving system rather than a fixed set of traditions.

Culture is inherently dynamic and continuously evolves over time. Each generation inherits, modifies, and integrates elements of past traditions into new forms of expression, as exemplified by the evolution of fashion trends, musical preferences, and modes of artistic representation. This process of adaptation and renewal demonstrates that culture is not static but rather responsive to social, technological, and ideological transformations.

Popular culture often referred to as *pop culture* emerges as a manifestation of this dynamic process, representing the production and consumption of cultural symbols within a mass-mediated context. It reflects collective tastes and identities that are shaped by the interplay between media industries, market forces, and audience participation. Furthermore, advances in technology and media have not only accelerated the creation of popular culture but also expanded its reach and influence across societies. As a

result, popular culture functions as a global communicative arena in which ideas, aesthetics, and lifestyles circulate, intersect, and are continuously redefined by audiences who both consume and reproduce its meanings.

3. Masculinity

In gender studies, the concept of masculinity is understood as a social construct shaped by dominant values and power relations within society. Rather than being an inherent biological attribute, masculinity is produced, reproduced, and legitimized through social expectations, cultural narratives, and institutional practices. It represents a set of socially prescribed norms that define how men are expected to behave, express emotion, and exercise authority in various social contexts.

According to Priandono (2018), societies that are male-oriented tend to idealize characteristics such as strength, assertiveness, speed, ambition, and competitiveness, as well as the pursuit of

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material success and public recognition.²⁰

This reflects an ideological framework in which masculinity is associated with dominance, productivity, and control—traits that reinforce hierarchical gender relations. Such an orientation privileges masculine-coded behaviors and values while marginalizing alternative forms of gender expression that fall outside traditional norms.

This perspective suggests that masculinity is not biologically determined but rather constructed through collective social expectations and cultural discourse. In this regard, masculinity operates as a performative identity—continuously enacted and negotiated through interaction, representation, and social evaluation. Therefore, understanding masculinity as a socio-cultural construct allows scholars to examine how different societies define, regulate, and challenge normative ideals of manhood across time and context.

Hasyim (2020) asserts that masculinity is a construct derived from the broader gender system, and as such, it is inherently contextual.²¹ This implies that the forms and expressions of masculinity are neither fixed nor universal, but rather vary across cultures and are deeply influenced by local value systems and socio-religious norms. Masculinity, therefore, must be understood as a culturally situated phenomenon one that reflects the moral, ideological, and symbolic frameworks of a given society.

For instance, within Malay-Islamic communities, masculinity is often associated with spiritual responsibility, moral leadership, and the preservation of *Marwah* a concept encompassing dignity, honor, and social integrity. This moralized model of manhood emphasizes restraint, wisdom, and accountability as markers of masculine virtue. In contrast, within the realm of contemporary Korean popular

²⁰ Ahmad Fatoni, *Maskulinitas dan Identitas Laki-Laki dalam Budaya Patriarkis* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2022), p. 47–49.

²¹ N. Hasyim, *Good Boys Doing Feminism: Maskulinitas dan Masa Depan Laki-Laki Baru*, edisi ke-2, vol. 2 (Yogyakarta: EA Books, 2021), p. 28–30

culture, masculinity tends to be represented through softer, more emotional, and aesthetically refined expressions. These variations demonstrate that masculinity is not a monolithic ideal but a plural and negotiated construct that adapts to cultural and historical contexts.

Pilcher (2004) argues that masculinity constitutes a set of social rules and expectations represented and reinforced through cultural practices. In this view, being a man is not merely a biological condition but a social process constructed through interaction with environmental, institutional, and cultural value systems. Masculinity, therefore, is a cultural product—an ideological framework developed to differentiate men from women, who are conventionally associated with feminine traits such as sensitivity, gentleness, and emotional expressiveness.²²

Similar to the stereotypes of femininity attached to women, masculinity also functions as a social stereotype that prescribes specific standards of behavior, appearance, and emotional expression for men. These prescriptive norms operate as cultural guidelines that delineate how men are expected to perform and embody their gender identity within a given social context.

These two constructs—masculinity and femininity—are often positioned as opposing poles within a binary value system that defines the perceived degree of “manliness” or “womanliness” in an individual. This binary opposition reinforces hierarchical gender relations, where deviation from socially sanctioned masculine traits is often stigmatized or interpreted as weakness. Thus, the concept of masculinity becomes meaningful only in relation to its constructed contrast with femininity, revealing how both categories are co-dependent within the cultural logic of gender differentiation.

²² Q. A. Z. Fatoni, *Resepsi Maskulinitas dalam Musik Video Boyband K-Pop (Studi Analisis Resepsi Khalayak pada Musik Video NCT U: BOSS dan Make*

a Wish) (Skripsi, Universitas Islam Indonesia, 2022), p.34–36,
<https://dspace.uui.ac.id/bitstream/handle/123456789/41359/18321149.pdf?sequence=1..>



Therefore, judgments of masculinity are inherently relative, contingent upon how local cultural values shape societal perceptions of gender roles and social behavior. The ways in which a community defines, measures, and evaluates masculinity are deeply influenced by its historical traditions, religious ethics, and socio-cultural environment. In this sense, masculinity cannot be understood as a fixed or universal essence but must instead be analyzed as a culturally situated performance that reflects the dynamics of power, ideology, and identity within a given society.

C. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach within an interpretive paradigm, aiming to understand how BTS fans (ARMY) in Bangka interpret and negotiate the representation of *soft masculinity* within

the framework of Malay-Islamic values.²³ The research subjects consisted of undergraduate students from Institut Pahlawan 12 Bangka who were active members of the ARMY community. Informants were selected based on the degree of their engagement within the fandom.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, digital observation, and documentation of participants' activities on social media platforms. The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (2014) interactive analysis model, which involves three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.²⁴ Data interpretation was conducted through two main theoretical frameworks: Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model²⁵ and Stella Ting-Toomey's (1999) identity negotiation theory.²⁶

²³ Norman K. Denzin dan Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The Landscape of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2018), p. 115–118

²⁴ A. M. Huberman dan M. B. Miles, *Analisis Data Kualitatif: Buku Sumber tentang Metode-Metode Baru*, ed. ke-2, diterjemahkan oleh Tjetjep Rohendi Rohidi (Jakarta: UI Press, 2014), p. 20–23.

²⁵ Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," dalam *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Routledge, 1980), p. 128–138

²⁶ Stella Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), hlm. 25–30



This methodological approach enabled an analysis of how the meanings of BTS's *soft masculinity* representations were produced, interpreted, and negotiated by ARMY members within the Malay-Islamic cultural context of Bangka. The analysis focused on three main processes: (1) Global Symbol Selection – examining how visual elements, lyrics, and communication styles of BTS as global symbols were selected and consumed by local ARMY members; (2) Local Meaning Interpretation – exploring how these symbols were interpreted through local values such as gender norms, religiosity, and Malay-Islamic social ethics; and (3) Cultural Reaction – analyzing how ARMY members negotiated the tension between alternative representations of masculinity and local social expectations, reflected through acceptance, rejection, or adaptation.

D. Discussion

The ARMY community of Institut Pahlawan 12 primarily discovered BTS through the digital mediascape, including

YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. In this process, music functioned as the initial “gateway” of attraction, while visual elements such as fashion and gestures subsequently emerged as supplementary stimuli. This sequence aligns with the selective attention model in perceptual studies, in which sensory organs identify and prioritize meaningful stimuli (selection) before directing attention toward focused information tracking (Alex Sobur). Several informants (Septalia, Fariana, Adelia, Yulisa, and Susan) stated that their initial interest in BTS and eventual involvement in the ARMY community originated from music that appeared incidentally on their social media feeds.

The initial interest in BTS did not arise from an active search, but rather from incidental exposure to the group's music through social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. BTS songs appeared spontaneously on the participants' feeds, initiating a process of engagement that began with curiosity and developed into sustained interest. As one

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informant expressed, “At first, I just came across a BTS song on TikTok it sounded good, so I wanted to know more” (Septalia). Another participant noted, “I accidentally heard a BTS song on Instagram, and then I started to like it” (Fariana). Similarly, Adelia recalled, “A BTS song appeared on YouTube; at first, I didn’t even know who they were, but the melody caught my attention.”

The initial response gradually developed into a more active form of engagement, including watching music videos, learning about BTS members, following official accounts, and eventually joining the ARMY community. This progression indicates that digital stimuli do not merely trigger momentary reactions but can also open pathways toward deeper forms of cultural participation.

Within the context of the digital mediascape, platforms such as TikTok and YouTube function not only as channels of

cultural distribution but also as spaces for active participation. The informants were not passive recipients of content; rather, they interacted with it, reshared it, and constructed their identities as fans. This process reinforces the finding that incidental exposure to digital content can evolve into active engagement, particularly when the received stimuli align with individuals’ affective and cognitive preferences.²⁷

From the perspective of perception and selective attention, the participants’ sensory processes identified meaningful stimuli—in this case, BTS’s music—and directed their focus toward further information tracking. Music thus served as the “gateway,” followed by visual stimuli such as fashion, choreography, and facial expressions, which strengthened emotional attachment and solidified fandom identity.

These findings are consistent with studies on selective attention, which

²⁷ Y. Lee dan S. Park, “Classifying and Characterizing Fandom Activities: A Focus on Superfans’ Posting and Commenting Behaviors in a

Digital Fandom Community,” *Applied Sciences (Switzerland)* 15, no. 9 (2025): hlm. 1–15.



demonstrate that attentional engagement increases when a stimulus possesses high perceptual load and strong emotional relevance.²⁸ BTS's music, which appeared spontaneously on social media feeds, elicited affective responses because its lyrics and tonal qualities resonated with listeners on an emotional level. In this context, the form of masculinity represented by BTS—characterized by softness, introspection, and empathy—constituted a central component of their initial appeal.

The representation of soft masculinity in BTS—manifested through the emotional expression in their songs, the warmth of interpersonal interactions among members, and their non-aggressive visual style—was positively received by the informants. Their attraction extended beyond the musical dimension, as they also identified with the values embodied by the group, perceiving

them as a form of masculinity that is both relevant to and resonant with local values such as politeness, empathy, and solidarity. Consequently, exposure to BTS's music functioned not merely as an aesthetic stimulus but also as a gateway to the acceptance of a more inclusive and alternative model of gender expression.²⁹

1. Music, Visuals, and the Negotiation of Masculinity: Local ARMY Interpretations of BTS

The informants' engagement with BTS began through spontaneous exposure to the group's music on social media. Songs such as "*Love Myself*" served as emotionally resonant entry points that initially captured their attention. The informants interpreted the song's lyrics as conveying motivational and masculine messages—masculinity not in the sense of physical dominance, but as emotional strength and resilience in facing life's

²⁸ J. L. S. C. Karina, "Perceptual Load and Early Selection: An Effect of Attentional Engagement?" *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (2013): hlm. 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00498>.

²⁹ K. Joseph dan Seung Ho Kwon, "K-Pop's Global Success and Its Innovative Production System," *Sustainability (Switzerland)* 14, no. 17 (2022): hlm. 1–15

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challenges. In this context, music functioned as a “gateway” that stimulated further information-seeking behaviors, including exploration of BTS’s stage visuals and the dynamics of interaction among its members.³⁰

After developing an interest in BTS’s music, the informants began to pay closer attention to the group’s visual aspects—fashion, gestures, and facial expressions. Several participants described BTS’s style of dress as somewhat feminine, yet they did not perceive it negatively. On the contrary, they interpreted these visual elements as part of the performative strategies of the entertainment industry. Statements such as “it’s part of the stage demands” indicate that the informants were able to distinguish between stage image and personal identity, recognizing that gender expression within the K-pop context is fluid and constructed.

This interpretation was shaped by past experiences, religious values, and local cultural norms emphasizing politeness, empathy, and resilience as forms of strength. Within the framework of the interpretive community (Fish) and framing theory (Entman), local ARMY members framed BTS’s texts through the lens of their collective experience. The lyrics were interpreted as a form of empowerment, whereas the visual attributes were understood as performative aesthetics that did not disrupt the masculine meanings they accepted. In this sense, verbal codes (lyrics) held greater authority in meaning construction than visual codes, particularly within the Malay-Islamic context of Bangka, where moral messages occupy a central position in cultural interpretation.³¹

Furthermore, the informants’ acceptance of BTS’s use of skirts,

³⁰ J. L. S. C. Karina, “Perceptual Load and Early Selection: An Effect of Attentional Engagement?” *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (2013): hlm. 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00498>.

³¹ Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): hlm. 51–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>.



accessories, and androgynous styles indicates an understanding of gender as a social construct produced through performative practices. They did not perceive femininity as a threat but rather as a legitimate form of artistic expression. This perspective reinforces the notion of masculine pluralism, in which elements of softness and assertiveness can coexist within a single male figure.³²

Thus, the informants' interpretations demonstrate that the ARMY community is not merely a space for the consumption of popular culture, but also an arena for negotiating complex meanings of gender. They embraced *soft masculinity* as a legitimate and relevant form of masculine identity, one that integrates emotional resilience with non-conventional aesthetics. This process illustrates how meanings are actively constructed by audiences through the interaction between global texts and local values.

2. From Interpretation to Action: Behavioral Responses and Cultural Reproduction

After interpreting the meanings embedded in BTS's music and imagery, the ARMY informants demonstrated forms of active engagement that extended beyond mere entertainment consumption. They followed the group's latest releases, joined fan communities, and emulated the clothing styles and accessories worn by BTS members. Collecting merchandise such as photocards and apparel became symbolic acts of affiliation and expressions of pride in being part of the ARMY.

Their responses to negative comments also reflected an internalization of BTS's values. The informants adopted the group's calm and constructive demeanor when facing criticism, choosing not to react emotionally but instead to respond through creative or positive action. As one

³² K. Joseph dan Seung Ho Kwon, "K-Pop's Global Success and Its Innovative Production System," *Sustainability (Switzerland)* 14, no. 17

(2022): p. 1-15,
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su14171101..>

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participant stated, “When people make snide remarks, I just ignore them. BTS never get angry, they respond through their songs.” This “indifference” or *let it be* attitude was not a form of avoidance, but rather a consciously learned and practiced social strategy.

Emotional closeness with BTS was further strengthened through digital interactions such as live streaming and messaging on Weverse. Several informants described their relationship with the group as “more like friends” rather than merely fans and idols. One respondent stated, “I feel very close to them, as if they really understand our feelings.” This phenomenon reflects a form of parasocial interaction, in which media facilitates an affective and motivational sense of intimacy. Horton and Wohl conceptualized this as a *parasocial relationship*—a “seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator

and performer” that feels authentic despite being unidirectional.³³

Imitative behaviors and the purchase of merchandise also functioned as markers of identity. For some informants, these practices were not simply about style or appearance but represented a means of expressing belonging within the ARMY community. As one participant explained, “I like wearing a necklace like Jimin’s, not because it’s expensive, but because it makes me feel connected.” Such forms of symbolic consumption serve as mechanisms for social identity formation while simultaneously reinforcing solidarity among fellow fans.

At the community level, local ARMY members were not merely consumers of culture but also active agents in the production and dissemination of meaning. Informants who served as community administrators or event organizers demonstrated that BTS-related cultural

³³ D. Horton dan R. Richard Wohl, “Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction,” *Psychiatry* 19, no. 3 (1956): hlm. 215-229,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049>.



practices were actively re-created within their own social spaces. As one community admin explained, “We organize watch parties not just for fun, but also to support one another and discuss the messages in BTS’s songs.”

One of the most notable impacts observed was the reproduction of *soft masculinity* values. The informants adopted BTS’s gentle, reflective, and empathetic demeanor while simultaneously filtering these traits through the cultural norms of the Malay-Islamic context of Bangka. The form of masculinity they performed was not one of dominance, but rather an expression characterized by politeness, controlled emotionality, and refinement in both appearance and behavior. As one male informant expressed, “I used to think that men shouldn’t cry, but after listening to BTS, I became more comfortable expressing my feelings still within limits, without being excessive.”

In addition, the informants’ attitudes toward *haters* illustrated that the ARMY community functions as a space for

learning social ethics. Instead of responding with anger, they chose dialogue or creative expression, reflecting the moral values internalized from BTS.

Thus, the behavioral responses of ARMY toward BTS demonstrate that this community serves as an active site for the formation of identity and values. Through the internalization of empathetic lyrics and a style that is gentle yet assertive, members reproduce a form of masculinity that not only mirrors BTS’s global image but is also locally adapted to values such as politeness, empathy, and measured emotional expression. These meanings emerge from the shared experience of music, sustained digital interaction, lived cultural values, and the dynamics of the community they collectively construct.

3. Negotiating Malay-Bangka Norms: Hybridity, Glocalization, and the Boundaries of Acceptance

In interpreting BTS’s representation of *soft masculinity*, the ARMY community of Institut Pahlawan 12 exhibited patterns of reception that were neither uniform nor



absolute, but rather negotiational and context-dependent. Amid the strong cultural emphasis on modesty, honor, and traditional gender roles within the Malay-Islamic society of Bangka, the informants did not entirely reject the fluid expressions of gender performed by BTS. Instead, they positioned these elements within a framework of local values that remains flexible yet controlled.

Most of the informants, including Yulisa and Susan, stated that BTS's feminine appearance such as the use of skirts, flower crowns, and makeup—was not immediately perceived as deviant, but rather understood as part of the performative demands and aesthetic conventions of the Korean entertainment industry. Yulisa, for instance, expressed concern about men dressing like women in everyday contexts but regarded it as acceptable within a performative framework. This distinction illustrates a clear separation between stage image and

personal identity, as well as an understanding that gender expression in K-pop is both constructed and artistic in nature.

This process reflects the dynamics of cultural glocalization, in which global symbols such as BTS are recontextualized within local value systems. Robertson's (1995)³⁴ theory of *glocalization* and Bhabha's (1994)³⁵ concept of *cultural hybridity* are particularly relevant in explaining how the Bangka ARMY community adopts BTS's emotional values—such as empathy, self-reflection, and solidarity—while simultaneously filtering visual aspects that are perceived as exceeding the boundaries of modesty. Through this negotiation, a synthesis occurs between global imagery and local norms, wherein elements aligned with Malay-Islamic values are embraced, while those deemed incongruent are selectively muted.

³⁴ Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), hlm. 25–30.

³⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), hlm. 38–45



Several informants even stated that they were more influenced by BTS's lyrics and moral messages than by the group's physical appearance. This finding suggests that BTS's representation functions not merely as an aesthetic stimulus but also as a moral medium capable of being locally translated and reinterpreted. Thus, *glocalization* is not simply a form of cultural adaptation, but an active process of interpretation and meaning reconstruction carried out by the audience.

The implications of these findings highlight the importance of adopting educational and cultural policy approaches that are not homogeneous but adaptive to local dynamics. Cross-cultural dialogues that emphasize aesthetic understanding, performative context, and local values can serve as a bridge to foster tolerance and appreciation toward more fluid expressions of gender, without disregarding deeply rooted cultural foundations.

E. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that BTS's representation of *soft masculinity* was received selectively and contextually by local fans. This process of reception occurred through three stages of perception—selection, interpretation, and reaction—each influenced by local cultural values, religious experiences, and the intensity of fandom engagement.

At the selection stage, BTS's verbal and nonverbal communication—particularly through song lyrics and stage performances—was found to convey a strong sense of masculinity, even though it was expressed through feminine elements such as androgynous fashion and gentle gestures. These feminine aspects, which might conventionally be seen as contradicting traditional standards of masculinity, were instead interpreted as part of the performative aesthetics and the more inclusive and flexible masculinity culture of South Korea.

The interpretation stage demonstrated that the ARMY community at Institut Pahlawan 12 did not consume

BTS content passively but actively reframed the meanings they encountered. The feminine characteristics displayed by BTS were integrated with the motivational and masculine messages found in songs such as *Love Myself*, which were perceived as expressions of emotional strength and legitimate forms of self-expression. This interpretation indicates that fans were able to synthesize local values—such as politeness and empathy—with global symbols they considered meaningful and relevant.

At the reaction stage, the fans' engagement extended beyond emotional appreciation toward behavioral expression. The ARMY members not only followed BTS's music releases and performances but also embodied the group's values of empathy, perseverance, and self-acceptance in their everyday interactions. The internalization of these values was reflected in how they responded to criticism and negative comments, often choosing composure, dialogue, or creative expression over confrontation. Such practices

demonstrate that fandom participation operates as a moral and cultural learning process through which global messages are adapted to local ethical frameworks.

In conclusion, this study highlights that BTS's *soft masculinity* is not merely received by local fans but actively negotiated within the moral, religious, and cultural parameters of the Malay-Islamic context of Bangka. Through processes of globalization and cultural hybridity, the ARMY community constructed a hybrid form of masculinity—one that integrates emotional depth, politeness, and empathy with assertiveness and self-discipline. This dynamic interplay between global media representation and local cultural values exemplifies how meaning is co-created in transnational fan cultures.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings contribute to the broader discourse on gender performativity, fandom studies, and cultural communication by demonstrating how global popular culture can be localized through selective adaptation and reinterpretation. Practically, the study

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suggests that educational and cultural policy approaches should adopt context-sensitive frameworks that encourage intercultural dialogue and appreciation of diverse gender expressions, without disregarding local moral foundations.

It is recommended that future research expand this inquiry to other fandom communities in Southeast Asia to further explore how local cultural systems negotiate global representations of gender and identity. Such comparative studies could deepen understanding of glocalized fandoms as active agents in shaping inclusive cultural narratives in the digital era.

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