



AUDIENCE RECEPTION OF MENTAL HEALTH REPRESENTATION IN THE FILM SLEEP CALL: AN ENCODING–DECODING ANALYSIS

Widya Annisa¹, *Iman Sumarlan²

^{1,2}Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

*Email: iman.sumarlan@comm.uad.ac.id

Abstract

This study examines how audiences interpret representations of mental health in the Indonesian film *Sleep Call* using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews with eight female Generation Z viewers aged 20–25 who watched the film in cinemas or via the Prime Video streaming platform. The data were analyzed through a thematic reception analysis to identify dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional decoding positions. The findings indicate that dominant-hegemonic readings largely align with the film's preferred meaning by framing mental health vulnerability as closely linked to economic pressure, illegal online lending, and digital loneliness. Negotiated readings accept this framing while expanding it to include relational and social dimensions, particularly the role of support systems. Oppositional readings challenge the film's narrative by foregrounding issues of gender representation and agency, interpreting the portrayal of mental health as embedded within broader representational politics. These findings demonstrate that meanings surrounding mental health in popular cinema are not fixed but are actively negotiated by audiences based on lived experience and ideological positioning. Within the context of a bounded interpretive community, this study contributes to media reception research in Indonesia by clarifying how mental health representations are decoded, contested, and reinterpreted in contemporary film culture.

Keywords: *Udience Reception; Mental Health; Sleep Call Film; Encoding/Decoding; Stuart Hall; Generation Z*

A. Introduction

Mental health issues have become a global and national concern due to the increasing number of individuals experiencing psychological disorders as a result of social, economic, and digital pressures. In Indonesia, mental health is no longer merely a personal issue, but rather a social problem that requires multidisciplinary attention, including perspectives from communication studies and media sociology (Hartini et al., 2018; Rahayu & Nugraha, 2024). In the context of modern society, mass media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of mental health issues. Representations of individuals with mental disorders in the media are often stereotypical, portraying them as irrational, dangerous, or socially isolated figures (Priadi, 2025; Riadi, 2022). Such representations have the potential to generate social stigma and exacerbate public

misunderstanding of the psychological realities faced by individuals with mental health conditions. Conversely, film as a form of popular media also functions as a space for social reflection, representing social realities, values, and cultural dynamics within society (McQuail, 2010; Mudjiono, 2011).

The film *Sleep Call* (2023) is particularly compelling for analysis because it addresses mental health issues through the character of Dina, a woman who experiences economic and emotional pressure as a result of entanglement with illegal online lending practices and loneliness within digital relationships. The film not only portrays individual struggles but also illustrates the social structures that influence the mental conditions of young people, especially urban women. This phenomenon reflects contemporary social dynamics in which psychological burdens increasingly intersect with economic precarity, social expectations, and digital technological disruption.

The research problem of this study is formulated through the following central question: how do audiences interpret mental health issues represented in the film *Sleep Call* through the perspective of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory? This question is significant because audience interpretation is not singular or homogeneous. Each individual constructs meaning based on their life experiences, social values, and cultural context. Importantly, this study does not aim to generalize to the Indonesian population as a whole; instead, it focuses on a bounded interpretive community—eight female Generation Z viewers aged 20–25—to prioritize interpretive depth over broad generalization.

Theoretically, this study is grounded in audience reception research, which argues that mass communication is not a one-way process. Audiences are not merely passive recipients of media messages, but social actors who actively interpret and assign meaning to media texts based on their backgrounds, experiences, and value systems (Laughey, 2007; Stanley J. Baran, 2011). Within this paradigm, communication is understood as an exchange of meaning between message producers (encoders) and message receivers (decoders), where the final interpretation does not always align with the sender's original intention. Stuart Hall's (2019; 2003) encoding/decoding model is central to this approach, positing that media meanings are open (polysemic) and that audiences possess the agency to accept, negotiate, or reject dominant meanings. Hall identifies three possible audience reception positions: the dominant-hegemonic position, in which audiences largely accept the preferred meaning constructed by media producers; the negotiated position, in which audiences partially accept the dominant meaning but modify their interpretations based on personal experiences and social values; and the oppositional position, in which audiences reject the dominant meaning and construct alternative interpretations grounded in differing ideological perspectives or personal viewpoints.

This framework is particularly relevant for examining film texts that address mental health because such representations are rich in symbolism, emotion, and social values. Mental health refers to an individual's psychological condition that enables them to function optimally in social and emotional life (Fusar-Poli et al., 2020). The media plays a strategic role in shaping public understanding of mental health: representations

may reinforce stereotypes and stigma, yet film also has the potential to function as an educational medium that fosters empathy and public awareness (Briandana et al., 2024; Riadi, 2022). Research by Jauhari and Arviani (2023), for example, demonstrates how film narratives can contribute to normalizing mental health discourse through humane representations, supporting the argument that popular media can shape mental health literacy.

Recent scholarship in reception studies also indicates a shift toward more active meaning production, particularly in digital contexts. Liang and Lu (2025) emphasize that audiences do not merely consume audiovisual texts but actively construct interpretations through emotional engagement, while Castaldi and Foundouka (2025) highlight that reception is strongly shaped by viewers' social and ideological contexts. In this sense, *Sleep Call* is a relevant cultural text because it integrates social issues (online lending), psychological issues (loneliness), and digital issues (online dating applications) that resonate with contemporary experiences of young audiences.

Several previous studies have examined mental health issues within media and film contexts, as well as women's representation in Indonesian cinema. Agustina et al. (2025) deconstructed the portrayal of women in *Sleep Call* using Sara Mills' theory and identified a narrative of double burden experienced by the main character. Andrianto and Aliffianto (2021) examined post-traumatic stress disorder in an Indonesian film text and emphasized the importance of empathetic representation of survivors. Audience reception studies have also explored how interpretations are shaped by personal experience, such as Hafidhah (2022) on audience reception and self-acceptance. However, studies that specifically investigate audience reception of mental health representations in Indonesian films through Hall's encoding/decoding framework remain limited, particularly those that explicitly map dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings toward a national film text such as *Sleep Call*. This gap constitutes the state of the art of the present study and positions the analysis within Indonesian media reception research that connects psychosocial issues with digital culture and socio-economic pressures.

Based on this gap, this study is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions within the context of a bounded interpretive community. Theoretically, it enriches media reception research in Indonesia by clarifying how meanings about mental health representation are constructed, negotiated, and resisted by audiences through Hall's decoding positions. Practically, the findings may serve as a reference for filmmakers, educators, and media practitioners in producing more empathetic and educational representations of mental health issues, while offering insights that are relevant for discussions on psychological wellbeing in contemporary social life.

B. Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm to examine how audiences construct meanings of mental health issues represented in the film *Sleep Call*. Qualitative reception research is particularly appropriate for exploring interpretive processes because it prioritizes participants'

subjective experiences and socially situated understandings of media texts. The analysis is guided by Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework, which conceptualizes audience interpretation as a non-linear process shaped by social position, lived experience, and ideological context. Through this approach, the study focuses on how meanings encoded in the film are accepted, negotiated, or resisted by viewers rather than on measuring audience attitudes quantitatively.

The research participants consisted of eight female viewers aged 20–25, representing Generation Z, who had watched *Sleep Call* either in cinemas or via the Prime Video streaming platform. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on criteria relevant to the research objectives: age cohort, gender, familiarity with the film's narrative, and willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. The study was conducted in Yogyakarta and Jakarta to capture variation in urban socio-cultural contexts while maintaining analytical focus. Data were collected between May and September 2025 through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 30–45 minutes. Interview questions explored participants' interpretations of the film's narrative, representations of mental health, socio-economic pressure, digital relationships, and perceived moral or social messages.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using a thematic reception analysis informed by Hall's decoding positions. The analysis proceeded through three stages: (1) open coding to identify recurring interpretive themes; (2) categorization of responses into dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional readings based on explicit criteria of acceptance, modification, or rejection of the film's preferred meaning; and (3) interpretive synthesis linking thematic patterns to participants' social and experiential contexts. To enhance trustworthiness, the study applied analytic memoing, peer debriefing, and thick description through representative quotations. Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant anonymity, and using all data solely for academic purposes.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Results

This study is grounded in the understanding that audiences are not merely passive recipients of media messages, but active agents who produce meaning based on their social contexts and lived experiences. In the case of the film *Sleep Call*, in-depth interviews with eight female participant aged 20–25 reveal diverse reception positions toward the representation of mental health issues. This diversity of interpretations illustrates the dynamics of audience reception as conceptualized by Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, which emphasizes that media meanings are open to interpretation, negotiation, and resistance by audiences. In line with the study's objective, the findings are organized into Hall's three decoding positions—dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional—to show how different viewers construct meanings around mental health messages presented in the film.

Before presenting the three decoding positions, it is important to clarify how each position was identified in this study. A response was categorized as dominant-hegemonic when an participant largely accepted the film's preferred meaning and framed Dina's distress in line with the film's moral critique (e.g., economic pressure, illegal online lending, and digital loneliness). A response was categorized as negotiated when the participant accepted the film's central message but qualified it by adding alternative explanations or emphasizing omitted social factors (e.g., family dynamics, support systems, and relational environments). A response was categorized as oppositional when the participant challenged the film's framing and constructed a counter-reading, particularly by foregrounding gender ideology, representational politics, or perceived patriarchal narrative patterns. These criteria ensure that the results directly address the research question regarding how audiences decode mental health representations in *Sleep Call*.

The film *Sleep Call* presents the representation of an urban young woman, Dina, who lives under social, economic, and emotional pressure. Dependence on digital technology, online lending practices, and virtual romantic relationships serves as a symbolic portrayal of modern human alienation. Within this context, the film seeks to communicate messages about the complexity of mental health issues in the digital era. However, the decoding process demonstrates that audiences interpret the film's messages in varied ways, influenced by their social backgrounds and personal value systems.

Dominant-Hegemonic Reception: Acceptance of the Film's Meaning as Social Reality Representation

Most participants in this study occupied the dominant-hegemonic position, namely viewers who generally accepted the film's meaning as constructed by the filmmakers. They perceived *Sleep Call* as a realistic representation of psychological pressure linked to economic burdens, social expectations, and digital loneliness. The film was regarded as successfully depicting contemporary mental health conditions in an honest and emotionally resonant manner.

"In my opinion, this film is very honest. Dina feels like a reflection of many young women today—working hard, facing constant pressure, yet having no space to share their struggles. Eventually, they just keep everything inside, which leads to stress." (IN1, 22 years old, university student)

"I really felt connected to this film. Pressure from work and financial problems can lead people into depression without them realizing it. This film made me more aware of the importance of rest and seeking professional help." (IN2, 24 years old, private-sector employee)

Participants in the dominant-hegemonic position viewed the film as an educational medium that promotes awareness of mental health issues. They appreciated the realistic portrayal of Dina as a character burdened by social and economic pressure without adequate emotional support. From their perspective, the film serves a social function by fostering empathy toward individuals experiencing psychological distress. In terms of the study's objective, these responses indicate that the preferred meaning encoded in the

film—linking mental health vulnerability with socio-economic and digital pressures—was largely decoded as intended.

Negotiated Reception: Hybrid Interpretations Between Acceptance and Critique

A second group of participants occupied the negotiated position. These viewers accepted certain aspects of the film's meaning but reinterpreted others based on their personal experiences and perspectives. They acknowledged that *Sleep Call* addresses an important and relevant issue, yet they perceived an imbalance in the causal representation of mental health problems, which they felt overly emphasized external factors such as economic pressure and occupational stress.

"The film is good, but it focuses too much on work problems and online loans. Mental pressure can also come from family relationships, friendships, or unsupportive social environments." (IN4, 23 years old, administrative staff)

"I understand the message, but the film should have shown the importance of a support system. Dina is portrayed as being too isolated, as if she has to carry all the burdens alone." (IN5, 21 years old, psychology student)

"I think the film is smart, but not everyone experiences stress because of economic problems. Sometimes it's simply because there's no space to be heard." (IN6, 25 years old, state-owned enterprise employee)

These statements indicate that audiences negotiated the film's message by incorporating broader social contexts. Rather than rejecting the film's core message, they suggested that mental health representations should extend beyond individual struggles to include systemic and relational dimensions. In Hall's framework, the negotiated position reflects selective acceptance: participants align with the dominant meaning while revising elements that do not fully match their lived realities. In relation to the study's objective, this position demonstrates how viewers decode mental health messages through a hybrid lens—accepting the film's critique while widening the explanatory frame.

Oppositional Reception: Rejection of Dominant Meaning and Construction of Counter-Readings

A smaller number of participants adopted an oppositional stance, rejecting the dominant meaning constructed by the film. These viewers argued that *Sleep Call* reproduces patriarchal biases and reinforces stereotypes of women with mental health issues. From their perspective, the film fails to present an empowering representation and instead reiterates a narrative that positions women primarily as passive victims.

"I disagree with how the film portrays Dina. It feels like all her problems exist because she isn't strong enough on her own. The film should have shown that women can rise independently without dependence." (IN7, 24 years old, women's rights activist)

"The film is still very patriarchal. From beginning to end, women are depicted as suffering, while men occupy dominant positions. It made me feel that the film is not progressive enough." (IN8, 23 years old, creative industry worker)

These oppositional readings reject the film's preferred meaning and construct counter-readings that foreground gender ideology and representational politics. Participants in this position interpreted the film's portrayal of mental health as inseparable from questions of agency and power. In terms of the study's objective, this position confirms that decoding can operate as resistance: audiences may actively contest the encoded message and reframe the film through alternative ideological interpretations.

2. Discussion

The findings of this study position *Sleep Call* as a cultural text embedded within broader regimes of meaning that shape how mental health, gender, and vulnerability are articulated in contemporary Indonesian cinema. Audience reception of the film does not merely reflect individual taste or emotional response, but reveals a struggle over representation, ideology, and symbolic power. Importantly, this struggle is visible in the patterned differences across decoding positions identified in the results: dominant-hegemonic readings tended to reproduce the film's preferred framing of distress as closely linked to economic pressure, illegal online lending, and digital loneliness, while negotiated readings widened the explanatory frame by emphasizing omitted relational factors such as support systems and social environments. Oppositional readings, in contrast, shifted the interpretive focus from "mental health awareness" to "gendered representation," foregrounding questions of agency and patriarchal narrative patterns. By grounding the ideological discussion in these empirically observed differences, the analysis demonstrates how broader discourses become meaningful through concrete interpretive practices rather than being assumed in advance (Aligwe et al., 2018).

The dominant-hegemonic readings indicate the effectiveness of the film's representational strategies in stabilizing particular interpretations of mental health. Participants in this position largely understood Dina's suffering as a realistic reflection of contemporary pressures and read the film as a moral reminder that encourages awareness and professional help-seeking. In reception terms, this aligns with Hall's argument that the preferred meaning of a text can be taken up when audiences find it plausible within their lived realities. At the same time, the dominance of this reading suggests that the film's critique is received primarily through individualized or interpersonal registers (e.g., "stress," "loneliness," "pressure") rather than through explicit interrogation of structural conditions. This observation is not a claim that audiences are unaware of structure; rather, it indicates that the interpretive resources mobilized in dominant readings tend to align with the film's narrative focus on personal vulnerability. This pattern resonates with scholarship emphasizing how media texts can organize public sense-making by making certain causal frames more "thinkable" than others, while also supporting the view that empathetic portrayals may foster awareness and reduce stigma when audiences identify emotionally with the character's predicament (e.g., Jauhari & Arviani, 2023).

Negotiated readings expose fissures within this dominant framing. Audiences in this position did not reject the film's message; instead, they accepted the central concern about mental health vulnerability but reworked it by emphasizing relational and social

dimensions—such as family, friendship, and the presence (or absence) of a support system. This selective acceptance reflects the core logic of Hall’s negotiated position, where dominant meanings remain partially intact but are revised to fit audience experiences. Analytically, these readings are crucial because they demonstrate that “mental health representation” is not interpreted only as a story of individual distress; it can also be interpreted as a commentary on social relations and collective responsibility. This is consistent with contemporary reception studies that emphasize contextual decoding, where interpretive outcomes are shaped by the social positioning, emotional experiences, and ideological repertoires of viewers (Castaldi & Foundouka, 2025). In practical terms, negotiated readings highlight what viewers perceive as missing in the film’s representational economy, particularly the under-visibility of social support as a resource for coping, and thus identify narrative openings for more socially embedded mental health portrayals.

The oppositional position constitutes the most explicitly critical mode of reception identified in this study. Audiences in this category read *Sleep Call* not only as a narrative about mental health but also as a gendered text that may reproduce representational conventions in which women’s suffering is foregrounded while women’s agency is backgrounded. Rather than treating this critique as marginal, the oppositional readings are analytically significant because they reveal the ideological limits of the film’s framing for certain viewers. Importantly, the oppositional stance does not necessarily deny the reality of mental health struggles; instead, it contests how vulnerability is narrativized and whose agency is made visible (Mulvey, 1975). This aligns with feminist critiques of media representation that problematize narratives that aestheticize women’s pain without equally articulating pathways of agency, resistance, or recovery. It also connects to prior work that has examined gender representation in *Sleep Call* and noted burdens placed on the female protagonist (Agustina et al., 2025), suggesting that audience resistance may emerge where viewers recognize familiar gendered patterns and expect more empowering representational alternatives.

From a critical-cultural standpoint, these findings reinforce the usefulness of encoding/decoding theory for analyzing Indonesian cinema as an ideological field where meanings about mental health, gender, and agency are negotiated rather than fixed. At the same time, the results suggest that “awareness” as a representational goal is not sufficient on its own: audiences may accept the intended awareness message while still questioning the ideological work performed by the narrative structure and character positioning. In this sense, the film functions as a site of contestation, where empathy-based readings can coexist with critical readings that demand greater structural and gender sensitivity. This also supports arguments in the reception literature that meaning is not simply decoded but actively produced through interpretive labor shaped by experience and discourse (Liang & Lu, 2025).

The study also implies that media literacy operates as a form of interpretive capacity that may enable audiences to move from identification toward critique. Viewers who foregrounded gender ideology and representational politics demonstrate a stronger

tendency to interrogate narrative assumptions and power relations embedded in the film, while those who emphasized emotional resonance tended to prioritize identification with the character's suffering and the film's moral framing. This is not a hierarchical evaluation of audiences; rather, it illustrates how affect, experience, and discourse interact to shape decoding practices. For communication and media sociology, this pattern matters because it shows that audience reception of mental health narratives is simultaneously an affective process (identification and empathy) and an ideological process (evaluation of representation, agency, and social framing).

In broader terms, the findings suggest practical implications for filmmakers and media educators. For filmmakers, the negotiated and oppositional readings point to audience expectations for mental health representations that more explicitly incorporate support systems, relational environments, and agency-oriented trajectories, rather than centering suffering alone. For educators and media literacy practitioners, the diversity of readings can be used as an entry point to discuss how films encode social meanings and how viewers can reflect critically on representation, stigma, and gender norms. Thus, films like *Sleep Call* may function not only as entertainment or awareness texts but also as pedagogical materials for public discussion about psychological wellbeing in digitally mediated social life.

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that audience reception of *Sleep Call* constitutes a process of ideological negotiation shaped by social experience, educational background, and psychological awareness. Using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework, the findings identify dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings, indicating that the film's representation of mental health as interpreted by young women in urban contexts operates within contested discursive terrain. While some audiences align with the film's framing of psychological vulnerability, others reinterpret or resist it by foregrounding structural and gendered dimensions, confirming that meaning is produced through negotiation rather than fixed at the point of production.

From a critical-cultural perspective, this study reinforces the relevance of encoding/decoding theory for analyzing Indonesian cinema as an ideological field where representations of mental health, gender, and agency are contested. Film emerges not only as a medium of awareness but as a cultural apparatus capable of reproducing or challenging dominant assumptions. Practically, the findings call for mental health representations that move beyond the visualization of suffering toward narratives that acknowledge agency and structural conditions. This study has limitations. It focuses on a single film and a bounded audience group (eight female viewers aged 20–25), which supports interpretive depth but limits broader generalization. Future research should examine wider audience segments and additional film texts to further interrogate how mental health and gender are negotiated within Indonesian media culture.

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