

## “Manusia Silver” As a Symbol of Marginality: A Social Semiotic Analysis on The Channel YouTube of Vice Indonesia

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### *Abstract*

*This research analyzed how “manusia silver” is represented as a symbol of marginality using the social semiotic approach developed by M.A.K. Halliday. “Manusia silver” are portrayed as one of the most marginalized individuals in the video published by Vice Indonesia's YouTube channel due to the harsh socio-economic conditions in the urban environment. Using social semiotic theory, this article explores how visual and linguistic practices constitute meanings of marginality in the video and consolidate a particular understanding of manusia silver's social position. The analysis underlines the fact that the painted bodies in silver must serve not only as a source of livelihood but also symbolize resistance to the social system that forces them into such a degrading life. The results indicate that “manusia silver” has now become an 'iconic visual' of social injustice, underlining the human tension between living an individual life and the oppressive structure of society.*

**Keywords:** *manusia silver, M. A.K Halliday, Youtube Channel, Social Semiotics.*

### **A. Introduction**

In recent years a weird social phenomenon witnessed in the Indonesian urban landscape, its known as “*manusia silver*”-people who paint their bodies in silver metallic paint and pose as living statues on busy streets for earn the money. This is a manifestation of urban poverty; with the people coming up with peculiar survival strategies, it has caught the attention one of media, the Vice Indonesia that have done some engaging video stories on their lives through content on their YouTube channel. YouTube as a new media is very helpful in delivering information (Reynata, 2022).

“*Manusia Silver*” in urban Indonesia speak to much more than an economic strategy for survival; moreover these are complex junctions of social marginalization, urban poverty, and creative resistance against systemic inequality. The background of disadvantage often characterizes these individuals who paint their bodies with silver, turning themselves into living, breathing art installations challenging the borders between performance art and desperate survival tactics in increasingly challenging urban environments.

*Manusia silver* phenomenon began to gain prominence during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and has since become a regular feature of Indonesian urban life, especially in big cities such as Jakarta, Surabaya, and Bandung. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia, many problems have occurred; one of them had the most influence on the economic sector (Afrizal &

Risdiana, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has caused social distancing, closure of various economic sectors, and loss of livelihood for many urban communities; hence, alternative survival strategies have emerged, one of which is the *manusia silver* phenomenon. The very presence of the street, intersection, and public square persons serves as a blunt reminder of the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, the increasingly wide gap in economic opportunities for social awareness, and the general lack of opportunities open to these groups of people. Using silver paint, which literally stands out within the cityscape, paradoxically serves to emphasize their invisibility in the general social and economic context.

The existence of *manusia silver* in documentary videos produced by Vice Indonesia also highlights the dynamics of the relationship between them and the surrounding community. The community often responds to them in various ways, ranging from indifference to recognition of their existence. This creates a space for dialog that can raise social awareness. There are groups of people who very easily meet their economic needs, and otherwise there are groups of people who are not easy to meet their economic needs (Augustia et al., 2023).

A social semiotic analysis of the *manusia silver* allows us to delve deeper into how their identities are shaped and perceived in society. By examining the visual and linguistic elements present in the documentary video, we can understand how the silver man functions as a symbol of marginality. Social semiotics, which specifically examines symbols, both symbols in the form of words and symbols in the form of non-words in units called sentences in other words, social semiotics examines the sign system contained in language (Matheson et al., 2019).

The research uses a qualitative approach and M.A.K. Halliday's social semiotics method. The researcher used social semiotics analysis because this semiotics specifically examines the sign system produced by humans in the form of symbols and sentences.

This research explores systematically and critically the meaning behind the silver man as a symbol of marginality in the Indonesian social context, and how the social semiotic approach provides deeper insights into the issues faced by marginalized groups in modern society.

## B. Method

This research uses a qualitative method with a social semiotic approach by M.A.K. Halliday. This method helps analyze how meaning is created and conveyed through visual and linguistic signs in the video. A qualitative approach is suitable for studying complex symbols and meanings in social contexts, such as the marginalization of *manusia silver*. As Mackiewicz (2018) explains, this approach allows researchers to understand social phenomena from the perspective of those involved. The social semiotic approach sees language and symbols as not just reflecting reality but also shaping it. Halliday (in Liu, 2014) states that people use language to achieve different goals and express their experiences. This study explores how marginality is represented through visual language in the context of *manusia silver*.

This research is a single case study focusing on *manusia silver* as portrayed in a Vice Indonesia documentary on YouTube. A case study allows for an in-depth analysis of a specific phenomenon within its social context. It examines how *manusia silver* is visually and narratively represented as a symbol of marginality in urban Indonesia. The Vice Indonesia documentary was selected as the primary data source due to its rich visual and verbal content. Secondary sources include journal articles, books, and studies on social semiotics and marginalized groups.

Data collection involved analyzing the documentary video to identify visual and linguistic signs related to *manusia silver*. The researcher examined key elements in the video's narrative and visuals, interpreting them through a social semiotic approach. The analysis focused on visual symbols, such as the silver body paint, and linguistic elements, such as narration, to uncover their deeper social meanings. This study explores how these signs reflect and shape the marginalized status of *manusia silver*.

### C. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of documentary video published by Vice Indonesia about *manusia silver* as one of the marginalized groups in urban society. As outlined above, current analysis adopts M.A.K. Halliday's social semiotic theory approach to viewing the visual and linguistic signs that set up the representation of marginality. The discussion is going to try to look at how those elements work in the sign system-representing social injustice and positioning the silver men as the symbols of wider marginality in the structures of society.

#### Findings

##### A. Scene 1

Table 1. Scene 1

| No | Naration   | Picture   |
|----|--|---|
| 1  | “Muhammad Yogi adalah satu dari jutaan masyarakat Indonesia yang kehilangan pekerjaan karena imbas pandemi, Indonesia merupakan salah satu negara dengan lonjakan kasus terbanyak se-Asia. Dan menghadapi situasi resesi setaelah lebih dari 20 tahun” |  |

##### 1. Field of Discourse

In scene 1, the narrator explains the impact of the pandemic. Indonesia, which is the country with the largest spike in Covid cases in Asia, is severely affected in the economic field, this is the worst case of recession in more than 20 years. One of the people affected by this pandemic is Muhammad Yogi.

##### 2. Tenor of Discourse



The interviewee in this scene 1 is Muhammad Yogi.

At minute 1:27 yogi is present as a speaker to be interviewed. In this interview in scene 1, yogi explains the background of why he chose to make a living by becoming a silver human.

"bisa dibbilang 70-80% grafik penurunan penghasilan yang didapatkan, mau coba cari kerjaan lain kan susah. Tapi kalo saya jadi manusia silver kan sedikit banyaknya bisa saya bawa pulang, bisa buat anak istri dirumah. Dulu saya kerja di angkutan, jadi supir angkot, sudah sekitar 16 tahun, walaupun kadang narik main main juga tetap aja bisa dibawa pulang. Tapi setelah Covid ini menjadikan diri saya manusia silver ini"

### 3. Mode of Discourse

Table 2. Mode of Discourse in Scene 1

| Naration Text   | Figurative Language  |
|---|--|
| <p>"Muhammad Yogi adalah satu dari jutaan masyarakat Indonesia yang kehilangan pekerjaan karena imbas pandemi, Indonesia merupakan salah satu negara dengan lonjakan kasus terbanyak se-Asia. Dan menghadapi situasi resesi setaelah lebih dari 20 tahun"</p> | <p>The hyperbolic style appears in the use of the phrase "jutaan masyarakat indonesia"-which gives a dramatic impression of the impact from the pandemic, though the actual number is smaller. But here, it tries to emphasize the effect on society. There is also parallelism in sentence construction, whereby two major facts of job losses and the spike in COVID-19 cases are harmoniously linked, with reinforcements in creating an impression of a simultaneous crisis in health and the economy. The use of a word like "Indonesia" can also be defined as metonymy, whereby a country is used to mean all its people or government in relation to the crisis.</p> |

#### B. Scene 2

Table 3. Scene 2

| No | Naration   | Picture  |
|----|--|--|
| 1  | <p>"Yogi tidak sendirian, tidak banyaknya lapangan pekerjaan membuat banyak orang yang memilih pekerjaan ini walaupun berbahaya. Yogi dan teman-temannya membeli cat yang paling murah yang ada di pasaran."</p> |  |

#### 1. Field of Discourse

In Scene 2 Narrator explains the limited job opportunities that made yogi and some of his friends decide to become silver men.. By purchasing the cheapest paint yogi began to apply paint all over his body.

#### 2. Tenor of Discourse



The interviewee in this scene 2 still Muhammad Yogi.

Yogi explained how he and his friend mixed the purchased paint, using a few additional ingredients.

*“Simpel sih kak bikinnya, paling tambahannya cuma minyak sayur dan juga hand body”*

### 3. Mode of Discourse


Table 4. Mode of Discourse in Scene 2

| Naration Text   | Figurative Language   |
|---|---|
| <p><i>“Yogi tidak sendirian, tidak banyaknya lapangan pekerjaan membuat banyak orang yang memilih pekerjaan ini walaupun berbahaya. Yogi dan teman-temannya membeli cat yang paling murah yang ada di pasaran.”</i></p> | <p>There is litotes: <i>“tidak banyaknya lapangan pekerjaan”</i> a gentle way of expressing the cruel fact that very few if any job opportunities exist. It does not say how hard it is to get work; however, by minimizing this, the crisis is even more stressed. Also, there is the antithesis in the expression <i>“memilih pekerjaan ini walaupun berbahaya”</i> which contrasts choice and danger. The contrast done here underlines how situations force people to take a risk in life, as has happened in the case of Yogi and his friend. There is parallelism, apparently, in the structure of the first sentence: juxtaposing two related situations of the job crisis and the decision to choose a dangerous job. This tightens up the logical connection between cause and effect. Also, the phrase <i>“the cheapest paint”</i> gives a good example of pleonasm: such a word as <i>“cheapest”</i> underlines the extreme low price of paint they purchased, though <i>“cheap”</i> itself was enough to describe their economic condition. The word makes an additional emphasis on the financial troubles Yogi and his friends went through..</p> |

### C. Scene 3

Table 5. Scene 3

| No | Naration | Picture |
|----|----------|---------|
|----|----------|---------|

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>1 "mereka tahu ini berbahaya untuk mereka, karena terasa panas di kulit mereka dan perih di mata. Dampak jangka panjang dapat merusak organ dalam mereka dan bahkan menyebabkan kanker".</p> |  |
|---|--|

1. Field of Discourse

In scene 3, the narrator explains that the paint they put on their bodies has side effects, such as burning on the skin and stinging in the eyes. Economic demands force them to ignore this even though they also realize that the long-term impact of wearing paint on their bodies will have a negative impact on their health.

2. Tenor of Discourse



The interviewee in this scene 3 is Muhammad Yogi.

In minute 03.21, yogi explained that in order to make the smell of the paint not too piercing, yogi and his friend mixed handbody into the silver paint.

"lantaran kita sudah campur pakai handbody jadi bau dari cat silvernya agak samar samar, terbawa bau handbody, pokoknya jadi tidak terlalu bau"

3. Mode of Discourse


Table 6. Mode of Discourse in Scene 3

| Naration Text   | Figurative Language   |
|---|---|
| <p>"mereka tahu ini berbahaya untuk mereka, karena terasa panas di kulit mereka dan perih di mata. Dampak jangka panjang dapat merusak organ dalam mereka dan bahkan menyebabkan kanker."</p> | <p><i>Terasa panas di kulit mereka dan perih di mata</i> - a phrase filled with synesthesia, or the mixing of the senses. This figure of speech brings together the sensations of touch, heating up on the skin, and sight, stinging in the eyes, in depicting the physical suffering they immediately experience due to exposure to dangerous substances. This synesthesia creates a clear, powerful image of the physical dangers: "can damage their internal organs and even cause cancer." There is some hyperbole in this sentence; this is an exaggeration for the horrific long-term outcomes of the occupation. The threats, such as cancer, are real; the forthright</p> |

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|  | and dramatic way the idea has been presented enhances their sense of fear and danger. |
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**D. Scene 4**

Table 7. Scene 4

| No | Naration  | Picture  |
|----|---|--|
| 1  | <i>Bahan beracun bukanlah satu satunya hal yang berbahaya dalam pekerjaan ini. Polisi dan satpol PP sering mentarget mereka karena dianggap sebagai pengemis jalanan.</i> |  |

1. Field of Discourse

In scene 3, the narrator explains that the paint they put on their bodies has side effects, such as burning on the skin and stinging in the eyes. Economic demands force them to ignore this even though they also realize that the long-term impact of wearing paint on their bodies will have a negative impact on their health.

2. Tenor of Discourse



The interviewee in this scene 4 is changed become Yogi's wife, Siti.

In minute 03.35, yogi's wife explained how challenging her husband's job become a *manusia silver*

*“alhamdulillah belum ada kejadian ditangkap satpol PP, kejar kejaran saja sama satpol PP, paling bajunya, celananya, sampe tas nya juga diangkat, tapi alhamdulillah ga sampe ditangkap”*

3. Mode of Discourse


Table 8. Mode of Discourse in Scene 4

| Naration Text  | Figurative Language  |
|--|--|
| <i>“Bahan beracun bukanlah satu satunya hal yang berbahaya dalam pekerjaan ini. Polisi dan satpol PP sering mentarget mereka karena dianggap sebagai pengemis jalanan”</i> | antithesis is evident in the contrast between two types of danger: <i>Bahan beracun bukanlah satu satunya hal yang berbahaya dalam pekerjaan ini. Polisi dan satpol PP</i> . This juxtaposition highlights the multiple forms of danger—both physical and social—that these workers face. It conveys the idea that while their |

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|  | work environment is dangerous due to toxic materials, they also suffer from external, authoritative forces ( <i>satpol PP</i> )targeting them. |
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**E. Scene 5**

Table 9. Scene 5

| No | Naration   | Picture  |
|----|--|--|
| 1  | "Walaupun bekerja selama lima jam. Yogi hanya bisa membawa pulang 50.000 Rupiah" |  |

1. Field of Discourse

After working in the bright heat of the day, yogi and his friends only got 50,000, which is not enough for daily needs in Jakarta. The income of being a silver man is uncertain but there is no other way but this, making yogi have to keep going in the harshness of life.

2. Tenor of Discourse



The interviewee in this scene 5 is back to yogi

In minute 04.45, yogi's wife explained how hard it is to be a silver man, with erratic income. But he explains his gratitude because the most important thing is that there is money for his wife and children.

"Lelah menjadi manusia silver, pendapatan ga nentu. Yang penting mah cukup buat makan ada untuk anak istri. Namanya buat keluarga, kalo buat badan sendiri mah apa saya bela belain begini"

3. Mode of Discourse

Table 10. Mode of Discourse in Scene 5

| Naration Text  | Figurative Language   |
|--|---|
| "Walaupun bekerja selama lima jam. Yogi hanya bisa membawa pulang 50.000 Rupiah" | There is a paradox in the relationship between effort and result, where despite Yogi working for five hours-a long time-the wage he receives is a paltry 50,000 Rupiah. This paradox suggests an imbalance between the physical |



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|  | effort expended and the reward received, thus reinforcing the sense of unfairness in the working conditions. |
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## Analysis

### ***Marginalized by the System: Metamorphosis from a worker to a manusia silver***

One of the social problems faced, namely the number of marginalized people which increases every year. This phenomenon of *manusia silver* has appeared in Indonesia's cityscape as one of the most striking symbols of social marginalization, especially in the COVID-19 pandemic. During Covid 19 pandemic, the *manusia silver* phenomenon has become an activity among the community that is used as a livelihood (Sartika et al., 2023). The manifestation has become a strong reflection of the deepening social and economic disparities through urban communities. That is where personal transformations-like Muhammad Yogi did, who left driving “*angkot*” for 16 years to turn into a *manusia silver* and his painted all over his body and it show the debilitating effect of economic replacement and to what extent people have to survive in a growingly difficult urban atmosphere. The drastic 70-80% drop in income mentioned by Yogi makes the case for becoming a *manusia silver* all the more compelling. As Needs, motivation can also arise because of the need for something in his life (Novita, 2022). So that he is motivated to be able to fulfill his life's needs.

### ***The Body as a Canvas of Suffering: The Physical Sacrifice of the Marginalized***

When coating full of his body with silver paint, Yogi and his friends used the cheapest paint mixed with cooking oil and lotion. Such an attempt represents not only desperate conditions of the finances but acceptance of serious personal risk as a means of survival. Illnesses experienced by the Silver Man include itching, dizziness, ARI, diarrhea and fatigue (Marpaung & Aidha, 2023). The immediate physical discomfort of burning skin and stinging eyes, in the future it will makes organ damage and cancer, creates a jarring parallel between immediate survival needs and long-term health consequences. The fact that physical suffering can be tolerated for the sake of economic survival powerfully symbolizes desperate choices that have been forced upon marginalized populations, especially sculpture for their own survival with their families.

### ***Visible but Invisible: The Dilemma of Marginalized Existence in Public Spaces***

The appearance of the silver-painted bodies in urban areas created an interesting contradiction between visible and invisible, it has to be underlined in a broader issue of social marginalization. even their metallic look makes them catch notice amongst hustle and bustle in the city, this noticeability serves only to emphasize their social invisibility and margin from general view. While the bodies-as-living-figures force the rest of society to take cognizance of social inequality, this aesthetic transformation on the other side runs the risk of dehumanization. It is through this that the duality of the visibility-yet-socially-unrecognized so poignantly illustrates a complex feature of marginalization in contemporary urban society.

### ***The Art of Resistance in Desperation: Symbolic Resistance of the “manusia silver”***

The practice of becoming a “*manusia silver*” realizes both submission and resistance to systemic inequality. As a stated that *pekerja informal yang berusaha mencari peluang dari keterbatasan ditengah pandemi Covid-19* (Prasetya & Hidayat, 2020), while this act represents the acceptance of degrading conditions for the sake of survival, it simultaneously serves as a form of creative resistance through the transformation of their bodies into living art. By transforming economic desperation into a form of street performance, these individuals demonstrate remarkable resilience and creativity in the face of adversity. Their presence disrupts the normal flow of urban life, forcing pedestrians to acknowledge social issues that might otherwise be ignored. But Silver men are not beggars but street performers street art, they peddle themselves with the knowledge of sculpture and hope to get rewards from art lovers, especially sculpture for their own survival and that of their families (Arifin, 2023).

## D. Conclusion

In conclusion the *manusia silver* phenomenon in Indonesia has become sadness realities of social and economic marginalization. a people such as Muhammad Yogi, who turned from being a public transport driver into a street performer, represent to the ravaging impact systemic failures and growing inequality have on cities, especially in view of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their bodies become a canvas of suffering, coated with toxic silver paint, symbolizing not just the physical and economic sacrifices they have to make but also the desperate measures put them through by the constraints of survival in marginalized life. These people are paradoxically both highly visible and socially invisible, prominent in public spaces yet still ignored by society. This is not an act of resignation to systemic inequality but a form of creative resistance as well-they took to the arts, using their bodies to confront society with the uncomfortable reality of inequality. The silver man phenomenon is an expressive proclamation of the vulnerability and resilience of the marginalized in contemporary urban life.

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