



Masculinity and Emotional Suppression in Calum's Character of Aftersun

Maskulinitas Hegemonik dan Penekanan Emosi pada Tokoh Calum dalam Aftersun

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji representasi maskulinitas hegemonik dan supresi emosional pada karakter Calum dalam film *Aftersun* (2022) karya Charlotte Wells. Kajian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh tekanan sosial yang secara sistematis memaksa laki-laki menutupi kerentanan emosional, pola yang turut memicu krisis kesehatan mental laki-laki yang kerap luput dari perhatian publik. Penelitian bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi bentuk maskulinitas hegemonik pada karakter Calum, mendeskripsikan manifestasi supresi emosinya melalui perilaku dan dialog, serta menganalisis dampaknya terhadap kondisi psikologis Calum. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan pendekatan dokumentasi dan observasi mendalam terhadap adegan, dialog bahasa tubuh, serta isyarat visual dalam film, dianalisis menggunakan kerangka teori maskulinitas hegemonik Connell (2005) dan konsep Boy Code Pollack (1998). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan maskulinitas hegemonik Calum termanifestasi melalui perannya sebagai pencari nafkah dan pengelolaan citra diri, sementara supresi emosinya ditampakkan melalui defleksi verbal dan regulasi nonverbal yang berakar dari pola asuh masa kecil, berujung pada isolasi emosional yang mendalam.

Kata kunci: *Aftersun*; *Boy Code*; *Calum*; *Maskulinitas Hegemonik*; *Supresi Emosional*

Abstract

This study examines the representation of hegemonic masculinity and emotional suppression in the character of Calum in Charlotte Wells' film Aftersun (2022). The background stems from social pressure that systematically pushes men to hide emotional vulnerability, a pattern contributing to the mental health crisis that is often overlooked among men. This study aims to identify representations of hegemonic masculinity in Calum, describe how emotional suppression manifests in his behavior and dialogue, and analyze its impact on his emotional state throughout the film. The method used is qualitative descriptive, employing in-depth documentation and observation of scenes, dialogue, body language, and visual cues, analyzed using Raewyn Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity and William Pollack's (1998) concept of the Boy Code. Results indicate that hegemonic masculinity in Calum is manifested through his role as provider and self-presentation in social settings, while emotional suppression appears through verbal deflection and nonverbal regulation rooted in childhood experiences, deepening his emotional isolation.

Keywords: *Aftersun*; *Boy Code*; *Calum*; *Emotional Suppression*; *Hegemonic Masculini*

INTRODUCTION

Society has long shaped rigid expectations around what it means to be a man, strength, emotional restraint, and the capacity to lead or provide, while treating vulnerability as something that contradicts these expectations (Alsyounf, 2018). Such standards are not natural but socially constructed and continuously reinforced across generations through family, cultural norms, media, and everyday interaction. From childhood, boys are conditioned through repeated messages, such as "boys don't cry" or

dismissive labels like "sissy," that define which emotional expressions are considered acceptable and gradually teach them to associate vulnerability with weakness and social rejection (Dennis & Zolnikov, 2024). Connell (2005) terms this dominant, hierarchical pattern of expectation hegemonic masculinity, a construct that shapes not only how men present themselves but also how they discipline other men who fail to follow these expectations.

When internalized over time, this conditioning does more than keep feelings private, it disconnects men from their own psychological states and may appear as difficulty maintaining relationships, withdrawal from social support, and, in severe cases, declining psychological stability (Bennett et al., 2024). Pollack (1998) describes this pattern through the concept of the *Boy Code*, in which men learn to maintain an outward composure that hides internal distress, making their struggles invisible to those around them.

Literature, including its modern visual form of film, has long functioned as a medium through which social constructs can be represented and examined (Jing, 2023; Rinahayu & Kristianto, 2022). *Aftersun* (2022), the semi-autobiographical debut feature by Charlotte Wells, offers a clear example. The film follows 11-year-old Sophie (Frankie Corio) on a holiday in Turkey with her father, Calum (Paul Mescal), while also showing fragments of adult Sophie's memories as she attempts to understand who her father truly was. Following its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival, the film received widespread recognition, including the Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role and multiple awards at the British Independent Film Awards. Rather than explicitly stating Calum's inner state, the film conveys his distress through body language, restrained expressions, silence, and visual details. These elements create a contrast between the image of a "good father" that Calum maintains for Sophie and the psychological strain beneath it, making *Aftersun* a powerful text for scholarly analysis.

Men's mental health remains an important social issue that is often overlooked. Sociologically, men continue to face expectations to be strong, stoic, and dominant, which can discourage emotional expression and contribute to patterns of emotional repression. Suicide rates among men also continue to exceed those among women (River, 2021), thus highlighting the serious consequences of a problem that often remains hidden. Men's silence, therefore, should not always be understood as an absence of emotional struggle (Mokhwelepa, 2025). Within this context, *Aftersun* offers a subtle yet compelling portrayal of a man struggling under the demands of traditional masculinity, making Calum's character a valuable case for examining how internalized hegemonic norms restrict emotional expression and affect his emotional condition.

No research has yet been found that examines *Aftersun* by combining Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity with Pollack's (1998) Boy Code framework, although similar theoretical combinations have been applied separately to analyze masculine identity in film (Nasution et al., 2026) and character personality in literary works (Fitrah, 2021). This study addresses this gap by identifying how hegemonic masculinity is represented through Calum's character, describing how emotional suppression appears in his behavior and dialogue, and analyzing its impact on his emotional condition throughout the film. Through this analysis, the study aims to provide further insight into the relationship between social expectations of masculinity, emotional suppression, and men's emotional struggles as represented in contemporary film.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method, which considered most appropriate for literary research that focuses on meaning and interpretation rather than numerical measurement (Creswell, 2009). This approach was selected because *Aftersun* does not present its themes explicitly, Calum's psychological state is expressed through indirect cues, dialogue, and behavioral patterns that require careful interpretive reading (Furidha, 2023). The data consist of primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained directly from the film *Aftersun*, accessed via Amazon Prime Video, consisting of visual and textual evidence such as scenes, dialogue, behavioral representations and interpersonal interactions involving the character Calum. Secondary data consist of theoretical and academic sources, primarily Connell's (2005) framework of hegemonic masculinity and Pollack's (1998) concept of the Boy Code, supported by relevant books and journal articles.

The research was conducted over approximately three months, from April to June 2026. As this study focuses on a film rather than field-based research, no physical research location was involved. The primary data source was *Aftersun* (2022), which was accessed digitally through Amazon Prime Video.

Instead of using population and sampling techniques in the statistical sense, this study focused on Calum as the main object of analysis. Scenes, dialogue, and behavioral cues were selected based on their relevance to the research questions. This selection followed a purposive sampling approach, in which qualitative data are chosen based on their relevance and information richness rather than through random selection (Ames et al., 2019).

Data were collected through document study and close observation, which are commonly used in qualitative research (Busetto et al., 2020). The documentation process involved compiling subtitle transcripts, scene descriptions, and notes on Calum's behavior through repeated viewings of the film. Close observation involved watching the film systematically and recording relevant scenes, dialogue, and behaviors based on the theoretical framework. The collected data were then organized by scene, timestamp, and analytical category. The researcher served as the primary instrument and used an observation framework based on Connell's (2005) and Pollack's (1998) theoretical concepts.

Data analysis followed four stages, consistent with the identification-classification-analysis-conclusion sequence commonly applied in literary character analysis (Syahbudin & Qodri, 2022). First, data identification involved selecting scenes, dialogue, and behavioral cues relevant to the research focus. Second, data classification grouped the identified data based on the two theoretical frameworks: data related to dominance, emotional control, and masculine performance were categorized under Connell's (2005) hegemonic masculinity, while data related to emotional suppression, stoicism, and avoidance of vulnerability were categorized under Pollack's (1998) Boy Code. Third, the classified data were analyzed using the theoretical frameworks to explain how Calum's behavior and dialogue represent hegemonic masculine values and demonstrate emotional suppression. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the overall findings of the analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Aftersun (2022), directed by Charlotte Wells, provides a representation of how hegemonic masculine norms can limit men's emotional expression. The findings of this study show how Calum's character is shaped by the internalization of hegemonic masculinity and the *Boy Code*. Using Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity and Pollack's (1998) *Boy Code* as the theoretical framework, this section examines the contrast between Calum's outward composure and his internal emotional struggles. The findings are presented in three stages: Calum's performance of hegemonic masculine norms, his patterns of emotional suppression, and the effects of these patterns on his emotional condition throughout the film.

1. The Representation of Hegemonic Masculinity in *Aftersun*

The diving mask that Calum had bought for Sophie is accidentally lost at sea during a diving session (00:29:45–00:33:52). When Sophie apologizes for the loss, Calum responds simply, "It's okay darling. It's fine. I'm just a little tired today," before redirecting her attention elsewhere.



Figure 1. Sophie apologizes to Calum after losing the diving mask.

Calum's response reflects the gendered practices through which hegemonic masculinity is maintained, as described by Connell (2005): the tendency to suppress feminine-coded traits such as emotional expression and vulnerability as part of the norms that shape how men respond to stress. Although the loss appears to affect him, Calum chooses not to acknowledge it openly, effectively ending further conversation about what he is truly feeling. This also reflects Connell's (2005) point that hegemonic masculinity expects men to project composure and competence, particularly in the provider role, so that financial or emotional difficulties are managed through concealment rather than acknowledgment.

A parallel pattern appears at the Turkish carpet shop (00:43:40–00:44:16), where Calum falls silent for a moment after hearing the price before proceeding with the purchase.



Figure 2. *Inside the Turkish carpet shop, Calum, Sophie, and the shop owner are having a conversation.*

This pause implies financial hesitation that is never verbalized. This reflects Connell's (2005) view that a man's ability to provide material support is often treated as a measure of his worth, making the provider role central to masculine identity. As a result, maintaining this image is prioritized over acknowledging financial difficulty.

The most symbolically significant instance occurs in the dance scene set to "Under Pressure" by Queen and David Bowie (01:29:27–01:31:00), where Calum and Sophie dance freely together.

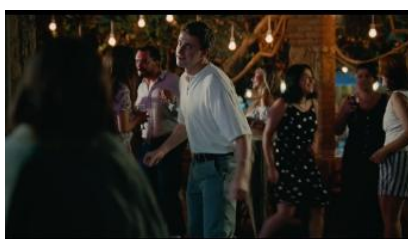


Figure 3. *Calum danced with Sophie to the song "Under Pressure" by David Bowie and Queen.*

On the surface, this scene appears to be a simple moment of happiness. However, the song's lyrics describe pressure that destroys a person from within, while the energetic melody creates a contrast that reflects Calum's condition, something vibrant on the outside while holding unresolved pressure within. Through Connell's (2005) concept of body-reflexive practices, Calum's unguarded movement shows how masculine norms can become deeply ingrained and shape his self-presentation in social situations. The moment therefore represents a man maintaining composure while carrying the weight of masculine expectations.

2. The Representation of Emotional Suppression in Calum in Aftersun

During a diving session, Calum and the instructor discuss settling down and starting a family. Calum responds, "Can't see myself at 40, to be honest. I'm surprised I made it to 30" (00:33:02–00:33:14), then falls silent, his expression difficult to read, before sighing and resuming the activity.



Figure 4. *The conversation between Calum and the diving instructor, the moment when Calum made the remark.*

This reflects Pollack's (1998) Sturdy Oak dimension of the Boy Code, in which men are conditioned to project toughness even when distress unintentionally surfaces; severe distress is expressed within ordinary small talk, leaving little room for an emotional response. The remark appears to slip out without Calum fully registering its emotional weight, consistent with what Levant et al. (2024) term normative male alexithymia. As Rogante et al. (2024) note, difficulty regulating emotional experience can mediate the relationship between emotional distress and behavioral withdrawal.

In their motel room (00:40:50–00:41:18), Sophie describes feeling as though "everything is tired... like you're sinking." Calum responds with, "We're here to have a good time, eh?" before ending the conversation, a pattern of avoidance also observed in male characters' handling of unresolved inner conflict in literary analysis (Ayuwulandari et al., 2024).



Figure 5. *Sophie and Calum were talking in their motel room. Sophie opened up about her feelings to Calum.*

This deflection reflects the Sturdy Oak dimension of the Boy Code (1998), in which men are conditioned to suppress emotional engagement even when directly confronted with vulnerability. Notably, Calum deflects at the moment Sophie expresses an experience that mirrors his own condition, showing how the Boy Code shapes both his self-presentation and his difficulty acknowledging his own emotional pressure.

A similar deflection is also evident when Sophie films Calum and asks what his eleven-year-old self imagined he would be doing at thirty-one (00:51:23–00:53:00).



Figure 6. *Sophie pointed her camera at Calum and asked him a personal question*

Calum responds with silence and then asks her to turn off the camera. Alongside this exchange, the film includes visual details of books on meditation and tai chi, a practice Calum performs throughout the film. This suggests that tai chi functions as a non-verbal outlet for what Calum does not express directly, consistent with the Sturdy Oak aspect of the Boy Code (1998).

Once the camera is off, Sophie repeats her question, and this time Calum answers: "When I was 11, nobody remembered that it was my birthday. And when I told my mum, she was so angry, she grabbed me by the ear, told my dad to drive me to the toy shop, and made me pick something to buy" (00:52:30–00:53:01). a memory that illustrates how unresolved childhood experiences can continue to shape adult emotional behaviour (Ginting et al., 2026).



Figure 7. *Calum opened up to Sophie about his childhood after the cameras were turned off.*

The fact that Calum only speaks once he is no longer being observed suggests that his willingness to disclose is shaped by how exposed he feels. The memory itself, in which his emotional needs were met with anger rather than acknowledgment, aligns with Pollack's (1998) concept of the gender straitjacket. The young Calum who received anger instead of recognition is connected to the adult Calum who deflects and withdraws when faced with vulnerability. This pattern was shaped from an early age, and the scene makes this connection visible.

3. The Effect of Hegemonic Masculinity on Calum's Emotions in Aftersun

After singing alone on stage and returning visibly upset, Sophie tells Calum, "Stop offering to pay when you don't have the money," directly pointing to his financial strain (01:03:54–01:04:19).

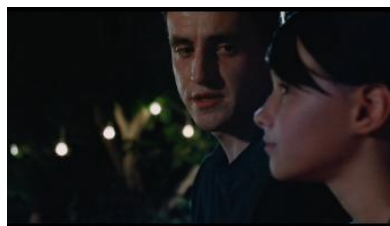


Figure 8. *Calum tried to cheer Sophie up.*

Calum falls silent, then deflects with a small laugh before moving the conversation forward. Sophie's remark exposes something Calum has carefully concealed throughout the film. This reflects Connell's (2005) framing of masculine identity as connected to the provider role; the financial difficulty remains unspoken, and this pattern of accumulating pressure without an outlet illustrates how hegemonic masculinity shapes both his emotional management and his growing isolation.

Following this exchange, Calum is shown walking alone at night toward the beach, continuing into the water until he is swallowed by darkness (01:11:19–01:12:02).



Figure 9. *Calum walked alone toward the sea.*

The absence of dialogue means that his emotional state is conveyed entirely through his actions. This withdrawal reflects Connell's (2005) gendered practices, in which men are conditioned to face difficulties independently. Pollack (1998) observes that the emotional disconnection produced by masculine conditioning can create deep and lasting shame, which may lead to withdrawal rather than exposure.

In the film's final emotional turn, Sophie and others serenade Calum with a birthday song while he watches from the steps; this shot overlaps with Calum crying alone in his motel room, his back to the camera (01:25:20–01:25:45).



Figure 10. *Calum is being serenaded with a birthday song by Sophie and the others, overlapping with a scene of him crying alone in a motel room.*

This contrast makes visible the gap between what Calum presents outwardly and what he feels internally. It reflects Connell's (2005) concept of body-reflexive practices and Pollack's (1998) Mask of Masculinity. This scene marks a shift from Calum's earlier coping mechanisms, verbal deflection, physical withdrawal, and compensatory action, to a point where these mechanisms are no longer sufficient. As Rogante et al. (2024) note, the capacity to regulate emotional experience can deteriorate under sustained suppression rather than remain stable, this scene reflects the point at which Calum's long-suppressed pressure begins to surface beyond what his composed exterior can contain.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that hegemonic masculinity in *Aftersun* is represented through Calum's performance as a provider and through body-reflexive practices that treat composure and financial

competence as measures of masculine worth, leading him to conceal rather than acknowledge difficulty. This performance produces a consistent pattern of emotional suppression, manifested through verbal deflection, non-verbal regulation, and a gender straitjacket rooted in his childhood experiences of unacknowledged vulnerability. Together, these norms progressively isolate Calum throughout the film. As pressure accumulates without an outlet, the mechanisms he relies on to maintain composure eventually prove insufficient, culminating in visible emotional breakdown.

These findings indicate that Calum's emotional suppression is not a personal failing but a consequence of hegemonic masculine norms that deny men the space to express vulnerability. By combining Connell's (2005) structural account of hegemonic masculinity with Pollack's (1998) psychological framework of the Boy Code, this study demonstrates how the demands of masculine performance and the emotional cost of sustaining that performance operate as a single, mutually reinforcing system. This system shapes not only how Calum presents himself to others but also the isolation and psychological strain that define his arc throughout the film.

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