

# Watching “Wonder Woman”: Reception of the American Film by Indonesian Youth

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## ABSTRACT

This research explores how the youth Indonesian audiences, as the bigger moviegoers take pleasure and make meaning to the element of western feminism in the Hollywood movie, “Wonder Woman” (2017). Taking a descriptive qualitative approach, the data are collected through in-depth personal interviews with twenty-five students at Universitas Sebelas Maret who have watched the Wonder Woman movie. Most of the informants have agreed that the character of Gal Gadot’s Diana in the movie presents both feminine and masculine qualities which offer a special spectacle for the audience, especially through the feminine elements, such as a beautiful face and graceful body. The duality of Diana’s character is also interpreted by the audiences as the ultimate sign of western feminism in the movie. It is observed that the Indonesian young audiences generally are open to the feminist idea in Wonder Woman as the movie highlights the womanly trait of Diana’s character and it is also commonly portrayed in many Hollywood movies viewed by the Indonesian audiences.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The popularity of the “Wonder Woman” movie (2017) worldwide has not only reached the western lands but also the Eastern countries, including Indonesia. As a popular Hollywood film that could draw a worldwide audience, Wonder Woman also gained attention from many viewers in Indonesia as it became the ten most viewed box office in 2017. The movie gets the second position as the highest-grossing movie as soon as it is first released at the box office in Indonesia (IMDb, 2017).

Despite its popularity, the movie also brings together its western feminist agenda. In this way, many female heroes and heroine characters presented in Hollywood’s superhero genre are intended to show that women can be as strong as men, even though they still hold their feminine characteristics. Presenting a typical female hero figure having both masculine and feminine qualities, Wonder Woman offers a western post-feminist idea that can bring various responses to the young audiences in Indonesia as part of a Muslim-majority country.

On the other side, some researchers have found that the feminist agenda within female hero movies can be accepted very well by Western audiences. As has been found by Jennifer McClearen (2015), her female participants in her research interpret action heroine text as a visual metaphor for female success in a career since the sensibilities of post-feminism make the strong feminine bodies figuratively unbelievable. Another research by Cocca (2014) has resulted that the representation of female superheroes in sexy uniforms, even though it may be called visual objectification, not only shows the power of freedom to choose to be attractive but also to be powerful in society at the same time.

This article attempts to explore how Indonesian youth audiences take pleasure and make meaning through watching the Wonder Woman movie since it delivers western values which are different from the Indonesian ones. Although several scholars have conducted their research related to this American movie, none of them has carried out such transnational audience research regarding youth in Indonesia.

## 2. METHOD

This research design is a descriptive qualitative study since it aims to summarize the event of watching Wonder Woman among Indonesian young people in a selective but appropriate combination of sampling, data collection, analysis, and representational techniques. The data used in this research is categorized into primary and secondary

data. The primary data is the transcript of the informants' descriptive answers, which are gained from an in-depth personal interview conducted in December 2019 and January 2020. The informants are 25 students from Universitas Sebelas Maret who have watched *Wonder Woman*, consisting of 10 men and 15 women aged 28 to 25. The secondary data are the information that can support the primary data which are taken from online sources and pictures related to the *Wonder Woman* movie. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques are used to determine the qualification of the informants based on their habit of watching films and the informants' recommendations. In collecting the data, the qualitative interview is conducted using an oral questionnaire for the interview form, consisting list of questions created in an integrated and open-ended way based on Radway's (1984, pp. 223-240) model. The questions for the interview are developed from the concept of third-wave feminism written by Genz. After collecting data, it is proceeded with analyzing the data by grouping the informants' responses firstly based on certain categories of the topic and making a selection or summary of any similar responses. Afterward, it is followed by interpreting and analyzing how each group makes meaning and pleasure through watching "*Wonder Woman*". This research follows Ien Ang's conception of pleasure combined with the concept of third-wave feminism. Further, the result is interpreted with the theory of Encoding-decoding by Stuart Hall to analyze how the informants take pleasure and make meaning, thus, whether the informant accepts, negotiates, or opposes the feminist sign.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. *Body as a Spectacle in Wonder Woman Movie*

Rather than the action or the fighting scenes in the *Wonder Woman* movie, Gal Gadot's performance as the character of Diana has attracted the attention of many young audiences in Indonesia. From what this research has found, most of the informants have stated that their favorite part while watching *Wonder Woman* is not only the plot of the story but also the cast and the character of the movie. Moreover, the audience's engagement after watching the movie has also mainly resulted in the further comprehension of Gal Gadot's carrier and personal background. As stated by Mayne (1993, p. 1), "Spectators is not only the act of watching a film but also the ways one takes pleasure in the experience." It can be seen that Gal Gadot as the actress who plays the main character Diana in *Wonder Woman* has carried a great impression on the viewers, and the pleasure that the Indonesian young audiences experience in watching the movie is a kind of an active pleasure as the spectators.

Gal Gadot, thus, as the actress who plays the female hero *Wonder Woman* character brings an important job to delivering the audiences' pleasure in watching the movie since its plot of the story is mainly focused on the character of Diana throughout the events on the screen. Many informants have mentioned that Gal Gadot has shown such a great acting skill in the movie and she is fit for representing the character of Diana as she can carry the *Wonder Woman*'s strong-but-gentle character well, also, more importantly, her beautiful face and ideal female body make her appearance as the Goddess *Wonder Woman* is impeccable for most audiences.

Talking about the appearance, the Gal Gadot's Diana character is one of the most popular representations of the female body in female superhero figures in America. As being a popular cultural product, this female body portrayal becomes a familiar 'object for pleasurable consumption that will eventually lead to popular pleasure (Ang, 1985, p. 19). Since the 1990s, their representation has been identified mostly by their long and slender bodies, small waist, big breasts, and minimal dressing, the body shape that makes it impossible for a woman to fight (Curtis & Cardo, 2017). Conforming to these prevailing representations of female hero, this research finds that several responses lead to the idea that Gal Gadot's Diana has a slender and ideal body for women which makes the character looks more attractive as a female hero to the audiences. Diana's costume in the movie also has been considered by most of the informants that it is too short and revealing, but it is fit well for Gal Gadot's Diana body and character at the same time. The depiction of the *Wonder Woman*'s body and costume can be seen in the picture below:

**Figure 1.** *Wonder Woman*'s body and costume in the movie



Source: Google

Despite every rough action on the battlefield, Wonder Woman can still look beautiful and graceful with her iconic costume since her overall appearance is strongly associated with a woman's body and look appealing to the men's eyes. From what this research has found, the informants who have chosen the movie's cast (Gal Gadot) as their favorite part of the movie are mostly male, and they have said that it is common for them to see a female hero character, particularly Wonder Woman, wearing such an exposing costume within any Hollywood movie. The unique appeal of Wonder Woman's appearance from her costume has been popularly implemented with the character since the first creation by William Marston, as he has argued that the attractive charm of the erotic actress as well as an erotic superheroine is the key to the success of the cultural product industry such as film and comic book, and he also stated that the powerful female character was the one who could get on a boy's nerves (Hanley, 2014).

Besides her body and uncovered costume, the most highlighted feature of Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman that attracts most of the Indonesian audiences is her beautiful face. The beautiful face is one of the most important elements to serve the audiences' pleasure, especially for Indonesian audiences who have been commonly pleased by their popular culture which is mainly focused on the visuality of a female's beautiful face. Many informants agree that Gal Gadot has an exquisitely beautiful face, some of them have even mentioned that she has a goddess-like visual which is suitable for her Wonder Woman character whose origin is a God's descent. These features meet the feminine standards of female bodies which are attractive and perfectly used as the object of the spectacle.

Therefore, this research has found that most young Indonesian audiences have often familiarized themselves with western cultural products through the activity of watching Hollywood movies. The popularity, regularity, and familiarity of Hollywood movies become part of pleasure and enjoyment for Indonesian young audiences. Most informants have stated that they like to watch American superhero or female hero movies which are similar to Wonder Woman, such as *The Avengers*, *Charles' Angels*, *Captain Marvel*, *Tomb Raider*, *Super Girl*, *The Divergent*, *The Hunger Games*, etc. Those female hero characters mostly embrace the western body standard of a female hero figure in the popular culture which possesses both symbolism of womanliness and manliness. Just like in Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman figure, the femininity of their sexualized bodies, together with the masculinity of their strength as female heroes, makes their performance likely to be the main spectacle of the movie. From these frequent familiarizations of watching female heroes in the western world, the young audiences in Indonesia become more acquainted with the western body in the female hero representation of Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman as well.

### **3.2. Indonesian Audiences Negotiating with Female Fighting Bodies**

Demonstrating the popular representation of female fighting bodies in western movies. Wonder Woman embraces the odd combination of both femininity and masculinity in the body as a female hero. The western fighting body features in the female hero character of Wonder Woman bring the distinctive idea and quality of the traditional female body to non-western audiences, including the young Indonesian audiences. This research finds that there are various responses and views given by the informants about the female fighting body in Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman character in the movie. The embodiment of the western female hero in Wonder Woman, which is quite controversial for the Indonesian audiences, mostly exists in Diana's less-covered costume as well as in her strong female body that is highly skilled in fighting. Since most Indonesian citizens embrace eastern and Islamic culture, Diana's costume and strong fighting body offer different customs from what Indonesian and even Javanese people have commonly believed about the ideal woman in the society.

It has been stated by MacDougall (2006) that the perception of bodies in the film, whether they are attractive or not, is a multifaceted matter than one nationality, gender, physique, etc. The costume in Wonder Woman movie displays the attractive style for a heroine or female hero in America, also this kind of style which exposes part of a woman's body including the thigh, upper torso, and shoulders is very common and not taboo at all for the modern American society and culture. On the other hand, the actresses in Indonesia wearing that kind of dress that exposes those parts of their body are usually considered negative in the eyes of the Indonesian audiences (Habsari, 2019).

However, this case is not completely applied to Wonder Woman's body and costume portrayal, since there are only two informants in this research who see it as being too erotic or in need to be censored. Most of the informants have considered that it is good and fit for Gal Gadot's Diana figure in the movie. Even though fourteen of them have also said that the costume is too short and revealing for a female fighting body like Diana's character with a reason that it can be better if her costume is more covering or less revealing for the action scenes, they have mentioned that it is not necessary to be censored for them as the Indonesian audiences. From these data, most of the young audiences in Indonesia negotiate with the western culture in Wonder Woman's body and costume, as they mainly accept the odd characteristic yet still also think that those are quite revealing, sexy, and inappropriate,

especially for children in Indonesia. Some informants (all of them are female) have mentioned that Wonder Woman's body and costume portrayal can give a negative effect on Indonesian children as viewers, those western embodiments can be tolerated for them considering that those contents are mainly targeted at teenagers to adult.

Another major reason for the acceptance and negotiation of Diana's body and costume depiction can happen is that the informants find it a typical representation of female action heroes in Hollywood movies. The exposing costume and body of Diana are considered fine and tolerable since the character has been usually portrayed that way from the very first creation. Nine informants who fully accept the Wonder Woman's body and costume portrayal have noted that they often watch western female heroes dress like that, particularly Wonder Woman character in any previous version. Some of them have even mentioned that most of the early Wonder Woman versions are presented in a more sexualized way, including the versions in cartoons, magazines, and America's TV series. While in this latest Wonder Woman 2017 version of the DC movie, Gal Gadot's Diana body and costume are seen to be less erotic and to have more masculine side through her strong, athletic and rather muscular body.

Moreover, few informants highlight that the portrayal of the female body and costume in Wonder Woman looks fine and not erotic because the one who presents it is a western or Caucasian woman and not the Indonesian one. The informants have mentioned that it turns out to be a different case if the one who wears the costume like Gal Gadot's Diana is either an Indonesian actress or a model. Thus, this sentiment is following the notion which has been stated by Habsari (2009) in her research of female bodies in an Indonesian television series, as she has said that Indonesian female celebrities who wear a dress exposing their thigh or breast are considered 'artis panas' (hot artist) and bad girl/woman in the eyes of Indonesian society.

Besides the female body and costume depiction on the screen, Wonder Woman's fighting body also brings various responses from the young audiences in Indonesia. As this research has found, most of the informants have chosen to negotiate with the representation of the female fighting body in Wonder Woman rather than to wholly agree or disagree with it. The ultimate substance of the existing negotiation is that the informants mostly prefer to put femininity as the most prominent element in a female figure, even for a strong female character like Gal Gadot's Diana in the movie. Therefore, the informants have considered that women who have a strong body and fighting skills are fine and tolerable if they still maintain their feminine traits and nature. The femininity mentioned by the informants here is mostly about bringing out either the female nurturing side of the female's nature as a wife and mother. As it has been noted by one of the informants, Shafira, a woman figure like Diana who is strong and independent is acceptable for her as an Indonesian youth, but it is also still important for a woman to always stick to her nature as a female, a wife, or a mother, especially when she is married, whereas unmarried women can be anything that they want.

This typical response of articulating the feminine side shows that many Indonesian young audiences still embrace the hegemonic sentiment about ideal femininity in Indonesia. In this way, the previous study by Parker (2008) has also stated that the dominant notion of ideal femininity or sexuality for females in Indonesia is the interlinking of marriage and reproduction. The emergence of these sentiments is most closely related to religious morality, particularly the influence of Islamization in Indonesia. Since almost all the informants are Muslim, it cannot be denied that their religious discourse can be one of the leading reasons which determine their perception of the ideal woman in the society, including their responses to a strong and fighting body for a female figure.

However, this research has found that no informant considers that the powerful body and character are not suitable for a female character, or completely opposes the representation of a strong female figure in the movie. The rest of several informants have chosen to be neutral or to be in agreement with the powerful female representation in Wonder Woman, aside from many informants who have chosen to negotiate with it. This result reveals that although the young audiences in Indonesia embrace and carry values that are different from the American ones, they tend to be more open and receptive to the American value of presenting a strong woman in Wonder Woman. Some of the informants have also mentioned that there have been many strong female figures who are prominent in Indonesia, such as Kartini, Cut Nyak Dien (both are female hero figures in Indonesian History), Srikandhi (a female hero in Javanese puppet story), and Sri Asih (a female hero character in Indonesia's superhero comic that will be adapted into Webtoon and movie version). In other words, the image of a woman who is powerful and skilled in fighting is not strange anymore for most young audiences in Indonesia.

Moreover, Diana and the Amazon's fighting training in the movie apply traditional weapons like swords, lasso, arrows, and bulletproof bracelets. Besides the training fighting skill with their body and weapon, the Amazon's warriors are also trained to be mastered riding a horse. Those skills which are trained by Diana and the Amazon cannot be seen completely as masculinized behavior because none of the training can develop women's muscle bulk significantly, instead, the fighting skills which are presented by Diana and the Amazon are more using the body's speed and agility that make their bodies look elegant when performing action scenes, similar to the skill of performing martial art in Asia. Thus, Wonder Woman's fighting body can still be negotiated and translated to fit the culture of Indonesian audiences through her feminine traits and graceful fighting performance. Consisting the combination of both adaptation and opposition, following Hall's reception theory (1977, p. 102), the costume and

female fighting bodies in Wonder Woman can be categorized as ‘the negotiated code’ for most young audiences in Indonesia since they recognize the hegemonic idea of what the ideal female figure in the society is, but they also operate ‘with exceptions to the rule’.

### **3.3. Reading Feminism in Wonder Woman**

Wonder Woman and feminism have been something that perhaps cannot be separated since Gloria Steinem has made her a feminist icon by putting Wonder Woman's image with no superpowers playing boisterously with strange men, on the Ms. Magazine cover in 1972. Besides, she has been an important figure of female hero character and representation in a genre dominated by males. With the newest Wonder Woman version of the movie starred by Gal Gadot, the vague

association of feminism within the movie has been still a hot issue among moviegoers and critics. Hence, it is important to find out how the young audiences in Indonesia make meaning to the elements of feminism within the movie and how they perceive feminism itself in general.

To understand how the informants interpret the feminist elements in Wonder Woman movie, the initial manner that shall be done is to discover the informants’ knowledge about feminism in general. As what this research has found, there are diverse responses about feminism given by the informants yet most of the answers define feminism as gender equality and women's emancipation. Another idea that has been mentioned by several informants is that feminism is related to femininity or any feminine trait in a woman. These notions of feminism deliver an important role in determining the informants’ responses to the elements of feminism in Wonder Woman.

After conveying their understanding of feminism, all the informants agree that there are feminist elements that existed within the Wonder Woman movie. The elements of feminism that have been mentioned by the informants consist in some scenes of the movie and female characters in the movie as well. Two scenes have been mainly considered as presenting and highlighting feminism by several informants; first, the scene when Diana appears in an important political meeting filled with male politicians in London, and the second, when Diana decides to take the first move by herself to resist lots of attack from the German soldiers across No Man’s Land on the battleground in Belgium. The informants’ judgment of choosing the first scene is influenced by their initial knowledge of feminism as gender equality or women's emancipation since this scene shows how women are treated differently than men in the movie’s era. Then some informants who have mentioned the second scene consider that Diana in the No Man’s Land scene is one of the most noticeable examples of women's power presented in Wonder Woman movie.

Besides both of the two scenes above, several informants have also mentioned that female characters, especially Diana as Wonder Woman, bring the major elements of feminism in the movie. Diana’s characteristics of power, courage, and determination which have been depicted and developed throughout the plot line of the movie’s scenes have made her seen as a feminist character as well by most of the informants. Aside from those masculine characteristics, some other informants have also mentioned that the feminine trait in the character of Diana plays an important part in constructing her to be seen as a feminist character either. As what has been stated by some of the informants before that feminism is closely related to femininity in women, few of them consider that Wonder Woman also shows her feminine side through her manner and physical appearance or costume. Some of them have even noted that Wonder Woman is strong because of her feminine traits, such as love, gentleness, and female intuition.

Therefore, both the femininity in Wonder Woman shown through her attractive female body as well as her beautiful face and the masculinity shown through her power as well as her determination make her character has also been viewed as strong and feminist by most of the informants in this research. According to Curtis and Cardo (2017, p. 2), the development of the female hero representation that conforms to the combination of femininity and masculinity in their body and character somewhat is because of ‘the centrality of intersectionality and pluralism to third-wave feminism’. Emerging with post-feminism, added by Genz (2006), this kind of feminism builds a new subjective space for women to be both feminine and feminist by gaining empowerment in their femininity but also presenting the sexualization of their feminist body at the same time. The paradoxical duality of Wonder Woman's character, which has been mentioned by the informants as one of the major elements of feminism in the movie, conforms with the feminist notion delivered by the ‘Third-Wave’ and post-feminism, which both of them together have given such a big influence to the prevalent development of major female hero characters.

## **4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

This research reveals that most of the young audiences in Indonesia, as the bigger moviegoers in 2017 than any other age group, are likely to be more receptive to the western value presenting the duality of Diana’s masculine and feminine side in Wonder Woman. It is considered tolerable since the audiences often familiarize themselves with Hollywood movies which commonly portray this typical representation of a western female hero. The

familiarity also makes the duality characteristic of Diana's body becomes one of the major spectacles of watching Wonder Woman for the young audiences. The spectacle of Diana's character, especially from Gal Gadot as the actress, gives a special pleasure to the audiences as she offers attractive performances through her feminine quality, such as a beautiful face, ideal female body, and lovely character, besides being a powerful female hero in the movie. By mentioning both the masculine and feminine sides within the character of Diana as well, most of the young audiences in Indonesia view Gal Gadot's Diana as one of the most prominent elements of feminism in Wonder Woman. This idea of feminism that has been brought by the audiences is following the notion of post-feminism, believing that women can be strong and feminine at the same time.

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