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Reading Power Through the Camera: Gender Representation, Trauma, and Resistance in the Short Film Hotspot

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Abstract

This study analyzes how the Indonesian independent short film *Hotspot* constructs representations of sexual harassment, power relations, and female resistance through visual and narrative structures. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory, bell hoo ks's feminist critique of objectification, Michel Foucault's conception of power as relational practice, and Bordwell and Thompson's film theory, the study employs qualitative close-reading analysis at the scene and shot level, combined with feminist discourse analysis. Findings show that sexual harassment is represented through digital messages, tight framing, and nonverbal expressions of distress, while power dynamics manifest through the perpetrator's symbolic dominance, the victim's silence, and the structural vulnerability of female interns. Resistance emerges through solidarity, the act of recording, and a shift in aspect ratio from 4:3 to 16:9—marking a transition from confinement to the public sphere. This study contributes to Indonesian film studies by establishing a feminist analytical framework for independent short films and demonstrating how audiovisual texts produce systems of meaning regarding power, trauma, and gender-based violence.

Keywords: Gender Representation, Male Gaze, Sexual Harassment, Feminist Film Theory, Indonesian Independent Film.

1 INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence in Indonesia has increased significantly over the past decade, particularly in educational and workplace settings. Data from Komnas Perempuan [1] indicates that cases of sexual harassment in the educational sector rose from 5% to 12% over the past three years, with the majority of victims being women aged 15–24. UN Women [2] emphasizes that sexual harassment is rooted in unequal power dynamics rather than individual desire, while the WHO [3] notes that its impacts include long-term psychological trauma such as depression, chronic anxiety, and loss of self-confidence. The expansion of digital communication has further diversified forms of harassment, making this a complex social problem requiring multidisciplinary attention.

Regulatory progress in Indonesia has advanced with the enactment of Law No. 12 of 2022 on Criminal Acts of Sexual Violence (UU TPKS), recognized as a milestone in victim protection [4]. Legal scholars assess that the law provides stronger foundations for evidentiary procedures and victim recovery compared to prior frameworks [5]. A Human Rights Watch report [6] links this development to growing social movement pressure aligned with global feminist discourse that views legal regulation as a challenge to patriarchal structures [7][8]. Nevertheless, implementation continues to face cultural and structural barriers, confirming that legal reform alone has not fully transformed social relations at the practical level.

Academic research on gender representation in film provides an important lens for understanding these dynamics. Mulvey's [16] foundational analysis of the male gaze demonstrates how cinema structures the objectification of women's bodies. Bordwell and Thompson [26] and Sikov [30] further argue that technical decisions in film production shape ideological meaning. In the Indonesian context, Ula's [32] research on short films addressing sexual violence reveals how visual representations influence public perception, while Hidayat [34] examines power and resistance in contemporary Indonesian cinema. However, no academic study has specifically analyzed the short film *Hotspot* through a feminist and film theory framework—a gap this study addresses.

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The short film *Hotspot* was produced on February 28, 2024, in Sidoarjo, East Java, in collaboration with SEStudio, and screened at several film festivals. Its narrative depicts two female interns who experience sexual harassment from a gardener and ultimately find the courage to speak out. Because this study analyzes a film in which the researcher was involved as filmmaker, a reflexive approach is applied: the film is treated strictly as an object of study, interpreted through a systematic theoretical framework and scientific method rather than through creative preferences. This positionality is acknowledged as both a resource—providing direct access to production documentation—and a potential source of interpretive bias, which is managed through rigorous theoretical grounding and analytical distance.

This study addresses three research questions: (1) How does *Hotspot* represent experiences of sexual harassment in an internship setting through narrative and visual structures? (2) How are power relations represented in the interactions between characters? (3) How can *Hotspot* be positioned as a cultural text reflecting the dynamics of female resistance? The study's contribution is twofold: theoretically, it expands Indonesian film studies by applying an integrated feminist-film theory framework to an independent short film; practically, it offers filmmakers, educational institutions, and the creative industry a model for ethical, gender-conscious production analysis.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Feminist Film Theory

Feminist film theory examines how cinema functions as a site of ideological production that shapes cultural understandings of gender, identity, and power. Tong [10] identifies three principal strands relevant to film analysis: liberal feminism, which focuses on individual rights and equal representation; radical feminism, which interrogates structural patriarchy embedded in social and cultural institutions; and socialist feminism, which links gender oppression to economic and class structures. Within this framework, film is understood not merely as entertainment but as a discursive apparatus that reproduces or contests gender hierarchies. hooks [8] extends this analysis by arguing that objectification is not an individual experience but a social process perpetuating power imbalance through mechanisms that appear normative. This theoretical position establishes the ground for analyzing how independent films such as *Hotspot* both reflect and interrogate the conditions of their cultural production

2.2 The Male Gaze and Power Dynamics in Cinema

Mulvey's [16] concept of the male gaze remains one of the most cited frameworks in feminist film scholarship. Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema structures the viewing subject as masculine, positioning women's bodies as objects of spectacle and control. This cinematic arrangement, she contends, is not merely technical but ideological, reproducing asymmetrical power relations. Foucault's [27] theory of power as a network of relations, dispersed across everyday practices rather than concentrated in a single authority, complements this analysis by explaining how domination operates through subtle mechanisms of surveillance, spatial control, and discursive legitimation. Bordwell [25] and Monaco [14] extend these insights to the level of film technique, demonstrating that framing, lens choice, and spatial composition function as aesthetic instruments through which power relations are produced and naturalized. Together, these frameworks enable a systematic analysis of how visual choices in *Hotspot* embody and critique gendered power structures.

2.3 Representation of Sexual Violence in Film

Cinema has a documented capacity to represent, normalize, or critique sexual violence, depending on the ideological orientation of the text. McDonald [22] shows that power dynamics within the film industry are frequently manipulated to produce mechanisms of fear and psychological dependency, particularly affecting women in junior or intern positions. Caruth's [23] trauma theory provides a framework for understanding how film can represent the somatic and psychological effects of violence through nonverbal, bodily registers—silence, trembling, withdrawal. Nichols [29] argues that documentary and quasi-documentary aesthetics in film produce claims of social truth that carry particular ethical weight when addressing sensitive subjects such as gender-based violence. Fairclough's [28] critical discourse analysis further enables examination of how the language of film—including its visual and narrative choices—constructs social positions, legitimizes certain identities, and silences others.

2.4 Indonesian Independent Film and Gender Studies

Scholarly attention to Indonesian independent films as sites of gender analysis remains limited. Ula [32] examines how short films addressing sexual violence in Indonesia influence public perception and victim positioning, finding that visual representation significantly shapes audience interpretation of culpability and agency. Hidayat [34] analyzes power and female resistance in contemporary Indonesian cinema,

identifying recurring narrative strategies that either reinforce or challenge patriarchal structures. Pratiwi [17] documents how women in junior professional positions face compounded pressure from gender norms and institutional power imbalances, a finding directly relevant to the internship context depicted in *Hotspot*. Wicaksono [33] notes that Indonesian film scholarship has disproportionately focused on mainstream commercial productions, leaving independent short films under-analyzed as research subjects. This study addresses that gap by positioning *Hotspot* as a primary analytical object within feminist film studies.

3 RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs qualitative textual analysis with a close-reading approach to film, combined with feminist discourse analysis as its interpretive framework. This approach follows the tradition of film research that places the film text at the center of inquiry as the primary source of data [29]. Rather than testing a hypothesis or identifying causal variables—approaches more suited to quantitative designs—this study pursues an interpretive analytical focus on three interrelated dimensions: (1) the visual and narrative construction of sexual harassment; (2) the representation of power relations in character interactions; and (3) the articulation of female resistance through bodily, spatial, and narrative strategies.

Data sources include: (1) the short film *Hotspot* [36]; (2) the final draft screenplay [35]; and (3) the production document *Menjadi Sutradara Film Pendek Hotspot* [37]. The unit of analysis is the scene and shot level, with particular attention to framing, spatial composition, gesture, dialogue, and the dynamics between characters as meaning-making elements. Data collection involved intensive viewing and systematic scene archiving, organized by three analytical categories: representations of power, practices of domination, and moments of resistance.

The analytical procedure proceeded in three steps. First, scenes were archived by category through repeated viewing and notation. Second, visual symbols, character dynamics, and dialogue patterns were coded using thematic categories drawn from the theoretical framework: the male gaze [16], objectification [8], and Foucauldian power networks [27]. Third, coded categories were interpreted in relation to the research questions, with reference to film-theoretical concepts of mise-en-scène, cinematography, and narrative structure [26]. Fairclough's [28] discourse analysis framework was applied to examine how the film constructs social positions regarding gender, power, and institutional setting. This procedure ensures that interpretation is systematic, theoretically grounded, and responsive to the analytical focus of the study.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Female Body as Site of Power: Representation of Sexual Harassment

Power relations in visual representations operate through gender constructions rooted in a long history of social, institutional, and symbolic legitimation. According to hooks [8], patriarchy operates through a structure of meaning that positions the female body as a site of control, moral evaluation, and an instrument for legitimizing norms. Foucault [27] interprets power as a network dispersed within everyday practices—not a singular authority but a diffuse system operating through discourse, space, and the body. Cinema, as Bordwell and Thompson [26] argue, translates these abstract power relations into concrete visual and narrative choices that determine how audiences understand characters, spaces, and social dynamics. This section addresses the first research question by analyzing how *Hotspot* represents experiences of sexual harassment through visual language, screenplay, and character dynamics.

The film's visual structure demonstrates how the camera functions as an instrument shaping space, bodily movement, and the psychological experience of female characters. Monaco [14] argues that framing and image composition are narrative choices determining how audiences interpret character authority, vulnerability, or subordination. The production document *Menjadi Sutradara Film Pendek Hotspot* [37] details the use of a 4:3 aspect ratio, a 35mm lens, and the tatami shot technique to create a confined space restricting the female characters' physical expression.



Figure 1. Production Document 'Menjadi Sutradara Film Pendek Hotspot' Page 4

These choices align with Mulvey's framework on the politics of the gaze [16], in which the camera functions as an agent that positions women's bodies within a space of symbolic powerlessness. Unlike mainstream Hollywood productions where the male gaze is often naturalised as the default viewing position, *Hotspot* employs a reflexive aesthetic that makes the spatial constraint itself visible—a strategy also identified by Ula [32] in her analysis of Indonesian short films that

foreground the victim's phenomenological experience rather than the spectator's voyeuristic pleasure.

The experience of sexual harassment is depicted through a scene in which Kia receives an explicit digital message from Firman. This scene illustrates how control operates through digital media as an instrument of power, a non-physical act that nonetheless generates fear, confusion, and self-subordination. McDonald [22] notes a similar dynamic in the global film industry, where perpetrators exploit hierarchical structures and professional titles to control victims without requiring physical presence. In the Indonesian context, Pratiwi [17] documents that women in junior positions face compounded institutional and gendered pressures, a pattern the film translates into visual terms through Kia's tense body and anxious expression.

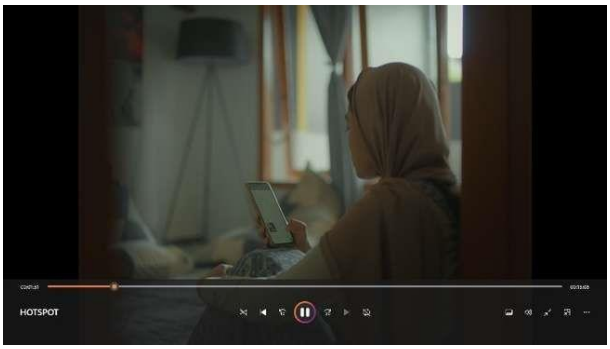


Figure 2. Scene in which Kia receives an explicit digital message from Firman

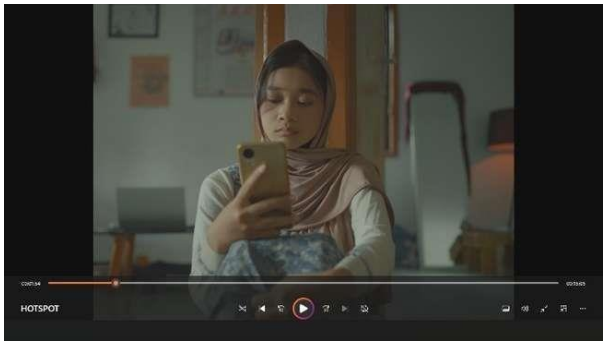


Figure 3. Kia's facial expression shifts to visible anxiety

The representation of trauma in Kia and Yessa's bodies becomes increasingly evident through silence, tears, and minimal gesture, the nonverbal language of their experience. The WHO [3] documents that trauma from sexual abuse often manifests through somatic responses, including inability to speak, shallow breathing, and withdrawal. Bordwell and Thompson [26] note that cinema can depict psychological states through visual language without dialogue. Caruth's [23] trauma theory further explains the body as an archive of experience, preserving traces of power and fear that resist verbalization. The following scene enacts this archival function.



Figure 4. Scene in which Kia cries in her bedroom

The directorial decisions documented in Figure 1 reveal that the 4:3 aspect ratio and tight framing are not merely aesthetic choices but representational strategies that confine women's bodies within a restricted frame. Monaco [14] notes that framing produces representational hierarchies controlling characters' range of motion. By bringing the camera close to the female body (Figures 2, 3, 4), the film forces the viewer to confront the character's emotions directly while simultaneously restricting her space to move. This technique addresses the first research question: the film uses visual strategies to depict harassment without explicit scenes, demonstrating that the visual space functions as a psychological mechanism constraining the body within a power structure dictating her social and emotional position.

Firman's presence demonstrates how a perpetrator can remain the center of control even when rarely appearing in close-ups. Mulvey [16] notes that within cinematic patriarchy, power can operate through narrative, instruction, and symbolic domination without requiring visual presence. Project Multatuli [18] identifies this pattern in real-world cases: perpetrators in the creative industry exploit symbolic positions to control relationships. In *Hotspot*, Firman controls through digital messages, gazes, and interpersonal proximity that create psychological discomfort.

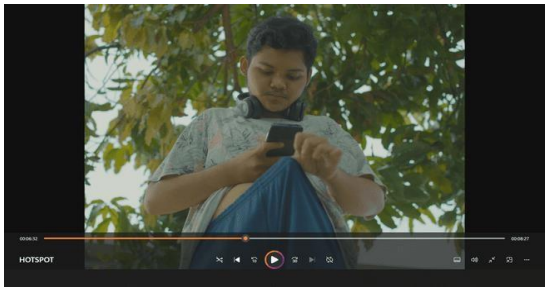


Figure 5. Firman prepares to send harassing digital content

An analysis of the four female characters, Kia, Yessa, Irene, and Angel—reveals how narrative and visual structures work in tandem to portray sexual harassment as a form of power that regulates the body, emotions, and space. hooks [8] argues that women's bodies serve as arenas where ideological control is tested through mechanisms of domination, internalization, and resistance. This collective experience shifts from internal pressure toward a shared consciousness, depicted in the following scene.



Figure 6. Kia, Yessa, Irene, and Angel begin to share their experiences

4.2 Power Relations, Interaction Structures, and the Production of Submission

Power relations in *Hotspot* are evident through patterns of character interaction that place the perpetrator in a dominant position and the victim in a subordinate one. Foucault [27] understands power as a relationship constantly negotiated through social practices that appear ordinary yet are laden with subjugation. In *Hotspot*, the positions of Kia, Yessa, Angel, and Irene are not determined by individual capabilities but by relational structures that have positioned perpetrators as figures of authority through their access and symbolic legitimacy. hooks [8] asserts that gender domination operates through the body, narrative, and social situations that normalize fear as part of psychological discipline. This section addresses the second research question: power in the film operates not through isolated aggressive actions but through a network of interpersonal representations that produce fear and silence.

The scene in which Kia reads Firman's message demonstrates how power relations emerge through digital communication, influencing the victim's emotions even when the perpetrator is physically absent. Bordwell [25] states that cinematic interactions are constructed not only through direct dialogue but also through objects, spaces, and media that produce specific dramatic effects. McDonald [22] notes a parallel in the global creative industry, where professional positions are used to regulate victims' behavior through implicit rather than explicit threat.

2 INT. RUANG TAMU KANTOR - DAY 2

Sebuah rumah kontrakan yang juga digunakan sebagai kantor Production House.

Terdengar suara notifikasi pesan Whatsapp berturut-turut. KIA duduk bersandar dinding sembari membiarkan runtutan pesan masuk pada ponsel yang ia tatap. ANGEL keluar dari dapur sambil mengelap tangannya di pinggang. Angel mengambil sebuah minuman kemasan di kulkas lalu memberikan pada Kia.

ANGEL
Dia lagi?

KIA
Aku blokir ya?!

Kia memandang Angel yang sibuk dengan berkas-berkas yang terletak di atas meja dekat sebuah laptop.

ANGEL
Nggak usah! Semua chat dan apa pun yang dia kirim jangan ada yang dihapus! Ntar aku aja yang backup biar kita punya bukti.

KIA
Masak aku kudu ngeladenin dia terus? Aku udah nggak kuat!

ANGEL
Udah gapapa.. Tenang ada aku.

Angel seketika memeluk Kia yang tak kuasa menahan tangis.

Figure 7. Scene in which Kia reads Firman message

The dynamics among the female characters reveal a spectrum of responses to the power dynamics they experience, ranging from silence to openly questioning one another's decisions. hooks [8] argues that women's solidarity does not arise automatically, as responses are shaped by social and cultural contexts and the internalization of patriarchal values. Bordwell and Thompson [26] explain that group dialogue can serve as a narrative turning point revealing the tension between fear and the urge to resist. This scene demonstrates that power relations occur not only between perpetrators and victims but also within the dynamics of solidarity being negotiated—a finding consistent with Hidayat's [34] observation that Indonesian films often depict female solidarity as a gradual, non-heroic process.

The directorial choices documented in *Menjadi Sutradara Film Pendek Hotspot* [37] place the women's group conversation in a single static-camera space to depict power negotiation without excessive dramatization. Monaco [14] explains that such decisions allow space to become a rhetorical arena where

characters confront the moral and psychological consequences of the actions being considered.



Figure 8. Bedroom scene: the four characters negotiate their respons

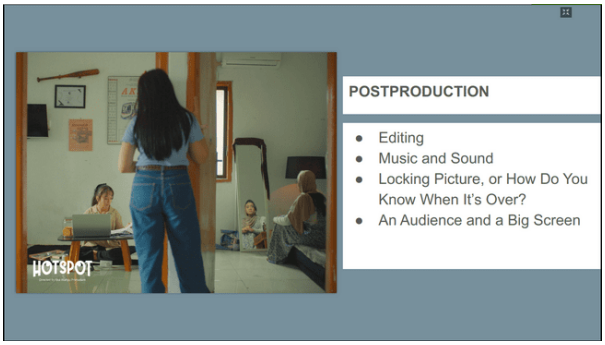


Figure 9. Production document page 10 : directorial approach to the group conversation

In the living room scene, the placement of the four characters sitting in a row reveals an effort to redistribute awareness and courage as a strategy to alleviate Kia's pressure. This structure illustrates how power dynamics are represented through shifts in spatial positioning, dialogue intensity, and nonverbal expression—a dynamic also identified by Ula [32] in her analysis of solidarity as a narrative turning point in Indonesian short films on gender-based violence.

Firman's absence from key scenes suggests that power operates as a shadow influencing victims' actions without physical presence. Mulvey [16] argues that in patriarchal cinema, masculine figures serve as the center of control structures even when not visually dominant. Project Multatuli [18] identified a parallel pattern in documented cases of sexual violence in the Indonesian creative industry, where perpetrators leverage reputation and position as a threat not requiring direct articulation. This mechanism of absence becomes an aesthetic device reinforcing the impression of power as invisible yet significantly influential—a strategy that distinguishes *Hotspot* from films that rely on graphic depiction of the perpetrator to convey threat [22].

KIA
Aku takut nyebar Angel!

ANGEL
Kamu tuh korban kok takut lapor?!

KIA
Resikonya itu lho..

ANGEL
Ya udah diemin aja?!

Yessa menatap Angel dengan tatapan frustasi.

YESSA
Kok dibiarin?! Ntar Firman tambah ngawur loh! Kamu mau kena juga?

KIA
Nah?!.

Kia dan Angel terkejut. Irene segera mengalihkan dengan pertanyaan.

IRENE
Ehh... Kita lapor orang kantor aja yuk! Pasti mereka punya solusi.

Kembali hening, semua mengarahkan pandangannya pada Irene yang tampak kikuk. Angel memutar bola matanya sambil mengangguk pelan, menimbang saran Irene yang kini menatap tajam ke Kia, menunggu respon.

ANGEL
Kalo ternyata mereka gamau tanggungjawab, gimana?

KIA
Atau parahnya kita yang dikeluarin?

YESSA
Nggak bakal selebay itu kalii..

IRENE
Ahh! Kita bikin video aja!

YESSA
Terus kalau udah bikin video?

ANGEL
Share di sosmed lah! Viralin!!

KIA
Aku takut_ sama konsekuensinya. Gimana kalo jadi makin parah?

Angel menatap Kia penuh empati, kemudian memegang tangan Kia yang menggaruk untuk menghentikannya.

Figure 10. Living room scene : spatial redistribution of agency among the four characters

4.3 Power Relations, Interaction Structures, and the Production of Submission

The film positions female resistance as a cultural response to power structures that suppress women's bodily experiences and voices within creative production spaces. hooks [8] explains that resistance arises from a critical awareness of one's position within the patriarchal system—operating through symbols, social relations, and narrative control. Bordwell [25] states that the development of a character arc reveals a shift in the character's self-perception as part of the narrative's structure of meaning. This section addresses the third research question: *Hotspot* can be positioned as a cultural text reflecting the dynamics of female resistance precisely because it portrays this shift as a process rather than an event.



Figure 11. A range of emotional expressions across the female characters

In the group dialogue scene, solidarity serves as the primary medium for transforming women's positions from victims to agents capable of disrupting mechanisms of social control. Sikov [30] explains that emotionally charged dialogue scenes function as narrative catalysts propelling characters out of subordinate positions. hooks [8] defines feminist solidarity as a political form that breaks down psychological isolation and fosters more equitable relationships. This is consistent with Pratiwi's [17] finding that in Indonesian professional contexts, collective support among junior female workers significantly mitigates the psychological impact of institutional harassment.

INT. KANTOR - DAY 14

Kia telah siap membuat video. Angel membantu menata ponsel.
Kia mengatur napas dan.... (teriak)

MATCH CUT TO:

BACK TO SCENE 1

YESSA meluapkan amarahnya, berteriak sekencang-kencangnya.

YESSA
Aaaa.....

Figure 12. Angel, Irene, and Yessa provide support to Kia

Resistance in the film is not represented through physical confrontation or heroic narrative but through acts of speaking out and rejecting bodily discipline imposed by perpetrators. Rahmadi [19] notes that silence frequently functions as a power mechanism limiting women's access to truth-telling and justice. Monaco [14] explains that affective narrative moments such as these mark shifts in meaning within the story's structure. Butler [7] interprets the public articulation of trauma as a performativity of resistance that reclaims the body's agency from symbolic subjugation.



Figure 13. Kia accompained by Angel, records her experience on video

The visual dimensions of the film construct resistance through spatial compositions that evolve as the female character decides to document and voice her experience. As described in the production document [37], the shift in aspect ratio from 4:3 to 16:9 (Figure 1) symbolizes a spatial expansion after psychological boundaries are crossed. Monaco [14] asserts that visual contrasts in film can function as markers of ideological shifts in power relations. This visual transformation—also noted as a strategy in Ula's [32] analysis of Indonesian short films—demonstrates that women's bodies are no longer confined within a narrow frame isolating their emotions: they enter a representational space that accommodates their full subjectivity.



Figure 14. Kia decide to record her experience, expanding from private to public sphere

Video recording (Figures 13 and 14) expands the terrain of female resistance from the narrative space to the broader public sphere. Dovey and Rose [24] note that audiovisual technology has become a political instrument enabling victims to produce cultural traces as evidence and resistance against oppressive power

structures. hooks [8] views speaking out in public spaces as a means of reclaiming authority over women's bodies and stories. Kantor and Twohey's [20] investigation of systematic abuse in the Hollywood industry demonstrates how such recordings can catalyse institutional accountability—a social function the film both depicts and enacts by entering the public sphere through festival distribution. Thus, the technology depicted in the film functions as a tool for reproducing agency: resistance is simultaneously performative and communicative.

5 CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the short film *Hotspot* constructs a coherent system of meaning regarding power, trauma, and female resistance through three interrelated representational strategies. First, it employs tight framing, a 4:3 aspect ratio, and close-body cinematography to position the female body as spatially constrained and psychologically pressured—a visual language of domination that operates without explicit depiction of violence. Second, it represents power as a relational network operating through digital messages, interpersonal gestures, and the symbolic weight of absence, consistent with Foucauldian [27] and Mulveyan [16] frameworks. Third, it portrays female resistance not as a heroic individual act but as a collective, processual practice grounded in solidarity, emotional acknowledgment, and the performative act of recording—a pattern that aligns with findings from both global feminist scholarship [8] and Indonesian gender studies [17][32].

The study's academic contribution is twofold. Theoretically, it establishes an integrated feminist-film analytical framework that can be applied to Indonesian independent short films—an under-examined corpus in the existing literature [33]. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of combining close-reading film analysis with Fairclough's [28] critical discourse analysis and trauma theory [23] for interpreting gender-based violence in audiovisual texts. These contributions extend the Indonesian film studies canon in the direction advocated by Hidayat [34] and Ula [32], who call for more systematic feminist reading of independent productions.

This study has several limitations. The analysis is restricted to a single short film, limiting the generalisability of findings. The researcher's dual role as filmmaker and analyst introduces potential interpretive bias that, while managed through theoretical rigor and analytical distance, cannot be entirely eliminated. Additionally, the study does not include audience reception data, leaving questions about how viewers interpret the film's representations unaddressed.

Future research should extend this framework to comparative analysis of multiple Indonesian short films addressing gender-based violence, incorporate audience reception studies to examine how representations are negotiated in social spaces [24], and integrate institutional analysis to understand how production ethics and organizational structures enable or constrain equitable representation. Distributing analytical frameworks of this kind to educational institutions and film communities has potential to foster both critical literacy and safer creative production practices [13][15].

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