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DESCRIPTIVE OF QUANTITATIVE DATA | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Construction of Social Inequality Reality Among Characters in the Drama Pyramid Game

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Abstract: This study examines the construction of social inequality among characters in the drama Pyramid Game using Peter Berger's social construction theory and Charles S. Peirce's semiotics. The research aims to analyze how visual and linguistic elements reflect social inequality between the characters. A descriptive qualitative analysis was employed, focusing on scenes depicting social inequality. The findings show that externalization is evident in actions and dialogues that demonstrate the enforcement of social rules and hierarchies. Objectivation is reflected in the shared acceptance of social inequality as a recognized reality, while internalization is observed in how the characters adapt to their roles within the social hierarchy. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of social inequality in the context of the drama.

Keywords: Reality Construction, Social Inequality, Construction Theory, Semiotic.

1. INTRODUCTION

Humans are social beings who live side by side with communication. Without communication, people would undoubtedly face difficulties in their social lives. The core of communication lies in the communication process itself, meaning that we can interact with others even if we are in different rooms or separated by time (Dyatmika 2021). Communication occurs in various contexts, one of which is mass communication. According to Breiner, mass communication refers to messages conveyed through mass media, whether in print or electronic form (Dyatmika 2021). One form of electronic mass media is film. Film is a popular medium worldwide. Beyond cinemas or television, numerous platforms now offer access to various film genres such as Action, Romance, Comedy, Horror, Science Fiction, Documentary, and more. According to Vera, a film is an artistic and cultural creation that serves as an audiovisual mass communication medium. It is produced through cinematographic principles and recorded on celluloid tape, videotapes, video discs, or other technological media (Syafrina 2022). Films, as a medium of reality construction, often depict different aspects of social life and real-world events. They reflect complex realities and present diverse perspectives on issues through their narratives. Some films draw inspiration from real-life events to portray challenges, struggles, and problems around us. Thus, films not only entertain but also provide profound perspectives that allow viewers to reflect on and understand the world better.

The Korean drama Pyramid Game is a new series by TVING, released on February 29, 2024. This thriller, action, and psychological drama is set in a high school and directed by Park Seo Yeon. Adapted from the 2020 webtoon by Dalkkonyak, it explores the issues among students at Baekyeon Girls' High School, including bullying, academic pressure, and social inequality. The plot revolves around a voting game held monthly in class 2-5 at Baekyeon Girls' High School. In the game, students are ranked based on popularity, with grades ranging from A to F. According to the rules, the student



with the lowest score receives an "F" and becomes the target of bullying by students with higher grades (A, B, C, and D). Seong Soo Ji, played by Kim Ji Yeon, is a transfer student who takes part in the game. During the 13th round of the Pyramid Game, she is ranked "F" and becomes the next victim of bullying. However, when she is bullied, no one cares, motivating her to escape her struggles and end the game to prevent further victims. In Pyramid Game, social inequality is evident through Baek Ha Rin, portrayed by Jang Da Ah. She holds complete control over the game by exploiting her family's influence and threatening the future careers of other students. With the help of powerful parental connections, she manipulates the ranking system that determines students' social status without considering their academic performance or behavior.

Karl Marx argued that social inequality arises from conflicts between two primary classes in capitalist societies: the working class (Proletariat) and the capitalist class (Bourgeoisie). The bourgeoisie benefits from exploiting the labor of the proletariat and maintains control over capital and production, while the proletariat only has their labor power to offer (Jones et al. 2016). In Pyramid Game, Baek Ha Rin's power mirrors the class conflict described by Marx. Baek Ha Rin represents the bourgeoisie, while the other students symbolize the proletariat. In a sociological analysis, it is essential to understand how the construction of reality in the drama reflects real-world social dynamics. Films and dramas often serve as powerful mass media that represent social realities by constructing stories or meaningful narratives (Hadiwijaya 2023). Therefore, analyzing the construction of reality in Pyramid Game can provide insights into social issues, especially the depiction of social inequality.

According to Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's theory of social construction, reality results from social processes and interactions among individuals in society (Hadiwijaya 2023). The construction of reality in the drama involves how characters build and interpret their surrounding realities. It also highlights the power structures within society, their perspectives toward each other, and their self-perception. Using Peter L. Berger's Social Construction Theory as the primary theoretical framework, this research aims to explore the dynamics of reality construction concerning social inequality in Pyramid Game. Furthermore, it is crucial to examine how symbols and signs are utilized to delve into the construction of social inequality among characters in the drama. Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotic Theory is relevant here, as it provides insights into how symbols and signs in language and visual communication depict social inequality and the complex construction of reality through visual and linguistic representations (Sahid 2016). This background serves as the foundation for further research to analyze the construction of social inequality among characters in the drama Pyramid Game.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *The Construction of Reality*

The construction of reality is the process of forming an understanding of reality through social interaction and the use of symbols, values, and language. According to the constructivist paradigm, reality is considered a result of mental constructions built through social experiences (Irawati, Natsir, and Haryanti 2021). In the context of communication, this means that individuals develop their understanding of the world through social interaction. This process shows that reality does not inherently exist but is formed through how individuals perceive and interpret the information they receive (Arfan and Arfan 2021; Pratiwi, Nurjuman, and Yusanto 2021). According to this concept, society is not an entity that evolves in a predetermined and unchangeable way. Instead, society is a

dynamic entity that continuously changes through social interaction and communication between individuals, who interpret the reality around them.

The term "construction of reality" became more popular after being introduced by two thinkers interested in sociology, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, in their book *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1990). For Berger, the construction of reality is a process through which individuals interact and shape realities. Berger and Luckmann's theory of the social construction of reality explains that social reality emerges from the process of social interaction between individuals within society. This theory identifies three essential components in the formation of social reality (Berger and Luckmann 2016):

1. Externalization – This is the process by which individuals adapt to their sociocultural environment. It involves objectifying their surroundings through language and behavior based on that language, which is later structured to be understood as reality.
2. Objectification – This occurs when the products of human activity or social interactions are internalized, ultimately becoming recognized and accepted as social reality by the individuals who created them.
3. Internalization – This involves understanding or directly interpreting an objective event as a manifestation of the surrounding subjective processes.

2.2. Peirce's Semiotics

Semiotics can be defined as the science that studies everything about signs and sign systems. According to Luxemburg, "Semiotics is a science that systematically studies signs and symbols, as well as their developmental processes." This idea is further elaborated by Aart van Zoest, who states, "Semiotics is a study of signs and everything related to them, such as how they function, their relationships with other signs, and how they are transmitted and received by those who use them" (Sahid 2016). Two scholars, Charles Sanders Peirce (1834-1914) and Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), are considered pioneers of semiotics. Saussure focused on semiotics from a linguistic perspective, suggesting that language is the most complete system of signs and thus a primary subject of study. In contrast, Peirce saw signs as something that represents something else within certain limits and refers to an object. For signs to function, they must be perceived and have a foundation or "ground" (Sobur 2013). According to Sobur, "For Peirce, semiotics is an action, influence, and cooperation between three objects: the sign (sign), the object (object), and the interpretant (interpretant)" (Nuziar 2021). In the context of analyzing the construction of social inequality among characters in the drama *Pyramid Game*, the analysis will apply Peirce's semiotic theory, which focuses on the trichotomy concept. This concept posits that "semiotics starts with three main elements: the sign (Representamen), the object (Object), and the interpretant (Interpretant)" (Tania, Sakinah, and Rusmana 2022). The triadic or meaning triangle model will be used to describe how meaning is formed within a sign (Sahid 2016).

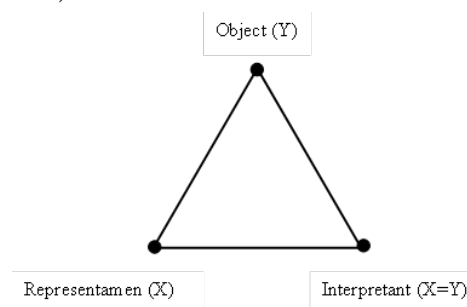


Figure 1. Charles S. Peirce's Triadic Model

Representamen or Sign can be defined as an object or item that functions as a sign. In other words, the representamen or sign is the first step in interpreting or understanding the use of a sign (interpretant). The object is the part represented by the representamen or sign—it is something distinct from the sign but remains related to it. The interpretant is a sign that reflects the understanding derived from a particular sign. This understanding is obtained from the sign referring to the object. Through this process, the representamen connects with both the interpreter and the object. Simply put, the interpretant is the meaning or understanding of a sign. In a film, the most important elements are the images, sounds, or spoken words, accompanied by other sounds that synchronize with the visuals (Wibowo 2013). In this context, the semiotic system becomes even more significant because the signs used in films convey messages with greater clarity. Since films can be regarded as message-delivering media rich with signs and symbols, the researcher uses them as objects to examine the signs and symbols related to the reality of social inequality depicted in the Pyramid Game film. In the study of the construction of social inequality among characters in the drama Pyramid Game, Peirce's triadic semiotic model is applied using three key elements: Representamen, Object, and Interpretant. Representamen as the sign can include anything from dialogues between characters, body movements, to facial expressions. Object in this context refers to social inequality, which can encompass differences in social status, wealth, or power among the characters in the drama. Interpretant refers to the meaning derived from the interpretation of the sign in relation to its referenced object, providing insight into how the social conflicts in the Pyramid Game drama are understood.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach, which enables an in-depth analysis of social phenomena through the observation and interpretation of descriptive data in the form of words and behavior (Abdussamad and Sik 2021). This approach is chosen for its ability to explore and understand the context and meaning of the research object. The research method used is Charles S. Peirce's semiotic analysis, which views signs as representations of something else. This method is applied to understand how signs are formed, used, and interpreted within literary texts, culture, and visual media. The study involves thorough observation of the research object by watching the Pyramid Game drama and identifying scenes containing elements of social inequality. The identification process is carried out through an in-depth analysis of the representamen, object, and interpretant to gain a better understanding of how social inequality is reflected. The units of analysis include scenes, dialogues, and monologues, such as:

1. Scene where Seo Do Ah explains the rules of the game (Scene 00:19:50 – 00:20:15).
2. Scene where Seong Soo Ji asks Lim Ye Rim why she participates in the game (Scene 00:42:09 – 00:42:33).
3. Scene where Baek Ha Rin gives a warning to the principal (Scene 00:45:15 – 00:45:15).
4. Scene where Seong Soo Ji invites Seo Do Ah to form an alliance (Scene 00:36:54 – 00:38:05).
5. Scene where Seo Do Ah warns Seong Soo Ji about the connection between the D-tier students and those in higher tiers (Scene 00:38:18 – 00:38:34).
6. Scene where Baek Ha Rin warns Bang Woo Yi for crossing the line (Scene 00:42:41 – 00:42:49).
7. Scene where Seo Do Ah's father advises his child about their status and the importance of maintaining it (Scene 00:16:30 – 00:17:00).

8. Scene where Baek Ha Rin warns the teacher not to interfere with the game's rules (Scene 00:39:52 – 00:40:31).
9. Scene where Baek Ha Rin asks Yoon Ye Won to manipulate the rankings in the game (Scene 00:13:02 – 00:13:52).
10. Scene where Seong Soo Ji discovers that Baek Ha Rin manipulated her father's job (Scene 00:29:50 – 00:30:32).
11. Scene where Kim Da Yeon belittles Ko Seul Ha (Scene 00:06:21 – 00:07:18).

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Korean drama *Pyramid Game* is the latest production by TVING, released on February 29, 2024. The drama falls under the genres of thriller, action, and psychological drama, set in a school environment. The story revolves around a voting game held once a month in Class 2-5 at Baekyeon Girls' High School. This game ranks students based on popularity, with five grade levels: A, B, C, D, and F. According to the rules, the student with the lowest score receives an F grade and becomes a target of bullying by those with higher grades, including A, B, C, and D. Seong Soo Ji, played by Kim Ji Yeon, is a newly transferred student who participates in the game. During the 13th round of the *Pyramid Game*, she is ranked F and becomes the next bullying target. However, when she is bullied, no one cares, which motivates her to escape her struggles and end the game to prevent future victims.

a. Scene 1 (Episode 1, 00:19:50 - 00:20:15).

In this scene, Seo Do Ah, as the class president, explains the game mechanics to the new students Seong Soo Ji, Baek Ha Rin, and Lim Ye Rim, while Myeong Ja Eun experiences bullying for being ranked F. Seo Do Ah states that students with an A grade enjoy privileges, while those with an F grade are ostracized and powerless. Peirce's semiotic analysis reveals that the characters' dialogue, facial expressions, and actions reflect the social inequality created by a rigid hierarchy, where those in the A tier hold power over those marginalized in the F tier. The findings highlight how the game system mirrors the injustice and inequality among characters, significantly affecting their interactions and psychological well-being.

b. Scene 2 (Episode 1, 00:42:09 - 00:42:33)

In this scene, Seong Soo Ji asks Lim Ye Rim why she participates in the game, considering her position as an idol trainee, which could negatively impact her public image. Lim Ye Rim responds that she does not feel threatened because she has enough money, secrets, and support from those around her. Peirce's semiotic analysis shows that the dialogue and facial expressions reflect different perspectives on risk and motivation. The findings reveal that social and economic background influences individual perceptions of risk, with Lim Ye Rim feeling secure and confident, while Soo Ji views participation as highly risky. This reflects social inequality, where individuals with resources feel less threatened.

c. Scene 3 (Episode 2, 00:45:00 - 00:45:15)

Baek Ha Rin discusses with the principal about a teacher's interference in Class 2-5's game, where the teacher tried to harm Seong Soo Ji to obtain evidence for reporting. Baek Ha Rin, with a dominant attitude, orders the principal to reprimand the teacher, displaying a neutral expression indicating her power. Peirce's semiotic analysis reveals that their dialogue and expressions reflect the power disparity, where Baek Ha Rin controls the principal, who should be the highest authority. This demonstrates the power dynamics at Baekyeon Girls' High School, showing that an influential student like Baek

Ha Rin can manipulate the situation, highlighting the injustice of education authorities being controlled by a student.

d. Scene 4 (Episode 3, 00:36:54 - 00:38:05)

Seong Soo Ji asks Seo Do Ah to form a D-tier alliance to destroy the game, but Seo Do Ah firmly refuses, citing the need to protect her position, power, and social connections. Peirce's semiotic analysis shows that their dialogue and expressions reflect the personal boundaries and power held by Seo Do Ah. The findings indicate that adherence to rules and power structures can hinder efforts to fight injustice, where only solidarity among students can overcome the unfair system. However, as a class president and influential figure, Seo Do Ah chooses not to risk her status.

e. Scene 5 (Episode 3, 00:38:18 - 00:38:34)

Seo Do Ah warns Seong Soo Ji about the impossibility of forming a D-tier alliance, explaining that most D-tier students have connections with higher-tier students. Peirce's semiotic analysis reveals that Seo Do Ah's dialogue and facial expressions emphasize the importance of social connections in power hierarchies. The findings show that social networks are crucial for maintaining status in the social hierarchy, and Seo Do Ah's influence can obstruct change that threatens her position.

f. Scene 6 (Episode 3, 00:42:21 - 00:42:49)

Bang Woo Yi expresses negative assumptions about Seo Do Ah to Baek Ha Rin, who responds aggressively by warning him not to speak ill of her friend and stepping on his foot. Peirce's semiotic analysis shows that Baek Ha Rin's dialogue and intimidating actions reflect the power and social dominance among higher-tier students over lower ones. The findings indicate that social inequality and power manifest through everyday interactions, where aggressive behavior maintains social control and position.

g. Scene 7 (Episode 4, 00:16:30 - 00:17:00)

Seo Do Ah's father explains the difference in social status between their family and other doctors, emphasizing the fortune of having a hospital to inherit and the importance of maintaining good relations with Baekyeon Group, including Baek Ha Rin. Peirce's semiotic analysis shows that the father's dialogue reflects social inequality and the importance of wealth in building social networks. The findings indicate that awareness of social status influences individual interactions and underscores the role of wealth and connections in maintaining power and future stability.

h. Scene 8 (Episode 4, 00:39:52 - 00:40:31)

Baek Ha Rin threatens the teacher to keep quiet about the camera incident in class. Although the teacher tries to help Seong Soo Ji, Baek Ha Rin uses her power to maintain the game's secrecy. Peirce's semiotic analysis shows that the dialogue and expressions reflect power manipulation, where Baek Ha Rin threatens the teacher with job loss and social status consequences. The findings reveal how power and control can suppress individuals for personal gain, illustrating the use of social inequality and materialism as tools of manipulation.

i. Scene 9 (Episode 6, 00:13:02 - 00:13:52)

Baek Ha Rin instructs Yoon Ye Won to manipulate the game's rankings after Seong Soo Ji removes the F-grade. However, Ye Won refuses, condemning the manipulative actions, prompting Baek Ha Rin to throw her laptop into a water bucket. Peirce's semiotic analysis reveals that Baek Ha Rin's actions reflect dominance and disregard for Ye Won's integrity. The findings show the conflict

between manipulative power and individual integrity, with Baek Ha Rin exerting her influence to control the situation while Ye Won struggles to uphold her dignity under materialistic pressure.

j. Scene 10 (Episode 6, 00:29:50 - 00:30:32)

Seong Soo Ji discovers that Baek Ha Rin was responsible for her father's transfer, forcing them to move schools and disrupting her plan to end the Pyramid Game. Despite this, Soo Ji refuses to leave and remains determined to continue her plan. Peirce's semiotic analysis shows that the dialogue emphasizes threats and determination, reflecting their emotions. The findings demonstrate how Baek Ha Rin uses her power to control individuals and their families, while Soo Ji's resolve illustrates the importance of resistance against injustice, even at significant risk.

k. Scene 11 (Episode 8, 00:42:03 - 00:43:03)

Seong Soo Ji confronts Baek Ha Rin in front of their friends, accusing her of disrupting friendships and blaming the hierarchy. Baek Ha Rin defends herself, claiming Soo Ji only wants attention. Peirce's semiotic analysis reveals the tension in their dialogue and actions, reflecting the psychological power associated with social status. The findings indicate that open resistance to injustice can have a significant impact, creating new dynamics in the social hierarchy, where previously marginalized characters can gain power and improved positions.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the explanation in the discussion regarding externalization, objectification, and internalization in each scene containing the concept of social inequality, the researcher draws the following conclusions about the construction of social inequality reality among the characters in the drama Pyramid Game:

1. Externalization in Pyramid Game occurs through various actions and dialogues between characters, which openly reveal the existence of social inequality, social hierarchy, and power dynamics at Baekyeon Girls' High School, especially in Class 2-5. An example of this is when Seo Do Ah explicitly explains the special privileges and absolute power held by students in the A tier, which contrasts sharply with students in the F-tier, who become victims of bullying and lack any form of power or rights, even over themselves.
2. Objectification in Pyramid Game is evident when the rules and social hierarchy of the game are accepted as reality by all involved parties. Examples include the game rules conveyed by Seo Do Ah, Baek Ha Rin's threats toward the teacher, and Seo Do Ah's father's explanation of the importance of maintaining social connections. These instances illustrate how social inequality and hierarchical power structures are acknowledged and accepted as a social reality at Baekyeon Girls' High School.
3. Internalization in Pyramid Game is reflected in how the characters accept and adapt to the rules, power hierarchies, and social inequality around them. For example, Baek Ha Rin uses her power to control the teacher, Lim Ye Rim feels secure due to the financial support she receives, and Seo Do Ah follows her father's advice to maintain good relations with Baek Ha Rin. The attitudes and responses of the characters demonstrate how they have internalized and accepted these realities as part of their lives.

Thus, the study of the construction of social inequality reality among characters in Pyramid Game reveals that the significant social inequality between characters is created through processes of externalization, objectification, and internalization. Externalization is seen through actions and

dialogues showing how social rules and hierarchies are implemented; objectification is observed in the collective acceptance of social inequality as a recognized reality; and internalization is evident in how the characters adjust and perform their roles within the existing social hierarchy and inequality. Overall, Pyramid Game highlights how social hierarchies can create significant injustice and social inequality among the characters. Ultimately, this impacts the social and psychological interactions of the characters.

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