

## Youth Reception of Gender-Based Violence Victim in Soft White Underbelly YouTube Channel

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**Abstract.** *Soft White Underbelly is a YouTube channel that produces content of interviews with marginalized people in America. It uncovers stories of stigmatized people and reveals the systemic inequality behind their presence. Gender-based violence (GBV) is one of the issues addressed on this channel. It portrays how prostitutes are victims of GBV. The author applied Stuart Hall's audience reception theory. The theory proposes that media messages are not static. Hall suggested that expectations and prior knowledge influence their text interpretation. This research investigates how young audiences perceive portrayals of GBV victims in Soft White Underbelly's videos on prostitution and explores the factors that influence these perceptions. A qualitative method was adopted, employing audience reception analysis as the approach. Informants were international YouTube users between the ages of 18 and 30. The study finds various receptions, influenced by social factors, media habits, educational levels, personal experiences, and economic factors. Furthermore, this research confirms that Hall's reception theory is evident in today's audience reception. The findings demonstrate how viewers can develop critical awareness, interpret media texts, and disseminate them back into their social environment.*

**Keywords:** *audience reception, gender-based violence, prostitute, YouTube, soft white underbelly.*

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## INTRODUCTION

YouTube is one of the new forms of social network-oriented online communication, or social media today that emerged in the internet era (Haridakis & Hanson, 2009). According to Kemp (2022) and Elareshi et al. (2022), YouTube is the world's second-most used and visited platform, with over 2 billion users logged in monthly. People watch its videos for over one billion hours monthly, making this platform suitable for disseminating information about social causes (Haridakis & Hanson, 2009). Consequently, YouTube is recognized as a powerful tool for social advocacy, including raising awareness about gender-based violence (GBV) against individuals involved in prostitution (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017).

Soft White Underbelly is a YouTube channel that leverages its platform to raise people's awareness of systemic inequality in the United States. Established on April 25, 2016, this channel has produced hundreds of videos interviewing marginalized people, including individuals involved in prostitution. This content, as mentioned in the introduction videos, is intended to give different perspectives on marginalized people like prostitutes and highlight the systemic inequality they face.

Prostitution involves sexual activity between sellers and buyers, with pleasure exchanged for money or goods (Fuadi et al., 2022). This definition is divided into four parts, namely act of selling, sexual exchange, and a promiscuous and emotionally indifferent activity. However,

there are reasons why someone falls into prostitution. It was discovered that most of the women became prostitutes because of their vulnerabilities, namely poverty, low education, childhood sexual violence, and lack of employment (Farley, 2018). Systemic inequality (gender, race, and class) contributes to prostitution and results in these women becoming prostitutes (Moran & Farley, 2019). Therefore, prostitution is classified as one form of GBV, and women involved in prostitution are considered victims.

Between 45 and 75% of sex workers experience violence (Deering et al., 2014). A survey conducted with 854 people in prostitution from nine countries found that 89% wished to leave prostitution but did not have the choice (Farley, 2018). However, the mainstream media rarely covered the dangers and vulnerabilities faced by prostitutes (Yadav, 2020). They are seldom allowed to speak up about their lives or opinions, and that is why the prostitute interview videos on Soft White Underbelly are compelling research subjects.

In Soft White Underbelly, prostitutes have the chance to voice their life experiences and struggles. The interviews reveal that many of them are children of abusive parents, victims of sexual violence, or struggle with poverty and low education. GBV becomes one prominent theme in the videos, highlighting how prostitutes are victims of GBV. However, in communication, a media message can be varied. Audiences play a role in constructing meaning. Therefore, an analysis of youth reception of GBV victims in the prostitute interview videos on Soft White Underbelly is conducted.

The research seeks to answer the research question of the youth reception of gender-based violence victims in the prostitute interview videos on the Soft White Underbelly YouTube Channel.

The research adopts qualitative methods, with Stuart Hall's reception analysis as its approach. Qualitative research is an exploratory method that seeks to explain 'how' and 'why' a particular social phenomenon or program operates as it does a specific context. Stuart Hall's reception analysis is a theory that posits audiences as active entities that give meaning to media text understanding. In receiving a media text, the audience can align their comprehension with the creator (dominant-hegemonic reading), accept the main message but have things objected to (negotiated reading), or reject the message of the media text (opposition reading) entirely. This method and theory are used to analyze how audiences receive the videos. The subjects of this research are international YouTube users between the ages of 18 and 30. The specific range of age is chosen to understand GBV issues from the young generation's perspective and international participants are selected to provide diverse social backgrounds. The subjects are YouTube users and familiar with English content to prevent misunderstanding of the language used. This research is expected to provide insights into communication reception analysis studies on YouTube content, particularly regarding GBV issues among prostitutes.

GBV is a global pandemic affecting millions of adults and children yearly (Bows & Fileborn, 2020). O'Toole et al. (2018) explained that gender-based violence is any interpersonal, organizational, or politically oriented violation perpetrated against people due to their gender identity, sexual orientation, or location in the hierarchy of male-dominated social systems such as family, military, organizations, or the labor force.

In discussing GBV, one must define sex, gender, and violence in society. Sex refers to the biological characteristics that define humans as female or male (WHO,

2017). Gender, on the other hand, means more than the sex of the victim (Johnson, 2015). Walby and Towers (2017) define violence as an action or the combination of action and harm, particularly in how repetition is addressed. Lorber (in Risman, 2004) argued that gender is an institution that is embedded in all the social processes of everyday life and social organizations. She further claimed that gender difference is primarily a means to justify sexual stratification. Gender difference is socially constructed yet universally used to justify stratification (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). Gender, as a modern social institution, constructs women as a subordinate group to men as a group. Current conceptions of violence against women have developed from the confluence of two traditions: advocacy movements for victims of sexual assault and domestic violence and social and behavioral research on sexual assault and family violence (Gordon, 2000).

The UN General Assembly (Walby et al., 2014), in its Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, defined violence against women thus:

For this Declaration, the term “violence against women” means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. Violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not be limited to, the following: (a) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation; (b) physical, sexual and psychological

violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution; (c) Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs.

Prostitution is an occupation in which an individual sells sex in a promiscuous and emotionally indifferent manner. This definition is divided into four parts; each is examined separately. The parts are prostitution as (1) an occupation, (2) an act of selling, (3) a sexual exchange, and (4) a promiscuous and emotionally indifferent activity (Armstrong, 1981). In the attempt to define prostitution, there are feminist neo-abolitionist perspectives as one of the perspectives that define it (Gerassi, 2015). The neo-abolitionist perspective believes prostitution is a form of GBV rooted in structural inequality, such as sex, economy, and race (Moran & Farley, 2019). It is proven that most people in prostitution are women who fall into prostitution due to their vulnerabilities. As Farley (2018) explained, “Women are prostitutes because they are vulnerable due to their poverty, a lack of educational options, lack of employment opportunities, and as a result of previous physical, sexual, and emotional harms.” Thus, people who work in prostitution are at the highest risk, facing health risks, physical violence, emotional and psychological violence, sexual violence, and socio-economic challenges (Harris & Vitis, 2020).

Media are communication tools to disseminate messages to reach and influence large numbers of people (Paul & Rai, 2021). It is a powerful information tool with the authority to determine, frame, and present the issues and events that must be communicated to the public (Sevtiany

et al., 2023). In society, the mass media, such as newspapers, television, and radio, often produce perspectives on events and issues (Ozascilar & Ziyalar, 2015). Given this competence, the media can reinforce the values and norms already believed in by society (Arias, 2019). However, the rise of social media has significantly changed the way how people interact and exchange information (Ulfa et al., 2023).

Social media is referred to as a set of information technologies that facilitate interactions and networking (Colliver & Coyle, 2020; Ernungtyas & Boer, 2023; Smith & Niker, 2021; Srauy, 2015; Wolf et al., 2017; Zauner, 2021). In cases of GBV and prostitutes, content with a gender perspective or featuring prostitutes as subjects will help fight the negative stigma around them.

Previous research has found that coverage of prostitutes in mass media remains biased, with systemic inequalities perspectives rarely included when discussing their issues (Ozascilar & Ziyalar, 2015). Reports on the vulnerabilities and dangers faced by prostitutes are likely to be neglected, risking them being in more harmful situations. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of YouTube content as a tool to deconstruct biases and stereotypes about GBV and prostitutes depends on people's perspectives and knowledge. Mainstream media has influenced public understanding for a long time. Therefore, in this study, the researcher aims to analyze the audience's understanding of prostitutes as GBV victims, considering their initial exposure to biased mainstream media.

Reception analysis is an active audience theory that explains how media interpretation by the audience can differ due to situated cultural context. Contextual factors play a considerable role in how audiences view or read media, which has been underlined in reception

analysis theory. Stuart Hall initiated this theory in 1973 in his essay "Encoding and Decoding in The Television Discourse." In the Encoding/Decoding model, a communication process involves creating a message from a code to deliver a specific meaning by the encoder/media producer (encoding) and interpreting the code to derive meaning by the decoder/audience (decoding) (Hall, 2021).

Audience analysis emphasizes the diversity of responses to particular popular cultural artifacts by directly examining how specific audiences understand and use popular cultural texts. Audience research gathers important information about a group of people who seek to have their understanding of cultural texts acknowledged (Annisa, 2023).

From this model, Stuart Hall argues three hypothetical positions regarding how the audience decodes or interprets a text: dominant or hegemonic reading, negotiated reading, and oppositional reading (Hall, 2021). The audiences in dominant reading understand the media/text as the media producer/encoder intends. Their decoding process aligns with the producer's intentions, accepting the intended meaning (preferred reading) from the media producer. In negotiated reading, the audience understands the creator's intended meaning differently, based on their interest and background. The audience places certain boundaries during, so the given media text partially accepts the main idea. Lastly, in oppositional or counter-hegemonic reading, the audiences entirely reject the intended meaning by the media producer. The decoding process does not align with the discourse provided by the producer, leading to a different understanding of the media. This research aims to explore and explain the youth reception of GBV victims in the prostitute's interview videos on the Soft White Underbelly YouTube Channel and the factors affecting it.

## METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative method, with reception analysis as its approach. The qualitative method allows the researcher to answer the research question through its exploratory quality regarding social phenomena. Using this method, the research seeks to explore youth reception of gender-based violence victims in the prostitute interview videos on Soft White Underbelly. Stuart Hall's reception analysis is used in this research to understand the audience's stance as active entities in the communication process. The audience can produce meaning from their media based on their background. The audience is categorized into three positions, namely dominant hegemonic position, negotiated position, and oppositional position, to define their reading.

In this research, informants are selected using a purposive sampling technique, meaning they are chosen based on their quality and suitability to answer the research question. Informants of this research are international audiences of any gender aged 18-30. They must be active YouTube users (accessing YouTube at least three times a week) and familiar with English-language content. International informants are chosen to compare the knowledge of gender-based violence among people from different social backgrounds. Informants include both men and women to provide a comprehensive perspective on how different genders understand this issue. Informants are young adults aged 18-30 who are expected to be aware of social problems and understand gender issues. Informants must be active YouTube users, indicating an interest in YouTube content and familiarity with English to ensure the content's message is well understood.

Data is gathered through form filling and in-depth interviews with the informants. The form filling is

conducted for initial informants data collection, including informants profiles, participation availability, and first impressions of the videos watched. The in-depth interview technique explores the audience's views, beliefs, and familiarity regarding gender-based violence victims, as represented in Soft White Underbelly's YouTube channel video. All data gathering was done online due to the pandemic and the different locations of the informant and the researcher.

Data analysis is conducted to systematically organize the results of interviews and other observations of the case being researched and present findings to the public. The qualitative data analysis process occurs in three interactive stages. The first stage is data reduction, which involves simplifying the rough data from the interview. In this stage, interview data is transcribed and summarized, then themed and clustered. The data reduction is done to help researchers better comprehend the data and ensure it aligns with the research purpose. The second stage is data presentation. The collected data is organized into a presentation to provide an overview of the research situation, conclusion, and action to be taken. The interview is presented as narratives in the findings and discussion chapters. The last stage of analyzing qualitative data is the conclusion. The conclusion is derived from the analysis. The data is clarified throughout this process and verified in several ways, such as rethinking during writing, reviewing field notes, and cross-referencing with other data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### **The Prostitute Videos: Kelly and Amber**

Of 21 video playlists on Soft White Underbelly, sex workers are the second most-produced theme, after addiction and homelessness, with 309 videos uploaded by January 13, 2022. The figures



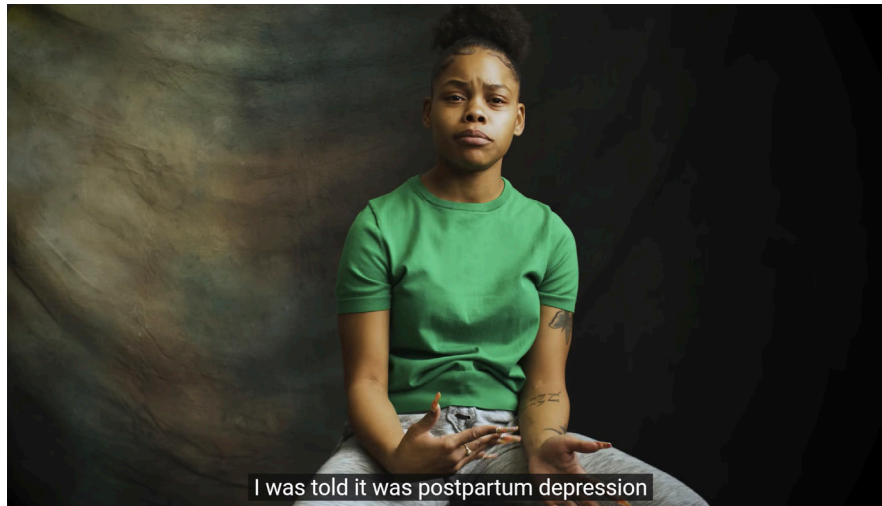


FIGURE 1. Prostitute Interview-Kelly

interviewed in this category include pimps, cam models, strippers, porn actresses, prostitutes, and ex-prostitutes. Some of these interviews have become the most popular videos on this channel. In this research, the researcher uses the interviews of prostitutes titled Prostitute Interview-Kelly and Prostitute Interview-Amber.

Prostitute Interview-Kelly. Kelly, 21 years old, is recognized as one of the most heartbreaking interviews ever done in Soft White Underbelly. First uploaded on January 28, 2020, and re-uploaded on October 10 of the same year to improve the audio version, this 23-minute documentary delves into Kelly's experience repeatedly facing

gender-based violence and other struggles as a prostitute. The original version, with poor audio quality, ranked fourth among the top five most popular videos in Soft White Underbelly, with 6 million views and 129 likes by January 19, 2022, while the improved audio version garnered 891 thousand views and 16 thousand likes.

Prostitute Interview-Amber. Amber was 21 years old when she was interviewed on Soft White Underbelly's YouTube Channel. Coming from Sacramento, California, her 12 minute interview became this channel's fifth most popular video. Uploaded on March 31, 2020, this documentary has been watched by 5 million people, and 68 thousand liked it by January 2022. She



FIGURE 2. Prostitute Interview-Amber

told about her life as a prostitute, a single mother, a breadwinner in the family, and other difficulties.

### **Audience Background**

In the YouTube context, the term audience refers to YouTube viewers or YouTube's channel subscribers. For this research, the audience is defined as active YouTube users who spend at least one to three hours per week watching two to three English videos on YouTube. The audience consists of Indonesian and International viewers or subscribers of the Soft White Underbelly YouTube channel. The audience for this research is 18-30-year-old young adults, a demographic considered mature enough to comprehend and engage with the selected videos.

Wahyu Aji, 25 years old, is the first informant of this research. Living in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, Wahyu Aji, also known as Aji, is an engineering graduate and works as a researcher and media freelancer. He earns a salary of 1-5 million monthly from his work. In

addition to his professional pursuits, he actively participates in the gender and humanitarian issues community, such as International Women's Day Yogyakarta.

Aji started to pay attention to social and gender issues in college, but his gender sensitivity has grown since he was young. After his father died in 2012, he was the last child and the only boy in his family. Being surrounded by women figures in his life (his mother and two big sisters) has taught him to treat everyone, especially women, equally. Therefore, when he found that his college environment was not supporting this value and lack of awareness of social issues, he looked out for external communities with the same concern. He began his activeness in the social issue movement in 2019. Consequently, he is familiar with terms like 'gender-based violence' and has exposure to minority groups, such as LGBTQA++, women, and sex workers.

As a YouTube user, Aji is considered an active user. He can spend over three hours watching over five English content videos on YouTube weekly. The contents

TABLE 1. Audience Background

Audience	Age	Occupation	GBV's Exposure
Wahyu Aji	25	Engineering graduate and currently works as a researcher and media freelancer	Actively participates in the gender and humanitarian issues community.
Wulan Surani	26	Staff program in Organisasi Perubahan Sosial Indonesia Nasional	Active sex worker
Kevin T. Liu	30	Database Developer	Interest in art, movies, music, psychology, and the human condition
Nika Mae L. Villanueva	19	Psychology student at Cavite State University	Interest in gender issues
Amara Nur'aini Kusuma Wardani Sarosa	21	Chemical Engineering student in Universitas Sebelas Maret	Interest in the human condition

he usually watches correlate to his interest in social issues, starting from educational videos, marginalized community themes and environmental issues. He also likes conspiracy theories, news and politics, and entertainment videos. Aji subscribed to several YouTube channels like Vice, Refinery, Watchdoc, Asumsi, Narasi, Nessie Judge, and Soft White Underbelly.

Before subscribing to Soft White Underbelly, Aji admitted that he was not interested in clicking on the video. Its thumbnail, which only had black and white portraits of a person, was not appealing to him. However, after the video appeared several times on his YouTube timeline, he decided to watch it and found that he liked it. He became the channel's subscriber at the beginning of 2022 and watched videos from several playlists, such as a prostitute named Amanda. Regarding Kelly and Amber, it was his first time watching their interview for this research. He watched both videos in one sitting before filling out the opinion form and did an in-depth interview with the researcher.

Wulan Surani. The second informant of this research is Wulan Surani, usually called Nana. Nana is a 26 years old woman born in Malang, East of Java, and currently lives in the capital city of Indonesia, Jakarta. Her last education was High School, and now she works in a staff program in Organisasi Perubahan Sosial Indonesia (OPSI) Nasional, as well as an active sex worker.

OPSI is an organization of sex workers and people from the High-Risk group that focuses on the rights of sex workers. Starting as a member of OPSI regional East of Java in 2016, Nana held various management roles, including secretary and director, before being assigned to the staff program of OPSI Nasional. Before being part of OPSI, Nana had known about prostitution since graduating from high school.

However, Nana publicly declared her profession as a sex worker in 2018, the moment after her marriage ended. She is now a single mother of a son with a monthly salary income of 1-5 million. From her experience working in OPSI Nasional, Nana grows her interest in gender issues. She is truly familiar with the term gender-based violence, which she ever experienced herself, and now is passionate to advocate it.

As a YouTube user, Nana usually spends one to three hours on it per week on the platform. She watches two to three English videos in a week, even though it is not her preference. She needs to remember the channel she subscribed to. However, the content that interests her is mostly educational, social issues related to people with HIV/AIDS, gender issues, and current issues. Soft White Underbelly is the channel she just discovered through this research. She watched the selected Prostitute Interview-Kelly and Prostitute Interview-Amber and found them fascinating. It was her first time to see content like that, which interviewed a prostitute in full identity and face. For research purposes, she watched both videos three times to understand the content better, as the videos used English, and she needed help with the language.

Kevin T. Liu. Kevin, 30 years old, is the third informant in this research. He was originally born in China, but at age 5 or 6, he moved to America and grew up there. He is a Bachelor of Arts in Mathematics graduate living in Sudbury, Massachusetts, United States of America. He works as a database developer with over 5 million rupiahs of income monthly.

Besides his professional work, Kevin is interested in art, movies, music, psychology, and the human condition. He likes to spend his spare time on YouTube, where he can spend more than 3 hours on it weekly. He watches various topics such as education, sports, psychology,



or human nature and rarely watches the news. He uses YouTube mostly for learning and entertainment.

Soft White Underbelly is one of the YouTube channels he finds amusing and worthy of subscription. Began watching and subscribing to it in 2021. The simple and unique black-and-white thumbnail was what caught his interest the first time the video popped up in his timeline. Then, as he watched the videos, he became more invested in the channel for the content and its purpose. He thinks Soft White Underbelly is amazing and a truly inspiring channel.

The prostitute interview videos are one of the interviews he watched on the channel. However, regarding Kelly and Amber's interview, it was his first time watching it for the research. In real life, prostitution is something that is out of his environment. He rarely finds the practice and the existence of sex workers in his surroundings. He is not familiar with the terms gender and gender-based violence, even though he knows there is such a thing as gender inequality or gender issues. For filling out the form and the interview, he watched Kelly's video twice and Amber's three times.

Nika Mae L. Villanueva. The fourth informant is Nika, 19 years old. As a psychology student at Cavite State University, Nika lives in Dasmariñas City, Cavite, Philippines. She does not work as a student and receives pocket money of less than five hundred thousand rupiahs monthly. In her current major, she has a social subject that she is into, which made her grow concerned about gender issues. The discussion of the LGBTQ++ issue and society's stereotypes of a certain gender what she mainly pays attention to, and in her personal life, she befriends minority groups like LGBTQ++. Therefore, the topic of gender issues and gender-based violence is something that is familiar to her and can be openly discussed with her

friends. However, to talk about it with her family is quite difficult as they still feel strange about the concept.

As a social media YouTube user, Nika is quite an active user. She spends about an hour to three hours weekly on YouTube and watches over five English videos. The categories of videos she usually watches are news, entertainment, and educational videos. She is also enthusiastic about social issues such as prostitution issue. Some channels that she remembered watching and subscribing to are Al Jazeera and DC Documentary.

Soft White Underbelly is a new channel she just heard about through this research. She watched Kelly's and Amber's interviews in one sitting and found the channel intriguing. She binge-watched all other videos uploaded by the channel afterward, ranging from the sex workers playlist to the gang members and people with poverty playlist.

In the city where she currently lives, prostitution is rare to be found. However, she knew the Philippines has certain well-known places for the practice. She also had a neighbor working as a sex worker and pretty much heard about the story of her life as a sex worker. That is as much as her exposure to sex work and prostitution.

Amara Nur'aini K. W. Sarosa. Amara, 21 years old, is the last informant of this research. She is a chemical engineering student at Universitas Negeri Sebelas Maret. As a student, she receives pocket money of less than five hundred thousand rupiahs in a month as her income. Besides her studies, Amara has an interest in cooking and culinary. She also likes to watch YouTube and can spend an hour to three hours on it weekly. She watches more than five English videos between them and uses YouTube as entertainment and sometimes a learning platform. Some of the content she watches is from creators like Devina Hermawan and Tasyi Athasyia, crafting and makeup

videos. At the same time, she also grew curious about the human condition topic as she watched Jubilee. Her interest in the human condition eventually led her to the Soft White Underbelly YouTube Channel.

The first video she watched was an interview with a female escort named Frenchie. Amara then watched other video playlists and decided to subscribe to the channel. She found the channel educational and interesting. Amara had already watched it once for Amber’s interview before this research, but it was her first time for Kellys’s interview. She watched Amber’s interview twice and Kelly once for filling out the opinion form and in-depth interview.

Regarding her environment, she is aware that prostitution can be found in a certain area of her town. She also knew some people in her surroundings who became clients of it. However, her biggest exposure to the issue is from the media. She is interested in gender inequality issues as she felt the stereotype impact on her daily life. The discussion about gender issues is quite common among her peers or in the media she uses but rarely with her family. However, there is a different understanding of what gender means between Amara and the researcher at the beginning of the interview.

**Results and Discussion**

Encoding is the process by which a creator constructs a message using codes to convey a specific meaning (Prihandini,

2021). The creator generates the meaning based on its technical infrastructure, relations of production, and knowledge frameworks combined. In this research, encoding means creating prostitute interview content from Mark Laita, the creator of The Soft White Underbelly YouTube Channel, to an audience with an intended meaning. Understanding the creator’s intention requires analyzing the visuals and conversations recorded in the interview.

The Prostitute Interview-Kelly and Prostitute Interview-Amber are among the five most popular videos created by Mark Laita. Like other interviews, Kelly and Amber’s interviews are conducted in a studio, with a plain cloth background and a single stool placed in the center for the interviewees to sit and share their stories. Mark Laita’s camera angle is always from the front and lower left sides, with enough lighting and audio to show the prostitute’s expression and help the story to be well delivered. The video gives an accent where prostitutes are the subjects or the interview highlight. It asks audiences to pay attention to nothing but the people and the stories they tell and listen to.

The conversation is focused on prostitutes’ life story experiences. The creator focuses on five aspects of a prostitute’s life, namely their profile, childhood/adolescent stages, adulthood stage, mental health condition, and socio-economic condition. Throughout the

TABLE 2. Audience’s Decoding Position

<b>Audience</b>	<b>Prostitute Interview-Kelly</b>	<b>Prostitute Interview-Amber</b>
Wahyu Aji	Dominant Hegemonic	Negotiated
Wulan Surani	Negotiated	Negotiated
Kevin T. Liu	Dominant Hegemonic	Dominant Hegemonic
Nika Mae L. Villanueva	Dominant Hegemonic	Dominant Hegemonic
Amara Nur’aini Kusuma Wardani Sarosa	Negotiated	Negotiated

recorded questions and answers, Kelly and Amber recounted their experiences of repeated gender-based violence, including sexual, physical, emotional, and socio-economic violence. Their transition into prostitution is influenced by their vulnerabilities rooted in gender inequality, is shaped by gender-based violence, and affects them like other victims of GBV. The following are excerpts from the interview that illustrate the prostitutes' vulnerabilities, contributing to the understanding of them as victims of gender-based violence.

### Dominant Hegemonic Position

According to Stuart Hall, audiences with a line understanding of a text's meaning as intended by the creator belong to a dominant hegemonic reading position (Hall, 2021). This implies that the audience fully accepts the creator's intended meaning through a text they consume without any objection. Therefore, informants who accept the idea of Kelly as a victim of gender-based violence due to prostitution belong to the dominant hegemonic position audience. Three out of five dominant informants are Aji, Kevin, and Nika.

Aji occupies this position because watching Kelly's interview, he noticed several instances of GBV that Kelly experienced throughout her life. He agrees that Kelly's presence as a prostitute is a victim of GBV. Aji points out that Kelly

experienced some physical violence and sexual violence in her childhood. Physical violence refers to any act attempting to cause bodily injury, while sexual violence is any sexual act or attempt of sexual act using coercion in any setting.

She once had a mother but was abusive, tearing her eyelids because she threw the TV remote or something like that, I forgot. Then he gets sadistic foster parents, who turn out to be her rapist in the house. The rape is not just the common rape; her vagina is torn and abused by her father. Then, after that, she left the house and was on the street (Interview with Aji on March 11, 2022).

Other than that, Aji finds that Kelly also experienced socio-economic violence. Socio-economic violence is a discrimination, denial of opportunities/services, and obstructive legal practices based on sex, gender, or sexual orientation. Aji notices Kelly's struggle against poverty, lack of education, and lack of opportunities, which was worsened by other forms of socio-economic violence present in non-supportive legal, public service, and societal contexts. He highlights that Kelly easily became a target of physical and sexual violence from her clients. Based on his reception, Kelly's condition is rooted in gender inequality, which makes her more vulnerable to becoming involved and

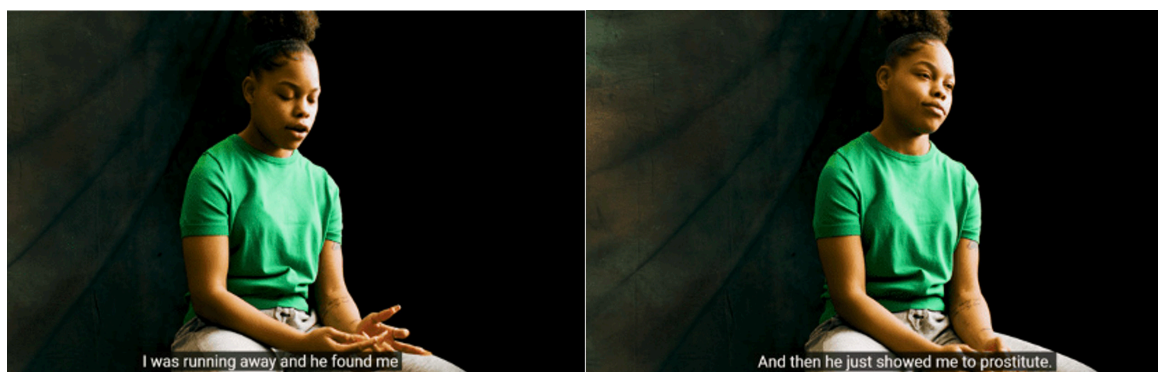


FIGURE 3. Kelly Talked about Her Beginning of Prostituting

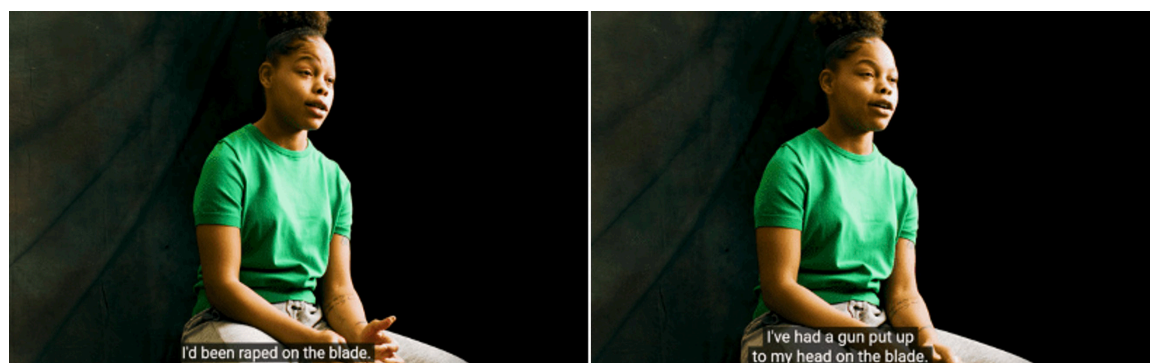


FIGURE 4. Kelly Talked about Her Physical and Sexual Violence in Prostitution

trapped in prostitution and becoming a victim.

Aji also identifies the consequences of being a GBV victim in Kelly's story. As explained in UNHCR, Kelly experienced physical consequences, including injury and drug abuse, resulting from the GBV she endured. Kelly also experienced emotional and psychological impact as Aji noticed Kelly's self-hatred and her attempts to harm or kill herself several times. Based on Aji's comprehension, Kelly's life as a victim has not improved, as she remains stuck in poverty and struggles to access public services.

The second informant who acknowledges Kelly as the victim is Kevin. Kevin noticed that Kelly experienced violence in her childhood, which was mostly sexual violence. He points out that Kelly was sexually assaulted in her foster home and was forced into prostitution by her pimp. Since he views prostitution as a profession, Kevin does not have a negative view of prostitutes. However, he explains that Kelly's existence as a prostitute resulted in her instability, evident prior violence, and lack of support during childhood, which made her vulnerable. Kevin's statement aligns with what Farley (2018) said about prostituted women. He cannot stress enough the detrimental foster care system that caused Kelly to undergo those experiences. Kevin also finds that Kelly suffered from socio-economic violence, evidenced by her difficulties

in accessing government facilities such as police and healthcare services. In his opinion, the violence Kelly experienced is rooted in gender (men and women) power relations. His explanation aligns with the definition of GBV by O'Toole et al. (2018), which defines GBV as any violation occurring because of gender identity, sexual orientation, or location rooted in the hierarchy of male-dominated social systems. Kevin's observation of Kelly's mental and psychological state is also another thing that showed he recognized Kelly experienced GBV. He also mentioned Kelly's socio-economic consequences, highlighting her struggles with social stigma, poverty, and exposure to other violence as a result of her involvement in prostitution.

Similar to prior informants, Nika notices Kelly's physical and sexual experience of physical and sexual violence from being abused and raped at a young age as well as socio-economic violence for having economic and educational difficulties. Nika asserts that Kelly's existence as a prostitute results from her vulnerabilities, which are rooted in gender inequality. Therefore, according to Nika, Kelly is a victim of GBV, and her experience of GBV has increased since she became a prostitute. Physical and sexual violence by her customers, such as being forced to have sex without a condom, is one example. Nika observes how this experience of GBV has affected Kelly's emotional and psychological state.



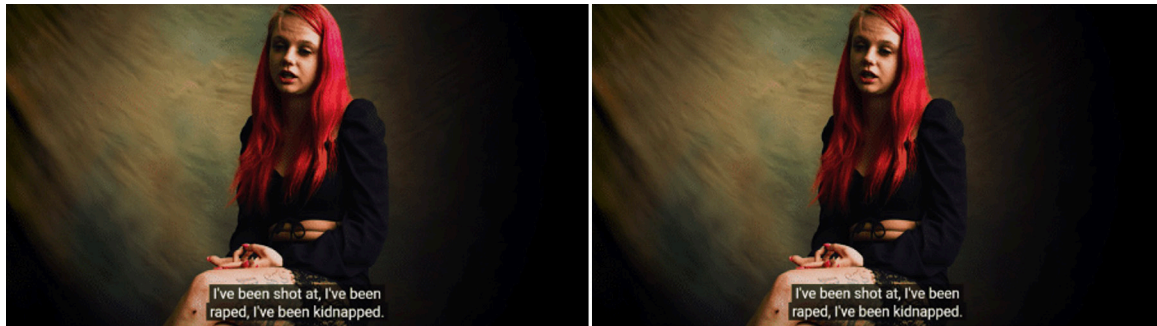


FIGURE 5. Amber's Violence Experience

She highlights the roles of family, sex education, and government in the welfare of prostitutes like Kelly. Ultimately, Nika does not have a negative perspective of prostitutes. However, she considers prostitution problematic because it increases the potential for violence.

The audience who fully accepts the intended meaning or has an aligned understanding with the creator of the text is considered part of the dominant hegemonic reading audience. In this research, the audiences who acknowledge Amber as a GBV victim are placed in this position. There are two informants in this position, namely Kevin and Nika.

In Amber's interview, Kevin identifies several similarities between her interview and Kelly's. Kevin recognizes Amber's vulnerabilities as a child of drug-addicted parents, living on the street, and struggling with poverty. Kevin is aware that she started engaging in prostitution at a young age and experienced socio-economic violence from the pimp who took advantage of her. Watching Amber's interview, Kevin also states that he does not have a problem with people working in prostitution; his concern was about the violence Amber experienced in it. Kevin notices how the violence and her involvement in prostitution affected Amber psychologically and physically. He sees that she is a victim of circumstances, mostly GBV, that affected her. Similarly, watching Amber's interview, Nika also points out the socio-economic violence Amber experienced in her childhood.

She also realizes that Amber experienced sexual violence.

Amber started being like a prostitute when he had a pimp or something like that, but then the pimp is like, exploiting her. Moreover, she realized that, you know, like wage equality, the fact that she is the one working and the pimp is just not the one arranging it for her. Moreover, you know, the pimp is also like, molesting you are like raping her, you know, is yeah, that is what I remember (Interview with Kevin on March 31, 2022).

In Nia's opinion, Amber, who is stuck as a prostitute, is a result of her economic, lack of education, and lack of opportunities. She remained a victim of GBV perpetrated by her clients, and Nika can see how GBV in Amber's life correlates with gender superiority. As a consequence, Amber's mental and psychological state has been affected. One such effect Nika perceives on Amber is the feeling of shame. Nika feels sorry about Amber's situation and commends her for being tough. Ultimately, she also thinks that Amber's parents play a big role in this making her angry about everything that happened to her.

### Negotiated Position

In reception analysis theory, Hall states that the negotiated position is filled with the audience who partly accepts the main idea of the message in the media text



(Hall, 2021). The audience combines their interests and backgrounds in receiving the message, therefore, they derive different meanings. In this research, audiences who notice GBV in Kelly's interview yet can not see Kelly as a victim of GBV are considered in this position. There are two informants in this position, namely Nana and Amara.

From Prostitute Interview-Kelly, Nana immediately considers Kelly a victim of GBV. Nana notices that, in childhood, Kelly must have experienced several instances of physical violence from her mother and her foster parents through beatings and abuse. Kelly also experienced sexual violence by being raped several times by some of her foster fathers. Nana feels sorry for Kelly and cried while listening to her story in the interview. She also pointed out the socio-economic violence Kelly faced, such as struggling with poverty, lack of education, and a bad foster system. Nana is aware that, as a consequence, there is an economic and psychological impact on Kelly. However, as Kelly grows up and becomes a prostitute, Nana sees prostitution as Kelly's decision despite her unwillingness. Nana understands that by becoming a prostitute, Kelly is an easy target of GBV, namely physical, sexual, verbal, psychological, and economic violence, yet according to

Nana, this violence is a risk of working as a prostitute. There is Kelly's agency in working as a prostitute rather than it being a result of gender inequality.

Amara is the last informant who accepts Kelly's experiences of GBV yet does not accept Kelly as a victim of GBV. Amara noticed from the interview that Kelly experienced sexual and physical abuse in her childhood. Amara continually stresses how bad the foster system is and feels sorry for what happened to Kelly. She is aware that there is a psychological impact as a consequence of Kelly's experiences; one of these impacts is Kelly's attempt at suicide. Amara can see how economically and socially unprivileged Kelly is, but as a prostitute, Amara thinks that Kelly has made her choice in that decision. Amara sees Kelly's vulnerable situation as an individual rather than a systemic inequality issue. Moreover, the rampant violence Kelly experienced in prostitution is related to Kelly's work environment or the street rather than systemic inequality. Therefore, Amara thinks the violence is to be expected.

Maybe people can say that being a prostitute is wrong because they are not in that position. Because they have the privilege to live comfortably, work in an office, or be able to be an



FIGURE 6. Kelly Talked about Her Self-hate and Suicidal Thought

entrepreneur, even having the thought of looking for a halal job is a privilege. If I were Kelly, I would be exposed to violence in my life from a young age, namely violence, physical/sexual violence, and she can make a living/money; if I were her, I would not want to do something else (Interview with Amara on March 20, 2022).

Negotiated reading is when the audience understand the main message of the media but partly accepts it. This happens because the audience associates meaning with their background during the decoding and selects what aligns with their knowledge. In this research, the informants who acknowledged Amber's GBV experiences yet did not see her solely as a victim are the ones who belong to this position. Three informants are categorized into negotiated positions: Aji, Nana, and Amara.

Watching Amber's interview, Aji feels the same sadness as he had when watching Kelly's interview. Aji notices how Amber grew up in an unhealthy family background as she was the child of parents with addiction issues in a broken home, had to support her family financially, and was a mother at a young age. Aji recognizes the socio-economic violence happening to Amber as she came from a poor family and experienced a lack of education. Her involvement in prostitution also increased her risk of experiencing other forms of violence from her clients. Therefore, there are aspects of GBV victimization observed in Amber, such as physical consequences like drug abuse, psychological and emotional aspects, and socio-economic factors due to the stigma associated with being raped and becoming a prostitute. He understands that the reason why Amber became a prostitute is because of her condition, yet Aji also thinks that it might be due to Amber's normalcy as well. Aji holds the opinion that Amber's mindset to

make money through prostitution made Amber keep becoming one rather than solely attributing it to the inequality she faced. Thus, Aji's stance falls within the negotiated position.

The second informant in this negotiated position is Nana. From Amber's interview, Nana also recognizes Amber's destructive childhood environment of growing up with addicted parents and struggling economically. She understands the reason Amber became a prostitute is because of her condition, and it first happened because she was getting exploited by a pimp. Socio-economic violence is evident because Amber was never able to keep the money she earned from prostitution, poverty, and lack of education, which made her dependent on prostitution. Moreover, Nana also recognizes that Amber experienced physical and sexual violence, such as rape and abuse while she was working. However, for Nana, it was Amber's choice, rather than gender-based violence, that ultimately led her to prostitution. Nana admires Amber's decision because she thinks it is a brave one. The GBV happening to Amber is a risk that Nana believes Amber accepted as part of working as a prostitute. Therefore, Nana is categorized in this position for acknowledging that GBV happened to Amber yet not seeing it as the sole reason for her becoming a prostitute, which would make her a victim.

What I got is that she experienced violence, which she accepted that she did not mind. It did not become a burden to her because she was aware of the risks of working as a sex worker. Her experience is not the reason she became a sex worker in the first place (Interview with Nana on March 20, 2022).

The last informant in this position is Amara. Amara can see how Amber grew

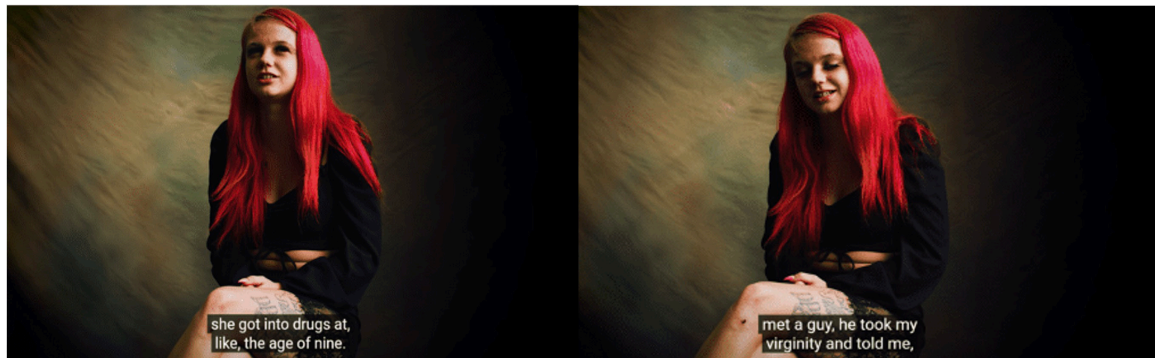


FIGURE 7. Amber Talked about Her in A Rough Environment

up in a rough environment. Her childhood was marked by being raised by drug-addict parents, exploitation by her pimp, and early motherhood. Amber experienced various forms of violence while working as a prostitute—socio-economic violence by her pimp and frequent arrests by the police, and sexual and physical violence from being kidnapped and raped by her clients. Amara acknowledges the profound impact of these experiences on Amber’s mental and psychological well-being, as evidenced by her apparent feelings of misery and stagnation. Amber possessed vulnerabilities that made her unable to go anywhere. However, Amara thinks Amber eventually accepted her becoming a prostitute.

**Audiences’ Background in Receiving Gender-Based Violence Victims in**

**the Prostitute Videos on Soft White Underbelly YouTube Channel**

In audience reception theory, the audience’s background is a significant aspect that helps the analysis. Audience background causes an audience to have different media meanings to others and determines whether their reading will align with the creator’s intent. Tunshorin (2016) discovered in her study that social situations within the audience’s environment, including support from family, friends, and also the audience around the informant, significantly influence the informant’s reception of textual media. This corroborates the research findings of Dewi (2012), indicating that attention to the press consumed and audience habits in consuming media, as well as their socio-cultural context, frame of mind, values,

TABLE 3. The Factors which Influence the Audience Decoding

Audience	Social Factor	Media Habit	Personal Experience (GBV)	Economic Background	Educational Factor
Wahyu Aji	√	√	-	√	√
Wulan Surani	√	-	√	√	√
Kevin T. Liu	-	√	-	√	√
Nika Mae L. Villanueva	√	-	-	√	√
Amara Nur’aini Kusuma Wardani Sarosa	√	√	-	√	√

and beliefs, significantly affect the depth of interpretation and dissemination of textual or message content in within society. These factors are also instrumental in identifying the characters in the media narratives and their portrayal within the audience's environment. This research identified five factors influencing the informant's reception of the GBV victims portrayed on the Soft White Underbelly YouTube channel, namely social factors, media habits, personal experience, economic circumstances, and educational background.

### **Social Background**

The first factor influencing informant reception of GBV victims portrayed in the prostitute interview videos on Soft White Underbelly is social background. Social background refers to the informant's life environment, encompassing the people they interact with regularly, shaping their worldview on various topics. Social background includes family, friends, neighborhood, and the workplace environment. Their different level of familiarity and exposure to prostitutes and GBV significantly affect their different understanding of the videos.

Aji comes from a family and a community of friends that valuing gender equality. In the family, he was taught to treat everyone equally, and, in his community, he advocated for the GBV issue in society. His participation in the gender equality movement also fostered connections with sex worker groups. Aji's knowledge and familiarity with GBV and minority groups informs the way Aji agrees and receives the meaning of prostitute as a victim of GBV in Kelly's video. In the in-depth interview, he mentioned that he saw the common ground between the prostitutes around him and Kelly's case in entering prostitution. Both of them are forced by their condition and

go through the same impacts as victims. On the other hand, being surrounded by this environment made him also negotiate the GBV victim message in Amber's video. From his experience, he found "Amber's figure" in real life who may be forced into prostitution but remain due to a sense of normalcy. Thus, his reception of prostitutes as a GBV victim is not fully in line with Amber's video.

Similar to Aji, Nana also comes from a work environment that is aware of and close to GBV and sex workers' issues. However, her closeness to the problem makes her negotiate the message of GBV victims in both prostitute interview videos on the Soft White Underbelly channel. Nana works as a sex worker and serves on a committee in a sex workers' rights organization, making her very familiar with the GBV evidence in Kelly and Amber's story. Nana receives the message that there are many GBV in their life yet separate Kelly's and Amber's professions as prostitutes as the impact of GBV. Nana reflects on her daily experience to decode both videos, where she views prostitutes as the job that Kelly and Amber ultimately chose. In addition, she states, based on her experience as a sex worker herself, GBV is the risk sex workers have to accept when entering prostitution for a living.

As for Nika, she mostly grew up in a more patriarchal family environment that perpetuated stereotypical gender roles and responsibilities in social life, yet her friend and university fostered a more open-minded perspective on gender issues. With her friends, Nika was able to openly discuss GBV and other minority issues, such as LGBTQ++, as she also became friends with one of them. Such a background affects Nika to have dominant reading in both videos due to her familiarity with gender issues and minority groups. Additionally, Nika's experience having a neighbor who was a



sex worker allows her to connect with the struggle depicted in Kelly's and Amber's interview, having encountered this reality firsthand.

Like Nika, discussions about gender issues are uncommon in Amara's family environment, but frequently discussed among her peers. While stereotypes between gender between genders are commonly discussed, topics like GBV and minority groups are seldom discussed. Specifically, regarding sex workers, Amara often found negative narratives in her social circle. This mixed exposure to her environment has led her to negotiate the intended meaning in both videos. For Kevin, his environment does not provide specific influence in reading both videos as he lives far away from prostitution, nor has he met a sex worker himself. Thus, he does not have any real-life experience to relate to. Kevin's knowledge of gender issues is limited, although they are often discussed in his social circle in a political context.

### **Media Habit Factor**

This study investigates how informants' social media habits influence their interpretation of the GBV victim message conveyed in the prostitute interview videos in Soft White Underbelly. The research revealed that the content informants typically consume, their frequency of social media use, and their subscription status to Soft White Underbelly YouTube Channel influence how they perceive the message. Most informants spend an hour to three hours using YouTube a week. Exceptions include Kevin and Aji, who use YouTube for over three hours weekly. The contents that informants consume also vary. However, they all have the same interest in social issues or the human condition content video. Aji, Kevin, and Amara are Soft White Underbelly's channel subscribers.

Kevin's media habit contributes to his familiarity with gender and minority issues. His understanding of prostitutes got broader since he subscribed to the Soft White Underbelly channel. It provides the reason why Kevin has the dominant reading of prostitutes as GBV victims through the prostitute interview videos, even though he has barely met one in real life. Due to his subscription, Aji's interest and familiarity with Soft White Underbelly's content influences his dominant reading of Kelly's interview video and his negotiated reading of Amber's interview video. Similarly, Amara's exposure to Soft White Underbelly content through her subscription raises her awareness of the GBV issue faced by prostitutes. Amara's social media habits foster her sympathy for them, contrasting with her social environment, where the problem is still negatively discussed. This further contrasts with the common portrayal of prostitutes in mainstream media, such as the *Pretty Woman* film, which portrays prostitutes living a glamorous life. Thus, it makes her negotiate the meaning in both videos.

Nika's media habit also affects her comprehension of GBV and prostitute issues. Although unfamiliar with the Soft White Underbelly channel and its videos, she regularly consumes similar content, such as content from Al Jazeera and DC documentaries. Therefore, in Kelly and Amber's video, Nika interprets the message as portraying both women as victims of GBV, leading to a dominant hegemonic reading. Comparably, Nana's media habits significantly influence her reading of the messages in Kelly and Amber's interview videos. She is also interested in gender issue-related content, which made her even more knowledgeable. While her experiences led her to accept the GBV issues faced by prostitutes, Nana objected them as a



victim. It resulted in her negotiating the message in both Soft White Underbelly prostitute interview videos.

### **Personal Experience of Gender-Based Violence Factor**

The third factor influencing interpretation is the informant's personal experience with GBV. Nana is the only informant who disclosed her personal experience as a victim of GBV. Nana explains feeling a strong connection to Kelly's story, having also experienced GBV as a child and adolescence and never receiving proper psychological treatment. It made her cry while watching Kelly's video and pay close attention to Kelly's psychological condition, as she identified with Kelly's past. Nana attributes her unresolved trauma and violent experience as contributing factors to her decision to enter prostitution. This shared experience leads Nana to understand Kelly and Amber's experiences in prostitution as potentially stemming from their own choice. Nana knows that GBV may occur during her work, but she views it as an occupational hazard. Thus, in both Kelly and Amber's interview videos, Nana negotiates the portrayal of Kelly and Amber solely as a victim of GBV, recognizing GBV as a consequence of their chosen profession.

### **Education Factor**

The informant's educational background is another factor influencing the informant's decoding process. This research's informants possess varying levels of education. Aji and Kevin hold bachelor's degrees, Amara and Nika are college students, and Nana has a high school diploma. All informants recognize that Kelly and Amber have limited formal education. Nika and Amara reflect on their privilege to access higher education, particularly due to their educational background. Their

educational academic background leads them to observe how Kelly and Amber's limited education likely restricted them from accessing opportunities due to a lack of necessary skills required for other work. Consequently, It made them sympathize with the prostitutes' situation, perceiving Kelly's and Amber's lives as unfair. Nika and Amara's educational background shapes their comprehension of the importance of sex education. They both express their belief that Kelly and Amber's experience might have been different if their parents had provided them with good sex education.

### **Economic Background**

Economic background is another factor influencing interpretation. Most of the informants belong to the middle to high-class economy, except Nana, who is from a lower-middle-class background. This is evident from their reported monthly income, in which Aji earns 1 to 5 million rupiahs, Kevin earns more than 5 million rupiahs, Nika and Amara receive less than five hundred thousand rupiahs yet currently in college, and Nana makes 1 to 5 million rupiahs as a single mother. The education economy background influences the way informants perceive the struggles and vulnerabilities faced by prostitutes.

The informants from the middle to upper-middle class acknowledge that Kelly and Amber are forced into prostitution because of their limited economic background. Nika, Amara and Kevin recognize their privilege in choosing their life paths, which Kelly and Amber lacked. They mentioned the stability that affects them to have a better education or career. Nana, coming from a lower-middle-class economic background and having experienced the struggle to meet her daily needs, considers prostitution as the job she chooses to do to survive. All informants

concur that prostitutes face discrimination in society. Two informants, Aji and Nika, highlight the government's responsibility and role in empowering the well-being of prostitutes. Amara points out the need for legal protection for prostitutes, while Kevin emphasizes overall system improvement. Finally, Nana underlines the need for both government and society to uphold the rights of prostitutes.

## CONCLUSION

This research reveals that the decoding of the informants varied, highlighting the audience's active role in meaning-making. Informants in this research exhibited different understandings of prostitutes' experiences as victims of GBV in the prostitute interview videos on the Soft White Underbelly YouTube channel due to various personal and socio-economic backgrounds. Based on the research findings and discussion, it can be concluded that three informants, namely Aji, Kevin, and Nika, adopted a dominant hegemonic reading of Kelly's interview video. Similarly, two informants, Kevin and Nika, are positioned in the dominant hegemonic reading of Amber's interview video. In both cases, they interpreted Kelly and Amber's experience in prostitution as stemming from gender-based violence. They believe that Kelly's vulnerabilities as a woman forced her to enter prostitution, thereby experiencing a great risk of violence. In addition, informants in this position are also aware of how these experiences affected Kelly and Amber, similarly to other GBV victims, mostly affecting their mental and psychological well-being.

Two informants, namely Nana and Amara, are positioned in the negotiated reading of the prostitute Kelly interview video. Similarly, three informants, Aji, Nana, and Amara, are placed in negotiated reading for prostitute Amber's interview

video. The informants in the negotiated reading acknowledge that Kelly and Amber experienced GBV, including sexual and physical violence, as well as vulnerable social conditions. However, they also recognize that both are making their own decision to be a prostitute. The informants in the negotiated reading perceive agency on the part of Kelly and Amber in their decision to enter prostitution. One informant who adopted a negotiated reading also mentioned experiencing GBV in prostitution as a consequence rather than solely a product of systemic inequality. This research identified a wide range of receptions influenced by various social factors, media habits, personal experiences, and economic and educational factors, leading to diverse receptions of the videos. Furthermore, the research also found that engaging with media texts can raise informants' awareness, empowering them to reinterpret these texts and then share these new interpretations with their social environment. The informants in this research mention this process, indicating that they reinterpreted the concept of GBV and shared this perspective in their social life.

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