Embodying Alternative Lifestyles

Queer Discontent and Performative Politics in Yogyakarta

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Abstract

This article explores how queer youth in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, use aesthetics, spatial practices, and digital media to navigate identity and visibility. Based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork, I developed the concept of implicit revolution to describe everyday forms of resistance enacted through fashion, social media, and informal safe spaces. Rather than overt activism, these practices take shape through thrifting, self-styling, and frequenting venues like cafés and bookstores, allowing young people to express belonging and challenge normative gender expectations. Although the Reformasi era opened space for diverse expressions, it also intensified the moral surveillance of queer life. Within this climate, Indonesian youth form networks and craft embodied strategies to signal queerness while managing risks. These strategies are shaped by access to economic and cultural capital, highlighting classed dynamics of queer visibility. Through everyday decisions, such as how to dress, where to gather, and what to share online, young people reshape Yogyakarta's gendered and moral landscapes. By centering the body, aesthetics, and subcultural participation, this article contributes to scholarship on performativity, new media, and queer politics in Southeast Asia. It argues that in cultural contexts where queer expression is precarious, resistance is often quiet, relational, and embedded in everyday life. These ordinary acts of styling and space-making offer a critique of dominant social norms in contemporary Indonesia.

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Introduction

Sunny afternoons in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, are often best spent in lush coffee shops. These hip cafés and bookshops, scattered across the city's urban centers and outskirts, have become more than just places to work and escape the heat. Today, they also function as informal hubs for queer youth, where individuals can socialize, exchange ideas, and observe each other. By accessing underground collectives and social events, younger queer individuals share information to map inclusive spaces from those posing potential risks. While it has become trickier to identify queer-friendly cafés, particularly as their target audience and social media marketing have diversified over the years, there are several key markers for venues attracting a more diverse and alternative crowd. Inclusive spots in Yogyakarta are often marked by the fashion represented, trendy items on display (i.e., books and decorative posters), whether they serve high-end espresso or affordable coffees, and other amenities (e.g., photo booths, adequate seating for groups, and speakers playing contemporary music). However, access to these spaces is shaped by ambivalent entanglements with neoliberal consumption and class privilege, signaling tensions within Yogyakarta's queer communities.

For queer youth, café culture offers a semi-neutral public environment shaped by relative anonymity, which many perceive to be safer for diverse expressions. On one scorching afternoon, I sat down at a café with Noah, a transgender man in his mid-twenties and founder of an underground queer collective. Known among his peers as a "master of thrifting," Noah is admired for his flair. He wears colorful blouses, tailored pants, and vintage loafers that defy the city's "black national color," a term for the local fashion trend favoring all-black outfits. While thrifting, a practice popularized through social media over the past few years, is often seen as a sustainable

consumption practice, embodying thrifty aesthetics requires individuals to have access to economic capital (i.e., disposable income) and cultural capital (i.e., media access and literacy). "Being trans in Yogya means that sometimes, you need to hide part of yourself," he said. "But fashion, aesthetics, and body modification," he added, "are things I can control. Even before coming out, dressing differently was how I showed my queerness."

This vignette points to a broader trend among queer and alternative-identifying youth in Yogyakarta, their strategic approach toward fashion and self-styling as tools for navigating visibility, community, and gender. In Indonesia, despite the social recognition and historic representation of transfeminine gender-transgressive communities,[1] contemporary forms of LGBTQ+ expressions have remained contentious since Reformasi in 1998. This period marked Indonesia's transition from Suharto's New Order regime to democracy, facilitating not only Islamic resurgence[2] but also the spread of globalized discourses like environmentalism[3] and feminism.[4] Although Indonesia officially upholds the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (unity in diversity) and promotes pluralism as a state ideology, discrimination against gender and religious minorities continues to pervade everyday life. As the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, queer advocacy in Indonesia is situated and negotiated within societal boundaries where heteronormativity and Islamic morality continue to inform normative gender and public expectations.[5]

1. Michael G. Peletz, *Gender Pluralism: Southeast Asia Since Early Modern Times* (Routledge, 2009).
2. Carool Kersten, *Islam in Indonesia: The Contest for Society, Ideas and Values* (Oxford University Press, 2016).
3. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton University Press, 2005).
4. Rachel Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety: Islam and Feminism in Indonesia* (Oxford University Press, 2013).
5. Linda Rae Bennett and Sharyn Graham Davies, eds., *Sex and Sexualities in Contemporary Indonesia: Sexual Politics, Health, Diversity and Representations* (Routledge, 2015).

Within these sociopolitical contexts, how do young people negotiate queer identity and belonging through embodied practices? How do popular trends, like gender-neutral fashion and alternative self-styling, create possibilities for expressing queerness in everyday life? Drawing on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2023 and 2024, this article explores how queer youth in Yogyakarta repurpose local subcultural practices and global queer aesthetics to carve out safe spaces and create what I call an *implicit revolution*. Implicit revolution refers to the subtle and embodied ways queer youth use everyday practices, including alternative fashion and underground queer spaces, to resist dominant norms in Yogyakarta. Rather than engaging in overt protests, they enact quieter and subversive forms of resistance through style, space-making, and online presence, reshaping the cultural fabric of heteronormativity that conditions everyday gender expectations in Indonesia. This analysis builds on transnational scholarship on digital media,[6] performativity,[7] and queer belonging, tracing how embodied and spatial practices emerge as everyday forms of social critique and resistance.

Theorizing performative politics as a framework linking bodily aesthetics with space-making and digital media consumption, I examine the generative and contested dimensions of queer youth's resistance strategies. The article has three sections. First, I discuss performativity and historicize Indonesian youth alt-scenes as entry points for queer alternative safe spaces. Second, I analyze the body as a site of resistance, where practices like androgynous dressing and body modification become a way of challenging dominant norms. Finally, I explore how circulating queer fashion and digital trends, while expanding possibilities, also reproduce tensions about class accessibility within Indonesian queer scenes. Centering embodied, spatial, and digital resistance among queer youth in Yogyakarta, this article contributes

6. Andre Cavalcante, *Struggling for Ordinary: Media and Transgender Belonging in Everyday Life* (New York University Press; Jia Tan, *Digital Masquerade: Feminist Rights and Queer Media in China* (New York University Press, 2023).
7. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 2006).

to scholarship on performativity, queer politics, and new media in contemporary Southeast Asia. It decenters Western visions of queer liberation and rights narratives by emphasizing the centrality and complexity of everyday negotiation of morality and visibility in twenty-first-century Indonesia.

Literature Review: Queer Performativity and Media Practices

Scholarship on queer and trans politics has long addressed the stakes of visibility and recognition. For LGBTQ+ individuals in societal contexts shaped by dominant heteronormativity and heightened moral regulation, as seen across Southeast Asia, negotiating identity is an everyday and often precarious practice. In Indonesia, this dynamic is evident in the experiences of religious minorities[8] and gender nonconforming groups like *bissu* (Ismoyo 2020).[9] Bissu are transgender ritual specialists among the Bugis who have struggled for recognition while navigating state surveillance and social discrimination. However, in Indonesia, recent LGBTQ+ expressions have faced growing scrutiny for challenging hegemonic expectations of Islamic morality.[10] As a result, gender nonconforming populations across Southeast Asia, including Indonesian *waria*[11] and Thai spirit mediums,[12] have engaged

8. Jane Monnig Atkinson, "Religions in Dialogue: The Construction of an Indonesian Minority Religion," *American Ethnologist* 10, no. 4 (1983): 684–96; Zainal Abidin Bagir et al., "Limitations to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Indonesia: Norms and Practices," *Religion & Human Rights* 15, nos. 1–2 (2020): 39–56.
9. Petsy Jessy Ismoyo, "Decolonizing Gender Identities in Indonesia: A Study of Bissu 'the Trans-Religious Leader' in Bugis People," *Paradigma: Jurnal Kajian Budaya* 10, no. 3 (2020): 277–88.
10. Diego García Rodríguez and Ben Murtagh, "Situating Anti-LGBT Moral Panics in Indonesia," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 50, no. 146 (2022): 1–9.
11. Terje Toomistu, "Thinking through the s(k)in: Indonesian Waria and Bodily Negotiations of Belonging across Religious Sensitivities," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 50, no. 146 (2022): 73–95.
12. Peter A. Jackson, "Spirit Possession and Diva Worship: Performance and Performativity in Queer Ritual Cultures Across Borders," in *Deities and Divas: Queer Ritual Specialists in*

with local Islamic and Theravada Buddhist discourses to assert their legitimacy and gender fluidity.

These persistent constraints have also shaped how younger generations of queer individuals navigate visibility in Indonesia, prompting careful security measures for underground organizing and creative strategies of self-presentation. To analyze these negotiations, I draw on Judith Butler's concept of performativity,[13] which offers a generative framework for understanding how gender norms are produced, reinforced, and subverted through embodied acts.[14] Butler argues that gender is not a fixed essence but is enacted through repeated, culturally intelligible practices that reference dominant norms. Though often developed within Western feminist contexts, Butler's framework invites attention to how gendered possibilities are always locally negotiated, constrained, and redefined. In Indonesia, heteronormative discourses and Islamic moral scripts are central to defining legitimate gender relations and bodily comportment.[15] These discourses circulate through state policies, media narratives, and everyday moral policing, creating barriers for those whose identities fall outside presumed gender binaries.

Even within these constraints, queer individuals have continued to assert alternative forms of belonging and legitimacy. Tom Boellstorff shows how Indonesian queer subject positions emerge through negotiations between local understandings of gender pluralism and global LGBTQ+ discourses.[16] Similarly, a study of West Sumatran *tomboi* illustrates how gender-transgressive AFAB individuals navigate family expectations and Islamic

Myanmar, Thailand and Beyond, ed. Peter A. Jackson and Benjamin Baumann (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2022).

13. Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
14. Henry Spiller, "How Not to Act like a Woman: Gender Ideology and Humor in West Java, Indonesia," *Asian Theatre Journal* 29, no. 1 (2012): 31–53.
15. Tom Boellstorff, "The Emergence of Political Homophobia in Indonesia: Masculinity and National Belonging," *Ethnos* 69, no. 4 (2004): 465–86; Kathryn Robinson, *Gender, Islam and Democracy in Indonesia*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2008).
16. Boellstorff, "The Emergence of Political Homophobia in Indonesia."

morality by embodying culturally legible masculinity.[17] These accounts highlight how gender performativity is locally situated and entangled with moral and cultural stakes. Building on this literature, I frame performative politics as the negotiation of queer visibility through embodied, spatial, and media practices. Whereas Butler's performativity emphasizes the production and subversion of gender norms through repeated acts, my approach highlights the strategic and collective dimensions of queer resistance within Indonesian contexts of moral regulation. It underpins what I call implicit revolution, which refers to everyday embodied challenges to normative gender expectations without overt protests.

As performativity increasingly unfolds across both physical and virtual realms, it is important to understand how online platforms amplify these embodied practices. Jia Tan's work on queer media practices in China demonstrates how photography, video, and social media afford new modes of visibility and community-building. Tan argues that queer "bodily performances and enactments" reach broader publics through social media, enabling alternative narratives of rights and belonging.[18] At the same time, these media introduce risks of surveillance and new forms of exclusion. In Andre Cavalcante's ethnography of trans media practices in the United States, it is evident that while media can provide vital resources for self-exploration and recognition, they do not guarantee social acceptance and may reinforce feelings of isolation. Even so, Cavalcante notes that online media platforms are generative because they allow transgender individuals to experience being part of a "larger world" and that queer life is indeed possible.[19]

In Southeast Asia, digital platforms have played a key role in shaping new forms of queer embodiment and activism. Online consumption of East Asian pop culture has redefined queer beauty standards, encouraging

17. Evelyn Blackwood, *Falling into the Lesbi World: Desire and Difference in Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010).
18. Tan, *Digital Masquerade*, 5.
19. Cavalcante, *Struggling for Ordinary*, 16.

softer features and makeup use among *toms* and gay men in Thailand.[20] In Singapore, Pink Dot's annual pride events since 2009 have used online campaigns, framed as celebrations of human rights rather than protests, to reshape public perceptions of LGBTQ+ visibility.[21] Furthermore in Indonesia, queer media representation dates back to the New Order regime, when the state's promotion of cinema culture increased the visibility of queer portrayals despite relying on comedic stereotypes.[22] After Reformasi, this representation shifted to internet platforms, expanding access to LGBTQ+ discourses amid rising Islamic trends.

Today in Yogyakarta, queer youth similarly mobilize digital media for knowledge-sharing and community-building. It is important to note that our attention to performativity and digital media must also engage spatial politics to understand how alternative safe spaces are constructed and contested. In Indonesia, alt-scenes (*skena*) have served as partial refuges for alternative identities, encompassing communities such as punk, indie, and environmentalist groups. These scenes emerged from the mid-1990s to early 2000s as the state lost hegemonic control over creative production after Reformasi.[23] While these spaces offer opportunities for collective identification and creative expression, access is mediated by class, cultural capital, and urban geography.

20. Dredge Byung'chu Kang, "The Softening of Butches: The Adoption of Korean 'Soft' Masculinity among Thai Toms," in *Pop Empires: Transnational and Diasporic Flows of India and Korea*, ed. S. Heijin Lee et al. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019).
21. Yi-Sheng Ng, "Pride versus Prudence: The Precarious Queer Politics of Pink Dot," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (2017): 238–50.
22. Ben Murtagh, *Genders and Sexualities in Indonesian Cinema: Constructing Gay, Lesbi and Waria Identities on Screen*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2013).
23. Jeffri Yosep Simanjorang and Gandhi Pawitan, "Modal Sosial, Inovasi, dan Skena Musik: Studi Kualitatif Komunitas Musik Indie Bandung 1994–2004," *Sosioglobal: Jurnal Pemikiran dan Penelitian Sosiologi* 5, no. 1 (2021): 73–88; Bian Pamungkas, Prisma Tejapermana, and Erizal Barnawi, "Komoditas Musik Dalam Skena Musik Underground Di Bandar Lampung," *Sulawesi Tenggara Educational Journal* 5, no. 1 (2025): 1, https://doi.org/10.54297/seduj.v5i1.1097.

My analysis traces how queer youth navigate both physical skena spaces and online platforms to build community, assert identity, and negotiate safety. These negotiations are shaped by the ambivalent logics of consumerism.[24] Gender-neutral fashion trends and thrift economies offer tools for subversive self-styling but are simultaneously implicated in commodification processes that can exclude those with limited access to digital and financial means.[25] Moreover, Islamic moral discourse remains prevalent in shaping gender dynamics, such as by framing LGBTQ+ expressions as threats to social and national values, intensifying stakes of queer bodily and spatial politics.[26]

Altogether, this body of scholarship provides a foundation for implicit revolution, which is the quieter, everyday practices through which Indonesian youth mobilize skena aesthetics and queer global trends to challenge norms while negotiating safety and belonging. The sections that follow examine how this implicit revolution is articulated through arenas of body politics, space-making, and digital media, illuminating the creative and contested dimensions of queer politics in globalized Indonesia.

Methodology

Yogyakarta has long been a key site for gender and sexuality movements in Indonesia. It hosted the first Indonesian Women's Congress in 1928, which

24. Brent Luvaas, *DIY Style: Fashion, Music and Global Digital Cultures* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).
25. Katherine Sender, "The Gay Market Is Dead, Long Live the Gay Market: From Identity to Algorithm in Predicting Consumer Behavior," *Advertising & Society Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (2018), https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/21/article/684249/summary; Xinyu Andy Zhao and Crystal Abidin, "Tiktok's 'Fox Eye' Trend and Everyday Activism: Gen Z Agency in an Audiovisual Narrative Case Study," *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research* (2021), https://spir.aoir.org/ojs/index.php/spir/article/view/12267.
26. Carla Jones, "Gender Diversity in Indonesia: Sexuality, Islam and Queer Selves," *Asian Studies Review* 36, no. 4 (2012): 585–86.

addressed gender inequalities in marriage, polygamy, and education.[27] Decades later, it became a hub for queer organizing, with gender nonconforming and transgender communities forming some of Indonesia's oldest LGBTQ+ organizations (Queer Indonesia Archive, 2024).[28] This context grounds my twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork in Yogyakarta (2023–2024). My analytical approach combines anthropological theories of practice and queer embodiment to emphasize the everyday production of gender reconfiguration and social change.

My research employs participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and archival research to trace the histories and strategies of intergenerational queer networks, including senior transgender populations and LGBTQ+ youth.[29] While my broader research attends to these intergenerational connections, this article focuses on my younger interlocutors in their early to late twenties, most of whom are transgender and gender nonconforming. It highlights their subversive activism through embodied strategies and creative expression rather than formal organizations or public demonstrations. These youth navigate visibility and community-building amid heightened moral panic over the past decade,[30] redefining safe spaces and activism through digital platforms and alternative urban scenes.

27. Susan Blackburn, "Women's Suffrage and Democracy in Indonesia," in *Women's Suffrage in Asia*, ed. Louise Edwards and Mina Roces (Routledge, 2004); Syahidah Sumayyah Rahman and Abdurakhman, "Aisyiyah and the Marriage Issue during the 1928 Indonesian Women's Congress," in *Dissecting History and Problematizing the Past in Indonesia* (Nova Science Publishers, 2021).
28. "*Merekam, Mencari Dan Menemukan*," Queer Indonesia Archive, accessed June 29, 2024, https://express.adobe.com/page/EFiuS2j8yS0qH/.
29. In Bahasa Indonesia, *pemuda* is a broad term used to describe youth and young people. Socially and linguistically, the term *youth* or *pemuda* encompasses a more expansive meaning compared to Western conceptions of youth. A 2023 report by the Indonesian Central Agency of Statistics defined *pemuda* as individuals between the age of sixteen and thirty years old, a range that includes both "school age and working adults." Badan Pusat Statistik Indonesia, *Statistik Pemuda Indonesia 2023*, vol. 21 (Jakarta, 2023), https://www.bps.go.id/id/publication/2023/12/29/18781f394974f2cae5241318/statistik-pemuda-indonesia-2023.html.
30. Daniel Peterson, *Islam, Blasphemy, and Human Rights in Indonesia: The Trial of Ahok* (Routledge, 2020).

My recruitment began in the summer of 2022, as I conducted preliminary fieldwork to map the landscape and establish connections with key organizers and community members in Yogyakarta. I initially approached these individuals on Instagram and WhatsApp, some of whom were LGBTQ+ activists while others were owners and leaders of different spaces (i.e., bookstores, collectives) promoting queer issues. My positionality as a native Indonesian and an androgynous, queer researcher eased my immersion into these communities. My interlocutors expressed feeling wary working with researchers due to previous research or journalism that failed to honor anonymity and security protocols. Over time, as I became an active part of routine and hangouts in these spaces, I was able to not only participate in activities but to build trust and offer support when needed.

For my larger project, I interviewed about fifty people ranging from their twenties to late seventies. Around half identified as transgender and gender nonconforming (including nonbinary and *waria*) while others identified along the spectrum of gay, lesbian, and queer. This article features about six interviews with my younger interlocutors. The dynamic of my participant observation was fixed and mobile. My main site was a bookstore café that served as a semi-public queer-friendly space for events and gatherings in southern Yogyakarta. Beyond this, I intentionally followed participants in their everyday activities such as café meetups, activist meetings, and personal gatherings. Additionally, I conducted a brief online ethnography to analyze how social media facilitates visibility, identity exploration, and temporary refuge while remaining sites of surveillance.

Instagram was the primary social media I analyzed, focusing on about ten posts from groups like Girl Up and other underground collectives, paying attention to their advocacy and comment sections. I also explored older text- and picture-based internet platforms like Kaskus and Pinterest, searching for queer aesthetics and forums my interlocutors referenced. All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, and I translated all social media content and transcripts, with strict adherence to anonymization to protect participant safety.

Ethnographic Analysis

Youth Activism, Digital Networks, and Alternative Safe Spaces

In Yogyakarta, young queer individuals have been navigating a sociocultural environment where state institutions, religious norms, and public perceptions remain pervasive in defining gendered relations and moral embodiment.[31] Simultaneously, younger individuals who grew up in the digital age have repurposed media, physical spaces, and student activist forums to carve out temporary safe zones for learning, organizing, and expressing queer identities.[32] This section argues that these practices exemplify implicit revolution, a form of everyday resistance where youth strategically mobilize online and physical spaces to embody queerness and advocate for change.

Outside universities, not only have youth utilized social media and alternative scenes to build community, but they have also experimented with self-presentation as subversive acts to challenge dominant gender expectations. These efforts point to youth's media engagement and performative politics to generate alternative spaces of belonging, even in the face of institutional surveillance and online harassment. Since the mid 2010s, the city has witnessed a proliferation of underground queer collectives and student-led groups dedicated to LGBTQ+ issues. These spaces exist both in tension and coexistence with Islamist and fundamentalist organizations, which rose in visibility since 2014 in response to a contentious presidential election marked by religious polarization and moral panic in Indonesia.[33]

31. Clarissa Adamson, "Gendered Anxieties: Islam, Women's Rights, and Moral Hierarchy in Java," *Anthropological Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2007): 5–37.
32. Olu Jenzen, "Trans Youth and Social Media: Moving Between Counterpublics and the Wider Web," *Gender, Place & Culture* 24, no. 11 (2017): 1626–41.
33. Muhammad Najib Azca, Hakimul Ikhwan, and Mohammad Zaki Arrobi, "A Tale of Two Royal Cities: The Narratives of Islamists' Intolerance in Yogyakarta and Solo," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 57, no. 1 (2019): 25–50.

In a dialogue with Ana, a young organizer in her early twenties who has assisted with local programming for transgender communities in Yogyakarta, I learned that in a pluralist society like Indonesia, diversity (*keragaman*) can function as a double-edged sword. This means that even under Pancasila, the national ideology undergirding recognition for religious and gender pluralism, expressions of intolerance still brew in post-Reformasi Indonesia (Lindsey and Pausacker 2016).[34] "That's the price of *keragaman* (diversity) in this country, I guess," said Ana. This "price" refers to how legal and ideological commitments to pluralism paradoxically permit the coexistence of queer-affirming initiatives and vocal conservative backlash. In practice, this creates a precarious terrain for queer organizing, where visibility may bring community recognition but also heightens moral scrutiny and political risk. Thus, Indonesian diversity warrants an open field for contestations, leading to the simultaneous emergence of queer-friendly and religiously conservative spaces in recent years.

As a strategy, informal initiatives formed by queer youth in Yogyakarta often take shape through online meetups, which then transform into physical gatherings in coffee shops, bookstores, and even personal homes. The availability of these politically neutral third spaces provides important shelter from public scrutiny while the internet offers a parallel world for information-sharing, identity exploration, and visibility. One afternoon in Kotabaru, a historic area with preserved colonial buildings in Yogyakarta, I met with Sofia, a twenty-year-old international relations student at Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM). Sofia is part of Girl Up UGM, a university chapter of a global movement funded by UN women that focuses on gender advocacy. While the official movement focuses on girl empowerment, Sofia informed me that the group has intentionally injected queer issues into their online advocacy, particularly as many transgender and queer students still struggle finding safe spaces on campus.

34. Tim Lindsey and Helen Pausacker, eds., *Religion, Law and Intolerance in Indonesia* (Routledge, 2016).

Sitting comfortably in a beige top and a hijab, Sofia shared that her interest in gender and queer issues began with observing patriarchal dynamics at home. "I realized that patriarchal values are everywhere, even in my house," she said. Her decision to wear the hijab, often perceived as a symbol of religious conformity, serves as a personal expression of faith and a strategic way to navigate the heteronormative space of her university. Her appearance complicates dominant assumptions that queerness and religiosity are at odds. "I first dyed my hair in high school, which totally pissed off my parents," Sofia told me. She added, "But that's my way of challenging their expectations. To this day, my hair remains dyed underneath this headscarf." Sofia's statement illuminates her subversive but deliberate defiance, where she uses self-styling as a form of everyday resistance. This negotiation of visibility and conformity illustrates an engagement in performative politics, where strategically balancing self-expression and safety contributes to implicit revolution. Through these embodied choices, Sofia challenges normative expectations from within both domestic and institutional spaces, enacting a form of activism that is deeply embedded in the moral landscapes she inhabits.

While Sofia's hijabi presentation defy normative assumptions about the incompatibility between Islam and queerness, she is also committed to creating safe spaces on campus. While at home, she observed her father's condescending behavior toward her mother. She is also frustrated by how male peers sometimes dismiss her opinions at school. These experiences of gendered marginalization pushed her further toward organizing. Through Girl Up, she channels that frustration into collective action. "We accept people with all gender identities," she said. Discussing representation in Girl Up, she claimed that the "community is a safe space for queer and trans students, especially those who feel alienated in conservative departments like engineering or natural sciences." As part of the research division, Sofia writes educational articles and curates social media content (figure 1)[35] addressing LGBTQ+ issues.

35. This screenshot is part of a larger slide on Girl Up UGM's Instagram page titled "Redefining the Meaning of Love Through a Queer Perspective," posted on February 26, 2022.

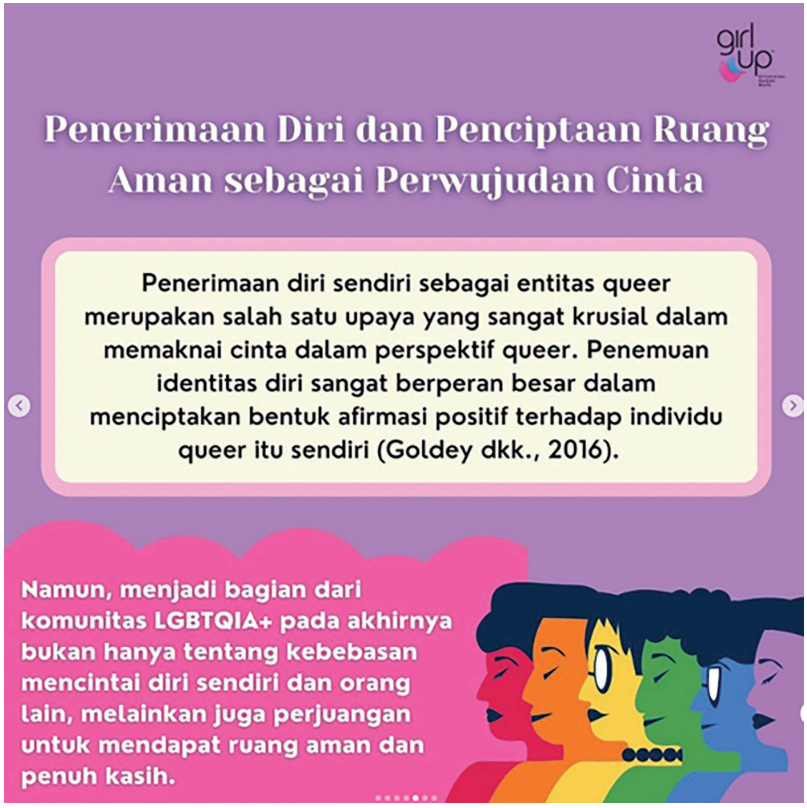

Figure 5.1: Girl Up UGM Instagram post from 2022 that reframes love through a queer lens. Posts promoting queer inclusivity like this often get flagged by anti-LGBTQ groups.
Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CacF3y2B6oC/?img_index=5

At the same time, this visibility comes with risks of Instagram suspension and online harassment. "Our account got suspended three or four times," she explained, chuckling. Her laughter, instead of signaling amusement, is

On this specific post, it addresses the notion of "self-acceptance and the creation of safe spaces as a form of love" within queer communities. This post is one of many educational posts circulated by this student organization pertaining to issues of gender and sexuality. Despite its significance, posts like this tend to be flagged by anti-LGBTQ pundits, leading to occasional deactivations of the account.

a coping mechanism to manage the stress of persistent backlash.[36] Humor functions as an affective and subtle mode of defiance, allowing Sofia to endure within social and digital structures that repeatedly undermine Girl Up's efforts at promoting inclusivity. "All because we post about queer rights," Sofia claimed that Girl Up sometimes became the center of online backlash, pushing its queer and trans members to go into hiding online and on campus.

Before the rise of social media, older text-based internet forums such as Kaskus (figure 2)[37] and Reddit served as digital spaces for queer Indonesians to explore identity. Noah, a twenty-five-year-old transgender man described how he first came to articulate his gender through a now-defunct site called lgbtindonesia.org, which had forums on different queer categories. "Back then there were categories like LBQ women or queer, but *transmen* was still a newer term in Indonesia," he said. Noah's statement shows how these digitally circulating terms shape new possibilities for self-understanding, enabling queerness not only to be named but also lived.

Increased global interconnectivity has enabled the circulation of contemporary queer categories across Asia, producing the "hybridization of local and Western cultures."[38] In this process, LGBTQ+ terms are not simply adopted but also reconfigured into locally legible identities. In Indonesia, this includes not only the uptake of global terms like *gay* and *transmen*

36. Sabina White and Andrew Winzelberg, *Laughter and Stress*, *HUMOR* 5, no. 4 (1992): 343–56.

37. A screenshot of Kaskus, the largest internet forum in Indonesia. Having been around since 1999, Kaskus still maintains its simple forum and community-based format just like Reddit and Quora. In this screenshot of Kaskus search, I explored posts using the keywords "LGBT" and "Queer." For "LGBT," most of the results center negative and humorous postings, such as "how to do anti-LGBT black magic." In contrasts, posts under "Queer" are often created by individuals seeking knowledge, exploring LGBTQ history, or discussing queer pop culture. In this screenshot, the first post delves into the history of Pride movement and the use of European kilts to challenge gender norms. The second post inquires, "what is the difference between bisexual, pansexual, and queer," while the last provides a review of the queer-centered film Call Me by Your Name (2017).

38. Jackson, "Spirit Possession and Diva Worship," 1.

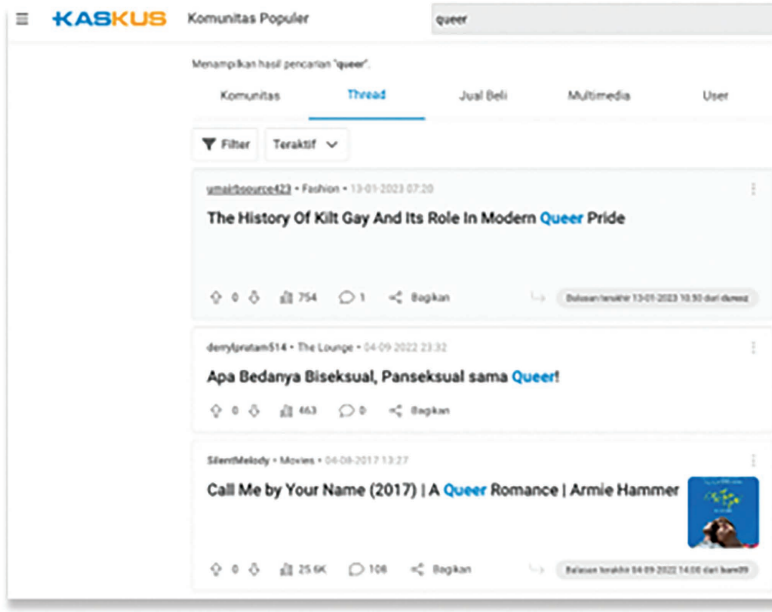

Figure 5.2: Kaskus forum search results showing how "queer" prompts more informative discussions whereas "LGBT" often attracts a mix of hostile and negative responses.
Source: https://www.kaskus.co.id/search?q=queer

but also the development of *bahasa gay*,[39] a distinct form of queer linguistic play involving unique suffixes, gestures, and slangs. For Noah and others, encountering such language and terminologies online provided more than information about gender and sexuality but also tools to imagine themselves in the right categories. Even today, Noah credits social media with helping youth learn about gender expression and style because as he emphasized, "We didn't have anywhere else to figure these things out."

At the same time, Bella, a twenty-one-year-old trans student and member of Girl Up, pointed out that digital safe spaces remain structurally fragile.

39. Tom Boellstorff, "Gay Language and Indonesia: Registering Belonging," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 14, no. 2 (2008): 248–68.

Echoing Sofia's concerns, Bella shared with me that Girl Up's queer-related content has gone viral several times, often triggering hatred on Indonesian social media. "You know *buzzers*?" she asked, referring to paid users and bots employed to flag content deemed controversial like pro-LGBT and anti-government posts, leading in account suspension and even arrests. The experiences of Sofia and Bella illuminate the ambivalent terrain of online activism in university settings. While student groups like Girl Up strive to foster gender-inclusive safe spaces, they are also subject to surveillance by institutions, peers, and netizens. In this context, digital platforms function as both tools for community-building and sites of vulnerability. The repeated suspension of the Girl Up account makes visible the volatility of queer digital visibility, where content can easily be flagged, censored, or erased.

The challenges that queer youth face online have led many to seek community within Yogyakarta's alternative urban scenes or skena. The term *anak skena* (scene kids) refers to fragments of youth subcultures built around niche interests, including music, film, fashion, and art. These communities are often associated with particular spaces like independent bookstores, hip cafés, local bars, and underground music venues. While not exclusively queer in their mission, many of these scenes offer a refuge from mainstream norms and institutional oversight. "Basically, anak skena is anything that's underground," Sofia explained. She claimed that it was popularized through subcultures in urban centers like Jakarta, such as music gigs in unknown venues. Yet, the term has also taken on a derogatory edge and sparked divisions, she added, "because people now use it to judge others for their looks or for expressing certain opinions."

Despite its ambiguity, skena culture offers queer youth a spatial strategy to locate safe spaces beyond formal institutions. Mapping which coffee shops or bookstores are queer friendly and circulating information about inclusive events through WhatsApp and Instagram has become a necessary survival tactic. "We are always wary of *preman* [gangsters] when we hold events independently, so entering skena sometimes provides extra safety because you blend with the alternative crowd," said a lesbian organizer who owned an

independent bookstore in southern Yogyakarta. Preman, typically hypermasculine and cis-heteronormative men, are often paid to surveil, intimidate, and disrupt events. They often linger outside venues, sometimes instigating verbal attacks and physical confrontations. One queer-friendly bookstore has developed security protocols due to previous encounters with these men. Associating informally with skena, therefore, is not just about subculture affiliation as it is a political act to re-map the city through queer presence. In doing so, queer youth in Yogyakarta are creating new possibilities for visibility within a cultural landscape that remains unsafe for overt queer expressions.

By navigating campus activism, social media ecosystems, and urban subcultures, queer youth in Yogyakarta demonstrate a flexible and digitally mediated mode of organizing that produces tangible effects, which are the formation of communities and the expansion of queer networks. Their ability to shift between platforms and spaces, whether online or offline, formal or underground, highlights a broader strategy of negotiating visibility in an uncertain political climate. Safe spaces, in this context, are not fixed locations. They are multisited and dynamic in forms, shaped by digital infrastructures, youth creativity, and institutional surveillance. These strategies illustrate the qualities of implicit revolution, where youth use daily acts of resistance and reimagination to reconfigure norms, spaces, and identities that challenge dominant power structures. Whether it is Sofia dyeing her hair beneath her hijab while leading gender-inclusive university initiatives, Noah learning the language of self-identification using online forums, or Bella defending queer-friendly content against coordinated online backlash, these practices demonstrate how change emerges through creative strategies and network-building embedded in everyday life.

Defining Aesthetics, Possibilities, and Embodied Politics

While many queer youth in Yogyakarta participate in activist groups and integrate themselves within preestablished alternative scenes, others

engage in quieter forms of resistance by turning to their bodies and self-presentation. As explored in the previous section, space-making through digital media and alternative urban scenes offers important avenues for creating belonging. Here, I shift focus to how implicit revolution is also enacted through the body (i.e., fashion, aesthetics, and style) as queer youth mobilize everyday forms of visibility in Yogyakarta. For these young individuals, aesthetics and pop culture are significant means of asserting identity and resisting normative expectations. Their embodied practices illuminate not only personal choices when it comes to gender negotiations but also a politics of visibility and belonging shaped by consumerist pressure and popular trends.

Nini, a lesbian member of an underground queer collective, explained that not everyone feels able or willing to take on highly visible activist roles. "Not everyone has the mental or physical capacity to actively partake in the world of advocacy," claimed Nini. "Some people don't want to get too involved because they need to take care of themselves and they are not too familiar yet with LGBTQ+ identities, or simply they're afraid to get caught," she further added. This fear often stems from family and school, where being openly queer or associated with pro-LGBTQ stances can lead to institutional punishment and social ostracization. In this context, aesthetics and self-styling become a more accessible and lower-risk form of resistance. Nini further elaborated:

> Sometimes, the easiest thing you can do to fight against norms is to craft a particular aesthetic where you can stay authentic and be yourself without repercussions. For young queers, self-expression is particularly important. With so many trends accessible on the internet, people also feel motivated and inspired to present a certain way.

Walking through the city, particularly around urban centers, the embodied politics of style can be observed by identifying alternative looks, including dyed hair, piercings, tattoos, elaborate nail art, and gender-bending

fashion such as cargo pants and oversized T-shirts. While these styles may appear common elsewhere, within the context of Yogyakarta's dominant aesthetics, marked by trendy hijabi fashion or the muted all-black attire popular among youth, they stand out as intentional deviations. These fashion choices are read as queer not only because they challenge local gender norms but also because they often involve unisex clothing that conceals the gendered body. Especially for trans and nonbinary youth, oversized shirts and the ability to mix masculine and feminine pieces allow for a more fluid and authentic self-presentation without necessarily being identified as LGBTQ. These visual markers are not simply an echo of internet trends; they also function as subtle statements of identity and community affiliations.

By adopting styles coded as queer, alternative, and rebellious, youth signal belonging to like-minded peers while pushing back against religious and heteronormative gender expectations. For Gee, a nonbinary member of a queer collective, embodied self-expression highlights the complexities of negotiating aesthetics and queerness in everyday life. "It's not that I want to be read as trans or nonbinary all the time," they explained. "Sometimes, I want to look ambiguous; other times I want to go full femme or masc. But even doing that feels political because people stare and you must accept people referring to you using presumed terms," Gee added. In Indonesia, it is customary to call each other using gender honorifics such as *mbak* (female), *mas* (male), and *kak* (neutral with more feminine undertone). Therefore, while having an ambiguous gender presentation, the public can still misread the identities of queer and trans youth. For Gee, changing hairstyles, experimenting with makeup, and choosing certain clothing silhouettes are not just stylistic choices but embodied acts of defiance and self-discovery facilitated by what they see and learn online. "I learned how to do all this from Instagram reels and TikTok; that's kind of the starting point of me reconfiguring how to express myself as a nonbinary person in Yogyakarta," Gee shared.

Bella, a transgender student leader from Girl Up, also reflected on how online media has accelerated these aesthetic shifts over the past decade. "Since COVID-19, a lot of young people spend their time on the internet,

where they get easy access to queer culture or things associated with queer communities," she said. These include bodily gestures like waving your hand down and snapping your fingers, all deriving from TikTok memes that communicate notions of "slaying" associated with queer ballroom. Beyond gestures, youth have also experimented with transgressive styles (e.g., piercings, alternative haircuts) and incorporated queer flags as accessories and on their Instagram bio. From makeup tutorials and TikTok fashion to memes and fandom, digital platforms circulate not only ideas about queerness but also concrete ways of performing it.

Bella emphasized how online culture "helps young queers figure out who they are and how they want to show up in the world." Simultaneously, this entanglement of self-expression and consumerism reflects a global dynamic in which queerness is both commodified and democratized through online platforms. On the one hand, corporate brands and influencers package queer aesthetics as trendy, marketable styles available to anyone with internet access. On the other hand, these same ecosystems enable marginalized youth to find representation, embody survival strategies, and express identities that might be taboo in everyday environments. In Yogyakarta, youth often negotiate this tension by selectively appropriating mass-marketed styles by recontextualizing them within local contexts, where they use embodied and performative strategies not to fit into global trends but as a coded language of resistance and community. Some youth intentionally resist branded or mainstream items in favor of DIY and thrifted looks, cultivating an aesthetic that signals antiestablishment and anti-normativity values. Thus, self-styling is an act of subtle deviance by repurposing the tools of consumer culture without fully subscribing to them.

Across Yogyakarta's urban landscapes, hybrid practices of digital and embodied politics become visible in specific social scenes. Spaces like coffee shops, bars, bookstores, and music venues serve as semi-public arenas for experimenting with diverse gender identities. These sites provide relative safety to try out new styles, meet peers who share similar values, and perform queerness in ways that may be risky in other parts of Yogyakarta

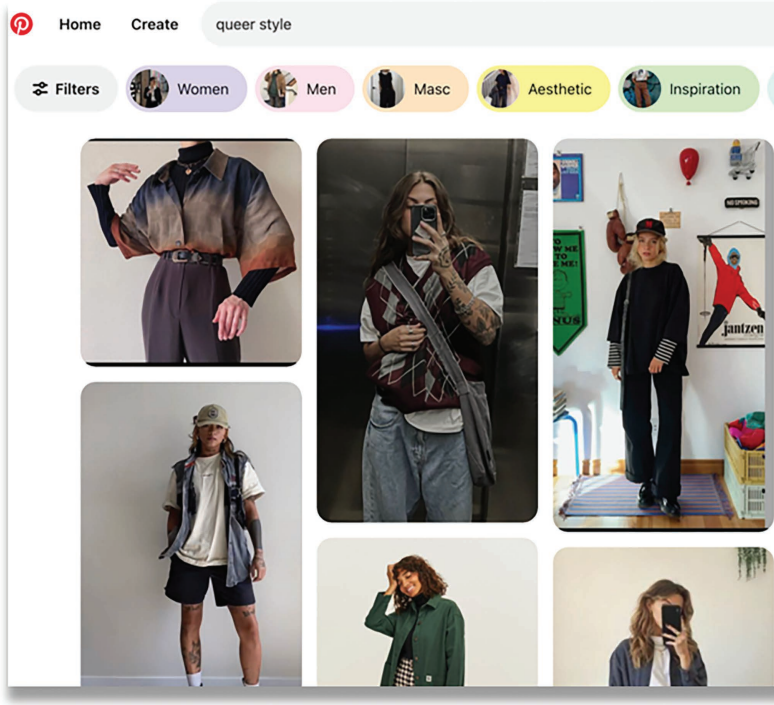

Figure 5.3: Queer fashion inspiration on Pinterest, where digital aesthetics shape self-expression and identity beyond LGBTQ+ communities. *Source:* https://www.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=queer%20style&rs=-typed

society. However, these spaces are not truly neutral. Access to them often requires forms of class and cultural capital, such as fluency in global aesthetics, leisure time, and disposable income. Moreover, while they offer shelter from public scrutiny, they are still shaped by surveillance, social judgment, and risks of being outed.

Queer self-styling and the adoption of hip global trends (figure 3),[40] in a sense, spark tensions around authenticity, class, and belonging.

40. As youth increasingly turned to online platforms for aesthetic inspiration, gender neutral and queer fashion has gained popularity, even extending beyond the LGBTQ

Not all youth can afford the clothes, tattoos, or beauty treatments that signal membership in these scenes. Adopting conspicuous queer-coded styles can still invite harassment from neighbors, classmates, and family members. As such, young people must continually negotiate how far they can go, when to conform, and when to stand out. This careful negotiation of visibility and safety exemplifies the workings of implicit revolution, or the everyday and embodied decisions that challenge dominant norms without relying on overt political confrontations. Through these subtle and strategic acts, Yogyakarta's queer youth contribute to the reshaping of social expectations within available social structures, where they assert presence in spaces not originally built with them in mind.

In this sense, self-presentation is not simply about fashion or personal aesthetics but about navigating the power to express one's authentic self. For queer youth, the body is a central site of negotiation, one that communicates dissent, solidarity, and alternative futures in ways that are subtle yet politically charged. These performative practices are part of what I call an implicit revolution. This mode of resistance does not take shape as direct confrontation or overt LGBTQ advocacy but rather as daily acts of styling and managing visibility through space. While earlier sections emphasize spatial strategies like reclaiming online platforms and skena venues, this section shows how revolution can unfold through embodied practices, such as choices around dress, hair, and gesture. In a climate where overt visibility attracts surveillance and harm, these quieter deliberate actions are powerful means of survival. Hence, resistance and change emerge not only through formal activism but also through the intimate terrain of the body and the curated aesthetics of the everyday.

community. In today's digital age, fashion consumption and an awareness of one's aesthetic have become crucial tools for self-expression and identity assertion, both for queer individuals and beyond.

Conclusion: Queer Possibilities and Implicit Revolution

In this ethnography, I have highlighted how queer youth in Yogyakarta are not merely seeking personal refuge or temporary safe zones through self-expression. Rather, they are collectively enacting what can be theorized as queer possibilities or alternative ways of inhabiting space, relating to one another, and imagining an inclusive future that expands beyond dominant gendered and spatial norms in Indonesia. These possibilities do not emerge through overt confrontations and street protests[41] but through what I call an *implicit revolution*. This implicit revolution refers to the subtle yet radical practices that unsettle normative expectations from within everyday life. It is subversive, less militant, and does not trigger an immediate, widespread change like classically portrayed street protests and national movements. These forms of resistance provide certain affordances through the cultivation of queer possibilities by remaking space, affiliation, and embodiment that contest dominant gender norms while navigating class and consumer culture.

Drawing on theories of performativity,[42] these acts can be seen as iterative practices that reference and rework dominant gender norms, not to reproduce them but to open spaces for contestations. The adoption of alternative aesthetics, such as piercings, ambiguous silhouettes, and dyed hair, does not simply communicate a stable identity but performs a refusal of heteronormative moral codes that regulate gendered expressions in Indonesia. This refusal is relational and public, even if modest, because it offers alternative scripts and affiliation. These queer possibilities are not just about individual styling but about reconfiguring space itself. By mobilizing

41. Doreen Lee, "Images of Youth: On the Iconography of History and Protest in Indonesia," *History and Anthropology* 22, no. 3 (2011): 307–36; Doreen Lee, *Activist Archives: Youth Culture and the Political Past in Indonesia* (Duke University Press, 2016).
42. Butler, *Gender Trouble.*

both offline and online spaces, queer youth in Yogyakarta carve out new terrains of possibility. When queer youth map inclusive cafés, convene in bookstores, or share information about safe venues online, they create alternative public realms that are relationally constituted to resist surveillance and exclusion. Rather than being fixed, these spaces are emergent and negotiated terrains that queer youth actively produce through collective practices. By doing so, they have also challenged the normative boundaries of Islamic morality and heteronormativity by carving out micro enclaves of inclusion and dissent.

Online networks and social media practices extend these spatial politics into the digital realm. More than platforms for visibility, these digital spaces allow marginal voices to share knowledge, cultivate solidarity, and imagine ways of being that might be dangerous to articulate offline. Even with algorithmic censorship and online harassment, queer youth in Yogyakarta use these platforms to circulate educational content and aesthetic cues that destabilize dominant norms and establish local queer networks. In this context, gender performance is not merely expressive or strategic but it serves as a method of building alternative forms of community, relationality, and identity. Through digital and embodied practices, queer youth contest state-sanctioned morality and institutional surveillance by offering a critique of heteronormative gender roles and national values that police differences under the guise of pluralism.

It is important to note that youth's performative and spatial politics are also profoundly entangled with consumerism and class tension. Access to alternative venues, fashionable styling, tattoos, or even reliable internet is not equally distributed among all queer individuals. While Instagram and TikTok democratize access to queer aesthetics and popular trends, they also commodify queerness as a purchasable style, producing queer commodity culture that risks minimizing political critique to marketable trends.[43]

43. Rosemary Hennessy, "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture," *Cultural Critique*, no. 29 (1994): 31–76.

Young people in Yogyakarta draw on these globalized consumer cultures to imagine and perform queerness, but doing so requires navigating the inequalities of who can afford to look queer, who has the freedom to experiment, and who remains vulnerable to economic precarity and familial control. This tension is not incidental but constitutive of performative politics in Yogyakarta. For some, styling the body with dyed hair, piercings, and ambiguous silhouettes is an accessible, low-cost mode of resistance that emphasizes everyday performance rather than relying on formalized institutions. For others, especially those with greater economic means, self-styling opens access to global queer trends and urban subcultural capital but risks reproducing class-based exclusions within supposedly inclusive scenes.

In other words, queer possibilities are negotiated within and against consumer capitalism, exposing tensions around authenticity, access, and solidarity. By theorizing these practices as implicit revolution, this analysis foregrounds the subtle and embodied forms of resistance that animate queer youth organizing in Indonesia. These are not simply individualized acts of self-expression but collective, situated strategies for remaking queer spatial configurations and embodied subjectivities. They generate alternative forms of belonging that both depend on and critique global consumer circuits, highlighting the entanglement between queer world-making and material conditions in the globalized twenty-first century. In sum, queer youth in Yogyakarta enact a performative politics that refuses to accept the moral and spatial order as given, particularly as it pertains to heteronormativity and dominant ethics of Islamic piety.

Younger queer individuals in Indonesia have actively contributed to the creation of dynamic, multisited safe spaces by mobilizing digital networks, circulating knowledge about queerness, and deploying aesthetic practices that signal dissent and negotiate consumerist desires. Queer youth's engagement with these forms of implicit revolution cannot be reduced to NGO advocacy or formal political claims. It is an ongoing process of collectively imagining and enacting new social possibilities through aesthetic experimentation. Such a perspective serves to expand

our understanding of queer politics in Indonesia beyond identity recognition or legal reform, demonstrating youth's cultivation of alternative spaces and queer embodiment. These aesthetic and spatial experimentations have the capacity to destabilize normative scripts around gender, sexuality, and class belonging in contemporary Indonesia.

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