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Gendered commodification of sadness on Instagram: Digital affective labour in Indonesian popular music

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Abstract:

In the postmodern era, sadness is represented, circulated, and transformed from a personal experience into digital attention. This study examines emotional representation and gender negotiation in Indonesian popular songs, the circulation of sad songs on Instagram, and the conversion of users' emotional expressions into digital engagement. It uses netnography and gender-informed descriptive and thematic analyses of the *valence* scores of ten Indonesian popular songs, engagement with a post featuring "Hilang Tanpa Bilang", and 21 purposively selected comments. The analysis examines language, subject positions, and gender norms without inferring users' gender. Findings show that: (1) eight of the ten songs are categorised as sad or very sad, representing loss, waiting, caregiving, and life pressures that reproduce and negotiate femininity and masculinity; (2) over 1,000 posts featuring "Hilang Tanpa Bilang" demonstrate the circulation of an emotional narrative performed by a female singer; (3) 12 of the 21 comments are negative, expressing vulnerability, loyalty, self-blame, and emotional responsibility, while positive comments demonstrate agency and personal boundaries; and (4) comments constitute digital affective labour that transforms private sadness into public expression, engagement data, and visibility. The commodification of sadness on Instagram emerges through gender representation, music circulation, and digital affective labour. Instagram is ambivalent: it supports emotional recognition and solidarity while transforming gendered emotions into attention and engagement with potential promotional and economic value. By integrating *valence* analysis, gender perspectives, and digital affective labour, this study illuminates the commodification of sadness in Indonesia's digital culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Instagram has transformed the music industry by integrating visual and audio elements while simultaneously giving rise to a new issue: the commodification of emotion in music. The platform enables musicians to construct their public images and build communities through likes, comments, direct messages, and content sharing, thereby strengthening their relationships with fans (Helal & Ozuem, 2019; Prey, 2020; de-Miguel-Molina et al., 2021; Nwagwu & Akintoye, 2024). The use of hashtags and algorithmic promotion has also expanded the circulation of music beyond conventional industry channels (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2019; Arrieta, 2020; Demyen, 2024), while visual culture contributes to the construction of musicians' identities and the appeal of their content (Chen et al., 2022; Murphy & Hume, 2023; Carpio-Jimenez et al., 2024; Zhang, 2024). In this context, sad songs draw upon universal experiences, such as loss, longing, waiting, and heartbreak, to foster emotional intimacy. Music functions as a "technology of the self" that enables individuals to regulate and express their emotions and connect their personal experiences with social life (DeNora, 2000; Terranova, 2000; Arcy, 2016). However, these expressions may also be converted into attention and engagement data, as well as digital visibility.

Previous studies have demonstrated that Instagram has changed how users interact with music through activities such as sharing, liking, and commenting on posts (Casaló et al., 2017; Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Pearce et al., 2018; Valverde, 2022). Features such as Stories, IGTV, polls, and live broadcasts allow musicians to share content, strengthen their relationships with audiences, and build fan communities (Crosby et al., 2018; Krause et al., 2018; Leaver et al., 2020; Nwagwu & Akintoye, 2024). Comment sections also serve as spaces for emotional expression and the construction of collective experiences, revealing the therapeutic and participatory dimensions of music consumption (Weisser, 2012; Wayne, 2011; Krause et al., 2020; Khanom, 2023; Harry & Muthusamy, 2024). Nevertheless, studies connecting the emotional characteristics of songs, representations of femininity and masculinity, users' affective expressions, and the commodification of emotion within the digital attention economy remain limited. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of valence scores, gender representation analysis, and a netnography of Instagram comments to explain how sadness is represented in songs, negotiated by users, and converted into digital engagement.

Based on this research gap, the study aims to analyze the representation of emotion and the negotiation of gender in popular Indonesian songs, the circulation of sad songs on Instagram, and the transformation of users' emotional expressions into attention and digital engagement. Three research questions are formulated: (1) How are emotion, femininity, and masculinity represented and negotiated in popular Indonesian songs? (2) How do users express, manage, and negotiate emotional experiences through comments on Instagram content featuring sad songs? (3) How are emotional expressions shaped by gender norms converted into attention, engagement data, and visibility within the digital economy? This study does not determine users' gender identities based on account names, profile photographs, or the content of their comments. Instead, it examines the language, subject positions, and gender norms present within emotional discourse. This study contributes to music, gender, and digital media studies by demonstrating that songs and user comments can reproduce norms of femininity and masculinity while simultaneously providing spaces for developing agency, establishing personal boundaries, and fostering emotional openness.

This study is based on the argument that the commodification of emotion in music consumption on Instagram is constituted through the relationship among musical representation, users' affective expressions, and the platform's engagement infrastructure.

Sad songs provide narratives of loss, waiting, longing, caregiving, disappointment, and mental pressure, which are reinterpreted through comments, likes, and content resharing. In this process, waiting, loyalty, and relational responsibility may reproduce constructions of femininity, whereas openness to loss and emotional pressure may negotiate hegemonic masculinity. Users also manage vulnerability through self-blame, humor, acceptance, and the establishment of personal boundaries. When these expressions increase attention, circulation, and content visibility, emotional experiences are transformed into digital affective labor and engagement data that potentially possess promotional and economic value. Therefore, the commodification of emotion in this study is not understood as direct economic profit but as the conversion of gendered emotional experiences into attention and visibility within the digital economy.

METHOD

Research Approach

This study employed a netnographic approach combined with gender-informed thematic analysis. Netnography is an online research method adapted from ethnography to examine behavior, interaction, and meaning-making within digital communities (Kozinets, 2015; Kerley, 2024). The study focused on three domains: representations of emotion and gender in popular Indonesian songs, the circulation of sad songs on Instagram, and the commodification of emotion through user interactions. The analysis did not seek to determine the identities or behaviors of women and men based on user accounts; instead, it examined the language, subject positions, and gender norms present in songs, comments, and digital engagement practices.

Research Objects and Units of Analysis

The research objects comprised ten popular Indonesian songs with different emotional tones and Instagram posts featuring sad songs as content or background music. The songs were *Runtuh*, *Apalah (Arti Menunggu)*, *Celengan Rindu*, *Tak Segampang Itu*, *Sial*, *Hati-Hati di Jalan*, *Secukupnya*, *Bertaut*, *Akad*, and *Mobil Balap*. The units of analysis included valence scores, emotional representations, gendered narratives and subject positions, content circulation, user engagement data, and comments containing emotional disclosure, waiting, self-blame, agency, and humor. The comment analysis focused on a post featuring Meiska's "Hilang Tanpa Bilang" on the @storymusik082 account.

Data Selection and Collection

Data were selected through purposive sampling based on song popularity, diversity of emotional themes, variation in singers' gender, and relevance to representations of femininity and masculinity. Instagram posts were identified using the search and Explore features, song titles, singers' names, and related hashtags. The selection criteria included publicly accessible posts, the use of original songs, cover versions, or background music, high engagement, and relevant comments (Gobo, 2008; Bengtsson, 2016). From the @storymusik082 post, which received 1.6 million views, 200,000 likes, 382 comments, and 15,000 shares, 21 comments were selected. Data were collected through non-participant observation and systematically documented without intervening in user activities.

Measurement of Songs' Emotional Characteristics

The emotional characteristics of the songs were identified using valence scores ranging from 0 to 1. Scores approaching 0 indicated negative, sad, or melancholic moods, whereas scores approaching 1 indicated positive, happy, or cheerful moods. Based on these scores, the songs were classified as very sad, sad, melancholic, and happy or cheerful. Valence scores

were used solely as supporting data to identify emotional tendencies, not to measure the gender of singers or listeners. Gender construction and negotiation were analyzed separately, drawing on the language, emotional narratives, subject positions, interpersonal relationships, and social norms represented in each song.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed descriptively and thematically. Descriptive analysis was used to present valence scores, digital engagement, and the frequencies and percentages of the 21 comments categorized as negative, positive, or neutral. Thematic analysis involved data reading, coding, code categorization, theme development, review, and interpretation (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2021; Darvish & Bick, 2023). The resulting themes included emotional disclosure, waiting and attachment, self-blame, agency and personal boundaries, humor and vulnerability management, and digital interaction. These themes were interpreted through the perspectives of gender, digital affective labor, and feminist political economy to explain gender negotiation and the commodification of emotion.

Data Trustworthiness

Data trustworthiness was ensured through source and data triangulation. Source triangulation involved comparing emotional representations in songs performed by female singers, male singers, and male–female collaborations. Data triangulation involved comparing valence scores, song narratives, digital engagement data, and user comments. The data were also read repeatedly, the consistency of relationships among codes, categories, and themes was examined, and the original contexts of the comments were revisited. Findings concerning the reproduction of gender norms were compared with data indicating negotiation or resistance, including emotional openness among male subjects and the construction of agency and personal boundaries within feminine subject positions.

Research Ethics

This study used data from publicly accessible Instagram profiles and posts. Despite their public availability, data use raises concerns about user privacy and potential vulnerability. Account names, profile photographs, and other information that could identify the authors of comments were removed and replaced with codes during data processing and presentation (Kozinets, 2015; Kerley, 2024). Comments were quoted only when necessary for the analysis and were not used to assess users' personal characteristics. The study employed non-participant observation without contacting, influencing, or manipulating users, thereby respecting the rights, privacy, and safety of digital community members.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Emotional representation and gender negotiation in Popular Indonesian songs

Popular music not only represents experiences of loss, longing, heartbreak, and life pressures but also provides a space in which meanings of femininity and masculinity are constructed. The ways songs portray vulnerability, waiting, loyalty, caregiving, and acceptance reflect social norms governing how gendered subjects are expected to express emotion. In digital media, listeners reinterpret these meanings through comments and interactions informed by their personal experiences.

The emotional characteristics of the songs were identified using valence scores. Low scores indicate negative or sad emotional tendencies, whereas high scores indicate more positive moods. Valence scores were not used to measure gender but to identify emotional

representations subsequently analyzed from a gender perspective. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Emotional Representation and Gender Negotiation in Popular Indonesian Songs

Category	Song and artist	Valence score	Emotional representation	Gender-related finding
Very sad	*Runtuh*—Feby Putri and Fiersa Besari	0.27	Mental exhaustion, loneliness, and vulnerability	The expression of vulnerability through female and male voices indicates that sadness is not confined to a single gender identity.
Very sad	*Apalah (Arti Menunggu)*—Raisa	0.29	Waiting and relationship uncertainty	Waiting represents loyalty and relational dependence, which are culturally associated with femininity.
Very sad	*Celengan Rindu*—Fiersa Besari	0.30	Longing in a long-distance relationship	The expression of longing through a male voice negotiates masculine norms that demand emotional restraint.
Sad	*Tak Segampang Itu*—Anggi Marito	0.31	Difficulty forgetting a partner	Emotional attachment reflects demands for loyalty and relationship continuity that are often imposed on feminine subjects.
Sad	*Sial*—Mahalini	0.33	Disappointment and relationship failure	The expression of disappointment demonstrates the agency of a female subject in articulating pain and relational injustice.
Sad	*Hati-Hati di Jalan*—Tulus	0.35	Separation and acceptance	Male openness to loss presents a reflective and emotionally expressive form of masculinity.
Sad	*Secukupnya*—Hindia	0.36	Life pressures and mental health	Acknowledging mental pressure challenges masculine norms requiring men to remain strong at all times.
Sad	*Bertaut*—Nadin Amizah	0.38	Emotional closeness between mother and child	Caregiving and protection reflect care work that is socially associated with maternal roles.
Melancholic	*Akad*—Payung Teduh	0.42	Longing and romantic commitment	The initiative to establish a relationship reproduces the masculine position as the party that expresses and directs commitment.
Happy/cheerful	*Mobil Balap*—Naif	0.84	Energy and positive nostalgia	The song provides a contrast, showing that musical expression does not always center on vulnerability and gendered romantic relationships.

Source: Data processed by the researchers, 2024.

Table 1 shows that eight of the ten songs were categorized as very sad or sad, with valence scores ranging from 0.27 to 0.38. This predominance indicates the prominence of loss, longing, waiting, and emotional pressure in the analyzed songs. From a gender perspective, these themes represent not only individual experiences but also social norms governing individuals' positions in romantic relationships and how they express emotion.

Songs performed by female singers, including *Apalah (Arti Menunggu)*, *Tak Segampang Itu*, and *Sial*, present narratives of waiting, attachment, and disappointment. Waiting and loyalty may reproduce constructions of femininity that position women as responsible for

sustaining relationships. However, expressing disappointment may also demonstrate agency, as female subjects do not merely endure pain but articulate their experiences and the injustices present within relationships.

Meanwhile, *Celengan Rindu*, *Hati-Hati di Jalan*, and *Secukupnya* express longing, acceptance of separation, and mental pressure through male voices. These representations negotiate hegemonic masculinity, which requires men to remain resilient and conceal vulnerability. Sadness is not portrayed as a loss of masculinity but as part of male subjects' capacity to acknowledge and manage their emotional experiences.

Gender dimensions are also evident in *Bertaut* and *Akad*. *Bertaut* places the mother–child relationship at the center of emotional experience, highlighting the association between femininity, caregiving, and care work. In contrast, *Akad* positions the masculine subject as the party that expresses desire and initiates relationship formation. Both songs demonstrate that emotional roles in popular music remain connected to gendered divisions of responsibility within families and romantic relationships.

These findings confirm that valence scores indicate only the emotional tendencies of songs, not the gender identities or characteristics of singers and listeners. A gender perspective was applied to examine how vulnerability, loyalty, caregiving, romantic initiative, and emotional restraint are represented in songs and interpreted by listeners. These songs may reproduce gender norms while simultaneously creating space for their negotiation through representations of women who articulate their experiences and men who express emotional vulnerability.

Digital Circulation of Sad Songs and Gender Representation

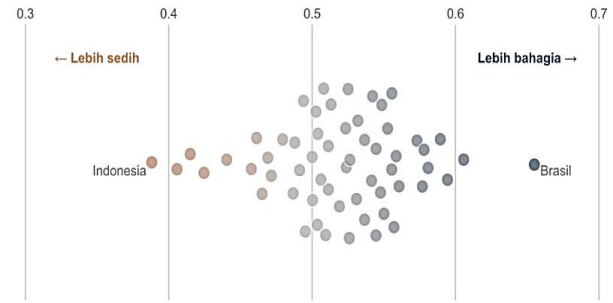
Digital media have expanded the circulation of sad songs while creating spaces for the exchange of emotional experiences. From a gender perspective, this circulation demonstrates how female singers publicly articulate loss, longing, and relationship breakdown.

These themes are prominent in the works of Indonesian singers. Mahalini performs "Mati-Matian," "Sial," "Sisa Rasa," and "Melawan Restu." Lyodra's repertoire includes "Tak Selalu Memiliki," "Pesan Terakhir," "Tak Dianggap," "Dibanding Dia," and "Kalau Bosan." Tiara Andini performs "Menyesal," "Merasa Indah," "Usai," and "Masih Hatiku," while Meiska is known for songs including "Hilang Tanpa Bilang."

Following their release, the songs' emotional meanings are reproduced and recirculated through videos, cover versions, background music, comments, likes, and shares. A search for the hashtag #hilangtanpabilang on Instagram identified more than 1,000 posts. One post uploaded by @storymusik082 received 1.6 million views, 200,000 likes, 382 comments, and 15,000 shares. The post featured a segment of the song depicting the experience of having fallen deeply in love and the pain of subsequent loss.

Figure 1

User Engagement with the Song "Hilang Tanpa Bilang" on Instagram



Source: Data processed by the researchers, 2024.

These findings demonstrate the extensive circulation of narratives of sadness performed by female singers. Waiting, longing, and emotional attachment may reproduce constructions of femininity that position women as emotional subjects. Nevertheless, expressing sadness also signifies agency, as women can name their pain, articulate disappointment, and establish authority over their emotional experiences.

The high numbers of views and interactions indicate that emotional experiences associated with femininity can be converted into digital attention and engagement. Although data from a single post neither represent all Indonesian listeners nor reveal users' gender identities, these findings illustrate the relationship between gender representation, the visibility of female singers, and the attention economy in digital media.

Gender Construction in Listeners' Emotional Expressions

Comments on the song "Hilang Tanpa Bilang" illustrate how loss, longing, jealousy, and unrequited love are expressed in digital spaces. From a gender perspective, these comments can be interpreted as discourses on vulnerability, loyalty, emotional responsibility, and agency in interpersonal relationships.

Table 2

Comments on an Indonesian Sad Song on Instagram

No.	Indonesian Comment	English Version	Category
1	Ayo balik dong ak gk tau btapa hncur ny ak ktika kmu pergi	Please come back. You do not know how devastated I was when you left.	Negative
2	Terlalu bodoh sampai lupa klo kamu cuma teman	I was too foolish to remember that you were only a friend.	Negative
3	Terlanjur mencintaimu 😊	I have already fallen in love with you 😊	Positive
4	Yah maap terlanjur jatuh cinta sedalam iniii	Sorry, I have already fallen this deeply in love.	Positive
5	Jangan pernah berharap kepada manusia karena manusia hati dan pikiran nya bisa berubah	Never place your hopes in people because their hearts and minds can change.	Positive
6	Peka lah anjgggggggg:'(	Be more sensitive, damn it:'(	Negative
7	Kapan lu balik gw masih nunggu kok selama apapun kamu masih aku tunggu.	When will you come back? I am still waiting, and I will wait for you no matter how long it takes.	Negative
8	Iri dengan org yang kau gandeng sekarang!!	I am jealous of the person you are with now!!	Negative
9	Bingung mau bilang siapaa kek ngerasa mati rasa ya engga juga gitu, mati rasanya tuh ga pengen suka sama orang tapi org lewat aja dikatain ganteng	I do not know whom to tell. I feel numb—but not exactly. Being numb means not wanting to like anyone, yet I still call random passersby handsome.	Neutral
10	Asing – kenalan – ttm – lost contact + bonusnya asing haha	Strangers–acquaintances–friends with benefits–lost contact—and, as a bonus, strangers again, haha.	Neutral
11	Gk nyangka bakal sehancur ini	I never expected to be this devastated.	Negative
12	Sakit wkwkw	It hurts, lol.	Negative
13	AKU BODOH BANGETTT!!!	I AM SO STUPID!!!	Negative
14	Jadi sekrang biarin aku tenang okey 😊	So, just let me be at peace now, okay? 😊	Positive

15	Cinta gue abis di masalalu hh ga ngotak banget jadi cwok anj malah balik ke mantan nyaa	I used up all my love in the past. Damn, what an unreasonable guy—he went back to his ex.	Negative
16	Anjrr ngeliat dia dengan cewe lain tuh nyesek bngt katanya teman TPI ko GK bisa berkata-kata lgii	Damn, seeing him with another girl hurts so much. He said she was only a friend, but now I am speechless.	Negative
17	Andai ku tau kan sesakit ini	If I had known it would hurt this much.	Negative
18	Kau telah melihat bukan tuan? Kau tau berapa ku mencintai mu…	You have seen it, have you not, sir? You know how much I love you…	Positive
19	Wirrr	(An expression/sound)	Neutral
20	Donlot	Download	Neutral
21	Salah aku naro perasaan sama teman sendiri:'(	It was my mistake to fall in love with my own friend:'(	Negative

Source: Data processed by the researchers, 2024.

Table 2 shows that of the 21 comments analyzed, 12 (57.1%) were negative, 5 (23.8%) positive, and 4 (19.0%) neutral. The predominance of negative comments indicates that the song was primarily used to express loss, emotional devastation, longing, jealousy, and unrequited love.

From a gender perspective, comments such as "When will you come back? I am still waiting" and "Please come back" position the speaker as a subject who waits and maintains emotional attachment, reflecting constructions of femininity that assign responsibility for sustaining relationships to one party. Self-blaming comments, including "I am so stupid" and "It was my mistake to fall in love with my own friend," indicate the internalization of responsibility for relational failure. References to a man returning to his former partner or being seen with another woman also reveal unequal relational positions: one party is free to leave, while the other bears the emotional consequences. Because users' gender identities were not verified, these findings represent gendered emotional positions rather than behavioral differences between men and women.

Positive comments demonstrate emotional agency. The statement "Just let me be at peace now" establishes personal boundaries and reclaims control, while advice against placing one's hopes in others reflects movement toward emotional independence. Neutral comments and humor, such as "haha" and "wkwkw," function as strategies for expressing pain without appearing fully vulnerable. Thus, the comments both reproduce gender norms concerning loyalty, sacrifice, and vulnerability and negotiate agency, personal boundaries, and emotional independence.

Gender negotiation and the commodification of emotion in digital interactions

The comment section of the song "Hilang Tanpa Bilang" serves as a space for the disclosure, management, and exchange of emotional experiences. From a gender perspective, user comments demonstrate how vulnerability, waiting, self-blame, and emotional agency are negotiated and converted into digital engagement.

Table 3

Findings on Gender Negotiation and the Commodification of Emotion in Digital Interactions

Finding Theme	Data Examples	Gender Dimension	Interpretation
Emotional disclosure	"Come back, please. You have no idea how devastated I was when you left"; "If only I had known it would hurt this much"	Vulnerability and emotional openness are culturally associated with femininity.	Users situate their personal experiences within the song's narrative and disclose them in a public space.

Waiting and attachment	"When are you coming back? I'm still waiting. No matter how long it takes, I'll keep waiting for you"; "I'm jealous of the person you're with now!!"	Loyalty, waiting, and responsibility for maintaining relationships are often attached to a feminine subject position.	The comments reproduce relational positions that prioritize loyalty and emotional dependence.
Self-blame	"I was so stupid that I forgot you were only a friend"; "I'M SO STUPID!!!"; "It was my fault for developing feelings for my own friend :'("	Subjects assume responsibility for relationship failure and internalize relational blame.	Self-evaluation may reinforce the idea that maintaining a successful relationship is the responsibility of the person who has been hurt.
Agency and personal boundaries	"So now, just let me be at peace, okay 😊"; "Never place your hopes in people because their hearts and minds can change"	Acceptance and the establishment of personal boundaries demonstrate a negotiation of emotional dependence.	Users do not merely present themselves as victims but also seek to establish independence and emotional control.
Humour and the management of vulnerability	"It hurts, wkwkw"; "Strangers–acquaintances–friends but more than friends–lost contact + the bonus is becoming strangers again, haha"	Humor mitigates the appearance of weakness and helps users adapt their emotional expressions to social norms.	Users manage their emotional presentation so that pain can be communicated more lightly.
Digital social interaction	"Wirrr"; "Donlot"; comments, replies, likes, and account tagging	Emotional and technical responses collectively shape a shared affective space.	Personal experiences evolve into interactions that reinforce the circulation of content.
Commodification of gendered emotions	1.6 million views; 200,000 likes; 382 comments; 15,000 shares; and more than 1,000 posts using the hashtag #hilangtanpabilang	Vulnerability, waiting, and sadness, which are constructed through gender norms, are transformed into engagement data.	Emotional disclosure increases attention, reach, and content visibility within the digital economy.

Source: Data processed by the researcher, 2024.

These findings can be examined through gender performativity theory, which conceptualizes gender as the product of repeated actions, language, and social norms (Butler, 1988). The words "aku" (I), "gue" (I), "kamu" (you), and "dia" (he/she/they) construct relational positions without revealing the users' gender identities. Narratives of waiting, loyalty, and self-blame reproduce emotional patterns that are culturally associated with femininity, whereas the statement "So now, just let me be at peace" demonstrates agency and the establishment of personal boundaries. Expressions of pain and longing also negotiate hegemonic masculinity, which demands emotional strength and restraint. The use of "haha" and "wkwkw" constitutes a strategy for communicating sadness without fully displaying vulnerability. The comment section thus becomes an arena in which gender norms are simultaneously reproduced and negotiated, while personal experiences are transformed into collective affective experiences and solidarity among users.

From a feminist political economy perspective, digital affective labour constitutes a form of immaterial labour connected to the exchange of digital capital (Jarrett, 2014). At the time of data collection, the "Hilang Tanpa Bilang" post had received 1.6 million views, 200,000 likes, 382 comments, and 15,000 shares, thereby increasing the content's circulation and visibility. The commodification of gendered emotions occurs when loss, waiting, jealousy, loyalty, and

self-blame are transformed into engagement data. This process is ambivalent because it creates a space for emotional expression and solidarity while also benefiting the platform by attracting user attention. However, this study does not establish direct economic gains because it does not examine advertising revenue, royalties, promotional contracts, or monetization mechanisms. Accordingly, commodification is limited here to the transformation of gender-shaped emotional experiences into attention, engagement, and digital visibility with potential promotional and economic value. This analysis does not determine users' gender identities; rather, it examines language, subject positions, and gender norms within emotional discourse.

Discussion

This study generated four principal findings concerning gender representation and the commodification of sadness on Instagram. First, eight of the ten songs were classified as sad or very sad, indicating that themes of loss, waiting, care, and life pressures simultaneously reproduce and negotiate norms of femininity and masculinity. Second, the digital circulation of the song "Hilang Tanpa Bilang," through more than 1,000 posts and high levels of views and interactions, expanded the visibility of the female singer's emotional narratives. Third, 12 of the 21 comments were classified as negative and reflected gendered discourses on vulnerability, loyalty, self-blame, and emotional responsibility, whereas positive comments demonstrated agency and the establishment of personal boundaries. Fourth, the disclosure of personal experiences through comments constituted a form of digital affective labor that transformed private sadness into public expression, engagement data, and visibility. Instagram, therefore, functions as an ambivalent space: it facilitates emotional recognition and solidarity while simultaneously transforming gendered emotions into sources of value within the commercial digital attention economy.

These findings are relevant to contemporary digital society, in which mental health and online emotional expression have become increasingly important. Social media provides an alternative space for younger generations to communicate sadness that may not always be accommodated in face-to-face interactions (Pellegrino et al., 2022). Eight of the ten songs analyzed were classified as sad or very sad, while 12 of the 21 comments (57.1%) were categorized as negative. These data demonstrate the strong articulation of loss, longing, waiting, and life pressures. When personal experiences are communicated through comments, sadness is transformed into a public expression that encourages user engagement (Graham, 2018; Rosamond, 2020). Collectivist culture helps explain the importance of empathy and emotional support in sharing experiences within public digital spaces (Geert, 2001). However, the users' gender identities were not verified. Instead, the comments revealed gendered emotional discourses: waiting, loyalty, and vulnerability were associated with femininity, whereas men were expected to control emotional vulnerability (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Eagly & Wood, 1999).

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the postmodern concept of commodification (Jameson, 1991; Featherstone, 2007), particularly the transformation of personal experiences into commodities within consumer culture. An examination of #hilangtanpabilang identified more than 1,000 posts, while one post received 1.6 million views, 200,000 likes, 382 comments, and 15,000 shares. These data indicate attention, circulation, and visibility rather than direct economic gains (Fuchs, 2013). Expressions of vulnerability, waiting, self-blame, and personal boundaries simultaneously reproduce and negotiate gender norms (Butler, 1988). The management of personal experiences as public expressions constitutes emotional and digital affective labor (Arlie, 2012; Feng et al., 2022), as well as immaterial labor and social

reproduction that sustain platform value (Jarrett, 2014). Personalization algorithms (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Rehman et al., 2022) and digital marketing (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019) explain only the potential expansion of content circulation, not an empirically tested influence. Baudrillard's (1994) perspective explains the digital mediation of emotion, but neither implies that users' emotions are inauthentic nor directly determines their gender identities.

This study demonstrates that social media is not merely a neutral channel but a space in which emotional experiences are organized, circulated, and transformed into engagement data. Music can function as a technology of the self that helps individuals recognize and manage their emotions (Johnson, 2015). Within the Instagram environment, this function is extended when users connect song narratives with personal experiences through comments, likes, and reposts. Each interaction contributes to data accumulation and increased content visibility, thereby potentially generating promotional and economic value for the platform ecosystem (van Dijck, 2013). From a gender perspective, comments concerning waiting, self-blame, and responsibility for maintaining relationships demonstrate the operation of relational norms commonly associated with femininity. Conversely, comments expressing acceptance and establishing personal boundaries demonstrate emotional agency. This understanding is necessary to ensure that users do not merely become uncompensated producers of affective labor but also establish healthier, more empathetic, and less exploitative digital interactions (Tarakeshwar et al., 2003; Ting-Toomey, 1999).

The findings of this study are related to the research of Casaló et al. (2020) on the role of influencers in new music discovery and Rubin's (2002) uses and gratifications theory concerning media use to satisfy emotional needs. However, the present study extends previous research by connecting the emotional characteristics of songs, user comments, gender representation, and the commodification of emotion on Instagram. Highfield and Leaver (2016) and Pearce et al. (2018) emphasize the diversity of active, passive, and functional forms of online interaction. This study further demonstrates that such interactions also involve negotiations of vulnerability, loyalty, self-blame, and agency. The literature on individualistic societies (Fischer & Manstead, 2000) and collectivist societies (Geert, 2001) provides a context for understanding variations in emotional expression; however, this study did not conduct a cross-cultural comparison. Unlike the studies by MacAulay (2015) and de-Miguel-Molina et al. (2021), which focused on Spotify, this study examines user interactions on Instagram. Its novelty lies in explaining how gendered emotional discourses are converted into engagement within a visual and participatory social media ecosystem.

Based on these findings, Instagram users need to develop critical digital literacy and recognize that emotional expressions shared through comment sections can be converted into engagement data. Instagram should improve the transparency of its data-management practices and provide users with greater control over emotionally oriented content. Educators and parents can incorporate an understanding of emotional expression, mental health, and digital affective labor into media literacy education. Policymakers need to strengthen personal data protection and anticipate the potential monetization of emotional data. The music industry should also balance marketing strategies with the preservation of genre diversity and artistic authenticity. Meanwhile, online communities can establish supportive spaces oriented not only toward popularity but also toward the quality of empathy and mutual understanding. Because this study did not directly examine algorithms, mental health impacts, or platform profits, these three areas should be prioritized for future research.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the commodification of sadness on Instagram occurs through the interrelationship among gender representation, song circulation, user expression, and digital affective labor. Eight of the ten songs were classified as sad or very sad and portrayed loss, waiting, care, and life pressures that simultaneously reproduce and negotiate femininity and masculinity. The song "Hilang Tanpa Bilang" circulated across more than 1,000 posts and generated high engagement, thereby expanding the visibility of the female singer's emotional narratives. Of the 21 comments analyzed, 12 were classified as negative and expressed vulnerability, loyalty, self-blame, and emotional responsibility, whereas positive comments demonstrated agency and the establishment of personal boundaries. These disclosures transformed private sadness into public expression, engagement data, and visibility. Instagram, therefore, constitutes an ambivalent space that facilitates emotional recognition and solidarity while simultaneously transforming gendered emotions into sources of value within Indonesia's contemporary digital attention economy.

This study contributes to the discourse on postmodern commodification by demonstrating that sadness is not merely expressed but also reproduced through affective labor shaped by gender norms. The perspective of Indonesian collectivist culture provides context for understanding the importance of empathy and emotional support in the practice of sharing personal experiences, although this study did not conduct a cross-cultural comparison. In practical terms, these findings encourage social media users to adopt a more critical approach when expressing emotions in public digital spaces. Instagram needs to improve the transparency of its data-management practices and provide users with greater control over emotionally oriented content. Policymakers also need to strengthen personal data protection and anticipate the potential monetization of emotional data. However, the effects of algorithms, influencers, marketing strategies, and the platform's economic gains were not directly established; therefore, these issues should be prioritized for future research.

This study has several limitations. First, the comment data were collected from only one song post and one Instagram account and therefore do not represent variations across genres, platforms, and periods. Second, the users' gender identities were not verified, and the study did not involve in-depth interviews; consequently, the motives underlying their emotional expressions could not be comprehensively explained. Third, the study did not examine algorithmic mechanisms, platform monetization, or the long-term effects of the commodification of sadness on users' mental health. Future research should employ mixed methods that combine surveys, interviews, and large-scale content analysis, and should extend the investigation to other platforms, such as TikTok. Cross-cultural research and gender comparisons are also required to determine whether similar dynamics occur across societies with varying levels of collectivism and patriarchal values.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no financial, personal, professional, or institutional interests that could have influenced the research, preparation, or publication of this article.

DECLARATION OF AI USE

Artificial intelligence tools were used solely for language polishing and editorial clarity. They were not used to formulate the research ideas, design the methodology, analyse the data, interpret the findings, or construct the scholarly arguments. The authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript and accept full responsibility for its accuracy and integrity.

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