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## Unraveling the Man: Toxic Masculinity and Cowboy Culture in 'The Power of the Dog'

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### Abstract

*This research explored how language, dialogue, and character portrayal in Jane Campion's 2021 film "The Power of the Dog" contributed to the deconstruction of toxic masculinity within the traditional cowboy film genre. Having won several awards, the movie is considered to be a suitable source of data for the current study, especially since it explores the theme of toxic masculinity to some extent. Employing a discourse analysis approach to examine the film's dialogue, clothing, and character interactions, this study revealed how the film challenged stereotypical notions of masculinity associated with strength, stoicism, and dominance. By analyzing specific scenes involving characters like Phil Burbank, the research demonstrated how the film critiqued the emotional repression and violence often linked to cowboy culture. The results also revealed how toxic masculinity and cowboy culture are related and mutually strengthen and maintain the construction of both. This exploration contributed to the understanding of how contemporary films could challenge traditional gender norms and redefine masculinity.*

**Keywords:** Toxic masculinity, cowboy culture, film analysis, western genre.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Film is a powerful medium for reflecting social realities and gender norms. Toxic masculinity, defined as a set of detrimental behaviors and

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attitudes associated with traditional ideas of manhood (Connell, 2005), is a pressing issue often portrayed in films. While research has examined toxic masculinity in contemporary films (Magfiroh, 2017; Jufanny & Girsang, 2020; Rosida, et al, 2022), there's a gap in understanding how it intersects with historically rooted concepts of masculinity like cowboy culture (Nicholas, 2006).

Ford (2019) argues that toxic masculinity refers to a number of detrimental behaviors and attitudes whose roots lie in society's expectations about what it means to be a man. Toxic masculinity is not an inherent quality in an individual but is a socially constructed phenomenon that is learned and reinforced through various social structures. As we know, toxic masculinity is a harsh attitude towards other people and oneself. However, this is also discussed in cowboy culture itself. Nicholas (2006) states that cowboy culture is a term that refers to a set of values, traditions and lifestyles associated with cowboy life, especially those that developed in the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Cowboy culture has had a strong influence on United States literature, visual arts, and popular culture. At the same time, perceptions of cowboy culture have also changed over time, sometimes romanticized as a symbol of freedom and adventure, while on the other hand, also associated with rigid concepts of masculinity and social norms that are sometimes exclusionary.

Previous researchers have discussed toxic masculinity itself in films but have not examined how toxic masculinity relates to cowboy culture. Therefore, what is lacking in current research is an analysis of the specific relationship between toxic masculinity and cowboy cultural context, as depicted in "The Power of the Dog" movie. This research attempts to close this gap by further examining the relationship between these two

variables. In addition, the aim of this research is to identify key elements such as language, dialogue, and cowboy culture which are used as instruments to reveal toxic masculinity in the film. It is expected that this research will contribute to our knowledge of how the relationship between toxic masculinity and cowboy culture can be addressed and reflected in films as a visual art form.

Based on the description above, the writers formulate the following research questions:

1. How does the film create representations of toxic masculinity and cowboy culture?
2. What is the relationship between toxic masculinity and cowboy culture that is depicted in the film?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Toxic Masculinity**

Kupers' (2005) theory of toxic masculinity is part of hegemonic masculinity, which includes traits that are culturally valuable but socially harmful. This masculinity consists of the destructive aspects of hegemonic masculinity, which reinforces dominance and destroys society. Its main characteristics include domination, readiness to use violence, misogyny, and aggression.

In Kupers' (2005) theory, domination in toxic masculinity refers to the use of strength, control, and power to dominate other people. This includes behavior that shows a desire to control situations, other people, or the surrounding environment as a way to assert power and superiority. Kupers states that domination in the context of toxic masculinity can be reflected in aggressive behavior, the desire to dominate social interactions or an emphasis on physical strength or power over other individuals. This can include behavior that displays verbal superiority, or the use of

violence to maintain a dominant position. Thus, dominance in toxic masculinity is not only about having influence or power over others, but also about the way that power is used in ways that harm, oppress, or empower others to maintain an image of masculinity dominated by power and control.

Kupers (2005) explains that violence is often part of an individual's understanding of toxic masculinity. They use violence as a tool to demonstrate that they meet stereotypical standards of strong and tough masculinity and commit physical acts that harm or hurt others directly. This occurs when individuals try to gain approval and recognition from the surrounding environment, including peers, father figures, coaches, and other role models who are considered very masculine. By using violence, this makes individuals try to assert their identity in accordance with what is considered a "real man." This highlights how violence can be an integral part of how individuals construct and maintain their image of masculinity, even when such actions harm themselves and others.

Misogyny in the context of toxic masculinity presents views of misogyny, or hatred of women. In this context, misogyny is considered a characteristic of toxic masculinity that causes physical and verbal violence against women. Misogyny, according to Kupers (2005), involves hatred of women, both by men and women themselves. This is related to the view that women are considered the cause of problems or objects that must be placed in the context of certain problems. In other words, those who have misogyny tend to blame or demean women, seeing them as threats or obstacles to the position of masculinity that is considered dominant. This misogyny is not only destructive towards women but can also create detrimental dynamics in relationships between male and female individuals. By placing women as objects or sources of problems, this

concept creates an unhealthy environment and reinforces toxic thought patterns regarding masculinity.

Lastly, aggression according to Kupers' (2005) theory is a collection of behavior where someone intentionally or unintentionally hurts someone for a specific purpose or reason. It includes a range of actions that may cause physical or psychological harm to oneself or others. This aggressive behavior can be manifested in overt or covert forms, sometimes with the intention of hurting other people. Aggression can arise as a response to certain situations, such as invitations or desired goals, or even without a clear external trigger, even the aggression itself can be verbal, such as threats or insults towards someone. Additionally, aggression does not always result in physical violence or injury, but also includes all forms of actions that cause potential damage or danger to other people. Therefore, aggression includes both intentional and unintentional actions, which often have a detrimental impact on the targeted individual or the surrounding environment.

In addition to Kupers' (2005) description of toxic masculinity, it has been recently argued that toxic masculinity is a factor that influences men to do violent acts or even as a catalyst for mental health in men (McGlashan and Mercer, 2023). On the other hand, it has also been debated that toxic masculinity, especially in relation to men's attitudes and behaviors, is not necessarily something that needs to be fixed since 'masculinity' itself is dynamic and there is not really a clear 'right' way to be a man. Seeing as there are various views on toxic masculinity, for the purpose of the current study, the researchers refer to the description proposed by Kupers (2005).

## 2.2 The Relationship between Toxic Masculinity and Cowboy Culture

Cowboy culture is a culture related to the life and work of cowboys in the United States in the 19th century. This culture involves a harsh lifestyle, horse riding skills, and the ability to herd livestock. McGillis (2009) states that cowboys are considered strong, brave and independent men, who are able to survive and work in harsh and difficult environments. They are often considered a symbol of freedom and adventure.

Cowboy culture also has several key elements such as cowboy hats, cowboy boots, Levis pants, and leather. These have become symbols of cowboy identity and the American West as a whole. One of the main elements is the cowboy hat. With its distinctive shape and decorative band, it not only serves as protection from the weather, but also as a symbol of status and elegance in cowboy culture. Likewise, cowboy boots are designed for comfort when riding and are durable in the deep environment of the American West. Jeans, originally the attire of farmers and cowboys, have become a symbol of the casual, rugged cowboy lifestyle, while leather goods provide durability and ruggedness in the harsh life of the American West. Taken together, these elements reflect the spirit of adventure and freedom inherent in cowboy culture, enriching an iconic cultural legacy throughout the world.

According to Wright (2001), toxic masculinity and cowboy culture are interrelated. In cowboy culture, the image of a man is often associated with attributes such as bravery, physical strength, and independence which are often considered positive aspects of masculinity. However, the cowboy image also displays traits that can be categorized as toxic masculinity, such as violence, emotional suppression, and superiority.

Kimmel (2006) argues that the relationship between toxic masculinity and cowboy culture is mutually reinforcing, where both

phenomena contribute to the spread and maintenance of values that are detrimental to individuals and society. Cowboy culture reinforces toxic masculinity by promoting values such as violence, domination, and emotional repression. Meanwhile, toxic masculinity values maintain cowboy culture by attracting individuals who are interested in violence and domination.

### 3. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative descriptive research method based on Creswell's (2008) guidelines to reveal the representation of toxic masculinity and cowboy culture in the film 'The Power of the Dog' (2021). The descriptive analysis in this film research reflects Creswell's qualitative approach by detailing aspects of language, dialogue, and cowboy clothing that adhere to cowboy culture in the film. This approach allows researchers to explore in depth, provide rich interpretations, and generate deeper insights within a qualitative research framework, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of toxic masculinity in cinematic contexts. In other words, a qualitative descriptive approach is suitable for the current study as the data involves scenes from the movie, and from those scenes, the language used in the dialogues as well as the clothing that the characters wear are analyzed qualitatively to describe how these elements portray toxic masculinity and cowboy culture. For instance, one scene may portray how the characters reflect dominance, which is part of toxic masculinity. From that scene, the language, actions from the characters, and other elements are analyzed by referring to Kupers' (2005) theory to determine whether this particular scene does indeed show toxic masculinity.

The main source of data used in this research comes from the film 'The Power of the Dog' (2021) which places great emphasis on language, dialogue and cowboy clothing. This analysis does not intentionally

attempt to generalize other films or different cultural settings, as it seeks to specifically explore how these elements contribute to the representation of toxic masculinity in the particular cowboy cultural setting depicted in this film. This research does not only focus on certain characters but discusses all the characters in the film.

One of the reasons for choosing this film as an analysis of toxic masculinity is because this film received several nominations and won some awards, including the best film and best director categories at the BAFTA Film Award (British Academy of Film and Television Arts), as well as winning the award for Best Film at AACTA International Awards (Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts Awards). Apart from that, this film has been discussed by many media such as BBC, CNN and NBC News about how this film really shows toxic masculinity.

For the data collection procedures, there are several steps that were taken. First, the movie was watched in its entirety to gain a comprehensive understanding of the narrative and characters. Next, dialogues and scenes that depict toxic masculinity and cowboy culture were collected through note taking and screenshots. Lastly, before starting the analysis, a thorough review of the notes and screenshots was conducted to ensure accuracy and alignment with the research focus.

As for the data analysis, the writers analyzed the collected data by referring to Kuper's (2005) and McGillis' (2009) theory to answer the first research question related to the portrayal of toxic masculinity and cowboy culture. As for the second research question, the theories from Wright (2001) and Kimmel (2006) were used to answer the second research question concerning the relationship between toxic masculinity and cowboy culture. In addition, this research employs a discourse analysis approach in analyzing the data since the utterances between the



characters are one of the elements that are closely examined. According to Canning and Walker (2024), analysis of spoken discourse involves looking at the meaning of words as well as the situation in which they are uttered. It also examines how spoken interactions unfold dynamically between the participants as they react and respond to each other. Considering that the dialogues between the characters are closely inspected to see how they portray toxic masculinity and cowboy culture, discourse analysis is considered suitable to analyze the data for this research. Furthermore, to ensure credibility of the data analysis, peer debriefing is employed, where several colleagues were asked to review the research findings.

Lastly, it should be noted that there are several limitations with regards to the research methodology for the current study. First of all, the analysis of toxic masculinity and cowboy culture is limited to only the movie under study, namely "The Power of the Dog." Next, there is also the potential of research bias even though peer debriefing has been employed. More specifically, the analysis of the data highly depends on the interpretation of the researchers. For example, although the researchers considered a particular scene to portray toxic masculinity, it may be the case that others do not see it that way. Lastly, this research is also limited as it specifically refers to the theories from Kuper's (2005) and McGillis' (2009) for the depiction of toxic masculinity and cowboy culture, and the theories from Wright (2001) and Kimmel (2006) for the basis of the description of the relationship between toxic masculinity and cowboy culture.

#### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section explores the film's representation of toxic masculinity and cowboy culture, addressing the two research questions. For the first part, the findings related to the portrayal of toxic masculinity from the

movie are presented. The second part focuses on scenes depicting cowboy culture. Lastly, the third section is concerned with the second research question which explores the relationship between these two variables.

#### 4.1 Toxic Masculinity

The film portrays toxic masculinity through the character Phil Burbank, who embodies several characteristics associated with this concept. The characteristics that are analyzed here include domination, misogyny, and aggression.

##### 4.1.1 Domination - Scene 1 (00:14:25 – 00:14:45)

Phil, George, and another Cowboy came to one of the places to eat. The place was also visited by several guests who were laughing and talking very happily, and Phil looked at them very cynically and didn't like their commotion.



**Figure 1. Toxic Masculinity – Domination**

***Phil: Do you mind quietening? We're reading.***

*The piano player kept playing and ignored Phil's words*

***Phil: Shut that down or I will!***

At that time, Phil was talking with his friends and there were several guests who were talking too, but these guests were very loud when talking and were happy. Phil is still normal about this. However, when one of the guests started walking towards the piano and playing the piano very happily, supported by several of the guest's friends with loud and happy voices, this suddenly disturbed Phil while he was talking. Phil turned his head back and said, "*Do you mind quietening? We're reading,*"

but the piano player continued to play the piano and turned to Phil while mocking and continued playing the piano and ignored Phill's words. Phill did not accept what the man did, and Phill became increasingly annoyed with the man's actions who did not listen to what he said. Phil suddenly stood up and stamped his feet and said, "*Shut that down or I will!*" Phil said this in a very loud and angry tone, so that everyone in the room was silent and did not make a sound at all. Phil here shows that he is in charge of the place. At first, Phill felt disturbed by the piano playing, then he tried to control and enforce his authority in the place by asking politely for conditions in the room to be quieter by saying "*Do you mind quietening? We're reading*" and the conditions in the room became increasingly unfavorable, so Phil threatened to stop the man who was playing the piano by saying "*Shut that down or I will!*" Phil uses strength and power to dominate the situation, which aligns with Kupers' (2005) notion of toxic masculinity. Phil's loud actions and clearly audible threats are certainly a form of use of physical force or power over another individual in an effort to maintain his dominant position in the situation. Phil's actions can be seen as an attempt to establish dominance in the context of toxic masculinity, where Phil uses his power and control to dominate social interactions that occur in that environment.

#### 4.1.2 *Misogyny - Scene 2 (00:27:40 – 00:28:04)*

George has just returned from Rose's house and apologizes to Rose for Phil's treatment of her child. George arrived home and sat in the living room. Phil came and asked George where he had been that afternoon. It was then that George told Phil that he had just spoken to Rose.



Figure 2. Toxic Masculinity – Misogyny

*George: I was speaking to Mrs. Gordon.*

*Phil: Oh, yes. She cried on your shoulders.*

*George: So, she did.*

***Phil: Give her a half chance and she'll be after some dollars for Ms.***

***Nancy's college fee.***

In this dialogue, Phil indirectly expresses misogyny by degrading women. He used a word that spoke about Mrs. Gordon "*Give her half a chance and she'll be after a few dollars for Ms. Nancy's college fee.*" These words reassured George and made Mrs. Gordon look bad. Phil said she only cared about money and sought material gain from their relationship. Apart from that, Phil also interferes in the relationship between George and Mrs. Gordon, looked down on Mrs. Gordon and hated her.

This reflects an attitude of misogyny where women are seen negatively and considered as objects of problems or objects who are only interested in money or material gain. Phil makes negative assumptions about Mrs. Gordon without considering that she may have much deeper and more complex interests in talking to George. Overall, this dialogue shows an attitude of misogyny in the context of toxic masculinity, where women are treated inappropriately or looked down upon by men, which is in line with Kupers' (2005) theory.

#### *4.1.3 Aggression - Scene 3 (00:11:30 – 00:11:58)*

Phil, George and Phil's friends came to the restaurant to eat together. When they arrived at the restaurant, Phil saw that the place was busy and noisy. Phil sat down and started looking at the flowers on the table which were very neatly placed, and the flowers looked like real flowers. Phil took the flower and smelled it. Not long after, Peter arrived after delivering drinks to the other guests at the restaurant.



Figure 3. Toxic Masculinity – Aggression

**Phil: Oh, yeah...well.. I wonder what little lady made these?**

Peter: Actually, I did, sir. My mother was a florist, so I made them to look like the ones in our garden.

Phil: Oh, well. Do pardon me. They're just as real as possible.  
(Cowboys Chuckle)

In this dialogue, Phil keeps looking at Peter who is delivering drinks to the guests at the table Phil is sitting at. Phil held the flower and said, "*I wonder what little ladies made these?*" These words were deliberately directed at Peter after Phil looked at Peter for a long time and began to doubt who made the flowers so beautiful. Peter came and said, "*Actually, I did, sir. My Mother was a florist, so I made them look like the ones in our garden.*" Peter said with a cheerful face and told Phil very proudly that he was the one who had made the flowers. However, Phil looked at Peter and pointed at Peter saying "*Oh well. Do pardon me. They're just as real as possible.*" Phil said that with a surprised facial expression and in a condescending tone and gave the flower to a friend who was beside him to smell the flower. This made everyone at the table laugh at what Phil said and did.

When Phil said, "*I wonder what little ladies made these?*" in a doubtful and deliberate tone aimed at Peter, he indirectly insinuated that the flower maker must be a little woman or girl. This is considered a form of verbal aggression aimed at degrading or even hurting Peter's feelings. Plus, when Phil says "*Oh well. Do pardon me. They're just as real as possible,*" here Phil expresses his disinterest or disbelief in Peter's abilities, even

though Peter has explained that the flowers were made with care. Even though he does not physically harm anyone, Phil's behavior in the dialogue shows a form of verbal aggression that can harm others psychologically. In other words, this is in accordance with Kupers' (2005) theory which states that aggression can also involve hurting others psychologically, where in this case, by saying these things, Phil is indeed hurting Peter's feelings or harming him psychologically.

## 4.2 Cowboy Culture

### 4.2.1 *Strong - Scene 4 (00:22:04 – 00:22:12)*

Phil was walking and saw the cowboys controlling the horses and playing with the horses in an extreme way unlike the usual way other people ride horses. This is one of their characteristics in controlling horses with a strong physique without fear.



Cowboy 1: Hold it.

Cowboy 2: Come on.

**Cowboy 3: He's got it.**

In this scene, when Phil was walking and saw what the cowboys were doing, the cowboys were playing with the horses. One of them shouted "*Hold it*" and then one of the cowboys shouted, "*Come on*" with the action of riding a horse standing up. This was shouted again by another cowboy after successfully standing on the horse, "*He's got it*" with a happy tone and the cowboys laughed at the action they managed to pull off.

The behavior of cowboys who control and play with horses in extreme ways reflects one aspect of the concept of 'strong' in cowboy culture just as stated by McGillis (2009). They demonstrate extraordinary physical and mental toughness, as well as the ability to face dangerous situations without showing fear. When one of them shouted "*Hold it*" followed by a call of "*Come on*", they showed not only courage in facing the risks that might arise from playing with a horse to the extreme, but also the physical strength to do it with confidence. One of them then shouted again "*He's got it*" when their friend managed to stand on the horse. The positive reaction from his colleagues showed their pride and joy at achieving this action. Overall, this represents a strong cowboy identity capable of surviving in a harsh and demanding environment.

#### 4.2.2 *Independent Men - Scene 5 (01:55:54 – 01:56:08)*

George invited his parents and the Governor, who was a friend of George's parents, to eat together at George and Rose's wedding. However, at that time Phil did not appear when his parents and guests arrived. Before the event started, George went looking for Phil and it turned out that Phil was in the warehouse sitting alone and didn't want to be disturbed by anyone.



Figure 5. Cowboy Culture – Independent Men

George: Everyone's here. And we're just about to eat.

**Phil: I'm not coming.**

George: And what will I say? The old Lady wants to see you too.

She's come a long way.

**Phil: You can tell them the truth. That I stink and I like it.**

George managed to find Phil who had not appeared. George started to tell Phil that everyone was already here, and it was just a meal and nothing more. However, Phil firmly refused and said, "*I'm not coming*", of course Phil was confused about what to do and said "*And what will I say? The old lady wants to see you too. She's come a long way*" in a confused tone at Phil's rejection. Phil insisted on telling George what he had to say to old lady "*You can tell them the truth. That I stink and I like it*" Phil said this proudly and that he liked his body dirty and smelly and had not showered and avoided the event.

In this dialogue, Phil shows his independence by firmly refusing to join in the meal held by George. When George tries to persuade him by saying that everyone is already there and that the parents and the governor also want to see him, Phil stands firm in his decision, saying, "*I'm not coming.*" This action reflects Phil's independent attitude, which shows that he is not influenced by other people's hopes or desires. However, George still tried to find excuses or words to tell his parents and governor about Phil's absence. Phil showed his character and courage by saying, "*You can tell them the truth. That I stink and I like it.*" With this statement, Phil proudly declares that he likes his dirty and smelly state, and he is not ashamed to express this to others. His attitude of being independent and unaffected by expectations or social norms shows conformity with the concept of independence, where cowboys are valued for their ability to live and work according to their own wishes, far from



the constraints or binding of social norms. All these utterances and actions are in line with McGillis' (2009) description of cowboy culture.

#### 4.2.3 Cowboy Clothing



**Figure 6. Cowboy Culture – Clothing**

The cowboys in the pictures above are wearing several common clothing in accordance with cowboy culture which usually uses cowboy hats, cowboy boots, Levis pants and cowhide. It can be seen that their appearance reflects the identity, functionality and aesthetics of cowboy culture itself. They always wear cowboy hats when they are outdoors in the sun. The boots they use provide a strong grip for them when riding and protect their feet from injury. Apart from that, the Levis pants in the picture are worn for days on end for numerous activities. What cowboys wear reflects their values and way of life. This is in accordance with McGillis's (2009) theory which underlines cowboys' typical appearances.

#### 4.3 Relationship between Toxic Masculinity and Cowboy Culture

With regards to the second research question, the relationship between toxic masculinity and cowboy culture can be understood as mutually reinforcing and maintaining the construction of toxic

masculinity. Cowboy culture often associates brave, physical strength, and independence as symbols of masculinity, which can encourage men to exploit superiority, violence, and emotional repression. The image of the cowboy is believed to strengthen thought patterns and behavior related to toxic masculinity. Therefore, cowboy culture, by condoning or even glorifying these behaviors, also strengthens toxic masculinity which emphasizes superiority and dominance as well as violence and emotional suppression.

In addition, cowboy culture associates bravery, toughness, physical strength and independence as a symbol of masculinity, which results in the encouragement of men to exploit superiority, violence and emotional oppression as a form of legitimizing masculinity. The condescending attitude and emotional suppression of others in cowboy culture is a way to strengthen their own image of masculinity. Cowboy culture also emphasizes bravery and toughness without showing weakness or weak emotions. This reinforces behavioral patterns associated with toxic masculinity, where bravery and toughness are prioritized while emotional expression and weakness are inhibited. Thus, the relationship between toxic masculinity and cowboy culture is complex, where values reinforce behavioral patterns associated with toxic masculinity, such as dominance and superiority. Hence, it can be said that toxic masculinity and cowboy culture are indeed closely related just as proposed by Wright (2001), and that they are both mutually reinforcing one another, which is in line with Kimmel's (2006) description.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

"The Power of the Dog" effectively portrays the entanglement of toxic masculinity and cowboy culture. The film showcases toxic masculinity through Phil Burbank's domineering behavior, misogyny, and aggression. These traits are bolstered by the cowboy culture's

emphasis on strength, bravery, and independence, often achieved through displays of dominance and a refusal to show weakness.

This research highlights a cyclical relationship: cowboy culture reinforces the need to conform to a rigid, hypermasculine ideal, breeding toxic behaviors. Conversely, Phil's unwavering commitment to this toxic masculinity strengthens the cowboy stereotype. The film goes beyond simply portraying these concepts; it offers a glimpse of alternative masculinities through George's gentler nature. Analyzing "The Power of the Dog" underscores the importance of recognizing how cultural norms can perpetuate toxic masculinity, even if those cultures are no longer prominent. This understanding can help dismantle these harmful patterns and promote healthier expressions of masculinity."

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