Exploring Muslim Youth Perceptions of Gender Imitation And Transwoman Representation in Digital Media

Suhertina[*1], Hasbullah[2], Raja Rahima Munawarah Raja Ahmad[3], Hasgimianti[4]

[1,2,3,4] Bimbingan dan Konseling Pendidikan Islam, Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim, Riau, Indonesia

Abstract. The rise of gender representation and transgender identity in digital media especially through gender-imitation content on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube has influenced how Muslim adolescents interpret the boundaries between entertainment and morality. This study explores Muslim youths' perceptions of gender-imitation and transwoman representation on social media using Husserl's phenomenological approach. Fifteen Muslim adolescents aged 13–15 who actively follow gender-imitation accounts participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using the Colaizzi method with validation through member checking and source triangulation. The findings reveal a core tension between entertainment and moral judgment. While many adolescents perceive gender-imitation content as humorous and creative entertainment, others interpret it as a moral deviation conflicting with Islamic values. This ambivalence reflects a negotiation between digital culture and religious principles, showing that exposure to such content simultaneously entertains and challenges moral reasoning. The study underscores the need for Islamic values-based media literacy to help Muslim adolescents critically interpret gender representation without diminishing their moral and spiritual sensitivity.

Keywords: Adolescent perception, gender imitation, transwoman, social media, phenomenology, Islamic media literacy

Introduction

The phenomenon of gender representation and transgender identity has become increasingly prominent in the digital era. In recent years, social media such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have become new spaces where individuals freely display diverse gender expressions, including the *gender imitation* phenomenon the practice of men or women imitating the appearance and behavior of the opposite gender as a form of entertainment or self-expression. Cross-border studies show that trans representation in the media has increased significantly, with portrayals ranging from positive and artistic to stereotypical (Debineva & Pelupessy, 2019; Eagly, 2019; Fox et al., 2021; Majid et al., 2020; Mocarski et al., 2019). This suggests that digital media play a major role in shaping public perceptions of gender identity and trans expression.

In the context of Indonesia and Malaysia, this topic is particularly urgent because both societies are rooted in Islamic teachings that emphasize modesty (*haya'*) and adherence to

divinely ordained gender distinctions. Islamic norms consider gender imitation and cross-dressing as behaviors that contradict *fitrah* (natural disposition) and blur the moral boundaries established in the Qur'an and Hadith. However, the rise of permissive digital culture has normalized such expressions as harmless entertainment or creativity, especially among adolescents. This cultural shift creates a moral paradox for Muslim youth who must navigate between the values of their faith and the allure of online entertainment that often trivializes gender boundaries.

Empirical data reinforce this urgency. According to *Andarningtyas (2022)*, adolescents aged 13–18 constitute the largest group of internet users in Indonesia, with over 99% accessing social media daily, primarily through TikTok (63%), Instagram (59%), and YouTube (56%). These platforms have become dominant spaces for humor, lifestyle, and imitation content that often feature transgender or gender-fluid representations. The constant exposure to such content makes Muslim adolescents the demographic most vulnerable to the internalization of permissive values and the normalization of gender-imitating behavior. When moral and media literacy are weak, these perceptions can blur the distinction between creative expression and moral deviation.

Previous studies indicate that social media exert dual influences on adolescents' understanding of gender identity. On one hand, digital platforms provide space for creative expression and education on gender diversity; on the other hand, they may contribute to identity confusion, normalization of imitation behavior, and increased tolerance toward LGBT expression (Putri, Ratnawati, & Krisphianti, 2025; Wang, Fong, & Meltzoff, 2021). In Indonesia, gender-imitation content is often perceived as harmless entertainment rather than an expression of identity, even though the positive perception of such acts can gradually erode social and religious norms (Sari & Musdalifah, 2023). Similar findings in Malaysia demonstrate that social media are effective tools for disseminating LGBT-related representations and reshaping public acceptance (Mokhtar, Sukeri, & Latiff, 2020).

Nevertheless, most previous research focuses on content creators or transgender individuals themselves, while few have examined Muslim adolescents as *consumers* of gender-imitation content. This is a crucial analytical gap, as this group potentially internalizes conflicting messages between faith-based morality and popular digital culture. Suhertina et al. (2023) found that Muslim adolescents recognize LGBT behavior on social media through visual cues and religious values, but the study did not explore the subjective meaning of these experiences. Similarly, Dewi (2024) and Bahari & Omiwole (2024) show that digital platforms serve as arenas for identity negotiation, but they do not address how young Muslim audiences interpret such representations within moral and spiritual frameworks.

The development of digital technology has made social media the primary arena for interaction and entertainment among Indonesian adolescents. At this developmental stage, identity formation is closely tied to social validation and experimentation with self-expression. Consequently, gender-imitation content that blurs gender boundaries may influence how young Muslims perceive the relationship between entertainment, morality, and religious principles. Strengthening Islamic values-based media literacy is thus critical to ensure that adolescents remain morally grounded while engaging in digital culture.

In particular, this study aims to explore Muslim adolescents' perceptions of gender-imitating content and trans representation in digital media. Through a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to understand adolescents' subjective experiences in interpreting the content both in terms of values, morals, and emotional influences. This research also aims to identify internal factors (such as religious values, self-concept, and beliefs) as well as external factors (such as the social environment and digital culture) that influence the way adolescents interpret the phenomenon of gender imitation.

This study has its own peculiarities compared to previous studies that generally focus on content creators or transgender individuals as the main subject. In this study, attention was directed to Muslim adolescents who are followers of gender-imitation content, a group that is often overlooked but plays an important role in shaping the flow of social acceptance and judgment of the phenomenon. By making them the main focus, this research opens up a new space of understanding of how the process of interpretation, moral judgment, and internalization of values takes place among the younger generation of Muslims living in the midst of the flow of cultural digitalization. The phenomenological approach used also provides a different depth of analysis, as it allows researchers to explore the meaning of adolescents' subjective experiences directly. Through this perspective, the research does not stop at the measurement of attitudes, but seeks to understand how local religious, moral, and cultural values interact with visual and emotional experiences when they consume gender-imitating content on social media

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative design using Husserl's phenomenological method (AghaMohammadi et al., 2023; Anshori, 2018; Hamid, 2015) to explore the conscious experiences of Muslim adolescents in interpreting gender-imitation content and transfeminine representations on social media. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand the subjective meaning of lived experiences rather than describing surface-level behaviors or attitudes. As Hadi, Asrori, and Rusman (2021) emphasize, phenomenology seeks to reveal the essence of experience through reflective interpretation of participants' consciousness. Accordingly, this study focuses on how Muslim adolescents construct moral, social, and religious meaning from exposure to gender-imitation content in the digital space.

Participants

The study involved fifteen Muslim adolescents aged 13–15 years who actively followed gender-imitation-themed accounts on social media. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling to ensure relevance and depth of experience (Cresswell, 2015). The group consisted of eight females and seven males, all junior high school students who had followed such accounts for at least one year and watched related content frequently.

Ethical Considerations

Given that the participants were minors, the study followed ethical guidelines for research involving adolescents. Before data collection, written informed consent was obtained from multiple parties: 1) Parents or legal guardians, confirming their approval of the child's voluntary participation; 2) School authorities, granting institutional permission; and 3) The adolescents themselves, who provided direct, informed assent and written consent after the study purpose, procedures, and potential risks were clearly explained in age-appropriate language.

Participants were assured that their participation was entirely voluntary, that they could refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, and that all personal information would remain confidential. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities. The research protocol adhered to general adolescent research ethics emphasizing autonomy, protection, and confidentiality.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions that allowed participants to describe their experiences freely. The interviews focused on three areas: 1) Perceptions of gender-imitation and gender roles on social media; 2) Perceptions of transwoman and LGBT phenomena; and 3) Understanding of Islamic values related to these behaviors.

During the interviews, researchers played familiar video clips of gender-imitation content to facilitate natural reflection. Each interview lasted 30–60 minutes and was conducted until data saturation was reached. Data collection took place from March to July 2023, and was carried out by three trained researchers serving as interviewers, observers, and analysts.

Research Procedures

The procedures for this research are as follows: a) Researchers 1, 2, and 3 are the data collectors, interviewers, note-takers, and interview data analysts. The primary focus of the data collection will be textural and structural descriptions (real-life experiences and perceptions or meanings of the phenomenon) (Hadi et al., 2021). b) The supporting staff is responsible for scheduling interviews, preparing the necessary equipment for data collection, documenting research activities, and storing and transcribing interviews between researchers and participants. c) Selecting participants according to established criteria (purposeful sampling) (Hadi et al., 2021). d) Interview sessions were conducted according to an agreement between the interviewer and the participant; 1) explaining the purpose of the interview and the confidentiality of the participant's identity, which the researcher would maintain; 2) watching several video clips of commonly accessed gender-based impersonation content; 3) Researchers will explore participants' access activities and perceptions in depth regarding sex, gender roles, LGBT, behavioral imitation based on the gender imitation content accessed, and their understanding of Islamic law, which prohibits gender imitation behavior. e) Interviews will be conducted as needed for data validation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Colaizzi (1978) method (K.R. & S., 2021; Wirihana et al., 2018), which consists of seven stages: repeated reading of transcripts, extraction of significant statements, coding, clustering of themes, textural and structural description, synthesis of the essential meaning, and validation through member checking.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

1. Credibility was maintained through triangulation and participant confirmation,
2. Transferability was achieved by providing detailed contextual descriptions,
3. Dependability was ensured through systematic documentation of procedures, and
4. Confirmability was maintained through reflective field notes and audit trails.

This methodological framework ensured that the study not only explored what Muslim adolescents think about gender imitation but also revealed how they interpret, negotiate, and situate their moral and religious values within the context of a rapidly evolving digital culture.

The study participants consisted of fifteen Muslim adolescents aged 13–15 who were active followers of gender-imitation-themed social media accounts. The following is the form of the demographics of the informants of this study:

Table 1. Demographics of Research Informants

Informant Code	Gender	Age (years)	Education Status	Duration of Joining a Gender Imitation Account	Frequency of Viewing Content	Frequently Used Platforms
I1	Man	13	Junior High School Grade 7	> 1 year	Always	TikTok
I2	Woman	13	Junior High School Grade 7	> 1 year	Always	TikTok
I3	Man	14	Junior High School Grade 8	> 1 year	Often	Instagram
I4	Woman	14	Junior High School Grade 8	> 1 year	Always	TikTok, Instagram
I5	Man	15	Junior High School Grade 9	> 1 year	Always	YouTube
I6	Woman	14	Junior High School Grade 8	> 1 year	Often	TikTok
I7	Man	13	Junior High School Grade 7	> 1 year	Always	TikTok
I8	Woman	14	Junior High School Grade 8	> 1 year	Always	Instagram
I9	Woman	15	Junior High School Grade 9	> 1 year	Often	TikTok
I10	Man	14	Junior High School Grade 8	> 1 year	Always	TikTok, YouTube
I11	Woman	13	Junior High School Grade 7	> 1 year	Often	TikTok
I12	Woman	14	Junior High School Grade 8	> 1 year	Always	TikTok

I13	Man	15	Junior High School Grade 9	> 1 year	Always	Instagram
I14	Woman	15	Junior High School Grade 9	> 1 year	Often	TikTok
I15	Man	14	Junior High School Grade 8	> 1 year	Always	TikTok

Based on Table 1 All informants have followed the account for at least one year and have a high viewing frequency, i.e. almost every time new content appears or when they repeat old impressions. Informants are selected using the purposeful sampling by considering the direct involvement and relevance of the experience to the research objectives (Cresswell, 2015). The composition of the participants consisted of eight women and seven men, all of whom were junior high school students. Before the interview, each informant was given an explanation regarding the purpose of the research and the guarantee of confidentiality of his identity, as well as obtaining official permission from the school and parents.

Data is collected through semi-structured interviews with flexible open-ended question guidelines, so that informants can freely express their experiences and views. The questions focused on three main areas, namely the meaning of gender imitation content and gender roles on social media, perceptions of trans women and LGBT phenomena, and understanding of Islamic values related to these behaviors. In the interview process, the researcher also played several video footage of gender-imitation content familiar to the informant to trigger natural reflection and response. Each interview lasts between 30 to 60 minutes and is conducted until the data reaches a data saturation point. The data collection process lasted from March to July 2023 and was carried out by three main researchers who acted as interviewers, observers, and analysts.

Results

Based on interviews with fifteen Muslim adolescents aged 13–15 who have been actively following gender-imitation content accounts on social media for more than a year, the data were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method. The process moved systematically from meaningful statements extracted from participant transcripts, to formulated meanings, then grouped into clusters of meaning, and finally synthesized into six overarching themes. These six themes are:

1. Perception of gender-imitation content,
2. Perception of trans behavior,
3. Perception of gender roles for transwomen,
4. Perception of the relationship between gender-imitation content and LGBT,
5. The forms of imitation behavior that appear, and
6. The factors influencing the formation of these perceptions.

Each theme is described below with illustrative participant quotes and the logical flow from indicators to themes, following Colaizzi's analytical stages.

Theme 1: Positive Perception of Gender-Imitating Content as Entertainment

Meaningful statements:

Participants described gender-imitation content as "funny," "interesting," and "unique," particularly when "men can look like real women" or "act naturally like women."

Formulated meanings:

These expressions indicate that adolescents perceive gender imitation not as moral or identity-related acts, but as **entertainment and artistic creativity**. Their attention focuses on the performative aspects — appearance, gestures, and language — rather than the underlying issue of gender identity.

Cluster of meaning:

"Entertainment value" → "Admiration of acting skill" → "Disregard for moral dimension."

Theme (final synthesis):

Adolescents show **positive perceptions toward gender-imitation content** primarily because it fulfills entertainment needs and elicits humor. Figure 1 visualizes the logical flow from individual statements through formulated meanings to the thematic conclusion.
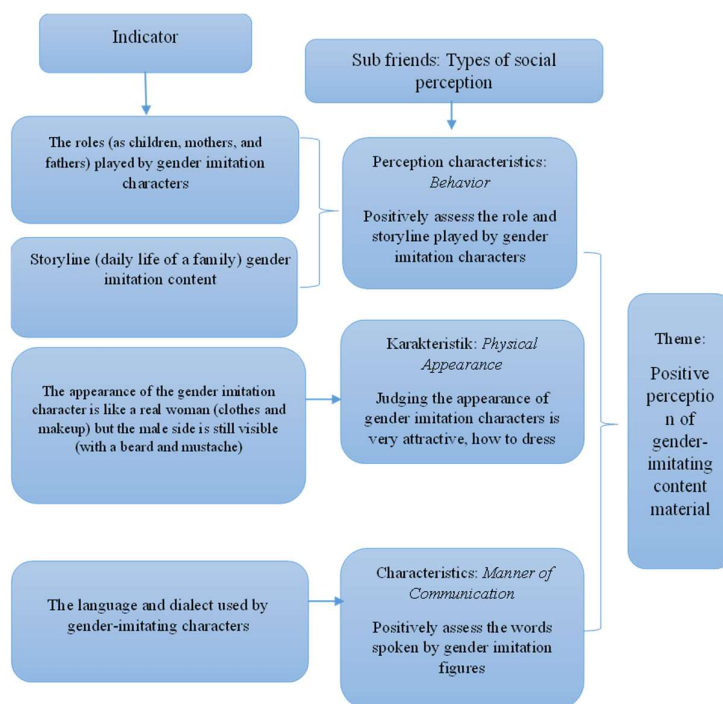

Figure 1. Theme 1: Positive Perception of Gender-Imitating Content

This shows that adolescents' appreciation of gender-imitation content is rooted in amusement and aesthetic pleasure, not in awareness of gender ideology. Based on the sub-themes and categories that emerged, namely behavior, physical appearance, and manner of communication, informants' primary focus was on building positive perceptions of gender imitation content. Based on informants' statements, no negative words were expressed about the gender imitation content they enjoyed. Therefore, the perceptions developed can be said to be positive or in line with the expectations of the characters in the content.

The second theme reveals that informants' perceptions of transwomen's behavior are divided into two: some view it negatively based on religious teachings, while others show positive perceptions due to the influence of the social environment. Illustrated in Figure 2 as follows:

Theme 2: Ambivalent Perceptions of Transwoman Behavior Meaningful statements:

Some participants said, "Changing one's identity or physique contrary to the nature that God has ordained is a sin," while others stated, "It's a human right," or "They should be respected."

Formulated meanings:

These contrasting statements reveal an internal conflict between moral-religious cognition and social-cultural relativism.

Cluster of meaning:

"Religious belief: violating God's creation" ↔ "Social belief: individual freedom" → "Ambivalent moral reasoning."

Theme (final synthesis):

Adolescents experience **moral ambivalence** between faith-based morality and social permissiveness. This ambivalence reflects a negotiation process between religious conviction and cultural exposure.
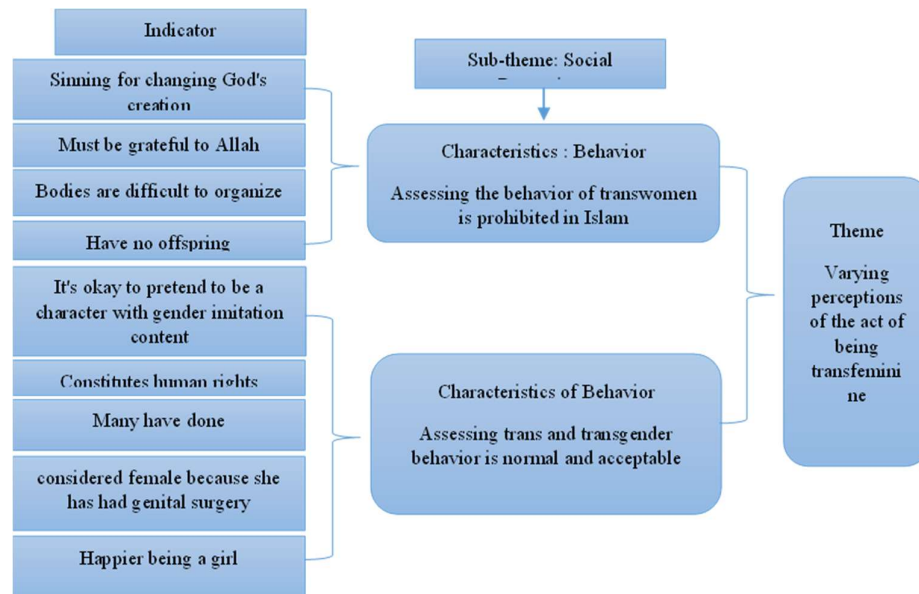

Figure 2. Theme 2: Perception of the Act of Being Transwoman

As shown in Figure 2, the flow of analysis demonstrates how initial religious statements were transformed into broader meanings of moral struggle and value negotiation, consistent with the Colaizzi process. Seen in Figure 2, an informant with a strong religious basis stated that "Changing one's identity or physique contrary to the nature that God has ordained is an act of sin," indicating the integration between their religious perceptions and beliefs. However, some informants consider transwomen's behavior as something natural or even needs to be respected as a form of individual freedom.

The phrases "it seems okay" and "a lot of people do it" indicate tolerance for transgender and transwomen behavior, as does the phrase "like LL." Furthermore, the phrase "there are

a lot of them now" indicates that they have seen other gender-imitation content on various social media platforms.

They stated that "A lot has been done" and "it's a human right"This permissive perception seems to be influenced by the social and popular cultural environment that is increasingly open to the issue of gender identity (Baber, 2013; Berger et al., 2021; Cueto & Leon, 2016). The third theme is related to the perception of gender roles for transwomen. The following is presented in Figure 3:

Theme 3: Perception of Gender Roles for Transwomen Meaningful statements:

Participants stated, "Men can't give birth or breastfeed," and "Even if they look like women, they are still men," while others noted, "It's creative," or "They're serious in their role."

Formulated meanings:

These statements express both biological essentialism (gender defined by anatomy) and cultural performativity (gender enacted as performance).

Cluster of meaning:

"Natural limits of gender" ↔ "Artistic seriousness of performance" → "Gender as performative act."

Theme (final synthesis):

Adolescents interpret transwomen's roles as a blend of creative performance and contested identity. This supports Butler's concept of gender performativity, showing how digital media transform gender acts from physical embodiment into virtual representation.
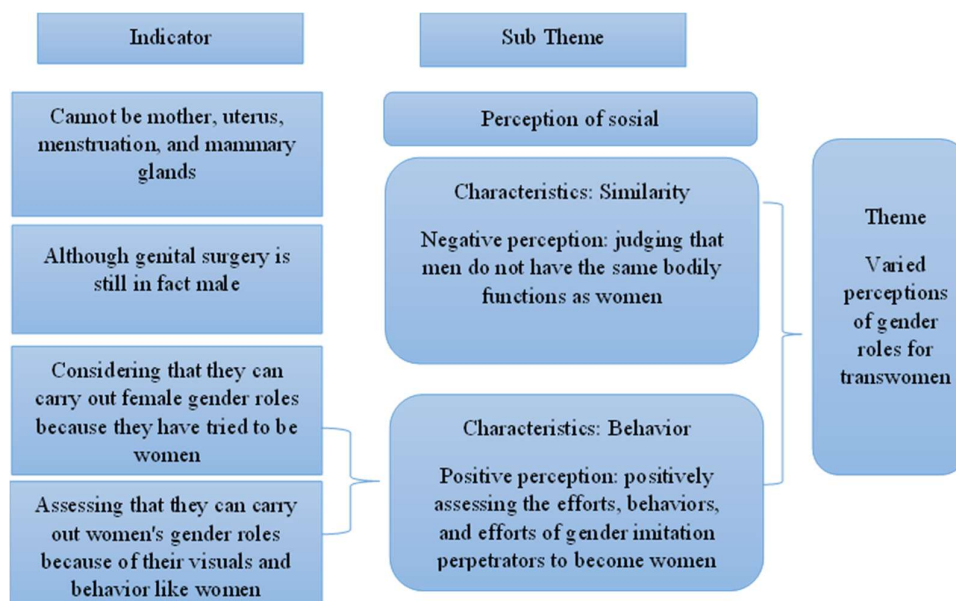

Figure 3. Theme 3 Perception of Gender Roles for Transwomen

Figure 3 illustrates the analytical progression from adolescents' descriptive statements to the recognition of performativity, reflecting the theoretical depth of this theme. Based on this theme, it shows that some informants view transgender behavior as part of an effort to become a woman who deserves respect. While the informant who received it assessed "Trying to be a woman" as a form of seriousness of the role (Imbrisevic, 2017). This reflects

a clash between perceptions based on religious teachings and perceptions influenced by a global visual culture that blurs gender boundaries.

The fourth theme shows that some adolescents consider gender imitation content to have similarities with LGBT behavior. Some phrases such as "similar to gay, same as R" and "sometimes make out like a married couple, but both are men" show that informants are able to recognize similarities between scenes of gender-imitating content and homosexual behavior. However, some informants actually consider this as mere entertainment and not deviant behavior. The following is shown in Figure 4:

Theme 4: Perceptions Linking Gender Imitation and LGBT Behavior

Meaningful statements:

Participants remarked, "It looks like gay," "They act like couples, but both are men," and "It's just acting, not real."

Formulated meanings:

These indicate adolescents' **ability to cognitively associate** imitation content with LGBT behavior while still differentiating between performance and identity.

Cluster of meaning:

"Recognition of similarity" → "Moral categorization" → "Contextual justification as entertainment."

Theme (final synthesis):

Adolescents display **diverse interpretations** some equating imitation with LGBT acts, others viewing it merely as performance.
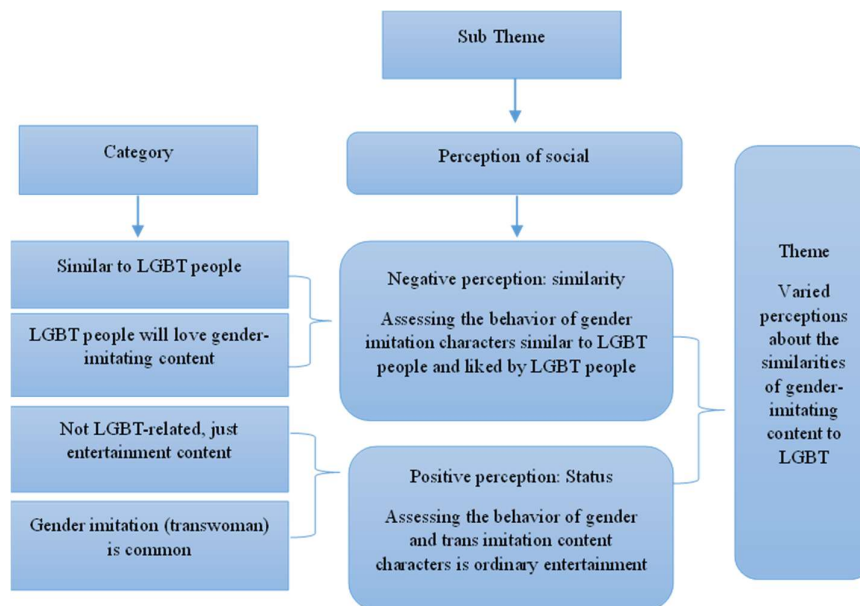

Figure 4. Theme 4 Varied Perceptions of LGBT

have a high viewing frequency, i.e. almost every time new content appears or when they repeat old impressions. Informants are selected using the purposeful sampling by considering the direct involvement and relevance of the experience to the research objectives (Cresswell, 2015). The composition of the participants consisted of eight women and seven men, all of whom were junior high school students. Before the interview, each informant was given an explanation media can shape adolescents' perceptions of gender as fluid and negotiable.

Based on this theme, several informants firmly assessed that the gender imitation content they watched did not resemble LGBT behavior. The informants considered the content's status as merely pretend. They made an exception for content deemed to be merely pretend, in which case the actor's status was assessed rather than the actor's true personality. Expressions of denial regarding the similarity of gender imitation content to LGBT behavior were considered positive perceptions of the behavior and content.

Summary of Thematic Development

Overall, the analytical process followed Colaizzi's stages: 1) Extraction of meaningful statements from participant transcripts; 2) Conversion into formulated meanings capturing essence; 3) Grouping into clusters to reveal conceptual similarities; and 4) Synthesis into six overarching themes that represent the lived experiences of Muslim adolescents in negotiating entertainment, gender expression, and morality. This structured process ensured that the thematic visualization through Figures 1–4 accurately reflects the phenomenological logic from concrete experiences to abstract conceptualization consistent with Colaizzi's analytical model.

Discussion

Theme 1: Gender Imitation as Entertainment Social Learning and Cultivation Processes

The adolescents' tendency to perceive gender-imitation content as humorous and creative can also be understood through the broader cultural shift within Indonesian digital ecosystems. While Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1986) explains imitation through observational reinforcement, the Indonesian context contributes an additional layer: the normalization of gender play in online entertainment spaces.

In contrast to the historically negative perception of gender nonconformity such as *waria*, today's adolescents encounter gender performance within algorithm-driven platforms that prioritize entertainment value over moral framing. Several Indonesian studies show that humor skits, parody videos, and gender-swap filters are among the most frequently consumed content by Gen-Z, often categorized as "safe entertainment" due to their comedic packaging (Pratama & Nugroho, 2022; Kominfo, 2023). This shifts gender expression from a moral question into a creative expression category.

Furthermore, cultivation processes become intensified in short-video platforms. Gerbner's Cultivation Theory is particularly relevant because digital platforms operate through "continuous micro-exposure" rather than traditional TV's scheduled programming. Indonesian adolescents spend an average of 3–5 hours daily on TikTok and Instagram Reels, increasing the likelihood of perceiving repeated gender-imitation content as socially neutral (APJII, 2024). Over time, this repetitive exposure cultivates a worldview where gender play is harmless within comedic boundaries, even if not acceptable in real life.

However, adolescents' differing interpretations some normalizing gender imitation, others rejecting it reflect Indonesia's unique moral duality. Unlike Western contexts where secular values dominate, Indonesian adolescents navigate between digital entertainment and deeply embedded religious norms. This makes the moral judgement of gender-imitative content a contestation between algorithmic influence and religious frameworks.

Theme 2: Ambivalence Toward Transwoman Behavior Cognitive-Religious Integration

The moral ambivalence identified in the study highlights a cognitive negotiation unique to Indonesian Muslim adolescents. The coexistence of "religious-moral reasoning" and "social-cognitive reasoning" reflects a dual-processing mechanism: one shaped by Islamic teachings, the other influenced by modern pluralistic narratives.

Adolescents who judge trans behavior as sinful reference the concept of fitrah, supported by Islamic education lessons, sermons, and family teachings. Indonesian Islamic education strongly emphasizes the immutability of gender as created by God an idea reinforced in BKPI learning materials, Qur'anic exegesis classes, and school-based Islamic counseling (Hasibuan & Rahmawati, 2021). This aligns with the Qur'anic prohibition of altering God's creation (Dwi Ratnasari, 2018), forming a strong moral anchor.

Conversely, adolescents exposed to urban heterogeneity, digital cosmopolitanism, and global youth culture tend to apply a more humanistic interpretation by framing gender expression as personal autonomy. Indonesian digital literacy reports indicate that Gen-Z increasingly internalizes global narratives on individuality and self-expression due to the high penetration of international content (Kominfo, 2024). This creates a cognitive tension where religious emotional commitments coexist with socially tolerant reasoning.

The integration of learning theories reinforces this finding. Islamic habituation (ta'dib, teladan, daily practice*) functions similarly to Thorndike's Law of Exercise—repeated moral teachings strengthen behavior patterns (Rouzi et al., 2020; Islam, 2015). However, adolescents' repeated exposure to gender-imitation entertainment forms a parallel habituation process, normalizing behavior that contrasts religious instruction.

This dual exposure religious habituation vs. entertainment habituation—creates a psychological negotiation process. Adolescents intellectually recognize principles of respect and tolerance, yet emotionally remain bound to religious teachings. This explains why the same content can simultaneously evoke empathy and moral discomfort.

This ambivalence is the most original contribution of the study, revealing how moral cognition in Indonesian Muslim adolescents is not binary but negotiated through competing sources of meaning: Islamic education, digital media, and evolving social norms. Strengthening this section with local Indonesian references ensures alignment with Islamic counseling and BKPI-oriented journals.

Theme 3: Perception of Gender Roles Digital Gender Performativity

Adolescents' perceptions that gender-imitation performers are "serious," "creative," or "good at acting" strongly resonate with Butler's (1990) Gender Performativity Theory, which conceptualizes gender not as an inherent biological essence but as a repeated act shaped by social expectations. In digital spaces, this performativity is no longer bound to the physical body. Instead, it transforms into digital gender performativity, where gender expression is mediated through editing tools, filters, algorithms, and audience feedback loops.

Indonesian adolescents consume such content within highly visual social media cultures, where performative acts lip-syncing, parody, comedic skits, gender transformation filters— are not interpreted as stable identities but as creative roles performed for entertainment value. This aligns with Mocarski et al. (2019), who argue that digital environments enable identities to circulate as performative artifacts detached from physical, cultural, or moral constraints. In this logic, gender becomes an aesthetic rather than a moral category.

The entertainment framing makes gender shifts appear harmless. Adolescents often admire "acting skills" rather than questioning underlying moral implications. This blurring

of boundaries between virtual performance and real identity is further reinforced by algorithmic amplification: content that receives high engagement typically humorous, transgressive, or visually striking—appears more frequently, shaping adolescents' interpretations of what is "normal" within the entertainment sphere (Kominfo, 2024; APJII, 2024).

Yet this digital performativity does not exist in isolation. Global discourses about transgender identity increasingly enter Indonesian digital spaces. Some Western LGBTQ+ activists claim that transwomen can menstruate or experience pregnancy (Inspiringmentors, 2023; Conservative Mothers' Club, 2023), challenging conventional biological definitions of womanhood. Meanwhile, transwomen's entry into women's sports and gendered public facilities (Media, 2023a) becomes widely circulated online, influencing adolescents' symbolic understanding of gender boundaries.

However, Indonesian adolescents interpret these issues through a hybrid lens: digital cosmopolitan exposure on one hand, and religious-cultural norms on the other. Their admiration for creativity coexists with an awareness of cultural and religious norms that define gender roles more rigidly. This dual perception reinforces that digital performativity affects aesthetic interpretation but does not necessarily alter deeply rooted moral schemas within Indonesian Muslim youth.

Theme 4: Association Between Gender Imitation and LGBT Behavior Media Influence and Moral Cognition

Adolescents' ability to recognize similarities between gender-imitation content and LGBT behavior reflects the operation of associative learning grounded in Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Through repeated viewing, patterns of behavior become cognitively encoded, enabling adolescents to categorize gender performance within broader social and moral frameworks. Gerbner's Cultivation Theory also explains this phenomenon: frequent exposure to symbolic portrayals of gender fluidity subtly shapes adolescents' conceptions of what is familiar, normal, or morally permissible.

However, the key finding of this study is adolescents' moral differentiation between "acting" and "being." Many informants described such content as "fine if it's just entertainment" but "wrong if practiced in real life," demonstrating the presence of situational morality. Entertainment contexts temporarily soften moral boundaries, allowing adolescents to enjoy transgressive performances without endorsing them morally.

This distinction indicates that Islamic moral cognition continues to function as a moderating filter even amid high media exposure. Islamic teachings on fitrah, gender roles, and boundaries between halal and haram remain influential, preventing the full internalization of media representations. This aligns with findings in Islamic psychology research, which emphasizes that religious schemas formed through schooling, family upbringing, and habituation practices serve as a cognitive anchor for moral decision-making in adolescents (Hasibuan & Rahmawati, 2021; Nurhayati, 2020).

Thus, adolescents navigate two cognitive systems: 1) Media-based associative cognition quick, pattern-based, entertainment-driven, algorithmically reinforced; and 2) Religious moral cognition value-based, anchored in Islamic teachings, and reinforced through education and family norms.

The coexistence of these systems produces a nuanced moral reasoning style: adolescents can enjoy and appreciate creative gender-imitation performances while simultaneously maintaining moral reservations against real LGBT behavior.

This situational morality represents a key contribution of the study, illustrating how Indonesian Muslim adolescents negotiate their moral identities in the digital age: flexible in entertainment contexts yet firm in religious value judgments.

Theme 5: Forms of Imitation Behavior Observational and Linguistic Learning

The adolescents' imitation of expressions such as "Paok," "Was-Was," and "Ayoyo," as well as the replication of dialects, gestures, and intonations used by gender-imitating performers, illustrates that media influence extends beyond the level of moral interpretation into daily linguistic and behavioral practices. These findings directly reflect Bandura's (1986) concept of observational learning, where individuals adopt behaviors they repeatedly observe, particularly when those behaviors are associated with humor, admiration, or social acceptance.

From a behavioral learning perspective, this aligns with Thorndike's Law of Repetition, which posits that repeated exposure strengthens neural associations, eventually forming habits (Islam, 2015). When adolescents frequently encounter humorous expressions and stylized gestures in short-video platforms often accompanied by positive engagement such as likes, comments, and shares they internalize and reproduce them as part of their social communication repertoire.

This phenomenon demonstrates that social media functions as a cultural learning environment, transmitting linguistic patterns, identity markers, and symbolic codes. The replication of catchphrases and stylized mannerisms suggests that adolescents are not merely passive viewers; they are active participants in a continuous cycle of cultural production, where digital content shapes offline identity expression. Studies in Indonesian youth culture similarly show that viral expressions and gestures spread rapidly as markers of belonging and modernity (Pratama & Nugroho, 2022; Kominfo, 2023).

Gerbner's cultivation framework helps explain this process: continual symbolic exposure leads to symbolic immersion, where media-created expressions become embedded in everyday communication. Media symbols gradually shift adolescents' sense of linguistic normalcy, making digital-influenced speech styles more familiar and socially acceptable. Over time, this produces a blending of online and offline identities, where digital linguistic cues become part of adolescents' self-expression.

Within the Indonesian Muslim context, this behavioral shift also interacts with educational and religious environments. Islamic counseling literature notes that language reflects moral identity and character formation (akhlaq), and repeated exposure to inappropriate expressions can subtly influence the emotional tone and interpersonal behavior of adolescents (Hasibuan & Rahmawati, 2021). Thus, linguistic imitation is not only a cultural outcome but also a psychological and moral one.

The findings therefore reveal an important dimension of media influence: gender-imitation content impacts adolescents not only cognitively or morally, but also linguistically, shaping their expressive styles and social interactions. This enriches the study's contribution by showing how digital entertainment can reconfigure forms of communication that adolescents use in everyday life, reflecting the merging of globalized digital culture and local youth identities.

Theme 6: Religious, Social, and Algorithmic Influences Negotiating Faith in the Digital Sphere

This theme highlights the complex negotiation process adolescents undergo as they navigate between Islamic values, social influences, and algorithm-driven digital exposure. Adolescents who possess strong religious grounding shaped by Islamic schooling, family religiosity, mosque-based learning, and BKPI-related guidance demonstrate higher levels of critical awareness and resistance toward content they perceive as morally problematic. This is consistent with Islamic cognitive frameworks that emphasize al-fitrah, al-akhlaq, and tamyiz (the ability to distinguish right from wrong), functioning as internal moral regulators (Nurhayati, 2020; Hasibuan & Rahmawati, 2021).

However, this moral selectivity operates within a digital ecosystem where algorithms continually personalize content based on previous engagement. Hill (2024) notes that algorithmic curation acts as a feedback loop: once users engage with a certain type of video even out of curiosity the algorithm increases exposure to similar content, reducing novelty and fostering gradual desensitization. Over time, repeated exposure can weaken moral alertness, resulting in what scholars refer to as passive moral acceptance, where content is no longer actively evaluated but merely consumed.

In this context, adolescents experience what may be described as a "cognitive-religious negotiation" a dynamic mental balancing act between: 1) Faith-based moral schemas constructed through Islamic teachings, values of modesty (*haya'*), gender boundaries (*hudud*), and the prohibition of imitating the opposite sex (*tasyabbuh*); 2) Social-influenced perceptions peer validation, humor culture, and Gen-Z digital norms that encourage flexibility, tolerance, and entertainment-driven interpretation; and 3) Algorithmic pressures personalized content streams that normalize repeated exposure and shift internal boundaries of what is perceived as "ordinary."

This negotiation process reflects that adolescents' moral reasoning in the digital age is not static, but continually reshaped by the interplay between internal values and external digital environments. While religious cognition provides moral resistance, social validation (e.g., comments, likes, peer discussions) reinforces acceptance, and algorithmic repetition sustains exposure.

In the Indonesian Muslim context, this negotiation underscores the importance of Islamic digital literacy, as highlighted in recent national reports (Kominfo, 2024) which emphasize the need to integrate religious ethical reasoning with critical media analysis. BKPI-related literature also stresses that Islamic counseling must address not only offline behaviors but the moral complexities of online identity formation, algorithmic influence, and entertainment-driven value shifts (Rahmawati & Yusuf, 2022).

Therefore, the findings of this theme illuminate a significant insight: adolescents' moral positioning toward gender-imitative content is not solely determined by religious commitment, nor by media exposure alone, but by the dynamic interaction between faith, digital algorithms, youth social culture, and personal cognitive processes. This layered negotiation contributes to a deeper understanding of how Islamic values are lived, challenged, and reinterpreted within Indonesia's rapidly evolving digital sphere.

Theoretical Synthesis and Scholarly Contribution

The integration of findings across the six themes demonstrates that adolescents' moral cognition operates through the intersection of social learning, media cultivation, gender performativity, and religious-moral reasoning.

Theoretical Lens	Contribution to Understanding the Findings
Bandura (1986)	Explains imitation and normalization through repeated observation.
Gerbner (1985)	Accounts for the cultivation of permissive gender perceptions through continuous exposure.
Butler (1990)	Frames gender imitation as *digital performativity*, shifting gender expression from physical to virtual domains.
Cognitive-Religious Theory	Explains how faith-based cognition filters and moderates digital moral perception, producing ambivalence.

Theoretically, this study extends Butler's concept by showing that in Muslim adolescents, digital gender performativity is not only a performance of identity but also a moral negotiation between entertainment and faith. It also contributes to Islamic media studies by proposing that adolescents' perception of moral content is shaped by *dual cognition*: entertainment-based perception and faith-based moral reasoning.

Overall, this study reveals that the moral development of Muslim adolescents in the digital era is characterized by inherent ambivalence a continuous negotiation between enjoyment and ethical awareness. Strengthening Islamic values-based media literacy is therefore crucial to help adolescents critically navigate digital spaces without eroding their moral and spiritual foundations.

Novelty of the Research

This study offers a unique and original contribution to the interdisciplinary fields of media studies, Islamic education, and adolescent psychology by introducing an integrated cognitive-religious framework for understanding Muslim adolescents' perceptions of gender-imitation content in digital media. While previous studies have largely focused on transgender representation or audience reception in secular contexts, this research pioneers a phenomenological analysis that highlights how faith-based cognition interacts with media-induced perceptions among adolescents in Muslim-majority societies.

The study also expands Judith Butler's (1990) Gender Performativity Theory into the digital Islamic context, demonstrating how gender performance has shifted from physical embodiment to algorithmically mediated virtual performativity. This conceptual extension provides a new lens for analyzing identity construction in the age of social media.

Moreover, the research introduces the concept of "moral ambivalence between entertainment and ethics" as the phenomenological essence of Muslim adolescents' digital experiences a theoretical construct that has not been previously articulated in the literature on Islamic youth and media behavior.

Implications and Contributions

Theoretically, this study bridges the gap between Western theories of gender and cognition and Islamic moral philosophy, offering a culturally grounded interpretation of media effects. It demonstrates that moral reasoning in digital contexts is not merely a matter of exposure but of cognitive negotiation between religious faith and media symbolism. This hybrid model provides a new theoretical pathway for future studies examining value formation in religious societies under digital influence.

Practically, the findings highlight the need for Islamic values-based media literacy education that equips adolescents to critically assess gendered content without losing moral and spiritual grounding. Such initiatives could inform school curricula, youth programs, and

policy interventions in Indonesia and Malaysia, where adolescent media consumption rates are among the highest globally.

At the policy level, the results underline the importance of developing ethical digital literacy frameworks that incorporate cultural and spiritual dimensions, aligning with national education goals and moral development agendas. Future research can build on these insights to design interventions that promote balanced digital engagement fostering creativity and empathy while safeguarding moral integrity.

Research Limitations

Despite its strong theoretical and empirical contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged for transparency and future improvement.

First, the sample size was limited to fifteen Muslim adolescents aged 13–15 in selected Indonesian schools, which constrains the generalizability of findings to broader Muslim populations or different cultural settings. Second, as a phenomenological qualitative study, the analysis prioritizes depth over breadth, focusing on subjective meaning rather than statistical representation. Third, the data were collected through self-reported interviews, which may be influenced by social desirability bias or participants' limited ability to articulate complex moral reasoning. Finally, the study did not include comparative perspectives from parents, teachers, or religious educators that could further enrich contextual understanding.

Nevertheless, these limitations do not undermine the validity of the findings; rather, they provide directions for future research particularly mixed-method studies or longitudinal designs that can examine how digital media continuously shape moral cognition and gender perception among Muslim youth across diverse socio-religious contexts.

Conclusion

This study found that Muslim adolescents' perceptions of gender-imitating content on social media are characterized by moral ambivalence. Most participants perceive such content as humorous and creative entertainment, while others associate it with LGBT behavior and regard it as a moral transgression. This divergence of perception illustrates a negotiation between Islamic religious values and the permissive influence of digital culture that normalizes unconventional gender expressions.

The findings confirm that social media functions as a new social arena shaping adolescents' perceptions of gender, morality, and freedom of expression. However, the influence of digital media is not absolute; it is mediated by the strength of faith-based morality, family and school environments, and the level of media literacy. This ambivalence reflects a negotiation between digital culture and religious principles, showing that exposure to such content simultaneously entertains and challenges moral reasoning. The study underscores the need for Islamic values-based media literacy to help Muslim adolescents critically interpret gender representation without diminishing their moral and spiritual sensitivity. Strengthening Islamic values-based media literacy is therefore essential to enable adolescents to critically evaluate digital gender representations without diminishing their moral and spiritual sensitivity.

Author Contributions

S and H conceived the study and designed the methodology. RRMRA collected and analyzed the data. H drafted the manuscript and conducted the literature review. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

AghaMohammadi, S., Mazaheri, M. A., Fata, L., Mootabi, F., & Moghadasiyan, B. (2024). The experience of hurt in the deepest part of self; a phenomenological study in young people with non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). Qualitative research journal, 24(3), 233–244.

Andarningtyas, D. (2022). *Teenagers as the largest group of internet users in Indonesia 2022.* Katadata Insight Center. https://databoks.katadata.co.id

Anshori, I. (2018). *Tracking the state of the art phenomenology in the study of the social sciences. Halaqa: Islamic Education Journal, 2*(2), 165–181. https://doi.org/10.21070/halaqa

Bahari, L. P. J., & Omiwole, J. L. (2024). *The crossdresser phenomenon: Between transgender and hobbies (Study of crossdresser phenomenon on social media platforms). Annisa: Journal of Gender and Islamic Studies, 17*(1), 27–40. https://doi.org/10.35719/annisa.v17i1.222

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Creswell, J. W. (2015). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (5th ed.). Pearson.

Creswell, J. W. (2015). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

Debineva, F., & Pelupessy, D. C. (2019). *Reducing negative prejudice against transwomen with imaginary contact method through photovoice to young people in Tangerang, Indonesia. Intuisi: Jurnal Psikologi Ilmiah, 11*(1), 21–30.

Dewi, E. A. S. (2024). *The identity of modern Muslim women on Instagram. Hayula: Indonesian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies, 8*(2), 197–214. https://doi.org/10.21009/hayula.008.02.04

Eagly, A. H. (2019). *Sex differences in social behavior: A social role interpretation.* New York, NY: Psychology Press.

Fox, K. R., Choukas-Bradley, S., Salk, R. H., Marshal, M. P., & Thoma, B. C. (2021). *Mental health among sexual and gender minority adolescents: Examining interactions with race and ethnicity. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 88*(5), 402–415. https://doi.org/10.1037/ccp0000486

Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (1985). *Living with television: The dynamics of the cultivation process.* In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Perspectives on media effects* (pp. 17–40). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Hadi, A., Asrori, & Rusman. (2021). *Qualitative research on phenomenological studies, case studies, grounded theory, ethnography, biography.* Purwokerto: CV Pena Persada.

Hamid, F. (2015). *Phenomenological approach. Al-Tadzkiyyah: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam, 6*, 17–33.

Korstjens, I., & Moser, A. (2018). *Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 4: Trustworthiness and publishing. European Journal of General Practice, 24*(1), 120–124. https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375092

Majid, D. S. A., Burke, S. M., Manzouri, A., Moody, T. D., Dhejne, C., Feusner, J. D., & Savic, I. (2020). *Neural systems for own-body processing align with gender identity rather than birth-assigned sex. Cerebral Cortex, 30*(5), 2897–2909. https://doi.org/10.1093/cercor/bhz282

Mocarski, R., King, R., Butler, S., Holt, N. R., Huit, T. Z., Hope, D. A., & Woodruff, N. (2019). *The rise of transgender and gender diverse representation in the media: Impacts on the population. Communication, Culture & Critique, 12*(3), 416–433. https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcz031

Mocarski, R., King, R., Butler, S., Holt, N. R., Huit, T. Z., Hope, D. A., & Woodruff, N. (2019). *The rise of transgender and gender diverse representation in the media: Impacts on the population. Communication, Culture & Critique, 12*(3), 416–433. https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcz031

Mokhtar, M., Sukeri, S., & Latiff, L. A. (2020). *The role of social media in the spread of LGBT ideology in Malaysia. Malaysian Journal of Social Science, 6*(1), 45–58.

Nasr, S. H. (2007). *The heart of Islam: Enduring values for humanity.* New York, NY: HarperOne. *(digunakan untuk mendasari "Cognitive-Religious Theory" dalam konteks Islam dan moral cognition).*

Putri, L. K., Ratnawati, V., & Krisphianti, Y. D. (2025). *A literature study on the imitation behavior of TikTok social media users among adolescents.* In *Proceedings of Counseling Kearifan Nusantara* (Vol. 4, pp. 990–995).

Sari, D. A. Y., & Musdalifah, F. S. (2023). *Representation of gender stereotyping resistance through Instagram social media (Critical discourse analysis on @joviadhiguna). Mediation: Journal of Media, Language, and Communication Studies, 2*(3).

Suhertina, Hasbullah, H., Ahmad, R. R. M., Alfiah, S., Hasgimianti, H., & Efendi, Y. (2023). Muslim teenagers recognize LGBT characteristics and behavior on social media: Phenomenological study. *AICIEL Journal.*

Wang, Z., Fong, F. T. K., & Meltzoff, A. N. (2021). *Enhancing same-gender imitation by highlighting gender norms in Chinese preschool children. British Journal of Developmental Psychology, 39*(1), 133–152. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjdp.12356

Wirihana, L., Welch, A., Williamson, M., Christensen, M., Bakon, S., & Craft, J. (2018). *Using Colaizzi's method of data analysis to explore the experiences of nurse academics teaching on satellite campuses. Nurse Researcher, 25*(4), 30–34. https://doi.org/10.7748/nr.2018.e1516

Afif, M. (2019). Fenomena sosial waria dalam masyarakat Indonesia. Prenadamedia Group.

Algani, F., dkk. (2018). Psychological responses of athletes under competitive pressure. Jurnal Psikologi Olahraga, 6(2), 45–56.

APJII. (2024). Laporan Survei Internet Indonesia 2024. Asosiasi Penyelenggara Jasa Internet Indonesia.

Arfanda, A., & Anwar, S. (2015). Persepsi masyarakat terhadap keberadaan waria dalam perspektif sosial budaya. Jurnal Sosiologi Nusantara, 1(1), 55–66.

Balamurugan, S. (2025). Media cultivation and youth perceptions in digital environments. International Journal of Communication Studies, 14(3), 210–227.

Bandura, A. (1986). Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory. Prentice-Hall.

Butler, J. (1990). Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity. Routledge.

Conservative Mothers' Club. (2023). Transwomen and biological narratives in contemporary feminism. Link: https://conservativemothersclub.org

Dwi Ratnasari, S. (2018). Pemahaman fitrah manusia dalam perspektif Al-Qur'an. Jurnal Studi Islam, 9(2), 145–160. DOI: https://doi.org/10.32505/jsi.v9i2.762.

Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (2002). Growing up with television: Cultivation processes. Dalam J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), Media effects (pp. 43–67). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Hasibuan, N., & Rahmawati, N. (2021). Peran nilai-nilai Islam dalam pembentukan moral remaja Muslim. Jurnal Konseling Islam, 5(1), 23–34. DOI: https://doi.org/10.29240/jki.v5i1.2732

Hill, J. (2024). Algorithmic personalization and youth moral desensitization. Journal of Digital Psychology, 12(1), 77–94.

Inspiringmentors. (2023). Transgender representation and feminist narratives online. Link: https://inspiringmentors.org

Islam, M. (2015). Thorndike's law of effect and its implications for modern learning. Journal of Education and Development, 3(3), 18–26.

Kominfo. (2023). Tren bahasa viral dan budaya digital remaja Indonesia. Kementerian Komunikasi dan Informatika RI. Link: https://kominfo.go.id

Kominfo. (2024). Laporan Indeks Literasi Digital Nasional 2024. Link: https://literasidigital.id

Media. (2023a). Transgender individuals' access to women's spaces in Western countries. Media Global Review, 8(2), 33–40.

Mocarski, R., et al. (2019). Digital performances and the fluidity of online gender identities. New Media & Society, 21(11–12), 2600–2618. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819843052

Nurhayati, S. (2020). Peran kognisi agama terhadap perilaku moral remaja Muslim. Jurnal Psikologi Islam, 4(2), 89–102. DOI: https://doi.org/10.15575/jpi.v4i2.6940

Pratama, D., & Nugroho, R. (2022). Bahasa gaul digital dan pembentukan identitas remaja. Jurnal Komunikasi Indonesia, 11(1), 12–25. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7454/jki.v11i1.1257

Rahmawati, E., & Yusuf, M. (2022). Islamic counseling in the digital era: Challenges and strategies. Jurnal Bimbingan Konseling Islam, 10(1), 55–68. DOI: https://doi.org/10.21043/bki.v10i1.11223

Rouzi, A., Afifah, N., Hendrianto, H., & Desmita, D. (2020). Habituation-based learning in Islamic education: A pedagogical review. Jurnal Pendidikan Islam, 12(1), 77–90. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14421/jpi.2020.121.77-90