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Cinematic Constructs of Power: A Comparative Analysis of Gender-Based Violence In "Virgin People" (1984) And "Selina's Gold" (2022)

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ABSTRACT: Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a persistent social issue frequently mirrored and reinforced by cinema's portrayal of gender and power. This study investigated the cinematic representation of GBV in two Filipino films produced in distinct socio-cultural eras: Virgin People (1984) and Selina's Gold (2022). By examining these works, the research sought to understand how specific filmic elements contribute to the construction and normalization of violence against women.

The study employed a qualitative relational content analysis to systematically examine the portrayal of GBV. Data were gathered through repeated viewing and rigorous coding of the films using a structured content analysis framework. The analysis focused on three primary dimensions: verbal cues, non-verbal cues, and cinematographic techniques.

The findings revealed that both films utilize language and visual storytelling to uphold patriarchal norms and male dominance. Verbally, dialogue is weaponized to manipulate, objectify, and assert control over female characters. Non-verbally, the films emphasize the female body as a site of vulnerability, using body language to convey fear and the psychological burden of survival. Furthermore, cinematographic elements—specifically voyeuristic camera angles, tight framing, and atmospheric lighting—are used to reinforce power imbalances and the objectification of the female form.

The results suggest that across four decades, these cinematic techniques continue to depict women as systemic victims whose primary agency is limited to submission or emotional adaptation. The study concludes that while the historical contexts of Filipino cinema have shifted, the underlying cinematic grammar often remains complicit in the normalization of gender-based inequality. These findings highlight the need for a more critical engagement with how visual media reproduces cycles of violence and the importance of deconstructing the "male gaze" in contemporary Philippine film.

KEYWORDS: gender-based violence, gender sensitivity, objectification, male gaze, patriarchism

INTRODUCTION

This study contextualizes the analysis of gender-based inequality and violence in the films *Selina's Gold* (2022) and *Virgin People* (1984) by examining the historical and sociocultural evolution of risqué cinema. Globally, the "softcore" genre gained prominence in the 1970s, oscillating between attempts at female empowerment and the reinforcement of traditional stereotypes. While European markets produced high-quality, mainstream sex comedies that avoided the "pornographic" label, the genre has seen a modern resurgence through streaming platforms like Vivamax, sparking contemporary concerns regarding its influence on younger audiences.

In the Philippine context, the study traces a long history of state censorship and artistic resistance. Since the establishment of the Board of Censorship in 1937, filmmakers have faced significant ideological hurdles, particularly during the reorganization of the board in 1961 and the subsequent era of military supervision. Despite these restrictions, iconic directors like Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal pushed the boundaries of political and social commentary. Historically, Philippine cinema often exploited women's suffering for entertainment—frequently depicting graphic violence and rape—a legacy that remains relevant as modern platforms transition back toward high-demand softcore content. Ultimately, this framework highlights how the portrayal of women has shifted from mere objects of desire toward more complex, yet still contested, representations of survival and systemic inequality.

The provided review of related literature contextualizes a comparative study of the films Selina's Gold (2022) and Virgin People (1984) through the lens of gender-based violence (GBV) and "risque" (softcore) cinema.

The Evolution of Risque and Softcore Cinema

The literature traces the origins of adult-oriented "stag films" to early 20th-century France, noting their shift from black-market private viewings to mainstream popularity in the 1960s and 70s. While global markets like Europe produced higher-quality "sex comedies," the genre often relies on problematic tropes. Specifically, research highlights a consistent "sexual aggressor/victim"

dynamic, where men are depicted as dominant pleasure-seekers and women are portrayed as submissive, fragile, and objectified. Excessive exposure to such content has been linked to the normalization of aggressive behavior and negative attitudes toward women among viewers.

The Philippine Context: Bomba and Vivamax

In the Philippines, the "bomba" genre flourished in the 1970s as a response to conservative cultural pressures. Although it faced a decline in the 2000s due to strict MTRCB censorship of R-18 films, the genre was revived in 2021 through the digital platform Vivamax. By operating in an unregulated online space, Vivamax has successfully bypassed traditional broadcast rules. While the platform features high-quality work from renowned directors, critics argue that much of its library relies on predictable storylines that reinforce harmful stereotypes and normalize violence against women.

The Roots and Impact of Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

The review establishes that GBV is an ancient, systemic issue rooted in patriarchal dominance and the rejection of gender equality—symbolized mythologically by the vilification of figures like Lilith. While indigenous Filipino women enjoyed high status prior to Spanish colonization, migration and colonial influence introduced misogynistic structures.

Global Statistics: Research indicates that approximately 30% of women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual abuse, with 38% of female homicides committed by intimate partners.

Psychological Effects: Studies show that "sexual compliance" (performing marital duties to maintain a relationship) increases stress (cortisol levels) in women and diminishes autonomy.

Media Normalization: Cinema is identified as a powerful medium that can either raise awareness or dangerously mold public perception. Frequent portrayals of women as "damsels in distress" or objects of desire lead to "desensitization," where audiences begin to view violence as a solution or believe victims deserve their mistreatment.

Stereotypes and Gender Sensitivity

Current literature emphasizes that modern media still largely portrays women as emotional and irrational, often using derogatory language disguised as humor. In domestic settings, women are burdened with "preserving dignity" through household labor and physical appearance, while men are granted rational and decisive roles. To combat this, the study introduces Gender Sensitivity—the process of developing empathy and awareness to treat all genders fairly. The review concludes by citing the Magna Carta of Women (Republic Act 9710) as the primary legal framework in the Philippines designed to eliminate these ingrained discriminations.

This study outlines the portrayal of women risqué films, specifically those containing scenes of Gender-Based Violence, using Feminist Film Theory as a framework. This chapter discusses the theoretical framework that guides the analysis of the films *Selina's Gold (2022)* and *Virgin People (1984).* Specifically, it focused on how gender sensitivity, particularly about gender-based violence is portrayed, providing a lens through which the researcher can examine themes, character representations, and power dynamics within the films. By applying an established theoretical perspective, this study gained an in-depth understanding of how gender roles, stereotypes, and visual representations are constructed and communicated to audiences.

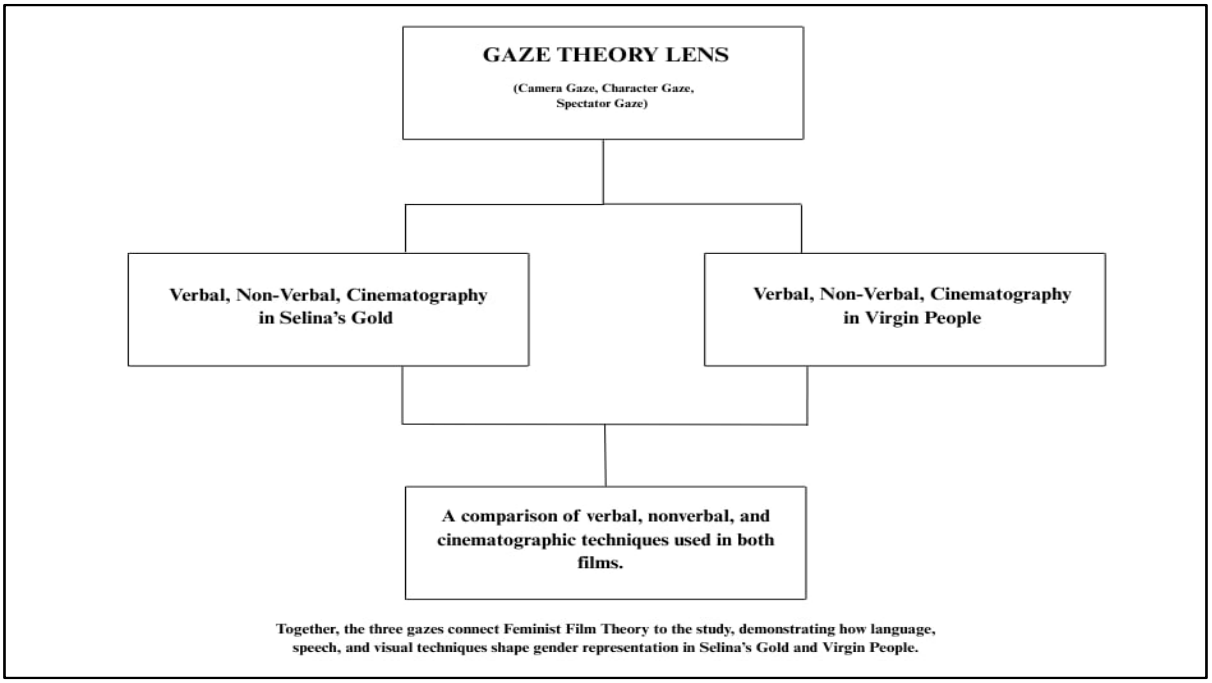


Figure 1

This study is guided by Feminist Film Theory, which examined how gender sensitivity and power relations are represented in cinema. Using this framework, the study analyzed Selina's Gold (2022) and Virgin People (1984) through verbal cues, nonverbal cues, and cinematography to understand how language, dialogue, and visual techniques shape gender representation and audience perception.

In this study, verbal cues, nonverbal cues, and cinematography are used to apply the feminist film theory.

Verbal cues

The researchers looked at the words and language used in the film. This shows whether the female characters are given important lines or shown as passive, silent, or less important than male characters.

Nonverbal cues

For nonverbal cues, the researchers focused on how characters communicated without words, including facial expression, body language, and physical positioning. This helped the researchers identify such moments when male characters assert dominance through posture, proximity, or control of space, while female characters are portrayed as passive, submissive, or restrained.

Cinematography

The researchers examined how the camera shows female characters. This includes the camera angles, as well as the framing. These techniques can either make women look like objects to be stared at or show them as strong and empowered individuals.

Feminist Film Theory was the main guide of the study, while verbal cues, nonverbal cues, and cinematography are the tools used to see how gender sensitivity, power, and dominance are presented in the films.

Statement of the Problem

This section explored how the Vivamax film Selina's Gold (2022), and Bomba film-genre Virgin People (1984) depicts gender-based sensitivity. It aimed to answer the questions that researchers examine.

Main Problem

How is gender-based violence portrayed in the films Selina's Gold (2022) and Virgin People (1984), in terms of verbal cues, nonverbal cues, and cinematography?

Specifically, it sought to answer:

1. How do Selina's Gold (2022) and Virgin People (1984) address the issues of gender-based sensitivity?
2. How are women in the films Selina's Gold (2022) and Virgin People (1984) depicted?
3. How do Selina's Gold (2022) and Virgin People (1984) exhibit unethical portrayals of women?
4. How can content analysis of Selina's Gold and Virgin People guide filmmakers toward gender-sensitive portrayals of women?

METHODOLOGY

A relational content analysis is a systematic analysis of contents of communication. The said method was initially conceptualized by Bernand Berelson, and further developed by scholars Klaus Krippendorff and Oliver Robinson. It helped to collect and analyze information to better understand and categorize a subject. This study aligned with relational content analysis because it aimed to help the researchers gather and analyze information to better understand and categorize the topic, and offered a clear, detailed picture of what's being studied (Columbia Public Health, 2023). In terms of data collection, the researchers used a qualitative approach that involved collecting and analyzing non-numeric data to understand concepts, culture and experiences. (Bhandari, 2025) Additionally, this approach helped the researchers gather in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas for research, particularly by gaining a deeper understanding of how derogatory languages and actions are portrayed in the chosen film, Selina's Gold (2022) and Virgin People (1984).

Research Instrument

The guide instrument that was used in this study is the content analysis coding form as the primary tool to interpret the portrayal of gender-based violence in the film Selina's Gold (2022) and Virgin People (1984). The data that were collected from the coding were examined through relational content analysis, to enable the identification of themes, verbal cues, nonverbal cues, and cinematography. This process assisted the collection of relevant data and supported the formulation of evidence-based conclusions to effectively address the study's research question.

Data Gathering Procedure

This study utilized a relational content analysis method to gather the data and information that are needed to aim the objectives that are necessary.

The researchers initially chose a film that was produced under Vivamax (VMX). This was done to make sure that the chosen film aligned with the title that was proposed by the researchers. In terms of choosing the desired Bomba film and Vivamax film, the researchers watched and compared different films that were produced by both Vivamax and old Bomba film. After some

discussion, it has been concluded that Virgin People and Selina's Gold are the films that were chosen to represent the two categories due to not only the similarities but also the contrast between the two. Setting was also considered with this decision, as the researchers were initially looking for an old-school, classic, and traditional film genre.

DISCUSSION

This research study analyzes how gender-based violence (GBV) is structurally and narratively embedded in two Filipino films from different eras: the "Bomba" film ***Virgin People*** (1984) and the Vivamax film ***Selina's Gold*** (2022).

The researchers conclude that both films portray an **androcentric world** where language, body language, and camera work are weaponized to normalize patriarchal dominance and the objectification of women.

1. Verbal Cues: Language as a Weapon

Both films use dialogue to enforce male privilege and silence female voices, though the delivery differs:

- **Commodification:** Women are framed as property or tradeable goods. In *Selina's Gold*, Selina is explicitly sold to settle a debt ("From now on, you are mine"). In *Virgin People*, men treat the three sisters as replaceable possessions.
- **Sexual Coercion & Threats:** Tiago (*Selina's Gold*) uses aggressive, explicit threats of violence to force submission. Cho Igna (*Virgin People*) uses "predatory grooming," masking malicious intent with playful, affectionate language (e.g., calling them "daughters" or reminiscing about them being "naked as children").
- **Gaslighting & Silencing:** Men in both films invalidate women's opinions. In *Selina's Gold*, women are told to stay out of "men's talk." In *Virgin People*, Isaac shifts the blame for exploitation onto the victim through gaslighting.

2. Nonverbal Cues: Survival & Exploitation

The study finds that female bodies in these films exist in a constant "survival mode."

- **Submission vs. Confrontation:** Selina exhibits **survival through submission**, characterized by tensed posture, lowered gaze, and flinching. The sisters in *Virgin People* display an initial innocence that shifts into hostility and defensive hiding once their trust is betrayed.
- **Emotional Detachment:** Characters like Cora and Selina show "blank stares" and emotional numbness, a psychological coping mechanism against repeated trauma.
- **Violent Retaliation:** In both films, the final act of "resistance" involves the female leads killing their oppressors (using machetes or booby traps) as their only means of escape.

3. Cinematography: Framing the "Male Gaze"

Visual techniques are used to reinforce power imbalances and satisfy the spectator's eye:

- **Camera Angles:** High-angle shots are used to make female characters look small and powerless, while low-angle shots make male characters look threatening and dominant.
- **Voyeuristic Framing:** *Virgin People* utilizes "voyeuristic camerawork" (e.g., peeking at characters while bathing) and highlights the female body during vulnerable moments.
- **Lighting & Mood:** Both films use dim lighting and cold blue tones to signify secrecy, fear, and the dark reality of exploitation.

Comparative Findings Summary

Category	Selina's Gold (2022)	Virgin People (1984)
Abuse Style	Explicit, aggressive, and harsh.	Subtle, manipulative, and predatory.
Women's Agency	Survival through total submission.	Survival through defensive confrontation.
Visual Strategy	Focus on emotional fear and trauma.	Focus on voyeurism and sexualized innocence.
Patriarchal Norm	Direct ownership and physical force.	Emotional manipulation and grooming.

Women as Collateral Damage

The study emphasizes that in both films, women lack **autonomy in decision-making**. They are treated as "collateral damage" of their environment—whether it is Selina being sold by her father or the three sisters being isolated by theirs. The researchers argue that these films reflect a reality where women's adherence to male instructions is not a choice, but a necessary survival strategy within a patriarchal structure.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Selina's Gold (2022) and Virgin People (1984) serve as cinematic anchors that illustrate the persistent evolution of patriarchal dominance in Philippine "risque" cinema. Despite the decades separating them, both films systematically reinforce gender-sensitivity issues across three dimensions: verbal weaponization, nonverbal subjugation, and the voyeuristic male gaze.

The Mechanics of Oppression

The comparative analysis reveals that gender-based violence is not merely a plot point but a structural element of the films' language. In Selina's Gold, the verbal cues are overtly aggressive, utilizing commodification and sexual threats to establish female characters as disposable currency. In contrast, Virgin People demonstrates a more insidious form of control, where predatory behavior is masked by the "benign" language of familial affection and the cultural tradition of utang na loob (debt of gratitude). This suggests that while the expression of patriarchy shifted from the subtle grooming of the 1980s to the explicit violence of the 2020s, the intent—the total ownership of the female body—remains unchanged.

The Visual and Behavioral Toll

The findings further indicate that cinematography and nonverbal cues work in tandem to strip women of their autonomy. The "Survival Mode" identified in the female leads—evidenced by tensed postures, flinching, and emotional detachment—paints a harrowing picture of women as "collateral damage" in a male-centric world. By utilizing high-angle shots to diminish women and low-angle shots to empower abusers, the films codify the Male Gaze as an administrative tool of control. This visual hierarchy teaches the audience to view female suffering as a natural byproduct of male desire.

Synthesized Answers to Research Problems

Gender Sensitivity: Both films fail to maintain gender sensitivity, instead prioritizing archetypes where women are "prey" and men are "predators," thereby reinforcing harmful stereotypes for modern audiences.

Depiction of Women: Women are depicted without agency. Their survival is contingent upon their ability to adapt to male commands, effectively portraying submission as a forced survival strategy rather than a character trait.

Unethical Portrayals: The films unethically link a woman's value to her sexual purity (virginity). By treating women as payment for financial or social debts, the narratives justify the dehumanization of women as tradeable commodities.

Guidance for Filmmakers: The content analysis serves as a critical mirror for the industry. It highlights that to move toward gender-sensitive filmmaking, creators must shift from passive objectification to active agency. Filmmaking techniques—such as framing, dialogue, and character motivation—must be intentionally redesigned to challenge, rather than mirror, systemic oppression.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to foster a more gender-sensitive and ethically responsible Philippine film industry:

1. Creative Reform for Film Practitioners

Narrative Agency and Character Depth: Directors and scriptwriters should pivot from "damsel-in-distress" archetypes toward portraying female characters with genuine agency, complex motivations, and meaningful roles. Narratives should treat women as active participants who drive the plot rather than passive objects used for visual or sexual gratification.

Reduction of Verbally Degrading Language: Scriptwriters are encouraged to exercise linguistic responsibility by minimizing the use of demeaning slurs and harsh verbal abuse. Reducing the normalization of verbal violence in scripts is crucial to preventing the desensitization of audiences toward gender-based aggression.

Substantive Storytelling: Filmmakers should move away from the "shock value" of physical and verbal abuse as primary plot devices. Instead, they should invest in deeper storytelling and character arcs that engage the audience through thematic substance rather than exploitation or the glorification of male dominance.

2. Ethical and Regulatory Standards

Age-Appropriate Narrative Representation: To mitigate the risk of promoting pedophilic tendencies or normalizing underage sexual activity, directors must ensure that characters in sexually explicit genres are both legally adults in reality and explicitly portrayed as adults within the story's context.

Institutional Gender-Sensitivity Criteria: Regulatory bodies (such as the MTRCB) and digital distributors should implement stricter criteria that reward gender-sensitive portrayals. These institutions should discourage content that presents violence, exploitation, or objectification without a clear, critical, or redemptive social reflection.

Implementation of the Study Guidebook: It is recommended that film schools and production houses adopt the Gender-Sensitivity Film Guidebook produced from this study as a framework for evaluating scripts and cinematography during the pre-production and production phases.

3. Advocacy and Public Awareness

Critical Media Literacy: Organizations and educational institutions should promote media literacy programs that teach audiences how to identify and critically analyze the "Male Gaze" and patriarchal tropes in cinema, empowering viewers to demand more ethical content.

4. Directions for Future Research

Audience Reception Analysis: Future researchers should conduct empirical studies on how viewers from various demographics perceive and internalize the gender portrayals in "risque" films. This would assess the long-term impact of these films on societal attitudes toward gender roles.

Cross-Cultural Comparative Studies: Scholars are encouraged to compare Filipino softcore cinema with similar genres in other Southeast Asian or Western contexts to understand how different cultural values shape the representation of gender and power.

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