



The Representation of Inequality and Social Class in Bong Joon-Ho's Film, Parasite (2019) and Its Impact on The Formation of Audience Perspectives and Thinking

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Abstract: Parasite (2019) at the same time depicted as social representation alongside entertainment, provides an insight into a functioning society and visualizes social class and inequality similar to modern-day society through Bong Joon-Ho. Essentially, the narrative structures, visual signs and inter-character relations that Parasite uses to construct representations of social class and inequality are examined. It also explores how such representations might affect people and their understanding of socially constructed realities. The study uses qualitative analytical method with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the main approach. It is supported by data collection techniques including in-depth interviews with viewers, analysis of reviews on the Letterboxd application, and examination of reviews from the CineCrib YouTube channel. This study finds that the film Parasite uses specific cinematic visuals and social symbols to present class inequality, and audiences accurately grasped its core critique of social systems, which verifies the effectiveness of the film's class narrative.

Keywords: Social Representation; Class Inequality; Parasite (film); Audience Interpretation; Critical Discourse Analysis.

Introduction

As the opening of this study, we first anchor the cross-era social attribute of cinema: dating back to the silent film era, before the popularization of synchronized spoken dialogue and sound effects, film has always been more than mere entertainment. It is capable of representing social structures and reflecting inequalities and power relations. Citing Kornhaber (2020), whose research finds that social stratification in that era restricted the general public's access to film viewings, we use the contemporary example of Bong Joon-ho's Parasite to illustrate that film still shapes audiences' perceptions of class-related issues, laying out the core direction for the subsequent cultural research of this study.

The film Parasite, directed by South Korean director Bong Joon-ho (2019), was released in 2019. The conflict between the Kim family, who live as dependents in another household, and their employers the Park family unfolds as a social critique crafted with satirical and suspenseful techniques, while also retaining broad entertainment value. The

film accurately targets the issues of class stratification and inequality in modern society, and explicitly lays bare the insurmountable class divide.

Parasite, directed by Bong Joon-ho, uses tangible class portrayal and symbolic design to depict the structural inequality in modern society spawned by socioeconomic systems, marking it as a highly representative film text centered on the theme of class. Scholar Dianiya (2020) identifies the core class divide at the heart of the film: the marginalized status of the low-income Kim family, who lack adequate housing, stands in stark contrast to the comfortable, prosperous life of the upper-class Park family. Through a sharp narrative, Bong Joon-ho transforms this abstract gap into spatial symbols: the Parks' luxurious mansion symbolizes power, while the Kims' semi-basement home symbolizes social segregation. Farahbakhsh & Ebrahimi, further add that class differences are co-shaped by multiple sets of opportunities including those related to space, education, and other related domains (Farahbakhsh & Ebrahimi, 2021).

This study takes the film *Parasite*, directed by Bong Joon-ho, as its core analytical object, and proposes two major research orientations: first, to explore how the film's visual representation shapes audiences' perceptions of social inequality and social class; second, to analyze the constructive logic through which the film's symbols and narratives build social reality, as well as how its embedded ideology influences audiences' understanding of social structures; meanwhile, it introduces the core argument of Yilmaz & Koşar Özen (2023), that social structures are manifested through the relationship between the ruling and subordinate classes, and the power hierarchy constructed by the social system is difficult to change.

Building on the research context introduced earlier, the core testable question of this study is: How does the media representation of inequality and social class issues in the film *Parasite* influence audiences' views and attitudes toward everyday social inequality? This study adopts a film-focused text analysis approach, aiming to explore the mechanisms through which visual media construct social reality and shape the public's class-related attitudes. This work is expected to expand academic understanding of the relationship between media representation, visual literacy, and social meaning construction. Meanwhile, the study draws on classic media research by (Hall, 1997) and Couldry & Hepp (2017) as its analytical support, citing the latter scholars' perspective to substantiate its core premise: social reality is constructed through ongoing media practices, and media shape individuals' worldviews and their perceptions of their own social position. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on semiotic and textual analysis of *Parasite*, this research combines representation theory, Marxian class analysis, and audience reception data from interviews and online reviews. Therefore, the study contributes to film and media scholarship by connecting cinematic representation with audience meaning-making processes.

Literature Review

Senthil Kumaran & Mary (2007) propose that films hold a dual nature: they are both a reflection of reality, and a medium that shapes social perception by relying on embedded symbols, visual language, and cultural context. All characters, plotlines, and visual details within a film participate in forming audiences' views on issues such as class dynamics and cultural identity. Meaning-making is a two-way process: audiences reinterpret a film's

connotations based on their own personal backgrounds. Hall (1997) frames this as an active space of social interaction within public consciousness, where multiple meanings and realities are constructed, negotiated, and reshaped.

The authors of this paper argue that the core power of film lies in its ability to influence audiences' thinking, attitudes, and empathy regarding specific issues. Numerous prior studies have confirmed that viewing social-themed films can generate tangible changes in audience cognition, an effect that is especially prominent among adolescent and young adult groups. Two factors that strengthen this influence are the level of connection audiences form with the film's theme, and their post-viewing discussion and reflection. Kubrak (2020) points out that film, which integrates narrative, visual, and emotional elements, can serve as an educational medium to cultivate social awareness and advance critical thinking.

Existing research on the film *Parasite* has largely focused on perspectives of film aesthetics and broad social criticism. Salim & Genep Sukendro (2021) define social criticism as a tool that reflects social reality and highlights inequality through cultural representations such as symbols and language. While Maharani & Saidi (2021) used visual, semiotic, and discourse analysis to discuss inequality issues in the film, they did not examine how audiences from different social backgrounds received the work. This study fills this gap, exploring the connection between the film's visual representations and the social meanings generated by audiences.

Directed by Bong Joon-ho, *Parasite* is a concrete expression of modern social and cultural reality, carrying abundant symbolic messages about the moral struggles of individuals amid social inequality and a distorted class structure. Through interactions between its on-screen characters and the symbolic design of social spaces featured in the film, it reconstructs the narrative of the lower class's fight for survival within the context dominated by the upper class. Similarly, according to research by Imawan (2017), the film's symbolic imagery also depicts the hidden social struggles over morality, ambition, and justice in the modern context, holding the dual value of both reflecting social reality and building a space for audiences to interpret the moral implications of everyday social life.

Integration of Representation Theory and Marxian Class Theory

Stuart Hall's theory of representation explains how meaning is produced through signs, symbols, and cultural practices, while Karl Marx's theory of class explains how economic structures generate unequal social relations. In this study, both theories are integrated to explain how cinematic representations in *Parasite* function not merely as reflections of reality but as ideological constructions that reproduce awareness of class domination. The visual symbols presented by Bong Joon-ho, such as spatial hierarchy, smell, and housing conditions, become representational mechanisms through which capitalist class relations are communicated and interpreted by audiences.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology combined with a critical discourse analysis approach, taking Bong Joon-ho's film *Parasite* as its research object to explore the film's construction of discourses of inequality and social class. This study adopts Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis framework, consisting

of textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. This method can examine the logic of meaning generation and transmission within the film.

In the textual analysis dimension, this study focuses on the symbols, dialogues, visual elements, and narratives that represent class inequality in *Parasite*. In the discursive practice dimension, the study examines how the film's meanings are produced, distributed, and interpreted by audiences through reviews on Letterboxd and YouTube. Meanwhile, the social practice dimension is used to understand the relationship between the representations portrayed in the film and broader social realities, particularly issues of economic inequality and class relations within capitalist society.

This study centers on the film *Parasite*, which conveys the themes of social inequality and class through its visual and symbolic elements, and can generate deep resonance among audiences. This study also includes as analysis samples Letterboxd, a platform for film fans to share reviews, and CineCrib, a YouTube film criticism channel dedicated exclusively to analyzing this film. Drawing on the 2023 conclusion put forward by Syahrul Huda et al. (2023) and other researchers that films are not only carriers of entertainment, but can also highlight social issues to raise the public's social awareness, this study examines the aforementioned social issues from the perspectives of diverse individuals.

This study takes the 2019 film *Parasite* as its research object, focusing on audiences' interpretations of its theme of class inequality and the film's impact on audiences' perceptions of real-world conditions. It adopts three types of research methods that align with the logic of triangulation: conducting primary in-depth interviews with film fans who have watched the film, carrying out participant observation and content analysis of user film reviews on Letterboxd, and analyzing related film reviews from the YouTube channel CineCrib. Each method is paired with a dedicated research question to ensure the reproducibility of the study's research design.

This study is a qualitative research project. The researcher acts as the core research instrument, participating in the full process of data collection and analysis. An observation guide and field notes are adopted to ensure the study stays aligned with its core objectives. The full official title of this study is *Inequality and Social Class Representation in Bong Joon-ho (2019) Film and Their Impact on the Formation of Audiences' Perspective-Based Thinking*. Two categories of data are used in this study: primary data extracted from the clips, scenes, dialogues, and visual symbols of *Parasite*; and secondary data that draws audiences' perceptions, opinions, and interpretations from film reviews posted on platforms including Letterboxd and YouTube.

In this study, the data analysis technique employed was the thematic analysis model developed by Braun & Clarke, which involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning or themes emerging from the qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and secondary content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

The author employed the persistence credibility test technique to assess the validity of the data; this technique involves continuous examination and observation to obtain stronger, verified data. The credibility-through-persistence test was conducted by observing and examining specific platforms such as Letterboxd and YouTube regarding audience reviews of the film *Parasite* in relation to the construction of meaning concerning inequality and social class within the film. This technique was applied with the aim of obtaining

stronger and more verified data in the study of the film *Parasite*, particularly regarding how the film shapes viewers’ perspectives on inequality and social class.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The criteria included individuals who had watched *Parasite* at least once, were willing to participate in interviews, and demonstrated an ability to discuss social issues represented in film narratives.

Table 1: Informant Table

Informant	Age	Education	Frequency of Movie Viewing	Interest in Social Issues
Diva Rahmanto	22	Student	High	High
Muhammad Zaidan	21	Student	High	High
Habib Al Anshor	22	Student	Medium	High

The interviews were not intended to produce statistical generalizations but to provide in-depth qualitative insights. Therefore, the study emphasizes analytical depth rather than numerical representativeness.

Result and Discussion

Social Class Domination in the Film Parasite

The film *Parasite* clearly depicts two sharply contrasting social classes: the Park family, representing the upper class with their wealth, spacious home, and access to abundant resources; and the Kim family, representing the lower class, who live in a cramped, unstable semi-basement marked by social and economic constraints. This paper draws on Karl Marx’s class analysis theory to examine the dual oppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie in film and television texts: the root of capitalist class inequality lies in the bourgeoisie’s control over the socioeconomic system, which leaves the proletariat marginalized and exploited under the dual pressures of constraints in labor relations and rising living costs.

A 2025 study by scholar Kumar corroborates that economic power shapes the lived realities of all classes through both explicit and implicit means. Taking the upper-class Park family and lower-class Kim family featured in these film and television texts as examples, the Park family hires members of the Kim family as domestic workers, private tutors, and drivers at low wages, shows no concern for their living circumstances, and imposes dehumanizing symbolic stigma by mocking the “smell” of the lower class. In this process, the upper class not only maintains a symbolic social distance from the lower class, but also fully normalizes class inequality.

Representations of Social Reality

The small-sample interviews conducted by this research team with 3 viewers of the film *Parasite* yielded preliminary findings that all interviewees uniformly agreed Bong Joon-Ho uses narrative, visual symbols, and character relationships to present class inequality. The gap between the rich and the poor depicted in the film is a true reflection of

real-world everyday social structures, and this finding connects to the core research topic of this study: the impact of class representation in film and television on audiences' perceptions.

Diva Rahmanto points out that the dialogue related to the "smell of poverty" in the film concretely demonstrates the social inequality between wealthy and poor households (Rahmanto, 2025). Habib (cited in Anshor, 2025) proposes that the film's depiction of reality is concise yet highly impactful, and accurately restores the situation where the underclass adopts manipulative strategies to survive. Zaidan, (2025) notes that recurring visual symbols such as staircases and rain implicitly convey class contradictions and guide audiences to think critically. These three interpretations unfold layer by layer from textual analysis to audiovisual analysis, covering the film's core creative dimensions.

This study uses the content analysis method for online film reviews. It selects as research samples reviews of *Parasite*, the film directed by Bong Joon-ho, posted by three users of the film review platform Letterboxd: Philbert Dy, Sally Black Jane, and Josh Lewis. First, the study sorts out the core consensus shared by the three reviews: all recognize that the film builds class symbols through housing, living environment, and intangible yet perceivable social boundaries. It then breaks down three categories of differing interpretations of the film. Finally, it derives the conclusion that *Parasite* not only reflects the reality of social inequality, but also shapes audiences' understanding of this issue.

The authors of this paper take the review of the film *Parasite* released in 2019 by the YouTube channel CineCrib, 2019 as their analysis subject, and unpack the core content of this review layer by layer: In terms of creative approach, it uses three layers of contrast visual, narrative, and symbolic to demonstrate the inequality between the rich and poor social classes; its core imagery concretizes the unbalanced class structure through the spatial opposition between the run-down semi-basement and the luxurious modern mansion; in terms of social value, it arouses audience empathy via well-crafted depictions and compelling performances, pushes viewers to reflect on inequality, and stands as an effective social commentary that shapes public perception of class (CineCrib, 2019).

This paper draws on interview records from the author's own research, film reviews from Letterboxd, and film criticism materials from the Cine Crib channel on YouTube, and introduces Stuart Hall's 1997 theory of representation—which posits that social meaning is constructed through signs—to interpret the depiction of social reality in the film *Parasite*. The representation in this film also aligns with Karl Marx's (2008) theory of social class as discussed in Hendriwani (2020), which views society as divided into classes with unequal relations, where the lower class is in a position of oppression and is forced to develop survival strategies due to the upper class's domination over resources and living space. Through these representations, Joon-ho's film not only reflects exploitative class structures but also reveals how the ideology of inequality operates subtly in daily life and is recognized by the audience through the viewing experience.

Audience Interpretation of Social Messages

Based on the results of the researcher's interviews with the informants, their interpretation of the social messages presented in this film indicates a strong process of critical reflection on the realities of inequality and social class. They not only grasped the the surface-level messages but also interpreted the symbols, narratives, and relationships between characters as a depiction of an unequal social structure. This film has proven capable of influencing viewers' perspectives in understanding class relations, power, and social injustice issues that are also relevant to real life Diva Rahmanto explains how the scenes in the film are highly reflective and depict the lives of the rich and the poor in a very realistic manner (Rahmanto, 2025).

Audience interpretations also suggest that the social message in the film **Parasite** is understood as a critique of a social system that oppresses the lower class and forces them to resort to various means to survive. Habib interprets **Parasite** as a depiction of how the lower class struggles to rise to the upper class and will do anything including deceiving others to attain wealth (Anshor, 2025). Furthermore, Zaidan offers a deeper interpretation by noting that the repetition of certain scenes made him realize that these scenes carry a specific meaning as a message about social reality that the director intended to convey (Zaidan, 2025).

This study sorts through film reviews published by three accounts on the film review platform Letterboxd about the movie *Parasite*, and finds that all three offer distinct reflective interpretations of the film's core social critique: Philbert Dy (2019) argues that the social system shaping an individual's birth background creates insurmountable class boundaries, interpreting *Parasite* as a portrayal of this rigidified class system (Dy, 2019); additionally, Josh Lewis (2019) proposes that the capitalist system is orderly on the surface but fragile at its core, interpreting the film as a critique of this capitalist structure (Lewis, 2019); meanwhile, Sally Jane Black (2019) argues that only audiences with class consciousness can comprehend the metaphors in the film, judging that the film's social messages are not communicated in a fully explicit way, and are only accessible to audiences with pre-existing class-related knowledge (Black, 2019).

In 2019, YouTube channel CineCrib released a film review of the movie *Parasite*. The review notes that the film goes far beyond having an entertaining plot: it highlights the social divide between the upper and lower classes through three sets of contrasts—residential space, power relations, and unequal emotional experiences. The review further supports this analysis with two specific narrative details: the multiple symbolic meanings of rain, and the use of scent as a class marker. It adds that the film's narrative shifts from lighthearted humor to oppressive unease, a tonal and narrative shift that can cultivate audiences' critical awareness of the class inequality issues explored in the film.

This study takes audience interpretations of the film *Parasite* as its research object. Drawing on three types of empirical materials interview findings, film reviews from Letterboxd, and content analysis of Cine Crib's YouTube content it proposes that audiences' interpretations constitute critical, reflective meaning-making centered on the realities of inequality and social class. This conclusion aligns with representation theory and Karl

Marx's theory of social class. Hall's 1997 representation theory notes that films construct representations through symbolic systems, which support viewers to actively interpret the film by integrating their own personal experiences. The Marxist class theory sorted out by Hendriwani in 2020, which builds on Marx's 2008 class theory, corresponds to the unequal structure that audiences identify in their interpretations: the oppression of lower-status groups under the capitalist system, and limited access to social mobility (Hendriwani, 2020).

The use of Letterboxd and YouTube reviews may introduce sampling bias because users of these platforms tend to be highly engaged film enthusiasts. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as representing active media audiences rather than the broader public.

Cross-Cultural Reception of Parasite

Although *Parasite* is rooted in the socio-economic realities of South Korea, many of its themes resonate with audiences from different cultural contexts. Indonesian viewers participating in this study tended to interpret the film through their own experiences of economic inequality, social mobility, and class differences within Indonesian society. Likewise, international reviews on Letterboxd suggest that audiences often connect the film's narrative to broader global concerns regarding capitalism and social stratification. These findings indicate that while the film's symbols emerge from a specifically Korean context, their meanings are often reinterpreted according to the cultural and social backgrounds of viewers. Therefore, audience reception is shaped not only by the film text itself but also by the cultural experiences and social realities that viewers bring to the viewing process.

Negotiated and Oppositional Readings

While most participants interpreted *Parasite* as a critique of social inequality, some audience responses suggested negotiated interpretations. Certain viewers perceived the Kim family's actions as morally problematic regardless of their class position, indicating that not all audiences fully aligned with the film's critique of capitalism.

The Symbolism of Space, Objects, and Behavior



Figure 1. A Wealthy Family Climbs the Stairs
(Source: iQIYI)

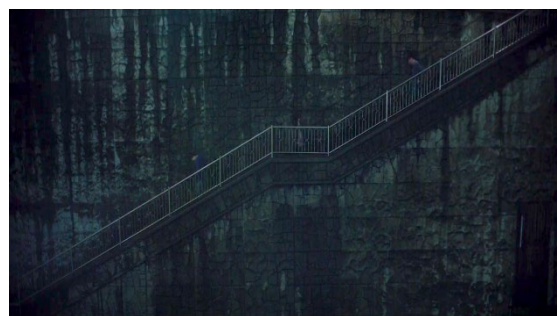


Figure 2. A Poor Family Descends the Stairs
(Source: iQIYI)

This paper takes two core scenes from the film *Parasite* as its starting point for analysis; these scenes are powerful visual metaphors that carry the theme of social class

inequality. The staircases that appear repeatedly throughout the film function not only as spatial elements, but also as symbols of class hierarchy: moving upward to access upper-level spaces corresponds to stability, power, and access to comfortable resources, while moving downward to enter lower-level spaces points to persistent poverty. The dark, cramped underground space located beneath the Park family’s residence further reinforces the spatial contrast between social classes. The film’s portrayal of class inequality is fully realized through the joint operation of two core dimensions: narrative construction and visual presentation.

This study sorts out common audience interpretations of the film *Parasite*, and conducts analysis based on audience interviews and film review materials from two major platforms, Letterboxd and YouTube. Most audiences agree that the film’s portrayal of the lives of the upper and lower social classes is realistic, allowing viewers to directly perceive the class gap between the two groups. Other audiences point out that the repeatedly featured scenes of characters moving up and down stairs are deliberately designed symbols by the director, used to reinforce class division. This interpretation aligns with the core feedback from mainstream audiences, who recognize the film’s critique of the competitive transactional class relationship in which overt luxury conceals the nature of exploitation. All supporting arguments in this paper are sourced from the first-hand audience survey data collected for this study.

Table 2: Comparison of Symbolic Meanings Identified by the Researcher and Audience Interpretations in *Parasite*

Researcher	Interpretation Symbol	Audience Interpretation
Stairs	Class hierarchy	Social mobility and status differences
Rain	Structural inequality	Different impacts of social conditions
Smell	Social stigma	Discrimination toward lower classes

The Impact of Depictions of Inequality on Viewers’ Social Awareness

This study conducted first-hand interviews with viewers of the film *Parasite*, and found that the movie can truly affect audiences’ perceptions and ways of thinking about similar social realities. All interviewees noted that the film uses visual symbols such as character interactions and hierarchical power structures to help audiences realize that social inequality is not a neutral condition; it is a systemic issue that places the underclass in a vulnerable position, forcing them to take measures to secure their survival.

This study, based on the results of audience interviews, finds that the film *Parasite* can guide viewers to engage in critical thinking, reflecting on the complex social structures and moral dilemmas presented in the film; audiences no longer simply label underprivileged groups purely as victims, and are able to understand that unequal social systems can produce manipulative behaviors among members of both opposing social classes. This shift in cognition confirms that audiences actively question the boundary

between victims and perpetrators within unjust social structures. The statement made by interviewee Habib supports this conclusion, and the relevant source materials are cited from Anshor, 2025.

This paper conducts a meta-analysis of user film reviews on the Letterboxd platform, and finds that while *Parasite* delivers an outstanding portrayal of social class, its impact on audiences' critical awareness varies across individual viewers. This is evident in Josh Lewis's review, in which he assesses that the film successfully portrays "a deviant and ever-changing symbiotic relationship between increasingly unequal and transactional social classes," indicating that he, as a viewer, grasped the structural critique of social inequality and its psychological impact (Lewis, 2019). Meanwhile, an account named Phibert Dy also emphasized that the power of metaphors in this film such as the house on the hill and the basement successfully fosters reflective social awareness, particularly through depictions of rigid class boundaries. The account stated, "There are systems we've been part of since birth, and those systems create boundaries that cannot be crossed." (Dy, 2019). Thus, the reviews posted on the Letterboxd app indicate that the portrayal of inequality in **Parasite** has a significant impact on viewers' social awareness, prompting deep critical reflection.

Finally, a review on the CineCrib YouTube channel also explains that watching **Parasite** took them through a range of emotions from laughter and tension to a sense of unease which ultimately prompted critical reflection on the social realities beyond the screen (CineCrib, 2019). Film analysis organization CineCrib points out that this film's portrayal of inequality does not only stay at the narrative level. It also touches on topics often taken for granted, including self-worth, human nature, and systemic injustice, and shapes viewers' social awareness. This trait aligns exactly with the core research focus prioritized in academic circles, which centers on how films shape public perceptions of social class.

This study supplements analysis from the audience-side dimension, introduces first-hand user comments from the local film community on South Korea's Naver Movie platform, cites a comment left by the user with ID MovieMania77, extracts its core views, deduces the collective interpretive logic of South Korea's local audiences, and concludes that *Parasite* has both entertainment attributes and social enlightenment value that awakens the general public's awareness of the wealth gap between the rich and poor.

While the findings indicate that *Parasite* encourages viewers to reflect critically on issues of social inequality, the present study does not provide sufficient evidence to claim a measurable transformation of social consciousness. Rather, the data suggest that the film stimulates reflection, discussion, and greater awareness of class-related issues among audiences. Therefore, the impact identified in this study should be understood as the promotion of critical engagement with social inequality rather than a direct change in attitudes or long-term social consciousness.

Conclusion

This study's observational findings show that Bong Joon-ho's film *Parasite*, through its narrative design, visual symbols, and character relationship framework, effectively presents the issue of social class inequality and accurately reflects the structure of real-world

society. This leads audiences not to view the work as merely an entertainment product, but as a social criticism text closely aligned with everyday life. The film uses class markers such as contrasts in residential space, the staircase metaphor, and the "smell" motif to highlight the nearly impenetrable power barriers between different social classes; multi-source research drawing on offline interviews, audience reviews from Letterboxd, and analysis of YouTube's CineCrib channel also confirms that audiences can interpret the film's core message from a reflective perspective, and recognize that inequality is an institutional product that oppresses the lower class and restricts social mobility. Thus, *Parasite* functions as an effective medium of representation that encourages critical reflection on social inequality and social class. Rather than directly transforming audience consciousness, the film stimulates discussion and awareness regarding structural inequalities that continue to exist in contemporary society.

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