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## Feminist Male Communication Experience in Revealing Gender Identity in the Campus Environment

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### Abstract

*This study explores the communication experiences of feminine male students at Trunodjoyo University, Madura, a region characterized by conservative and religious norms. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research examines how three purposively selected informants navigate their gender identity within a dominant masculine culture. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation. The findings reveal that informants express femininity through both verbal and non-verbal communication, including soft speech patterns, refined gestures, neat aesthetics, and high emotional openness. However, these expressions are highly contextual; while informants are authentic in "safe spaces" or among supportive peers, they often perform communication adjustments in formal or public settings to mitigate social stigma and negative labeling. Key factors enabling identity disclosure include robust self-acceptance, social support systems, and the university's relatively inclusive academic climate. The study concludes that gender identity is not a static trait but a dynamic, negotiated process. It highlights the tension between individual authenticity and cultural expectations, emphasizing that the campus serves as a critical site for negotiating identity through continuous social interaction.*

**Keywords**– Communication Experience, Feminine Men, Gender Identity



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## **1. Introduction**

The university environment serves as a vibrant social arena where diverse identities, values, and modes of expression intersect. Beyond being a site for formal academic instruction, the campus functions as a living laboratory for social interaction, occurring in spaces ranging from student organization meetings and art activities to spontaneous conversations in faculty corridors. Within these multifaceted settings, students do not merely exchange information; they actively build relationships and negotiate their identities based on personal meanings and social perceptions. The campus, therefore, is a space where individuals display their self-concept and seek social validation, making the dynamics of communication central to the student experience of belonging and self-actualization.

Observing the daily communicative landscape at Universitas Trunojoyo Madura reveals a compelling phenomenon: the presence of male students who adopt feminine expressions in their everyday lives. These expressions manifest through soft speech patterns, meticulous and stylish fashion choices, refined gestures, and an emotional openness that contrasts sharply with conventional masculine archetypes. Such observations suggest that gender identity is not a static or singular biological trait but is instead a fluid construct that is continuously formed, formulated, and negotiated through social communication. Communication, in this sense, acts as the primary medium through which individuals broadcast their identity and signal how they wish to be perceived by their peers and the broader academic community.

In the broader context of Indonesian society, gender norms remain predominantly binary, strictly demarcating the boundaries between masculinity and femininity. Men are generally expected to embody assertiveness, strength, and rationality while suppressing emotional vulnerability. Consequently, feminine expressions in men are frequently pathologized or viewed as deviations from established social scripts, leading to social responses such as stereotyping, prejudice, and negative labeling. This

vulnerability is mirrored in studies on bullying, where individuals perceived as "different" are often positioned as powerless within asymmetrical social relations. As Wahyuningsih (2023) notes, perpetrators often justify oppression by framing the victim as inherently weak, a pattern that resonates with the communication experiences of feminine male students who challenge dominant masculine norms.

Universitas Trunojoyo Madura is situated within a cultural environment characterized by deep religious values and a strong adherence to patriarchal masculinity. In Madurese culture, the ideal male figure is defined by *ketegasan* (assertiveness), *kegagahan* (gallantry), and courage (Nurcholish & Widyastuti, 2023). Expressions of femininity in men are often viewed as contradictory to these cultural virtues and are frequently conflated with moral judgments or specific sexual orientations (Nurrahmah, 2017). This cultural backdrop exerts significant pressure on feminine male students, forcing them to meticulously manage their identities. This often results in a "dualistic" communication style, where individuals suppress their true expressions in public campus spaces and only disclose their authentic selves within specific "safe zones" or trusted friendship circles.

The preliminary findings from observations and interviews conducted in October 2025 highlight the tangible impact of these social pressures. For instance, students like Mohammad Nico Fitriyanto report being subjected to derogatory labels such as "banci" (effeminate) due to their soft intonation and fashionable appearance. Others, such as Nanang Setiawan, face systemic barriers within campus organizations, where they are deemed unfit for leadership roles because they lack "masculine authority." Similarly, Rasya Aditya Pratama experienced social exclusion in classroom discussions because his gestures and speech style were deemed "too feminine." These experiences underscore that the act of communication itself is the primary arena where stigma is enacted and social worth is contested.

While previous studies have explored feminine masculinity, there remains a significant research gap regarding the lived communication experiences of these individuals within highly conservative and religious regional contexts like Madura. Existing literature often focuses on adaptive strategies in more liberal urban centers or digital spaces but fails to capture the nuances of face-to-face verbal and non-verbal negotiations in a patriarchal academic setting. There is a critical need to understand how these students navigate the "gaze" of their peers, endure verbal bullying, and utilize communication to survive and find acceptance. Without this empirical understanding, higher education institutions may lack the necessary foundation to create inclusive policies that protect the rights of all students regardless of their gender expression.

This research is grounded in Social Identity Theory, the Social Construction of Reality, and Symbolic Interactionism, which posits that identity is forged through symbols and shared meanings. By integrating Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity and Hapsari & Suryandari's (2023) identity negotiation framework, this study seeks to provide a voice for a marginalized student population. Using a phenomenological approach, the research aims to uncover the essence of these students' subjective experiences—how they perceive, respond to, and negotiate their identities. Ultimately, the findings are intended to contribute to the field of gender communication and provide a roadmap for Universitas Trunojoyo Madura to cultivate a campus environment that is safe, inclusive, and respectful of diverse identity expressions.

## **2. Method**

The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in the constructivist or interpretive paradigm, which perceives social reality as a pluralistic, dynamic, and multifaceted construct shaped through social interaction and subjective human experience. Unlike positivist traditions that seek a single objective truth,

this paradigm acknowledges that reality is "co-created" by individuals as they assign meaning to their daily encounters. This framework is specifically chosen because the research focuses on the intricate layers of meaning-making regarding the communication experiences of feminine male students at Universitas Trunojoyo Madura. By adopting a constructivist lens, the researcher acts as an interpretive tool, aiming to uncover how these individuals build an understanding of their gender identity in relation to a conservative social environment, emphasizing the "lived truth" of the participants over external statistical generalizations.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, specifically aimed at capturing the "lived experience" (lebenswelt) of the participants. Phenomenology is uniquely suited for this inquiry because it allows the researcher to peel back the layers of social labels to reach the core essence of the phenomenon: the lived reality of being a feminine male student in a patriarchal culture. The focus is directed toward understanding how these students perceive, describe, and interpret their communication negotiations and social dynamics. By utilizing this approach, the study prioritizes the depth of human perception and the nuances of identity disclosure, ensuring that the research captures the authentic voices and internal emotional landscapes of the informants rather than mere observable variables.

The subjects of this study were selected using a purposive sampling technique, involving three feminine male students who actively study at Universitas Trunojoyo Madura. This specific number of informants is intentional; in phenomenological research, the priority is the richness and "thickness" of the data rather than a large-scale sample size. To ensure data integrity and validity, the study utilizes data triangulation through three primary methods: passive participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and meticulous documentation. Observations provide context for the students' non-verbal behaviors in campus corridors, while in-depth interviews serve as the primary vehicle for exploring their subjective responses to social stigma. The collected data is processed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which

involves organizing transcripts, identifying significant statements, and synthesizing these into "meaning units" to reveal the universal essence of the experience. To maintain academic rigor, the researcher employs member checking and systematic audit trails to ensure the findings accurately reflect the participants' perspectives.

### **3. Result and Discussion**

This study strategically engaged three male students at Universitas Trunojoyo Madura who consistently manifest feminine expressions as its primary informants, selected through a rigorous purposive sampling process. These individuals were chosen based on specific criteria: a sustained display of feminine traits in daily communication, high levels of social interaction within the university, and the ability to narrate and reflect deeply upon their gender identity disclosure. By involving participants from various faculties and academic programs, the research captured a diverse spectrum of academic social contexts, providing a rich, multi-layered data set. Despite the university being a supposedly progressive space, these informants navigate their identities within the broader Madurese cultural landscape, which remains deeply rooted in religious conservatism and traditional patriarchal values. Consequently, their gender expression is not a static attribute but a dynamic negotiation; they must constantly assess social risks, choosing when to perform their authentic selves and when to adjust their communication patterns to meet the rigid expectations of formal academic or local social environments.

#### ***Feminine Expression as a Form of Internalized Communication***

The empirical findings from both observation and in-depth interviews reveal that femininity serves as a natural, internalized pillar of the informants' communicative identities rather than a mere aesthetic choice. Observations highlighted distinct verbal and non-verbal patterns, such as soft vocal intonations, refined vocabulary, and expressive, fluid physical gestures that emerge most authentically during relaxed interactions with peers. This phenomenon aligns with Social Identity Theory by Tajfel and Turner, suggesting that these students

categorize themselves within a specific social group and communicate in ways that reinforce their belonging to that identity. As echoed in the interviews, Nanang Setiawan remarked that forced masculinity felt "inauthentic," while Mohammad Nico Fitriyanto described his soft speech as a "lifelong reflection of self." These narratives confirm that communication is the primary medium for self-actualization; as supported by Sumardiono (2022), gender identity is continuously constructed and reinforced through the repetition of these communicative behaviors, which the informants view as the most honest representation of their "true selves" in a complex social world.

### ***Appearance and Body Language as Identity Representations***

In addition to verbal communication, feminine expressions are also seen through the appearance and body language of the informant. Based on field documentation (Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3), the three informants showed a tendency to choose a neat, clean, and effective clean look style of dressing. The color of the clothes used tends to be soft, accompanied by attention to details such as perfume, hairstyle, and personal hygiene.



**Figure 1.** Appearance and Body Language as Identity Representations

The appearance and body language of informants can be understood through the Social Construction of Reality Theory put forward by Berger and Luckmann. The choice of clothing style, soft colors, and flexible and expressive body gestures are a form of objectification of feminine identity that is built through the process of social interaction. Through the internalization of gender-

related social norms and meanings, informants display their self-image as a warm and approachable person, so that appearance and body language function as a medium of identity representation in daily life.

Observations showed that informants' body language tended to be less aggressive, cautious, and showed friendly facial expressions. Flexible hand gestures and expressive facial expressions are the hallmarks of their communication. This pattern reinforces the feminine impression while forming a self-image as a warm and approachable person in social interactions.

### ***Safe Space and Negotiation of Self-Expression***

The study found that all three informants had what they called a safe circle, which is a social space where they feel safe displaying feminine expressions more openly. These safe spaces are generally formed from close friendship groups, campus organizational communities, or creative environments that are more inclusive of differences in gender expression.

The findings regarding the existence of the safe circle can be understood through the Social Construction of Reality Theory by Berger and Luckmann, which views identity as the result of an ongoing process of social interaction. Informants construct their gender expression situationally based on the acceptance of the social environment, so that identity is not fixed, but adaptive and contextual.

Rasya Aditya Pratama revealed, "In class I felt safe, my friends accepted me as I am. But when it comes to the Warriors, I'm more cautious." This statement shows that there is an ongoing identity negotiation process. Informants adjust the level of feminine expression based on social context, not as a form of self-denial, but as an adaptation strategy to remain able to function socially and academically.

### ***Stigma and Psychological Traces***

The results of the interviews showed that although the acceptance in the campus environment was relatively good, the three informants had experience of stigma in the previous phase of education. The stigma comes in the form of verbal bullying, demeaning jokes, and painful social judgments. Rasya shared her



traumatic experience, "When I was in elementary school, I was often bullied until I thought about quitting school."

The experience of stigma experienced by informants can be understood through Berger and Luckmann's Social Construction Theory of Reality, where the negative judgments and stereotypes they receive are the result of social realities that are constructed and institutionalized from the early educational phases. The process of internalizing the experience leaves a psychological imprint that affects the way informants interpret themselves and their social environment today.

Nanang and Nico also admitted that they had received stereotypical sarcasm or comments, albeit in a lighter intensity. However, the experience still leaves a psychological imprint that affects the way they read social situations and present themselves. The stigma of the past is an important background in the formation of communication strategies and informants' self-acceptance in the present.

### ***Adaptation and Self-Acceptance Strategies***

In facing these social realities, the three informants developed a relatively similar adaptation strategy, namely by being selective in expressing their identity. They do not cover themselves completely, but adjust their expressions according to space and social relations. Nico stated, "I became more empathetic and careful in speaking, because I know what it's like to be judged."

The adaptation strategy carried out by informants can be understood through Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory, which views individuals as active actors in managing their identities in the midst of social relations. Selectivity in self-expression shows the informant's efforts to maintain self-esteem and the sustainability of social relations without having to negate his personal identity.

Self-acceptance is the main key in this process. Nanang emphasized, "I'm happier when I can perform as I am." Meanwhile, Rasya called self-acceptance a long spiritual and emotional process. This adaptation strategy is not interpreted as

compliance with oppressive norms, but as a form of social intelligence to maintain the continuity of relationships and comfort of communication.

### ***The Meaning of the Experience of Being a Feminine Man on Campus***

Based on phenomenological analysis, the experience of being a feminine man in the campus environment is interpreted by informants as a journey towards self-authenticity. These experiences not only shape their personal identities, but also their way of understanding diversity, empathy, and courage in communicating. Nico stated, "Difference is not wrong. That's what makes me who I am." Feminine expression in men is not just a style, but a form of self-identity representation born from a sense of comfort and personal awareness (Scientific & Education, 2022)

The campus environment is understood as a space for identity negotiation, where individuals learn to balance self-expression, cultural norms, and formal academic demands. These findings confirm that gender identity is dynamic, formed through the interaction between subjective experiences and sociocultural structures. Thus, the results of this study enrich the understanding of the dynamics of gender communication in the local context of Madura, especially in the higher education environment.

## **4. Conclusion**

The study concludes that the communication experiences of feminine male students at Universitas Trunojoyo Madura are characterized by a dynamic and highly contextual negotiation of gender identity. Feminine expressions are articulated through both verbal and non-verbal channels—such as gentle speech patterns, refined gestures, meticulous grooming, and emotional transparency—yet these are not displayed uniformly across all settings. Instead, informants engage in strategic self-presentation, consciously modulating their expressions based on the social environment; they embrace authenticity within perceived "safe spaces" while exercising restraint in formal or traditional academic spheres. This behavior highlights that gender identity is not a static trait but a continuous

negotiation between the private self, prevailing social norms, and the specific religious and conservative cultural backdrop of Madura.

The findings further identify that the courage to maintain such expressions is driven by a triad of factors: profound self-acceptance, robust social support, and a relatively inclusive campus climate. Self-acceptance serves as the psychological foundation, allowing students to align their outward communication with their internal identity, while support from peers and specific communities provides the necessary emotional safety net. Although the surrounding society remains traditional, the university environment offers a more pluralistic space that minimizes social pressure, transforming feminine expression from a mere personal style into a profound act of self-authenticity. Consequently, it is recommended that society fosters more inclusive perspectives to reduce stigma, and that higher education institutions implement gender literacy programs and sensitive counseling services to ensure a safe, equitable academic environment for all students regardless of their gender expression.

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