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Commodifying Dread: The Visual Rhetoric of Indonesian Box-Office Horror Posters

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ABSTRACT

Film posters are sites of ideological production, yet studies of Indonesian horror posters remain case-based, and the visual rhetoric of commercially successful posters has not been mapped across a corpus. This study analyzes how the visual rhetoric of fear is constructed, and how aesthetic trends developed from 2022 to 2025, in the posters of seven Indonesian horror and horror-hybrid films among the fifteen most-watched films nationally, selected purposively. Using qualitative textual analysis informed by Finnegan's production–reproduction–circulation framework and Foss's visual rhetoric, each poster was coded, grouped thematically, and interpreted through the three phases. Two patterns emerge: re-affirmation of traditional mysticism and real-world trauma, and horror-comedy hybridization. The posters show visible design decisions in lighting, palette, and iconography, and a typographic hierarchy that borrows cultural and digital assets, such as a storyteller's following, comedians' reputations, and true-story claims, to build commercial legitimacy. Across 2022–2025, trends form an expanding of fear in which new strategies accumulate on the established mystical culture. Theoretically, the study modifies Finnegan's framework for commercial artifacts by specifying reproduction as the reproduction of cultural and digital capital and by proposing a circuit model in which box-office success selects the appeals reproduced in later posters. The next researchers can apply it through the indicators set for each phase. Practically, it gives designers a map of commercially legitimated conventions and gives regulators grounds to review promotion that monetizes identifiable suffering.

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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly ocularcentric media culture, film posters operate not as passive representations but as active rhetorical artifacts that persuade audiences and shape public discourse before a single frame is screened. For the horror genre, the poster carries a double burden, it must condense a film's affective promise which is fear, into a single glance while simultaneously competing for attention in a crowded commercial marketplace. This dual function, at once aesthetic and economic, makes the horror film poster a strategic site for examining how fear is visually constructed, standardized, and sold.

Within Indonesian cinema, horror constitutes one of the backbone of the national film industry alongside drama (Prasandy et al., 2024). The genre's standing is more reflected in the box office records. Horror was one of the three most favorite film genres in Indonesia in a national survey (Armando et al., 2024). The genre's share has since fluctuated but remains large. Horror accounted for 40.16% of Indonesian films released in 2023 (Marsa, 2024) and about 44.8% of those released in 2025 (Dadi, 2026), while estimates for 2024 range from 30.5% of the 285 national titles registered with the Film Censorship Board (Syaifullah, 2026) to 60% of 258 productions in Indonesian Film Board counts (AFP, 2025). The seven horror and horror-hybrid titles studied here generated 45,873,721 admissions, or 45.5% of the 100,878,071 admissions for the fifteen most-watched films in the history of Indonesian cinema, slightly above the 44,003,484 admissions for the drama, comedy and animated titles combined (filmindonesia.or.id, 2026).

The genre has produced enduring cultural icons such as Sundel Bolong, Jelangkung, Kuntilanak, Hantu Jeruk Purut and in recent years horror titles have consistently dominated national box-office admissions such as KKN di Desa Penari and Agak Laen (Praratya et al., 2024). The endurance is also indicative of shifts in the genre's main antagonists: psychological horror was prevalent in the 1970s, ghostly spirits were the main threat from 1985 to 1998, and there was a sustained revival after Jelangkung (2001) (Adiprasetio, 2023). Recent work indicates that the genre has been incorporating religious themes, including Islamic identity, from the 1980s to the 2020s (Ahmadi et al., 2025). Yet beneath this commercial dominance, the genre's reputation has fluctuated, as producers have historically leveraged mass interest in horror to prioritize sensational appeal over narrative integrity (Setiawan & Halim, 2023). The box office is therefore not merely an economic indicator, but also has functions as a cultural filter that determines which visual formulas of fear achieve mass legitimacy. Understanding what those formulas are, and how they evolve, is the central concern of this study.

Building on this premise, a poster's persuasive force depends on the audience's cultural knowledge to complete what the image leaves unstated: it advances an incomplete argument, withholding part of its reasoning and relying on the viewer to supply the missing logic (Foss, 2004). This dynamic aligns closely with what Carroll (2003) terms the paradox of horror that the genre's pleasure lies precisely in the experience of dread, an emotion audiences actively pay to feel despite its aversive nature. This paradox imposes a specific constraint on horror posters as persuasive artifacts, because dread cannot be manufactured from arbitrary imagery, a poster can only elicit fear by drawing on visual codes that its target culture already recognizes as credible sources of dread. In the Indonesian context, this means the poster must anchor itself in culturally embedded symbols such as the silhouette of the Kuntilanak, the iconography of Islamic eschatology, and imagery bearing traces of historical violence. The box office turns this rhetorical transaction into an economic one, and acts as a selection mechanism. In (Finnegan's (2004) framework,

circulation is not the end of an image's life but the condition of its reproduction: the successful circulating forms are the forms that return in the next round of production. For posters then, the market's verdict decides what rhetorical appeals are reproduced. The evaluative criterion of Foss (2004) clarifies what is being selected. A visual argument is judged by its function and the function of a commercial horror poster is to incite an audience to buy a ticket. Admissions are the market's measure of that function. Appeals that rely on enthymematic premises that audiences can easily supply themselves (local mysticism, a recognizable figure, a claim that the story is true) are repeated, while those that do not get admissions disappear from the visual repertoire. Visual rhetoric provides the persuasive machinery, horror aesthetics the culturally specific vocabulary of fear, and the box office the feedback loop that turns persuasion into formula.

We chose the two frameworks because they together cover the poster and its life cycle. Foss (2004) provides the tools for reading each poster for an argument and the criteria for assessing whether it works. This argument is taken through production, reproduction and circulation by (Finnegan (2004), which is what makes it possible to treat the box office as part of the same circuit rather than as an external fact. Case-based semiotic readings, however, isolate individual posters from this loop, and thus cannot account for the feedback dynamic.

International scholarship has established that film posters archive and negotiate ideology. Through a feminist semiotic analysis of five decades of Bollywood posters (1970–2020), traced a shift in gender representation from an era of male chauvinism toward post-globalization gender equality, demonstrating that posters are dynamic cultural artifacts that both record and renegotiate patriarchal parameters (Sehrawat et al., 2025). Sara Sadeghi Nia and Mitra Alavi Talab analyzed the ideological shift and visual marginalization of women in mainstream film posters by examining Filmfarsi posters in Iran from the 1960s to 1970s (Nia & Talab, 2025). They using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis on Iranian Filmfarsi posters of the 1960s–1970s, showed how Pahlavi-era posters were governed by Western pseudo-modernist and capitalist ideology, sexually objectifying actresses while rendering traditional women passive.

In the Indonesian context, this ideological reading has centered on gender and political history, namely Adiprasetio (2023) traced the genealogy of the Kuntilanak as the dominant antagonist of Indonesian horror (1970–2020) and rooted the rise of female ghosts in post-1965 military propaganda; Wijaya et al. (2025) found that contemporary titles such as Sewu Dino, Khanzab, and Waktu Maghrib continue to confine women to the archetypes of vulnerable victim or monstrous supernatural threat, and Andriani & Murtono (2025) applying van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis to four 2023 horror posters, confirmed the visual objectification of women's bodies as symbols of pain, fragility, and passive victimhood. Collectively, these research establishes that horror posters are ideological instruments, but its analytical lens remains fixed on representation of gender.

A second research examines Indonesian horror posters through semiotic and multimodal case studies. Dewi & Pratiwi (2024) showed how the posters of Siksa Kubur and Kuyang exploit cultural anxieties over death and the supernatural through ominous imagery and jagged lettering, the next is from Anggraheni et al. (2024), reading the Siksa Neraka poster through Saussure's framework, demonstrated that its afterlife imagery is anchored in Islamic eschatology while functioning as a marketing instrument, and lastly Aisyah & Siddiq (2025) contrasted religious terror in Western and Indonesian horror, situating the Indonesian jinn within contests among public piety, Islamic orthodoxy, and local syncretism. Studies of individual design elements extend this micro-level attention

such as El Chidtian & Renzina (2024) documented the dominance of decorated horror effect typography in the best-selling posters of 2022, while Prasetyo & Ahmad (2024) traced the aesthetic evolution from the hand-drawn of asymmetrical poster of Suzzanna: Malam Jumat Kliwon (1986) to its CGI 2023 remake. Moving to broader multimodal approaches, the research of Rahmalina et al. (2025) on the synergy of visual darkness, sound, and cultural narrative in three blockbuster horror films, and Yudhanto (2025) on the power of text and image relations in Studio Ghibli posters that confirm the richness of this tradition. Yet these studies share a common analytical horizon: they read finished posters as static texts, one case, one element, or one year in an each research.

Table 1. Mapping of previous studies and the position of this study

Aspect	**Representative studies**	**Unit and approach**	**What it establishes**	**What it leaves unexamined**
Ideological readings (international)	Sehrawat et al. (2025); Nia & Talab (2025)	Poster decades, feminist semiotics and Fairclough's CDA	Posters record and renegotiate ideology	Horror genre; commercial selection
Ideological readings (Indonesia)	Adiprasetio (2023); Wijaya et al. (2025); Andriani & Murtono (2025)	Genealogy of the kuntilanak; titles and 2023 posters; van Dijk's CDA	Gendered and political representation	Rhetorical patterns beyond gender; life cycle
Semiotic case studies	Dewi & Pratiwi (2024); Anggraheni et al. (2024); Aisyah & Siddiq (2025)	One to two posters or religious motifs; Saussurean semiotics	Cultural and religious anxieties anchored in imagery	Cross-case patterns; production and circulation
Single-element and diachronic studies	El Chidtian & Renzina (2024); Prasetyo & Ahmad (2024)	Typography of 2022 best-sellers; one title and its remake, 1986–2023	Element-level conventions; change within one title	Whole-poster rhetoric; multi-year trends across titles
Multimodal studies	Rahmalina et al. (2025); Yudhanto (2025)	Blockbuster films' visual, sound, and narrative; Ghibli posters	Text, image, sound synergy	Horror posters as a commercially defined corpus

Overall, there are three specific gaps in the literature based on what prior studies have not done. The first is methodological. While the fields of Semiotics and Critical Discourse Analysis have generated rich interpretations of individual posters, no research has identified rhetorical patterns across a multi-year corpus defined by commercial performance. The nearest attempts are the analysis of a single year and a single design element) or the analysis of a single title and its remake spanning almost four decades. Isolated cases cannot explain trends at the level of genre on their own. The second is analytic. Existing studies treat the poster as a finished artifact and therefore do not examine how its rhetoric is produced, reproduced across films, and circulated to audiences. Thus,

recurring devices such as typographic hierarchy or borrowed digital credibility remain unexplained. The third is commercial legitimacy. None of the existing studies question whether commercial performance is a filter for which visual appeals endure, treating box-office success as sampling label or context rather than mechanism. The present study tackles all three gaps simultaneously by treating seven posters from the highest grossing Indonesian horror films of 2022–2025 as a single corpus and tracing them through the three phases of Finnegan, which reads the box office as the selection mechanism that connects persuasion to formula.

These gaps give rise to two research questions, each of which is necessary for different reasons. RQ1 addresses the methodological and analytical gaps: without understanding how the rhetoric of fear is constructed and reproduced across a corpus, the recurrence of devices cannot be explained, and design practice remains intuitive rather than evidence-based. RQ2 addresses the third gap: if commercial success decides which appeals survive, then over time, trends should be identifiable and their circulation should reveal what is actually being sold. Without RQ2, the research is able to describe how posters are built but not why certain formulas persist, nor where the promotion shifts from bargaining a collective fear to monetizing identifiable suffering, which is the question that matters for media regulation.

RQ1: How do the production and reproduction of Indonesian box-office horror film posters construct the visual rhetoric of fear? and RQ2: What are the aesthetic trends of Indonesian box-office horror posters in 2022-2025 and what does their circulation tell us about commodification of collective fear?

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative design with a textual approach to analyze the visual and verbal elements of contemporary horror cinema promotional materials (Jürgens et al., 2024). This design was chosen for its capacity to illuminate the layered meanings, rhetorical operations, and aesthetic structures of popular cultural artifacts holistically (Zhao, 2023). The research is situated in the digital domain, which now serves as the primary space for the distribution, consumption, and visual articulation of the contemporary Indonesian horror film business.

Data were collected by digital document analysis of three types of sources. The main source was the film database filmindonesia.or.id, which provided the admission figures, year of release and genre metadata that were used to define the sample. These figures were cross-checked against Cinepoint, an Indonesian film analytics platform, and against genre and title classifications from the Film Censorship Board (LSF) registry, where sources diverged, the discrepancy was recorded and the analysis was run on the figure that the majority of sources supported. A third check was audience milestones announced on the official social media accounts of the production companies. The posters themselves were downloaded from these official accounts and compared with the poster versions in the database to make sure that the artifact analyzed corresponds to the theatrical release.

Table 2. The most view films in Indonesia cinema
(Source: filmindonesia.or.id, 2026)

Rank	Title	Year of release	Number of viewers
1	Agak Laen: Menyala Pantiku!	2025	11.000.866
2	Jumbo	2025	10.218.708
3	KKN di Desa Penari	2022	10.061.033
4	Agak Laen	2024	9.126.979
5	Warkop DKI Reborn: Jangkrik Boss! part 1	2016	6.858.616
6	Pengabdi Setan 2: Communion	2022	6.390.970
7	Dilan 1990	2018	6.315.664
8	Miracle in Cell No 7	2022	5.861.067
9	Vina: Sebelum 7 Hari	2024	5.815.945
10	Dilan 1991	2019	5.253.411
11	Sewu Dino	2023	4.891.469
12	Kang Mak: from Pee Mak	2024	4.860.565
13	Ipar Adalah Maut	2024	4.776.565
14	Pabrik Gula	2025	4.726.760
15	Laskar Pelangi	2008	4.719.453

Selection Criteria

The sample was selected purposively so that the analyzed material would connect to the theoretical objectives of the study. Selection started from the all-time box-office admission list published by filmindonesia.or.id (accessed on May, 21 2026) that shown on Table 1, applying three explicit inclusion criteria. First, commercial legitimacy that mean the film appears in the top 15 of the all-time national admission list, ensuring that its poster represents visual rhetoric that has achieved verified mass success rather than critical or festival success. Second, genre classification, so the film is officially classified as horror, or as a horror hybrid such as horror-comedy, in the genre metadata of filmindonesia.or.id, so that genre assignment relies on documented industry categorization rather than the researchers' judgment. Third, artifact availability, related to the official theatrical release poster is publicly available from an official source, guaranteeing the authenticity of the analyzed artifact. Films in the top 15 that are not classified as horror including comedies, dramas, and animated features were excluded. Although Agak Laen: Menyala Pantiku! ranked as the highest-grossing Indonesian film of the period under study, it was excluded from the selection because its genre classification is comedy and falls outside the scope of this research.

Because there may be multiple promotional images per film, the unit of analysis was the main theatrical release poster that is the official one-sheet with the title, billing block, and release date. If there was more than one candidate, the poster was selected by applying three rules in order: (1) the poster released by the production house or distributor through its official channels (official Instagram account or website); (2) the poster used as the film's primary image on filmindonesia.or.id; (3) if both rules still left more than one candidate,

the earliest officially published poster. Teaser posters, character posters, regional or festival variants and re-release versions were not coded. They were used solely as background material in the production and circulation phases.

The application of these criteria resulted in a compilation of seven films, whose official posters are: KKN di Desa Penari (2022), Pengabdi Setan 2: Communion (2022), Sewu Dino (2023), Agak Laen (2024), Vina: Sebelum 7 Hari (2024), Kang Mak: From Pee Mak (2024), and Pabrik Gula (2025). Therefore, the database size was a consequence of the inclusion criteria, not a pre-set number. It includes all the films in the top 15 that meet the criteria. This is a complete set of the defined population and not a sample of it. This size is adequate for a macro-level analysis for three reasons. The study first uses an interpretive visual rhetorical analysis, in which each poster is analyzed through three phases (production, reproduction, circulation), so that analytic depth per artifact is favored over statistical breadth. Second, the threshold of the top 15 is the point at which the list hits [X] million admissions, isolating the commercially dominant stratum, and adding more films from lower ranks would introduce films with much lower reach and dilute the criterion of confirmed mass success. Third, the corpus covers four consecutive release years (2022-2025), which helps the diachronic reading needed in RQ2. The seven films attracted 45,873,721 admissions collectively, confirming the material as the commercially dominant of Indonesian horror cinema. Claims about aesthetic trends should be considered indicative, because the corpus comprises two films from 2022, one from 2023, three from 2024, and one from 2025, findings should not be generalized to horror posters with lower box-office performance.

Visual Analysis Indicators and Rhetoric Categorization Guidelines

Data were extracted through a visual analysis framework built upon Yudhanto, (2025) and adapted to incorporate indicators specific to this study. The resulting eight indicators composition and layout, figure representation, lighting, color palette, typography, iconography and cultural symbols, verbal elements, and the credit block with its status hierarchy that were applied uniformly to every poster in this research. The first group of indicators concerns the staging of fear on the pictorial surface. Composition and layout were observed through the placement and hierarchy of figures, the treatment of negative space, and the symmetry or asymmetry of the frame, in order to identify what each poster foregrounds as its primary source of fear. Figure representation was observed through the presence of human and supernatural figures, their gender, gaze, and posture, and the relation constructed between threat and vulnerability, revealing who is positioned to embody terror and who its victim. Lighting was examined through the direction of the key light, contrast ratio, silhouette, and chiaroscuro effects, which together determine how dread is staged through the interplay of visibility and concealment, while the color palette taken from its dominant hues, saturation, and temperature that indicates the affective register each poster signals, whether dread, decay, nostalgia, or comedy.

The second indicators concerns the cultural and typographic coding of the image. Typography was analyzed through typeface classification, distortion and horror effects, and intertextual references to earlier poster traditions, showing how lettering itself. Iconography and cultural symbols were traced through the appearance of local supernatural figures, religious and eschatological symbols, and markers of historical events, in order to identify which cultural knowledge the audience must supply to complete the poster's persuasive appeal. The third group concerns the verbal and institutional layer of the artifact. Verbal elements including the title, tagline, admission

claims, and censorship rating were read as explicit claims that support the visual argument. Meanwhile, the credit block, through its hierarchy of prominence given to producers, directors, and studios, together with franchise markers and formulations such as "from the makers of," was read as a construction of economic and creative credibility.

The rhetorical categorization of these observations followed Foss's (2004) three-step scheme for visual rhetoric, in which each artifact is examined through the nature of the image, namely its presented and suggested elements; its function, namely the communicative work it performs for the audience; and its evaluation, namely the degree to which its elements support that function. Within this scheme, the indicators concerning composition, figures, lighting, color, typography, and iconography primarily operationalize appeals to pathos through the staging of fear, whereas the verbal and credit-block indicators operationalize appeals to ethos and logos through the construction of credibility and claims of success. This categorization guideline ensures that the labeling of rhetorical strategies is anchored in an established analytical scheme rather than in impressionistic description.

Analytical Procedure: Operationalizing Finnegan's Framework

The analysis is a textual analysis based on Finnegan's (2004) production–reproduction–circulation model. The framework dictates what the posters can tell us about their production, what they reproduce, and how they are positioned to travel. The framework is not used to reconstruct production processes, or to measure audience reception, which would require interview, platform, or reception data that this study does not collect. The analysis was carried out in five phases, the first three being preparatory to the data and the last two being interpretive analysis. The poster artifacts were collected, dated and archived with their database metadata on admissions, genre and release year during the collecting stage. In the authentication stage, each artifact was validated with the official accounts of the production companies and filmindonesia.or.id. In the coding stage, each poster was coded with the eight-indicator protocol described above, resulting in a structured description of each artifact. During the thematic categorization phase, qualitative thematic analysis was employed to the coded data to identify, label, and describe dominant patterns across the corpus (Alejandro & Zhao, 2024), which resulted in cross-cutting rhetorical themes. During the interpretation stage these themes were read through Finnegan's three phases as operationalized in Table 3.

Table 3. Operationalization of Finnegan's framework in this study

Phase	**Guiding question**	**What is examined**	**Data used**	**Limit of the claim**
Production	What design decisions does the artifact embody?	Composition, figure representation, lighting, color palette, typography, iconography	The poster itself; credited production company and design information where public	Choices visible in the artifact, not designers' intent, briefs, or commercial pressure
Reproduction	Which prior texts, reputations,	Typographic hierarchy; digital intertextuality;	The poster's verbal and institutional layer, read against	Credibility is constructed on the artifact; its

Phase	Guiding question	What is examined	Data used	Limit of the claim
	and capital does the poster reproduce?	creative status hierarchy; authenticity claims	the source texts and reputations it cites	effect on audiences is not measured
Circulation	How is the rhetoric positioned to travel?	Circulation-oriented textual features; recirculation in public discourse	The poster; media coverage and public discussion referring to it	Contextual evidence of public life, not engagement metrics or audience response

Each phase has associated indicators and data and an explicit limit on what can be claimed. In the production phase the question is: which design decisions does the artifact represent? i.e. composition, representation of figures, lighting, color scheme, typography and iconography . They are read as rhetorical choices by comparing each poster against the conventions of the other posters in the corpus and, where publicly available, credited information such as production company and design credits. They are taken as evidence for choices visible in the artifact, not for designers' intentions, producers' briefs or commercial pressures, which are not available without data on the production side. The reproduction phase asks which prior texts, reputations and forms of capital the poster is reproducing. Building on Finnegan's observation that an image's meaning is reconstituted as it is reproduced into new contexts, this study treats reproduction as the analysis of how the poster brings pre-existing cultural and digital capital into the new artifact: the typographic hierarchy that ranks names and claims, the digital intertextuality that cites viral source texts and social media personae, and the creative status hierarchy of casts, producers, and franchise markers. Each is read against the text it comes from or the reputation it summons. The circulation phase asks how the rhetoric is set to move. The analysis is carried out through the circulation-oriented characteristics of the posters themselves, such as claims of authenticity, references to source texts and adapted properties, and cited social media identities, and through publicly available traces of their recirculation, i.e. media coverage and public discussion referring to a poster or its imagery. These traces are contextual evidence to interpret the public life of the posters, not to quantify engagement or audience response. The results of the three phases were finally synthesized diachronically across the corpus of 2022-2025 to define the trajectory of aesthetic trends (RQ2).

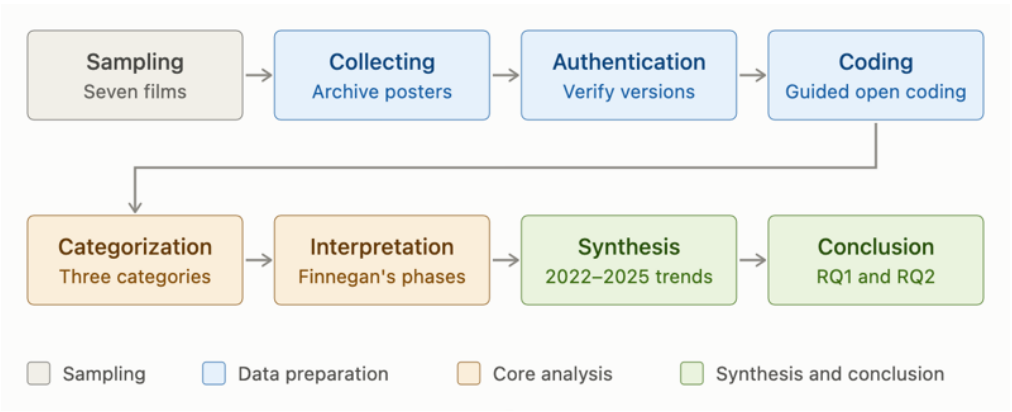


Figure 1. Research's Flow
(Source: Authors processed, 2026)

Validity: Theory and Data Triangulation

Trustworthiness of the interpretation was established through forms of triangulation. Begin with as much as the data allowed, each interpretive claim was read against visual rhetoric theory (Foss, 2004), Finnegan's (2004) production-reproduction-circulation framework, and the critical scholarship on Indonesian horror reviewed in the Introduction In this way no interpretation is based on one framework, and description is driven toward theoretically grounded explanation. Second, triangulation of data: each poster was cross-checked using three types of sources, namely the artifact as published on the official accounts of its production company, the metadata of its film on filmindonesia.or.id, and public traces of its circulation, such as media coverage. We only kept data on artifacts for which we could match between the official account and the database the version. Third, investigator triangulation: the three authors coded the corpus independently and discussed their differences until consensus was reached.

FINDING

The coded posters were divided into three types. The categories were not imposed from theory but were derived inductively. We compared the coded data for each poster across the corpus and grouped recurring combinations of three category-defining indicators (the source of fear, the chromatic code, and the focal element) into provisional categories through open coding. Then, each category was compared to the other poster indicators such as the verbal layer and the retained genre tokens. The number of categories was not pre-specified; three is the number of unique indicator combinations yielded by the corpus. The categories were not derived from Finnegan's (2004) framework, but interpreted with it, as will be described below. The categories are analytic types, assigned by a poster's dominant combination of indicators, rather than mutually exclusive classes, and where they occur overlaps are reported. The position of each poster is given in Table 4.

Table 4. Position of each poster on the category-defining indicators

Poster	Source of fear	Chromatic code	Focal element	Verbal layer	Category
KKN di Desa Penari	Javanese animism and offering	Dark monochrome, brownish and deep green	Female dancer coiled by a snake at the foot of a barren tree	"@Simpleman" / "Inspired by True Events from Simpleman"	Traditional (folkloric-dense)
Sewu Dino	Occult practice	Dark monochrome, brownish and deep green	Coffin with a corpse behind a carved wooden door	Simpleman credit	Traditional (folkloric-dense)
Pabrik Gula	Ritual and colonial-historical trauma	Dark monochrome, brownish and deep green	Ritual palanquin procession in a sugarcane field, factory chimney.	Simpleman credit	Traditional (folkloric-dense)
Pengabdi Setan 2: Communion	Maternal ghost; pocong	Extreme lighting contrast	Single figure of "Mother" in a veiled wedding gown, pocong in background	Pengabdi Setan 2: Communion	Traditional (minimalist-iconic)
Vina: Sebelum 7 Hari	Human violence; real event	Desaturated dark blue-gray	Figures suffering physical pain on a roadway	"The True Story of The Late Vina"	Reality-Based
Agak Laen	Genre parody	Bright neon (purple, neon green)	Cast's comic shock expressions	Comedians' names at top margin (Bene Dion, Oki Rengga)	Horror-Comedy Hybrid
Kang Mak: From Pee Mak	Genre parody; adapted Thai property	Bright neon (green mist)	Cast's comic shock expressions	Comedians' names at top margin (Indro Warkop, Tora Sudiro)	Horror-Comedy Hybrid

1. Traditional Horror. The fear is supernatural, folkloric, based on local belief. The chromatic code is dark, low-key. The central element is a menacing figure or a ritual scene. KKN di Desa Penari, Sewu Dino, and Pabrik Gula draw their visuals from local mythology, oral traditions, animism, and the traces of historical and colonial trauma. They have a folkloric-dense approach, with dark palettes of deep greens and high-contrast monochromatic tones that communicate a handful of cultural symbols per image that are simultaneously sacred and haunting (Figure 2). Pengabdi Setan 2: Communion is in the same category in a minimalist-iconic form. It employs the

same repertoire, a maternal ghost in a veiled wedding gown and a pocong, but it reduces the picture to one iconographic figure, established on the collective memory of the Indonesian audience, isolated by the harsh contrast of lighting (Figure 3). It is read as a variant, not a separate category, because the source of fear is the same, only the compositional economy differs.

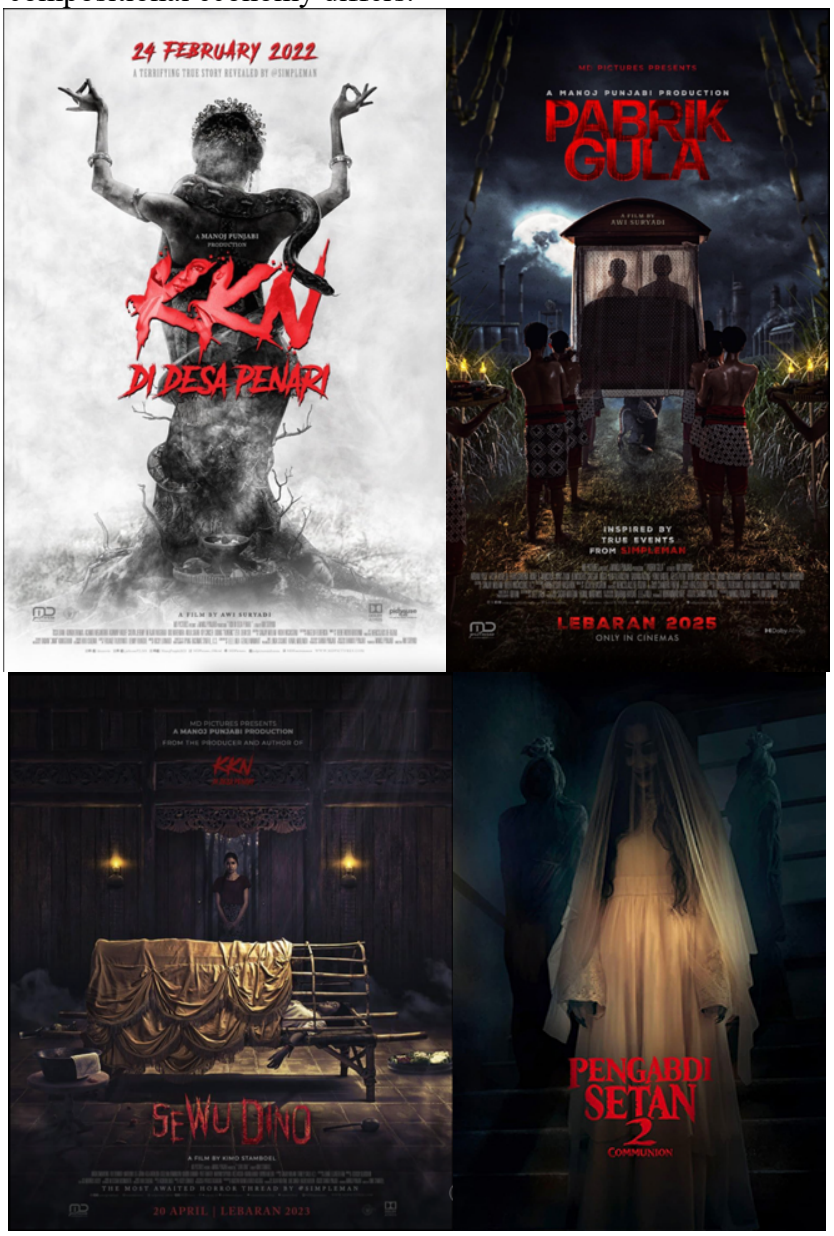


Figure 2. Film Poster of KKN di Desa Penari, Pabrik Gula, Sewu Dino and Pengabdi Setan 2: Communion
(Source: filmindonesia.or.id, 2026)

2. Reality-Based Horror. This category is characterized by the fear based on human violence instead of a supernatural presence, a desaturated chromatic code and figures in physical suffering as the main element. Vina: This is the only poster in the corpus that fits this definition before 7 Days. Its dark, desaturated blue-gray palette and crime-scene-reconstruction aesthetic show figures suffering physical pain from street violence, and the centrally placed phrase “The True Story of The

Late Vina" anchors the fear in a real event (Figure 4). This category is based on a single poster and is thus considered exploratory. It is retained because it represents a marker of a source of fear opposed to the supernatural source of the other posters, and the claims made about it are limited to this case.



Figure 3. Film Poster of Vina: Sebelum 7 Hari
(Source: filmindonesia.or.id, 2026)

3. Horror-Comedy Hybrid. This category is marked by comedic subversion of fear: a chromatic code that is bright, the performers' expressions as the central element, and macabre tokens retained as genre anchors. Kang Mak: From Pee Mak and Agak Laen break tradition of dark hues with colors like purple, neon green and green mist, put comical shock faces of the cast and famous comedian names in the spotlight, and maintain macabre elements like the "Haunted House" ride sign.



Figure 4. Film Kang Mak: from Pee Mak and Agak Laen
(Source: filmindonesia.or.id, 2026)

Read together, the first two, sourcing fear in local mysticism and in real-world trauma, read together constitute a pattern of re-affirming traditional mysticism and real-world trauma. The third constitutes a pattern of horror-comedy genre hybridization. The following paragraphs illustrate how these two patterns are instantiated across the three phases of Finnegan as operationalized in Table 3.

In the production phase, the posters display visible design decisions in lighting, color, composition, and imagery that create the mood of each poster; these are read as rhetorical choices in the artifact, not as the designers' intentions. KKN di Desa Penari, Sewu Dino, and Pabrik Gula are predominantly rendered in dark, monochromatic palettes of brownish tones and dark greens, using the symbolism of Javanese animism and occult practice: a female dancer coiled by a snake with an offering at the foot of a barren tree, a coffin with a corpse behind a traditionally carved wooden door, and a procession carrying a ritual palanquin through a sugarcane field with a colonial factory chimney in the background. The minimalist poster for Pengabdi Setan 2: Communion takes this approach to its logical extreme, with extreme contrast of light isolating the ghostly figure of "Mother" in an old fashioned veiled wedding gown, with a pocong lurking in the background. The poster of Vina: Sebelum 7 Hari has desaturated dark blue-gray tone that shows real suffering in the lawless scenes on the roadway. Agak Laen and Kang Mak, however, are a departure from pure horror conventions, employing bright neon colors and emphasizing the cast's comical shock expressions, while still including some macabre touches like the "Haunted House" ride sign.

During the reproduction phase, all seven posters arrange names and claims in a strict typographic hierarchy allowing them to draw on credibility and commercial legitimacy of prior texts and reputations . KKN di Desa Penari, Sewu Dino, and Pabrik Gula all feature the digital phrases "@Simpleman" or "Inspired by True Events from Simpleman" in bold typography that resembles meat cuts or chiseled carvings, linking the projects to the storyteller's social media popularity. The Agak Laen, the Kang Mak posters: Pee Mak

reserve their top margins for the names of popular comedians like Bene Dion, Oki Rengga, Indro Warkop, and Tora Sudiro. The surrounding verbal layer also makes claims of story authenticity, especially the centrally placed phrase, "The True Story of The Late Vina."

In the circulation phase, the posters are read for features that position them for travel and for publicly accessible traces of their recirculation. Their circulation-boosting features are the claims of authenticity, a cited social media identity, and in the case of Kang Mak, the adaptation of a Thai box-office property while the horror-comedy posters slide into the established reputation of the domestic comedy industry and promise a safe and pleasant viewing experience. The recirculation of the Vina: Sebelum 7 Hari imagery is most visible in media coverage. A film critic described the film's original poster as highly exploitative, a comment that was reported along with public anger and criticism from a national women's rights commission (CNA Indonesia, 2024). The film's retelling of the case brought a murder stalled for eight years back into the public eye (CNN Indonesia, 2024). This recirculation can be read as the commodification of real suffering, extending the reach of the poster into a social conversation beyond film marketing. As elsewhere in this study, these traces are not treated here as measures of audience response but as contextual evidence for interpretation.

Foss's (2004) scheme shows that the three categories operate differently. For example, the artifact in the traditional horror posters contains a staged folk scene such as a coiled dancer, a coffin behind a carved door, or a ritual procession before a colonial chimney, the credential "Inspired by True Events from Simpleman". It is intended to draw out the folkloric assumptions of the audience and to accept a digitally-sourced declaration of truth. The pictorial and verbal layers are complementary and the same device is repeated in KKN di Desa Penari, Sewu Dino and Pabrik Gula. This is hence called the folkloric dread with a borrowed digital ethos. Pengabdi Setan 2: Communion breaks this mold with an extreme lighting isolates a single ghostly figure, pulling on an image already in collective memory. The isolation concentrating dread without a verbal credential. And this is what is called iconic minimalist dread.

In Vina: Before 7 Days, the artifact adopts a desaturated blue-gray, crime-scene esthetic, in which the text "The True Story of The Late Vina" is placed at the center. Connecting fear with a known real event is effective. The image and claim match. This makes it more appealing but also raises an ethical concern which is discussed. With a true-story claim, the strategy is called realist trauma.

In Agak Laen and Kang Mak: From Pee Mak, the artifacts are in a comic shock expressions and neon palette. The former has a macabre token (a "Haunted House" sign). Their job is to promise fear that can be shared safely with laughter. The credit block lends credibility by the names of the comedians (Bene Dion and Oki Rengga; Indro Warkop and Tora Sudiro). The horror token maintains the genre anchor, therefore the strategy is called comic subversion with comedian ethos, expanded in Kang Mak by the adapted property.

DISCUSSION

This study examines how the visual rhetoric of fear is constructed in Indonesian box-office horror posters (RQ1), how their aesthetic trends have evolved between 2022 and 2025 and what their circulation reveals about the commodification of collective fear (RQ2). The seven posters are categorized into three, following Finnegan's (2004) categories: traditional horror in a folkloric-dense and minimalist-iconic variant, reality-based horror, and a hybrid of horror and comedy. These can be categorized into two patterns, re-affirmation of traditional mysticism and real-world trauma, and horror-comedy hybridization. The posters show visible design decisions in palette, lighting and

iconography in production. In reproduction all seven order names and claims in a typographic hierarchy that draws credibility from viral source texts, comedians' reputations and claims of a true story. In circulation they are ready to circulate through authenticity claims and adapted properties. The recirculation of the Vina: Sebelum 7 Hari imagery is documented in media coverage. The trend is an increasing fragmentation of fear through 2022-2025, with new strategies being layered on the established mystical repertoire. It is more profitable to read these patterns as positions within a single visual economy of fear than as a taxonomy of styles, for each draws on a different reservoir of collective anxiety: local mysticism and colonial-historical trauma, actual violence, and the wish to consume fear safely.

The results reinforce and contribute to the literature on horror posters as carriers of collective belief. Wahyudin & Supratman (2026) interpret Indonesian horror as cultural text, based on local mythology and religious conviction, while Adiprasetio (2023) historicizes the kuntilanak as historical trauma. The densely folkloric posters in this corpus, with their dancer and offering, coffin and carved door, and ritual palanquin before a colonial chimney, are the visual counterpart of those readings. While previous poster studies focused on representation, especially gender representation (Andriani & Murtono, 2025), the present analysis shows how cultural premises work. As a poster only persuades when the audience fills in the missing premises (Foss, 2004), what is processed in production is not just light and color but the audience's own cultural knowledge, which the poster activates at no charge. International work as a point of reference. Nguyen (2026) analyzed top-grossing American horror posters and found that they create horror through provoking the viewer, engaging the viewer, and creating a heightened sense of realism, with a preference for psychological unease over gore. The exaggerated realism of that dataset is reflected in the authenticity claims of the Indonesian posters. But here, credibility is borrowed outside the image, from a storyteller's social media identity, a comedian's reputation, or a publicly known case. Fear is anchored in locally specific symbolism. This comparison is suggestive but not conclusive, as the two studies differ in sample and method.

The horror-comedy posters illustrate the way hybridization works on a still image. Adiprasetio & Larasati (2025) read the evolution of the pocong as a sacred figure diluted by global media trends and industry seeking the widest audience, and Utin (2016) describes a "slippery structure" of genre mixing in Korean cinema. The current corpus is consistent with both accounts, but points to dilution not being the whole story. Brannan (2025) argues that horror comedy requires a framework beyond tonal alternation and tonal conflation, and demonstrates hybrid forms carrying social anxieties. Since a static poster cannot change over time, its hybridity is in space: Agak Laen and Uncle Mak: In a single frame Pee Mak blend a neon palette and comic expressions with macabre tokens like the "Haunted House" ride sign through a tonal inversion of the chromatic code, a substitution of the focal element for threat with performers, and a strategic retention of horror tokens. In Hick's (2022)terms, the negative emotion is maintained as a frame but reframed as pleasure. Kang Mak's trajectory: From Pee Mak, a Thai property adapted and localized around Indonesian comedians, shows that here, globalization is more like borrowing, remixing across Asia, than a one-way flow. Recycling is also a known practice of the industry, Hołobut et al. (2024) document historical trends in "content recycling" in a survey of 986 Hollywood remakes released between 1915 and 2020 and argue that they elucidate the cultural and commercial role of remakes and serial forms. Recycling at the level of poster rhetoric is evident in the sequel and prequel pairings around titles in this corpus, the remake of a Thai film, and the recurring "@Simpleman" device on three posters across 2022–2025, but this study cannot establish that box-office success caused it.

The most reflective problem is also the reproduction instruments. The arrangement can be interpreted as a "ethos machine" because of the digital intertext set in letterforms that mimic carved wood or torn flesh, the creative status hierarchy at the top margin, and the central authenticity claim that transforms accumulated symbolic capital into narrative credibility. Conversion is not symmetric. When what is claimed to be true is a thread of folklore, the transaction recycles shared imagination. When it is a recent and unresolved case, as in Vina: Sebelum 7 Hari, the poster's claim to authenticity draws commercial value from a grief that belongs first to a family and a community, and the layout that centers "The Late Vina" places that death at the center of the promotion. Linke & Brune (2025) found a similar tension in platformed true-crime narratives between empowering and voyeuristic depictions of gender-based violence, connecting the exploitative pull to platform pressures that value engagement over quality. One film critic considered the film's original poster as very exploitative, a remark reported on with public outrage (CNA Indonesia, 2024), and the film also revived a case that had been on hold for eight years (CNN Indonesia, 2024). The media coverage demonstrates both sides of the tension for Vina. Kai-nunna & Boon-arch (2025), tracing the evolution of Indonesian horror cinema through the case of *Vina: Before 7 Days*, argue that combining spiritual belief with horror both entertains audiences and raises awareness of social problems such as sexual violence and injustice. The poster evidence here does not contradict that reading, but it locates a further layer: whatever awareness the film generates, the poster's authenticity claim and typographic emphasis also operate as a promotional device. So that same circulation which gives collective trauma a public form, also makes it a promotional resource. This reading is based on the text of the poster and the public record, and makes no claims as to the producers' intentions.

The study contributes theoretically in two ways. These are presented as modest modifications rather than a new theory. First, it adapts Finnegan's (2004) framework to commercial artifacts. Finnegan tracks an image through the phases of production, reproduction, and circulation, and in this corpus the three phases seem to close into a loop, where what circulates successfully is also the material for the next reproduction, as the recurring Simpleman motif and the sequels suggest, and the point at which circulation feeds into production is the box office. This is a conceptual proposal based on textual recurrence and the industry record, not a tested causal claim. The study also identifies two analytic moves. Reproduction is operationalized as the reproduction of pre-existing cultural and digital capital. Foss's (2004) extended to include credentials that the poster borrows from outside the image as premises the audience supplies, a heuristic that the term "ethos machine" names but does not fully theorize.

Second, the results show that spiritual and historical dimensions are not decorative contents but fundamental structural variables in the framing of horror images. Animism, occult practice, colonial-historical trauma, and the maternal ghost provide the premises for audiences to fill in. Reading these posters, therefore, requires attention to indigenous cosmology, the Islamic eschatological imagination, and colonial history as well as conventional semiotic analysis. The spatial conflation above adds a specification for hybridity in static images, and the adaptation of Kang Mak: From Pee Mak positions Indonesia as an active node in Asian region aesthetic exchange that a claim that is based on a single case and needs to be tested on more.

The findings identify the standards that have accompanied commercial success for graphic designers and creative directors, such as dark monochrome palettes and single iconographic figures, folkloric density, neon palettes paired with comedians, and typographic credentials. This study specifies the coordinates through which that evolution currently functions in Indonesian horror, as film posters have developed into visual-cultural

spaces opened by digital technology (Tao, 2022). The plot can show us what success looks like, but it cannot confirm that it will be successful. Where an authenticity claim references a recent and identifiable case, designers should treat the claim as an ethically significant decision, verify the source, and avoid typography and layout that make a victim's death the selling point. The findings argue for a separation between factual claims and fictional elements in promotional copy, and for consulting affected families or advocacy bodies before building promotion on a recent case, for producers and marketing teams. The findings indicate that for regulators and cultural institutions where film review already takes into account sensitive content, promotional materials merit similar scrutiny. The poster's veracity claim, use of typography, and representation of identifiable victims provide tangible review standards that can be applied in dialog with women's rights and victim-protection agencies. These recommendations are based on a textual analysis and should be understood as proposals for deliberation, not as evidence of effects.

This study has limitations that qualify its claims. The data set is made up of seven posters chosen for their commercial success, thus it is representative of the successful stratum and cannot show how unsuccessful posters differed. In the final scheme, two of the original distinctions are carried by one poster each. The reality-based category in particular is exploratory. It is a Finnegan-style textual analysis in that it does not draw on interviews with designers or marketing teams, or on data about platform engagement. Its readings of production and circulation are inferred from the artifacts and from public traces such as media coverage, and do not measure audience response. The study is limited to a single national context, a four-year period, and posters not trailers or other promotional materials.

These limitations suggest several directions for future research. The successful posters can be directly tested against the posters of low-grossing horror films, because the mechanism proposed here predicts that unsuccessful appeals will be eliminated. Interviews with designers and marketing teams and analysis of platform engagement would allow examination, rather than inference, of production context and audience response. Studies of poster studies in Thailand, South Korea, Vietnam, and the Philippines would test whether the patterns and the intra-Asian exchange extend beyond Indonesia, and studies of other genres would show whether the loop between circulation and reproduction is specific to horror. Kim et al., (2025) found that mismatches between the mood a poster signals and a film's actual content are associated with box-office performance, an expectancy question that the horror-comedy posters in this corpus make worth testing directly.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the visual construction of fear in Indonesian box-office horror posters (RQ1) and the patterns and circulation of the posters in relation to the commodification of collective fear (RQ2). Seven top-grossing posters from 2022–2025 were selected for a Finnegan-informed textual analysis using Foss's visual rhetoric scheme. RQ1 constructs fear in three ways: traditional horror through folkloric images and a digital-source credential, reality-based horror through a claim of true story, and horror-comedy hybrids through neon palettes and comic expressions with comedians' names and a retained macabre token. Lighting, palette, symbolism and typographic hierarchy translate cultural and digital capital into commercial legitimacy. For RQ2, the sampled posters do not exhibit a linear progression in styles. Due to the small sample size and admissions selection, two re-emerging patterns are reported as observations rather than a trend: re-affirmation of traditional mysticism and real world trauma, and horror-comedy hybridization, stacked on an established mystical repertoire. Public traces of

circulation suggest that the reality-based case fear was used as a promotional resource. In theory, the study indicates a simple circuit model in which circulation and box-office selection determine the later creation and replication of posters. In practice, claims of authenticity in real cases should be considered ethical decisions and promotional claims should separate fact from fiction. Findings are limited to textual analysis and seven commercially successful posters in one genre and nation. Future research should compare failed posters, designers' accounts, and engagement data, and should test other genres and industries.

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