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# "BOYS WILL BE BOYS?": MEN'S TALK AS HOMOSOCIAL ENGAGEMENT IN MALE-DOMINATED WHATSAPP GROUPS OF CYCLING COMMUNITIES IN BANDUNG

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## ABSTRACT

*This article explores how men shape their masculine identities within the WhatsApp groups of cycling communities in Bandung, Indonesia, in particular how dominating masculinity is exhibited in the social interactions between members of WhatsApp groups and how this influences the formation of masculine identities. The comprehensive netnographic study conducted in this research, spanning from 2020 to 2023, discerns two distinct modes of interaction that underscore this association. In virtual chat groups, hegemonic masculinity is maintained through messages focusing on core cycling-related activities, which are rooted in themes of competition and male dominance. Additionally, the use of chat fillers, including verbal, pictorial, and video postings, reinforces hegemonic masculinity, even if they digress from the core discussions. This study employs a qualitative methodology to illuminate the multifaceted ways in which individuals engage in reshaping formal sporting communities into playful male homosociality. The aims are to examine the ways in which men perform their masculine identities through internal competition and the perpetuation of masculine stereotypes within these virtual homosocial settings. Moreover, they engage in the internalisation of gender role stereotypes and stigmas, the endorsement of heterosexual masculinities, and the expression of transphobic sentiments to defend and perpetuate norms associated with hegemonic masculinity. The article argues that the circulation of and interaction with digital images associated with femininity and womanhood underpins male homosocial bonding within WhatsApp groups belonging to the cycling community in Bandung.*

**Keywords:** Cycling, WhatsApp group, masculinity, homosocial bonding, gender construction

## INTRODUCTION

Bicycles have held many symbolic meanings across time and cultures. The bicycle emerged as an important sociopolitical symbol in Italy between 1885 and 1955 (Pivato 1990). A bicycle was considered a symbol of American youth during the early nineteenth century, representing the transition from childhood to adulthood (Turpin 2018). Kossuth and Wamsley (2003) discuss the bicycle as a symbol of honour and power that affected perceptions of femininity and masculinity in late nineteenth-century Canada. Hoor (2022) asserts that cycling has evolved into a symbol denoting lifestyle, status, and social differentiation among Berlin's twenty-first-century middle class.

In Indonesia, cycling shifted from transportation to sport and lifestyle domains in 2010 due to the economic progress following the 1998 monetary crisis and subsequent reforms (Fauzan 2018). Driven by historical factors

and global trends, cycling has become a popular sport for quite a long time in Bandung, a city 160 km from Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia. Since 2015, the Facebook page for the Bandung Bicycle Community Forum has identified eighty cycling communities, including two specifically for women cyclists. These communities have diverse interests, including mountain biking, road cycling, commuting, and recreational cycling. WhatsApp groups function as pluralist platforms that embrace diversity and uncertainty (McQuail 2010). They are considered independent and democratic spaces (Jenkins 2006), fostering active sports communities by enabling instant messaging, real-time updates, and seamless event coordination. However, social structures and hierarchies still influence member interactions within these groups.

In Bandung, sports play a crucial role in creating male identity (Prabasmoro and Ridwansyah 2019). Beyond leisure or competition, sports are essential to the formation of male identity. Driven by an affection for numerous interrelated characteristics, such as identity and belonging, community-based attachments, and emotional connection, these communities began as grassroots movements that first emerged in local schools and neighbourhoods (Branscombe and Wann 1991). Cycling is a somewhat upscale leisure activity and lifestyle choice favoured by the middle class (Yusuf 2018; Karisman 2022), which is characterised by stable jobs, steady incomes, and a satisfactory level of education (Afif 2014). Consequently, bicycles are increasingly perceived as a symbol of upward advancement among the Indonesian middle class. Research by Syarief (2023) shows that cycling in Bandung is also considered a space for *silaturahmi*, a widely used Arabic term that denotes the act of maintaining interpersonal relations and bonding. This supports the arguments proposed by other theorists that cycling supports connection and socialisation (O'Connor and Brown 2007; Crane and Temple 2015; Bergesen Dalen and Seippel 2019; Brady 2021).

In twenty-first-century Indonesia, the middle class plays a significant role in gender politics. They introduce alternative concepts of masculinity, such as metrosexual or hybrid masculinity (Clark 2004; Nilan 2009). However, the situation in the cycling community in Bandung presents a different reality despite the middle class's efforts to alter the dynamics of gender politics. Cycling is often associated with masculinity (O'Connor and Brown 2007), which can influence the formation of individual identities (Mackintosh and Norcliffe 2007; Hallenbeck 2015). Through cycling, individuals can demonstrate physical strength and economic capacity. For instance, high-quality cycling gear can contribute to an individual's self-perception by signalling success and reinforcing a masculine image of superiority.

The inconsistent behaviour among the middle-class regarding gender dynamics and politics is worth investigating because it could represent issues and transformations in gender relations in society (Connell 2012). In addition, as Anderson and McCormack (2018) suggest, sports organisations such as the cycling community in Bandung can provide broader insight into the concept of masculinity in the contemporary era. This study observes men's behaviour regarding the construction of masculinity in the cycling community in Bandung, which has evolved from a physical to a virtual environment. Using a netnographic perspective (Kozinets 2002), this article analyses the interactions in four male amateur cycling communities in Bandung through their communication in WhatsApp groups.

Similar to the influence of advertising in America in the early twentieth century (Turpin 2018), the impact of social media exposure, especially WhatsApp, in Indonesia affects the public's perception (Lim 2015) of the popularity of cycling. Thus, the interactions observed via this WhatsApp group also reflect the dynamics of masculinity within the cycling community and, to a greater extent, within the male community in general. With features accommodating communal communication, WhatsApp is a widely used communication platform (Sanusi et al. 2022). It is also popular because of the privacy, promptness, group cohesion, sociability, and legitimacy (Braga and Carauta 2020) that it provides to satisfy specific demands of different situations. All these features help build the members' sense of belonging and identity, which, as far as the WhatsApp groups observed are concerned, are geared towards maintaining and perpetuating hegemonic masculinity.

Members share memes, jokes, links, or texts that sexualise women. Conversations about cycling often quickly shift into discussions of a sexual nature, with members quickly adapting to the topic change by responding with brief, often mocking messages or by sharing more sexualised or revealing images of women from other resources or by reposting from other WhatsApp groups. When conversations about neutral topics like cycling shift into sexual content, it reflects what Bridges and Pascoe (2014) describe as culturally dominant masculinity. This pattern reinforces male bonding through humour, objectification of women, and casual sexual talk; the normalising of such behaviour as part of everyday interactions subtly maintains the power dynamics in favour of heterosexual men. These behaviours perpetuate gender constructions that support traditional masculinity norms, ignoring unconventional femininity and masculinity (Bird 1996; Kimmel 2005). Various sexist actions emphasise how, through friendship and homosociality, men continue to maintain and strengthen the patriarchal gender order

(Lipman-Blumen 1976; Bird 1996; Flood 2008). Thus, WhatsApp groups are an extension of sporting activities and a prominent means of articulating male stereotypes or hegemonic identities (Braga and Carauta 2020). In other words, such groups present a space where masculinity is constructed, determining how men should behave in society.

Combining qualitative content analysis and social media engagement principles (Light 2013; Waterloo et al. 2018), this research examines individuals' active engagement and interactions in WhatsApp groups, including actions such as liking, commenting, sharing, and other forms of engagement that allow individuals to articulate their viewpoints and reactions to content associated with the construction of masculinity. The research also discusses significant factors in these interactions, including the type of content (text, images, videos, memes, or WhatsApp stickers), individual characteristics and user motivation (age, religion, and interests). The aim of this article is to elaborate on how hegemonic masculinity is performed in the social interactions between members of WhatsApp groups and how hegemonic masculinity influences the formation of masculine identities.

## PAST STUDIES ON CYCLING CULTURE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

With its 168 $km^2$ area and a population of approximately 2,481,469, Bandung holds cultural and political significance, which impacts Indonesia's political, economic, and social spheres. The city faces typical social challenges associated with urban expansion (Hidayati 2021), such as population surges, unemployment, homelessness, slum proliferation, traffic congestion, elevated population density, and urban development sprawl.

Due to the various potential barriers, such as city traffic congestion, hot tropical weather, and hilly terrain, cycling in Bandung offers a challenging riding experience. Despite being a non-contact sport, it demands physical prowess generally associated with men (Powell et al. 2005). It is not a surprise that cycling remains predominantly male-dominated in Bandung. Karisman (2022) notes that approximately 86% of cycling sport participants in the city are men. Another important observation is that there is still an underrepresentation of women in cycling in Bandung due to the prevailing patriarchal culture. Despite progress in education, women's rights, and awareness, the deeply ingrained patriarchal system in Bandung (Priyatna et al. 2017) continues to be a significant obstacle to achieving gender equality as it impedes men and women from direct engagement, including in cycling

sports. While the city is composed of diverse ethnic and religious groups, the majority of the population in Bandung are Sundanese and Muslims, contributing to a certain perspective on gender construction and relations.

Female cyclists may face social stigma and discrimination from other road users. Religious norms, particularly within Islam, may also influence women's participation in cycling in Indonesia (Song et al. 2019). Although the modernist Islamic movement in Indonesia does not explicitly prohibit women from appearing in public or participating in activities such as sports, the religious context still reinforces ingrained gender norms, which dictate that men are the heads of households. In contrast, women are primarily responsible for domestic duties. This belief is deeply ingrained even among the younger educated generations and urban middle-class society (Song et al. 2019). As a result, women are frequently expected to prioritise domestic over public or social roles, which leads to the perception that women have limitations in cycling (Ravensbergen et al. 2024).

Among the few studies linking WhatsApp, gender, and sex(uality), only a few scholars have explored homosocial, heterosexual interactions, and normative masculinity. Braga and Carauta (2020) identify the playful and satirical male homosocial behaviour among members of soccer fans-based WhatsApp groups in Brazil. Whereas the research by Braga focuses on reaffirming hegemonic masculinity in the established Brazilian football culture, this study perceives that homosociality in the WhatsApp groups observed develops as a response to the crisis that hegemonic masculinity faces. This study contends that it is the crisis that drives changes in hegemonic masculinity.

Research by Roberts et al. (2021) examines how social behaviours are acquired through the intersection of "shared idea cultures" within the WhatsApp landscape where sexting occurs. They argue that sexting is a normalised aspect of young people's sexuality, distinct from flirting and harassment, by emphasising the pivotal role of consent and mutual engagement. The participants in their research are also believed to have a shared understanding of gender behaviour, but they struggle to define a suitable form of masculine identity. In a different study, Toder and Barak-Brandes (2022) analyse individuals participating in homosocial pornographic activities on WhatsApp groups in Israel to acquire social, symbolic, and cultural capital, distinct from economic advantages, in line with Bourdieu's field theory. Their research challenges the concept of a "safe space" in the context of social capital accumulation and highlights the role of WhatsApp pornography in shaping masculine identity. It suggests that this engagement

reinforces traditional masculine traits, fostering a perception of desirable heterosexual masculinity.

Masculinity cannot be reduced to a fixed ideal or type but changes according to certain social spaces and settings (Connell 1995). On Indonesian social media, Saputro and Yuwarti (2016) observe a change in the image of modern Indonesian masculinity, which they call metrosexual men. In analysing discourse about urban men's lifestyles displayed through online media, they highlight how *Men's Health Indonesia* presents modern men as individuals who care about health and physical appearance and are more emotional, active and intellectual. Their findings corroborate the research findings by Clark (2004) and Nilan (2009), which show alternative masculine images, such as metrosexual men, in post-reform Indonesian masculinity discourse.

In another case, Fadhlina (2021) observes how social media such as YouTube actually strengthens traditional masculinity in Indonesia. In her research on digital *da'wah* (conveying Islamic teachings and beliefs to others) and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people, especially transvestites, on YouTube channels, Fadhlina (2021) notes two opposing conditions. Social media allows dialogue between devout religious people and transgender people, which is often considered controversial in Indonesia because religious and cultural values play a significant role, and the intersection of religion with LGBTQ+ issues, such as transgender identities, can provoke strong disagreements and debates. At the same time, digital *da'wah* is also used by Islamic organisations to shape individuals into pious political subjects, targeting transgender people to turn them into "real" men. Fadhlina's research notes two important points. First, social media, such as YouTube, can become a political force that certain bodies and agencies, such as Islamic organisations, can use. Second, masculinity in post-reformation Indonesia has become more complex because it not only gives rise to an alternative masculine image (Clark 2004; Saputro and Yuwarti 2016), but also a masculinity supported by Islam's rise, as found by Van Wichelen (2009) and Fadhlina (2021).

Hermawan et al. (2017) see that in WhatsApp groups, sexual humour, with women as objects, are always circulated. According to Hermawan et al. (2017), this cannot be separated from the production of meaning, when humorous language becomes an indexical marker which is always based on male paradigms and interests and is in line with patriarchal values. Similarly, Mirawati et al. (2018) highlight sexist humour in lecturer WhatsApp groups at several universities in West Java. Even though male and female members populate the WhatsApp group, sexist humour often appears in these

interactions, mainly due to the large gender gap and the strong patriarchal culture in Indonesia. These two studies indicate that gender discourse has entered the virtual space of WhatsApp groups. They emphasise that sexist humour occurs in private spaces such as WhatsApp groups because patriarchal culture is still dominant.

While previous studies examine various forms of masculinity within WhatsApp groups and delve into how specific behaviours like sexting or pornographic engagement both shape and reflect masculine identities, our research introduces the roles of religion and economy as significant factors in the formation of masculinity within Bandung's cycling communities. Rather than focusing solely on reinforcing traditional masculinity, our study suggests that while these communities display a traditional masculine identity, their interactions on WhatsApp may also reflect more diverse expressions of masculinity. By examining how patriarchal and conventional ideas of masculinity are articulated and problematised, our research expands on existing studies by highlighting the complex, evolving nature of masculinity within a specific cultural and economic context.

## HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND THE SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE: THEORY AND METHOD

Despite its popularity, the cycling culture requires an understanding and acceptance of possible physical discomfort or risk of injury, which are otherwise often ascribed to demonstrations of power, autonomy, and dominance within the public sphere (Bouvier 2015). According to Connell (2005), such attributes form the core of masculine identity. The term "masculine" does not exclusively pertain to biological sex. It emphasises social roles, behaviours, and societal expectations associated with men (Butler 1990). In other words, men's responsibilities in society, their actions, and the expectations placed on them by the larger cultural and socioeconomic environment all contribute to the complex concept of masculinity (Mac an Ghaill 1996).

In patriarchal cultures, social activities can create disparities for women and also impose pressures on men to conform to normative standards of masculinity. Scholars such as Butler (1990), Connell (1995), and Kimmel (2000) have extensively discussed this topic. While not inherently exclusive to men, cycling became a sport that reinforces hegemonic masculinity values (Bonham et al. 2015) as it is a physical endeavour and a means to cultivate mental traits such as alertness, concentration, prudence,

a composed mindset, endurance, and determination (Oosterhuis 2016). Such characteristics align with the coinage *Bapakism*, an Indonesian concept of masculinity developed during the authoritarian New Order rule from 1966 to 1998.

*Bapakism* is a term derived from *bapak* (father) and refers to the role of men as the family's foundation, extending their influence across various spheres of power. The term embodies traditional Javanese qualities such as gentleness and compassion while incorporating the need for assertiveness in the modern work environment (Nilan 2009). As the manifestation of Indonesian masculinity, *Bapakism* reflects the predominantly expected attitudes and behaviours, including those related to activities such as sports, jobs, or politics. After the fall of the New Order regime in 1998, the doctrine's legitimacy as the primary representation of masculinity—though still persistent in many aspects of the present Indonesian society—began to be challenged (Boellstorff 2004), leading to an ideological struggle (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). As Nilan (2009) observes, the prevailing ideal of masculinity in contemporary Indonesia still "heavily promotes the image of the urban middle-class male as a breadwinner and consumer" (331). This idealisation reinforces heterosexuality as the dominant norm (Boellstorff 2004). However, in the global consumerist landscape, a man's success is no longer solely measured by his ability to provide for a family (Nilan 2009). It is also measured by the status symbols associated with owning specific products and brands. This shift reflects a broader societal transformation in which material possessions and brand affiliation have become markers of success and social standing for men, in addition to their traditional role as providers for their families.

Hegemonic masculine ideals are reinforced in homosocial environments (Flood 2002), including through cycling as a masculine institution. It has become a way for the middle class to display their achievements, especially given the economic conditions that allow for leisure time and the integration of cycling into their lifestyle. Consequently, bicycles symbolise male authority over women and signify middle-class dominance in Bandung. Cycling, therefore, represents men's strategy and efforts to maintain or expand their influence and sustain gender dominance (Flood 2002). The close yet intricate intersectionality between cycling and masculinity makes Connell's (1995) notion of hegemonic masculinity relevant as a framework. Connell emphasises the pivotal role of hegemony in understanding the dynamics of change within societies, particularly regarding gender roles and norms. Connell (1995) defines hegemonic masculinity as the dominant gender ideology of a particular

era that expects all men to conform to its standards, thereby endorsing the subordination of both women and non-hegemonic men. According to this ideology, cycling is a cultural practice reinforcing the notion that men should occupy a superior position. As cycling communities significantly impact the socialisation process of men in Bandung, they reinforce collective values and norms associated with hegemonic masculinity, which continually fluctuate and evolve (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). They also serve as platforms for groups to navigate changing social norms and encourage adherence to established norms (Campbell and Cornish 2012). From Connell's (1995) perspective, the homosocial interactions within the cycling community serve as evidence of how hegemonic masculinity is glorified and preserved.

This research is moreover conducted using a method of categorising data into emergent themes or meaningful segments, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which align with the research aims and relevant content. The data is systematically categorised thematically and sub-thematically. Initially, hundreds of samples were gathered and meticulously screened. To focus specifically on themes related to masculinity, the data were categorised into topics such as misogyny, sexting, leadership styles, toughness, material status, and social status. The messaging content was obtained from a research corpus collected manually through screenshots. It is important to note that community members (King, Baonk, Gravels, and Brights) have approved all data and adhere to the ethical guidelines established by the Universitas Padjadjaran Ethics Committee.

Qualitative content analysis was also chosen as the most appropriate method to investigate the communications of WhatsApp groups due to the corpus data consisting of written content, images, videos, memes, emojis, and stickers (Waterloo et al. 2018). Generally, a significant portion of the content shared within the group is not created by the participants themselves. Instead, it consists of memes, photos, and videos sourced and forwarded from other groups or the internet. Participants often add brief comments to the forwarded content, customising and adapting the post to fit the context of their community. WhatsApp groups have made it easier for the cycling communities to spread masculine values and norms through daily communication. Members can share photos, memes, or videos that appropriate heterosexist and cycling culture elements. This platform provides a rich data set regarding masculinity practices.

Bandung's cycling communities typically operate through voluntary participation, with members organising and pursuing opportunities to engage in leisurely sports and pastimes. However, during several instances observed in the field, these communities also displayed competitive behaviours, engaging

in activities focused on speed competitions, hill conquests, or instances of intimidation among the members. In this initial stage of the socialisation process, members actively engage and consistently undergo physical training based on the community's characteristics. This pattern is often observed in sports communities as a male rite (Glackin and Beale 2018) to reinforce masculinity (Dworkin and Messner 2002).

Message samples were collected from four bicycle communities in Bandung between 2020–2023. The samples may reflect current trends in the conceptualisation of masculinity. The four selected communities comprising the research subjects were Baonk, Brights, Gravels, and King. The all-male mountain biking club Baonk has 18 members aged 35–50 years old. Combining sport and Bridgestone vintage bike collecting, Brights has 143 male members aged 40–72 years old. Mixing mountain biking and road biking, Gravels' members consist of 74 males (aged 24–67 years old). King, a bike travel club, has 52 male members aged 35–70 years old.

The data set allowed the researchers to identify several thematic patterns in the interactions between WhatsApp group members on the idea of masculinity. These patterns enabled the researchers to identify three categories of analysis:

1. The notion that men establish their masculine identity by creating homosocial spaces.
2. Members reinforce masculine identity through internal competitiveness.
3. By subordinating and prejudicing women, supporting masculine work, and promoting transphobic sentiments, the members perform a form of masculinity that is more nuanced and complicated.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Enacting Homosocial Setting: Spending Mutual Time with Brothers

For Gravels and Baonk communities interested in road cycling and mountain biking, speed and power manifest their physical prowess. Gravels and Baonk members are familiar with self-tracking apps, like Strava, that display the speed, altitude, or distance achieved. The digital platform enables identity to be constructed in terms of space and time (Barrie et al. 2019). In contrast, within the King community, which is primarily focused on bike touring, and the Brights community, which emphasises the fusion of sports and

vintage bike collections and showcases physical accomplishments, typically involves the sharing of personal or group photos and videos captured during biking adventures. Through such engagement, individual members also seek recognition as genuine cyclists. Regardless of the manner of engagement, presenting oneself as an active cyclist is important in creating a bond since a member will not only be recognised but also gain awards and achievements, such as the titles "leader of the week", *jago tanjakan* (king of the hill), *tukang ngaprak* (the adventurous), or other humorous yet actual compliments. This finding aligns with the views of Donnelly and Young (1988), who argue that in the cycling subculture, members accept one another because they share the same language and experiences as cyclists (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009).

Some exceptions, however, apply. While most Gravels and Baonk members receive positive reactions upon posting good or poor Strava records, professional local racers, such as Kinan, Odie, and Miki (Gravels) or Deni and Rifa (Baonk), receive a different response. Their Strava posts receive negative feedback, often expressed in playful humour, such as "Sure. The dude's a racer". The same pattern extends to YS, aged 48 years old and a member of Brights, who was teased for frequently reposting his achievements in cycling around Indonesia. Both examples illustrate that in this field of sociability, the significance of reality takes a back seat to maintaining contact, as discussed by Braga and Carauta (2020). Togetherness is valued far more than pursuing individual accomplishments (Aull 2019). These examples suggest that while respect for traditional masculine attributes such as speed, distance, height, adventure, and physical accomplishments (Messner 1992; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) remains prevalent, the idea of "hypermasculinity" has notably diminished. Hypermasculinity is often viewed as an attempt to conceal feelings of inadequacy and as a symbol of lower social status.

The term "hypermasculinity" describes negative societal norms pertaining to stereotypical masculine roles, such as emotional repression and power. Changes in gender norms, greater knowledge and education, better media portrayal, and the impact of positive role models have all contributed to a reduction in the idea of toxic masculinity. Within male-dominated cycling communities of WhatsApp groups, one might see humour that reinforces conventional masculinity, competitive discussions centred on technical details, assertive language, and restricted emotional expression. Additionally, men are more likely to hold leadership positions and make decisions, and there may be opposition to activities that are associated with femininity. The emphasis on competitiveness in the culture often overshadows the communal aspects.

Not all members are familiar with sports tracking apps, and not all members can be involved in the empirical practice of sharing destination pictures, considering that members of an amateur community live outside the community. Yet, every member can still be involved in the sociability by commenting, assessing, interrupting posts, or initiating a conversation session with themes or interests that may attract other group members. For instance, when the local football team Persib Bandung played, the WhatsApp groups typically buzzed with discussions about the game, filled with banter, passionate support, and football jargon. Occasionally, members sent birthday greetings to other members using humorous expressions to show intimacy and a sense of brotherhood. Nonetheless, participating in sociability without showing their masculine identity seems to be inadequate for the members.

To display their masculine selves, they convince all members that they are heterosexual men. As a text-based chatting room, this reconstruction act is manifested in WhatsApp groups in various modalities of sexist expressions and humour. From the different possible modes, posting various modalities concerning the feminine body becomes a form of "role-take" or managing impressions to appear more aligned with the group's values than they actually are (Donnelly and Young 1988). Chat fillers, namely verbal, pictorial, and video posting, though interrupting the core conversations, also help strengthen hegemonic masculinity by objectifying feminine bodies, as shown in Figure 1.

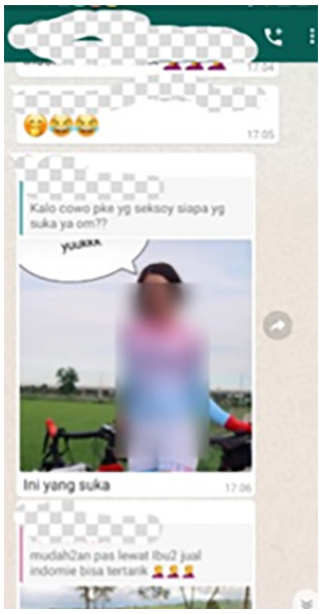


Figure 1: Messaging in Baonk on 20 January 2022; impersonating women to mark one's presence.

*Source*: Research collection.

Edi, aged 50 years old, for instance, is known as *si wanian*, "the brave", not because he can bike through difficult routes but because he dares to post sensual images of women. In Figure 1, Edi attempts to enter sociability by adjusting to the discussion theme of road bikes. By posting a modality of a woman, he shows his heterosexual masculine identity. The image selection is inseparable from Edi's own subjective male gaze, through which women in media (including social media) are perceived by heterosexual men's eyes (Mulvey 1975; Bridges and Pascoe 2014). In many cases, female modality is also used to impersonalise oneself as if the female subject is present to greet, invite, or question the presence of the participants.

Considering the high consistency and frequency of this modus operandi, it can be said that each WhatsApp group has become a vehicle of stereotypical masculine expressions in disguise rather than a communication medium for bicycling. However, during observations of this behaviour, neither vulgar nor pornographic photos or videos were posted. If it is not associated with bicycles, then images of women are posted within a humorous framework or to complement humorous text messages. Thus, even though the sexual objectification of women is one of the aspects that influences the formation of male superiority in a patriarchal society, pornographic behaviour has no place in socialisation.

In Edi's case, disrupting core conversations by posting images of women bridges the gap in physical achievements compared to other members. In this way, he is still respected as a masculine man. As a digital space, WhatsApp groups offer a new way of presenting the masculine self and a new manner of forming a masculine brotherhood (Morrell et al. 2012). These digital ways surpass the definition of masculinity that often correlates with physical performance or men's daily activities, such as the drive for muscularity. By utilising gendered scripts on the internet, they can display various constructs and reconstructs of heterosexual masculine identity (Moloney and Love 2018).

## Reinforcement of Masculine Identity

The commonly accepted concept of hegemonic masculinity refers to culturally celebrated masculinity, a configuration that justifies dominance and inequality (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Men must demonstrate standards that other men can see and recognise to create and reinforce gender hierarchies to achieve this configuration. Those who successfully display hegemonic masculinity hold power (Kimmel 2000), and this power is a

manhood act (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Consequently, they build internal competitiveness. Sociocultural changes have not changed the specific characteristics of masculine constructs but only adjustments to the patriarchal social system and traditional standards of masculinity, which are generally characterised by fortitude, dominance, aggression, and competitiveness (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Kimmel 2018).

To contextualise this act of masculinity within the internal dynamics of communities, this study applies David and Brannon's (1976) four rules of masculinity, which include: "no sissy stuff" (49), "be a big wheel" (89), "the sturdy oak" (161), and "give 'em hell" (199). These rules respectively emphasise: (1) anti-feminine attitude; (2) striving for success; (3) maintaining emotional control; and (4) displaying aggression. For example, Boy (45 years old) is particularly strong in uphill rides and fast on tracks, evidenced by several leader-of-the-week awards. Off track, he is a successful business executive with a happy family. This can be seen from his posts of participating in a gathering with a new SUV or on a large cruiser motorcycle with his colleagues. He also initiated family camping events for members of the community. These efforts represent Boy as an ideal man who "occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relation" (Connell 1995: 76) since he fulfils the prescriptive cognitions of a modern man: strong, wealthy, and heterosexual. In the context of Indonesian culture, he fulfils the criteria of a patriarchal male that appears in the traditional expression *harta*, *tahta*, *wanita* (wealth, power, women). When the members appointed "The Big Wheel" Boy as Gravels chair, they celebrated hegemonic masculinity.

However, "to maintain the pattern of hegemony, men need rules to be enforced" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 844). As shown in Figure 2, Boy, who is respected as a model of hegemonic masculinity, was immediately punished when he admitted that he could not join a cycling event because he had to take his wife to Lembang. The members responded with aggressive humour and transphobic references, saying, "the transgender (transition) is successful". Pascoe (2005) explained that terms like "faggot" (and also "transgender") are used to ensure that men conform to masculine behaviour. When they exhibit something considered feminine, they are seen as showing vulnerability, thus labelled as "transgender". Expressions of vulnerability are deemed to violate David and Brannon's (1976) "no sissy stuff" rule, as they are associated with effeminate traits. This punishment aligns with Hegarty et al.'s (2004) argument that hegemonic norms usually operate through implicit communication but face strong opposition when made explicit.

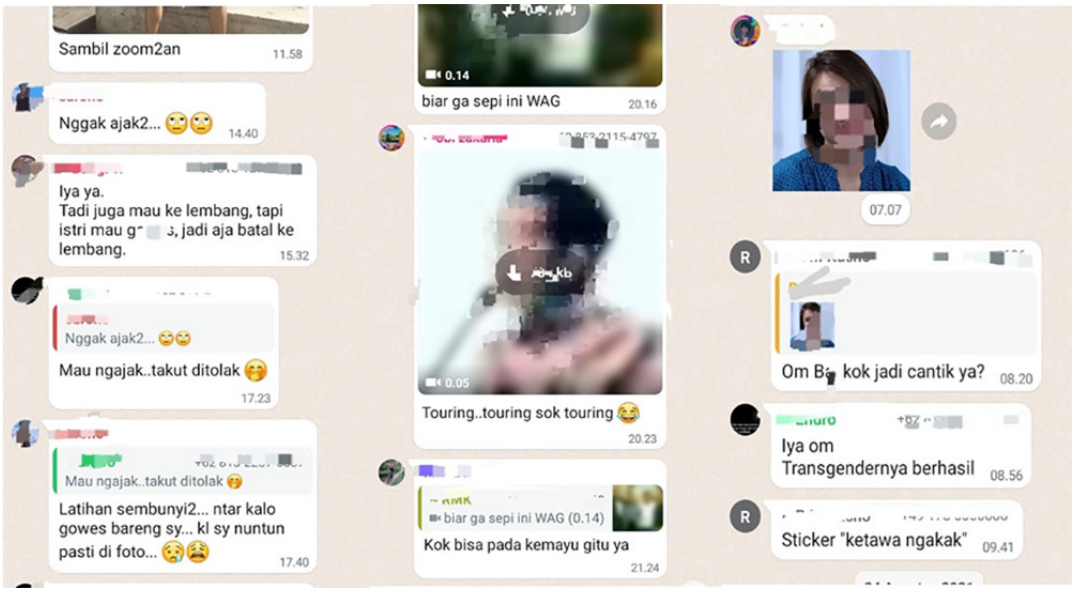


Figure 2: Messaging in Gravels on 22 August 2021.

*Note*: Since he had to be absent for quite some time, the other members told Boy to sell his bike or called him feminine; the strongest of these messages said, "Om Boy turns pretty, and the transgender (transition) is successful".

*Source*: Research collection.

The same case happened to Amin (56 years old), the charismatic King community leader. In his message, Amin hesitated to join a tour because of a family matter. Reacting to Amin's hesitation, a member posted a polygamy-themed meme. As shown in Figure 3, the meme humorously conveys the message, "Don't be scared of your wife; there are numerous other women". Though meant as a joke, it also serves as a clear warning to Amin about his indecisiveness. In Indonesia, the term *suami takut istri* (henpecked husband) is a label that challenges a married man's pride. This cannot be separated from the stereotype of men as the main breadwinner. As such, a man or a husband is considered to have the power to control and make decisions in a family instead of a wife.

Transphobic references and henpecked husband humour are among the varieties of sexist humour used in establishing sociability, especially for a member who fails to enforce the gender norms upheld by the community. Hesitant expressions are considered to violate proper masculinity and male superiority (Messerschmidt 1993) and, in this context, are considered to violate the superior image of the community members. As a result, each violation earns denigrating expressions such as the ones exemplified above. While considered rude, such acts also constitute friendship codes for prioritising gender identity within homosociality (Flood 2008).

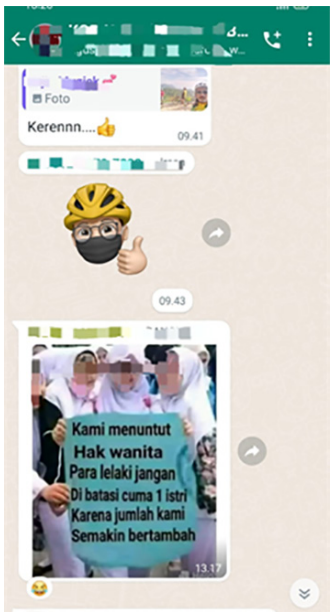


Figure 3: King's message on 12 July 2022; "We demand women's rights. Men should not be limited to just one wife because our number is increasing".

*Source*: Research collection.

The examples show that masculine norms must be enforced by personal conviction and performed to be seen by others in community interactions (Croft et al. 2015). Members employ various strategies to avoid emotional expressions, even in the face of serious threats, such as illnesses, injuries, difficulties, and losses. One such strategy is distraction, as shown in Figure 4.

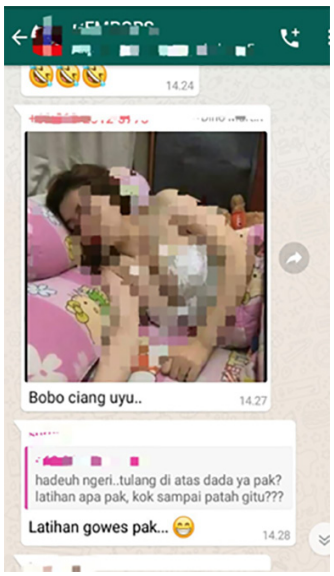


Figure 4: Gravels messaging on 12 March 2020; image of a woman as the distractive modality.

*Source*: Research collection.

Siswono (53 years old) broke his collarbone after falling off his bike on a downhill ride. A broken collarbone is not a light injury, but showing pain or suffering is an emotional expression associated with feminine traits. Keogh (2015) documented that expressions of pain challenge the masculine identity and demasculinise pain. Siswono created a distraction for his pain due to his belief in his masculine ideology. However, Siswono added a sexual fantasy to his distraction by posting a playful message, "Let's take a nap", accompanied by an image of a woman (Figure 4) portrayed as his sleeping companion. Such interactions can only happen in a masculine virtual environment. The members are complicit in the demasculinisation of pain.

Siswono exemplifies how WhatsApp group members strengthen their traditional masculinity in the sense that a man has to be strong and resilient, as in David and Brannon's (1976) concept of "the sturdy oak". He validates his masculinity by practising obedience to the masculine ideology. Instead of complaining, he validates the male symbolic domain by using aggressive sexist humour and a heterosexual reference to conquering women. The male homosocial environment posits the conquest of women as a status symbol among men (Flood 2008). In this case, women (through images) play a supporting role in the narrative of distracting from pain. This strategy shows that he is "in the box" (the elite hierarchy), and even when in pain, he can still joke around.

Sharing images of women is a significant tool for validating masculinity. It provides emotional compensation and potentially reinforces a particular version of heterosexual masculinity that aligns with the community's norms. For instance, Haris (56 years old) frequently shares religious Islamic sermons and reminds people of prayer times, earning him the title "Uncle Hajji" and an image of a well-mannered, pious, and mature individual. However, to keep up with his peers, Uncle Hajji shares images of women.

Figure 5 illustrates how religion, an important aspect of Indonesian culture, is not only a belief but also an integral part of identity. Every activity, including cycling, is linked to a dimension of religious values (Song et al. 2019). However, objectifying women contradicts religious values. As Katz (2006) stated, "sometimes men have to participate in sexist practices, or even violence, to be accepted into the brotherhood" (523). Haris and the other members affirm masculine practices with this kind of participation.

They avoid the image of "pious men" to maintain their recognition as "bad boys" in the context of heterosexual masculinity. Sharing women's images was commonly practised by male teenagers (Ringrose 2011) but recent surveys have found that it is also done by adults. According to Zimmerman

(2015), sexting is a "carefree and fun" activity for adult men. Objectifying practices serve to build the paradoxical "old boys' clubs" (Flood 2008: 42) spaces where men maintain an atmosphere of fun while upholding traditional performances of hegemonic masculinity. This somewhat aligns with the concept of David and Brannon's "give 'em hell", where men are required not to show fear, weakness, and anxiety, including feelings of guilt or sin, in the context of Islam.

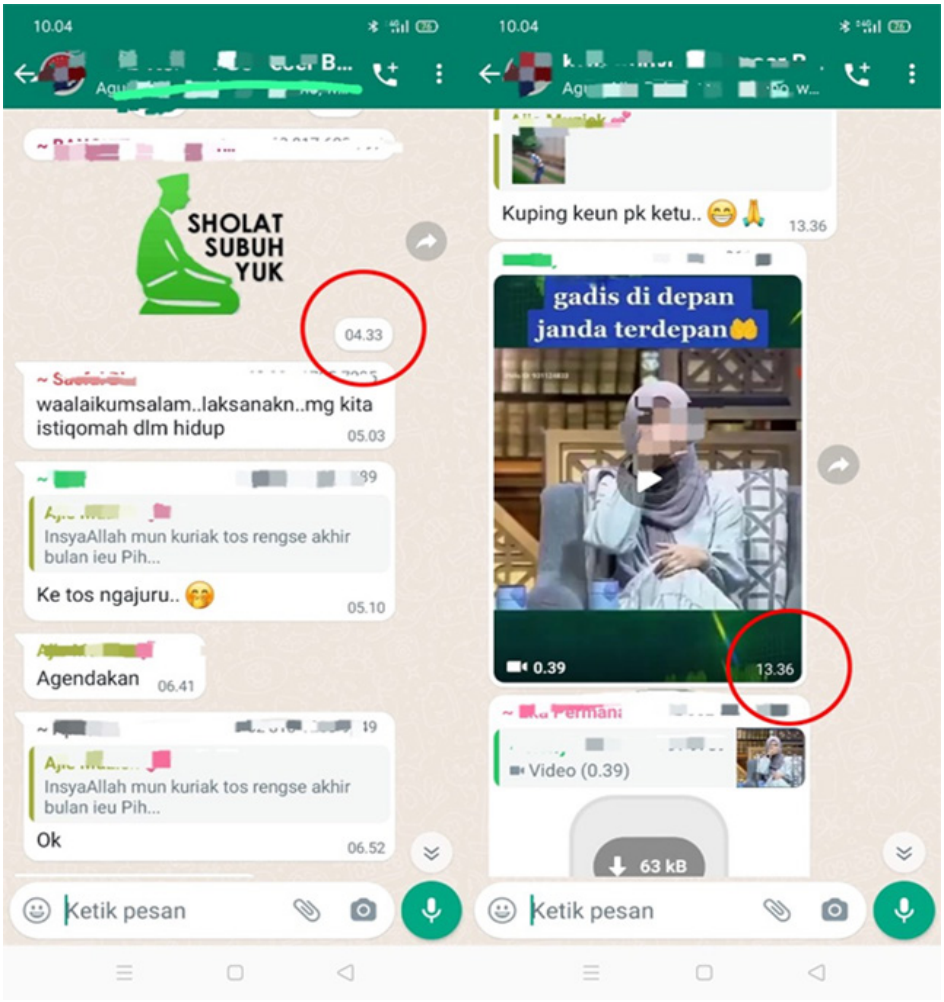


Figure 5: King's messaging on 14 December 2022.

*Note*: At 04:30, Haris reminded other members of the fajr praying time, but at 13:36 (1:36 pm), he sent the video "Girls beat even the foremost widows in a race".

*Source*: Research collection.

The examples show competitiveness within the community's internal game, intended to seek homosocial agreement and recognition of the status of the identity of its members (Kimmel 1994). Competitiveness does not always correlate with the sense of winning, but it appears whenever a threat to

masculinity is felt among the community's members. Individually, the members practice flexibility in affirming collective traits and behaviour to avoid being publicly shamed. In this game, the members use expressions associated with descriptively stereotypical male behaviour to validate their masculinity.

## Performing Masculinity

While the previous section demonstrated how the interactions among the members of the WhatsApp groups descriptively enforce norms of masculinity, this section further explains their flexibility in actively maintaining and preserving masculine norms as collective expressions and behaviours (Genter 2014). To frame this analysis, these expressions and behaviours are connected to the discourse of shifting societal gender roles. This connection is drawn from the idea that reaffirming masculine norms is linked to the discourse on evolving gender relations (Connell 2005; Nilan 2009). The men attempt to anticipate threats to their masculinity by internalising prescriptive hegemonic masculine norms. These can be seen from the expressions that, despite their triviality and playfulness, refer to certain attributes and characteristics of how a man or woman "should be".

Cycling communities do not function as social entities or political organisations directly engaging with the gender equality movement. Instead, these communities comprise individuals who identify as cyclists and uphold traditional notions of masculinity. Nevertheless, outside of the community, the system of gender relations in Indonesia is in a state of dynamic change. For example, the percentage of women in the workforce is increasing in sectors once dominated by men. In the narrower context of cycling, female participation in Bandung is also increasing. Reacting to these conditions, men (male cyclists) tend to attempt to maintain the status quo by symbolically internalising hegemonic masculine norms instead of trying to fight the winds of change.

Community members construct narratives of masculinising cycling using WhatsApp features such as sharing images, creating and distributing memes, or creating and modifying other modalities related to gender stereotypes. This matter can be seen in Figure 6.

The figure illustrates how community members stigmatise women by finding fault with them and assuming that women are less competent at cycling and that they are significantly different from them. Even when presented humorously, such criticism is deeply seated in sexism and

misogyny. According to homosocial positioning, men use images of women as content for sexist humour and mockery, as seen in Figure 6 above, to reinforce unity within their group. Negative views toward the women emerge when men perceive changes in the existing gender hierarchy as a threat. These shifts result from women's growing involvement in sports and the workforce, making some men uneasy. Consequently, the sexist humour is seen as a covert method of expressing bias against the woman.

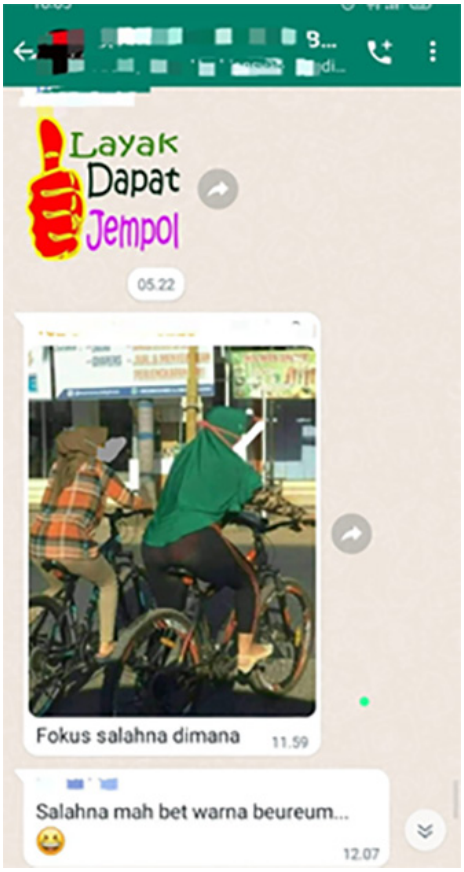


Figure 6: Message of Brights community on 24 March 2022.

*Note*: Two women on bicycles were depicted wearing everyday clothes so that their underwear was visible, and it became a joke: "focus on where the downside is" and "the downside is that (the underwear) is red".

*Source*: Research collection.

Besides directly objectifying women's bodies, another discursive way of maintaining hegemonic norms is to use gender as a metaphor. Women become expressions of less-than-standard qualities; for example, routes that are not challenging are referred to as feminine routes, as seen in Figure 7.

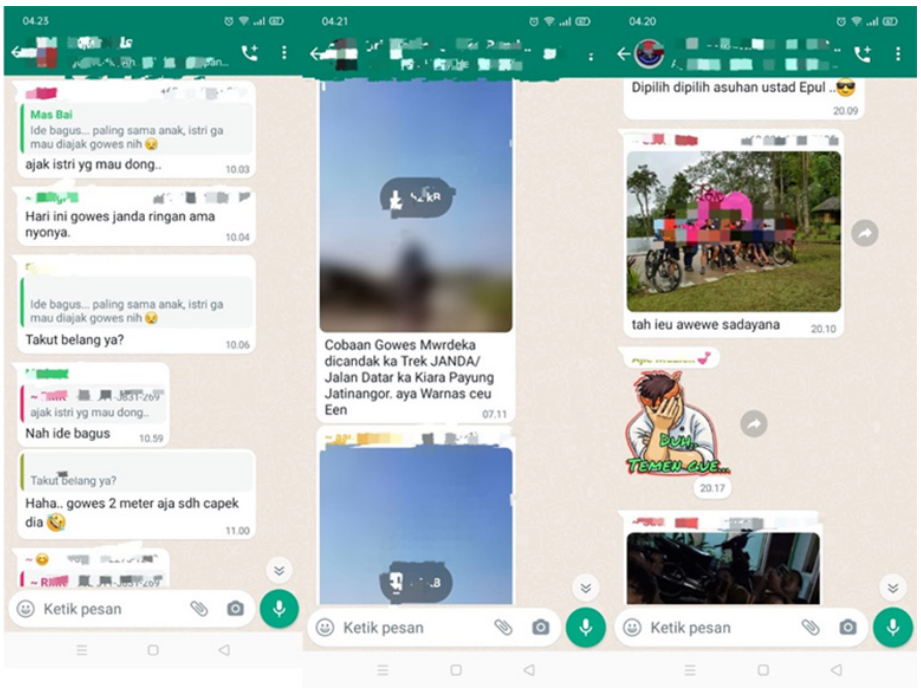


Figure 7: Messages in King, 22 April 2022.

*Note*: These multimodalities of stigmatisation of women are posted to inform less challenging cycling routes.

*Source*: Research collection.

In Figure 7, the modalities of women become a metaphor for something less challenging: a biking route that is flat, short, and boring. This means that the members have certain ideal standards; when the standards are not met, the condition is then seen as womanly or feminine. The statement *tah ieu awewe sadayana* (these are all women/ladies) does not pertain to the participants' gender but rather signifies shorter, less demanding city routes. Furthermore, the post is not intended to criticise any specific member, as the person posting is also part of it. It signifies, "[t]oday, we're only cycling through a route suitable for women".

In another case, a gentle, flat cycling route is often called a *janda* (widow), derived from the abbreviation *jalan datar* (flat terrain). This term became popular due to its connection with the societal stigma faced by divorced women who experience discrimination in Indonesian society (Parker 2016). This stigma is also influenced by heteronormative culture in Indonesia, which expects women to be in heterosexual relationships. On the other hand, being a widow is linked to the perception of a woman as sexually experienced but economically disadvantaged. Being a widow is often associated with being a woman who is easily won over and conquered. Thus, the acronym *janda* for a cycling track implies something easily conquered or inferior.

In contrast, anything considered superior is labelled as "male". For example, they give their bicycles masculine names such as "Mas Gagah" (with "Mas" as an honorific for Javanese men), "Pangeran Biru" (Blue Prince) or "Black Mamba". Within the Baonk community, mountain bikes are known as *sepeda jalu* (men's bikes), while other bicycles are termed *sepeda bikang* (women's bikes). From both the difficult routes and the choice of bicycle, it can be concluded that these factors, or other similar elements above them, are considered standard or even surpassing the standards, representing their masculine identity. In contrast, anything considered below this standard is viewed as feminine.

The logic of self and others is also applied in their interaction practices, particularly in the form of emoticons, stickers, or GIFs. When members do or express things considered masculine, they are rewarded with an image of a younger woman. Conversely, when they do something collectively considered less masculine, they will be rewarded with a negative emoticon or a less-appealing sticker of an (older) woman, as seen in Figure 8. In the gender relation framework, the usage of modalities of women as a measure of masculinity shows that women are seen as subordinate or "a currency used by men to upgrade their level in a masculine social scale" (Kimmel 1994: 119–120).

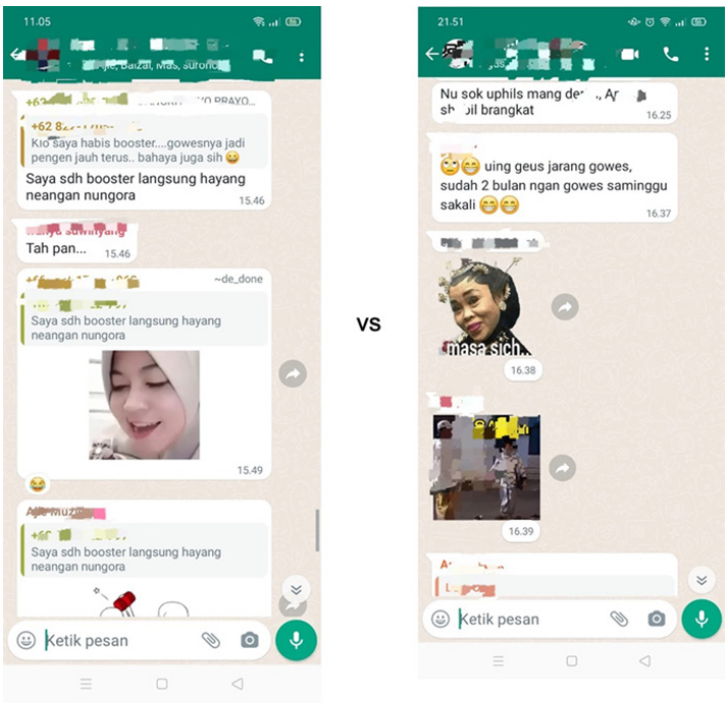


Figure 8: Message about "After COVID booster shots, I feel like looking for a young wife" and "During COVID, I can only ride once a week".

*Source*: Research collection.

The excerpt in Figure 8 illustrates how homosociality is built through the supposedly collective desire for polygamy as a member expresses, albeit jokingly, such a desire after having received the vaccine. The utterance is, however, followed up by the seemingly irrelevant comment from the other group that "he only rides a week". The discussion on "taking a second wife" and "riding" can be alluded to as a form of self-mockery. "Riding" is a widely accepted metaphor for having sex. The utterance that one only rides once a week can also be understood that he only has sex once a week as the implication of the COVID pandemic when people tend to maintain a safe distance for fear of being infected. Thus, the idea of having a second wife as a manifestation of masculine sexual prowess is effectively undermined as they can only enjoy riding once a week. This also shows that masculine physical strength and power are ultimately limited.

Hundreds of modalities that problematise gender relations manifest in interactions within these communities, including pictures, videos, memes, and WhatsApp stickers. Most of these were not initially created by the members but were reposted from other sources. The viral Brompton meme is an example, as seen in Figure 9. For context, in 2019, a pilot for Garuda Airways attempted to smuggle a Brompton folding bike, resulting in the popularity of the premium bicycle brand and putting their products in high demand, which caused their prices to increase. The viral meme cleverly plays with the abbreviations, turning SNI (Standard Nasional Indonesia – Indonesian National Standard) into *Sudah Nanya Istri* (already asking for wife's approval) and ISO (International Organization for Standardization) into *Istri Sudah Oke* (wife has okayed). This meme gained popularity due to its humorous context and content, which resonated with biking communities, and because *Sudah Nanya Istri* and *Istri Sudah Oke* point to women's domestic roles as family bookkeepers. However, it also highlights the power dynamic between husbands and wives in a way that these men recognise the wife's power in the form of self-mockery and denigration.

Expressions and interactions in humorous modalities blur the lines between humour and harassment, making the preservation of these hegemonic masculine norms more natural and pervasive. The use of memes, gifs, and stickers problematises gender construction and relations. While memes can perpetuate stereotypes, they reflect a more complicated dynamic between men and women. According to Coates (2014) and Hickey-Moody and Laurie (2017), these expressions become clues of how they form relationships between men and women and between men and men, inside and outside the community.


Figure 9: The Brompton meme; men's money, wife power: marital power dynamics.

*Source*: Research collection.

## CONCLUSION

Having analysed interactions on WhatsApp to illustrate the practice of masculinity in the cycling communities, this study found complexities emerging in regard to the sociopolitical context in Indonesia. Tradition, religion, and culture are essential in shaping views on gender in Indonesia. Global gender discourses also influence these factors, as the country is connected to the world's economic structure. The WhatsApp groups of four bicycling communities in Bandung provide an operational space for hegemonic masculinity, where members present themselves as the ideal heterosexual men envisioned by Indonesian society.

This study argues that the interactions among men in WhatsApp groups encourage homosocial bonding. The casual exchange of texts, jokes, memes, photos, or links pertaining to women in the groups contributes to the (re) shaping and intensification of dominant male stereotypes. Furthermore, this study argues that these interactions in WhatsApp groups that diminish femininity contribute to the upholding and extension of norms linked to hegemonic masculinity. Since it enables the study to examine the complex features of WhatsApp groups inside cycling communities, the netnographic study is essential because it gives a deep and nuanced knowledge of the online dynamics, culture, and relationships within these digital spaces. The phrase

"boys will be boys" in the title precisely refers to this attitude, implying that men continue to perform their masculinity in alignment with their peers to ensure their rapport and group membership.

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## COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Universitas Padjadjaran research committee. The Research Ethics Committee, Universitas Padjadjaran Bandung, issued the ethical approval, with registration number 2305050948.

## NOTES

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