



Generation Z's Reception of Horror Messages and Gender Myths in the Petaka Gunung Gede Movie

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Abstract

This study analyses Generation Z's reception of the Indonesian horror film Petaka Gunung Gede using Stuart Hall's decoding theory. The film is based on a true story that went viral on YouTube with 17.1 million views and raises local myths of Mount Gede, including the prohibition for menstruating women to climb and the sacredness of Alun-Alun Suryakencana. A qualitative approach was employed using in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion involving ten Generation Z informants (seven females and three males). The results reveal three decoding positions. The dominant-hegemonic position, held by 20% of informants, fully accepts the myths and prohibitions. The negotiated position, held by 60% of informants, accepts the moral message about respecting nature but remains skeptical toward mystical elements. The oppositional position, held by 20% of informants, rejects the myth as discriminatory against women. All oppositional informants are women, while all dominant informants are men. Despite differing decoding positions, almost all informants agree that the film successfully conveys the importance of maintaining ethics and respect for nature.

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Introduction

An interesting phenomenon has emerged among Generation Z in Indonesia. Interest in local horror films has increased significantly. They watch these films not only for entertainment but also to understand the meaningful messages embedded in the stories (Annisa et al., 2025). The 2025 film

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Petaka Gunung Gede, adapted from a famous YouTube story with 17.1 million views, attracted 3.2 million viewers (based on national box office and streaming platform reports) and sparked a debate regarding the myth of a ban on female hikers who are menstruating on Mount Gede—an issue related to gender awareness. The Indonesian film industry currently features many horror films that capture the interest of young audiences. This is because the horror genre taps into human curiosity about frightening and unusual phenomena (Widagdo, 2021).

As a mass communication medium, film plays a role that extends beyond mere entertainment; it also serves as a vehicle for conveying messages, cultural values, and representations of social reality (Murphy et al., 2025). The combination of visual, audio, and narrative elements in film is capable of shaping and influencing the audience's perspective on a phenomenon. In communication studies, film is viewed as an open text that allows the audience to interpret it subjectively, where the meaning formed is influenced by the audience's social background and individual experiences. This perspective aligns with Stuart Hall's thinking, which positions the audience as an active participant in the process of interpreting media messages. Cross-cultural research also confirms the relevance of Hall's model in the context of contemporary media (Wu et al., 2025).

In Indonesia, the decoding approach has also been used to analyse how young audiences interpret political and popular cultural content (Maida et al., 2026). Generation Z has grown up in a digital environment. Film serves as both a form of entertainment and a reflection of cultural values, beliefs, and social norms. A defining characteristic of Generation Z is their direct involvement in interpreting film messages based on their social background, experiences, and culture; they are not passive viewers but active individuals in interpreting content based on their education, social environment, and religious understanding (Annisa & Sumarlan, 2026). This process makes the film *Petaka Gunung Gede* an intriguing subject because it was produced from a viral story, so many in Generation Z already possess basic knowledge of the narrative.

Stuart Hall's model explains that audiences have the potential to interpret media messages through three decoding positions. First, the dominant-hegemonic position, where audiences accept the message's meaning in its entirety according to the framework established by the media creators. Second, the negotiation position, where audiences essentially accept the message but make adjustments based on their experiences and social context. Third, the oppositional position, which is the condition where the audience rejects the conveyed meaning and interprets the message in a manner contrary to the intent designed by the media creators (Xie et al., 2022).

Similar practices are also found at Mount Prau, Dieng, where base camp guards prohibit menstruating women from passing through certain trails because it is believed to invite mystical occurrences. The pattern of stigmatizing menstruation as a source of danger in oral traditions and media representations, including horror films, has been globally examined by Platt (2024) as a form of reinforcing negative stereotypes against women.

This film combines horror with themes of friendship, making it engaging and akin to a friendship drama (Triantoro & Pramana, 2025). Meaning in media is not static but undergoes a continuous process of negotiation by the audience based on their social and cultural contexts (Fathimah, 2025). This study employs Stuart Hall's decoding theory to analyse Generation Z's interpretation. The research problems identified in this study include (1) a lack of research on how Generation Z perceives the content of the film *Petaka Gunung Gede*, (2) the decoding perspective has not been studied, (3) the differences in how men and women interpret the menstrual taboo myth are not yet clear, and (4) the phenomenon of message delivery involving various media (YouTube) that influences decoding has not been extensively researched. Previous research has been dominated by textual content analysis of films, such

as cultural representations and visual symbols (Rahmalina et al., 2025). Research on audience reception, particularly among Generation Z regarding horror films containing local myths, remains limited. Indonesian horror films tend to be narratively repetitive (Noer, 2021), yet such studies have not highlighted audience interpretation. There is a gap between the dominance of research on message production and the limited studies on reception among Generation Z, who are crisis-prone and selective.

The main research question is how Generation Z understands the horror messages, cultural values, and morals present in the film *Petaka Gunung Gede*. The specific questions are: (1) which decoding perspective is most dominant among Generation Z, (2) what factors influence the way they decode the myth of the menstrual taboo, including personal experiences, cultural background, viewing platforms, and prior understanding from YouTube, and (3) how decoding methods differ between men and women. The benefits of this research include providing insights into audience reception and Hall's theory, offering recommendations to filmmakers and content creators, and shedding light on the negotiation between traditional and modern values among the younger generation.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach using reception analysis (*reception analysis*), which focuses on the audience's decoding process (Annisa et al., 2025). The qualitative approach was chosen because it is capable of capturing in depth the contextual and subjective processes of interpretation that cannot be measured quantitatively. Reception analysis is designed to reveal how sociocultural factors, personal experiences, and the subject's position (gender, education) shape audience meaning. This approach is superior to surveys because it captures the nuances of ambivalence, contradiction, and negotiation of meaning in horror messages and local myths. The objective of this approach is to observe the influence of sociocultural factors and personal experiences on the reception of media messages (Wahyudin & Supratman, 2026). The research design employed is a single-case study with individual members of Generation Z who have watched the film *Petaka Gunung Gede* as the unit of analysis. The research sample consisted of ten informants selected through purposive sampling, a method of selecting informants based on specific relevant criteria. These criteria include (1) individuals belonging to Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012), (2) having watched the film *Petaka Gunung Gede* in a movie theater or via a streaming platform, and (3) being willing to provide in-depth insights regarding the myths and cultural messages in the film. Based on these criteria, this study involved ten informants, comprising seven women and three men.

The data collection techniques used were in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The in-depth interviews were designed to identify each informant's initial *decoding* positions. The FGD was designed to examine the dynamics of social interaction while understanding the process of meaning-making that emerges when informants exchange views and respond to one another's opinions. The in-depth interviews and FGD were conducted individually and in groups via the *Google Meet* platform from April 13, 2026, to April 14, 2026, divided into two sessions. The first session was held on April 13, 2026, involving seven informants. The total duration of the in-depth interviews in the first session was approximately 35 minutes (an average of 5 minutes per person), followed by an FGD lasting about 25 minutes. The relatively short duration was deemed sufficient because the discussion focused strictly on the film's core themes (menstrual, local myths, and gender) without expanding to general horror film preferences. The second session was held on April 14, 2026, involving three informants; the total duration of the in-depth interviews was approximately 15 minutes (an average of 5 minutes per person), followed by a focus group discussion (FGD) lasting about 15 minutes. The division

of the process into these two sessions was implemented to accommodate the informants' availability while ensuring effectiveness and focus throughout the interview and discussion process, thereby ensuring that the data collected remained focused, relevant, and aligned with the research needs.

The FGD was facilitated using a semi-structured question guide that referenced the film's main themes: horror messages, the taboo surrounding menstruation, local cultural values, and gender dimensions. Of the ten informants involved, eight participated in the FGD session, as two were unable to attend due to technical difficulties. Additionally, eight informants were already familiar with the viral story circulating on YouTube and podcasts before watching the film, while the other two informants only became acquainted with the story after watching it. This prior knowledge served as one of the factors influencing how the informants interpreted the film's content. Data analysis utilized the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which has been adapted by contemporary qualitative researchers. This model comprises three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (Hasan & Syarkawi, 2025). During the reduction stage, data from the transcripts were classified into three categories of meaning: dominant-hegemonic, negotiation, and opposition. All interview and FGD data were recorded with the informants' permission and then transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. The data presentation stage was conducted in a narrative format enriched with direct quotes from the informants to illustrate each individual's interpretive position. Conclusions were drawn iteratively by comparing findings across informants and across methods (individual interviews vs. FGDs). To ensure data validity, this study employed source triangulation by comparing findings from in-depth interviews and FGDs. Additionally, the researcher conducted *member checking* with all 10 informants by confirming the analysis results through interview summaries. All informants stated that the summaries accurately reflected their intended meanings (Fadli, 2021).

Results and Discussions

1. Result

This study involved ten Generation Z informants aged 21 to 23 who had watched the film *Petaka Gunung Gede*. The group consisted of seven women and three men. In terms of educational background, eight informants (Jangkung, Ojan, Ale, Luna, Aci, Michelle, Zao, and Sinta) were students in the Communication Studies program. One informant (Fira) is from the Elementary School Teacher Education (PGSD) program, and one informant (Bima) is from the Public Administration program. Thus, the majority of the informants have educational backgrounds in communication studies and the social sciences and humanities. Regarding mountain climbing experience, seven informants had climbed a mountain before watching the film, while the other three had not. Eight informants were already aware of the viral story circulating on YouTube and podcasts before watching the film, while two informants only became familiar with the story after watching it. Of the ten informants, five watched in a movie theater, four via Netflix, and one watched in both places. Seven informants watched with friends, two watched alone, and one watched with a partner.

In the dominant-hegemonic position (20% of informants), both informants (R1 and R2) were male. They accepted the film's message in its entirety, in line with the meaning conveyed by the filmmakers. Both believed that violating the ban on mountain climbing during menstruation could lead to tangible consequences that they interpreted as mystical in nature. This belief is influenced by stories passed down from family elders as well as the experiences of senior climbers they know. R1 stated, "I believe it because my grandmother used to say that the mountain has a guardian, and menstruating women are considered impure." R2 added, "My friend who frequently climbs Mount Gede also said,

‘Don’t even try it if you’re menstruating; you might get lost.’” Both informants assessed that the film *Petaka Gunung Gede* effectively represents local myths and cultural values. The impact of this reception is evident in increased caution, including a tendency to restrict menstruating women from participating in hiking activities.

In the negotiation category (60% of informants), there were six informants (R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8), comprising four women and two men. This group represents the most significant finding. They essentially accept the film’s narrative but adjust their interpretation by prioritizing rational explanations. Informants in this category tend to interpret events in the film from a physical condition perspective. They argue that extreme fatigue, hypothermia, or hallucinations resulting from physical exhaustion and hormonal changes during menstruation can explain the mystical events depicted. R3 (female) stated, “I do believe in the myths, but more because of physical conditions. During menstruation, you get tired quickly, feel cold, and can hallucinate. It’s not because of ghosts.” R5 (male) added, “The film is good, but I think it’s more of a health warning. Hiking during menstruation without preparation is medically dangerous.” R7 (female) remarked, “I accept that the local community has their wisdom. But this film overemphasizes the mystical horror, so it’s a bit excessive.” Informants in the negotiation position acknowledged that the myth can be understood as a form of local wisdom to protect the safety of female hikers. R4 (female) explained, “My grandmother used to say the same thing, but her intention was good—so we wouldn’t push ourselves too hard. In the movie, it’s made to be scary, but that’s the core of it.” R8 (male) emphasized, “I agree with the message that women should be careful when hiking, but there’s no need to link it to a curse.” Nevertheless, they stated that the film presents mystical horror too intensely, raising concerns it could foster negative stereotypes toward menstruating women.

Specifically, factors influencing this negotiating position include (a) educational background, as the majority of informants are students with exposure to health sciences or social sciences, (b) personal mountain-climbing experience, where five out of six informants have climbed mountains, (c) prior knowledge from YouTube, which provided a more balanced perspective—not just the horror aspect—and (d) viewing platforms, whether Netflix or the cinema.

In the opposition group (20% of informants), there were two informants (R9 and R10), both of whom were female. They expressed firm rejection of the film’s central message. Both informants understood that the film intended to present the myth as a warning, but they rejected it because they viewed it as perpetuating superstition and discrimination against women. R9 stated, “This film actually reinforces the stigma that menstruating women are unclean and bring bad luck. I cannot accept that narrative. That is discrimination.” R10 added, “That myth is actually a tool of social control to restrict women’s freedom of movement. In the film, women are portrayed as the root cause of all mystical events. That’s wrong and harmful.” Both informants believe that the film *Petaka Gunung Gede* reproduces patriarchal ideology by positioning women’s bodies as a source of danger. R9 continued, “Menstruation is a natural process; it doesn’t need to be feared, let alone turned into a horror. Films like this hinder efforts toward gender equality.” Although there were differences in *interpretation* regarding the mystical elements, nearly all informants agreed that the film successfully conveyed a message about the importance of maintaining ethics and respect toward nature. This indicates that local wisdom values related to the relationship between humans and nature can be accepted across decoding positions. Although there are differences in interpretation regarding the mystical elements, nearly all informants agree that the film successfully conveys a message about the importance of maintaining ethics and respect toward nature. This indicates that local wisdom values related to the relationship between humans and nature can be accepted across decoding positions.

2. Discussion

The dominant 60% negotiation position aligns with the premise of Hall's *decoding* theory that modern audiences no longer accept messages blindly, but rather adapt them to their experiences and social context (Xie et al., 2022). In the context of Indonesian horror films, this finding reinforces the results of a study Rimbodo & Huda (2025) that found Generation Z tends to adopt a negotiating stance when interpreting moral messages in horror films. The negotiating stance in this study is characterized by rational, medically grounded explanations. Informants linked mystical events to fatigue, hypothermia, or hallucinations. This reflects a dialogue between local wisdom and modern knowledge. They respect tradition but do not accept it uncritically without logic. This finding differs from research Platt (2024) where audiences tended to interpret menstruation literally as the monstrous feminine. Conversely, Indonesian Generation Z is capable of double reading—that is, valuing cultural traditions while simultaneously critiquing mystical aspects.

The 20% opposition rate indicates gender resistance to patriarchal narratives. All opposing informants were women, and they explicitly cited discrimination as the reason for their rejection. This aligns with the feminist critique put forward by Prasetyo et al. (2025) that the representation of women in Indonesian horror films is often ambivalent, yet critical viewers are able to unpack that *ambivalence* Wijaya et al. (2025) that Indonesian horror narratives often reproduce gender inequality by portraying female entities as sources of calamity. Thus, the position of opposition in this study is not merely about rejecting mystical elements but also constitutes a form of resistance against the stigmatization of women's bodies. In line with the principles of digital communication ethics outlined by Faiza et al. (2025), balanced messaging is essential to ensure audiences are not solely exposed to sensational narratives that could potentially stigmatize specific groups.

The dominant-hegemonic position (20%), primarily from male informants with direct experience of oral traditions, indicates that direct cultural transmission remains influential but is not absolute for the majority of Generation Z. Gender differences are striking: all opposition comes from women, all dominance from men. Direct experience as a subject of stigmatization (menstruation) drives the rejection of myths. Conversely, men who do not experience menstruation tend to accept myths as neutral or merely cultural. Other factors: educational background, hiking experience, prior knowledge from YouTube, and viewing platforms. Generation Z, exposed to health and social sciences, is more critical of mystical narratives. Prior knowledge from YouTube, which presents more balanced stories, shapes expectations and leads to more rational decoding. This aligns with Putri & Wati (2023), which states that the cross-platform dissemination of stories creates different reception experiences.

Cross-cultural research also confirms that the *decoding* process is heavily influenced by local context and the audience's prior knowledge (Wu et al., 2025). In Indonesia, Asshafa & Hanathasia (2025) found that horror film audiences tend to negotiate meaning between modern logic and traditional beliefs. Overall, this study offers three main contributions. First, Hall's decoding theory remains relevant for digital audiences, though a critical gender dimension must be incorporated. Second, the negotiation position needs to be subdivided into subcategories based on medical rationality versus cultural acceptance. Third, the concept of the "monstrous feminine" requires revision in the Indonesian context, as local audiences are capable of actively resisting menstrual stigma.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the analysis of Generation Z's reception of the film *Petaka Gunung Gede*, this study concludes that the most dominant decoding position is the negotiation position. However,

this finding is limited to the specific sample and context of this research. Most informants accepted the local cultural messages but filtered them through rational logic and modern knowledge, so they valued local wisdom without fully believing in the mystical elements. Factors influencing differences in interpretation included educational background, personal mountain climbing experience, prior knowledge from YouTube, viewing platform, and gender. Gender differences are quite striking, as all informants in the opposition position were women, while those in the dominant position were men. This indicates that direct experience as subjects of stigmatization—specifically menstruation—drives resistance against discriminatory myths, whereas men tend to accept such myths as neutral or cultural phenomena. Although there were differences in the interpretation of mystical elements, almost all informants agreed that the film successfully conveyed a message about the importance of maintaining ethics and respect toward nature. Thus, the research objective of analysing how Generation Z interprets the message in the film has been achieved.

For filmmakers and content creators, horror films that explore local myths should present a dual perspective both mystical and rational to avoid gender stigmatization. In the principles of digital-based communication and outreach, conveying messages that are balanced, non-sensationalist, and mindful of the social impact on specific groups must be a top priority (Faiza et al., 2025). Filmmakers need to recognize that the content they produce serves not only as entertainment but also shapes the audience's perceptions and attitudes toward social issues, including gender and local wisdom. Therefore, gender issues within myths must be addressed sensitively, for example, by incorporating characters or narratives that challenge myths from an equality-focused perspective. The use of digital platforms for promotion must account for Generation Z's prior exposure to viral stories on YouTube, allowing audience expectations to be managed through balanced promotional content. For future researchers, it is recommended to expand the sample size to ensure more representative results and to balance gender composition to analyse differences in interpretation more deeply. Further research could employ participatory observation or incorporate encoding analysis to complement reception studies, and a cross-generational comparison between Generation Z and Millennials is necessary to observe shifts in interpretation patterns regarding local myths. For the general public and mountain climbers, local wisdom should continue to be respected as part of cultural ethics; however, potentially discriminatory myths need not be rigidly upheld, and modern medical knowledge should take precedence in preparing for climbs, especially for female climbers who are menstruating.

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