

Constructing Masculinity in Popular Malay Television Dramas: A Multimodal and Audience-Based Analysis

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ABSTRACT

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Malay television dramas (TVDs) of the romantic genre are highly popular among local viewers. While gender representation of popular media is extensively studied, limited attention has been given to how masculinity in particular is constructed in Malay media especially from a multimodal approach. As such, this study addresses this gap by examining the portrayal and negotiation of masculinity in five popular Malay TVDs. A multimodal discourse analysis on the male protagonists was first conducted, taking into consideration verbal and visual resources. This was then followed by a thematic analysis of audience online comments with regard to the male protagonists. Findings of the analyses reveal that most of the male protagonists analysed are constructed as authoritative and responsible figures in the early parts of their respective narratives, which are justified as a result of being juxtaposed with problematic female counterparts. As each narrative progresses, their dominance is then softened through increased emotional expressivity, making hegemonic masculinity more acceptable within romantic narratives. Furthermore, it was found that audience responses largely align with these depictions, resulting in more dominant readings of the texts. These findings suggest that masculinity in its hegemonic form is reconfigured rather than challenged in these drama texts, which in turn sustain gender hierarchies. This study contributes to research on multimodal construction of masculinity in popular media in the non-Western context and underscores the role of the audience in reinforcing gender power relations.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature on masculinity construction using a multimodal approach and how it is interpreted by audiences. It is among the few studies that investigate Malay male protagonists in popular Malay television dramas showing how male authority is culturally represented, normalised and idealised within heterosexual relationships.

1. Introduction

Malay Television Dramas (henceforth TVDs) have remained a popular form of television in Malaysia particularly through prime-time slots and romance-oriented narratives (Idrus et al., 2019; Zainal, 2018). Their popularity could be due to several reasons, the first being that they depict familiar themes like love, familial conflict and moral binaries which producers accommodate to audience pleasure. Another reason could be that watching and interacting with Malay TVDs gives people a break from the harsh realities of life (Idrus et al., 2017). As a result of their high demand, television channels have distributed these TVDs beyond the television screen by making them available on free video-sharing websites like YouTube. This allows audiences to watch and engage with these dramas anywhere and at any time. In turn, due to high audience reach, this phenomenon encourages the production of more TVDs of the same genre. In light of these factors, popular Malay TVDs, many of which are of the romantic genre across television channels, revolve around heterosexual relationships between male and female characters, which may provide insights into how gender roles and gendered power relations are represented. As Kang et al. (2017) argue that “[m]edia representation is a key domain for identity formation and the creation of gendered and sexualized difference” (p. 68), these popular TVDs may disseminate ideas with regards to how the audiences themselves understand and view their gendered roles and identities.

Building on this, as TVDs are popular cultural products, it is said to provide a current understanding of our social reality. It is important to note that popular culture not only reflects our social reality, but it also has the power to shape it, often seamlessly (Fiske & Hartley, 2003; Storey, 2018). As a result, audiences may gradually internalise particular ideas about gender. Some studies have shown that the romantic genre has some effect with how audiences understand gender roles and dynamics (Galloway et al., 2015; Giaccardi et al., 2016; Kretz, 2019) as well as romantic relationships (Holmes, 2007). Furthermore, it has been found that viewers who watched more romance media seem to hold more idealised views with regard to romantic relationships (Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Hence, this area of study warrants attention since romantic narratives are often associated with female audiences, which could shape and reinforce gender role expectations of themselves and their male counterparts within romantic relationships.

While studies on gender representation in the media focus on gender in a broader manner (Ward & Grower, 2020), and while studies on how women are portrayed have been well established in the field (Kurnaz & Tok, 2026), it is crucial to examine how these representations construct and sustain specific types of masculinity. This is because studies on the representation of men in media within romantic narratives have been underexplored. It is important to examine masculinity in the romantic genre context because their portrayals may appear to offer appealing representations of men when, in fact, their depictions may subtly reinforce male authority within heterosexual relationships. Such findings could potentially be concerning, as even seemingly positive portrayals of men could still reproduce certain assumptions about gender roles and power within specific cultural understandings of heterosexual relationships. As such, despite the popularity of Malay TVDs, there has been limited attention in examining masculinity in the Malay media context. Addressing this gap, this study utilises a multimodal approach in investigating masculinity in Malay TVDs, which is further enriched with an audience reception analysis to examine how masculinity is constructed and received in these popular TVDs. As gendered representations are shaped by both narrative content and a range of semiotic resources, this study first uses a multimodal

approach in examining the drama texts and then includes an audience analysis to investigate viewers' responses to the representation of men. Bednarek (2011) highlights that a multimodal approach is necessary to capture how different semiotic modes like gaze, posture, camera angles and sound interact to construct and reinforce particular characterisations, which in this case are the characterisations of men. Meanwhile, Stuart Hall's (1980/1997) encoding/decoding model allows for the examination of how viewers may accept, negotiate or oppose these mediated constructions. Therefore, using these two approaches, this study aims to answer the following questions:

- i. How is masculinity constructed multimodally in popular Malay TVDs?
- ii. How do audiences interpret these constructions of masculinity?

By attempting to answer these questions, this study offers fresh insights on how masculinity is portrayed and construed within the Malay media context.

2. Literature Review

Studies on how gender is represented in different media genres are well established (Ward & Grower, 2020). The popularity of this field of study has been due to the media playing a significant role in shaping societal understandings of gender across various levels of society, as they are influential agents of socialisation. The media circulate repeated images, narratives as well as values through which viewers are able to make sense of their own social roles and identities (Kang et al., 2017). Based on cultivation theory, repeated exposure to television can shape audiences' views with regard to their social reality (Gerbner et al., 2002). As such, when it comes to gender, television has shown to reproduce an unfair and unbalanced depiction of men and women (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Ward & Grower, 2020) which in turn, influences viewers' beliefs about gender. Television dramas in particular may have an influence on the gender role values of audiences as they often present stereotypical depictions of male and female behaviour (Malik & Hameed-ur-Rahman, 2021). These stereotypical gendered messages can become widespread as television programmes are usually part of popular culture and especially since television discourse offers an up-to-date portrayal of social relationships and cultural understandings (Fiske & Hartley, 2003). As such, heavy consumers of these television products could come to cultivate these beliefs about gender behaviour as well as gender roles within heterosexual relationships. In fact, some studies have shown that a higher exposure to romance media has been linked to the cultivation of certain beliefs and expectations about romantic relationships, as viewers adopt the patterns and ideals that are repeatedly portrayed (Holmes, 2007; Jayasainan et al., 2014). Moreover, some studies have further demonstrated that regular engagement with romance media influences how both men and women understand gender dynamics, especially with regards to intimacy, power, and relational roles (Galloway et al., 2015; Giaccardi et al., 2016; Kretz, 2019). Hence, within the context of popular Malay TVDs, particularly of the romantic genre, the portrayal of gender relations between male and female protagonists may provide insight into culturally circulated beliefs on gender roles in Malay media.

According to Storey (2018), popular culture "reproduces prevailing structures of power" (p. 9) and therefore, serves as an important channel for the dissemination of ideology. This may well include ideologies related to the representation of gendered relations in popular media, which reveres men while subjugating women. This process often appears subtly. Strinati (2004) argues that popular culture functions to obscure interests of those in power, presenting them as natural and taken-for-granted. In doing so, it sustains existing power relations, such as the privileging of men over women, while

masking them as normal. While numerous studies have focused on how women are subjugated in the media (e.g. Collins, 2011; Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999), there remain limited investigations on how men and more specifically, masculinity is performed, endorsed and sustained in these kinds of popular media texts. Furthermore, how the subordination of women is portrayed may be in tandem with how the authority of men is depicted (Bakar et al., 2025; Ahmed & Wahab, 2019). Therefore, in the context of Malay TVDs of the romantic genre, where relational storylines are the focus, the representations of the male identity are likely to contribute to the construction of culturally specific ideals of masculinity. This issue is imperative considering that such TVDs have a predominantly female target audience (Geraghty, 2006) which could shape how they view themselves as well as their male counterparts. Against this backdrop, masculinity should be perceived as a socially constructed identity that is continuously produced and circulated through media representations.

While women are often stereotypically portrayed as the weaker sex, men are typically depicted as powerful. Power in terms of gender relations refers to “the overall subordination of women and dominance of men” (Connell, 1995, p. 74). Connell (1995) posits there are four types of masculinity: hegemonic, subordinated, complicit, and marginalised, the first being most associated with patriarchy. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the culturally dominant idealised form of masculinity as it legitimises male authority and reinforces gender hierarchies (Connell, 1995). This type of masculinity is relational and context-dependent. It is often represented as men having a sense of control, emotional restraint, heterosexual desirability, and authority, as they tend to be contrasted with subordinated forms of masculinities and femininities (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Schippers, 2007). Within media contexts, these representations play an important role in reproducing and normalising these ideals. Studies have shown that male characters tend to be portrayed as agentive, rational and authoritative figures which reinforces broader structures of gendered power (Lauzen et al., 2008; Daalmans et al., 2017; Santoniccolo et al., 2023). With regard to this, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) however, did caution that hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed set of traits but in fact varies across different contexts. For example, it was observed that when men pursue or are in a relationship with women, their performance of masculinity differs compared to when they are with other men (Cerdán-Torregrosa et al., 2023). This supports the view that masculinity is relational and contextual.

In the Malaysian context, Radzi et al. (2018) found that the Malaysian men who were interviewed for their study believed that having both masculine and feminine traits was considered part of being masculine. These traits include being independent, competitive, and a risk taker as well as emotionally expressive. This was a similar finding by Khalaf et al. (2013) and Bakar (2014) in that Malaysian men considered masculinity to include being physically fit, being financially independent, being respected, being successful with women, being a family man, and being sensitive. Here, it is important to note that within the Malay Muslim context, the construction of masculinity may be influenced by cultural interpretations of Islam, especially with regard to men’s roles as husbands, fathers, household leaders, and providers. However, religiosity does not imply the reinforcement of patriarchal ideals. In fact, Boo (2025) demonstrated that Muslim men in Malaysia, who were considered more Islamic showed higher participation in housework and childcare, suggesting an adoption of feminine traits. Furthermore, Alatas (2026) also found that Muslim men in Malaysia embraced forms of masculinity that were softer but also believed in masculinising care. It seems that their understanding of Islamic discourse shapes their negotiation of care and authority. Meanwhile, a study by Nik Mat

et al. (2022) showed a correlation between religiosity and gender role perception among Malaysian Muslim men in that they believed that the religion does not support gender equality. Therefore, it seems that masculinity in the Islamic context is quite ambivalent, whereby cultural understandings of Islam may seem to legitimise male authority on one hand, but it may also frame masculinity through responsibility, care, and protection on the other hand. As such, this kind of belief may be projected in Malay TVDs, which could give some indications into how masculinity is understood within the Malay Muslim context which may differ from other socio-cultural contexts.

As hegemonic masculinity is fluid, contextual and can be renegotiated, popular media provides a useful site for examining how masculinity is represented, challenged or reconfigured (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Radzi et al., 2021). This is evident in studies on popular media within the Malaysian context. In some observations of local television dramas, it is argued that men tend to be positively depicted as rational, independent, assertive, and competitive (Ibrahim et al., 2017). In a study by Velu and Kaur (2018) who examined masculinity in a Malaysian televised show, they found that masculinity is visually constructed through social interaction, including interactions involving female characters. This highlights the notion that the performance of masculinity can be relational. Lee's (2022) study on the other hand, found that even when gender is performed invertedly, heteronormative gender binaries can still be sustained. Meanwhile, when it comes to Malaysian viewers' engagements with Korean dramas, Ainslie (2017) has shown that there exist tensions between soft and hegemonic masculinities. Within the romantic genre, masculinity is often constructed to make men appear to be more emotionally expressive or adopt more 'soft' versions of male identity. Some scholars recognise a pattern in relation to female audiences and desire in which the depiction of men in romance-oriented media are idealised as attentive, protective, emotionally available, and desirable romantic partners (Aran-Ranspott et al., 2014; Gammon, 2024; Kluger, 2024). Such depictions may seem to promote a contrasting type of masculinity on the surface, but when examined further, they may in fact reconfigure hegemonic masculinity in a more palatable form (Wojnicka & de Boise, 2025). This holds true especially if the male protagonists are still portrayed as retaining wealth and power within their romantic relationships (Khai & Wahab, 2017).

Ainslie (2017) demonstrated the importance of how audience members may differ in their interpretations of mediated masculinity. This highlights the need to examine audience reactions to the representation of men in popular Malay TVDs. This is because audience members' responses may reveal whether viewers accept, negotiate or challenge the content produced in media texts (Hall, 1980/1997). Through this, findings on audience responses to the depictions of men may further illustrate what gender norms are accepted in the wider social context which in turn is reproduced in popular media texts. However, despite the popularity of these Malay TVDs, there has been a limited number of studies that have examined gender representation with these texts as their dataset, particularly in relation to masculinity as well as audience reception. While there are some studies that have looked into gender representation in Malaysian media texts more broadly, less attention has been given to how male characters are represented and how audiences interpret these representations. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by investigating both the multimodal construction of masculinity in selected Malay TVDs and audience reactions to these constructions.

Worth noting is that this study builds on Bakar et al.'s (2025) analysis of female protagonists in the same five Malay TVDs which examined how the women go through a

moral and relational transformation across each narrative. While Bakar et al. (2025) focused on the transformation of Malay women, this paper shifts attention to the male protagonists to investigate how masculinity is constructed along with female transformation.

3. Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design by first employing a multimodal discourse analytical approach due to the multimodal nature of the chosen corpus. The advantage of using a multimodal approach is that it allows for an examination of meaning-making across multiple semiotic resources which include dialogue, character actions and other visual representations. According to van Leeuwen (2021), we use semiotic resources “to express our identity in ways that others can recognise and accept as evidence of our identity” (p. 6). For television characters in particular, examining how they are represented through a combination of multiple expressive resources warrants the use of a multimodal approach (Bednarek, 2015). Secondly, besides the multimodal approach, this study also incorporates the use of a thematic analysis to investigate audience reactions to the portrayals of the male protagonists. Since media texts both construct and are shaped by our social reality (Fiske & Hartley, 2003; Iedema, 2001), investigating audiences’ responses to these representations may provide insight into societal values regarding gender.

As such, this study has two types of data. The first data source includes five TVDs entitled *Rindu Awak 200%*, *Dia Isteri Luar Biasa*, *7 Hari Mencintaiku*, *Kekasih Paksa Rela* and *Jangan Benci Cintaku*. These TVDs were selected, as they are of the romance genre, a highly popular genre among TVDs in the Malay context (Zainal, 2018). Moreover, as aforementioned, the romance genre is said to potentially shape gender role values of avid viewers (Jayasainan et al., 2014). These TVDs were selected from a popular television channel TV3, each of which was chosen due to their high viewership, indicating significant popularity among viewers. The data selection criteria also included the high number of comments left by audience members on TV3’s official YouTube channel. This step was to ensure that there were an adequate number of comments to analyse. Hence, the second data source includes comments left by viewers specifically with regard to the male protagonists of each TVD.

Given the nature of the two data sources, one of which is multimodal whilst the other is textual, the male characters from the TVDs were analysed using Bednarek’s (2011) televisual characterisation framework which investigates how characters are construed through expressive strategies, which include visual kinesic actions like facial expressions, body movement, and camera angles, as well as dialogue, which include paralinguistic features. This framework allows us to identify recurring character traits across the different stages of the narratives. Meanwhile for the audiences’ comments, the analysis is guided by Hall’s (1980/1997) encoding/decoding model, which theorises audience readings as dominant, negotiated, or oppositional. This framework aids in analysing the extent to which audience members align or resist the preferred meanings conveyed in the text. Hence, a thematic analysis of the comments was conducted to identify recurring patterns in the viewers’ stance towards the male protagonists.

As for the procedure for this analysis, the selected TVDs were viewed multiple times to identify key scenes and character performance. Then, each TVD was organised according to three narrative stages which were the beginning (Act I), the middle (Act II) and the

end (Act III). After organising the TVDs in this manner, using the purposive sampling technique, only selected scenes in which the male protagonists were present were analysed. Thereafter, the character traits of each male protagonist were coded. The coding process first began with a list of codes adopted by England et al. (2011) in their analysis of gender representation in Disney films. England et al.'s (2011) codes were chosen as they reflect stereotypical character traits of masculinity and femininity. Then, as the analysis took place, other inductive codes emerged from the data which were then labelled accordingly. These codes were then evaluated by examining some of the collective expressive strategies employed by the male characters, following Bednarek's framework. Hence, the preferred meanings encoded by the texts were deciphered.

Following this, the analysis of audience comments began. The comments were collected and coded thematically to identify patterns of evaluation of the male protagonists. Their reactions were subsequently evaluated and categorised according to Hall's (1980/1997) encoding/decoding model based on their alignment with the meaning of the texts. This combined approach of using a multimodal discourse analysis and a thematic analysis of viewer comments allows for a cohesive analysis of representation and reception, which enables an examination of the way in which male protagonists are constructed and how audiences align with the meanings encoded by these depictions.

4. Results

4.1. Male Protagonists' Characterisation Across Narratives

This section reveals the results of the analysis conducted where the most dominant character traits for each male protagonist across their designated narratives are demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Dominant Character Traits of Male Protagonists Across Narrative Progression (Acts I–III)





Character	Act I (Beginning)	Act II (Middle)	Act III (Ending)
Zill <i>(Rindu Awak 200%)</i>	Assertive (16%), Gives advice (12%), Intimidating (8%), Religious (8%), Responsible (8%)	Shows emotions (21%), Gives advice (16%), Responsible (11%), Leader (11%)	Affectionate (31%), Shows emotions (25%), Assertive (6%), Gives advice (6%)
Raden <i>(Dia Isteri Luar Biasa)</i>	Responsible (25%), Affectionate (11%), Religious (10%), Shows concern (9%)	Affectionate (27%), Gives advice (9%), Shows concern (9%), Assertive (5%)	Affectionate (22%), Shows intellect (15%), Gives advice (11%), Shows concern (11%)
Khuzairi <i>(7 Hari Mencintaiku)</i>	Responsible (22%), Affectionate (14%), Shows concern (11%), Religious (6%), Gives advice (5%)	Shows emotions (33%), Assertive (11%), Shows concern (7%), Jealous (7%)	Shows emotions (33%), Religious (19%), Affectionate (19%)
Adham <i>(Kekasih Paksa Rela)</i>	Assertive (20%), Affectionate (12%), Intimidating (8%), Shows concern (8%), Saviour (7%)	Assertive (26%), Affectionate (16%), Shows concern (9%), Jealous (7%)	Affectionate (20%), Assertive (14%), Shows concern (9%), Shows emotions (9%)

Shah (Jangan Benci Cintaku)	Assertive (20%), Affectionate (13%), Patient (8%), Gives advice (7%), Shows emotions (7%)	Assertive (24%), Affectionate (14%), Shows emotions (10%), Shows concern (8%)	Assertive (30%), Shows emotions (14%), Affectionate (11%), Apologetic (6%)
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**Note. Data only shows ±50% of a character’s performed traits*

The findings show that male protagonists have been systematically constructed as symbols of authority in which their dominance has been subtly warranted through the narrative design of each TVD. As demonstrated in Table 1, Act I shows that the male characters are depicted with a strong emphasis on either assertiveness or responsibility. This is due to the juxtaposition of them with their female counterparts who were characterised as emotionally unstable or burdensome. Hence, within this relational dynamic, authority performed by the male protagonists is not framed as being dominating but instead as a necessary response to female emotional volatility. To illustrate, Figure 1 shows a segment of a scene in Act I from *Kekasih Paksa Rela* in which the male protagonist, Adham, exercises his assertive and intimidating traits, performing an authoritative role towards his female counterpart.

Figure 1: Sample Scene in Act I of *Kekasih Paksa Rela*

Shot	Visual Frame	Kinesic Action	Soundtrack	Translation
11		Adham still looking down at his tablet	Adham: Ada tak ibu:::	Adham: Did your mother:::
12		Hanan looks at Adham, her shoulders are tensed	dengan,	and,
13		Adham still looking at his tablet	((still looking at his tablet)) ayah tiri awak call? Pasa haritu.	((still looking at his tablet)) Your step-father call you? about the other day.
14		Hanan looks down	Hanan: ((speaks softly)) Kalau ada saya bagitau Abang Daus teru:::s. Kan saya dah janji.	Hanan: ((speaks softly)) If they did, I would immediately inform Abang Daus. I had already promised this.

15		Adham looks directly at Hanan	Adham: Kalau saya tanya:::, jawab terus. Tak payah tunggu Daus.	Adham: If I ask::: just answer. You don't have to mention Daus.
16		Hanan's voice shakes slightly, she looks at Adham	Hanan: Kenapa pak cik marah kat saya? Saya tahu lah saya banyak menyusahkan pak cik ¹ .	Hanan: Why are you scolding me? I'm aware I have inconvenienced you a lot.

Note. ((*italicised text*)): Annotation of non-verbal activity, such as gestures, facial expressions, changes in voice quality; (:::): Prolongation of sound ; (,): Indicates a temporary rise or fall in intonation; (?): Indicates rising pitch or intonation.

In Figure 1, Adham has just married his female counterpart, Hanan, to save her from her irresponsible mother and stepfather. In this particular scene, he exercises his authority by asking questions (shots 11 and 13), and asserting his position as an authoritative figure by being direct with her and looking directly at her (shot 15). Furthermore, the close up of his direct gaze in shot 15 also emphasises the portrayal of his authority. He seems detached as he speaks to her in a distracted manner as he does not give any eye contact (shots 11 and 13), suggesting their relationship is not a romantic one. This pattern of behaviour is consistent in Act I of the TVD. From this context, Hanan feels intimidated by Adham as she rounds her shoulders, making her look smaller, and looks down (shots 12 and 14). She also shows her awareness of being troublesome (shot 16), amplifying the differing power positions each character has. This pattern is also prominent in the other TVDs, some of whom the female protagonists are portrayed in a more negative light. Hence, the need for the male protagonists to contain them in Act I.





As each narrative progresses into Acts II and III, as illustrated in Table 1, there is noticeable change in characterisation of the male protagonists towards more emotionally expressive traits which include higher instances of affection and emotional openness. This development entails that the male protagonists in these popular Malay TVDs are not only positioned as symbols of authority, but they are also humanised through emotional framing, making them more relatable and sympathetic to audiences. To provide some context, as the female characters in the TVDs had become more subdued as each narrative progressed, the male protagonists were depicted as toning down their need to be morally upright figures towards their female counterparts, allowing them to display more of their emotions. Figure 2 is a sample of a scene from *Dia Isteri Luar Biasa* and shows how a male character begins to be more emotionally expressive.

In Figure 2, the male protagonist, Raden, has found his wife who had run away from home. She had run away because she was embarrassed about being discovered to have had ill intentions regarding their marriage in Act I. In this scene, Raden is relieved to have found her and is depicted as accepting her wholeheartedly despite her initial ill intentions. Here, prior to scenes in Act I, he addresses her lovingly with the term of

¹ Hanan addresses Adham as Pak Cik (uncle) in Act I, illustrating the age gap and that they are married out of responsibility not love.

endearment ‘*sayang*’ which means ‘love’ in Bahasa Melayu (shot 34) while holding her face lovingly (shots 34, 36 and 38). Furthermore, his command to listen to her in shot 4 as well as his negative statement in shot 37 underscores his authoritative position as a man and husband but done so in a soft way. This sample scene illustrates the infallibility of the male protagonist in spite of the female protagonist’s prior shortfalls in characterisation as he forgives her despite her prior cruel intentions. This is a similar pattern across all TVDs with slight exceptions in two TVDs where Khuzairi from *7 Hari Mencintaiku* had become less affectionate in Act II due to his wife’s temporary abandonment. Meanwhile, Shah from *Jangan Benci Cintaku* showed more consistency in his assertiveness and affection across the narrative as he was conflicted in showing love for his wife and being upset with her. Nevertheless, the pattern is quite consistent in that the male protagonists were characterised as moral authority figures in Act I and became more emotionally expressive as their narratives progressed. This dual construction allows for the normalisation of a reconfigured form of hegemonic masculinity because it is softened and justified through emotional representation. Moreover, a crucial uniting factor in this depiction remains in that male characterisation is constructed in response to how the females are characterised which contributes to the consistent portrayal of male authority across the narrative progression.

Figure 2: Sample Scene in Act II of *Dia Isteri Luar Biasa*

Shot	Visual Frame	Kinesic Action	Soundtrack	Translation
34		Raden brings one hand down and grabs her one of her hands. Both gazing at each other	Sayang, awak dengar ni,	<i>Sayang</i> , listen here,
35		Raden looks directly into Dewi’s eyes	walaupun apa pun terjadi,	whatever happens,
36		Dewi’s eyes droop, gazing at Raden	((no speech))	((no speech))
37		Raden’s eye well up	((voice quivers)) saya tak nak kehilangan awak.	((voice quivers)) I don’t want to lose you.

Note. ((*italicised text*)): Annotation of non-verbal activity, such as gestures, facial expressions, changes in voice quality; (underline): Indicates stress on speech; (,): Indicates a temporary rise or fall in intonation;

4.2. Decoding Male Protagonists: Audience Reading Positions

This section examines some of the responses made by audiences with regard to the male protagonists. By doing this, the assessment of the extent to which viewers align with the preferred meanings encoded from the text is revealed. Drawing on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, the audience comments were examined in terms of dominant, negotiated and oppositional reading positions. The results are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Audience Evaluation and Reading Positions of Male Protagonists

Character	Dominant (%)	Negotiated (%)	Oppositional (%)
Zill (<i>Rindu Awak 200%</i>)	80	20	-
Raden (<i>Dia Isteri Luar Biasa</i>)	93	7	-
Khuzairi (<i>7 Hari Mencintaiku</i>)	51	13	36
Adham (<i>Kekasih Paksa Rela</i>)	79	-	21
Shah (<i>Jangan Benci Cintaku</i>)	90	-	10

As illustrated in Table 2, audience reactions are principally characterised by dominant readings which reflect a strong alignment with the portrayal of the male characters. While Zill, Raden and Adham are mostly viewed as admirable male protagonists, Shah is viewed as predominantly problematic as encoded from the drama text. Worth noting is that the reading positions depend on each narrative's overall message. The first four TVDs portrayed the male protagonists positively. *Jangan Benci Cintaku* however, first began to establish a positive portrayal of Shah which quickly turned negative due to the plot predominantly revolving around his infidelity. As such, the dominant reading position of the fifth TVD suggests audiences aligned with the overall negative portrayal of Shah.

Within the dominant reading positions, most of the comments that audiences made with regard to most of the male protagonists include an admiration towards them for being both authoritative figures as well as emotionally intelligent. An example of this is a comment made by an audience member of *Dia Isteri Luar Biasa* which states:

He is a husband who takes on his responsibility sincerely and is 100% perfect in this day. The Prophet had also loved his wives and taught them patiently.

The comment above highlights Raden's sincerity in being a responsible husband as well as doing so in an emotionally intelligent manner. These kinds of comments were similar for the dominant readings of the first four TVDs which illustrate a strong audience alignment with the male portrayals.

However, among the male protagonists from the first four TVDs, Khuzairi from *7 Hari Mencintaiku* had a considerable percentage of audience members who shared a high percentage (36%) of oppositional readings. Two factors that contributed to this oppositional reading are first due to Khuzairi's inability to be firm with his promises and decisions. The second factor is due to the existence of a problematic supporting

character, his mother, which made audiences empathise with the female protagonist's perspective. A comment states:

Okay, I wouldn't want a husband like Khuzairi. He is really unfair. Of course, one's mother is important but a wife is just as important. He should be fair, love both of them.

Meanwhile, among the male protagonists, Adham from *Kekasih Paksa Rela* also had a considerable percentage of viewers (21%) who had an oppositional reading towards his portrayal. This seemed to be attributed to his high ego in the beginning of the narrative. As Adham had initially married the female protagonist out of sheer responsibility, he was depicted as unaffectionate towards her in early episodes of the narrative.

As for the TVD *Jangan Benci Cintaku*, a small percentage (10%) of audience members felt that Shah was a victim of his wife's selfishness which legitimised his infidelity. The following is an example of a comment made by an audience member of *Jangan Benci Cintaku* with regards to Shah:

Poor Shah. In the early stages of marriage his wife is neither here nor there. If you're married you should act like you're married. She goes out at night and goes out with her friends, she wakes up late, leaving her husband to fend for himself. Of course, it opens doors for someone else to walk into his life.

Meanwhile, only *Rindu Awak 200%*, *Dia Isteri Luar Biasa* and *7 Hari Mencintaiku* had some negotiated readings by audiences as they align with most of the representations but try to rationalise the female position as performed by the female characters in these TVDs. An example comment which reflects a negotiated reading position is as follows:

Feel like slapping Zill, he should have been honest from the start.

This comment was made in reference to Zill from *Rindu Awak 200%*, who did a noble deed, but his flaw was that he had not told his wife of his whereabouts, which warranted her suspicion towards him. This kind of negotiated reading position suggests that some audience members believed that the male protagonists have flaws, but it highlights the fact that despite the acknowledgement, the male protagonists are still revered as these negotiated readings appeared in episodes where the men were depicted to have made a mistake.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study have shown that masculinity in popular Malay TVDs of the romance genre is constructed by balancing the male protagonists' sense of authority and emotional expressiveness. The male protagonists across all TVDs were consistently portrayed as dominant in the beginning of the TVDs, especially in relation to their female counterparts, who were depicted as problematic. As each narrative progresses, especially for the first four TVDs, the male characters' authority is softened through the integration of more feminine traits like affection and emotional vulnerability. Nevertheless, while this depiction may seem like a shift from hegemonic masculinity in the traditional sense, this double construction seems to act as a means to normalise and sustain it within a more acceptable, relational framework as the female characters also

become more yielding as each TVD progresses. This is in line with Storey (2018) and Strinati (2004) who contend that popular cultural products serve to normalise existing power structures which in this case is the authoritative role of men. However, this is done subtly by presenting this role in romantic narratives as necessary within the relational dynamics of the main male and female characters.

Hence, taking Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) perspective on redefined masculinities into account, these findings highlight a rearticulation of hegemonic masculinity rather than a disruption of it. The main features which include authority, control and moral leadership are performed but are reconfigured through the performance of emotional expressiveness in order to align with the romantic genre's conventions. This suggests that hegemonic masculinity is purposefully adapted to be performed and practiced under the disguise of emotional sensitivity and relational depth. This is possible due to the narratives being of the romantic genre which supports the notion that masculinity is not a fixed concept but rather fluid based on certain contexts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hence, in the romantic genre context, men being represented as able to show their emotions results in an extension to their masculinity rather than being a threat to it. This is a finding that is also consistent with studies done on Malaysian masculinity whereby Malaysian men believed in their need to adopt traditional masculine traits like authority and independence with feminine traits like emotional expressiveness and familial responsibility (Bakar, 2014; Khalaf et al., 2013; Radzi et al., 2018). Furthermore, it reflects the demand for softer masculinities in local media texts as observed by Ainslie (2017) but of which remain surface-based as these soft depictions of men seem to be hegemonic masculinity in disguise especially as most of the male protagonists in this analysis hold positions of power in terms of wealth and social positioning (Khai & Wahab, 2017) in the TVDs.

More importantly, this kind of masculinity is constructed in these TVDs relationally as male authority seems to be repeatedly justified through the portrayal of problematic female counterparts. This dynamic reinforces gendered power relations by positioning male authority as both necessary and legitimate. As such, female subordination as exhibited by the female protagonists as the narratives progress acts not only as a narrative device but also as a systematic way in which hegemonic masculinity is sustained. This in fact reflects patriarchal control in a more comprehensive sense as argued by Connell (1995) because it maintains the power position of men through the subservience of women.

Drawing from Hall's (1980/1997) encoding/decoding model, the prevalence of dominant reading positions by viewers suggests a high degree of alignment with the preferred meanings encoded in the TVDs. The main male characters are revered as ideal male figures who balance both authority and emotionality. As most of the TVDs' audiences admire the male protagonists for being responsible and emotionally intelligent, this suggests that masculinity is interpreted through dominance as well as morally-charged expectations of husbandhood. This can be seen in one of the comments which compares Raden's patience with his wife with the Prophet Muhammad's (Peace Be Upon Him) treatment of his wives. This kind of response highlights the notion that some viewers interpret ideal masculinity through Islamic models of marriage responsibility. Following Boo (2025), this suggests Islamic religiosity does not necessarily mean there is reverence for patriarchal practices within heterosexual relationships. Instead, the findings indicate that Malay Muslim masculinity is

constructed in a way that advocates for a softened version of male authority, where dominance is made acceptable through responsibility and care.

6. Conclusion

As a whole, the findings of this study have shown that masculinity in popular Malay TVDs is constructed through a culturally specific form of male dominance. This is done by representing the male protagonists as assertive, responsible, and emotionally expressive. Instead of challenging hegemonic masculinity, these TVDs repackage it to be more acceptable. The combination of a multimodal discourse analysis and an audience reception analysis contributes to research on masculinity in non-Western contexts by showing how male authority is constructed through both mediated forms and through audience alignment with the portrayals. However, since audience data was limited to YouTube comments, the findings may only reflect the views of fans of the TVDs rather than the wider audience. Hence, future studies should consider examining audience responses through interviews, focus groups or other platforms like online forums. Other than that, future work could also explore whether similar constructions of masculinity appear in other Malay media genres. Overall, this study underscores the need to examine how culturally specific ideals of masculinity are produced, circulated and normalised within popular media.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study analysed publicly available drama texts and audience comments that were accessible during the time of study from the free video-sharing platform, youtube.com. In order to protect users' privacy, no names or usernames were disclosed; comments in Bahasa Melayu were translated whereas comments in English were paraphrased to reduce traceability. Drama texts were only used for scholarly research and criticism and were treated in accordance with fair dealing principles under the Malaysian Copyright Act 1987.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest for this work.

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