A NEGOTIATING GENDER AND CULTURE: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF ANGGINI'S COSTUME IN *WIRO SABLENG* 1995 AND 2018

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ABSTRACT

Different cinematic contexts reflect filmmakers' varied perspectives and intentions, shaping the visual ideologies presented on screen. One principal means by which filmmakers articulate such ideologies is through costume design. Costumes function not merely as clothing but as symbolic artefacts that convey social, cultural, and ideological meanings. They play a vital role in shaping audience perceptions of characters and their roles while revealing more profound insights into identity, values, and worldviews. Previous research has highlighted how costumes contribute to character identity, particularly in terms of status, role, and psychological attributes. This study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and content analysis to explore the denotative and connotative meanings of costumes. The aim is to deepen the understanding of costume as a visual medium and to examine its ideological function, particularly in character representation. The analysis focuses on the character Anggini in the *Wiro Sableng* series (1995) and the movie (2018). Findings indicate that Anggini's costume in the 1995 series reflects traditional cultural values, emphasising modesty, elegance, and femininity. In contrast, the 2018 film's costumes portray female strength more explicitly, influenced by Western aesthetics and the film's multinational context. A structural costume pattern for female warrior characters typically consists of traditional female attire on the upper body, accompanied by male or unisex garments below for enhanced agility, and functional footwear for combat. These findings offer practical insights for emerging costume or fashion designers working with female warrior archetypes in Indonesian cinema.

INTRODUCTION

The story of *Wiro Sableng* is one of the popular cultures in Indonesia that has undergone various adaptations and changes in different versions. This martial arts story has evolved from a novel into a comic, a television series, and a feature film. The adaptation of *Wiro Sableng* into an audio-visual form has developed into both a television series and a feature film. These two adaptations were produced in different years. The *Wiro Sableng* story was first created as a television series in 1995 by Vision Media Asia, while the feature film was directed by Lifelike Pictures in 2018 [1] [2].

Film is not just an entertainment art form but also a powerful medium for conveying the interests (ideologies) of the creators. In the context of film, these interests may refer to values or ideas the director, producer, or other creative teams wish to communicate. These interests may encompass various aspects, ranging from politics and social issues to culture and the filmmakers' personal worldview [3] [4]. Therefore, different filmmakers in the *Wiro Sableng* television series and film can create dynamics in perspective and interpretation.

This dynamic is evident in the television series *Wiro Sableng* (1995) and the feature film *Wiro Sableng* (2018). Although both use a 16th-century Nusantara setting, the two versions of *Wiro Sableng* showcase different visual styles and interpretations of the setting. The setting in the *Wiro Sableng* television series remains focused on the Javanese landscape, mirroring the novel. In contrast, the *Wiro Sableng* movie cinema employs a general 16th-century Nusantara setting without identifying itself with a specific location. This dynamic suggests that there are differing interests among the filmmakers.

One way to communicate ideologies in a film is through visual elements, such as costumes. Structurally, costumes are not merely clothes worn by characters, but also serve as symbols that express character [5] [6], backgrounds, and values the filmmakers wish to emphasise [7]. In the context of film, costumes serve as an effective tool in shaping the audience's perception of the character and, on a broader level, the ideological message the filmmakers intend to convey. Therefore, costumes are designed to be displayed and framed in a way that communicates a visual ideology.

Fairclough defines ideology as a set of beliefs, values, and assumptions constructed through language and influencing social structures and practices. For Fairclough, ideologies are not simply abstract beliefs but are embedded in discourse, meaning they are enacted and reinforced through everyday language use. In Fairclough's view, ideologies serve to justify the power dynamics and social inequalities present in society [8] [9].

Visual ideology refers to the way visual representations, such as images, advertisements, and media content, convey underlying beliefs, values, and power structures. Just like language, visual elements can be used to promote particular worldviews, reinforce social norms, or challenge the status quo [10] [11]. Visual ideology shapes how people perceive reality, often by presenting specific perspectives as natural or unquestionable, while marginalising others. These visual cues can subtly influence people's attitudes, behaviours, and political or social beliefs. A key aspect of visual ideology is how visual elements communicate meaning through signs and symbols, often in a way that is less direct than language but equally powerful in influencing thought and action [10].

Costume ideology refers to the visual elements in costume design that support the character or storyline and convey specific ideological, social, and cultural values. Costumes in films or other visual media often carry deeper symbolic meanings related to the filmmakers' subjectivity or dominant values in society at the time of the film's production [12] [13].

Research on the costumes of characters in films has been extensively conducted. Based on research by Anderson through models and materiality, a costume can serve as an effective visual communication medium for telling a story in a film [14]. Additionally, Jung and Kim studied costumes and makeup in the movie Anna Karenina, highlighting how these elements support the characters within the film [15]. Yin found narratively that the status, traits, and emotional changes of characters are expressed through costume models in drama films [16]. Choi et al. used a descriptive narrative to examine costume images in movies and investigate how fashion and style in films reflect psychological changes in the main character and their identity formation process [17].

Previous studies have generally focused on the meaning of costumes in character identity formation. This formation is related to occupations, social status, character roles (such as antagonist or protagonist), and even psychological changes. Therefore, the meaning of costumes in terms of visual ideology can still be further researched.

Moreover, the research methods previously used were mostly limited to narrative analysis. Descriptive narrative analysis effectively examines the relationship between costumes and film narratives, making the connections clear. However, the drawback of descriptive analysis is that it tends to focus more on the relationship between costumes and characters or storylines rather than the technical and aesthetic aspects of the costume design itself. This can overlook material, design details, and the craftsmanship behind costumes, which serve as visual objects. Therefore, an alternative approach is needed to study costumes without losing the details of costumes as visual objects while still obtaining meaning from themselves. For this reason, this research will employ Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis with a content analysis approach.

Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis is one of the critical methods and theoretical approaches in studying signs, symbols, and meaning in visual culture. Barthes, a French philosopher and semiotician, developed a semiotic theory that examines how meaning is communicated through signs, which can include words, images, sounds, or even costumes in films [18] [19] [20]. This semiotic analysis can be applied to both denotative and connotative meanings in costumes. By understanding how these signs work, the visual ideology embedded in costumes can be identified. In addition, content analysis focuses on one or several visual elements in costumes that can be analysed objectively, such as design, colour, shape, texture, and composition. This approach emphasises the technical and aesthetic aspects of costumes, as well as how these visual elements function to support character and storyline visualisation in the film. Therefore, this study aims to complement the reference for the use of methods and interpretation in understanding and meaning of visual objects, particularly the costumes of characters in film media.

METHOD

The data used in this research is non-numeric, and therefore, this research is classified as qualitative. This study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, utilising the concepts of denotative and connotative meaning [18].

Theoretically, Barthes borrows the concept of signs from Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, who divides signs into two parts: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the physical form of the sign, something that can be seen, heard, or felt, such as words, images, or objects. The signified is the meaning or concept contained in the sign; the mental representation we form based on the signifier [18] [21].

One of Barthes' significant contributions to semiotic theory is the development of the concept of myth. Barthes argued that advertisements, films, and other forms of popular culture form "modern myths", which are specific ways social meanings and ideologies are conveyed through signs. According to Barthes, myths are not traditional stories or fairy tales, but rather how popular culture constructs meanings and social values that are perceived as "natural" or "universal." These myths are often hidden in visual symbols and everyday cultural practices, reinforcing specific ideologies.
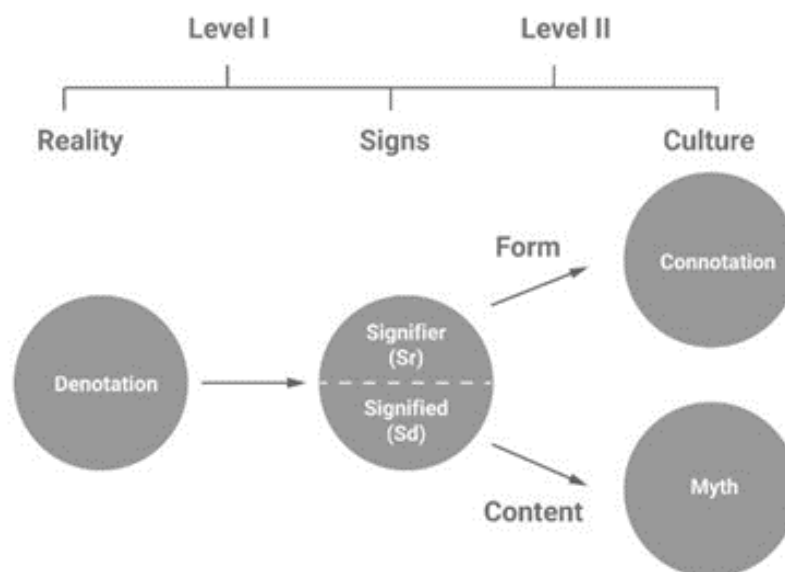
Figure 1. Two levels of meaning in Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory (Tommi et al., 2022)

The diagram in Figure 1 illustrates how a sign carries a literal meaning (denotation) and symbolic and ideological meanings (connotation and myth). In the context of cultural and media studies, Barthes' analysis helps us understand how everyday objects can be embedded with deep cultural and ideological messages.

The approach used in this research is content analysis with a case study on the *Wiro Sableng* television series (1995) and the *Wiro Sableng* film (2018). This content analysis will focus on the costume structure used to create a pattern that depicts a female warrior character. Furthermore, the interpretation of visual ideology in the characters' costumes remains broad. Therefore, this research will limit the analysis to meanings related to gender ideology. The study will also narrow its scope to focus specifically on the analysed warrior character, Anggini.

The choice of Anggini as the focus character is based on her role as a supporting female character and the significant differences in her costume portrayal across the two versions of *Wiro Sableng*. Anggini's character was selected because of her distinct and evolving costume design, which highlights the changes in her representation as a female warrior in the 1995 series and the 2018 film adaptation. This choice enables a comparative analysis of how the portrayal of a female warrior character through costume conveys different gender ideologies in the context of both traditional and modern interpretations of femininity and strength.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of the *Wiro Sableng* Television Series, Movie, and Its Cultural Context.
Wiro Sableng is a work of martial arts fiction authored by Bastian Tito and holds a significant place within the corpus of Indonesian popular culture [23] [24]. The narrative follows the journey of its central character, Wiro Sableng, an eccentric warrior renowned for his bravery, supernatural powers, and unorthodox approach to confronting evil. While both the 1995 television series and the 2018 feature film draw upon the same core storyline, Wiro's adventures and his struggle for justice, their narrative and aesthetic approaches reflect markedly different cultural, political, and technological contexts.

The 2018 film adaptation of *Wiro Sableng* adopts a more modern and cinematic sensibility, strongly emphasising character depth and a darker, more serious visual aesthetic. This storytelling mode signifies a broader shift in Indonesian cinema towards global mainstream trends, favouring character-driven narratives, psychological exploration, and advanced CGI technology, as well as sophisticated cinematography. In contrast, the 1995 television series foregrounded humour, visual simplicity, and a lighter narrative tone, which were characteristic of Indonesian television culture during the New Order era.

These differences may be understood within the framework of Indonesia's socio-political transformations. The year 1995 marked the latter phase of the New Order regime, during which authoritarian political structures still prevailed, albeit amid emerging social tensions. At the time, popular culture tended to prioritise local and traditional values, responding to ideological constraints and forming part of state cultural policy [25]. Thus, the 1995 Wiro Sableng series strongly expressed local identity through its narrative, costume design, and characterisation, all of which were rooted in Javanese cultural symbolism.

In contrast, the 2018 film was produced in a vastly different landscape. By then, Indonesia had entered the Reformasi era, characterised by broader democratisation, openness to globalisation, and a burgeoning national creative industry [26], [27]. In this context, Indonesian cinema no longer functioned solely as a medium for local expression but also as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy and participation in the global entertainment industry [28]. The *Wiro Sableng* (2018), co-produced with international studios such as Fox International Productions, illustrates an attempt to bridge traditional Indonesian elements with global market sensibilities through more intricate visuals and a more serious narrative tone. This reflects what Iwabuchi describes in terms of cultural hybridisation as a process in which local identity and global influences are negotiated and blended within cultural products [29].

Thus, the divergence between the two versions of *Wiro Sableng* lies not merely in visual style or plot development, but in how each articulates Indonesian cultural values, identity, and aspirations in two distinct historical moments. The 1995 series served as a mirror of the desire for a stable local identity amidst socio-political transition, while the 2018 film represents a visually expressive and creative medium for Indonesian cultural production that seeks to present itself in a modern and globally competitive form.

The Character of Anggini in *Wiro Sableng*

In the *Wiro Sableng* narrative, the character of Anggini occupies a significant position within the heroic mythos, functioning not only as a potential romantic partner for the protagonist but also as a symbol of evolving female agency in Indonesian popular culture. Anggini is introduced as a beautiful young woman endowed with formidable mystical powers. She is trained under the tutelage of Dewa Tuak, a powerful hermit and spiritual teacher. Notably, Dewa Tuak and Wiro's mentor, Guru Sinto, had previously agreed to arrange a marriage between their respective disciples, Anggini and Wiro. However, this planned union remains unrealised, serving more as a narrative background than a central plot [2], [30].

In the 1995 television adaptation, Anggini is portrayed following traditional gender expectations. She appears shy, gentle, and emotionally reserved, particularly in the presence of Wiro, for whom she expresses romantic admiration. However, this external softness belies an inner strength and spiritual prowess. Her costume, demeanour, and speech patterns align with the Javanese ideal of "*wanita halus*", a woman who is refined, modest, and emotionally restrained [31], [32]. Despite these characteristics, Anggini is also depicted as a warrior with supernatural abilities, suggesting female representation: femininity is maintained on the

surface, while strength is embedded as an internal quality. This aligns with what Butler describes as "*gender performativity*", a repetition of acts that align with cultural norms, while still allowing subversive strength beneath the surface [33]

By contrast, the 2018 cinematic version of Anggini presents a reconfiguration of the character to align more closely with contemporary ideals of female empowerment. Here, Anggini is more vocal, assertive, and independent. She explicitly rejects being romantically bound by her master's arrangement, indicating her refusal to be objectified or instrumentalised within patriarchal traditions. Instead, she articulates her ambition to become a warrior and exercise autonomy over her destiny [30]. Her character arc in the 2018 film reflects broader shifts in gender representation influenced by both feminist discourse and global cinematic conventions.

Anggini's updated personality is that of a character who possesses agency, physical power, and the ability to navigate her narrative on her terms [34]. She joins Wiro in the quest to defeat Mahesa Birawa, not as a love interest but as an equal partner in combat and purpose. This marks a departure from earlier representations, which often confined female characters to passive or supportive roles.

In summary, Anggini's character evolution from the soft-spoken mystical figure of 1995 to the assertive warrior of 2018 serves as a microcosm of the broader transformation in gender representation within Indonesian popular media. This evolution reflects changing socio-cultural norms and the increasing influence of global feminist and cinematic discourses on local storytelling practices.

Costume Analysis of the Character Anggini in the *Wiro Sableng* Television Series (1995)

Structurally, Anggini's costume consists of two distinct parts: an upper part and a lower part. The upper part includes a *kemben* (a traditional wrap-around garment) and a modified kebaya. In contrast, the lower part consists of *pangsi* pants (loose pants), complemented with a sash at the waist and gladiator sandals. The structure is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Structure of Anggini's character's costume in *Wiro Sableng* 1995

Kemben is a women's garment made of fabric wrapped around the body, especially around the chest and upper body (breast cloth). The *kemben* is traditionally worn by women at cultural events or ceremonies in Java [35]. The kemben has a strong cultural connotation related to traditional elegance, simplicity, and modesty. In many contexts of Indonesian culture, women wear the kemben to reflect beauty and femininity.

Like the *kemben*, the kebaya is a traditional Indonesian women's garment characterised by a fitted top, typically featuring an open-front design. It is generally paired with a long cloth or a batik sarong. The kebaya also carries a connotative meaning of femininity, representing a woman's role in presenting herself elegantly and with attention to appearance, especially in social contexts that value modesty and traditional beauty.

The lower part of the costume consists of *pangsi* pants and gladiator sandals. Celana *pangsi* are traditional pants with a loose fit, typically worn by men. These pants are commonly used as conventional attire in Java and Sumatra. The *pangsi* pants can be interpreted as a symbol of physical strength and practicality, implying that the wearer should be strong and able to work freely without the constraints of complicated clothing. It also reflects the freedom of movement required for many male activities, such as work and other pursuits.

Furthermore, gladiator sandals are a type of footwear with a distinctive design, featuring straps that wrap around the foot, typically from the toes to the ankles or even higher. These sandals were inspired by gladiators in ancient Rome and were designed to provide comfort and protection during battles. Gladiator sandals carry the connotative meaning of strength, struggle, and courage. The design of the straps wrapped around the foot resembles the appearance of gladiators fighting in the arena, creating associations with the struggles of life or even resistance [36].

Costume Analysis of the Character Anggini in the *Wiro Sableng* Film (2018)

In the *Wiro Sableng* film (2018), Anggini appears strong and brave explicitly. She is wearing a costume that blends ethnic elements with a modern and practical style, as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Structure of Anggini's character's costume in *Wiro Sableng* 2018

Anggini's costume features a modified *hoba-hoba*, a traditional Batak woman's garment [37]. The modified *hoba-hoba* consists of an inner piece (a long-sleeved blouse) and an outer piece (a section of Ulos fabric tied with a sash around the waist).

To complete her upper attire, Anggini wears modified jogger pants. Jogger pants are designed to fit snugly in the ankles (with snug cuffs). Men typically wear these pants for sports activities or comfort and flexibility. The pants' characteristics allow the wearer to move freely, which supports the primary need for performing combat scenes.

Anggini also has several accessories that complement her primary costume. She carries a sash (*selendang*) and silver nails as weapons. The sash appears ordinary, as it is a standard accessory in women's clothing. However, beneath its simple appearance, it holds tremendous power.

Additionally, Anggini uses arm and leg protectors, as well as boots. The arm protectors serve as a place for Anggini to store her silver nails. These protectors are engraved, reflecting a touch of traditional culture. The arm and leg protectors serve a protective function and also make a powerful aesthetic statement that reinforces her identity as a warrior. Moreover, her boots are designed with practicality, supporting her movements.

Costume Structure Pattern of the Anggini as a Female Warrior Character

Structurally, the costume of the character Anggini has the same structure in both versions. The upper garment is always associated with traditional women's clothing, such as the *kemben*, kebaya, and *hoba-hoba*. However, the lower garment is more commonly associated with men's clothing, such as pants like pangsi and joggers. One interesting aspect is the use of traditional fabrics in both costumes: batik fabric (in the television series) and Ulos and Bali's woven fabric (in the feature film). The traditional fabrics are used differently in each version. Overall, the female warrior costume structure is illustrated in Figure 4 below.
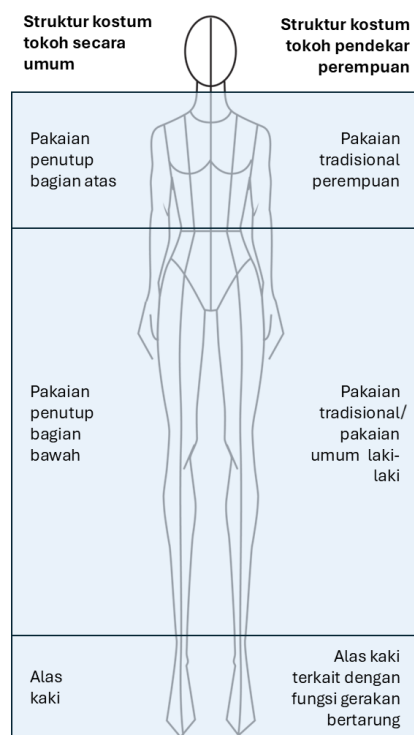

Figure 4. Structure of the female warrior character's costume

Visual Ideology of Anggini's Costume in The Television Serial and The Cinema Movie

The comparative semiotic analysis of Anggini's costume in Wiro Sableng (1995 and 2018) highlights a significant shift in gender expression, costume ideology, and cinematic intent. Drawing on Barthes' theory of myth, costume operates not only as denotation, a practical or decorative item, but as connotation, bearing layered cultural and ideological meanings [18]. In this context, Anggini's costume becomes a site for negotiating the evolving constructions of femininity and national identity. It also indicates that costume does not merely reflect occupations, status, character roles (such as antagonist or protagonist), or psychological transformations of the character [38].

In the 1995 television series, Anggini is portrayed as a strong woman within a traditional cultural framework. Despite wearing *pangsi*-style trousers and combat-suitable sandals, her costume preserves key elements of modesty, grace, and femininity, embodying the female perspective from a social norm. Her strength is not disruptive to social norms, but rather harmonised with traditional gender roles. This reflects what Butler refers to as gender performance within a hegemonic cultural context [33]. Anggini performs strength, but through culturally sanctioned femininity.

By contrast, Anggini's costume in the 2018 film departs from this subtle mode of expression. The visual language of her appearance adopts a more overt and explicitly masculine-coded aesthetic, influenced strongly by global cinematic trends. Jogger-style trousers, arm and leg guards, and a fitted *hoba-hoba*-inspired top reflect a fusion between archipelagic tradition and contemporary global fashion. Yet, unlike the traditional grace of her 1995 counterpart, the 2018 Anggini embodies what Bordo describes as the "muscular feminism" trope, where physical power is foregrounded visually, and femininity is secondary to combat readiness [39].

This transformation is not coincidental but reflective of the film's broader production agenda. The 1995 series was designed for local consumption, rooted in Javanese cultural codes, and broadcast during an era when local values shaped narrative direction. Conversely, the 2018 reboot aimed to revitalise the Wiro Sableng franchise for a global audience, targeting Gen Z, millennials, Wiro Sableng fans, and the Indonesian martial arts community. As such, the producers' vision extended beyond national mythmaking to constructing a transnational Nusantara cinematic universe, compelling costume designers to navigate cultural authenticity and global appeal.

Creative tension lies in the fact that Anggini's costume gestures toward Indonesian traditions, and its silhouette, structure, and combat-oriented utility place it squarely within the action cinema style. The 2018 Anggini is mythologised not only as a strong Indonesian woman but also as a culturally hybrid heroine, one who must look strong in ways that resonate with global media expectations [40]. Thus, costume serves as a visual bridge between indigenous narrative elements and global cinematic aesthetics, striking a balance between localisation and internationalisation.

Ultimately, this evolution from implicit to explicit representation of female strength illustrates the increasingly performative and commodified nature of gender in contemporary film. While the 1995 series affirms cultural values through subtle symbolic cues, the 2018 film uses costume as a strategic instrument that merges nationalism and femininity with visual aesthetics and global marketability.

CONCLUSION

The interpretation of the female warrior's costume in the *Wiro Sableng* films, produced in two different periods (1995 and 2018), reveals how the production year significantly influences visual style and the ideological framework represented. Visual ideology in costume design is shaped by aesthetic choices and the broader cultural, socio-political, and industrial contexts that inform filmmakers' intentions at different times.

In the 1995 television series, Anggini is depicted as a strong yet traditionally feminine character. Her mystical strength is conveyed subtly, while her modesty, gentleness, and romantic restraint reflect the idealised Javanese femininity of the New Order era. This portrayal aligns with the socio-political climate of the mid-1990s, which prioritised national cultural cohesion and upheld conservative gender norms. Conversely, the 2018 feature film presents a reimagined Anggini, visibly ambitious, vocal, and independent. She openly defies patriarchal expectations and asserts autonomy over her role as a warrior. This transformation reflects broader discourses of gender equality and women's empowerment, which are more commonly embraced in post-reform Indonesia.

These contrasts also reflect distinct production objectives. The 1995 series stabilised and reinforced national identity through culturally rooted narratives. By comparison, the 2018 film is a creative and commercial endeavour, aiming to reposition *Wiro Sableng* within a globalised entertainment market. Collaborating with Fox International Productions, the filmmakers integrated modern cinematic techniques with traditional aesthetics to appeal to domestic and international audiences.

This study also identifies a recurring pattern in the costume structure of female warrior characters. Typically, the upper garment consists of traditional women's attire, preserving cultural identity and femininity. The lower garment, often masculine-coded or based on men's traditional clothing, enhances mobility, while footwear is designed functionally to support dynamic movement, particularly in combat. This hybrid structure symbolises a visual negotiation between tradition and practicality, as well as between femininity and strength.

However, the study is limited in scope, focusing only on two versions of *Wiro Sableng* and a single female character. Additionally, the analysis is primarily visual and textual, and does not yet incorporate audience interpretation or creator interviews, which could yield more profound insights.

The findings underscore the ideological significance of costumes and offer helpful guidance for emerging costume designers. Future research should encompass a broader range of characters and employ interdisciplinary methods, combining cultural analysis with industry perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of the evolving portrayal of female warriors in contemporary Indonesian cinema.

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