

# **Desacralizing Islamic Symbol and Gender Inclusivity: Viewers' Attitude Toward Cross-dressing Accounts on Social Media**

**A Thesis**

**Submitted to Master's Study Program of Islamic Studies at the  
Faculty of Islamic Studies in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Arts (M.A.)**



**Universitas  
Islam Internasional  
Indonesia**

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## ABSTRACT

Name : Husni Mulyawati  
Programme : Islamic Studies  
Title : Desacralizing Islamic Symbol and Gender Inclusivity: Viewers' Attitude toward Cross-dressing Accounts on Social Media

The entanglement of religious behavior and social media leads to a new form of religious expression which is manifested within 'posting Islam' -as Slama contended-. Computer-literate content creators, primarily Muslim youths, produce creative youthful Islamic content to engage and help viewers to gain a better understanding of the messages conveyed. However, some content creators use uncommon ways to promote their content. One of them is by parodying the opposite sex and resembling them in dressing as a so-called cross-dresser. In Indonesia, the existence of cross-dressers is still perceived as taboo and stigmatized as immoral. However, it seems different when someone views what happens on social media. Whereas people try to refuse the existence of the LGBT community and everything associated with them – including cross-dressing- in real life, enormous people unconsciously give validation on the existence of cross-dressers in the digital realm proven with millions of followers. Cross-dressing contents wrapped in Islamic symbols in social media are seemingly successful in shifting the perception of society toward the contradictive phenomenon. This research aims to examine the motives of viewers to watch the contents of cross-dressing parody and elaborate on the impacts engendered for Muslims' perception by engaging his contents, especially related to gender and religious symbols. To explain this case, I choose two content creators doing this parody namely Mak Beti and Fadlan Holao. The research was conducted by employing qualitative methods which the process of gaining primary data uses observation of social media, sharing questionnaires with the viewers, and interviewing some respondents. The result affirms that most of the viewers conceive cross-dressing as a deed violating religious norms and they are reluctant to accept it in real life, but they unconsciously showcase an accepting attitude toward cross-dressing in social media because of entertainment and it has become a common thing. This case displays the ambivalence and self-conflicting coming from contestation between self-idealism and what Schielke called moral registers and also coming from social media. It also asserts the power of social media to shift paradigms. It is subtle but potentially powerful. Furthermore, this research also amplifies the assumption that *hijab* as a religious symbol no longer becomes a Muslim's identity but shifts to become a lifestyle and commodified good. In other words, the religious symbol has been desacralized.

**Keywords:** *ambivalence, cross-dressing, gender blurred, religious symbol, social media*

## الملخص

الاسم : حسني مولياواتي  
القسم : الدراسات الإسلامية  
الموضوع : إلغاء الرمز الإسلامي المقدس وشمولية الجندر: موقف المشاهدين تجاه حسابات اللباس المتقاطع على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي

تشابك السلوك الديني ووسائل التواصل الاجتماعي يؤدي إلى شكل جديد من التعبير الديني يتجلى فيما يعرف بـ "posting Islam" كما أشار .- Slama يقوم صانعو المحتوى الملمون بالكمبيوتر، وهم في الأساس شباب مسلمون، بإنتاج محتوى إسلامي شبابي إبداعي لجذب المشاهدين ومساعدتهم على فهم الرسائل المنقولة بشكل أفضل. ومع ذلك، يستخدم بعض صناع المحتوى طرقًا غير تقليدية للترويج لمحتوهم. أحد هذه الطرق هو تقليد الجنس الآخر ومحاكاة ملابسهم كما يطلق عليه "اللباس المتقاطع". في إندونيسيا، يُعتبر وجود اللباس المتقاطع ما زال محظورًا ويعامل بالاستنكار كأمر غير أخلاقي. ومع ذلك، يبدو أن الأمور مختلفة عندما يشاهد شخص ما يحدث على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي. بينما يحاول الناس رفض وجود مجتمع LGBT وكل ما يتعلق به - بما في ذلك اللباس المتقاطع - في الحياة الحقيقية، يُظهر الكثيرون بشكل غير مدرك موافقة على وجود اللباس المتقاطع في العالم الرقمي مما يُثبت ذلك بالملايين من المتابعين. يبدو أن محتوى اللباس المتقاطع الملفوف برموز إسلامية على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي ناجح في تحويل تصور المجتمع نحو الظاهرة المتناقضة. يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة دوافع المشاهدين لمشاهدة محتوى السخرية من اللباس المتقاطع وشرح التأثيرات التي يولدها على تصور المسلمين من خلال مشاركة محتوياته، وخصوصًا فيما يتعلق بالجندر والرموز الدينية. لشرح هذه الحالة، اخترت صانعي محتوى يقومان بهذه السخرية وهما Mak Beti وFadlan Holao. تم إجراء البحث باستخدام أساليب نوعية حيث تستخدم عملية الحصول على البيانات الأولية مراقبة وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي وتوزيع استبيانات على المشاهدين ومقابلة بعض الأشخاص المستجيبين. تؤكد النتيجة أن معظم المشاهدين يتصورون اللباس المتقاطع كفعل ينتهك الأعراف الدينية وأنهم مترددون في قبوله في الحياة الحقيقية، ولكنهم بشكل غير مدرك يظهرون موقفًا مقبولًا تجاه اللباس المتقاطع على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي بسبب الإثارة وأنها أصبحت شيئًا شائعًا. تعرض هذه الحالة الاستفراد والتناقض الذاتي الناتج عن التنازع بين الذات المثلى وما يسمى به Schielke بالقيم الأخلاقية والناتج عن التواصل الاجتماعي. وتؤكد أيضًا قوة وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في تحويل الأطر وعلى الرغم من كونها خفية إلا أنها قوية بشكل محتمل. وعلاوة على ذلك، يعزز هذا البحث أيضًا افتراض أن الحجاب كرمز ديني لم يعد يمثل هوية المسلم بل تحول ليصبح نمط حياة وسلعة مرتجلة. وبعبارة أخرى، تم إلغاء اللباس الديني المقدس.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التناقض، اللباس المتقاطع، الجندر المبهم، الرمز الديني، وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي.

## TRANSLITERATION GUIDE

| Arabic | Roman | Arabic | Roman | Arabic | Roman |
|--------|-------|--------|-------|--------|-------|
| ا      | a     | س      | s     | ل      | l     |
| ب      | b     | ش      | sh    | م      | m     |
| ت      | t     | ص      | ṣ     | ن      | n     |
| ث      | th    | ض      | ḍ     | و      | w     |
| ج      | j     | ط      | ṭ     | ه      | h     |
| ح      | ḥ     | ظ      | ẓ     | ي      | y     |
| خ      | kh    | ع      | '     |        |       |
| د      | d     | غ      | gh    |        |       |
| ذ      | dh    | ف      | f     |        |       |
| ر      | r     | ق      | q     |        |       |
| ز      | z     | ك      | k     |        |       |

### Short Vocal

| Arab Alphabet | Roman Alphabet | Arabic Example | Transliteration |
|---------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| َ             | a              | جَلَسَ         | <i>jalasa</i>   |
| ِ             | i              | رَكِبَ         | <i>rakiba</i>   |
| ُ             | u              | كُتِبَ         | <i>kutiba</i>   |

### Long Vocal

| Arab Alphabet | Roman Alphabet | Arabic Example | Transliteration   |
|---------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------|
| ا/ى           | ā              | جَرَى/سَافِر   | <i>jarā/sāfar</i> |
| ي             | ī              | سَلِيم         | <i>salīm</i>      |
| و             | ū              | سَجُود         | <i>sujūd</i>      |

### Diphthong

| Arab Alphabet | Roman Alphabet | Arabic Example | Transliteration |
|---------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|
|               |                |                |                 |

|   |    |      |              |
|---|----|------|--------------|
| و | aw | مولا | <i>mawlā</i> |
| ي | ay | غيب  | <i>ghayb</i> |

Notes:

1. Consonant with shaddah (◌◌) for instance, أمة is written as *ummah* (double letters).
2. Arabic letter *hamzah* (ء) at the beginning of a word is transliterated into “a” not into “`a”. For instance, أحمد is written as *aḥmad* not *`aḥmad*.
3. Arabic script of *alif-lam qamariyah* (ال) is written as “al” at the beginning of words and *alif-lam shamsiyah* (ا) is written in accordance with the first letter at the beginning of words. For instance:  
المائدة : al-māidah  
الرحمان : ar-rahmān
4. Arabic letter *ta' marbutah* (ة) is written as “h” when it is located at the end of the words, such as البقرة is written as *al-baqarah*. When located in the middle of a sentence is written as “t”, such as أمة وسطا is written as *ummatan wasaṭan*.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of Study

The entanglement of religious behavior and social media leads to a new form of religious expression and public piety. Through social media, Islamic religiosity is more visible and demonstrated in the public sphere for broader spectrums.<sup>1</sup> To date, the religious expressions and practices virtually are getting popular in almost entire lines of Muslim societies. For instance, mushrooming of the postings related to worship and religious messages in social media as contributions to Islamic proselytization and innovation for apps related to worship. It indicates that the use of social media seemingly is unavoidable even for sacred purposes. By its visibility in the public sphere, religion is not only practiced and positioned as a value system but displayed publicly to affirm its existence or otherwise abuse it. This phenomenon leads to the utilization of religious symbols and contents in lifestyle recently. In its turn, religion is considered a commodity good that is perceived as lucrative and beneficial.

Computer-literate content creators primarily Muslim youths take a big role in the entanglement of religion and social media. They create content comprising Islamic nuances through various platforms by presenting typical youthful sense content amusedly, creatively, and visually appealing. They produce entertaining content wrapped in funny stories and religious symbols which mostly follow the trends on demand. In addition, to attract the millennials who are the largest users of social media generally, they make creative youthful vibrant packaging of content aimed to make the viewers more engaged and understanding of the messages conveyed. Lou and Yuan contend that the contents of social media can reinforce the shared perception between

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<sup>1</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, "The Making of Public Islam: Piety, Agency, and Commodification on the Landscape of the Indonesian Public Sphere," *Contemporary Islam* 3, no. 3 (October 1, 2009): p 229, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-009-0096-9>.

the creators and the viewers, thus the efficacy of message acceptance through social media is perceived as significant with only simple ways by commenting, reposting, liking, and subscribing.<sup>2</sup>

However, some content creators use uncommon ways to promote their content. One of them is by parodying the opposite sex and resembling them in dressing as so-called cross-dressers. The term cross-dresser refers to a person who wears the attires of the opposite sex regardless of his/her sexual orientation.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that cross-dresser is not necessarily transgender and homosexual. Most of them are real men and do cross-dressing because of merely entertaining and gaining followers although some contents comprise Islamic values and symbols. They make creative packages of digital content by combining religious themes, humor, and bizarre appearance. They wear female attires such as *hijabs*, long dresses, and skirts to make their character stronger and more convincing. In this case, *hijab* as a religious symbol has been commodified to gain profit. In this context, the commodification of religion through social media that is attached to Islamic symbols tends to legitimize popular culture among Muslims, especially young Muslims. The position of the *hijab* is no longer just a Muslimah attribute that marks the identity and fulfills the demands of Islamic religious law, but it shifts to a profitable business commodity.

The phenomenon of cross-dressing is not something new. It is a common practice carried out by artists and performers. Women were prohibited to appear and perform on the stage in Ancient Greek due to their lower status, thus they chose to do cross-dressing. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, cross-dressing was getting proliferation

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<sup>2</sup> Chen Lou and Shupeí Yuan, "Influencer Marketing: How Message Value and Credibility Affect Consumer Trust of Branded Content on Social Media," *Journal of Interactive Advertising* 19, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): p 59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501>.

<sup>3</sup> Jane E. Hegland and Nancy J. Nelson, "Cross-Dressers in Cyber-Space: Exploring the Internet as a Tool for Expressing Gendered Identity," *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 7, no. 2 (July 1, 2002), p 140.

in Europe.<sup>4</sup> In fact, it has still become an attractive commodity in traditional arts in Asia. For instance, Kabuki performing art in the age of Edo in Japan showed male actors who appeared with female attires and took female roles. In Indonesia, this practice is not strange, especially in performing art. Many male actors or comedians wear female attires and accessories on the stage until now. Recently, Japanese popular culture began mushrooming in Indonesia and cosplay or costume play has been becoming a trend among youths.

The existence of cross-dressers in Indonesia is still perceived as taboo and stigmatized as immoral. It is reasonable given cross-dresser is often deemed as transgender and closely related to LGBT.<sup>5</sup> Besides, Indonesian Muslim society is arguably religious in many ways. They still hold the norms and customs firmly and tend to refuse sensitive issues that violate the norms. However, it seems different when someone views what happens on social media. The users tend to be more permissive and open toward the cross-dressing issue. Recently, many accounts undertake cross-dressing parodies using Islamic symbols, especially *hijab*. Intriguingly, these kinds of accounts have enormous viewers and get many positive comments. Cross-dressing contents wrapped in Islamic symbols and humor in social media are seemingly successful in shifting the perception of society toward the contradictory phenomenon. As a result, the shifting perception is not only limited to their acceptance of the phenomenon but also impacting to their view toward religious symbols. Religious symbols are not considered sacred anymore and become part of daily fashion. Furthermore, the *hijab* as the identity of Muslim women eventually fades away and the gender line especially in dressing is getting blurred.

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<sup>4</sup> Geofakta Razali, "Moral Pluralism in Drag Queen Art (Critical Analysis of Axel Honneth's Social Recognition Theory through Actor Crossdresser)," *International Journal of Management Studies and Social Science Research* 3, no. 1 (2021): 262.

<sup>5</sup> Evelyn Blackwood, "Regulation of Sexuality in Indonesian Discourse: Normative Gender, Criminal Law and Shifting Strategies of Control," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 9, no. 3 (May 2007): p 295, 302. See also Badgett, M.V. Lee, Amira Hasenbush, and Winston Ekaprasetya Luhur. "The Current Situation of LGBT People in Indonesia." *LGBT Exclusion in Indonesia and Its Economic Effects*. The Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law, 2017.

Furthermore, the emergence of cross-dressing accounts in social media seemingly engenders a kind of unique pattern. It can be seen potentially as a form of resistance against radicalism and conservatism particularly brought by Islamist groups. The increasing notion of anti-LGBT hysteria in 2016-2017 which marginalized communities were subjected to targeted policy changes has restricted their visibility.<sup>6</sup> Social media as an inclusive platform for these marginalized groups has become a tool for them to assert their existence by sharing cross-dressing content combined with comedy and humor. The portrayal of femininity demonstrated by male content creators exposed the contradictions within gender ideologies in a nonthreatening way through comedy allowing audiences to avoid being provoked by their notion.

Some scholars have discussed the phenomenon of cross-dressers. Bullough has elaborated thoroughly on the practice of cross-dressing in various places from one era to another era. He mentions that every culture has different attitudes in responding to this practice. Moreover, varying attitudes are also associated with individuals who engage in cross-dressing. Cross-dressing men are generally viewed with more humiliation compared to women.<sup>7</sup> In Indonesia, the practice of cross-dressing especially with hijab is condemned in reality. Hidayat argues that using religious symbols especially *hijab* in the cross-dressing content is misappropriation.<sup>8</sup> Whereas people view cross-dressing as a taboo, contradictive, and colliding with prevalent norms in the real world, the big numbers of viewers conversely enjoy their content and take them for granted in the virtual realm. Thus, I want to scrutinize more what followers actually want from cross-dressing contents. Is it merely for the sake of entertainment or is it an unconscious inclusiveness toward gender fluidity, or is it a such trial to normalize the dogma- in this context *hijab*-?

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<sup>6</sup> Sharyn Graham Davies, "Indonesia's Anti-LGBT Panic," *East Asia Forum Quarterly*, 2016, p 11.

<sup>7</sup> See Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Hamdan Hidayat, "Crosshijaber antara Trend Dan Gejolak Sosial (Analisis Perilaku Crosshijaber Perspektif Al-Qur'an dan Psikologi)," *Marwah: Jurnal Perempuan, Agama dan Jender* 19, no. 2 (December 1, 2020): p 192,

To explain this case, I choose one of the parody accounts signifying cross-dressing behavior on YouTube namely Arif Muhammad or well-known as Mak Beti. Mak Beti is one of pioneer of crossdresser content in Indonesia. His content initially was uploaded on YouTube and become booming. He represents many female figures with various characteristics and plays 13 characters in one video simultaneously. To date, he plays 33 distinctive characters in total by himself, some of them are Mak Beti who wears a white *songkok* –head scarf- with thick Batak accent, Beti as a female student in junior high school who always wears *hijab*, Wak Sellow as *pecel* –salad with peanut sauce- seller which is identic with slow speaking way, Wak Keling as black skin, curly hair, grumpy stall owner, and others. He reaches big numerous followers on his YouTube channel up to 15 million subscribers. No wonder, his YouTube channel occupies the top three with the highest number of subscribers in the comedy YouTube channel category in Indonesia.

Arif Muhammad started his career as a content creator on YouTube in 2017. The theme used by Arif is always about everyday life telling a Binjai family and their interactions with the surrounding people. He links his contents to the message of virtues. By packaging the content with comedy, Islamic values and executed in a unique way, he successes to captivate many subscribers.

As a comparison, I also choose the account @HolaoFadlan on Instagram as my case study. Fadlan started his career as a content creator on the TikTok platform. He made several videos demonstrating various professions, such as cashier, gas station employee, pharmacist, and others. His video went viral because of his good acting in playing these roles. He reaches 600.000s followers on Instagram. He identifies himself as a non-binary person.<sup>9</sup> This is the reason for him to look according to what he likes. On some occasions, he performed a parody of Mamah Dedeh, the famous female preacher in Indonesia. He succeeded in imitating Mamah Dedeh with funny

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<sup>9</sup> *Gue Bukan Cowo.. Bukan Cewe!!*. Fadlan Holao- Deddy Corbuzier Podcast, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYg9BxlIBG8>.

expressions and convincing acting. Recently, he also made a parody of woman who sang *qasida* songs. Taking account into their way to promote the virtue values –in this case with *tasyabbuh* or resembling the opposite sex-, it is interesting that in fact his contents are enjoyed by enormous Muslim people.

Through the study of relevant literature and observation of digital contents, I attempt to analyze the viewers' attitudes generally toward the cross-dresser who spread contents comprising Islamic nuance through social media and its impacts related to Islamic normativity and gender inclusivity.

## **1.2 Research Objectives**

This research attempts to examine the motives of viewers to watch the contents of cross-dressing parody which disseminates Islamic contents given cross-dressing still remains taboo in society. Subsequently, I want to elaborate on the impacts engendered for viewers and Muslims generally by engaging his contents. In addition, by discussing cross-dressing content creators Arif Muhammad and Holao Fadlan on Instagram, I want to reveal Indonesian Muslims' attitudes toward whether they are getting inclusive or not about cross-dressers especially if the contents are related to Islam and whether they feel ambivalence when they see cross-dresser directly before their eyes and through social media or not.

## **1.3 Research Questions**

The proliferation of cross-dressing contents in social media interconnected with Islamic symbols and how society responds to them signifies that cross-dressing begins to be accepted in the virtual realm. Whereas people try to refuse the existence of LGBT community and everything related to them –including cross-dressing- in real life, enormous people seemingly give validation to the existence of this community in the digital realm. This form of validation definitely will lead to shifting society's paradigm in viewing sensitive contents particularly cross-dressing issues.

When talking about cross-dressing contents wrapped by Islamic symbols and humor in social media particularly related to viewers' attitudes toward the contents, some basic questions will appear such as how does society respond to their contents combining Islam, humor, and cross-dressing appearance? To what extent do cross-dressing contents make Indonesian Muslims getting inclusive toward the phenomenon of cross-dresser especially if the contents are related to Islam? What are the effects engendered for followers or viewers and Muslims generally by engaging his contents? To what extent do cross-dresser's contents lead to blurring the lines between genders among Indonesian Muslims? Gender blurring is still being debated discourse across the world, Indonesia is no exception. Moreover performing gender blurring and fluidity gets a strong refusal from major Islamic institutions such as Indonesian Ulema Council. However, the enormous number of followers and viewers of cross-dressing parody content on YouTube shows that they even enjoy the content of gender blurring.

In a nutshell, this research primarily asks three questions: What are the primary motives of cross-dressing accounts' viewers to enjoy their content? To what extent do the motives and social media lead to the shifting of Muslims' perception toward the cross-dressing issue, gender inclusivity, and religious symbols? How do viewers respond to the ambivalence of cross-dressing issues in the digital realm and the actual realm?

#### **1.4 Literature Review**

Cross-dressing is not a new phenomenon within society. It is a behavior that has existed for a long time and has been practiced in various contexts, particularly in terms of stage performance. One can observe this behavior in Shakespeare's plays, where some of his stages revolve around the theme of cross-dressing and challenge gender roles. The majority of plays featuring female protagonists disguising themselves as men tend to portray cross-dressing sympathetically. Typically, they depict it as a tactic employed by wives and girlfriends to accompany or reunite with the men they care for. In

alternative scenarios, the female characters adopt male attire as a means to shield themselves from male sexual desires.

In academic milieu, the discourse of cross-dressing in general has attracted many scholars then discussed the issue broadly. Some scholars such as Bullough explain cross-dressing cultures spanning from the ancient world to the modern world.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, Hegland focuses on analyzing the practice of cross-dressing on the internet. He describes how marginalized cross-dressers use the internet to express themselves publicly.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Nwolu et.al depict the women's perception of male cross-dresser comedians on Instagram. They conclude that male cross-dressers do not project women in good ways, instead capitalizing on the weakness of women.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, the discussion about cross-dressers who use *hijab* - the Islamic symbol signifying femininity- for gaining profit, drawing attention, or even conveying virtue values is still less elaborating. Hidayat analyzes the behavior of cross-dresser in online media from the Qur'anic perspective and psychology.<sup>13</sup> He argues that their behavior is a deviation from norms and values in religion and society. They abuse the *hijab* to carry out actions that are troubling the community, such as entering special places for women and even doing criminal acts, such as theft. In line with Hidayat, Kamaludin and Suheri argue that male cross-dressers who wear *hijab* can have a major effect on the level of sacredness in some Islamic values of Indonesian Muslim communities and lead to shifting the function of *hijab* which theologically means sacred to something profane.<sup>14</sup> Although it is deemed as a violation and corroding the sacredness of religious symbols, the contents are still enjoyed massively. Even, some writings

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<sup>10</sup> See Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*.

<sup>11</sup> Jane E Hegland and Nancy J Nelson, "Cross-Dressers in Cyber-Space: Exploring the Internet as a Tool for Expressing Gendered Identity," *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, 2002. p13.

<sup>12</sup> Obiajulu Joel Nwolu, Chika Onyinye Nnabuiife, and Chukwunonso Chukwuagozie Nnabuiife, "Women Perception of Cross-Dressing Among Male Comedians on Instagram," *UNIZIK Journal of Gender Research* 1 (2022): 125–48, p 145.

<sup>13</sup> Hidayat, p 190

<sup>14</sup> Ihsan Kamaludin and Suheri Suheri, "Fenomena Cross Hijab Dan Pengaruhnya Terhadap Pergeseran Sakralitas Keagamaan Di Masyarakat" 15, no. 2 (2021), p 339.

indicate the normalization of cross-dressing contents wrapped by Islamic nuances implicitly by arguing that the contents of Arif Muhammad are full of *da'wa* messages.<sup>15</sup> Besides, Hariyanto tries to determine the motives of the vlog audience of "beti family". He argues that apart from getting entertainment, the audience can interact with each other and get new conversations about the uniqueness contained in this vlog.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, other motives probably affect the viewers in choosing this content over mere entertainment.

Furthermore, looking at how people respond to the existence of cross-dressing especially in social media which unconsciously accept this phenomenon through repetitive behavior -by enjoying the contents in a reiterative manner and eventually becoming habitus-, but at the same time they are also reluctant for being permissive toward the phenomenon when they are in conscious thought mode or finding the phenomenon under their eyes, it showcases the ambivalence and inconsistency between what they think and what they practice. Schielke argues that there is a certain tendency to reflect Islam as a perfectionist ethical project of self-discipline but people are not always following morality.<sup>17</sup> Their aspirations and their everyday lives are characterized by ambiguity, complexity, and frustration. In the end, religion is not the only comprehensive guidance that maintains Muslims' life. There are other 'moral registers' affecting Muslims in their conduct which lead to ambivalence and inconsistency of piety. Rather than trying to compromise or contest, ambivalence is an inevitability.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Pramita Dewi Suryatna, "Pesan Dakwah Melalui Media Instagram: Analisis Isi Videogram Pada Akun Instagram @arifmuhammaddd\_Cerita Mak Beti Periode Desember 2018- Mei 2019." (Bandung, UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, 2019, p 64.

<sup>16</sup> Didik Hariyanto and Aninda Pinasti Putri Mariyanto, "Motif Menonton Vlog 'Keluarga Beti' Channel Youtube Arif Muhammad," *Kanal: Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi* 8, no. 2 (March 1, 2020): 67–72, p 70 <https://doi.org/10.21070/kanal.v8i2.264>.

<sup>17</sup> Samuli Schielke, "Second Thoughts About the Anthropology of Islam, or How to Make Sense of Grand Schemes in Everyday Life," in *Research in the Islamic Context*, by M.H. Ilias, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2022), p 44, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003244912-4>.

<sup>18</sup> Samuli Schielke, "Being Good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, Fragmentation, and the Moral Self in the Lives of Young Egyptians," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009): 534.

Ewing also describes the concept of ambivalence and ambiguity which people often find self-conflicting comes from contestation between self-idealism and society or religious values, although they can show identity and principle clearly and coherently at a certain time.<sup>19</sup> When cross-dressing in social media is acceptable, it will lead to shifting the perception toward cross-dressing unconsciously, but remain weird in real life. Although ambivalence inevitably occurs, taking the ambivalence for granted can lead to a major change in terms of their perception. Somehow, the ambivalence still needs to be contested.

Most studies discuss the behavior of cross-dressers from psychological aspects and their negative impacts on society. In addition, they do not link the phenomenon with the Islamic aspect. Thus, I intend to elaborate more on this case. Furthermore, the previous studies about Arif Muhammad's contents did not discuss about his virtue messages delivered through cross-dressing conduct. The topic of disseminating Islamic content in social media by cross-dressers and the response of public society is still lack of discussion. Thus, I want to fill the gap by elucidating more on the intermingling between cross-dressing, Islamic symbols, and humor and portraying the response of other Muslims toward this phenomenon.

## **1.5 Theoretical Framework**

The object of research comprises the phenomenon of cross-dresser which makes the content imply Islamic values and symbols in social media and the viewers' attitudes toward this phenomenon. To elaborate on the viewers' attitudes toward cross-dressing contents wrapped by Islamic nuances, I frame it with the uses and gratification theory by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch which contend that the viewers have full agency to choose the contents enjoyed and explain how people use the media for their own need and get satisfied when their needs are fulfilled. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch through

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<sup>19</sup> Katherine P. Ewing, "The Illusion of Wholeness: Culture, Self and the Experience of Inconsistency," *Ethos* 18, no. 3 (January 1, 1990): 251–78, p 252.

their theory elaborate on the goal of using social media by users.<sup>20</sup> They maintain that people actively choose particular sources of information and entertainment to serve individual psychological needs, such as learning or regulating moods. Sometimes people who seek out humor and entertainment in social media find social issues there and the content somehow works as an influencer of social change by drawing attention, opening a door to complex social issues, breaking social barriers, and encouraging sharing with others. Through this framework, I try to elucidate the motives encouraging the viewers to enjoy cross-dressing contents.

Subsequently, to explain the impact of motives and social media in shifting Muslims' perception toward the cross-dressing issue, I use the theory of habitus by Bourdieu which links socialization and the actions of individuals. The habitus is constructed from all the dispositions, patterns of action, or perceptions that the individual acquires through his social experience<sup>21</sup>. Through socialization and repetition, each individual slowly incorporates a set of ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Bourdieu thinks that these dispositions or habits are at the origin of the future practices of individuals. The internalization process is very subtle, unconscious, and appears as a natural thing. Habitus is inherent and repeated by humans in their daily lives. It has been ingrained and undertaken continuously and repetitively. Thus, this habit can be constructed unconsciously. Through this theory, I frame how watching these kinds of contents can bring to shift the perception of Muslims in viewing gender and religious normativity. I assume that their habitus to watch these contents repetitively indirectly and unconsciously leads to the perception that they begin to be permissive toward cross-dressing, gender blurring, and desacralizing of religious symbols such as *hijab*.

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<sup>20</sup> Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch, "Uses and Gratifications Research," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1974): 509–23, p 511.

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), p 83.

Through this framework, I examine whether Muslim society is getting inclusive with gender blurring, normalizing religious symbols, and getting used to the presence of this phenomenon.

## **1.6 Research Significance**

This research is significant for some reasons. First, this research amplifies the assumption that *hijab* as religious symbol no longer becomes Muslim identity but shifts to become a lifestyle and commodified good. In other words, the religious symbol has been desacralized. Second, some scholars have discussed ambivalence and its construction from the individual itself because of the distinction between what they hold as the principle and what they practice. In this research, I want to show that the ambivalence is not only coming from the individual but also the social media. It will contribute to the cultural studies field which social media also affect in constructing ambivalence. Third, the topic of cross-dressing contents which reflects Islamic nuances is still lack of discussion. Thus, I choose representative accounts that have many followers and contain Islamic nuances to a certain extent.

## **1.7 Methods**

This research utilizes qualitative research. The process of gaining primary data uses observation of social media and sharing questionnaires with the viewers given Arif Muhammad has a big number of followers about up to 15 million subscribers on YouTube. Similarly, Fadlan also has many followers on Instagram about 600.000 followers and 2.4 million on TikTok. To select the informants, I use purposive sampling. It reflects a group of non-probability sampling techniques in which units are selected based on the characteristics of a population and the objective of the study. I choose the samples that are appropriate for my study. For instance, they are the viewers of two accounts with the age range of 16-30. Thus, I share the questionnaires with 164 viewers coming from some areas. Approximately 76% of the respondents to this questionnaire are high school and college students, while the remaining respondents

come from various professions such as employees, entrepreneurs, housewives, and freelancers. Furthermore, 66% of the respondents are female, while the rest are male (see Table 1.1.). The questionnaire uses the likert scale to show the perception and attitude of respondents toward certain issues. I inserted 16 questions in my questionnaire which encompass some indicators, such as engagement with content, attitude and perception toward content, and personal point of view regarding gender, religious symbol, and cross-dressing.

| <b>Variable</b>   | <b>Classification</b> | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|-------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Gender</b>     | Male                  | 56               | 34%               |
|                   | Female                | 108              | 66%               |
| <b>Age</b>        | Under 16              | 6                | 4%                |
|                   | 16 to 30              | 151              | 92%               |
|                   | Over 30               | 7                | 4%                |
| <b>Occupation</b> | Student               | 124              | 76%               |
|                   | Private employee      | 18               | 11%               |
|                   | Public employee       | 4                | 2%                |
|                   | Entrepreneur          | 11               | 7%                |
|                   | Housewife             | 6                | 4%                |
|                   | Freelancer            | 1                | 1%                |
| <b>Education</b>  | Under diploma         | 114              | 70%               |

| Variable        | Classification  | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------|------------|
|                 | Bachelor degree | 42        | 26%        |
|                 | Master degree   | 8         | 5%         |
| <b>Domicile</b> | Urban area      | 60        | 37%        |
|                 | Remote area     | 104       | 63%        |

**Table 1. 1** *Demographic statistics of questionnaire respondents*

Besides, I conduct a semi-in-depth interview with 15 followers and viewers of these accounts to get deeper data. The respondents are selected from the questionnaire participants by considering variety of backgrounds. The research instrument contains profound and intense questions such as do you feel different when you watch cross-dressing in the actual and digital realm? What is your perception of *hijab* and gender? Do you think that the position of *hijab* as something sacral is faded away?

The data are analyzed through critical discourse analysis based on the Fairclough model which combines text and social context. This analysis is undertaken through three steps: description, interpretation, and explanation.<sup>22</sup> In the description step, the data are exposed descriptively. The analysis focuses on the text and how it is presented. Afterward, the data are interpreted and linked to the context of discourse production by linking the text and its context. The last step is the explanation which explains the discourse practice linked to sociocultural practice. This research utilizes a sociological approach to identify the response of society to cross-dressing parody. Given that the research is largely exploratory and is committed to a deductive approach, the data analysis requires an open and reflexive engagement with existing literature.

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<sup>22</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London: Routledge, 2003),p 191-194.

## **1.8 Outline**

This research contains several chapters. The first chapter is the introduction. This chapter reflects an introductory explanation of the study such as background, research questions, literature review, theoretical framework, and methodology. In the second chapter, I discuss the visibility of cross-dressing accounts on social media and the entanglement of cross-dressing, social media, and religious symbol -in this case, hijab-. Subsequently, I also elucidate cross-dressing from Islamic historical trajectories and humor in Islamic tradition. The third chapter focuses on two accounts representing cross-dressing content, digital media, and viewers' attitudes toward cross-dresser content. It captures the case study, dig into the motives of viewers to watch cross-dresser content, and scrutinize their viewers themselves which are youths and millennials. The fourth chapter elaborates on the impacts of engaging in cross-dressing contents on Muslims' perception especially in terms of gender and religious symbols. It reveals to what extent the habitus of watching the contents bring to gender inclusivity and desacralization of religious normativity in Muslims' perception nowadays. Besides, I also allude to the topic of religious commodification in this chapter. I also investigate the ambivalence that followers or viewers have to deal with when they see cross-dressing before their eyes and when they watch through social media and how they respond to this ambivalence. Lastly, the final chapter contains concluding remarks and trajectories.

## CHAPTER II

### THE VISIBILITY AND REPRESENTATION OF CROSS-DRESSING ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS INTERSECTION WITH ISLAMIC TRAJECTORY

#### 2.1 Visibility of Cross-dressing Accounts on Social Media

Social media has become an important avenue not only for sharing information instantly but also a platform for generating and promoting diverse content to a wide range of audiences. Many content creators compete to create their creative content to attract a big number of followers and expand their influence. It makes sense given Indonesia is one of the countries with the largest population of internet users in the world. The Association of Indonesian Internet Service Providers noted that Internet penetration in Indonesia has reached 78.19% in 2023 or transcending to 215.626.156 people out of a total population of 266.91 million people.<sup>23</sup> Thus, promoting content on social media is the simplest way to rise in popularity and ascend vertical social mobility.

Creativity is inevitably the key for content creators to appeal the followers. They attempt to serve unique and distinctive contents standing out from the crowd from presenting humor, satire, prank to parody. One of the content that succeeds in drawing attention in social media is cross-dressing content. Cross-dressing generally refers to the practice of wearing attires and adopting the appearance associated with the opposite gender. It is crucial to understand that cross-dressing does not necessarily indicate a person's gender identity or sexual orientation. The term cross-dressing refers to an act or a behavior without referring to a particular cause of the act. Cross-dressing

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<sup>23</sup> “Asosiasi Penyelenggara Jasa Internet Indonesia,” accessed May 26, 2023, <https://apjii.or.id/berita/d/survei-apjii-pengguna-internet-di-indonesia-tembus-215-juta-orang>.

encompasses a spectrum of expression, spanning from minimal attire changes to extravagant burlesque performances, from a comic impersonation to serious endeavors to convincingly portray the opposite gender.<sup>24</sup> Some people engage in cross-dressing for various motives, such as a form of entertainment, artistic expression, personal enjoyment, or as part of their gender exploration.<sup>25</sup> For some, it may be a temporary form of self-expression, while for others, it may constitute a fundamental part of their personal identity. The practice has been steadily growing worldwide with various reasons for embracing it.

Cross-dressing has often been linked primarily to transvestism<sup>26</sup>, fetishism, lesbianism, and homosexuality especially in certain eras and cultural contexts, although it also can be embraced by heterosexual individuals. It is understandable given dress has served as a prevalent symbol of sexual distinctions reinforcing societal notions of masculinity and femininity throughout history. Hence, cross-dressing symbolically challenges these gender boundaries by venturing into territory that confronts traditional gender norms and leads to assumptions or speculation about their sexual orientation.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Rani S Pillai, "An Essay on Cross-Dressing with Special Reference to Kottamkulangara Chamayavilkku," *Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences* 10, No. 1 (2019), p 3.

<sup>26</sup> It is noteworthy that scholars hold different perspectives on the terminology and definitions surrounding transvestism and cross-dressing. While some consider transvestism and cross-dressing to be synonymous, others argue for distinctions between the two concepts. The term "transvestite" was first coined by Hirschfeld (1910) to describe people who wore clothing of members of different sex which is aligning with the understanding of cross-dressing (see more Capuzza & Spencer, 2015, *Transgender Communication Studies: Histories, Trends, and Trajectories*, p. 174). Additionally, in contemporary discourse, "cross-dresser" has gained preference as a replacement for "transvestite," which is seen as derogatory and outdated (see more David A. Gerstner, 2006, *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Queer Culture*. Routledge, p. 568; Rudd, P. J. (1993). *My Husband Wears My Clothes : Crossdressing from the Perspective of a Wife: Vol. 1st edition*, PM Publisher). However, other scholars give slight differences between cross-dressing and transvestism. A cross-dresser is not necessarily transvestite because cross-dressing can be embraced either by homosexual or heterosexual or bisexual with various purposes, not only related to sexual orientation. On the other hand, transvestism is often associated with a disorder and viewed as more closely tied to sexual orientation. In other words, cross-dressing is more emphasized on practice of donning other sex's dress whereas transvestism is linked to their sexual tendency which is manifested through their outward appearance (see e.g. Balon, R., 2016, *Transvestic Disorder*. In: Balon, R. (eds) *Practical Guide to Paraphilia and Paraphilic Disorders*. Springer, Devor, H. 1993. *Cross Dressing Then and Now. The Journal of Sex Research*, 30(3), p 290.)

<sup>27</sup> Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, p 8.

Furthermore, in some cases, individuals who identify as homosexual and transvestite may engage in cross-dressing as a form of self-expression, exploration, or celebration of their gender identity and sexual orientation. This personal association amplifies the perception of the linkage between cross-dressing and homosexuality. In its turn, cross-dresser is categorized and stigmatized as individual who deviates from societal expectations.

The actual determination of cross-dressing is heavily influenced by social constructs. This is demonstrated by the fact that women wearing trousers or men wearing earrings are now widely accepted and no longer considered as cross-dressing in modern culture. Similarly, males who wear skirt-like clothing—such as kilts or sarongs—in traditional cultures are not considered to be cross-dressers since they do not view these things as feminine attire. Nonetheless, the case would be different if men or women don certain attires and gender signifiers of the opposite gender such as men wearing dress, gown, and *hijab* or women wearing *koko* shirt and prayer cap or *peci*. It would be considered as cross-dressing and violating gender boundaries. From this point, it can also be inferred that gender boundaries themselves are not rigid. They are socially constructed and subject to change with time, place, and culture. For instance, gender boundaries are strict in earlier twentieth-century America compared to previous periods.<sup>28</sup> Boy babies are dressed in blue and girls in pink, with boys typically wearing pants and girls wearing dresses. These conventions have become deeply ingrained in their assumptions. Another instance is the emergence of unisex clothing nowadays which challenges traditional gender norms and allows for greater flexibility in self-expression.

The practice of cross-dressing had a longstanding presence throughout history. It has been a ubiquitous phenomenon in many cultures manifested in myth, folklore, music, theater, or even in the everyday lives of society. The tale of Sardanapalus

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<sup>28</sup> Marjorie B. Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (Psychology Press, 1997),p 1.

(Ashurbanipal), the last of the Assyrian kings, is one of the oldest mentions related to male cross-dressers in the ancient world. According to the tale, he spent a lot of time in the palace dressed in female attire with his concubines.<sup>29</sup> Hatshepsut, an Egyptian pharaoh who lived during the fifteenth century B.C.E., holds the distinction of being the first recorded woman in history who adopted masculine attire to amplify her authority. She was depicted with a symbolic royal beard, further emphasizing her adoption of masculine symbolism. In Hindu mythology, Vishnu appeared in effeminate character to resolve the conflict among gods and demons. Similarly, Greek history and literature also depict the practice of cross-dressing. For instance, the bride had to shave her head and dress in male and sometimes wear fake beards in certain areas such as Argo and Sparta and reversely the groom don female dress in Cos city. In Roman kingdom, some emperors such as Gaius Caesar Germanicus and Emperor Nero are assumed to appear in public in the female attributes.<sup>30</sup> Mostly, cross-dressing in antiquity is acceptable if it was undertaken for religious rites, laudable actions, and festivals.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The account originates from Ctesias, a Greek writer from the fifth century B.C.E., who served as a physician in the court of the Persian king. During his time there, he transcribed the historical records from the royal archives, which formed the foundation of his historical works. It was taken as fact in antiquity until the nineteenth century. The tale showcased that cross-dressing is perceived as a symbol of feminine with its weakness and vulnerability which Sardanapalus had to counter the rebellion of his nobles after his secret life was known by them. See e.g. Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, 1993; Susan J. Wolfson, *A Problem Few Dare Imitate: Sardanapalus and Effeminate Character*, 1991.

<sup>30</sup> Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, p 89.

<sup>31</sup> There were many reasons behind the cross-dressing practice in the ancient world based on history and myth. In Hindu society, it is understandable if women appeared in male attributes to uplift their social status or challenge status quo, given they were subordinated. Nonetheless, male cross-dressers were predominantly found because they were interested in what it is like to be a woman and to arouse their sexual urges. Greek myth made clear that cross-dressing frequently had a connection to divinity. For instance, Dionysus (one of their deity) retains nothing male except a beard. It provided a rationale for individuals in society to engage in cross-dressing as a means to establish a closer connection with their deities and form of devotion. The practice of cross-dressing is permissible for commendable actions such as defeating enemies like what Solon did by disguising himself as a woman and the Amazons (women warrior) who appeared in male attributes. It is noteworthy that some Greek legendary heroes such as Heracles, Achilles, and Theseus also engaged in cross-dressing for some episodes of their life. Additionally, cross-dressing was justified when men had to do tasks typically performed by women. For instance, they take the role of women in the Greek stage because it was not permissible for women to expose themselves publicly. Some marches and parades in Greek also involved cross-dressing. For instance, two young men of noble birth and from wealthy families led the public parade during the Athenian festival of Oskhophoria by dressing in female attires. See more in Campanile, D., Carlà-Uhink,

In contrast to Greek and Roman mythology, the practice of male cross-dressing was frowned upon and stricter in medieval culture. They had to face the double consequence which they would experience a loss of social status and get suspicions from their surroundings to get closer to women for sexual purposes. The prohibition of male cross-dressing was enforced by influential religious institutions, which held significant authority during that period. These churches went as far as forbidding cross-dressing in theatrical performances, leading to a decline in such portrayals until the resurgence of drama stages and festivals in the late medieval period. It differs slightly from the majority of female cross-dressers, who were tolerated more for their existence to get a better life. Nevertheless, female cross-dressers also faced rejection in certain cases as exemplified by the experience of Joan of Arc, the heroine of France's revolution, in which her cross-dressing behavior led to her execution.<sup>32</sup>

Cross-dressing also emerged as a prominent theme in the literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In Ludovico Ariosto's epic poem, *Orlando Furioso*, female warriors were portrayed as adopting male appearances or disguises. Shakespeare's plays also featured instances of cross-dressing on stage. Furthermore, this practice was still a tool for political expression during that period. Rulers like Queen Christina of Sweden utilized cross-dressing as a means to enhance their authority and assert their power. Additionally, the prevalence of celebrations, masquerades, and carnivals such as Halloween and Maytide by mumming from home to home using masks and costumes tended to foster the idea that cross-dressing was acceptable.<sup>33</sup> In the United States, cross-dressing was encouraged for entertainment

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F., & Facella, M. (Eds.). (2017). *TransAntiquity: Cross-Dressing and Transgender Dynamics in the Ancient World* (1st ed.). Routledge.

<sup>32</sup> Chukwuemeka Nwigwe, "Breaking the Code: Female Cross-Dressing in Southeastern Nigeria," *Fashion Theory* 26, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): p 5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2019.1697025>. See more Hotchkiss, V.R. (1996). *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203871102>. See Lorber, J. (1994). *Paradoxes of gender*. Yale University Press.

<sup>33</sup> David Cressy, "Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing in Early Modern England," *Journal of British Studies* 35, no. 4 (1996): p 461.

purposes allowing male actors to portray female characters on stage after the mass migration -the Gold Rush- happened in 1849. However, it is important to note that this acceptance of cross-dressing was primarily limited to the realm of theatrical performances and did not extend to broader acceptance or recognition of diverse gender identities or same-sex desires in society. The tolerance for cross-dressing in this context was largely confined to the specific roles and narratives presented on stage, rather than being embraced as a broader expression of personal identity or sexual orientation. However, some states and cities enacted laws against cross-dressing by making it illegal for individuals to appear in public wearing clothing that did not align with their assigned gender and framing the act as a form of immoral sexual perversion until enforcing laws that strictly defined feminine and masculine attire became increasingly challenging in the twentieth century.<sup>34</sup>

Cross-dressing is not confined to Western countries but it is found in various cultures worldwide. It has a pervasive presence in countries such as Brazil, Guatemala, Peru, the Philippines, Africa, and so forth in certain eras. These regions have their own unique cultural expressions of cross-dressing which were influenced by local traditions, folklore, religious beliefs, or social dynamics. The practice of cross-dressing in these regions reflects a more tolerant and accepting attitude towards cross-dressing compared to what had usually been in the United States, particularly in nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup> For instance, cross-dressing is considered a normal and ordinary part of social reality in

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<sup>34</sup> See e.g. Clare Sears, "Electric Brilliancy: Cross-Dressing Law and Freak Show Displays in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3/4 (2008): 170–87, and Clare Sears, "*Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*" (2015).

<sup>35</sup> It is important to note that societal attitudes toward cross-dressing can change over time and vary within different communities even within the same country. While the United States has made significant progress in promoting acceptance and understanding of diverse gender identities and expressions nowadays, there are still regional and individual differences in attitudes toward cross-dressing. The attitude also shifted from time to time. There have been periods in history where cross-dressing was embraced and even celebrated, while in other eras, it was met with resistance or even condemnation. These shifts can be influenced by factors such as religious beliefs, moral codes, societal expectations, and prevailing cultural norms. It is a dynamic phenomenon that reflects the evolving understanding and acceptance of diverse gender expressions within different societies and periods of time.

South America. In Madagascar, there have been historical cases where parents chose to raise boys as girls, a practice known as berdaches or *sekrata* in Malagasy culture. The Philippines is another example where parents are known to openly acknowledge and accept their children's identification as a *bayot* which refers to a cross-dressing homosexual person. Cross-dressing was also practiced as part of religious and belief ceremonies and a sign of spirituality in Africa, India, and some areas in Indonesia. Based on Egyptian myth, dressing young boys as girls were believed to protect them from the evil eye or negative influences. Similarly, it was also believed by Zulu tribe to bring rain after a long drought. In Java, specific tribal groups change the dress of an ill child in the belief that it will help remove the disease.<sup>36</sup> Korean shamanism also embraced cross-dressing in their rites for spiritual purposes. Meanwhile, cross-dressing in Japan and China is common on the stages and operas to the present such as Kabuki performances which demand the male actor to appear in female attire either on the stage or in real life. Similarly, cross-dressing is also visible in Indonesian arts, primarily in theatres and dances.

To conclude, cross-dressing is an omnipresent phenomenon transcending beyond space and time. Nonetheless, perception toward this phenomenon can vary significantly across different cultures depending on cultural context, beliefs, traditions, social norms, and values. It highlights the diverse ways in which gender is understood and expressed in different parts of the world. Some cultures may have a more accepting and tolerant view of cross-dressing. Conversely, some cultures may have more conservative or restrictive attitudes towards cross-dressing perceiving it as a violation of traditional gender norms or societal expectations. In such contexts, individuals who cross-dress may face discrimination, prejudice, or social stigma. Apart from that, there are also cultures that praise female cross-dressers but denigrate male cross-dressers

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<sup>36</sup> Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, p 46. See more Whitam, Frederick L. and Mathy, Robin M. *Male, Homosexuality in Four Societies : Brazil, Guatemala, the Philippines, and the United States*, Frederick L. Whitam, Robin M. Mathy, (New York ,1986).

inasmuch as masculinity is conceived higher and more significant than femininity entrenched from prevalent social prejudice.

In the contemporary age, cross-dressing is getting common, particularly in the realm of entertainment. It is present in various performances such as festivals, comedy, theater, narrative ballads, television shows, movies, as well as fashion campaigns. For instance in Indonesia, the *ronggeng* dance was performed by a cross-dresser male singer/ dancer for Sufi traits. It was said that the *wali* (saint) was dressed as women to dance and sing their religious songs representing the melding of male and female to reach *ma'rifa* (union with divine principle).<sup>37</sup> It is similar to what Didik Ninik Thowok termed as mystical gender. Didik Ninik Thowok is a famous cross-dressing performer in the post-modern hiding cross-gender impersonation behind a mask of humor. He believed that there is a mystical transformation when males danced in a female dress which can bring them the meeting of human and divine.<sup>38</sup> Dorce Gamalama is another example of a cross-dressing transsexual performer who succeeded in the entertainment realm. Before undertaking sex reassignment surgery in 1985, he was making a reputation in the entertainment and cabaret scenes, mainly as a singer and comedian. However, after post-transition, Dorce gained prominence as a star and celebrity. His widespread popularity among the Indonesian people is evident from the fact that the majority of Indonesians are familiar with her identity and life journey.<sup>39</sup> It probably emerges a question about how comes a transsexual woman was able to become a big celebrity under the New Order and into the post-New Order period. In one of his interviews, Dorce remarked that he believed that he would get acceptance predominantly from Muslim audiences if he underwent sex reassignment surgery. By emphasizing his self-identity as a genuine woman and setting himself apart from his

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<sup>37</sup> Kathy Foley, "The Ronggeng, the Wayang, the Wali, and Islam: Female or Transvestite Male Dancers-Singers-Performers and Evolving Islam in West Java," *Asian Theatre Journal* 32, no. 2 (2015): p 362.

<sup>38</sup> Foley, p 379.

<sup>39</sup> Ben Murtagh, "Double Identities in Dorce's Comedies: Negotiating Gender and Class in New Order Indonesian Cinema," *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 173, no. 2-3 (January 1, 2017): p 183.

*waria* (queer) peers, he managed to maintain his sustained success with his strong stage presence and charisma.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, as social media continues to evolve, cross-dressers have greater opportunities to create content and express themselves and their work freely. Social media fosters an inclusive space for them to share and provides access to a broader audience. In doing so, it has helped to increase the visibility and representation of cross-dressing in the public sphere. Recently, social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube have witnessed a notable trend and influx involving male cross-dressers who employ their platforms to depict female attitudes, physical appearances, demeanor, behaviors, norms, and gestures authentically for entertainment purposes. They have embraced the adoption of female-designated dress and effeminate characters skilfully as an avenue to create compelling and fascinating content.

The popularity of male cross-dressers specifically on Instagram has attained a significant surge with tripled in number currently.<sup>41</sup> Hence, they eventually emerge as Instagram celebrities who gain a growing number of organic followers and achieve a great deal of popularity in the digital realm. Mostly, they package the content in the form of comedy skits. By combining comedy and cross-dressing personas, they succeed to generate innovative ideas and refreshing works that stand out from the crowd and bring them to the forefront of entertainment. Their success highlights the ability of social media to amplify and propel unconventional forms of entertainment, while also contributing to a broader dialogue on gender, identity, and the evolving nature of comedy in the digital age.

Social media as an inclusive space enable to accommodate any marginalized groups to express their identity and bizarre appearance. It offers a secure space where fringes of society can show themselves and find support without fear of public

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<sup>40</sup> Murtagh, p 190.

<sup>41</sup> Obiajulu Joel Nwolu, Chika Onyinye Nnabuife, and Chukwunonso Chukwuagozie Nnabuife, "Women Perception of Cross-Dressing Among Male Comedians on Instagram," *UNIZIK Journal of Gender Research* 1 (2022): p 128.

judgment.<sup>42</sup> Indirectly, these groups notably crossdressers seemingly have the ability to challenge deep-rooted norms and open up discussions about self-expression, identity, and acceptance while expressing their artistic sense through their content on social media. The popularity of male cross-dressers on platforms like Instagram and YouTube in a way demonstrates the changing landscape of entertainment and the increasing acceptance of diverse gender expressions. In a nutshell, it means that social media serves in shaping public perception and constructing societal viewpoints.

Previous scholars have proposed a term referring to this circumstance. A.R. Stone called it computer cross-dressing which demonstrates the power of the internet in allowing people to experiment with gender by disguising themselves as another gender in a safe environment.<sup>43</sup> This case highlighted the notion that online spaces provide a platform for individuals to explore and perform different identities. The concept of computer cross-dressing has been perceived as a symbol of the fluid and shifting nature of identities in the digital realm. It is accustomed as a metaphor for understanding diverse forms of identity performance in online environments. Computer cross-dressing is often associated with the men's endeavor to emulate the women's appearance and character in order to convince other people that they are real women.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, Hegland and Nelson contend that computer cross-dressers leverage the capabilities of the Internet and social media platforms to engage in communication that is intertwined with broader cultural discussions on gender. They utilize these digital spaces to establish, transform, and challenge existing gender identities.<sup>45</sup> This case will lead to questions about the authenticity of online identities

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<sup>42</sup> Jane E Hegland and Nancy J Nelson, "Cross-Dressers in Cyber-Space: Exploring the Internet as a Tool for Expressing Gendered Identity," *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, 2002, p 3.

<sup>43</sup> Allucquère Rosanne Stone, "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?," in *Cyberspace: First Steps*, ed. Michael Benedikt (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press., 1994), p 84.

<sup>44</sup> Debra Ferreday and Simon Lock, "Computer Cross-Dressing: Queering the Virtual Subject," ed. Kate O'Riordan and David J. Phillips (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), p 164.

<sup>45</sup> Jane E. Hegland and Nancy J. Nelson, "Cross-Dressers in Cyber-Space: Exploring the Internet as a Tool for Expressing Gendered Identity," *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 7, no. 2 (July 1, 2002): p 139, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1015845100237>.

and the potential for deception. The online identities will construct a digital representation of individuals manifested on visible physical identities, interests, values, thoughts, and narratives delivered. Online identity can influence how others see and interact with the individual, and can provide space for individuals to express themselves and explore aspects of identity that may be different from their offline lives. It highlights the need for critical engagement with online representations and the recognition that not everything portrayed online may be as it seems.

Not only as a platform to channel self-expression and challenge prevailing norms, but social media also propel to monetize cross-dressing, especially for drag queens. For instance, RuPaul's Drag Race represents the pinnacle of mainstream success for global drag culture. Thanks to commercial social media platforms like YouTube, they have built successful careers by maintaining their self-branding on social media. Besides, social media also plays a significant role in providing references for people to identify themselves as cross-dressers, as well as imitate existing cross-dressing content shared on these platforms. It possesses the ability to reinforce underlying attitudes as well as desires and activate them publicly by engaging in specific actions. This phenomenon transforms social media into a powerful socializing agent for cross-dressing. One notable example is within the cosplay community which draws inspiration for characters, costumes, and gestures primarily from the content available on social media in order to fulfill the desire for self-actualization.<sup>46</sup>

## **2.2 The Nexus of Cross-dressing, Social Media, and Religious Symbols**

Over recent years, there has been a notable shift in how Muslims in Indonesia engage with their faith which they rely on social media to undertake their religious practices. These practices have become closely intertwined with media activities, and many Muslims perceive their online presence as an integral part of their religious devotion

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<sup>46</sup> Deyana Zenita, Karim Suryadi, and Siti Nurbayani, "Impresi Media Dalam Perkembangan Minat Dan Kehidupan Sehari-Hari Cosplayer Crossdress Male To Female," *Sosietas* 10, no. 1 (2020): p 819, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17509/ijost.v3i2.12758> |.

and efforts to enhance their spirituality. Not merely practice, religious symbols also often intermingle with social media mostly in the form of content. Social media platforms, due to their pervasive nature in users' daily lives, play a particularly significant role in facilitating this intersection between religion, social media, and everyday life. This nexus has begun since the fall of Soeharto in 1998 when political changes and the emergence of the Muslim middle class engaging in consuming Islam coincided with the transformation of Indonesia's media landscape.<sup>47</sup> Not only that, in the aftermath of Soeharto regime in 1998, a conservative Islamic minority advocated for stricter regulations within the State Penal Code. This drive triggered extensive public discussions about the state's involvement in matters of sexuality and moral values by emphasizing gender normativity and criminalizing various forms of sexual activities outside heteronormativity. While state and Islamic discourse highlighted adherence to gender norms, media has become the main channel for non-conformity gender groups to affirm their presence.

Social media indeed plays a significant role in disseminating religious symbols and practices in the midst of the public sphere. The public sphere is conceived as a space of contestation where everyone has the same chance to communicate without restrictions and without viewing social status. The visibility of religion in the public sphere goes beyond mere practice and moral values; it is also prominently displayed to amplify its presence or even exploited for various purposes. This trend has led to the incorporation of religious symbols and content into contemporary lifestyles, turning religion into a commodity through the process known as religious commodification. Commodification is defined as the act of treating something as a commodity. Fealy has mentioned the factors driving religious commodification and argues that the increasing

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<sup>47</sup> Martin Slama, "Practising Islam through Social Media in Indonesia," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, no. 134 (January 2, 2018): p 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2018.1416798>.

commodification of Islam is caused by the socioeconomic, technological, and cultural changes that happened in recent decades.<sup>48</sup>

Religious commodification implies ideological commercialization which is actually selling the religion through products or selling certain products by giving religious values to them. In some cases, this commodification brings to understanding the religious values superficially. But in other cases, it also gives the easiness to worship for the adherents, and the Islamic principle is more strictly upheld. Kitiarsa exemplifies the case of Bhuddist in Chiang Mai who got the materials for ritual easily because of religious commodification or so-called *Phutta Phanit*.<sup>49</sup> This commodified form of religion is still being debated among scholars. It is still inquired what is the boundary between the sacred and the profane in the relationship between spirituality and commerce. Hasan argues that commodification which happens in tandem with rising market demands for Islamic products does not primarily mean commercialization. It is more of an attempt to offer and package Islam, hence it can be accepted by a broader market.<sup>50</sup>

The phenomena of Islamic commodification especially in Indonesia can be manifested in many aspects of life, such as the emergence of *syariah* banking, popular culture with Islamic themes, Islamic dresses, applications related to Islamic practices, and other various instances. Some scholars such as Lengauer (2018)<sup>51</sup>, Nisa (2018)<sup>52</sup>,

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<sup>48</sup> Greg Fealy, "Consuming Islam: Commodified Religion and Aspirational Pietism in Contemporary Indonesia," in *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. Greg Fealy and Sally White (ISEAS Publishing, 2008), p 16, <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789812308528>.

<sup>49</sup> Pattana Kitiarsa, "Buddha Phanit: Thailand's Prosperity Religion and Its Commodifying Tactics," in *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*, ed. Pattana Kitiarsa (Routledge, 2007), p 140.

<sup>50</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, "The Making of Public Islam: Piety, Agency, and Commodification on the Landscape of the Indonesian Public Sphere," *Contemporary Islam* 3, no. 3 (October 1, 2009): p 242, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-009-0096-9>.

<sup>51</sup> Dayana Lengauer, "Sharing Semangat Taqwa: Social Media and Digital Islamic Socialities in Bandung," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, no. 134 (January 2, 2018): 5–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2018.1415276>. She focuses on discussing how social media encourage to build the zeal of piety among young generations in some communities in Bandung.

<sup>52</sup> Eva F. Nisa, "Social Media and the Birth of an Islamic Social Movement: ODOJ (One Day One Juz) in Contemporary Indonesia," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, no. 134 (January 2, 2018):

Halim (2018)<sup>53</sup>, and Hew (2018)<sup>54</sup> have captured meticulously the phenomena of intermingling between social media and religious practices in Muslim Indonesia. Their study generally showcased the power of social media to construct zeal of piety in the public sphere and amplify religious authority in the case of preachers.

In essence, religious commodification is an inevitable phenomenon in the era of globalization. Muslim as one of the major populations in the world becomes the potential marketplace. In addition, the phenomenon of mass consumption has taken place everywhere, including in Muslim societies. Globalized brands are pervasive and practices of consumption are significantly increasing, but Muslim consumers are not merely passive victims of global consumerism. They actively adapt the commodities and integrate them into their culture by attaching religious symbols, for instance. The expansion of market demands for Islamic commodities undertaken by the middle class leads to the commodification phenomenon and in the end, it emerges as a trend and spreads into remote areas.<sup>55</sup> This transformation of Islam into a symbolic commodity caters to the aspirations of upwardly mobile customers seeking to incorporate religious values into their everyday lives in a way that aligns with their desired lifestyle choices.

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24–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2017.1416758>. She discusses on the utilization of social media in *dakwah* by One Day One Juz (ODOJ), which aims to encourage Muslims to revive the spirit of reading the Qur'an through WhatsApp.

<sup>53</sup> Wahyuddin Halim, “Young Islamic Preachers on Facebook: Pesantren As’adiyah and Its Engagement with Social Media,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, no. 134 (January 2, 2018): 44–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2018.1416796>. He captures the engagement of *pesantren* community with internet and social media especially in two religious programmes, i.e. training of imams and the provision of *mubaligh* or preachers. He maintains that some young imams who have memorized whole Al-Qur'an are Facebook active user and benefit it as means of self-presentation. He mentions about As'adiyah preachers who gain the popularity and expand their connection through social media.

<sup>54</sup> Wai Weng Hew, “The Art of *Dakwah*: Social Media, Visual Persuasion and the Islamist Propagation of Felix Siau,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, no. 134 (January 2, 2018): 61–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2018.1416757>. He portrays Felix Siau who employs social media and visual imagery to effectively disseminate HTI ideology among young Indonesian Muslims. His approach to da'wa is characterized by a blend of entertainment and conservatism presenting his message in a casual yet dogmatic manner.

<sup>55</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, “Islam in Provincial Indonesia: Middle Class, Lifestyle, and Democracy,” *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 49, no. 1 (June 29, 2011): p 151, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2011.491.119-157>.

Islamic commodification cannot merely be regarded as a detrimental phenomenon because it can reconcile piety and construct the image of Islam in the public sphere. Nonetheless, it is also possible to bring negative impacts such as making the Islamic value superficial and abuse of religious symbols. Notwithstanding, one still cannot deny that encounter of social media advancements and religion will lead to religious development. The adoption of social media in spiritual journeys reflects the prevalent desires, particularly among the youth generation, for a rediscovery of profound experiences. The existence of a religious dimension in this media can be described as a modern expression of pop culture sacramentality.<sup>56</sup>

Speaking about religious symbols, the *hijab* or veil is one of the religious symbols which become a trend in the midst of society. It is a visible expression of one's religious beliefs and serves as a representation of their commitment to their faith. The *hijab*, worn by Muslim women, holds significant cultural and religious significance, symbolizing modesty, piety, fortitude, and adherence to Islamic values. Its visibility in public spaces contributes to the recognition and awareness of Islam as a prominent religious tradition. The *hijab* plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and challenging stereotypes, resisting the objectification of women, and fostering a sense of identity and belonging within the Muslim community.

Initially, the term *hijab* originates from Arabic which conveys the meaning of a curtain or a barrier between two entities. From an Islamic perspective, the *hijab* gives women an esteemed position and dignity. It is supposed to protect women and their chastity against wicked behavior. Within Islam, it is compulsory for Muslim women to wear the *hijab* with the purpose of covering their private parts according to most ulama's opinion. It symbolizes their belief in adhering to the concept of 'awra,, modesty, and covering the body. The Quran also suggests that Muslim women wear the *hijab* as a way of life and as a manner of expressing their religiosity. It emphasizes

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<sup>56</sup> Heidi Campbell, "This Is My Church: Seeing the Internet and Club Culture as Spiritual Spaces," in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, ed. Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (Routledge, 2004), p 120.

the importance of adhering to a modest dress code for women. Modesty is seen as integral to Islamic teachings, and specific guidelines are provided for women's outer garments and head covers.

Historically, the practice of covering hair in Islam can be traced back to pre-Islamic customs and cultural practices. For nomadic people in pre-Islamic Arab society, the veil was used to protect women from potential harm and ensure their safety from precarious conditions such as sudden attacks, kidnapping, and sexual violence. Muslim women employed this custom as a continuation of pre-existing tradition. In addition, Muslim women were influenced by the customs of Persian and Byzantine women who used body coverings to distinguish themselves from others in the context of social class.<sup>57</sup> Muslim women began covering themselves as a way to demonstrate their sense of belonging to the Islamic faith, reflect their submissiveness to the Creator, and emphasize the uniqueness of their religious identity.<sup>58</sup> Women used to cover their heads with the veil, allowing its ends to fall behind their ears and on their backs, leaving the neck and upper chest uncovered, similar to how Christian women used to dress. However, time by time, the practice evolved and Muslim women began wearing headscarves instead. Furthermore, the Quran also commands Muslim women to cover their upper chests and necks with the veil. The Quran's directives aim to ensure that women keep their beauty and adornments concealed from others, except for incidental exposure of items like rings or the lower hem of a dress. This requirement is intended to distinguish Muslim women from slave and pagan women and to protect them from harassment and molestation.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p 55.

<sup>58</sup> John L. Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2002), p 105.

<sup>59</sup> Francis Felix Edet, "Dress Code for Women in Islam: A Sociological Investigation," *Lwati: A Journal of Contemporary Research* 16, no. 3 (September 27, 2019): p 184, <https://doi.org/10.4314/lwati.v16i3>. Furthermore, there are contrary perspectives regarding *hijab* mandatory among scholars. Some scholars especially classical *ulemas* believe that some verses in Qur'an are clear orders that require Muslim women to wear *hijab*, while others argue that these verses do not specifically mandate *hijab* for all Muslim women. These scholars particularly modern scholars such as

In contemporary settings, donning the veil is often subject to criticism as it is seen by some as restrictive and as suppressing women's femininity. This viewpoint stems from the belief that the veil symbolizes the subjugation of women and limits their personal freedom and self-expression. They often received negative portrayal which are regarded as weak, uneducated, submissive, passive, and one who had no authority over their own lives. Conversely, Mernissi argues that the veil represents a rejection of Western notions of modernity.<sup>60</sup> The veil also reflected a symbol of freedom from colonial oppression, especially in some countries in the Middle East.<sup>61</sup> It is important to note that discussions on the significance of the veil are diverse and context-dependent. Different individuals and communities hold varying interpretations and perspectives on its meaning and purposes.

Meanwhile, the development of *hijab* in Indonesia can be rooted back to the late 1980 which was worn by Muslim women, mostly in Islamic boarding schools and those with religious backgrounds. Initially, wearing of *hijab* in public spaces was prohibited by the state until the late 1990s.<sup>62</sup> The space for *hijabi* women to express their identity was still restricted. During the New Order era, the headscarf symbolized resistance against the authoritarian rule of President Suharto. It was inspired by the Iranian Revolution which represented a sense of freedom and opposition to an oppressive government. The spirit of revolution encourages them to express their Islamic identity overtly. The advancement of the *hijab* gained momentum within university campuses, where activists played a significant role in promoting its use and

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Leila Ahmed, J.L. Esposito, and so forth contend that there is no explicit verse in Qur'an which order to wear *hijab* as a mandatory and it is considered a form of understanding coercion if one requires wearing *hijab* to all Muslim women. Additionally, there are varying interpretations for those who require *hijab* regarding which parts of the body should be covered as part of *hijab*.

<sup>60</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil And The Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation Of Women's Rights In Islam* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p 99.

<sup>61</sup> Fadwa El Guindi, "Veiling Infitah with Muslim Ethic: Egypt's Contemporary Islamic Movement," *Social Problems* 28, no. 4 (1981): p 476, <https://doi.org/10.2307/800058>.

<sup>62</sup> Yessy Hermawati, et.al, "*Hijab Fashion : Construction of Femininity and Identity of Muslim Women in Indonesia*" (International Conference on Humanities at Universiti of Sains Malaysia, Malaysia, 2016), p 2.

raising awareness about its significance. By the end of 1998, the reform of *hijab* usage began to expand across various sectors and public spaces.<sup>63</sup> Many people started expressing needs that had previously been suppressed as soon as the echoes of freedom of expression started to open. Thus, many Muslim women opt to don the headscarf. In the early 2000s, there was a resurgence of Islamic practices and the implementation of Islamic law in certain regions of Indonesia. This led to increased acceptance and promotion of the headscarf as a symbol of religious devotion and adherence to Islamic values.

In tandem with the passage of time and the proliferation of social media, the function of *hijab* also shifted. As I alluded to before, the entanglement of social media and religious symbols leads to the commodification of religious symbols, *hijab* is no exception. *Hijab* has become part of fashion and lifestyle for Muslim women. On top of that, *hijab* is frequently accentuated in many contents on social media, including cross-dressing content. In Indonesia, people who engage in cross-dressing while wearing *hijab* are referred to as "cross-*hijaber*." This term combines the practice of cross-dressing with the inclusion of *hijab*, which is traditionally worn by Muslim women. The term "cross-*hijaber*" describes people who blend both feminine and masculine elements in their attire by incorporating *hijab* into their cross-dressing style.

Content featuring pure cross-*hijaber* themes once become viral on Indonesian social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, as well as YouTube under the account name @infinity. The Instagram account showcased several photos of a man dressed in women's garments, including hijab, robes, veils, and related accessories. The content sparked spontaneous reactions from netizens, ranging from blasphemy and insults to criticism. However, following the widespread negative coverage and backlash surrounding cross-*hijaber*, the postings associated with the phenomenon were

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<sup>63</sup> Yessi Hermawati, et.al, p 2.

deleted and can no longer be traced.<sup>64</sup> However, the different scenario emerges when content creators incorporate comedy into their content. Netizens tend to give positive reactions toward cross-*hijaber* content wrapped by comedy. This can be observed through the widespread presence of comedy skits featuring cross-*hijaber* on various social media platforms.

The phenomenon of cross-*hijaber* on social media is primarily driven by the pursuit of entertainment and increasing followers, although certain content may also incorporate elements promoting Islamic values such as honesty and discipline. Those who engage in cross-dressing wear *hijab* to strengthen and authenticate their characters and combine it with fresh humor and slight moral messages. It creates a unique blend of religious symbolism and personal expression. This artistic performance that incorporates religious symbols subsequently is channeled through social media platforms. Social media acts as a catalyst for visibility, enabling cross-hijab to gain attention, followers, and engagement.

### 2.3 Cross-dressing in Islamic Historical Trajectories

As previously mentioned, the culture of cross-dressing is omnipresent from era to era, including within Muslim civilization. Some historical accounts indicate a strong nexus between cross-dressing phenomenon -primarily *ghulāmiyyāt*- and the Abbasid court. The *ghulāmiyyāt* refers to a boyish singing slave woman who masculinized herself and dressed in male garments in order to appeal sexually to men.<sup>65</sup> For instance, Al-Jāhiz wrote in his essay on ‘The Competition of Male Youths [*ghilmān*] and Female Youths [*al-jawāri*]’ which he presented the argument that if a *jāriya* (female servant) was exceptionally beautiful, she would be regarded as resembling a *ghulām* (male servant) and would be praised if her physical appearance resembled the *ghulām*. Besides, there

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<sup>64</sup> Hamdan Hidayat, “Crosshijaber antara Trend dan Gejolak Sosial (Analisis Perilaku Crosshijaber Perspektif Al-Qur’an dan Psikologi),” *Marwah: Jurnal Perempuan, Agama dan Jender* 19, no. 2 (December 1, 2020): p 194, <https://doi.org/10.24014/marwah.v19i2.9614>.

<sup>65</sup> India Kotis, “‘She is a Boy, or If Not a Boy, then a Boy Resembles Her’: Cross-Dressing, Homosexuality and Enslaved Sex and Gender in Umayyad Iberia,” *The Macksey Journal* 1 (2020): p 3.

was an anecdote reported by Al- Mas'ūdī (d.345/956) which explained the origin of the *ghulāmiyyāt* term. It initially originated during era of Al-Amīn, the Caliph of the Abbasid, which his mother served him female servants resembling the male appearance with turban and short-cut hair. Another anecdote by Al- Qālī (d.356/967) also told about the *ghulāmiyyāt* and young al-Ma'mūn.<sup>66</sup> Abū Nuwās also captured the *ghulāmiyyāt* characteristics thoroughly in his poetry and arguably had one-time affair with a *ghulāmiyyāt*.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, countless instances of Arabic folks also alluded cross-dressing tradition, such as narrations within *Alf Layla wa Layla* (One Thousand and One Night) and *siyar sha'biya* (Nation's History) especially regarded to Amazons (woman warriors).<sup>68</sup>

During the early Abbasid era, theologians and jurists showed different views on the phenomenon of cross-dressing compared to poets and literary writers. They classified the *ghulāmiyyāt* (female servants resembling males) and the *shāfirāt* (free women who cross-dress voluntarily) under the term *mutarajjilāt* (masculinized female) which was portrayed negatively in hadith tradition likewise mukhannathūn (effeminate men).<sup>69</sup> This was underlaid on tradition saying that the Messenger of God cursed effeminate men and manly women<sup>70</sup>, or in another version, it is expressed: “the Messenger of God cursed those men who sought to resemble women and those women

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<sup>66</sup> Johannes Thomann, “Illusions of Androgyny: Cross-Dressing Women (Ghulāmiyyāt) in Abbasid Society,” in *Sex and Desire in Muslim Culture: Beyond Norms and Transgression from the Abbasids to the Present Day*, ed. Aymon Kreil, Lucia Sorbera, and Serena Tolino (London: I.B. TAURIS Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021), p 54-55.

<sup>67</sup>India Kotis, 'She Is a Boy, or If Not a Boy, Then a Boy Resembles Her': Cross-Dressing, Homosexuality and Enslaved Sex and Gender in Umayyad Iberia,"p 8.

<sup>68</sup> Sahar Amer, *Crossing Borders: Love Between Women in Medieval French and Arabic Literatures* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p 64.

<sup>69</sup> Johannes Thomann, “Illusions of Androgyny: Cross-Dressing Women (Ghulāmiyyāt) in Abbasid Society,”p 51.

<sup>70</sup> Muhammad ibn Ismā'il al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, nos 5586, 6834; al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi'*, no. 2785; al-Dārimī, *al-Musnad al-Jāmi'*, ed. N. b. H. v. 'A. al-Bā'alawī (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā'ir al-Islāmiyya, 2013), no. 2853; 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf* no. 21357; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, nos 1982, 2123, 2291, 2328, 3458, 5649.

who sought to resemble men”.<sup>71</sup> The existence of some traditions condemning effeminate men and manly women indicated that the phenomenon was pervasive from the early days of Islam. Still, the practice has been preserved until the next generations in the Ottoman Sultanate in which male dancers often show their performances in front of the court with female attributes.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, this kind of male dancers was also prevalent in Egypt in nineteenth century. Even, within North Omani society up until now, they still recognized the third gender role so-called *xanith* (trans women) who manages to appear feminine.

To date, some Muslim countries prohibited the practice of cross-dressing, even it is considered as crime as it happened in Saudi Arabia.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, most of Muslim Indonesia regard cross-dressing as taboo. MUI or Indonesian Ulema Council also contends that cross-dressing is prohibited based on hadith narrated by al-Bukhārī as above-mentioned.<sup>74</sup> It indicates that Muslims in Indonesia still hold firmly the tenets recorded in canonical hadith. It is important to note that there are intense debates related to cross-dressing in the context of academic milieu. Similar with *hijab* debate, classical ulemas such as Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī, al- Dhahabī, and the like tend to follow the hadith derived from Prophet Muhammad PBUH which prohibit *tasyabbuh* (resembling with other gender). Al-Rāzī in his commentary also implied that cross-dressing is

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<sup>71</sup> Muhammad ibn Ismāīl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2002), no. 5585; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, ed. Sh. al-Arna’ūt and M. K. Q. Balilī (Beirut: Dār al-Risāla al-‘Ālimiyya, 2009), no. 4097; al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi’ al-Kabīr*, ed. B. ‘A. Ma’rūf (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1996), no. 2784, 3151; Ibn Māja, *Musnad*, ed. M. F. ‘Abd al-Bāqī (Cairo: ‘Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1952–1953), no. 1904; al-Ṭayālīsī, *Musnad*, ed. M. ‘A. al-Turkī (Cairo: Dār Hajar, 1999), no. 2801; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, ed. Sh. Al-Arna’ūt and ‘A. Murshid (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 1995), no. 3059.

<sup>72</sup> Stephen O. Murray, “The Will Not to Know: Islamic Accommodations of Male Homosexuality,” in *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature*, ed. Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (New York: NYU Press, 1997), p 24.

<sup>73</sup> “Saudi Arabia: 5 Arrested for Cross-Dressing on Social Media,” October 25, 2021, <https://gulfnnews.com/world/gulf/saudi/saudi-arabia-5-arrested-for-cross-dressing-on-social-media-1.83187330>. accessed July 1, 2023.

<sup>74</sup> “MUI: Crosshijaber Haram - News Liputan6.Com,” accessed July 1, 2023, <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/4085560/mui-crosshijaber-haram>.

among the driving factors of sodomy happened.<sup>75</sup> However, some contemporary scholars, for instance, Bullough assumed that there is still little space where cross-dressing is permissible. It is tolerated when women's existence was confined in public, men take women's roles and acted like them.<sup>76</sup> Besides, other scholars amplify their arguments by showing the weakness of hadith from the aspect of *sanad*.

#### **2.4 Comedy and Humor in Islamic Tradition**

Humor is considered a form of communication that may provoke laughter. Humor can be defined as all categories in the form of objects as well as events that evoke laughter and amusement. The humor can be presented in various formats such as satire news, situational comedy, stand-up comedy, parody, meme, and so forth. These formats can be employed on social media to gain popularity, even for religious purposes. Some preachers sometimes inserted humor elements in their conventional proselytization to draw the attention of audiences and maintain their focus. The entanglement of humor and religion is not a recent case indeed but it existed since the prophet era. It means that humor has always been an aspect of Muslim practices. Moreover, it is manifested in Qur'an and Sunna. For instance, when the prophet Abraham put food on the Meccan pagans and he asked why they do not eat it (QS. 37: 91-98). In another verse, it is portrayed how the prophet Abraham and his wife Sarah shared a sense of humor and wit in their relationship. When they got the message that Sarah will bear a son, she was astonished and laughed because she did not believe that an old woman like her can give birth (QS 11: 69-73). Similarly, the prophet Zechariah also showed his confusion about whether he can get a son in his old age and his wife sterile when God granted his wish for a son (QS 19: 3-8). There are other countless examples of stories in the Qur'an

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<sup>75</sup> Junaid Jahangir and Hussein Abdullatif, *Islamic Law and Muslim Same-Sex Unions* (Lexington Books, 2016), p 106.

<sup>76</sup> Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, p 53.

implying humor such as the story Moses and Khidr (QS 18: 65-82), the story of Medina hypocrites (QS 33: 20), and so forth.<sup>77</sup>

Not only in the Qur'an, Sunna also points out some anecdotes highlighting the prophet Muhammad's wit and sense of humor. For instance, once an elderly woman approached Prophet Muhammad and expressed her desire to enter paradise. In response, the Prophet humorously remarked that such a request was not possible. He explained that, according to the Qur'an, the inhabitants of paradise, known as "*houris*," are described as youthful and beautiful women.<sup>78</sup> However, the Prophet still reminds the limitation of humor and laughter. It was told that when the Prophet did not like the humor, he would be silent. The tradition of humor continued to Muslim medieval and contemporary literature. Among the notable figures who showed intense humor in the literature was Nasreddin Hoja. There is a rich collection of nearly three hundred anecdotes that revolve around the wit, wisdom, and clever foolishness of Nasreddin.

Nonetheless, the perception of humor intersecting with religion is changeable over time. It is found in religious scriptures, medieval literature, and Muslim folk stories, but at another time, Muslims were regarded as 'those who do not know how to be funny' indicating the incompatibility between Islam and humor. The discourse of humor in Muslim society still remains peripheral perhaps, but it is starting to be discussed intensely after the 9/11 events. The humor or comedy becomes the intermediary to resist the discrimination and negative stereotypes from the majority. It is a unique analytical site to evaluate the way that Muslim Americans deal with the stereotypes and realities of being both Muslim and American in the post-9/11 context. When Muslims were viewed with racial stereotypes and labeled with masculine violence, fanaticism, and barbarism, the American minorities respond to the pressure and racial system by taking steps to hide their Muslim identity in public spaces and

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<sup>77</sup> Mustansir Mir, "Humor in the Quran," *The Muslim World* 81, no. 3-4 (October 1991): p 184-86, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.1991.tb03524.x>.

<sup>78</sup> Jaelyn Michael, "Contemporary Muslim Comedy," in *Handbook of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Lives*, ed. Mark Woodward and Ronald Lukens-Bull (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), p 4, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73653-2\\_41-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73653-2_41-2).

altering patterns of observable “Muslim” behavior such as dress or speech.<sup>79</sup> Notwithstanding, some of them initiated to counter the pressure and embody social justice through comedy by improving their image to outsiders as well as convincing the insiders and coreligionists to resist the societal foible.

Some comedies were generated aftermath of 9/11 such as *Allah Made Me Funny* (2003), *Axis of Evil Comedy Tour* (2006), *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (2007), and so on. These comedies aim to edify the outsider about Islam as well as encourage the insider or coreligionists to work together to improve the image to the outsider. Muslim American comedy has the potential to deliver important social messages to both non-Muslims and Muslims regarding contemporary debates on American social belonging and Muslim-American debates on how they link to their groups in the post-9/11. Humor also acts as an educational tool for the Muslim community which is aiming to the creation of a role model. They throw comedy constructive critics either explicitly or implicitly to their coreligionists’ ‘wrong-doings’ and articulate moral behaviors and decent values.<sup>80</sup> When addressing their insiders, the comics promote their ideal of the American *umma* through education and encourage a united community transcending the ethnic and racial division. They prompt their audience to defend their interests as Muslims in the American mainstream.

It shows that humor can lead to social change. The comedian as organic intellectual is able to encourage the class to fight against social injustice. Gramsci in his prison notebooks elaborated that organic intellectuals must have the ability to address the needs and desires of the community. They represent the community and acknowledge that they are products of the community. They should voice the interests of the group, defend the perception of it in public and provide it with social, cultural,

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<sup>79</sup> Jaclyn Michael, “Contemporary Muslim Comedy,” p 6.

<sup>80</sup> Morgane Thonnart, “American Muslims and Contemporary Hahahahalal Comedy,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 27, no. 2 (April 2, 2016): p 133, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2015.1114242>.

and political leadership.<sup>81</sup>The comedy itself can engage in complex social by simplifying and making them accessible. I argue that humor can be effective intermediary to criticize the social orders and fight against social incongruity.

Besides humor is being counter-narratives for discrimination and Islamophobia aftermath of 9/11 event, it is also utilized to oppose those who say ‘Muslim do not know how to be funny’, gelotophobic, and so on. It is noteworthy that the entanglement of humor and Islam especially in the twentieth century is fluctuated and changeable. As explained before, Islam and humor were perceived compatible in the post 9/11 to combat the negative stereotypes. But, the array of events afterward such as the attacks in New York, Madrid, and London, the Danish cartoon controversy and the teddy bear affairs, and the violence perpetrated by Islamist groups such as ISIS and Boko Haram have brought back age-old fears and spread topical clichés: Muslims are ‘gelotophobic fundamentalist terrorists’.<sup>82</sup> Gelotophobic means those who are afraid with the laughter. It means that Muslims were associated as those who do not know about the humor and depicted as barbarism and cruel. These events also lead to debate about the relationship between Muslims, Islam, and humor. This debate began in late 2005 when a Danish newspaper published cartoons that portrayed the Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist driving Muslims’ protests and demonstrations. It engendered the impression that Muslims are not inherently funny, humor is not allowed in Islam, and that there is no space for humor in Islamic tradition. Hence, Muslims eventually used humor to prove that those assumptions were incorrect. Unlike humor in Western countries, the intersection between Islam and humor in Indonesia is more visible in content on social media. Sometimes, preachers also employ humor in their proselytization to draw the attention of the congregation.

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<sup>81</sup> Amarnath Amarasingam, “Laughter the Best Medicine: Muslim Comedians and Social Criticism in Post-9/11 America,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30, no. 4 (December 2010): p 467, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2010.533444>.

<sup>82</sup> Jaclyn Michael, “American Muslims Stand up and Speak out: Trajectories of Humor in Muslim American Stand-up Comedy,” *Contemporary Islam* 7, no. 2 (July 2013): p 135, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-011-0183-6>.

## CHAPTER III

### THE ALLURE OF CROSS-DRESSING ACCOUNTS AND VIEWERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD THEIR CONTENT

Although cross-dressing is considered taboo and violates religious norms for a majority of Muslims in Indonesia, cross-dressing content continues to thrive on social media. This content generally receives positive responses from its audience because, at times, it implies underlying values of kindness wrapped in fresh humor and comedy. Furthermore, I provide two examples of influencers' accounts that utilize cross-dressing as an alternative to gain popularity, namely Mak Beti and Fadlan Holao.

#### **3.1 Mak Beti and Fadlan Holao: The Female Impersonator on Social Media**

YouTube offers its users a flexible platform to express their creativity in a virtual space through a wide range of videos catering to educational, informational, business, and entertainment purposes. This freedom enables users to not only consume existing videos but also actively produce their own video content. Content creators on YouTube strive to create videos that attract a large viewership, partly driven by the motivation to earn rewards through YouTube's monetization program. Thus, they try to create creative and unique content to draw the attention of viewers. In this context, they employ the cross-dressing theme as a way to attract viewers.

Arif Muhammad or well-known as Mak Beti is one of the pioneers of cross-dressing content on social media. His captivating content has garnered a significant following on YouTube with his channel amassing an impressive 15s million subscribers. As a result, he holds one of the top three positions in terms of the highest number of subscribers in the comedy category among Indonesian YouTube channels in 2020.<sup>83</sup> He succeeds to captivate audiences with his diverse character portrayal

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<sup>83</sup> Didik Hariyanto and Aninda Pinasti Putri Mariyanto, "Motif Menonton Vlog 'Keluarga Beti' Channel Youtube Arif Muhammad," *Kanal: Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi* 8, no. 2 (March 1, 2020): p 68, <https://doi.org/10.21070/kanal.v8i2.264>.

attracting a wide range of viewers who appreciate his comedic talent and unique approach to cross-dressing content. Arif presents his content in the form of a series with an average duration of 15-20 minutes. The stories revolve around the life of Mak Beti and the people surrounding him in Binjai and highlight the realities of everyday life. In the series, various forms of satire, criticism, and moral messages are interwoven with humor.

The story revolves around Mak Beti, a Batak woman renowned for her straightforward speaking ways. He appears in the white *songkok* (head scarf) and negligee. Besides, he also portrays other characters such as Pak Sutris, Beti's husband, who is a Javanese man characterized by his lazy disposition and personal issues, Beti as a female student in junior high school who always wears *hijab*, Martha and Merlin as Beti's friends, Wak Sellow as *pecel* –salad with peanut sauce- seller which is identical with slow speaking way, Wak Keling as black skin, curly hair, grumpy stall owner, and so forth. Throughout the series, Arif embodies a total of 33 different characters, with the majority of them being women.<sup>84</sup> For these roles, he engages in cross-dressing to enliven the characters. His versatile portrayal of diverse characters adds depth and dimension to the narratives allowing the audience to engage with a wide range of perspectives and experiences.

Arif began to make content when he worked in Abu Dhabi, Saudi Arabia. In 2013, Arif decided to work in Abu Dhabi to improve his family's financial situation. He started his journey in the city, seeking a job that aligned with his education. Eventually, he worked as a domestic helper and housekeeper in a hotel. Being far away from his family, Arif naturally felt homesick and missed his family. He missed his hometown, Binjai and reminisced it frequently. Inspired by his longing for his hometown, Arif came up with the idea of creating videos that captured the essence of

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<sup>84</sup> Podcast *Aman Aja* between Karin Novilda and Arif Muhammad, uploaded on 17 November 2022.

village life, showcasing the people and their daily activities.<sup>85</sup> The concept of these videos reflected the daily life in Binjai Medan. The uniqueness of his parody video lies in the fact that he portrays all the characters using his own face. Initially, Arif adopted this concept to avoid excessive expenses on hiring actors. However, this concept has continued to be employed up to the present time.

Arif decided to use his @arifmuhammadd\_ account to entertain people with humorous videos. He began to upload his short videos on his Instagram with limited equipment and basic techniques. He tried to create a parody video with the character of Mak Beti. Getting positive responses, Arif realized the importance of incorporating positive elements into his videos. In the subsequent videos, he began to insert messages of kindness and virtue values without dismissing the humor that made him popular. Arif started sharing content that contained meaningful messages and provided benefits to the viewers. When uploading videos, Arif always strives to innovate which has contributed to the popularity of his Instagram account among users. His videos quickly went viral on social media and drove him to fame. In the end, he made the decision to return to Indonesia and build his career on the YouTube platform utilizing the character of Mak Beti.

Notwithstanding, Arif Muhammad did not always have a smooth journey while building his career on the YouTube platform. In the beginning, he faced opposition from his parents who were unhappy to see their son changing clothes to portray female characters for YouTube videos. However, over time, Arif Muhammad managed to convince his parents that what he was doing was simply a form of artistic performance. He also emphasized that the content had the potential to generate income and support his family's financial situation at the time.<sup>86</sup> Eventually, Arif got the permission and

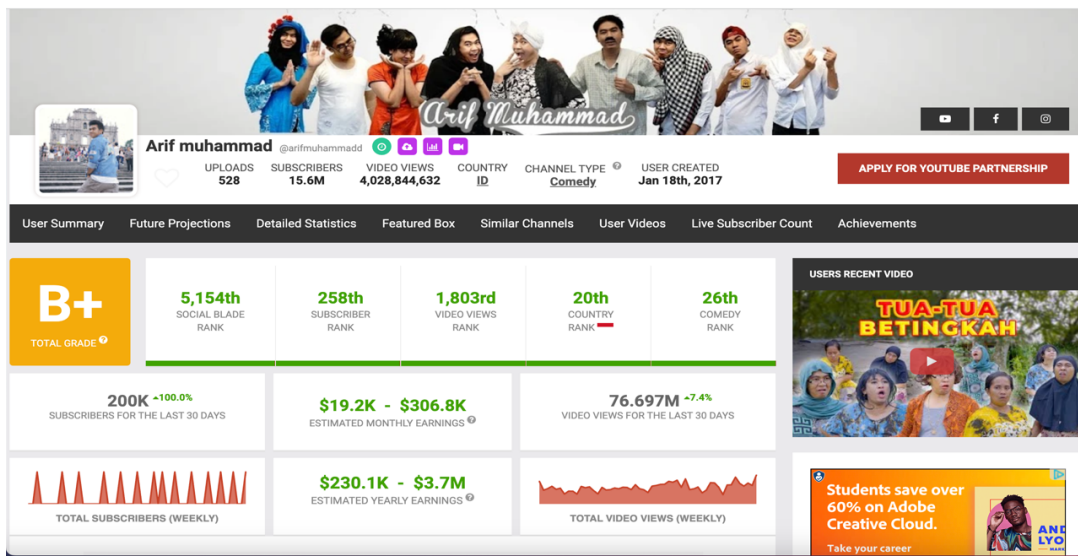
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<sup>85</sup> Kompas Cyber Media, "Asal Muasal Mak Beti, Berawal dari Rindu Kampung Halaman hingga Pertentangan Orangtua Halaman all," KOMPAS.com, November 1, 2020, <https://www.kompas.com/hype/read/2020/11/01/072400366/asal-muasal-mak-beti-berawal-dari-rindu-kampung-halaman-hingga-pertentangan>.

<sup>86</sup> Podcast *Aman Aja* between Karin Novilda and Arif Muhammad, uploaded on 17 November 2022.

blessings of his mother. Besides, there were many netizens who bullied him because his content was perceived as reinforcing stereotypes about effeminate men or gay before but changed their responses after knowing the challenge faced by Arif when he produced the videos.

To date, Arif has gained 15.6 million followers on YouTube with 528 total videos. All his videos on his YouTube account have been watched about 4,028,844,632 times since January 2017. Based on the statistic below (Figure 3.1), he still got mass engagement from the viewers. He gained 76.697 million views for the last 30 days and 200,000 subscribers for last 30 days.



**Figure 3. 1** Arif Muhammad's YouTube statistic (summary profiles)  
<https://socialblade.com/youtube/c/arifmuhammadd>, accessed on 7 June 2023

Furthermore, it can be seen from the table that Arif consistently receives 2 million views on average on a daily basis. Sometimes, this number significantly increases on the day he uploads a new video. He typically uploads content twice a week. Similarly, weekly and monthly average of video views also indicates steady engagement.

| YOUTUBE STATS SUMMARY / USER STATISTICS FOR ARIF MUHAMMAD (2023-05-25 - 2023-06-07) |     |             |        |             |               |                    |
|---|-----|-------------|--------|-------------|---------------|--------------------|
| DATE  |     | SUBSCRIBERS |        | VIDEO VIEWS |               | ESTIMATED EARNINGS |
| 2023-05-25  | Thu | -           | 15.5M  | +1,922,550  | 3,996,061,894 | \$481 - \$7.7K     |
| 2023-05-26  | Fri | -           | 15.5M  | +2,774,811  | 3,998,836,705 | \$694 - \$11.1K    |
| 2023-05-27  | Sat | -           | 15.5M  | +2,190,673  | 4,001,027,378 | \$548 - \$8.8K     |
| 2023-05-28  | Sun | -           | 15.5M  | +2,116,852  | 4,003,144,230 | \$529 - \$8.5K     |
| 2023-05-29  | Mon | -           | 15.5M  | -           | 4,003,144,230 | \$0 - \$0          |
| 2023-05-30  | Tue | -           | 15.5M  | +1,732,701  | 4,004,876,931 | \$433 - \$6.9K     |
| 2023-05-31  | Wed | -           | 15.5M  | +5,080,737  | 4,009,957,668 | \$1.3K - \$20.3K   |
| 2023-06-01  | Thu | -           | 15.5M  | +2,619,363  | 4,012,577,031 | \$655 - \$10.5K    |
| 2023-06-02  | Fri | -           | 15.5M  | -           | 4,012,577,031 | \$0 - \$0          |
| 2023-06-03  | Sat | +100K       | 15.6M  | +3,678,404  | 4,016,255,435 | \$920 - \$14.7K    |
| 2023-06-04  | Sun | -           | 15.6M  | +2,416,653  | 4,018,672,088 | \$604 - \$9.7K     |
| 2023-06-05  | Mon | -           | 15.6M  | +3,383,965  | 4,022,056,053 | \$846 - \$13.5K    |
| 2023-06-06  | Tue | -           | 15.6M  | +6,788,579  | 4,028,844,632 | \$1.7K - \$27.2K   |
| 2023-06-07  | Wed | -           | 15.6M  | 🔴 LIVE      | 4,028,844,632 | \$0 - \$0          |
| Daily Averages  |     | ↔️          | +6.66K | +2,556,568  |               | \$639 - \$10.2K    |

**Table 3. 1** *YouTube stats summary for Arif Muhammad (25 August- 7 June 2023) from socialblade.com*

The data above-mentioned show that Arif Muhammad's content continues to be highly popular among his viewers. It means that the engagement generated from each posting is quite well. This suggests that Arif Muhammad's content receives positive reactions, despite his appearance in female attire in his videos.

Arif Muhammad's success in attracting subscribers and gaining popularity on YouTube is undoubtedly attributed to the creativity that he incorporates into his content while considering the benefits brought to his viewers. As a result, he sometimes includes Islamic values in his content reflecting his dedication to delivering positive messages to his audience. He tries to keep his followers and viewers engaged with his content by promoting themes related to Islam on certain occasions. The content he uploads sometimes promotes virtue values through messages about character, worship, and faith. One can see that his content presents messages or information in the form of a one-minute videogram that is uniquely packaged, visually appealing, and easily understandable for followers and viewers. The uploaded videos are simple and depict everyday life situations enabling followers and viewers to easily grasp the core message conveyed in the videogram content.

Arif Muhammad in his interview contends that he attempts to convey diverse content and follows what is currently popular. He constantly addresses current trends and significant issues in his videos making them engaging and accessible for audiences of all ages. For example, during Independence Day or the holy month of Ramadan, he creates videograms about celebrating Independence Day by raising flags, expressing gratitude, and sending prayers to the heroes, as well as fasting during the sacred month of Ramadan. He links the content to religious tenets to strengthen his content. Most of the content revolves around stories about the relationship between mother and daughter, how to respect parents, *hijab*, and the reality of daily life.<sup>87</sup>

The second influencer who also wears *hijab* frequently in his content is Fadlan Holao. Born in 2000, Fadlan began his career as a content creator on the TikTok platform. He initially created several parody videos of famous celebrities in Indonesia. His videos went viral when he tried to portray various occupations, such as cashier at Indomart (a convenience store chain), gas station attendant, pharmacist, and more. These videos went viral due to his exceptional acting skills in embodying these professions. As a result, he gained recognition as a TikToker by many people.<sup>88</sup> His career is getting bigger in the entertainment realm, as evidenced by his involvement in several films, web series, dramas, and reality shows.

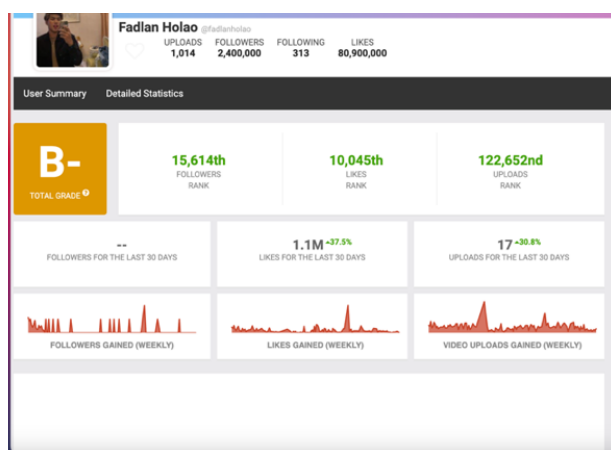
Furthermore, he started expanding his content into Instagram and YouTube. To date, he reached 600.000s followers on Instagram and 2.4 million followers on TikTok with a good engagement rate (see Figure 3.3. and Figure 3.4). His videos mostly consist of short-duration videos and embrace a point-of-view style that serves content based on the character's viewpoint. On certain occasions, Fadlan has showcased his talent by

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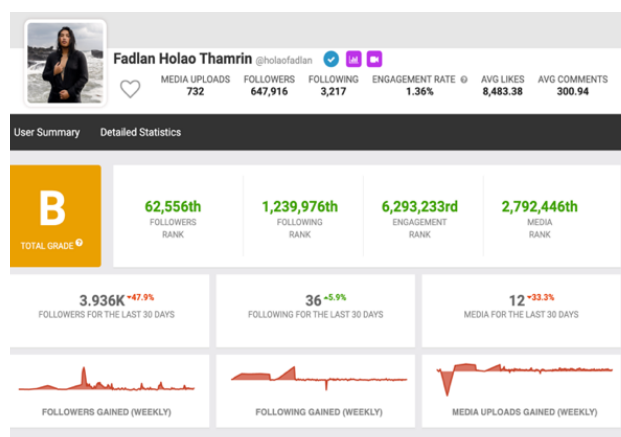
<sup>87</sup> Pramita Dewi Suryatna, "Pesan Dakwah Melalui Media Instagram: Analisis Isi Videogram Pada Akun Instagram @arifmuhamadd\_ Cerita Mak Beti Periode Desember 2018- Mei 2019." (Bandung, UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, 2019), p 66.

<sup>88</sup> "Profil Fadlan Holao, Selebgram yang Sempat Unggah Foto Tangan Disayat," kumparan, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://kumparan.com/berita-hari-ini/profil-fadlan-holao-selebgram-yang-sempat-unggah-foto-tangan-disayat-1vERW7NRhyJ>.

parodying Mamah Dedeh, a well-known female preacher in Indonesia. He has managed to imitate Mamah Dedeh with humorous expressions and convincing acting capturing the essence of her character and gestures in an entertaining way. He frequently acted as a mother figure who always scold her daughters and join in *qasida* (Islamic devotional songs sung by a group of women) group. In these performances, Fadlan brings a comedic touch to the character highlighting the dynamics and humor found in everyday family and community interactions.

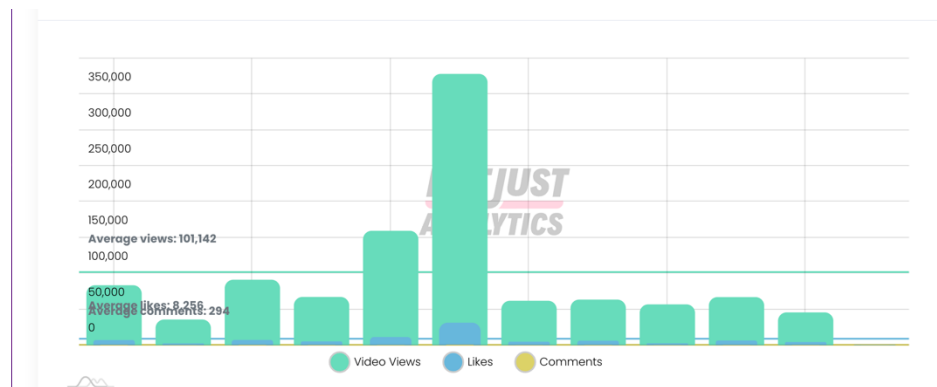


**Figure 3. 2** *Fadlan's TikTok statistic (summary from profiles) from socialblade.com on July 2023*



**Figure 3. 3** *Fadlan's Instagram profile statistic from socialblade.com accessed on 7 June 2023*

Based on the data, Fadlan consistently receives a significant number of viewers for each video he uploads on Instagram with an average view count of around 100,000s with average likes of around 8000s (see Figure 3.4). He regularly releases content two to three times a week while preserving his unique style to maintain his engagement with viewers. No wonder, his contents are still enjoyed by many viewers.



**Figure 3. 4** Average views, likes, and comments on Fadlan’s content on Instagram from notjustanalytics.com accessed on 7 June 2023

Due to his role as woman, he often appears with hijab and female attire in his content. Likewise, Fadlan’s appearance in real life often gives off a feminine impression. He has long flowing hair and even presented himself in a feminine manner wearing clothing that was typically associated with women. At the beginning of his career, he identified himself as a non-binary person. He contended in a podcast that he started looking like a woman while studying in the United States and began his career as an influencer with that appearance. However, in 2021, he got pressure from netizens regarding his appearance and gender identity, which may have made him feel stressed or uncomfortable. In response to this pressure, he decided to cut his hair.<sup>89</sup> This decision might be an attempt to express his real identity or as a response to the social pressure that he was experiencing. However, in 2022, he chose to return to a feminine

<sup>89</sup> *Gue Bukan Cowo.. Bukan Cewe!!*. Fadlan Holao- Deddy Corbuzier Podcast, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYg9BxlIBG8>.

appearance with long hair and feminine gestures and once referred to himself as a sissy jokingly.<sup>90</sup> Intriguingly, as I observed on his account, there is no comment that criticizes his appearance with hijab and his status as non-binary recently. It shows that the viewers are more inclusive about the gender matter and perhaps they just care about the entertaining side of content.

### **3.2 Motives Beyond Engaging in Cross-Dressing Accounts**

Cross-dressing in Indonesia is often considered taboo and stigmatized as violating prevalent norms, mainly because it is associated with being transgender and the broader LGBT community. It makes sense given the religious nature of Indonesian Muslim society grasps the moral values and religious norms firmly and tries to preserve them in society life. They tend to refuse tradition defying their principles. However, there is a noticeable difference in how cross-dressing is perceived on social media platforms. Users tend to be more accepting and open to cross-dressing content, especially when it involves humor and Islamic symbols.

Interestingly, cross-dressing accounts presenting parodies incorporating Islamic symbols, particularly the hijab in social media show greater engagement. Surprisingly, these accounts have gained a large following and received numerous positive comments. This phenomenon definitely raises a question about what motivates viewers to watch cross-dressing content on social media, despite it potentially conflicting with their personal principles. They undoubtedly had certain motives when they decide to watch certain content. This motive comes from the audiences' necessity that ought to be fulfilled by social media. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch have postulated that audiences actively choose what they watch on social media to align with their needs. Through uses and gratification theory, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch argued that audiences use mass media with specific motives and subsequently social

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<sup>90</sup> *Fleksibel!! Fadlan Holao Bisa Jadi Cowo, Bisa Jadi Cewe!! Bebas!!*, Podcast of Ngobrol Asix with Azriel, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQ9blf0Ao2Q>.

media attempts to fulfill these motives and satisfy their expectations.<sup>91</sup> Rather than focusing on the messages conveyed, this theory focuses on the audiences as active consumers of social media. They seek the contents, watch them, and respond to them differently due to different experiences and different values embraced.

Furthermore, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch elucidate five basic assumptions of use and gratification theory. First, audiences are active consumers who determine the contents that they want to enjoy based on their needs. When social media serves content aligning with the interest of audiences, it means that social media is effective and capable of meeting the needs of the audience. Second, audiences can determine freely what content they will watch to meet their necessity. The initiative is fully in their hand. Third, the media is not the only source of fulfilling needs. Fourth, audiences realize their interest in the use of social media and the algorithm will direct based on data supplied by themselves. Fifth, the judgment of the contents of social media is carried on by audiences.<sup>92</sup> These basic assumptions reflect the interaction between media and the users which users are not passive entities. They become the determinants of media and content selection. In addition, McQuail mentions that there are several needs-based motives that drive audiences to use social media, such as the need for grasping information, the need for shaping identity through media consumption by seeking the role model for instance, the need for maintaining relationships and social connections with others, and the need for a source of entertainment.<sup>93</sup>

In the context of interaction between audiences and cross-dressing content, one can find different motives driving the audience to enjoy this content. I conducted the research regarding motives of viewers in enjoying cross-dressing content. Previously, I choose two accounts of cross-dressing on social media as my study case. The first

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<sup>91</sup> Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch, "Uses and Gratifications Research," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1974): p 511.

<sup>92</sup> Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, p 511.

<sup>93</sup> Denis McQuail and Mark Deuze, *McQuail's Media and Mass Communication Theory* (SAGE, 2020), p 320.

account is Arif Muhammad's YouTube channel which has around 15 million subscribers. Besides having a large number of followers, I decided to choose this account because Arif is one of the pioneering content creators in cross-dressing content and he has consistently developed his cross-dressing character up until now. The second account is Fadlan Holao's Instagram and TikTok which has a considerable following of approximately 600,000 followers on Instagram and 2.4 million on TikTok. I gathered primary data by observing social media platforms, distributing questionnaires to their viewers, and conducting interviews with some viewers.

The data reflects that desire to watch videos on social media is influenced by different motives. A total of 41% of respondents admitted that they are interested in Mak Beti and Fadlan's content because they find it funny and entertaining. They release the tension and escape from the hurly burly of reality by seeking entertainment on social media. Other reasons that also attract them include the creative presentation of the content (21%) and the depiction of everyday life realities, which makes them feel relatable (21%). Interestingly, 11% of respondents mentioned that they are drawn to Mak Beti's content because it showcases *da'wa* and universal values. The data shows that viewers have full agency to choose the content enjoyed and use the media for their own needs and obtain gratification when their needs are fulfilled.

The interview also showcases similar results. Out of the 15 people surveyed, the majority contended that entertainment sparked their interest in Mak Beti and Fadlan's content. For the remaining respondents, the reasons for their interest in Mak Beti's and Fadlan's content are varied. Some have mentioned factors such as relatability to the content, appreciation for creativity, and moral values delivered in the content. Tomo (27) maintains that Mak Beti always performed the trending issues in his content. Thus, he admits that Mak Beti is a figure that portrays real-life everyday situations and incorporates numerous lessons within the content.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, Joni (28)

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<sup>94</sup> Interview with Tomo (pseudonym), 27 years old

also states that Mak Beti sometimes delivered moral and religious values flexibly in an entertaining way.<sup>95</sup> Besides, Arifi (19) captures the creativity of Mak Beti who serves simple and light-hearted drama, hence it definitely portrays the reality of life.<sup>96</sup> Another reason mentioned by the interlocutor is due to curiosity. Reski (30) admitted that he was curious about the parody content presented by Fadlan when his content appear on her Instagram Explore.<sup>97</sup>

In essence, the motives of audiences affect the selection of content on social media. They will decide to watch certain content to fulfill their needs and obtain gratification. The motives definitely varied depending on the audience itself. Based on the motives proposed by McQuail earlier, one can conclude that the motives that drive viewers to engage with cross-dressing content are mostly audience-centric where the viewers have full control. The decision to watch cross-dressing content is driven by their own needs and desires, such as the need for entertainment, personal identity expression, social interaction, and information. In this research, entertainment emerges as the primary motive that motivates the majority of viewers to watch cross-dressing content. Besides, viewers are also obtaining information from cross-dressing content because the content serves moral values implicitly. Some comments in this account imply their satisfaction with messages and lessons presented by content creators. For instance, one of the comments in Fadlan's video "Do not date" indicates that the audiences are aware that they have to protect themselves from fornication as Islamic tenets command (see Figure 3.6). In addition, these accounts serve as a platform for the audience to interact with each other and create dialogue in the virtual space. In this case, media serves as means of fulfilling social needs. Lastly, the motive can be linked to the need for shaping personal identity by seeking inspiration on social media. Some comments reflect their admiration toward the content creator (see Figure 3.5).

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<sup>95</sup> Interview with Joni (pseudonym), 28 years old

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Arifi, 19 years old

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Reski, 30 years old



**Figure 3. 5** *The comment on Fadlan's content shows that viewers praise him*



**Figure 3. 6** *The comment shows that viewers are aware that letting people do khalwa (seclusion) is sinful*

The last point that I want to discuss here is about uses and gratification theory itself. Motive certainly is an important aspect driving audiences to choose certain content in media and audiences definitely are active entities who decide what kind of content will be consumed by themselves. However, one cannot negate the power of social media to attract audiences. The content itself has the allure and persona to draw the attention of audiences. This explanation perhaps directs to the hypodermic needle

theory, which is in contrast to the uses and gratification theory. The hypodermic needle theory coined by Lasswell suggests that the media has significant control over a passive audience.<sup>98</sup> It is believed that the media has the power to influence the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of the audience similar to injecting ideas and information into their minds like a hypodermic needle. Rather than considering the media as an active entity and the audience as a passive entity or vice versa, I tend to argue that media and audiences in tandem create a dynamic interplay and pull each other. Both of them are active players. It can be said that the media and the audience stand at the same meeting point at a certain time. When the audience needs media to meet their needs, the media offers the persona looked for by the audience, resulting in an interaction between them.

### **3.3 Viewers' Attitude toward Cross-dressing Contents**

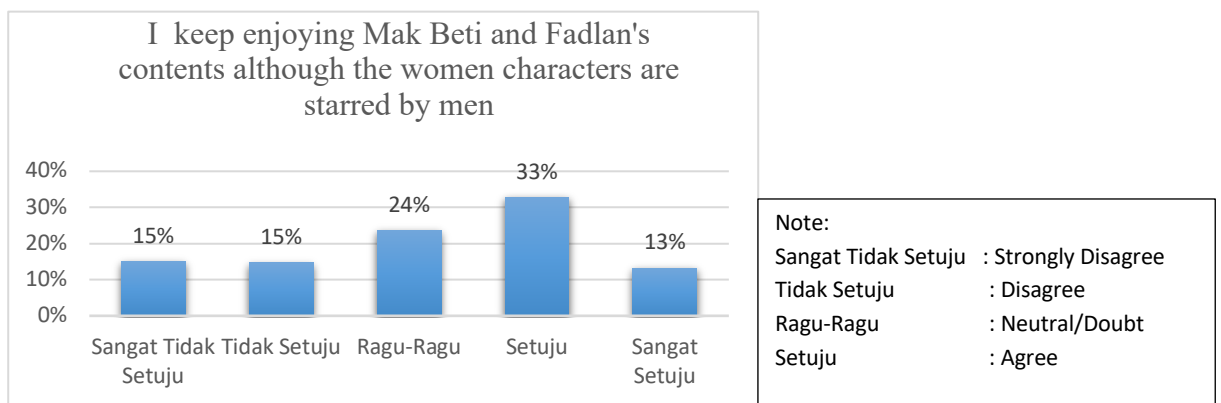
As I alluded to earlier, although cross-dressing is stigmatized negatively among Muslims in Indonesia, it shows different reactions on social media. Evidently, the contents of cross-dressing are watched million times and their existence is getting proliferation recently. Many content creators eventually join the trend of crossdressing content parodying woman with hijab, especially on Instagram and TikTok considering the promising prospects and higher audience engagement. This case shows that enormous people indirectly give validation on the existence of this practice in the digital realm.

From the data that I obtain, most respondents are not reluctant to enjoy this content. They are unconsciously being permissive to this content on behalf of entertainment considering they enjoy and watch it repetitively. About 46% of respondents admit that they keep enjoying Mak Beti and Fadlan's content although they wear hijab and negligee in starring their characters. Subsequently, 30% of respondents imply discomfort when watching cross-dressing content. The remaining 24% choose to be neutral (see Figure 3.7). The same result is also reflected in another

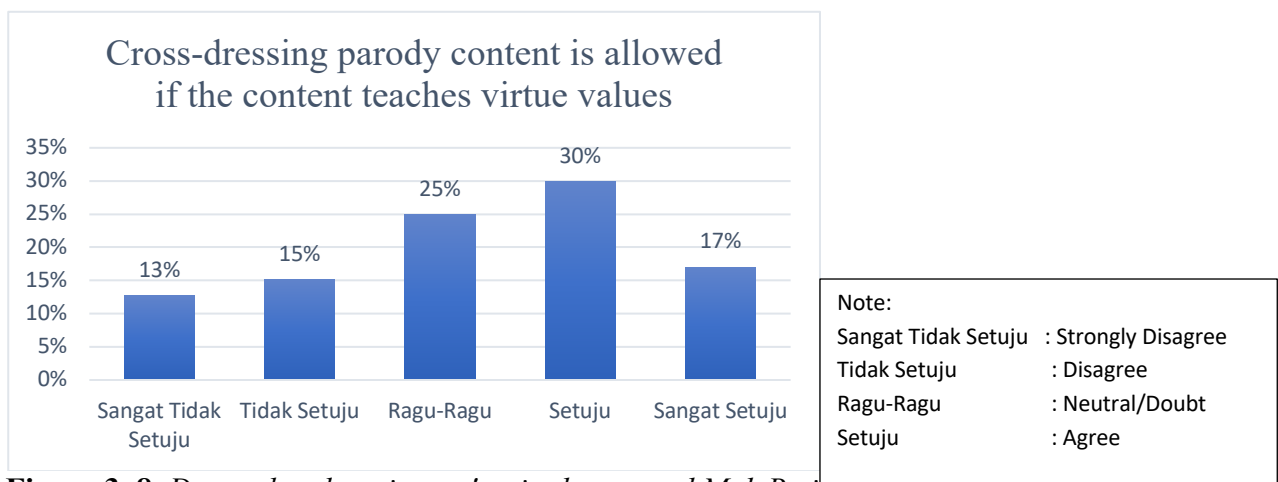
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<sup>98</sup> See Harold D. Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (Ravenio Books, 1927).

question regarded their feeling toward the existence of cross-dressing content on social media which 45% of respondents admit that they do not feel disturbed by the presence of cross-dressing contents on social media. Furthermore, the data also showcase their acceptance of cross-dressing content with some excuses such as for entertainment and performing arts. They also tend to accept it if the content teaches virtue values (see Figure 3.8.). As can be seen from the data, 47% of respondents show their agreement toward the presence of cross-dressing content which contains moral values. About 25% of respondents answered with neutral responses while the rest consistently disagreed with cross-dressing content regardless of the reasons.



**Figure 3. 7** Data related to viewers' attitudes toward Mak Beti and Fadlan contents



**Figure 3. 8** Data related to viewers' attitudes toward Mak Beti and Fadlan contents

In parallel, the result of interviews and observation of comments also demonstrate the acceptance of cross-dressing content on social media. 9 out of 15 interlocutors contend that they consider it an ordinary phenomenon because it is simply part of the content landscape. Farhan (29) maintains that he views Mak Beti just as a character and it does not matter to him.<sup>99</sup> Joni (28) shares a similar sentiment stating that cross-dressing content is acceptable as long as it serves the purpose of entertainment and livelihood.<sup>100</sup> Ressa (22) adds that she is not bothered by such content but believes that there should still be boundaries as long as it does not harm other people and violate the norms.<sup>101</sup> For example, if the content intends to educate or remind, it is acceptable. However, if it becomes deviant or disrespectful, it is a different story. In addition, Nana (26) mentions that the parody performed by Fadlan can become the intermediary to spread Mama Dedeh's da'wa widely, especially for the millennials in a creative way.<sup>102</sup> Most of the comments on their account also show supporting responses for content creators.

Furthermore, the data also imply that the younger generation tends to respond to this phenomenon as something common and normal because this kind of content is already mushrooming on social media although they consider cross-dressing as violating religious norms.<sup>103</sup> They exhibit a more inclusive mindset. Arifi (19) also mentions that it is their right to create content including cross-dressing content and other people just should respect them. However, they have to avoid going to extremes, for instance, undergoing a complete identity change to become transgender.<sup>104</sup> Their assumptions reflect the significance of media's influence on shaping perception, habit,

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<sup>99</sup> Interview with Farhan (pseudonym), 29 years old

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Joni (pseudonym), 28 years old

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Ressa, 22 years old

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Nana (pseudonym), 26 years old

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Zahra, 16 years old

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Arifi , 19 years old

and behaviors, particularly in the generation of millennials and Z who are mostly digital savvies.

From the earlier explanation, it can be concluded that the audience on social media tends to be more open and permissive towards sensitive issues compared to real-life society. This case indirectly demonstrates the power of social media to shift existing perceptions. The power of content offered by content creators also to some extent also determines the level of engagement and acceptance from the audience. The success of Arif Muhammad and Fadlan Holao in gaining popularity through their cross-dressing content is undoubtedly influenced by their creativity and discipline in maintaining engagement with their audience. Their work on social media reflects the phenomenon of McDonaldization. This concept was coined by George Ritzer focusing on the process representing the characteristic of fast-food restaurants -efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control- in various aspects of life.<sup>105</sup> The existence of social media helps the process of McDonaldization massively indeed. Therefore, content creators such as Arif Muhammad and Fadlan Holao tap into this chance to amplify their position as influencers. Social media serves as a comfort platform for them to spread content effectively and efficiently. The character of calculability is shown through their discipline to create content routinely two to three times per week. This step is needed to maintain their interaction with their viewers. Their content also performs their uniqueness differing from other content creators. Thus, viewers are able to predict and make expectations for their content. This is part of the predictability dimension of their content. Lastly, the control dimension emphasizes the utilization of technology -in this case social media- controlled directly by content creators. These five dimensions are arguably reflected in how Arif Muhammad and Fadlan Holao manage their accounts and contents, thus their contents radiate the allure for audiences.

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<sup>105</sup> George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society: Into the Digital Age*, 9th ed. (California: Sage Publications Inc, 2018), p 5.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE IMPACT OF ENGAGEMENT IN CROSS-DRESSING CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA TOWARD SOCIETAL PERCEPTION

The inclusive tendency of Indonesian Muslims in responding to the phenomenon of cross-dressing on social media certainly brings about consequences and impacts, at least changes in individual perceptions that are getting loose towards cross-dressing - a stance that differs from their former generation-. These impacts encompass shifts in gender aspects, religious symbols, and psychological dissonance.

#### 4.1 The Ambivalence and Incongruity

If someone has to describe the public opinion of Indonesian Muslims regarding cross-dressing in reality, it could be said that cross-dressing experiences long-term aphasia and uncertainty.<sup>106</sup> Its presence still carries a negative stigma within society. Cross-dressing may not be widely accepted in the actual realm, but the expression of cross-dressing in the virtual realm has become increasingly diverse. The contents of cross-dressing are mushrooming on social media indicating high engagement from netizens. The significant difference in responses to cross-dressing in reality and the virtual realm is probably reasonable. While cross-dressing content that is wrapped in comedy and moral messages is well-received by the audiences of social media, the image of cross-dressers wearing *hijab* in the actual realm is getting deteriorated due to criminal acts committed by perpetrators who disguise themselves as women. Back in 2019, the public was shocked by a series of thefts committed by the *cross-hijaber* community. Their presence also engenders restlessness among women. It was reported that a man

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<sup>106</sup> Shuya Hao and Weili Zi, "Research on Images of Cross-Dresser from the Perspective of Androgyny," *Chinese Studies* 8, no. 3 (August 9, 2019): p 93, <https://doi.org/10.4236/chnstd.2019.83008>.

wearing *hijab* entered the mosque and sat in women's *shaf* (section in salat) thus his act disturbed the privacy of women. They were even not reluctant to enter places that are typically reserved for women, such as woman's restrooms.<sup>107</sup> Meanwhile, cross-dressing content seasoned with comedy is easily accepted because people deem it as an imaginary possibility. In addition, the moral message implied in the content amplifies the belief of audiences that the content is beneficial and worth watching.

It is also important to note that the emergence of cross-dressing - *cross-hijaber* in this case- for the majority of Muslims in Indonesia is perceived as deviating from religious norms associated with sacred attributes and socio-cultural norms related to gender. *Hijab* serves as a means to differentiate between Muslim women and non-Muslims as well as distinguish between men and women.<sup>108</sup> Additionally, the *hijab* carries cultural significance as a symbol of Muslim identity. The presence of *cross-hijabers* is seen as blurring this distinction and creating a negative image of Islam by violating established *sharia* laws. Wulandari conducted research on the responses of Muslims toward cross-dressing phenomenon in reality. Some of them consider it insulting to women, deviating from nature, lack of confidence in what they got from God, a disorder, and degrading *hijab* as a religious symbol.<sup>109</sup>

In line with the data that I gained, 52% of respondents agree with the notion of cross-dressing as something taboo and a form of deviation (see Figure 4.1). Similarly, when I asked them about their opinions regarding men who wear women's attire generally, 57% of respondents viewed cross-dressing as a violation of religious norms, regardless of the reasons (see Figure 4.2). The corresponding conclusion is

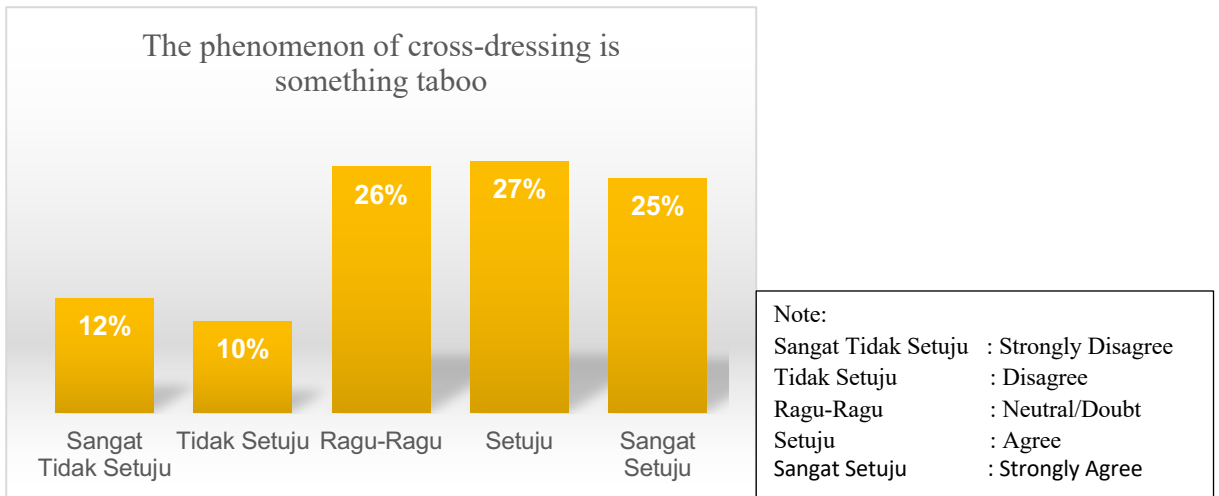
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<sup>107</sup> Tim detikcom, "Fenomena Crosshijaber Jadi Ancaman Nyata," detiknews, 20 October 2019, accessed July 15, 2023, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4752764/fenomena-crosshijaber-jadi-ancaman-nyata>.

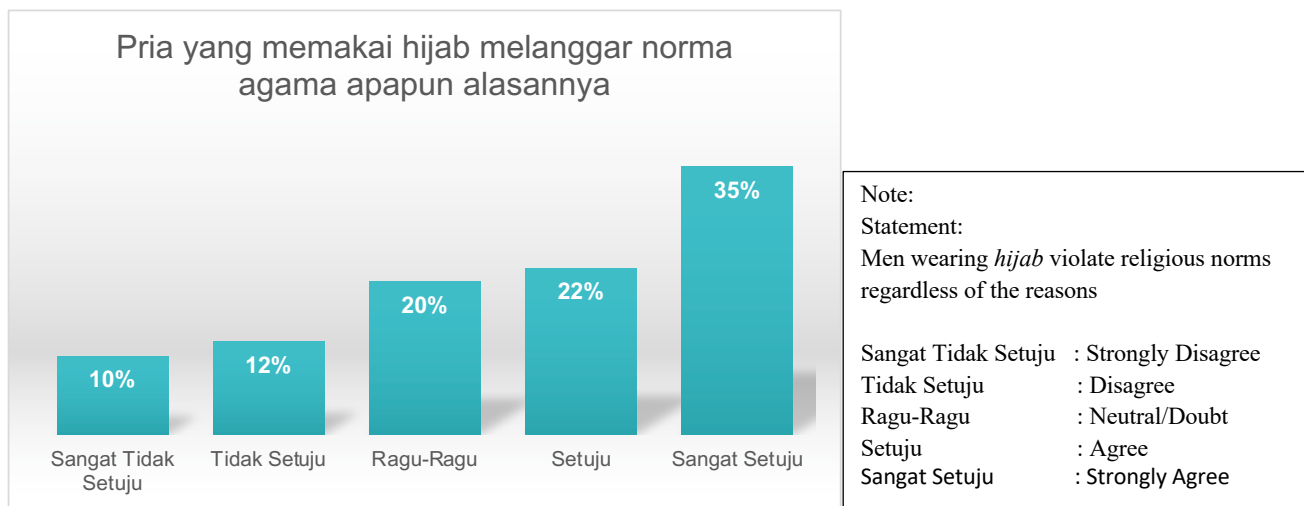
<sup>108</sup> Hamdan Hidayat, "Crosshijaber antara Trend dan Gejolak Sosial (Analisis Perilaku Crosshijaber Perspektif Al-Qur'an dan Psikologi), p 194,

<sup>109</sup> Muflikha Silvi Wulandari, "Perilaku Cross Hijaber Dan Komunitas Hijrahku Di Pekalongan Jawa Tengah" (undergraduate, UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, 2020), p 38–40.

demonstrated by interview results which all of interlocutors maintain that cross-dressing practice in actual realm is transgressing religious norm and ethical standards.



**Figure 4. 1** Data related to respondents' perception toward cross-dressing



**Figure 4. 2** Data related to respondents' perception toward cross-dressing

Meanwhile, a quite significant number of respondents expressed uncertainty in this case. This could indicate that they position themselves as neutral and do not lean towards either agreement or disagreement. However, it can also be interpreted that they do not fully understand the notion being presented, hence they do not have a clear answer that represents their opinion. They may genuinely feel unsure and uncertain about their response because the statement relates to principles and values.

To sum up, the practice of cross-dressing in the actual realm among Muslim society in Indonesia is still perceived as taboo indeed. They tend to feel uncomfortable when they meet directly with cross-dressers. I argue that the negative stigma towards cross-dressing in the reality of Muslims in Indonesia remains strong, particularly due to religious prohibitions against *tashabbuh* (resembling the appearance of the opposite gender). As a result, cross-dressing is considered unlawful and unacceptable. On the other hand, they keep engaging in cross-dressing contents on social media as if they accept their presence albeit only in the virtual realm. The significant engagement of cross-dressing accounts also shows that viewers are not reluctant to their presence on social media. This case indicates the ambivalence and incongruity between principle and reality. Schielke contends that there is a certain tendency to reflect Islam as a perfectionist ethical project of self-discipline for Muslims, but they do not always follow morality.<sup>110</sup> Their ideal morals and their everyday lives often show incongruity, ambiguity, complexity, and dissonance.

Furthermore, Schielke with his grand scheme theory argues that Islam is not the sole comprehensive moral framework that directs the lives of Muslims. Instead, there are multiple moral systems that influence Muslims' subjectivity so-called moral registers such as social justice, community and family, love and romance, good character, self-realization, and religion itself.<sup>111</sup> Sometimes these moral registers contradict each other leading to ambiguity and lack of consistency in adhering to their religion. His theory was inspired by Egyptian youth who played soccer in Ramadhan while they still maintained their fasting and after passing Ramadhan, they began to do immoral acts such as grabbing women.<sup>112</sup> This case articulates that Muslims aim to be pious and follow their religious principle consciously and consistently but sometimes

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<sup>110</sup> Samuli Schielke, "Second Thoughts About the Anthropology of Islam, or How to Make Sense of Grand Schemes in Everyday Life," p 44.

<sup>111</sup> Samuli Schielke, "Being Good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, Fragmentation, and the Moral Self in the Lives of Young Egyptians," p 530.

<sup>112</sup> Samuli Schielke, "Ambivalent Commitments: Troubles of Morality, Religiosity and Aspiration among Young Egyptians," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 39, no. 2 (2009): p 159.

they engage in immoral behaviors. It is criticizing what was emphasized by Mahmood who focuses on cultivating piety without looking at the ambiguity happening in that process of cultivation and judging other morality and religion as a coherent system.<sup>113</sup>

In this context, ambivalence emerges when the viewers still enjoy cross-dressing contents on social media but at the same time, they hold the principle that cross-dressing is not allowed. Ewing addresses that ambivalence comes from contestation between self-idealism and societal values.<sup>114</sup> They consider Islamic values as ideal morals, but when they are faced with reality, sometimes they are influenced by other morals such as fun in this context. Furthermore, Schielke addresses that this ambivalence is an inevitability and normal that does not need to be contested as it leads to the fragmentation of society.<sup>115</sup> I go along with his argument that ambivalence is an inevitability in everyday life practices, as no Muslim is truly perfect. However, this ambivalence to a certain extent cannot be taken for granted and allowed to perpetuate as it can lead to a shift in societal paradigms in certain cases. Indeed, some cases such as playing soccer in Ramadhan or falling in love with another do not contradict religious convictions and do not need to be conflicted. Yet, in my case, people may eventually become more accepting of cross-dressing as a normal part of behavior.

Subsequently, I am supposed to point out that ambivalence is not solely coming from internal aspirations and society surrounding the individual, but it also can be propelled by social media. It is in line with what Slama contends that ambivalence is generated by media practices and new Islamic digital realms.<sup>116</sup> In this context, social media leads to different perceptions when someone sees cross-dressers directly and

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<sup>113</sup> Samuli Schielke, "Being Good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, Fragmentation, and the Moral Self in the Lives of Young Egyptians", p 525.

<sup>114</sup> Katherine P. Ewing, "The Illusion of Wholeness: Culture, Self and the Experience of Inconsistency," *Ethos* 18, no. 3 (January 1, 1990): p 252.

<sup>115</sup> Samuli Schielke, "Being Good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, Fragmentation, and the Moral Self in the Lives of Young Egyptians," p 534.

<sup>116</sup> Martin Slama and James B Hoesterey, "Ambivalence, Discontent, and Divides in Southeast Asia's Islamic Digital Realms: An Introduction," *CyberOrient* 15, no. 1 (2021): p 24.

through social media. They tend to be permissive toward cross-dressing in the digital realm and refuse the practice in the actual realm, thus they have to deal with ambivalence and ambiguity. As one of my interlocutors mentions that she once dealt with inner conflict when watching this content. “I think it does not matter to watch this content, but I know from religious subject in school that it is not allowed to resemble another sex’s appearance,” she said.<sup>117</sup> Khaira (23) also states that although this content is made for entertainment, it is still wrong and violates religious norms. Yet, she also contends that whenever she needs entertainment, she will watch that videos.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, Vera (29) explains the different feelings when she looks at cross-dressing directly in reality that she feels uncomfortable and when looks through content. She admits that she does not bother at all because it is solely for entertainment.<sup>119</sup>

#### **4.2 Normalizing Non-Conforming Practice and Gender Expression on Social Media**

Social media has led to normalizing cross-dressing when it is presented in a comedic manner. The context of cross-dressing content being perceived as mere entertainment for the majority of people makes it a daily consumption with minimal impact. However, the tendency to accept cross-dressing content on social media does not close the possibility to lead the acceptance of cross-dressing as non-conforming practice completely. It is underlaid to acceptance and reiteration will lead to habitus and habitus will lead to new construction of paradigm. Based on observation of accounts, I conceive that most of the followers or viewers are not reluctant to the appearance of cross-dressing influencers. They become fans of content creators and keep following their content. Hence, I presume that it does not close the possibility of assuming that the habitus to watch these contents repetitively indirectly and unconsciously leads to

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<sup>117</sup> Interview with Ressa (22).

<sup>118</sup> Interview with Khaira (23)

<sup>119</sup> Interview with Vera (pseudonym, 29)

the perception that they begin to be permissive toward cross-dressing, gender blurred, and desacralizing of religious symbols.

Speaking of habitus theory, Bourdieu addresses this theory as “a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions* and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks”.<sup>120</sup> It is formed through an individual's social experience, which includes their dispositions, patterns of action, and perceptions. Through socialization and repeated exposure, individuals gradually adopt certain ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. It is a consequence of involvement in certain repetitive social relationships. Bourdieu argues that these dispositions and habits shape the future practice of the individual. The internalization process occurs subtly and unconsciously, becoming a natural part of one's existence. Habitus is embedded and ingrained in individuals, influencing their daily lives through continuous and repeated enactment.

The high number of views for each video indicates that the content offered is well-received by the audience. This suggests that they also accept all aspects presented in the content, including the performers' appearances. Even though it is limited to social media, cross-dressing is gradually being accepted. By continuously consuming content with similar themes, it eventually becomes normalized. Occasionally, one may come across negative reactions to the content -in little amounts- and it turns out that they become a judgmental target from supporters of this account because they are considered close-minded people. This matter shows that perceptions can indeed change through continuous engagement.

Furthermore, cross-dressing perhaps serves as a form of resistance against patriarchal norms and toxic masculinity that dominate society. Cross-dressing can be

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<sup>120</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), p 83.

motivated by cultural values and self-expression, rather than solely driven by sexual gratification.<sup>121</sup> One of my interlocutors shared his opinion regarding Arif Muhammad mentioning that he continues to maintain his feminine appearance even in real life when meeting fans. He stated, “Initially, I saw Mak Beti just as a character, but over time, I noticed that his personality seemed to merge with it. It made me uncomfortable when he was invited to events and he still dressed as his female character. However, the audience cheered and showed their support at that time. I think when he meets fans, he should present himself as the real Arif. Perhaps, in the end, this has become a small part of his true character, which is expressed even in real life.”<sup>122</sup> In Fadlan's case, the expression of gender is perhaps more apparent. He regularly appears with his long hair and occasionally wears women's clothing indicating a tendency to display his slightly feminine nature in real life as well. In one of his podcast episodes, he jokingly remarked, “*Emang jiwanya banci tampil* (My soul is a sissy who loves performing indeed)”.<sup>123</sup>

### 4.3 Desacralizing Religious Symbols

As I mentioned in the earlier chapter, the presence of cross-dressing, particularly cross-*hijabers*, allows *hijab* which is a symbol of Muslim women's identity to be worn by anyone, including men who intend to fully capture the portrayal of women through their *hijab*. It amplifies that *hijab* nowadays is not solely reflecting a sacred religious symbol mirroring their chastity and covering their ‘*awra*, but also reflecting other mundane functions. One cannot deny the fact that people still believe that *hijab* is a symbol of Muslim women’s identity and appropriate just for women. Based on my data, it showcases that *hijab* continues to represent the identity of Muslim women about

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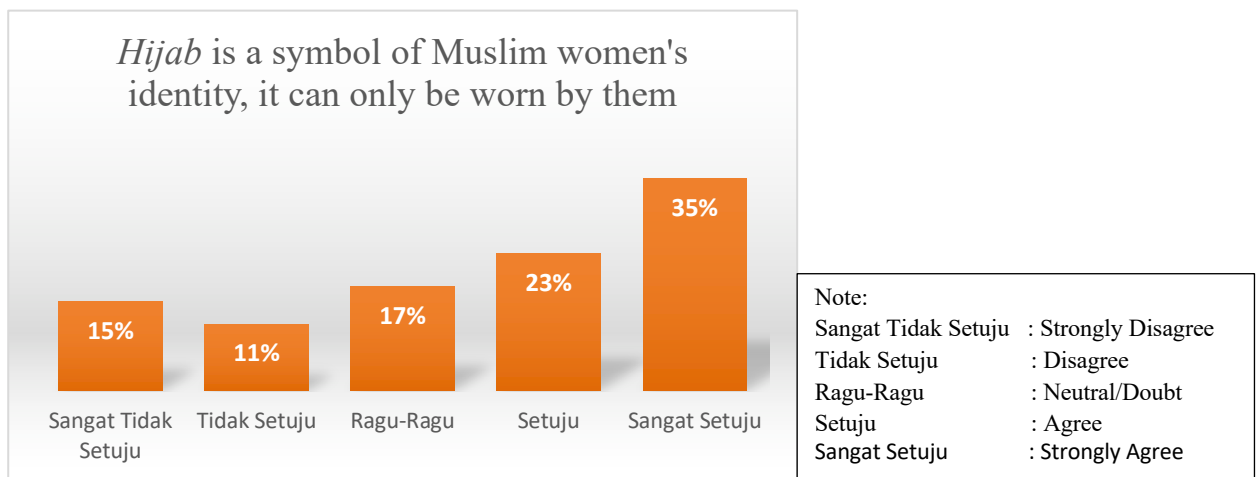
<sup>121</sup> Aly Mecca, Ahmad Fahrul Muchtar Affandi, and Gumilar Pratama, “Men With Hijab: Menetapkan Kejamakan Identitas Gender Cross-Hjaber di Media Sosial,” *Jurnal Sosial Humaniora* 15, no. 2 (December 30, 2022): 92, <https://doi.org/10.12962/j24433527.v0i0.14947>.

<sup>122</sup> Interview with Farhan (pseudonym, 29 years old)

<sup>123</sup> *Fleksibel!! Fadlan Holao Bisa Jadi Cowo, Bisa Jadi Cewe!! Bebas!!*, Podcast of Ngobrol Asix with Azriel, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQ9blf0Ao2Q>.

58% of respondents (see Figure 4.3). However, this primary function is accompanied by other functions. For content creators, *hijab* is considered a means to gain popularity and draw the attention of audiences. They know that anything that is wrapped in Islamic religious elements easily elicits significant responses and profits. It means that *hijab* is a commodity good that creates income for them. *Hijab* commodified by social media has been trapped in the mainstream of popular culture.

*Hijab* recently becomes part of lifestyle and fashion. It adheres to the prevailing fashion logic and follows the trend. Its presence in visual spaces has made *hijab* as a massive cultural trend to construct and express social identity. It showcases the expression of fashion consciousness and social status. Thus, *hijab* becomes more and more popular among women and an icon of the Muslim women trend. *Hijab* amplifies its position as a reflection of femininity associated with characteristics of gender.<sup>124</sup> Therefore, in order to establish a strong image in portraying women and resemble their femininity, cross-dressing content creators use *hijab* to convince their audience.



**Figure 4.3** Data representing respondents' perception toward *hijab*

<sup>124</sup> Yessy Hermawati, Aquarini Priyatna, and Muhamad Adji, "Hijab Fashion : Construction of Femininity and Identity of Muslim Women in Indonesia", p 3.

Based on the data, some respondents shared their views on the function of the hijab generally. Most of them consider *hijab* as an identity symbol and part of their lifestyle. Vera (29) mentions that the true function of the *hijab* is as the identity of Muslim women, but now it has shifted especially due to job demand.<sup>125</sup> People think that they have to change their appearance even to another sex's appearance to earn money as many content creators do.

The shifting of hijab function gradually occurs simultaneously with the shifting perception of people in viewing *hijab*. When *hijab* does not only represent religious symbols but also as commodity goods, it has lost some of its significance as a symbol and has become less meaningful. In addition, the proliferation of cross-*hijaber* content on social media amplifies the assumption that hijab is not sacred anymore.

#### **4.4 Inclusivity of Gender Attributes in Digital Realm**

Another impact engendered by the acceptance of cross-dressing on social media is the inclusivity and fluidity of gender attributes in the virtual space. *Hijab* which can be worn by anyone whatever their sex on social media showcases the fluidity of gender boundaries. It means that *the hijab* is no longer creating a boundary between men and women on social media. Even, one can find men with mustaches wearing *hijab* on social media nowadays. Feminine and masculine attributes ultimately become blurred.

The fluidity of masculine and feminine attributes is not a new phenomenon. Trouser is a proper example of this. In the past, trousers were exclusively worn by men, and this was the case in almost every part of the world. If a woman wore trousers, she would be considered a cross-dresser, such as the Amazons (the ancient female warriors in Greece culture) and female warriors in China. In Nigeria, women who wore trousers have come under verbal and physical attacks because they transgressed from traditional female roles.<sup>126</sup> Trousers have definitely become one of the most mentioned items of

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<sup>125</sup> Interview with Vera (pseudonym, 29 years old)

<sup>126</sup> Nwigwe, "Breaking the Code," 12.

female cross-dressing in the 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>127</sup> Similar to other attributes which are worn either by males or females such as earrings. Recently, unisex clothing lines are produced massively, thus it amplifies the inclusivity of gender attributes.

This is not surprising considering that gender boundaries themselves are not rigid. They are socially constructed and subject to change with time, place, and culture. Even, in the certain places and cultures, gender is not confined to male and female only. For instance, for Bugis tribe in South Sulawesi, they believe that there are five gender roles in society named *makkunrai* (cis female), *oroani* (cis male), *calalai* (transman), *calabai* (transwoman), and *bissu* (androgynous).<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, femininity, like masculinity, is a socially constructed concept that defines the behavior and appearance expected from women. It is characterized by softness and perceived as unstable, as it is shaped by cultural norms and patriarchal influences. However, the understanding and negotiation of femininity can change over time as societal and cultural contexts evolve. Thus, the shifting of gender attributes is highly likely to occur.

Based on data that I gained, although 58% of respondents admit that the gender boundary between male and female is still clear especially in actual realm, some interlocutors add that the shifting of gender attributes is getting apparent. For instance, Reski (30) states, “*Recently there is no difference between male and female’s attires because male wears female’s attire and vice versa, thus there is a shift and fluid in clothing matter indeed. Perhaps, hijab still shows the difference*”.<sup>129</sup> Farhan (29) adds that sometimes, symbols that were once considered markers of identity may no longer hold the same significance. For example, wearing earrings was traditionally associated with women, but nowadays it is common to see men wearing earrings, and society has become more accepting of this matter. Similarly, items like bracelets, rings, and jeans are no longer strictly associated with a specific gender. The boundaries around gender

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<sup>127</sup> Nwigwe, p 4.

<sup>128</sup> “Mengenal lima gender dalam Suku Bugis di Sulawesi yang kerap alami stigma dan diskriminasi,” *BBC News Indonesia*, accessed July 17, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/vert-tra-56854166>.

<sup>129</sup> Interview with Reski (30 years old)

identity are still clear, but there are instances where certain signs or attributes that were typically associated with one gender have become more blurred.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Interview with Farhan (pseudonym, 29 years old)

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **5.1 Concluding Remarks**

The phenomenon of cross-dressing has been omnipresent throughout history. However, its presence has also sparked considerable controversy in the midst of society. It raised negative backlash from people because it was considered breaking traditional norms and societal expectations. For the majority of Muslims, cross-dressing is regarded as violating religious norms because resembling another sex's appearance is unlawful based on Sunna. However, the visibility of cross-dressing on social media is getting clear.

In recent, many content creators choose cross-dressing as their theme in creating content since this kind of theme is watched by millions of viewers. Cross-dressing content wrapped in humor and moral messages in the format of comedy skits becomes one of the most popular content in Indonesia. The high engagement of cross-dressing content on social media showcases that many audiences enjoy the content and accept the cross-dressing phenomenon in the virtual realm with the justification that it is merely for entertainment although they refuse it in the actual realm. I argue that even if they watch the content on account of solely for entertainment and it has nothing to do with violating norms, it means that they begin to accept the practice of cross-dressing through an excuse -entertainment in this case-. If they refuse the cross-dressing phenomenon based on Islamic tenets and subsequently, they make exceptions for cross-dressing for entertainment purposes, it opens the possibility for other excuses to emerge in the future to justify cross-dressing. The binding nature of Islamic rule is getting diminishing and not holistic, then. Besides, regardless of the creators' motive for making comical cross-dressing content, content creators or comics are regarded as organic intellectuals who are able to mobilize and influence a large number of people with the notions they offer. I do not claim that they have certain motives related to

challenging traditional norms and promoting gender diversity, but if they intend to do it, they will achieve it easily.

Social media is potentially powerful yet subtle to create ambivalence and shift perception indeed. It creates the ambiguity between the ideal ethical project -in this context Islamic tenets- and reality and habit. It leads people to perceive certain contexts with double paradoxical standards. Ambivalence is always happening, but still it needs to be contested because in certain cases, allowing ambivalence persistently can lead to normalization and a shift in societal perception towards the related issue -cross-dressing in this context-. In fact, cross-dressing practice as non-conforming practice and other impacts such as normalizing religious symbols and inclusivity of gender attributes are permissible in the digital realm. People often perceive everything that happens in the virtual world as artificial and quasi-reality, while anything that happens in the virtual world is a reflection of the actual realm. Perceptions formed in the virtual world can also be transferred and disseminated in reality. I assume that habitus plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions. When many people consider a certain case as something ordinary, new construction will unconsciously form.

Additionally, the proliferation of cross-dressing content creators potentially shows an attempt to counter anti-LGBT subtly in a non-confrontational way. By presenting skits and comedy, they try to affirm gender non-conformity and challenge radicalism and conservatism brought by Islamist groups. It has been carried on by *waria* (effeminate male) groups before by utilizing humor as a strategy by repurposing slurs against them and engaging with their religious communities to assert their agency as Muslims.<sup>131</sup> The humor becomes their weapon to combat discomfort attitudes supposed to them. Intriguingly, audiences find these contents as mere humor rather than a transgression of the status quo. They interpreted the contents as rhemes -signs of imaginative possibility- which cannot be taken literally.

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<sup>131</sup> Amirah Fadhlina, "Humor, Piety, and Masculinity: The Role of Digital Platforms in Aiding 'Conversations' Between Islamic Preachers and Waria in Indonesia," *CyberOrient* 15, no. 1 (2021): p 64, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cyo2.7>.

## **5.2 Trajectories**

In conclusion, this research tries to shed light on the Muslim's perception surrounding the phenomenon of cross-dressing on social media. The findings highlight the complex interplay between deep-rooted norms, social media, and gender expression. As I navigate the intermingling between cross-dressing, religion, social media, and gender expression, it is important to note that shifting perception is still happening in digital scope. Future research could delve deeper into the societal implications of cross-dressing in reality. Research about cross-dressing content implications and motives from the point of view of creators is also needed to make this study more comprehensive.

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