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# Controversy on the Acceptance of Transgender Characterization in the Movie “Lovely Man”

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**Abstract:** Creating a transgender-themed movie in a Muslim majority country like Indonesia is indeed difficult to do. Although transgenderism is a social phenomenon, it remains too sensitive to be accepted by most of the society members. The presence of the movie “Lovely Man” comprises a courage to be present. This study was not intended to assess the public’s acceptance of transgender people but more to analyze the transgender community’s acceptance, including the controversy toward the overall role of the transgender character Saiful played by Donny Damara. This research applied the qualitative method with encoding/decoding reception analysis technique developed by Stuart Hall. The data collection was conducted by having an in-depth interview with the transgender community in Surabaya through the Surabaya transvestite group. The result of the study indicated that the transgender community in Surabaya accepted the success of the character Saiful who represented their lives as transgender in the movie “Lovely Man”. However, the characterization of Saiful also ignited controversy because it was not considered to be a representation of daily life for transgender people. Some of the notes on the controversies included: Saiful being less gentle, the use of wigs, the use of a low-pitched voice and sexual harassment, i.e. sodomy.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Lifestyle is often practiced as a means to show identity. This is evident from how people dress, the way they speak, their ethics, and even from their daily behavior (Davis, 1992; Joyce, 2005). Likewise, every group identity holds special characteristics to show its existence in society (Adelman, 2008; Crane, 2012). One of the groups in society that has special characteristics in terms of the way they speak and how they behave and dress up is the transvestite or transgender group (Stryker, 2006). They are physically men but they dress up, wear makeup, and talk like women. Their behavior and performance do not match the role of gender in general.

Transgender is a person who “violates” cultural norms on some level with regard to how men and women should behave. A woman is culturally required to be gentler than a man. When a man acts as femininely as a woman does, he is considered to be transgender. People who are born with a combination of male and female genitalia are also included in the transgender group. Gender is a basic category in culture, as a process of identification not only as an individual but also in terms of

vocabulary, speech pattern, attitudes and behavior, goals and activities which are grouped into “masculinity” or “femininity” (Waters and Ellis, 1996). Unlike sex, gender is not what we are born with, rather, it is related to what we do in our life (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

The daily life of a transgender person entered the world of cinema through the movie “Lovely Man”, the first Indonesian movie that openly discusses transgender people in depth, although there have been 20 Indonesian movies which share similar themes about sexuality and gender since 2002 to 2008 with the movie “Arisan!” considered as the breakthrough (Murtagh, 2008).

“Lovely Man” was awarded the Best Actor for Donny Damara while Teddy Soeriaatmadja was nominated for Best Director in the Asian Film Awards 2012. It was also awarded Best Film and Best Director in the Tiburon International Film Festival, which was held on April 19–27, 2012. This movie ignited controversy since it was the first movie for the way it blatantly depicts the lives of transgender/transvestite individuals.

This movie is about a Moslem girl, Cahaya (played by Raihaanun Soeriaatmadja) who is in

search of her father in Jakarta. Cahaya's father, Saiful (played by Donny Damara), left her when she was four. Saiful adopts an alias name, Ipu, when he is living his transvestite life in Jakarta. He works to earn money to reach his dream of changing his sex to female through sex surgery. His goal is to live together with his boyfriend.

A movie can be considered as a representation of people's lives because through movies people can see a description or reflection of real life even when they sometimes do not realize that the movie may represent the real lives of real people (Tom, 2014).

In reality, the lives of the transgender group are similar to Saiful's. The fact is that they are commonly marginalized by society and often get scorned and laughed at by people while they wear their transvestite clothes. This is similar to what happened to the character in the movie "Boys Don't Cry" (Aguilar, 2010).

Although there are some signs of the community being comfortable with the transgender group and accepting them, there are also many studies that indicate that they still face challenges, denial, and a negative perception than lesbians, gays, and bisexuals (Norton and Herek, 2012).

The reference to this research is a study conducted in a TV drama entitled "All My Children" where there was a transgender character, Zoe. This research interviewed TV viewers from the LGBT community (Morrison, 2010).

## 2 METHOD

This research employed a qualitative descriptive method with reception analysis. This method is intended to collect information about the status of symptoms which exist when the research is ongoing, without examining any particular hypothesis. Instead, it only describes a situation/condition "as it is". Analytical research is one of the descriptive research methods that is conducted toward information of pictures and sounds (Arikunto, 2005: 234, 244).

Reception analysis research starts with a text identification process and objective consideration of the data collection, analysis, and data interpretation from an in-depth interview. The data which is taken from the interview was categorized based on the themes which emerged in the interpretation conducted by the subject of the study (an emerged meaning). The emerging themes were then compared to preferred reading and then grouped into

three groups of meanings, i.e.: *dominant reading*, *oppositional reading* and *negotiated reading*.

The *dominant reading* means that the interviewees accepted Saiful in the movie "Lovely Man". On the other hand, *negotiated reading* means that the interviewees accepted Saiful conditionally. Finally, *oppositional reading* means that the interviewee refused to accept the figure of Saiful in the movie. The character Saiful was perceived through a code displayed through pictures and sounds in the movie.

Saiful was the object of the study. As previously mentioned, Saiful leaves his family in the village and moves to Jakarta because he feels that he is transgender. After 14 years, his daughter, Cahaya (played by Raihaanun Soeriaatmadja), goes to Jakarta to look for him. Cahaya is surprised to discover that her father has changed into a transvestite.

The interviewees in this research were members of Yayasan Ekspresi Wana Surabaya, Perwakos or Persatuan Waria Kota Surabaya (the Organisation of Surabaya Transvestite). Perwakos was chosen because it housed 950 members in Surabaya, 650 of whom were registered in Komisi Penanggulangan AIDS or KPA (the National AIDS Commission) and more than 350 were commuting transvestites, meaning they did not permanently reside in Surabaya. The researcher also got informants from 10 transvestite hotspots spread across Irian Barat Street, Ketabang Kali Street, Tanjung Perak, Cantikan Street, Wonokromo Train Station, Margomulyo area, Rolak Gunung Sari, Perkumpulan Ludruk, Persekutuan Kudus Waria, and Pengajian Al-Ikhlis for transvestites. It was easier for the researcher to conduct the interview using this method (interview with Ibu Irma as the program manager of Perwakos).

The data collection was conducted through observation, in-depth interview and documentation. This research determined four interviewees who had watched "Lovely Man" and each of them had a different background. The criteria to become interviewees in this study included being a member of Perwakos and being a transvestite for more than 10 years.

The four interviewees were: 1) Feby, whose real name was Budi Setiawan, 33 years old, and worked in an NGO and a beauty salon at home; 2) Mrs Sonya, whose real name was Anton, 53 years old, worked for an NGO; 3) Ririn whose real name was Haryono, 39 years old, worked for an NGO and an entrepreneur, and last; 3) Mrs Irma whose real name was Iman Subekhi, 64 years old, owned a beauty

salon at home and was program manager for Perwakos.

These four chosen interviewees worked for Perwakos because they often interacted with other transgenders and knew well the transgenders' lives in Surabaya. In addition, they also watched "Lovely Man" and were capable of describing the problems being observed from their point of view as transgender people. This interview was conducted to gain an understanding of how accepting the transgender community are toward the characterization of transgender in the figure of Saiful in the movie "Lovely Man".

### 3 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Transgender can be described as behavior performed both by men or women who feel that the gender shaping in them is not who they are inside, thus, they choose to behave and perform as the gender they want to be. Some of them may wear outfits of the opposite gender, and this possibly happens because of the job requirement or because of their own sheer pleasure. Therefore, it can be concluded that transsexual and transgender are very different from each other (Stryker, 2008).

A filmed transgender life is like documenting a real story. Through a movie, the moviemaker aims to convey a message to the audience as members of society (Roncallo, 2013). Movies are cultural works. "Movies tell a story that comes from the work of the human mind, as well as language" (Turner, 1999). As a result of an artwork and culture, movies have broad and large social, economic, and cultural functions and benefits that help to maintain the diversity of values in performing the life of a nation or a country (Pusnik, 2015).

The moral values from a movie can provide satisfaction to the audience since it is supported by the elements of the movie (Mulvey, 1986), including narrative and cinematic elements, *mise en scene*, settings, the human figure, cinematography, editing, and sounds. The narrative element constitutes a material that will be processed as well as the idea of the story, while the cinematic element refers to a way or style to process an idea or a technical aspect of the filmmaker so that the idea can be executed well.

*Mise en scene* refers to how various visual materials are utilized, framed and photographed in a movie frame. *Mise en scene* consists of angle, the actors' and actresses' makeup, wardrobe and accessories, intimacy and proximity distances,

territorial space, lighting, and the actors' and actresses' expressions (Giannetti, 2006).

The setting is a location for a movie which is crucial to strengthen the idea of the story as well as the theme to show in a movie. The setting can show the audience the socio-cultural condition of the characters in the movie and the motive development of each character (Barnett, 2000).

The human figure is the suitability and ability of the movie players in playing certain characters. The power of a character played by an actor or actress can bring the story alive and create good images in the movie.

Cinematography, editing, and sounds are more about the technicality of filmmaking and contribute their roles in supporting the narrative and aesthetic aspects of the movie as a whole. A communicative story can certainly combine many meanings, which are presented through signs, symbols, and significance (Mick, 1986).

In transgender movies, all elements of the movie have the potential to mutually reinforce the story, so that the moral values can be accepted by the wider community. To assess whether the moral values in the movie are accepted, reception analysis can be employed. After determining a particular social group of people who have watched a movie, questions are asked through interviews on various aspects of the film. Through the informants' answers, a researcher can find out their thoughts by receiving the messages, using messages and assessing the movie's strong influence on the interviewees. Reception analysis examines the aspects of social communication that occur between the movie, audience and social context. The communication of those three aspects creates meaning, therefore movies influence the society. The point that the reception analysis argues is that there will be no influences without meaning (Jensen, 2003:135).

The following is the summary of the analysis and results of the interview in accordance with the requirements to conduct the reception analysis in this movie.

#### 3.1 The Acceptance of the Story of "Lovely Man"

From those four interviewees, three of them, Mrs Sonya, Ririn and Feby, said that they agreed with the story of the movie "Lovely Man".

"...This movie tells us about a transvestite who has a child. In real life, there are also transvestites who have wives and children,



*although people think that a transvestite cannot have a wife nor children."* (An interview with Feby)

The claim from Mrs Irma was different. She accepted the story in "Lovely Man" under one condition.

*"...this movie is one that is representative of those transvestites who have wives and children but not representative of all transvestites because it is only a small part of them who have wives and children."* (An interview with Mrs Irma)

The story of "Lovely Man" is based on the fact that there are transvestites who have a complete family and even children. But from the perspective of an actual transvestite (Mrs Irma), not all transvestites' lives were represented in the movie. Only some part of the story was represented. According to her, the sad story was overdramatized. This could be because to make a good movie the conflict of the story was raised to create controversy in the transgender group.

As a movie categorized as fiction and non-documentary, it was made by following culture development, highlighting a particular social class and was embellished with pop culture (Barnett, 2000).

### **3.2 The Acceptance of the Jobs and Risk of Becoming a Transgender in "Lovely Man"**

The risks of being a transvestite or working as a transgender include often facing harassment. As featured in the movie, violence seems to be common and all of the interviewees confirmed that it truly happens in transgender people's lives. Another risk that they usually encounter is disease and thuggery.

*"Violence often happens to transvestites both from the thugs and the authorities."* (An interview with Feby)

*"This also happens during a raid when the authorities see a beautiful transvestite, they will ask for oral sex and anal sex."* (An interview with Mrs Irma)

Transgender people always face unexpected social norms (Stieglitz, 2010). Gender behavior is a particular behavior that is prone to discrimination either at home, school or work and when receiving health care, and they also often become a target of abuse (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). Sexual

harassment can also cause health risks for transgender people, such as HIV transmission and other sexual diseases (Lindley et al., 2003).

In real life, they are often subjected to physical violence such as being hit, slapped, and kicked by the authorities (police and public order authorities), security personnel and even thugs. There are so many cases where transgender people become victims of physical violence (Barboza, Dominguez and Chance, 2016).

### **3.3 Acceptance of the Transgender Behavior to Attract Customers**

In "Lovely Man" Saiful works as a commercial sex worker and peddles himself on the roads of Lawang Park. A comprehensive study of transgender behavior was conducted by Luis F. Morales Knight (2016) in his dissertation at Nebraska University, entitled *Dimensions of Individuals' Judgment on Sexual Attraction, Romantic Attachment, and Sexual Orientation*.

In peddling himself, Saiful uses various ways to seduce and attract his prospective customers who pass by. The transgender group in real life also apply similar tricks, such as teasing and dressing up as attractively as possible to get customers.

*"The way Saiful seduces the customers is similar to other transvestites in seducing their customers, not overly dramatized. I did it too once a while."* (An interview with Mrs Sonya).

### **3.4 Acceptance of The Characterization of The Character Saiful in "Lovely Man"**

The character Saiful played by Donny Damara is the central character of the movie. Saiful, who used to work as a construction worker during the day and became a transvestite at night, has to leave his wife and child to fulfill his desire of becoming transgender and get a male partner.

Ibu Sonya, who accepted the character Saiful, argued that in Surabaya, transvestites behaved as Saiful did.

*"I agree because if Saiful didn't take the 30 million bills, he wouldn't be pursued by the money owner. This also happens here in Surabaya."* (An interview with Mrs Sonya)

Meanwhile, Feby, Ririn, and Mrs Irma accepted the characterization of transgender people through the figure of Saiful.

*Overall, it is almost appropriate, but he is still less womanly than a real transvestite. In real life, there are transvestites who dress up as a transvestite for the whole 24 hours, so their behavior becomes as gentle as a real woman. But there are also transvestites who dress up as a woman only at night, so they are not as gentle as a 24-hour transvestite."*  
(An interview with Feby)

The character Saiful was accepted by the transgender community but his behavior was too rough and less gentle than common transgender people.

The acceptance of the transgender community toward the character Saiful in "Lovely Man" was based on the encoding/decoding theory by Stuart Hall and was categorized as acceptance with a condition. There were several attitudes and behaviors that became controversies, such as when Saiful says that he had become a transvestite more than 10 years earlier but still behaves as roughly as a man: his response when he faced violence (being beaten and sodomized), the way he communicated when he seduced his customers, and his interactions with other transgender people seemed unrealistic.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

This movie was considered successful in portraying some parts of transgender people's daily life. The character Saiful represented the real life of a transgender. Nevertheless, the characterization of Saiful also created controversy among the transgender audience as he was not considered by them to be a whole representation of their daily lives.

The incident when Saiful was robbed and sodomized was considered to be overly dramatized because such an incident was never experienced by transgender people in real life during work because most of them only engage in oral sex.

The character Saiful was less womanly than a real-life transgender person when he interacted with his customers, his daughter, and his friends. His character seemed to be less feminine compared to a real transvestite since he mentioned that he had transferred into a different gender quite a long time ago.

The way he behaved and talked also seemed inappropriate in the following ways: 1) his use of wigs while working because, in fact, wigs only tend to be used by transvestites when they have a show or just for fun. They usually choose to grow their own hair so that they really look like a woman; 2) transgender people rarely have a low-pitched voice like Saiful did. They usually suppress their voice when talking and use a high pitch to sound more like a woman.

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