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Gender-Fluid Fashion as a Representation of Contemporary Masculinity: A Semiotic and Audience Reception Study

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Abstract

The increasing popularity of K-Pop has contributed to the emergence of gender-fluid fashion as a significant cultural phenomenon that challenges traditional understandings of masculinity. Among K-Pop artists, G-Dragon is widely recognized for his distinctive fashion style, which frequently combines masculine and feminine elements. This study aims to analyze the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings embedded in G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework and to examine how Indonesian audiences perceive his fashion style as a representation of contemporary masculinity. This research employed a qualitative approach using visual and textual data. The visual data consisted of six selected images of G-Dragon's fashion style, while the textual data comprised comments from Indonesian social media users. The findings reveal that G-Dragon's fashion style conveys meanings of individuality, creativity, and freedom of self-expression. At the mythical level, his appearance constructs a new understanding of masculinity that is flexible, inclusive, and not limited by traditional gender norms. Furthermore, Indonesian audiences generally interpret his fashion style positively, associating it with artistic expression, confidence, and innovation rather than gender deviation. These findings suggest that contemporary masculinity is increasingly perceived as a socially constructed and evolving concept influenced by global popular culture. This study contributes to the fields of semiotics, gender studies, and cultural studies by providing insights into the relationship between fashion, identity, and audience perception within contemporary K-Pop culture.

Keywords : Gender-fluid fashion, G-Dragon, semiotics, masculinity, audience perception, K-Pop.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global expansion of K-Pop has transformed the industry into a powerful cultural force that influences not only music consumption but also fashion, identity, and lifestyle practices. Through digital media and transnational fan communities, K-Pop idols have become influential figures whose appearances shape public perceptions of beauty, gender, and self-expression. Recent studies indicate that K-Pop has contributed significantly to the globalization of cultural values and the emergence of new forms of identity construction among audiences worldwide (Sankaran et al., 2025; Nakamura et al., 2025; Youngsun et al., 2024). As a result, fashion has become one of the most visible mediums through which K-Pop idols communicate cultural meanings and negotiate social norms.

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One of the most notable phenomena within contemporary K-Pop culture is the increasing visibility of gender-fluid fashion among male idols. Gender-fluid fashion refers to clothing styles and aesthetic practices that transcend traditional distinctions between masculinity and femininity. Among the artists associated with this phenomenon, G-Dragon has received particular attention for consistently incorporating both masculine and feminine elements into his fashion choices. His distinctive style has established him as a global fashion icon and trendsetter whose influence extends beyond the music industry. Scholars have argued that G-Dragon's appearance challenges conventional gender expectations and represents a more fluid understanding of masculine identity (Roy, 2025; Nara, 2024; Kyeongjae et al., 2025). Nevertheless, such representations continue to generate diverse interpretations among audiences, particularly in societies where traditional gender norms remain influential.

Fashion can be understood as a system of signs that conveys meanings beyond its practical function. Clothing, accessories, and appearance often communicate social identities, cultural values, and ideological messages. To examine these meanings, this study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, which analyzes signs through three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a sign, connotation concerns the cultural and symbolic meanings attached to it, while myth represents broader ideological narratives that become naturalized within society. Barthes' framework is particularly useful for understanding how fashion images construct meanings related to gender and identity.

Previous studies have explored issues of masculinity, gender representation, and audience perceptions within K-Pop culture. Research by Kim and Son (2025) demonstrates that K-Pop audiences increasingly recognize alternative forms of masculinity that move beyond traditional gender expectations. Similarly, Pirol and Gedik (2025) found that representations of male K-Pop idols contribute to evolving cultural understandings of masculinity across different social contexts. Furthermore, Chu et al. (2025) highlighted G-Dragon's role as a global cultural icon whose influence extends to fashion, branding, and identity formation. Despite these contributions, limited research has specifically examined the semiotic meanings embedded in G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style while simultaneously investigating how audiences interpret those meanings. Most existing studies focus either on textual analyses of fashion representations or on audience perceptions separately.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings embedded in G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework and examining how Indonesian audiences perceive and interpret his fashion style as a representation of contemporary masculinity. The findings are expected to contribute to the fields of semiotics, cultural studies, gender studies, and media studies by providing a deeper understanding of how fashion functions as a site of meaning-making and identity construction. In addition, this study may offer insights into the influence of global popular culture on changing perceptions of masculinity and gender expression among Indonesian audiences.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to analyze the meanings embedded in G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style. Qualitative research was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore and interpret meanings, symbols, and audience perceptions rather than measure numerical data. Barthes' framework of denotation, connotation, and myth was used to examine how fashion functions as a system of signs that communicates cultural and ideological meanings.

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2.2 Data Sources

The study utilized two types of data. The primary data consisted of six selected images portraying G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style obtained from publicly accessible online sources, including fashion magazines, social media platforms, and entertainment websites. The images were purposively selected based on their relevance to the concept of gender-fluid fashion and their visibility in public discourse.

The secondary data consisted of comments and audience responses collected from Indonesian social media users on platforms such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and online discussion forums. These comments were selected because they reflected audience interpretations and perceptions of G-Dragon's fashion style as a representation of contemporary masculinity.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through documentation techniques. First, visual data in the form of photographs featuring G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style were identified and compiled. Second, Indonesian audience comments related to these fashion representations were gathered from social media platforms and online discussions. The collected data were then categorized according to the research objectives and organized for analysis.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. The analysis was conducted in three stages. First, the denotative level examined the literal and observable elements of the fashion images, including clothing, accessories, colors, and styling choices. Second, the connotative level explored the cultural and symbolic meanings associated with these visual elements. Third, the mythical level identified broader ideological messages and cultural beliefs embedded in the representations of gender and masculinity.

To address the second research objective, audience comments were analyzed using thematic analysis. Similar responses were grouped into categories to identify recurring themes regarding Indonesian audiences' perceptions of G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style. The findings from the semiotic analysis and audience analysis were then interpreted collectively to provide a comprehensive understanding of how contemporary masculinity is represented and perceived within K-Pop culture.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Gender-Fluid Fashion in K-Pop

The K-Pop industry has become one of the most influential cultural forces in shaping contemporary fashion trends and gender expression. In recent years, many K-Pop idols have adopted fashion styles that blur conventional distinctions between masculinity and femininity. According to Jung (2022), K-Pop performers frequently employ androgynous aesthetics as a strategy to expand their appeal to diverse audiences while simultaneously challenging traditional gender norms. Similarly, Oh (2023) argues that gender-fluid fashion in K-Pop functions as a cultural practice that allows artists to experiment with identity and self-presentation beyond binary gender categories.

The growing visibility of gender-fluid fashion has contributed to broader discussions about gender diversity in popular culture. Lee and Kim (2024) found that younger audiences tend to perceive androgynous fashion as a symbol of creativity and individuality rather than a challenge to social values. Moreover, Park (2023) notes that fashion has become an important medium through which K-Pop idols negotiate contemporary understandings of gender, identity, and celebrity culture. These studies suggest that gender-fluid fashion is not merely an aesthetic choice but also a form of cultural communication that reflects changing social attitudes toward gender expression.

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3.2 Semiotics and Fashion Representation

Fashion can be understood as a system of signs that communicates social and cultural meanings. Semiotic analysis provides a useful framework for examining how clothing, accessories, and visual appearances generate meaning beyond their practical functions. According to Chandler (2022), semiotics examines how signs operate within cultural contexts and how meanings are produced through interpretation. In fashion studies, clothing often serves as a symbolic resource through which individuals construct and communicate identities.

Barthes' semiotic theory remains one of the most influential approaches for analyzing fashion representations. As explained by Cobley and Jansz (2023), Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth enable researchers to uncover both explicit and implicit meanings embedded within visual texts. Furthermore, Barnard (2024) argues that fashion communicates ideological messages concerning class, gender, status, and identity. Through semiotic analysis, fashion can therefore be examined not only as a visual phenomenon but also as a cultural text that reflects broader social values and beliefs (Suheri et al., 2025; Faisal et al., 2025; Youngsun et al., 2024).

3.3 Contemporary Masculinity and Audience Perception

Contemporary understandings of masculinity have undergone significant transformation due to globalization, digital media, and changing cultural expectations. Traditional models of masculinity, which emphasize dominance, emotional restraint, and physical strength, are increasingly being questioned and redefined. Anderson and McCormack (2023) suggest that modern masculinity has become more inclusive, allowing men greater freedom to express emotions, creativity, and individuality without compromising their masculine identities.

Audience perception plays a crucial role in determining how representations of masculinity are interpreted and negotiated. According to Gill (2024), media audiences actively construct meanings rather than passively receiving messages presented by media texts. Similarly, Banet-Weiser (2023) argues that contemporary media cultures encourage audiences to engage with diverse gender representations and develop more flexible understandings of identity. In the context of K-Pop, audience interpretations are particularly important because fans often negotiate global cultural influences alongside local social values (Andini et al., 2022; Faisal et al., 2025; Yaumi et al., 2023). Therefore, examining Indonesian audiences' perceptions of G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style can provide valuable insights into how contemporary masculinity is understood and reconstructed within a specific cultural context.

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3.4 Conceptual Framework

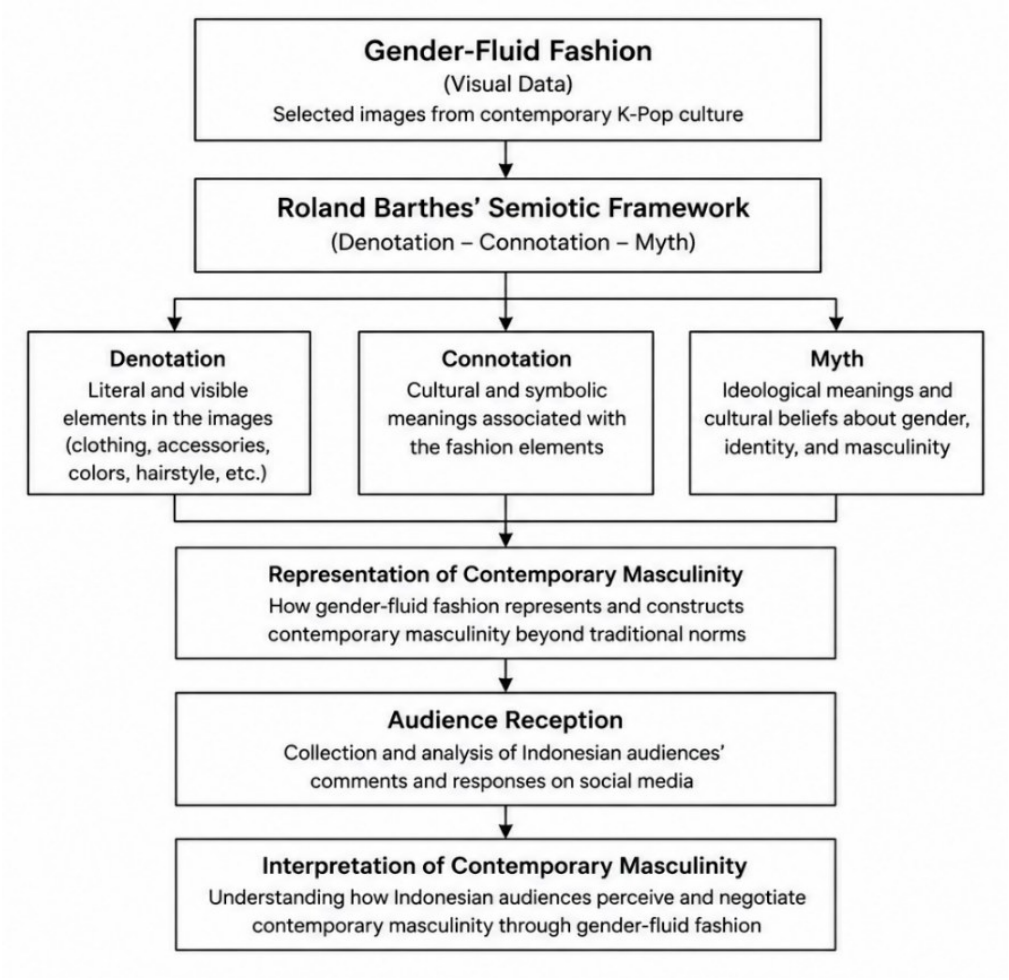


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

This framework illustrates the research process used to examine gender-fluid fashion as a representation of contemporary masculinity. The study analyzes visual data through Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, focusing on denotation, connotation, and myth. The meanings identified from the semiotic analysis are used to understand the representation of contemporary masculinity and are further explored through Indonesian audience reception. Finally, the study investigates how audiences interpret and perceive contemporary masculinity through gender-fluid fashion.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study found that G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style carries multiple layers of meaning that challenge conventional understandings of masculinity. Through Barthes' semiotic framework, the visual representations of G-Dragon reveal denotative meanings related to clothing appearance, connotative meanings associated with identity and self-expression, and mythical meanings connected to contemporary masculinity in K-Pop culture. In addition, Indonesian audiences generally perceive his fashion style positively, viewing it as a form of creativity, confidence, and individuality rather than a rejection of masculinity.

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4.1. Semiotic Analysis of G-Dragon's Gender-Fluid Fashion Style

This section analyzes the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings embedded in G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. Through selected visual data, the study explores how fashion functions as a system of signs that communicates messages about identity, masculinity, and gender expression. The analysis reveals that G-Dragon's fashion choices challenge conventional gender norms while promoting alternative representations of contemporary masculinity.

Data 1



Sources : dipastch.com

The image shows G-Dragon wearing an oversized knitted outfit featuring decorative details that are often associated with feminine fashion. Denotatively, the image presents a male celebrity dressed in an unconventional fashion style. Connotatively, the outfit signifies freedom of expression and the rejection of traditional gender norms, emphasizing fashion as a form of artistic identity rather than a reflection of biological sex. Mythically, the image reinforces the idea that contemporary masculinity can coexist with traits traditionally labeled as feminine, such as aesthetic sensitivity and creativity. As a result, G-Dragon's appearance contributes to the construction of a new myth of masculinity in which self-expression and individuality are valued alongside conventional masculine attributes.

Data 2

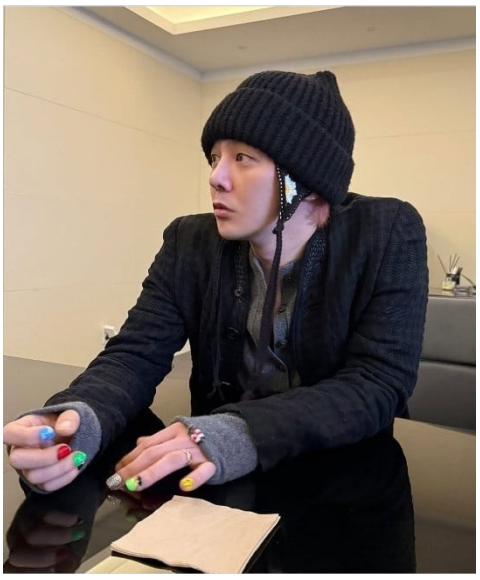
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Sources : dipastch.com

The image shows G-Dragon dressed in a patterned formal suit accompanied by accessories and styling choices that blur traditional distinctions between masculine and feminine fashion codes. Denotatively, the image represents a male celebrity wearing a formal outfit. Connotatively, the fusion of sophistication and unconventional fashion elements signifies self-confidence, individuality, and the freedom to construct one's identity beyond rigid gender norms. The image communicates the notion that fashion identity is fluid and adaptable rather than fixed by societal expectations. At the mythical level, the representation constructs the image of the contemporary male celebrity whose popularity and cultural influence are derived from originality and innovation. Through this myth, G-Dragon embodies a new model of masculinity in which creativity and aesthetic expression become sources of admiration and social prestige.

Data 3



Sources : dipastch.com

Through his casual outfit and unconventional styling choices, G-Dragon challenges dominant representations of masculine fashion. Denotatively, the appearance shows a male celebrity wearing casual clothing accompanied by distinctive accessories. Connotatively, the styling conveys

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individuality, authenticity, and artistic expression, suggesting that fashion functions as a means of constructing and communicating personal identity. Mythically, the image reinforces the belief that modern masculinity is characterized by creativity, self-expression, and the freedom to transcend traditional gender boundaries. As a result, masculinity is represented as a fluid and evolving concept rather than a fixed social category.

4.2. Indonesian Audiences' Perceptions of G-Dragon's Gender-Fluid Fashion Style

Audience responses indicate diverse yet predominantly positive interpretations of G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style. The data demonstrate that Indonesian audiences generally perceive his appearance as an expression of creativity, personal identity, and fashion innovation rather than a rejection of masculine values. Such perceptions reflect a growing acceptance of alternative forms of masculinity, influenced by the global spread of K-Pop culture and evolving understandings of gender expression. Consequently, G-Dragon's fashion style is viewed not only as a personal aesthetic choice but also as a representation of contemporary masculinity that challenges conventional gender norms while maintaining social appeal.

Data 4



Sources : TikTok comments

Comments from Indonesian social media users indicate admiration for G-Dragon's confidence and distinctive fashion sense. Many users praise his ability to set trends and maintain a unique identity despite constantly evolving fashion styles. His willingness to experiment with unconventional clothing and accessories is often viewed as a reflection of creativity and artistic expression. Furthermore, audiences appreciate his confidence in presenting himself authentically, regardless of traditional expectations regarding masculine appearance. These responses suggest that Indonesian audiences tend to associate his fashion choices with originality, innovation, and charisma rather than with gender deviation. As a result, G-Dragon is widely perceived not only as a fashion icon but also as a cultural figure who inspires self-expression and individuality among his fans.

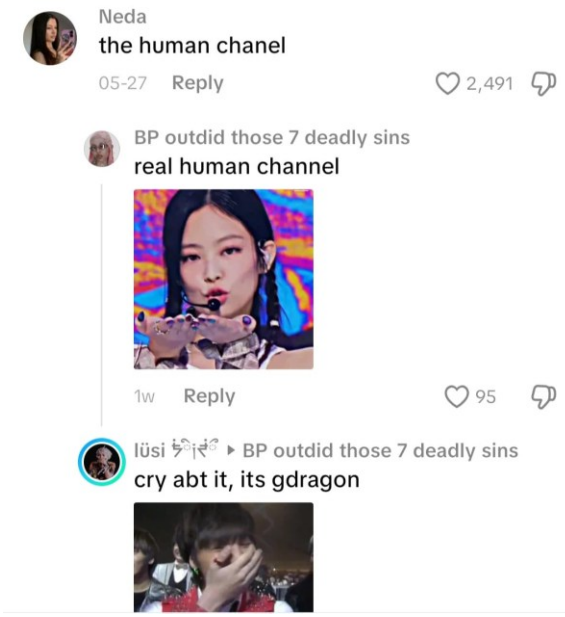
Data 5



Sources : TikTok comments

Several comments refer to G-Dragon as a fashion icon and trendsetter whose influence extends beyond the K-Pop industry. Indonesian audiences acknowledge his significant contribution to global fashion trends and recognize his ability to introduce styles that challenge conventional fashion norms. Many respondents admire his originality and willingness to experiment with clothing, accessories, and aesthetics that are often considered unconventional. Rather than viewing these fashion choices negatively, audiences tend to interpret them as symbols of confidence, creativity, and artistic innovation. This perception reflects a growing acceptance of diverse expressions of masculinity, particularly among younger generations who are more exposed to global popular culture. It also suggests that masculinity is increasingly understood as a flexible and evolving concept that allows individuals to express themselves in various ways without being confined by traditional gender expectations.

Data 6



Sources : TikTok comments

Audience responses generally reveal positive interpretations of G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style. While some users continue to evaluate fashion through traditional gender expectations, the majority perceive his appearance as a form of artistic and creative self-expression. Many respondents

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appreciate his confidence in experimenting with different styles and regard his fashion choices as a reflection of individuality rather than a challenge to masculine identity. Furthermore, audiences tend to associate his appearance with innovation, authenticity, and personal freedom, qualities that have contributed to his reputation as a global fashion icon. These findings suggest that perceptions of masculinity among Indonesian audiences are becoming increasingly flexible and open to diverse forms of expression. Consequently, masculinity is no longer viewed solely as a fixed set of characteristics but rather as a socially constructed and evolving concept that can accommodate various identities, styles, and modes of self-representation.

4.3. Discussion

The findings indicate that G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style functions as a complex system of signs that generates denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings. Based on Barthes' semiotic perspective, fashion is not merely a form of clothing but a cultural text that communicates values, ideologies, and social identities. The denotative meanings found in G-Dragon's outfits are transformed into connotative meanings that signify freedom of expression, individuality, and resistance to rigid gender boundaries. These findings support previous studies arguing that K-Pop idols frequently employ fashion as a medium for constructing alternative gender identities and challenging traditional gender norms (Ho, 2025; Roy, 2025).

At the connotative level, G-Dragon's fashion style represents a form of contemporary masculinity that differs from conventional notions of masculinity characterized by dominance, toughness, and emotional restraint. Instead, his appearance promotes creativity, aesthetic expression, and self-confidence. This finding is consistent with Kim and Son (2025), who found that K-Pop fans increasingly perceive male idols as embodying alternative forms of masculinity that expand traditional gender expectations. Through fashion and performance, male idols create new possibilities for expressing masculine identities beyond binary gender norms.

Furthermore, the mythical meaning embedded in G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style constructs a cultural narrative that masculinity is not fixed but socially negotiated and continuously reconstructed. Repeated media representations normalize the idea that men can engage in fashion practices traditionally associated with femininity without compromising their masculine identity. Similar conclusions were reached by recent studies examining K-Pop's role in reshaping perceptions of masculinity, which found that androgynous and aesthetically expressive male images increasingly challenge dominant masculine ideals in various cultural contexts, including Asian societies (Walisyah et al., 2025; Pirol & Gedik, 2025).

The audience analysis also reveals that Indonesian viewers generally interpret G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style positively. Most participants associate his appearance with artistic creativity, fashion innovation, and personal authenticity rather than with a rejection of masculinity. This finding suggests that younger audiences are becoming more receptive to diverse expressions of gender and identity. Such perceptions reflect broader global cultural shifts in which masculinity is increasingly understood as flexible and performative rather than biologically predetermined. The growing acceptance of alternative masculinities among K-Pop audiences demonstrates the influence of transnational popular culture in reshaping local understandings of gender expression (Kim & Son, 2025).

Overall, this study confirms that G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style serves not only as an aesthetic practice but also as a cultural discourse that challenges traditional gender ideologies. Through Barthes' semiotic framework, the study demonstrates how fashion operates as a symbolic system that produces new meanings of masculinity in contemporary K-Pop culture. These findings contribute to the growing body of research on gender representation, celebrity culture, and the negotiation of masculinity in global popular culture.

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CONCLUSION

This study examined the meanings embedded in G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style and explored Indonesian audiences' perceptions of his appearance as a representation of contemporary masculinity. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, the analysis revealed that G-Dragon's fashion style communicates meanings that extend beyond clothing and aesthetics. At the denotative level, the selected images portray distinctive fashion choices that combine masculine and feminine elements. At the connotative level, these fashion representations signify individuality, creativity, confidence, and freedom of self-expression. At the mythical level, the images construct a contemporary understanding of masculinity that embraces flexibility, artistic expression, and independence from rigid gender expectations.

The findings also indicate that Indonesian audiences generally perceive G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style positively. Most respondents interpret his appearance as a form of creativity and personal expression rather than a challenge to masculine identity. Although some audiences continue to view fashion through traditional gender norms, the majority demonstrate an openness toward diverse forms of gender expression. This suggests that perceptions of masculinity are evolving and becoming increasingly influenced by global cultural trends, particularly those promoted through K-Pop culture.

Overall, this study demonstrates that fashion serves as an important medium for constructing and communicating meanings related to gender and identity. G-Dragon's gender-fluid fashion style not only challenges conventional representations of masculinity but also contributes to broader cultural discussions about self-expression and gender diversity in contemporary society. Future studies may examine other K-Pop artists or compare audience perceptions across different cultural contexts to further understand the relationship between fashion, gender representation, and popular culture.

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