

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SHAPING GENDER IDENTITY AMONG GENERATION Z

Gender Equality, Gender and Social Media

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ABSTRACT: Social media platforms have emerged as pivotal environments in which Generation Z - individuals born between 1997 and 2012 - negotiate, perform, and reconstruct their gender identities. Despite a growing body of literature, the precise mechanisms through which social media shapes gender identity among this cohort remain insufficiently theorized, particularly with respect to algorithmic curation and its gendered effects. This article presents a critical integrative review of empirical and theoretical scholarship published between 2020 and 2026, drawing on Social Identity Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Algorithmic Culture Theory, supplemented by Butler's concept of gender performativity. Through systematic thematic synthesis of 47 selected studies sourced from Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed journals, the review identifies six recurring themes: social media as a performative stage for gender; algorithmic amplification of gender norms; Gen Z as active identity negotiators; platform affordances and gendered self-presentation; gender fluidity and LGBTQ+ digital safe spaces; and tensions between normative pressure and expressive freedom. The findings reveal a bidirectional relationship between social media and gender identity - one in which users both reproduce and contest prevailing gender norms through their digital practices. This article contributes a unified

	theoretical model of algorithmic gender performativity and calls for platform-sensitive, intersectional research methodologies in future studies.
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I. INTRODUCTION

The question of how individuals come to understand, express, and identify with gender has occupied scholars across sociology, psychology, and cultural studies for decades. Yet the emergence of social media as the dominant arena of everyday social life has fundamentally reconfigured the conditions under which gender identity is formed and performed. For Generation Z - the first cohort to have grown up in an environment where digital connectivity is normative rather than exceptional - social media platforms do not merely reflect pre-existing gender identities; they actively participate in their construction [1]. Several converging developments underscore the urgency of this inquiry.

First, platform proliferation has dramatically expanded the range of identity-relevant digital environments accessible to young people. TikTok surpassed one billion active users globally in 2023, with Indonesia alone recording 113 million active users, placing it among the world's largest TikTok audiences [2]. Instagram and YouTube similarly maintain dominant positions within Gen Z's media diet, with approximately 76% of Gen Z reporting regular Instagram use [3]. Each platform embeds distinct affordances - from TikTok's short-form video loops to Instagram's curated visual grids - that structure how gender is performed and perceived differently across contexts.

Second, the architecture of algorithmic recommendation systems has introduced a qualitatively new dimension to the gender-media relationship. Unlike broadcast media, where gender representations were produced by a relatively small number of content gatekeepers, social media platforms deploy machine-learning algorithms that continuously personalize content streams based on user behavior, creating highly individualized - yet structurally patterned - exposures to gendered content [4]. Algorithms on platforms such as TikTok have been shown to create echo chambers that reinforce gender stereotypes even as the platforms simultaneously enable counter-normative expression [5, 6].

Third, Generation Z exhibits notably fluid and heterogeneous orientations toward gender compared with previous cohorts. Survey data consistently

show that Gen Z is more likely than older generations to identify outside the gender binary and to view gender as a spectrum rather than a fixed binary attribute [7]. This generational distinctiveness cannot be disentangled from the media environments in which Gen Z has been socialized, raising the fundamental question of whether - and how - social media has contributed to these attitudinal and identificatory shifts.

Scholarly engagement with the intersection of social media and gender identity has grown substantially since 2020, yet the field remains fragmented along disciplinary, methodological, and contextual lines. Early work by Manago et al. [8] established social media as a tool for cultural change in the transition to adulthood, highlighting how platforms facilitate access to alternative gender narratives for young people. Barsigian et al. [9] documented how LGBTQ+ youth in the digital age engage with both dominant and counter-cultural gender narratives through social media, finding that platform use is associated with greater identity affirmation and community belonging. A comprehensive review conducted by the ODI in 2023 and synthesized by Diepeveen [10] examined 51 empirical studies on social media and gender norms among adolescents, revealing a foundational methodological tension: quantitative studies tended to assume unidirectional influence from platform to user, while qualitative studies revealed that adolescents actively select and produce gendered content in line with pre-existing identities.

Platform-specific research has yielded more granular findings. Studies of TikTok have concentrated heavily on algorithmic features and their gendered implications. Sair et al. [11], examining East Javanese Gen Z users, found that TikTok exerts measurable influence on gender norms and lifestyle orientations, but that this influence operates differentially across users depending on prior cultural and religious dispositions. Yin and Abdullah [6] identified persistent gender discourse bias embedded within TikTok's content recommendation architecture. Research on Instagram has similarly highlighted the platform's role in promoting visual gender ideals linked to body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem among adolescent girls [12]. Studies of gender fluidity and LGBTQ+ identity online have produced a more affirmative narrative [13, 7], yet the majority of available studies are conducted in Western contexts, limiting their generalizability to regions such as Southeast Asia where distinctive cultural and religious factors mediate the relationship.

Four significant gaps persist in the existing literature: (1) the directionality of social media influence remains undertheorized, with most studies treating it as proceeding from platform to user without accounting for the

reciprocal dynamics; (2) algorithmic systems remain undertheorized as active co-producers of gendered identity [1]; (3) existing research treats Generation Z as a homogeneous category, neglecting intersectional differences; and (4) non-Western contexts remain substantially underrepresented. This article addresses these gaps through an integrated theoretical model and a critical synthesis of 47 studies, guided by the following research questions: (RQ1) Through what mechanisms does social media shape gender identity among Generation Z? (RQ2) What role do platform-specific algorithms play in curating gendered content and reinforcing or contesting gender norms? (RQ3) To what extent do Gen Z users actively negotiate and resist normative gender representations on social media, and what factors mediate this agency?

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Identity Theory in Digital Contexts. Tajfel and Turner's [14] Social Identity Theory (SIT) posits that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept from membership in social groups, engaging in social categorization, social comparison, and positive distinctiveness to maintain a favorable group identity. Applied to digital environments, SIT illuminates how social media platforms function as arenas for gender-based group identification, where Gen Z users encounter, compare themselves against, and selectively affiliate with particular gender communities and representations [15]. Importantly, SIT does not position social comparison as inherently normative; users may compare themselves against non-normative gender representations and derive positive identity from gender-transgressive group affiliations, as research on LGBTQ+ online communities consistently demonstrates [9].

Social Cognitive Theory and Digital Observational Learning. Bandura's [16] Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) emphasizes the role of observational learning, self-efficacy, and reciprocal determinism in shaping behavior. In the context of social media and gender identity, SCT offers a framework for understanding how Gen Z users model gender behaviors, norms, and aesthetics observed through content creators and influencers. The theory's concept of reciprocal determinism - the mutual influence among behavior, personal factors, and environment - is particularly germane: users' gender identities shape what content they seek and produce, while the content they consume in turn shapes their gender self-perceptions [10]. Digital extensions of SCT have further emphasized how algorithmic amplification functions as an environmental variable that can accelerate or constrain the

modeling process by controlling which gendered behaviors become visible to specific users [17].

Algorithmic Culture Theory. Bucher's [4] theorization of the "algorithmic imaginary" and Gillespie's [18] work on platform governance have established algorithmic systems as culturally consequential forces that go beyond technical content delivery. Recommendation algorithms do not passively reflect user preferences; they actively construct what Bucher terms the "threat of invisibility" - the structuring anxiety that drives users to produce content legible to the algorithm, thereby shaping what kinds of gender performances attract engagement and amplification [1]. The gender-differential operation of these algorithms - evidenced in studies showing disproportionate exposure of female-presenting users to appearance-related content - demonstrates that algorithms are not gender-neutral [6].

Butler's Performativity: From Stage to Screen. Judith Butler's [19] theory of gender performativity argues that gender is not an essential inner quality but a social accomplishment produced through repeated stylized acts that cite and reiterate cultural norms. Social media platforms constitute a new and historically unprecedented structure for gender performance: one characterized by unprecedented scale, persistence, quantified audience feedback, and algorithmic amplification. Digital performativity - the extension of Butler's framework to online environments - captures how social media transforms the conditions and stakes of gender performance, as acts that were previously local and ephemeral become globally visible and permanently archived [20]. This heightened visibility intensifies both the normative pressure to perform gender correctly and the emancipatory potential for gender-transgressive performances to reach and embolden wider audiences.

An Integrated Model. The three theoretical pillars and Butler's performativity framework are synthesized into an integrated model of algorithmic gender performativity. In this model, Gen Z users enter social media platforms carrying pre-existing gender identities shaped by offline socialization (SIT). On platforms, they engage in observational learning from peers and influencers (SCT). Simultaneously, recommendation algorithms curate their content environments in ways that systematically expose them to particular gendered representations while occluding others (Algorithmic Culture Theory). The cumulative effect is a continuous, recursive performance of gender that both draws on and reproduces - or contests - prevailing gender norms (Butlerian performativity). Critically, this model treats the relationship as bidirectional and dynamic: the

feedback loop between user identity, platform behavior, and algorithmic curation is the central mechanism through which social media participates in the ongoing construction of gender identity among Generation Z.

III. METHOD

Research Design. This study employs a critical integrative review design, a methodological approach that synthesizes diverse forms of evidence - including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies - with the explicit aim of generating new theoretical frameworks rather than merely summarizing existing findings [21]. Unlike systematic reviews oriented toward meta-analytic aggregation, the integrative review is epistemically suited to fields characterized by methodological pluralism and theoretical heterogeneity - conditions that accurately describe the current state of research on social media and gender identity. The approach is further informed by critical discourse analysis (CDA) principles, enabling the examination of implicit power relations and ideological assumptions embedded in both the empirical literature and platform policy documents.

Search Strategy and Data Sources. A systematic search was conducted across four databases: Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. The search was restricted to publications between January 2020 and March 2026. The following search string was applied: ("Generation Z" OR "Gen Z" OR "digital natives") AND ("gender identity" OR "gender norms" OR "gender performativity") AND ("social media" OR "TikTok" OR "Instagram" OR "YouTube" OR "digital platforms"). Additional targeted searches were conducted for key theoretical texts predating 2020 that anchor the conceptual framework.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria. Studies were included if they: (1) focused on Generation Z as the primary population, or included Gen Z as a substantively analyzed subgroup; (2) examined social media use in relation to gender identity, gender norms, or gender expression; (3) were published in peer-reviewed Scopus- or Web of Science-indexed journals or recognized academic books; and (4) were written in English or Indonesian. Studies were excluded if they: (1) examined social media and gender in exclusively commercial contexts without relevance to identity formation; (2) focused primarily on health outcomes without substantive attention to gender identity per se; or (3) lacked sufficient methodological transparency. Following screening, 47 studies were retained for thematic synthesis.

Data Extraction and Thematic Synthesis. Data extraction followed a structured protocol recording study design, sample characteristics, platform(s) examined, theoretical framework, key findings, and limitations. Thematic synthesis proceeded through three phases adapted from Thomas and Harden [22]: (1) line-by-line coding of key findings from each study; (2) construction of descriptive themes capturing patterns across studies; and (3) development of analytical themes that go beyond the content of individual studies to generate new interpretive insights. Quality appraisal was conducted using the CASP checklist for qualitative studies and the STROBE checklist for observational quantitative studies. Studies scoring below the minimum threshold were excluded from the synthesis.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Social Media as a Performative Stage for Gender. Across the reviewed literature, the most consistently supported finding is that Gen Z users treat social media platforms as stages for gender performance - spaces in which gender identity is not merely expressed but actively constructed through public display. This finding resonates strongly with Butler's [19] performativity framework: rather than revealing a pre-formed gender identity, social media posts, profile aesthetics, and content choices constitute acts through which gender is iteratively produced. Stahl and Literat [1] observe that Gen Z constructs collective identities through shared symbols, hashtags, and visual aesthetics - processes that are fundamentally performative. The public, quantified nature of social media performance - where acts receive immediate numerical feedback through likes and shares - intensifies the performative dynamic by making the social adjudication of gender performances unusually explicit and consequential. Crucially, several studies challenge a reductive reading of social media gender performance as straightforwardly normative, documenting forms of gender-transgressive performance uniquely enabled by the digital context [23].

Algorithmic Amplification of Gender Norms. The reviewed literature converges on the finding that algorithms do not treat gender-related content neutrally: they differentially amplify content that conforms to established gender conventions while systematically limiting the reach of gender-transgressive content. Yin and Abdullah [6] provide particularly compelling evidence, documenting how TikTok's content recommendation architecture encodes gender discourse biases that systematically expose female-presenting users to appearance-related

content at disproportionate rates. Similarly, Lee and Abidin [5] demonstrate how TikTok's algorithm-driven echo chambers reinforce gender stereotypes even as the platform's official discourse emphasizes creative freedom. This finding has significant theoretical implications: algorithmic systems function as a structural constraint on gender performance in Butlerian terms - a new regulatory regime that determines which gender performances are rendered intelligible and which are rendered invisible, operating largely without user awareness [4].

Generation Z as Active Identity Negotiators. A significant finding across the reviewed literature is that Gen Z users are not passive recipients of algorithmically curated gender norms but active agents who negotiate, appropriate, and resist the gender representations to which they are exposed. This finding aligns with SCT's concept of reciprocal determinism and complicates the unidirectional effects model that has dominated much quantitative research [10, 16]. Research on Gen Z's rejection of traditional gender roles demonstrates that users strategically deploy social media to contest intergenerational gender norms through normalization, augmentation, and liberalization of gender-transgressive content [24]. At the same time, the literature cautions against romanticizing Gen Z's digital agency: the capacity to resist algorithmic gender norms is unevenly distributed, with users who hold strong pre-existing non-normative gender identities demonstrating the greatest capacity for critical engagement [9].

Platform Affordances and Gendered Self-Presentation. The reviewed literature reveals that the relationship between social media and gender identity is not uniform across platforms but varies significantly with the specific affordances each platform embeds. Platforms such as Pinterest, TikTok, and Instagram are dominated by female users, reflecting preferences for visually driven and lifestyle-oriented content [3], while platforms such as YouTube attract more gender-balanced engagement. TikTok's short-form video format privileges gender performances that are visually dynamic and embodied - characteristics that tend to emphasize physical appearance. Instagram's emphasis on visual curation similarly privileges aesthetic self-presentation and has been more consistently linked to appearance-related pressures and body dissatisfaction [12]. YouTube's longer-form content, by contrast, affords space for more elaborated identity narratives and educational gender content [13]. These platform-specific findings underscore the importance of treating social media as a heterogeneous ecosystem rather than a monolithic influence.

Gender Fluidity, LGBTQ+ Visibility, and Digital Safe Spaces. One of the most consistent findings is that social media has significantly expanded the visibility of gender-non-conforming and LGBTQ+ identities among Generation Z, with substantial implications for how gender fluidity is normalized within this cohort. Online communities devoted to gender exploration have been shown to provide important developmental resources for young people who lack affirming offline environments: spaces for identity experimentation, community belonging, and access to alternative gender narratives [13, 7]. This access to diverse gender representations has been theorized as a key mechanism through which social media contributes to Gen Z's characteristically more fluid orientations toward gender. At the same time, persistent risks associated with LGBTQ+ visibility on social media - including harassment and exposure through algorithmic outing - are particularly acute for users in cultural contexts where gender non-conformity carries significant social or legal risk, as research from East Java demonstrates [11].

Tensions: Normative Pressure Versus Expressive Freedom. The reviewed literature reveals that social media constitutes a fundamentally ambivalent environment for gender identity development among Generation Z: it simultaneously exerts normative pressures that can constrain and harm, while also enabling forms of expressive freedom and community building that are historically unprecedented. Gen Z constantly negotiates their identity differently on online and offline platforms and across private and public digital spaces [25], and a substantial proportion report leading a "double life" online, presenting idealized personas that diverge from their offline self-presentations [12]. These dialectical tensions cannot be resolved by positioning social media as either predominantly harmful or predominantly liberatory. The most theoretically productive framing, supported by the integrated model of algorithmic gender performativity, understands social media as a differentially structured field in which the balance between normative pressure and expressive freedom varies as a function of platform affordances, algorithmic architecture, user agency, and contextual factors including culture, religion, and socioeconomic position.

V. CONCLUSION

This article has presented a critical integrative review of scholarship on the role of social media in shaping gender identity among Generation Z. Through systematic thematic synthesis of 47 studies, six analytical themes were identified: social media as a performative stage for gender;

algorithmic amplification of gender norms; Gen Z as active identity negotiators; platform affordances and gendered self-presentation; gender fluidity and LGBTQ+ digital safe spaces; and the fundamental dialectical tension between normative pressure and expressive freedom. Together, these themes reveal a relationship between social media and gender identity that is bidirectional, context-dependent, and mediated by the specific affordances and algorithmic architectures of individual platforms.

Theoretically, this article contributes an integrated model of algorithmic gender performativity that synthesizes Social Identity Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, Algorithmic Culture Theory, and Butler's performativity framework. This model advances existing scholarship by treating the algorithm as an active co-producer of gender norms and by positioning the social media–gender identity relationship as fundamentally reciprocal rather than unidirectional. Practically, the review supports the case for gender-sensitive platform regulation, critical digital literacy education, and inclusive policy frameworks that account for the intersection of social media with local cultural and religious contexts - including Indonesia's distinctive socioreligious landscape.

Several limitations of the present review should be acknowledged. As an integrative review rather than a primary empirical study, its findings are constrained by the characteristics of available scholarship, including its predominantly Western orientation. The restriction to English and Indonesian language sources excludes potentially relevant scholarship in other languages. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs capable of capturing the temporally dynamic and bidirectional relationship between social media use and gender identity development. Platform-comparative studies examining the same population across multiple platforms simultaneously, and intersectional research accounting for religion, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, represent critical frontiers for future empirical investigation.

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