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# The politics of masculinity: male virility and social coercion in Indonesian cinema

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the representation of male virility as a form of social coercion in two Indonesian films: *Test Pack* (2012) and *Seperti Dendam Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* (Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash, 2021). Drawing on Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's multimodal discourse analysis, the study explores how the two films construct and critique the pressure on men to prove their masculinity through sexual performance. Although set in different political eras, the Orde Baru and the Reformation, both films depict the penis as a symbolic measure of virility. Characters like Rahmat and Ajo Kawir demonstrate that heterosexual men can also experience subordination due to infertility or impotence, challenging dominant ideals of masculinity. Despite their distinct visual and narrative strategies, the two films reveal how virility operates as a persistent mechanism of social control, shaping male identity across time. These findings underscore the role of cinema in reflecting on and questioning gender norms, particularly ideals surrounding male sexual performance.

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini menganalisis representasi virilitas laki-laki sebagai bentuk paksaan sosial dalam dua film Indonesia: *Test Pack* (2012) dan *Seperti Dendam Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* (2021). Mengacu pada analisis wacana multimodal Gunther Kress dan Theo van Leeuwen, studi ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana kedua film tersebut mengkonstruksi dan mengkritisi tekanan terhadap laki-laki untuk membuktikan maskulinitas mereka melalui performa seksual. Meskipun berlatar di era politik yang berbeda (Orde Baru dan Reformasi) kedua film tersebut menggambarkan penis sebagai ukuran simbolis virilitas. Tokoh seperti Rahmat dan Ajo Kawir menunjukkan bahwa laki-laki heteroseksual juga dapat mengalami subordinasi akibat infertilitas atau impotensi, sehingga menantang ideal maskulinitas yang dominan. Terlepas dari strategi visual dan naratif mereka yang berbeda, kedua film ini mengungkapkan bagaimana virilitas beroperasi sebagai mekanisme kontrol sosial yang persisten, yang membentuk identitas laki-laki dari masa ke masa. Temuan-temuan ini menggarisbawahi peran sinema dalam merefleksikan dan mempertanyakan norma-norma gender, khususnya ideal-ideal seputar performa seksual laki-laki.

## INTRODUCTION

Film is a tool considered quite popular and effective in influencing audiences through the discourse it conveys (Tombu, 2024). According to data from the Indonesian Film Editorial, in 2020, the number of Indonesian film viewers reached 446,982 people (Redaksi\_FI, 2021). Rianto (2024) emphasized that film functions not merely as entertainment but also as a space for meaning that reflects and shapes social discourse and power relations in society. Furthermore, he argued that cinematic representations often reproduce dominant ideologies that reinforce existing stereotypes and social norms. One theme rarely encountered in Indonesian films is the theme of masculinity. The theme of masculinity raised in films generally represents inequality within the body of masculinity itself, especially between hegemonic masculinity and subordinate masculinity. It is not uncommon for the represented domination to contain elements of symbolic violence that are produced through text, meaning, and continuous conversation as an effort to assert the power of the hegemonic group and perpetuate all forms of oppression against subordinate groups (Udasmoro & Rahmawati, 2021). Oppression is an act of coercion that deprives a person or group of their will, causing suffering for the oppressed (Ariawan, 2019). Research by Oktaviana & Aprilia (2022) suggests that Indonesian action films from the last decade often portray masculinity that emphasizes physical strength and male dominance. In addition, a study by Putri (2020) revealed that social expectations of men in patriarchal cultures can be a form of symbolic violence that affects their identity and behavior.

The discourse of masculinity shown in films is generally always associated with

the context of sexuality. Talking about masculinity is closely related to sexuality, particularly in relation to sex roles and cultural expectations (Storey, 2021) and the male body, namely the penis (Lehman, 2013a). Sex becomes a crucial domain for testing and exercising power relations between men and women. Árnason (2018) explains that, as theorized by Foucault, sexuality is regulated through discursive and institutional mechanisms that shape the human subject within biopolitical regimes. In line with this, Vanwesenbeeck et al. (2021) emphasize that sexual agency is not merely individual but shaped by social norms, gender expectations, and structural inequalities. Thus, sexuality becomes a key site where dominance and submission are negotiated, reproduced, or resisted. Sex is a symbol of masculine domination that must be owned by men, which is interpreted as an active and influential male party penetrating women as a form of submission and domination that is limited and understood from the beginning as something fixed and regular (hooks, 2004).

This means that the context of sexuality will always be embedded in the discourse of masculinity, even though sexuality is not the only element that shapes masculinity (Winder, 2023). Meanwhile, Connell (2017) emphasizes that masculinities, although contested and constantly reshaped, continue to be structured around hegemonic ideals often maintained through embodied performances of power such as sexual virility. In the cultural context, Großmann et al. (2017) highlight the importance of understanding masculinity in a patriarchal culture, which is highly influential in Indonesia. Meanwhile, Shin (2024) highlights that religious and cultural norms shape the regulation of sexuality in Indonesia. In the context of masculinity,

film often serves as a medium that constructs and reinforces standards of male virility. Recent studies on Indonesian films reveal the perpetuation of toxic masculinity through the suppression of emotions, authoritarian father figures, and the symbolic association between masculinity and sexual dominance. (Basuki et al., 2024; Widiassa, 2023)

In sexuality-themed films, virility is often constructed through elements such as titles, scenes, and dialogues that emphasize male sexual performance. Being manly is not presented as a choice, but as a social imperative, something men must embody to fulfill the normative standards of masculinity. Virility serves as a core mechanism in sustaining male dominance, which is reproduced and maintained through social and cultural systems (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Reddy et al., 2019; Valsecchi et al., 2023).

However, the film also offers a discursive space to question and deconstruct these dominant ideals. Representations of men who deviate from hegemonic masculinity are not limited to the post-reform era, but can also be found in earlier periods, including the Orde Baru era. During the early years of Orde Baru, Indonesian cinema served the state's ideological agenda by constructing masculinity as rational, productive, and sexually potent, reflecting the regime's emphasis on stability and control.

Male characters were rarely portrayed as vulnerable or sexually inadequate, and films generally reinforced normative virility. However, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, cracks in this monolithic portrayal began to emerge. *Cinta Dalam Sepotong Roti (Love in a Slice of Bread, 1991)* presents an early and nuanced cinematic portrayal of male sexual dysfunction in Indonesian film.

The character Haris, who suffers from sexual dysfunction within his marriage, becomes the locus through which masculinity in crisis is explored. His condition is depicted not merely as a physiological issue, but as a trigger for emotional turmoil and identity destabilization. Haris's increasing alienation from his wife and social circle reflects a more profound anxiety about his failure to meet societal expectations of manhood. In this context, sexual dysfunction operates as a cinematic metaphor for male subordination and vulnerability within a patriarchal culture that demands constant virility and performance.

As Widiassa (2023) observes in her reading of *Seperti Dendam Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas (Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash)*, sexual failure is strongly linked to a perceived erosion of masculine identity, revealing how men are rendered subordinated when they fall short of hegemonic norms. This cinematic pattern echoes broader cultural anxieties in which virility becomes both an expectation and a source of psychological tension.

Similarly, Yakali (2024), in their analysis of *Barbie*, argue that hegemonic and toxic masculinity are not innate traits but socially constructed ideals that can and should be critically dismantled. *Love in a Slice of Bread*, therefore, not only anticipates later films such as *Test Pack and Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* but also serves as a foundational text in the evolving representation of Indonesian Masculinity, one that exposes virility as a mode of social coercion rather than natural male essence.

Ann V. Bell's (2016) research on the medicalization of male infertility explores how masculinity is constructed through men's engagement with reproductive technologies. Bell argues that medical

processes, such as semen analysis, are interpreted by men not only as clinical procedures but also as tests of virility. In this context, virility becomes a measure of masculinity, reinforced not only by the body but also by the social and emotional meanings attached to medical performance.

Waling (2017) supports this by stating that media representations continue to pressure men to conform to narrow standards of masculinity, often centered on power, control, and sexual performance. Similarly, Goodwill et al. (2019) demonstrate how popular culture and media figures play a significant role in constructing dominant ideals of masculinity, particularly virility as a measure of male identity. These representations not only shape public perceptions but also contribute to the psychological strain experienced by men who fail to meet these societal expectations.

Several studies and writings that examine virility remain universal, without focusing on virility represented in a single medium; this research emphasizes the analysis of Indonesian films that reflect *the* virility constructed and maintained in society. By combining Steve Neale's (1983) concept of how masculinity is objectified with Rawyn Connell's (2005; 2017) theory of masculinity, this research offers a more holistic approach to understanding the social and cultural dynamics related to the discourse of virility represented in films.

Two films that are interesting to analyze in this context are *Test Pack* (2012) and *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* (2021). The movie *Test Pack* tells the story of Rahmat, a husband who experiences infertility and faces a crisis of masculine identity in his marriage. Meanwhile, *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash*, tells the character of Ajo Kawir, a man with sexual dysfunction who tries to ensure his masculinity with violence. These

two films were chosen because they illustrate how virility is not only an idealized standard but also functions as a social coercion for heterosexual men.

Previous studies of masculinity, sexuality, and virility in film have primarily been rooted in Western cultural contexts. Steve Neale's (1983) seminal work argues that masculinity in cinema is not simply a visual representation. However, instead a spectacular construction that reinforces patriarchal ideals perpetuated through heteronormative definitions of ideal masculinity (Smith & Attwood, 2017). Meanwhile, Lehman (2007) highlights the ambivalence of the male body in film, which is both glorified and concealed to perpetuate the myth of male sexual potency, an idea further developed by Mercer (2017) through an analysis of how cinematic techniques regulate male erotic visibility to maintain dominant norms.

Smiler (2024) offers a conceptual framework of masculinity as a multifaceted structure shaped by the intersection of health, sexuality, and media visibility. Seidler (2006) emphasizes that the constant pressure to appear masculine can lead to alienation and an identity crisis in modern men. This instability of masculinity is further expanded by Bridges & Pascoe (2014) through the concept of hybrid masculinity, a strategy in which men adopt elements of subordinate identities while retaining patriarchal power.

Ghumkhor & Mir (2022) critique the so-called "masculinity crisis" as a form of moral panic and a discursive strategy to reassert normative masculinity amidst sociocultural change. In Asian contexts, studies on masculinity in South Korean cinema (Kim, 2004) and Indian cinema (Nandakumar, 2021) reveal that male characters often oscillate between hegemonic power and a crisis of virility.

Overall, these studies demonstrate that masculinity in film is never neutral, but rather is always produced within complex power relations, fraught with tensions between normativity and resistance.

Cultural pressures surrounding masculinity are also evident in patriarchal, non-Western societies such as Indonesia. Fukuoka (2017) noted that post-reform Indonesian films continue to reproduce conservative gender norms, despite attempts at subversion. This persistence can be traced back to the New Order's ideological legacy, particularly through the concept of State Ibuism (Suryakusuma, 2011), which institutionalized gender roles by associating femininity with reproductive and domestic duties and masculinity with leadership and control.

Moreover, Shiraishi (2018) argues in *Young Heroes* that the Indonesian state strategically utilized family-centered narratives in constructing ideal citizenship, positioning the heterosexual nuclear family as the foundation of moral and political order. These ideological constructions continue to inform contemporary media representations, where men are still expected to assert virility and women to embody domestic virtue, even when the films attempt to critique or parody these norms.

Fatmawaty et al. (2022) examined how the body in film serves as a site of gendered power negotiation. However, studies that explicitly explore virility as a form of social coercion in Indonesian cinema remain scarce. The representation of heterosexual men subjected to subordination due to sexual dysfunction, as depicted in *Test Pack* and *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash*, has yet to receive critical attention within media, cultural, and gender studies scholarship.

This study offers a new contribution to masculinity studies and Indonesian film scholarship by shifting the analytical focus from masculinity as a display of dominance to virility as a form of social coercion.

While previous studies have addressed male dominance, hegemonic masculinity, or cinematic masculinity as aesthetic spectacle, few have critically examined how virility becomes a compulsory standard that can subjugate heterosexual men, primarily through narratives of sexual dysfunction. By analyzing two contemporary Indonesian films, *Test Pack* (2012) and *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* (2021) this research highlights how cinema not only reflects but also constructs cultural imperatives of manhood that are often unspoken yet deeply internalized. This focus on heterosexual male subordination within patriarchal structures offers a perspective rarely explored in current Southeast Asian media studies, thus filling a conceptual and regional gap in the global discourse on masculinity.

Distinct from previous studies that often conceptualize masculinity as either a form of domination or an aestheticized display of the male body, this research introduces a novel approach by examining virility as a mode of social coercion in Indonesian cinema. It focuses on how norms of manhood are produced and reproduced through symbols, narratives, and the male body on screen.

This study also demonstrates that men are not only actors within the patriarchal system but may also become victims when they fail to conform to socially constructed standards of virility. By employing a multimodal discourse analysis approach, this research aims to make a theoretical contribution to mascu-

linity studies in non-Western contexts and expand the discourse on gender, power, and representation in Indonesian visual culture. By focusing on subordinate characters through sexual issues, this study offers a new perspective: virility is not merely a biological or psychological imperative, but a socially constructed demand that can oppress men themselves. Where earlier studies have focused on masculinity as either a visual spectacle or patriarchal power, this study reframes virility as a socially imposed imperative that regulates male identity in post-Orde Baru Indonesian films.

## METHODS

This research employs a critical paradigm and multimodal discourse analysis, as developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. Multimodal discourse analysis employs various semiotic modes to comprehend the complex meanings constructed in films, including the social functions of semiotic resources that serve three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual (Noviani, 2018; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020).

The research object includes scenes and dialogues in both films that represent the relationship between subordinate masculinity and sexuality. The primary data collected consists of images, sounds, and narratives that represent the characters in the context of sexuality. In addition to primary data, secondary data was obtained through documentation and literature studies that support the analysis, including relevant journals and books.

Kress & Van Leeuwen's (2006) framework of multimodal discourse analysis conceptualizes meaning-making through three metafunctions: Ideational, interpersonal, and textual. These metafunctions guide the analytical reading of filmic elements to understand how masculinity (particularly virility) is constructed and reproduced. This ideational metafunction is used to identify themes of masculinity within the narrative structure, character development, and plot.

The interpersonal metafunction helps examine the relational dynamics among characters through gesture, dialogue, and bodily performance, revealing how power and gender positions are negotiated. The textual metafunction is applied to analyze the visual grammar of film, such as framing, composition, lighting, and symbolic codes, to understand how the discourse of virility is visually structured and communicated. This multimodal approach allows for a holistic reading of film texts as complex sites where gendered meanings are both produced and contested.

The analysis process was conducted in several stages. First, the selection of scenes that represent subordinate masculinity was performed, followed by a description of the selected scenes and their dialogue. The selected scenes are detailed in Table 1, which lists the film titles, year of release, brief synopsis, and specific time-stamped scenes analyzed in this study. Next, compositional analysis was conducted on the ideas of Kress and van Leeuwen, who treat images as a language with three interrelated metafunctions.

**Table 1**

*Selected film scenes analyzed in the study*

No.	FILM TITLE	YEAR & BRIEF SYNOPSIS	SELECTED SCENE(S) AND TIMESTAMP(S)
1	Test Pack	2012 Rahmat, a psychologist, experiences a masculinity crisis after learning he is infertile, leading to conflict in his marriage.	a) Rahmat is diagnosed as infertile (00:16:45–00:18:00) b) Argument with his wife about childlessness (00:39:20–00:41:05) c) Scene with traditional male tonic vendor (00:47:12–00:48:30)
2	Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas (Vengeance is Mine, All Others Pay Cash)	2021 Ajo Kawir, a street fighter with sexual dysfunction, attempts to reaffirm his masculinity through acts of violence.	a) Ajo Kawir avoids intimacy due to impotence (00:11:30–00:12:55) b) Ajo Kawir fights after being mocked (00:29:15–00:30:50) c) Ajo and Iteung discuss his impotence (01:07:00–01:09:20)

**Source:** Result of data analysis

Finally, the semiotic mode analysis stage was conducted to explore how various visual and narrative elements work together to construct meaning.

Following this, the ideational metafunction was used to identify dominant themes and representations of masculinity within the narrative and character development; the interpersonal metafunction to examine character relationships, power dynamics, and emotional expressions through gestures, tone, and proximity; and the textual metafunction to analyze visual composition such as camera angles, lighting, color schemes, and framing.

Scenes were selected based on their relevance to expressions of subordinate masculinity and sexual identity conflict, particularly those involving emotional or social turning points. Each selected was broken down into still frames, dialogue transcripts, and audio elements, and then

coded qualitatively under the three metafunctions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study employs Kress & Van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal discourse analysis framework, which conceptualizes meaning-making through three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. These metafunctions guide an analytical reading of film elements to understand how masculinity (especially virility) is constructed and reproduced. The ideational metafunction is used to identify themes of masculinity within narrative structure, character development, and plot. The interpersonal metafunction helps examine the relational dynamics between characters through gesture, dialogue, and bodily appearance, revealing how power and gender positions are negotiated. The textual metafunction is applied to analyze



the film's visual grammar, including framing, composition, lighting, and symbolic codes, to understand how the discourse of virility is structured and communicated visually. This multimodal approach allows for a holistic reading of film texts as complex sites where gendered meanings are produced and contested.

### **Virility as Social Coercion for Men in Indonesia**

Masculinity is not the man himself, but the values attached to men. These values are predominantly adopted by men, giving the impression that it is a male-dominated culture, although women can also adopt these masculine values (Udasmoro, 2022). Virility is seen as a measure that men must have to become ideal masculinity, especially in sexual terms. Virility can be seen as a materialization or manifestation of male qualities through physical appearance and anatomy, as a place where masculinity develops (Liliequist, 2007). This idea is further supported by Hagedorn et al. (2019), who argue that masculinity is not solely derived from biological traits but is significantly shaped by socialization processes, including influences from race, media, and gender norms. These factors contribute to the malleability of masculinity, emphasizing how external forces help materialize and reinforce dominant ideals of virility in men's bodies and behaviors.

To understand masculinity as a social structure, Connell (2005) outlines four key dimensions of gender relation: the power structure that legitimizes male dominance; the division of labor that places men in control of assets and the public sphere; emotional relations or *cathexis*, which regulate sexual desire and affection within male dominated frameworks; and symbolic representation that positions men at the center of cultural,

media, and knowledge institutions. In her later work, Connell (2017) emphasizes that these structures are dynamic and shaped by neoliberalism, transnational politics, and shifting local-global power relations. Within this framework, hegemonic masculinity not only subordinates women or homosexual men but can also discipline heterosexual men through pressures to meet standards of virility, particularly those related to fertility, sexual performance, and social control. Connell's framework thus serves as a crucial lens to interpret the representation of male subordination in film narratives.

The context of sexuality cannot be separated from the body of masculinity. The necessity for men to fulfill the aspects that define them as male is the primary key to being considered ideal. Virility has been instilled in men as a necessity from an early age. Masculine identity in Indonesia is shaped not only by patriarchal expectations but also by tensions between emotional expression and cultural norms of manhood. Boys are often discouraged from expressing vulnerability, such as crying or verbally articulating their feelings, which are commonly associated with femininity. However, these expressions are not necessarily linked to sexual orientation. This tension between expected and repressed emotionality reflects the interpersonal metafiction, as it explores affect, interaction, and the positioning of the male subject. As Nilan (2009) explains, young Indonesian men navigate conflicting demands: they are expected to display toughness and dominance in the public sphere, while simultaneously engaging with softer, emotionally expressive masculinities promoted through popular culture and religious values. This duality produces a form of emotional ambivalence in Indonesian masculinities, where affection is both desired and repressed.

In a similar vein, Prianti (2019) emphasizes that sexual expression in Indonesia is heavily regulated through sociocultural norms that frame male desire as inherently dominant but morally bounded. They argue that masculinity is constructed through a combination of bodily control, sexual performance, and affective discipline, highlighting that even heterosexual men can experience subordination when they fail to meet these rigid expectations.

In this context, emotional openness and sexual inadequacy (e.g., impotence or infertility) not only challenge hegemonic masculinity but also reveal how masculinity in Indonesia is a contested and fragile identity shaped by both affect and power. This framing is echoed by Jewkes et al. (2015), who argue that hegemonic masculinity is deeply rooted in social expectations of dominance, power, and control, particularly in sexual contexts. Similarly, Mshweshwe (2020) highlights how cultural traditions and patriarchal norms legitimize male authority and reinforce the association between masculinity, sexual control, and violence, especially within intimate relationships.

The authors view virility as a necessity, if not a belief, that burdens men to fulfill societal expectations and norms. Here, the ideational metafunction is evident in how social meanings are constructed around masculinity as a form of coercion. Men who cannot meet virility standards cannot be categorized as hegemonic masculinity, which means they will automatically be subordinated, even though they are heterosexual. Virility is then produced in everyday life through almost all economic, political, and social institutions, and is projected in song lyrics, magazine pages, billboards, and cinema. This process is reinforced by media

exposure, which plays a significant role in shaping and perpetuating traditional notions of masculinity. Scharrer & Warren (2022), for instance, found that adolescents' media consumption, including video games and television, is positively associated with support for traditional masculine gender role norms such as aggression and dominance. Their study highlights how the media contributes to strengthening societal expectations for men to meet specific standards of virility.

Advertisements promoting products intended for men always feature masculine characters that seem manly. For example, advertisements L-Men, which carries the *tagline* “skinny? How cool!” have shown a form of social coercion on men that the ideal body is muscular. Advertising models are also chosen to represent masculinity, often with an idealized muscular body.

Advertisements for male-targeted products such as Vaseline Men and Men's Biore demonstrate how virility is constructed through visual and narrative cues that associate masculinity with muscular bodies, active lifestyles, and dominance, reinforcing the myth that male identity is inseparable from physical strength and sexual potency (Lasido, 2016; Pratami & Hasiholan, 2020). The composition of these ads, featuring muscular bodies, bold taglines, and product placement, functions through textual metafunction, organizing visual and linguistic modes to convey virility.

This is evident in the *Honda Sport Motoshow 2022* advertisement, where the tagline “*Ini Baru Laki*” (*Now This Is a Real Man*) associates' masculinity with riding manual sport motorcycles rather than automatic ones. The ad implies that manhood is not only defined by physical appearance, but also by a set of complete masculine qualities

(such as body shape, facial features, behavioral assertiveness, and sexual performance), thus

reinforcing virility through choices of action and symbolic props like vehicles.

**Figure 1**

*Virility produced in advertising*



**Source:** Screenshot from Paguyubanhondamalang.com and YouTube.com

Not only through appearance, but the words in the Hormoviton Pasak Bumi ad or the Kuku Bima TL ad, for example, also emphasize that being "manly" is a great pride, as well as the ideals and dreams of every man. The Kuku Bima Energi version of Mbah Marijan and Chris John, for example, emphasizes that the two characters chosen to represent brave men come from different age ranges, occupations, and social classes.

The chosen tagline highlights the concept of courage as a vital aspect of masculinity for men of all ages. This use of popular figures and taglines reveals the interpersonal metafunction, constructing affective relationships and aspirational positioning for viewers. The critical point that can be underlined here is that all men from any social class still face social coercion to be manly and strong. As highlighted by Barker et al. (2018), traditional masculine norms, such as the emphasis on courage and dominance, are socially constructed ideals imposed on men

across all social strata, reinforcing behavioral expectations that can contribute to various forms of violence and psychological stress.

In Indonesia, virility is perceived as a social compulsion in a more diverse manner than in European or American countries. Indonesian culture and values believe that many things can and do affect their virility and penile function, in addition to the generally accepted values. As noted by Rahmi and Fahrudin (2024), many Indonesian men experiencing erectile dysfunction or premature ejaculation turn to traditional healers such as Mak Erot, demonstrating how cultural beliefs strongly influence how virility is perceived and pursued. In addition, it is not without reason that the social coercion of manhood in Indonesia is more diverse than in developed countries such as America.

The rise of traditional treatments specifically for the male reproductive system, such as pasak bumi, tongkat ali, ginseng, and the Mak Erot phenomenon,

which still has a significant influence today, is attributed to several factors. Dr. Effiana from Gadjah Mada University stated that, in general, Indonesians are dissatisfied with the medical services in Indonesia, leading them to seek treatment abroad (FKKMK.UGM, 2023). The distrust of medical treatment in the country also eventually led some people to choose alternative or traditional medicine because it is considered more effective, cheaper, and easier, has the possibility of faster recovery, and the knowledge and confidence of the community in the raw materials used compared to drugs or medical procedures (Yanti et al., 2021). The author sees that sexual problems in men in Indonesia are seen as a disgrace that must be covered, so traditional medicine is chosen on the grounds of maintaining confidentiality. The process of some treatment procedures can be done by yourself, such as making and drinking your own concoctions. These practices are sustained through interpersonal mechanisms, where shame and secrecy govern male conduct.

The Indonesian Minister of Health, Terawan Agus Putranto, introduced the Indonesian Traditional Health Tourism program in 2019, which showcased various traditional Indonesian therapies and treatment techniques, including *Kerokan*, *Purwaceng*, *Tongkat Ali*, and Mak Erot-style penis enlargement (Permana, 2019). The name Mak Erot has been attached to various brands of penis enlargement products that are selling well in Indonesia, and even some male-only health practices and clinics are not limited to using Mak Erot's name as their trademark, but also claim to be able to enlarge the male penis as Mak Erot can.

Mak Erot is an Indonesian traditional medicine expert who claims to

have the ability to enlarge the male penis through means based on conventional Javanese knowledge passed down through generations. He gained popularity in the 1990s and early 2000s, as many local and international patients were interested in penis enlargement. Mak Erot's method is a massage technique that he claims can increase the size of the penis. By massaging using special oils and applying pressure and stretching the penis, this technique is considered effective in enlarging or lengthening the penis up to several cm (Darmoko, 2020). Mak Erot became a legend that merged with the myth of male virility in Indonesia. However, the medical community is generally skeptical of this method, from the medical side considering Mak's Erotic-style treatment techniques as pseudoscience.

In Indonesia, some traditions are associated with masculinity; the practice of circumcision, for example, not only aims for medical reasons but also as a ritual that marks the transition for men from childhood to *aqil baligh* or adulthood (Arifson, 2017). In other words, circumcision is a form of ritual that opens the door to the perfection of adult male penile function. The beliefs that have developed in Indonesian society around the practice of circumcision are also associated with sexual performance. The belief that men who practice circumcision have the potential to have longer erections and increase partner satisfaction (Honestdocs, 2020) is also a form of social coercion, unlike countries such as America and other European countries, where male circumcision is typically regarded as an optional medical procedure rather than a cultural necessity (Earp & Shaw, 2017; Coene, 2018). In Indonesia, circumcision is deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions. As such, it functions not only as

a rite of passage into manhood but also as a marker of virility and social legitimacy.

From a medical perspective, several medical procedures are also offered to overcome problems around the penis that are associated with virility symbols. Procedures such as implants to surgery have a goal that is not much different from Mak Erot style traditional medicine techniques, namely, changing the shape and size of the penis to become larger and longer. Various efforts and methods that are presented as solutions to sexual problems boil down to an effort to enhance male manhood in sexual terms. This implicit social coercion has become so massive that being and proving manhood is a must. This social coercion is like fertilizer that nourishes the risky practices that men inevitably take just to prove their manhood. Statistics from the *International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery* state that there are an average of 8,000 penis enlargement procedures every year in the world, even though, since 1994, the *American Urological Association* has issued appeals and warnings that penis enlargement has not been proven safe and effective (Lahitani, 2017). The pressure to uphold virility in Indonesia is deeply entangled with legal, religious, and cultural frameworks. As Nilan (2009) points out, many young men internalize traditional ideals of masculinity but find few legitimate public arenas to express doubts, fears, or alternative masculinities. Publicly questioning a man's virility through implications of impotence, infertility, or perceived weakness is often enough to destabilize his social identity. This silencing mechanism keeps the ideals of manhood intact while suppressing voices that do not conform.

### **The Mistification of Virility Representation in Indonesian Films**

Film is one of the most accessible cultural tools in shaping gender ideas, including the normalization of virility as a cornerstone of masculine identity. However, masculinity in Indonesian cinema is not a singular concept. It varies according to age, life stage, and sociocultural expectations. To better understand the shifting discourses of manhood and virility in Indonesian films, it is helpful to categorize masculinity into three types: youth masculinity, bachelor masculinity, and married masculinity, each with its own gendered pressures and vulnerabilities. This typology provides a lens through which to read the ideational metafunction of film texts, particularly in how they thematize masculinity across the life course. During the Orde Baru era (1966-1998), youth masculinity was constructed around the ideals of discipline, modernity, and romantic desirability. Characters such as Boy in *Catatan si Boy (The Boy Notes)* and *Lupus* represented a clean-cut, emotionally controlled yet charming model of masculinity, resonating with state narratives about the ideal men. These characters were not just narrative figures, but multimodal constructs that blended visual cues (neat appearance and composed gestures) with verbal codes (polite and persuasive speech), which together encode the interpersonal metafunction of masculinity as both desirable and governable.

Nugroho & Suwanto (2015) explain that the Orde Baru era strongly promoted a masculine ideal tied to political stability, productivity, and family responsibility. According to Pam Nilan (2009), Indonesian young men often negotiate contradictory expectations. They are encouraged to exhibit toughness in public while simultaneously consuming pop culture that promotes affective expression. This produces a form of emotional ambivalence where affection is both

desired and repressed, a pattern visually coded in body posture and eye contact, and ideationally inscribed in recurring themes of romantic restraint. Meanwhile, bachelor masculinity in Indonesian cinema is often portrayed through comedic yet sexually potent characters like the male protagonists of *Warkop DKI*. Although their physical appearance or behavior may deviate from hegemonic norms, they consistently assert their masculinity by successfully conquering women, reflecting a continued valorization of sexual dominance. Here, the textual metafunction plays a significant role in anchoring visual humor with sexually suggestive framing and exaggerated physicality. The body becomes a semiotic resource, functioning not only as narrative propulsion but also as a visual strategy for legibility of masculinity. In this model, women are positioned as objects to be won, reinforcing patriarchal scripts of heterosexual virility as a symbol of success even in humorous or ridiculous scenarios. As Wright & Tokunaga (2016) argue, exposure to media portraying women as sexual objects can lead to dehumanizing views of women, reinforcing masculine norms that emphasize male sexual dominance. It is only in the post-Reformasi era that married masculinity and its associated vulnerabilities begin to take center stage. Films such as *Test Pack* (2012) depict male protagonists like Rahmat, a successful psychologist whose infertility leads to a masculinity crisis within his marriage. Similarly, *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* explores how Ajo Kawir, a street fighter with sexual dysfunction, attempts to reaffirm his manhood through violence and risk-taking. These films illustrate that even heterosexual men can experience subordination when they fail to meet the sexual, emotional, and social expectations

of hegemonic masculinity. At the interpersonal level, this tension is enacted through dialogue, gaze, and proxemics; the affective distance between characters becomes a marker of fractured masculinity. As Davies & Bennett (2015) argue, masculinity in Indonesia is maintained not only through bodily control and sexual performance but also through affective discipline, the regulation of feelings and desires within sociocultural and moral boundaries. Thus, across different stages of life, virility functions as a coercive social imperative, whether it is through emotional restraint in youth, sexual conquest in bachelorhood, or reproductive performance in marriage. Each of these is rendered visually and narratively through recurring signs, structures, and symbols fulfilling the textual metafunction that binds modes into coherent messages about gendered expectations.

On the other hand, the construction of masculinity became complex and diverse during the Reformation period (1998). Not only do political acceleration and economic liberalization drive significant changes in Indonesia, but the development of popular culture also influences the development of Indonesian cinema. Demands for democracy, inclusiveness, and recognition of human rights also increased awareness of gender equality. Masculinity and virility during the Reformation period were presented in films with more diverse narratives. The themes are also more varied and bolder. The movie *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta* (*What is with Love*, 2001), for example, successfully gave birth to a new teen idol played by Nicholas Saputra (Rangga). Nicholas Saputra's character as Rangga has made him a symbol of ideal masculinity in Indonesia. Not only in cinema, but the actor Nicholas Saputra has also become a male icon whom women in

Indonesia love. Men with cold, haughty, quiet, assertive characters and loved by many women became the new criteria for ideal men in the 2000s.

The emphasis on female subjugation as an object provides deep insight into the relationship between sexuality and power in representations of masculinity. In this context, female subjugation is not only seen as a physical act but also as a symbol of male status and dominance. This reflects how patriarchal norms shape perceptions of virility, where men's ability to subdue women becomes a key indicator of their virility. This analysis is particularly relevant in film studies, where these representations often illustrate the power dynamics underlying interactions between men and women. As Satchell-Baeza (2023) discusses in her analysis of Nina Menkes' work, especially the documentary *Brainwashed: Sex Camera Power*, the visual subjugation of women through the "male gaze" in mainstream cinema is a powerful cinematic technique that reinforces patriarchal dominance, making women both literal and symbolic objects in narratives driven by male virility.

In the movie *Test Pack* (2012), the character Rahmat faces an identity crisis about his manhood when he is unable to provide offspring for his wife. Meanwhile, in the film *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* (2021), it features Ajo Kawir, who, despite successfully marrying the woman he loves, the condition of his penis that cannot erect has made him an outsider in the discourse of sexuality. The ideal penis is characterized by its ability to fulfill recreational and procreational functions. Pieces of dialogue or scenes that formulate the ideal penis as well as a form of oppression for non-ideal penises can be found throughout the film.

Steve Neale (1983) explains that masculinity is often represented as a

spectacle that aims not only to attract the audience's attention but also to create images and criteria of ideal men that tend to be unrealistic. Neale also asserts that the heterosexual male body is indeed shown as a spectacle, but not to be sexually desired or marked. If it must be demonstrated erotically, the male body can only be shown explicitly. In this context, the mystification of virility refers to the creation of an idealized male image that serves to reinforce social norms that require men to meet specific standards. When films portray the penis as a symbol of perfect manhood, they not only create unrealistic expectations but also encourage men to feel pressured to meet those standards, ultimately contributing to dissatisfaction and an identity crisis.

Furthermore, Peter Lehman (2013) emphasizes that the representation of the penis in films must always be disguised to maintain its awe and mystique, so that women cannot compare men's sexual performance based on its shape and size. The penis in films can only appear with melodramatic and spectacular stories, such as erect penises in porn and flaccid penises in depicting subordinate (homosexual) masculinity. Men tend to feel comfortable and safe with the silence surrounding the penis, which increases its value and mystique. Victor J. Seidler (2013) asserts that there is social pressure on men to suppress their fears and anxieties, as admitting uncertainty may threaten their male identity. This, according to the author, is the reason why virility in the context of sexuality must be transposed into other symbols, such as appearance and physical strength, because it leads to the belief that a man's sexual performance is directly proportional to his physical perfection and character.

The choice of actor Reza Rahardian in the film *Test Pack*, who plays the character Rahmat, has physically

represented the masculine and male physical form. Height, posture, voice, and society's perception of men with abundant body hair are often associated with strength and masculinity. Rahmat's character, who works as a wedding consultant, adds complexity to the storyline. A marriage consultant who looks masculine is apparently unable to overcome his household problems due to infertility. Likewise, the selection of Marthino Lio as Ajo Kawir in the film *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* portrays a masculine man with physical abilities, an athletic body, and no fear of being subordinated because of his sexual problems. This means that if the audience is confronted with these two characters without knowing the sexual issues they face, the mystification of virility in a sexual context can be said to be successful. As Neale previously stated, the male body in these two films is presented in a masculine

manner to fulfill the ego ideal, where the representation of ideal masculinity through the bodies of Rahmat and Ajo Kawir reinforces the audience's fantasy of what the physical form of ideal masculinity looks like. However, because the two films chosen by the author raise themes around the sexual problems of heterosexual men, in this film, the virility of the characters Rahmat and Ajo Kawir, represented through physical appearance, becomes a paradox. Both the director of the film *Test Pack* and the director of the film *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* seem to invite the audience to realize that not always is virility in a sexual context directly proportional to male sexual performance. More deeply, these films want to convey and show that heterosexual men can also experience sexual problems that then place them as outsiders in the politics of masculinity.

**Figure 2**

*Representation of virility through physical appearance in test pack*



**Source:** Screenshot from *Test Pack* (2012)



**Figure 3**

*Representation of virility through physical appearance in Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash*



**Source:** Screenshot, *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* (2021).

What the author sees then is that although the characters of Rahmat and Ajo Kawir are presented with masculine and idealized physiques, they are also depicted as experiencing a profound identity crisis due to their inability to fulfill sexual expectations. This shows the audience that manhood is not only determined by appearance but also by sexual ability. This dissatisfaction stems from social pressures that demand that men always look perfect and ideal. In other words, idealized representations of masculinity are often not in line with the reality that men experience in the real world. This is what directors try to show in these two films, where men's sexual problems can also make them experience oppression that makes them feel alienated and helpless in fulfilling ideal masculinity standards. In this section, we can see that subordinate masculinity is not only reserved for homosexual men or boys as Connell (2005) suggests. In fact, through these two films,

the discourse of sexuality proves to be more fluid and less rigid. Heterosexual men who, in Connell's grouping, are positioned as hegemonic masculinity can also experience oppression because they are unable to fulfill the ideal criteria perfectly. They are subordinate in the realm of masculinity politics. However, it cannot be denied that some things are still maintained and difficult to negotiate, namely, male sexual performance.

In the film *Test Pack*, the audience is shown how the performance of the penis is represented through carefully chosen symbols, such as the position of a football player (striker) at minute 57:42, through a dialogue that states "*barren men are nothing, it is like a striker cannot score goals*". Not only through dialogue, but also in the scene where Rahmat visits the health clinic to check the condition of his sperm, the audience is introduced to a male nurse who accompanies Rahmat as a character with a muscular physique, seen lifting

barbells. This scene can be interpreted as a form of representation of the male sexual function that must be strong and mighty.

The audience is faced with a form of virility mystification in the discourse of sexuality implicitly.

**Figure 4**

*Misrepresentation of virility in the Test Pack Movie*



**Source:** Screenshot from *Test Pack* (2012)

Meanwhile, in films such as *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash*, penis performance is shown more openly and boldly through dialogue, scenes, or other symbols. Like the sentence at the beginning of the movie, “*only people who cannot get an erection can do anything without fear of death*” at the minute. Another dialogue spoken by Mak Erot at minute 04, “*Nothing insults a whore more than a bird that can't stand,*” also emphasizes that an erect penis is an ideal penis. The representation of the erect penis

that women desire is also shown in the scene when Iteung (Ajo Kawir's wife) looks transfixed and mesmerized looking at the Geoduck animal, which has a shape like an erect penis squirting its liquid. *Geoduck* is not the only animal that signifies virility in this movie. The leech oil produced by Budi Baik is also used as a symbol of male virility. In Budi Baik's dialogue with Iteung, he explains the uses and functions of the leech oil: “*leech oil adds virility, can make male birds stand upright for hours*” (32:19).

**Figure 5**

*Misrepresentation of penis representation in movies: Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash*



**Source:** Screenshot from *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* (2021)

Overall, the mystification of virility representations in Indonesian films creates a complex and diverse image of masculinity. Films such as *Test Pack* and *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* show that although men are often presented with idealized and masculine physiques, they also face real challenges in fulfilling sexual expectations. The dissatisfaction that arises from this inability reflects the social pressure that demands that men always look perfect. As such, representations of virility not only serve to reinforce patriarchal norms but also highlight the identity crisis experienced by men when they are unable to meet the standards set by society. Overall, the mystification of virility in Indonesian cinema constructs a complex portrayal of masculinity, idealized yet fragile. Films such as *Test Pack* and *Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash* depict male characters grappling with sexual expectations and identity crises, reflecting societal pressure to embody perfection as men. This resonates with Neale's (1983) and Lehman's (2007) arguments that the male body in cinema is often a site of contradiction between power

and vulnerability. Furthermore, as bell hooks (2004) emphasizes, patriarchal socialization suppresses emotional expression in men, framing sexual failure as a loss of manhood.

Rather than claiming a complete deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity, this study argues that post-reform Indonesian films increasingly expose the cracks and contradictions within dominant masculinity norms, especially around sexual performance. The presence of male characters who suffer from infertility (*Test Pack*) or impotence (*Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash*) represents a notable shift in Indonesian cinema, not necessarily as an act of resistance, but as an attempt by filmmakers to visualize a layer of masculinity long considered taboo or invisible in the Orde Baru Era. These films do not entirely reject virility as a masculine ideal; instead, they reveal how virility continues to function as a form of social coercion, even for heterosexual men. In this context, cinema becomes a discursive space where the pressure to perform masculinity is both dramatized and problematized. Rather than offering an emancipatory alternative, these narratives portray masculinity as a

fragile identity constantly negotiated through bodies, failures, and silences. This analysis contributes to masculinity studies by foregrounding how Indonesian cinema reflects and subtly contests the affective and sexual dimensions of male subordination in a culturally specific context.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research reveals that virility functions as a form of social coercion that obligates men to conform to idealized standards of masculinity, particularly in the sexual domain. Masculinity is not merely an individual identity, but a social construct imbued with normative expectations that can result in subordination or psychological distress when these expectations are not met. These expectations are internalized and reinforced through various cultural channels such as media, advertising, and even medical discourse, intensifying the pressure on men to perform their "manhood continuously." Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's framework of multimodal analysis, this study explains how those expectations are not narrated but also visually and relationally coded in Indonesian cinema. The ideational metafunction operates through the thematic fixation on virility and sexual performance; the interpersonal metafunction manifests in power-laden interactions between male and female characters, and the textual metafunction becomes evident in the visual grammar that structures how masculine identity is imagined and consumed.

Furthermore, the mystification of virility in Indonesian cinema functions as both a reflection and a reinforcement of these ideals. Films such as *Test Pack* and *Like Revenge Rindu Must Be Paid Completely* (*Vengeance Is Mine, All Others Pay Cash*) depict male characters whose

identity crises stem from their inability to fulfill socially constructed standards of virility. These films not only depict male vulnerability under the weight of patriarchal expectations but also open discursive space for critiquing hegemonic masculinity. The cinematic emphasis on the male body, sexual failure, and women's subordination illustrates how gender norms are upheld and potentially resisted through popular culture. By weaving together verbal, visual, and symbolic modes, these films become multimodal texts that both dramatize and interrogate the contradictions of dominant masculinity.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of fostering critical engagement with the ways media, particularly film, participate in constructing and legitimizing dominant ideals of masculinity. Rather than merely reflecting reality, cinematic representations actively shape public perceptions of what it means to be a real man, often through tropes of virility, physical dominance, and sexual performance. Thus, understanding these films through a multimodal lens not only enhances interpretive depth but also affirms the cultural power of media in regulating the affective and symbolic economies of gender. Recognizing this, future research and creative practices might explore how alternative narratives for those who embrace vulnerability, emotional expression, and diverse male experiences can open space for more inclusive articulations of masculinity. By disrupting the singular image of the virile male, such interventions have the potential to ease the psychological and social pressures men face in performing masculinity, and to contribute to broader efforts in gender justice within cultural production.

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