

Analysis The Online Habits of Gay Users on X in Indonesia: A Study through Pierre Bourdieu's Concept of Habitus

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Abstract

This study examines the online habits of gay users on X (formerly Twitter) in Indonesia through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, focusing on how self-presentation, validation-seeking, and partner-seeking behavior are shaped as durable, internalized dispositions rather than isolated individual choices. A descriptive qualitative design was employed, combining observational documentation of publicly accessible posts, images, and reply threads with semi-structured interviews involving a minimum of three gay users who actively use the platform. Data were analyzed thematically using a Topic–Evidence–Explanation–Link (TEEL) structure, guided by Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and capital. The findings show that digital habitus functions as a mediating structure linking bodily self-presentation to social validation and relational connection: ambiguous, body-focused posts consistently generate patterned clusters of responses coded into three overlapping categories—Flirtation and Sexual Desire, Intimacy Field, and Validation. The disproportionate ratio of likes to written comments further indicates that liking operates as a low-risk form of symbolic capital transfer, allowing users to participate in the community's economy of recognition while minimizing exposure to moral scrutiny. These findings suggest that everyday, seemingly minor digital interactions are not spontaneous but are structured practices shaped by Indonesia's heteronormative and religious sociocultural context. The study contributes a culturally grounded, habitus-based understanding of digital queer self-presentation and recommends further comparative research across other platforms.

Keywords: digital habitus; self-presentation; symbolic capital; gay users; social media

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji kebiasaan berperilaku daring pengguna gay di X (dahulu Twitter) di Indonesia melalui konsep habitus Pierre Bourdieu, dengan fokus pada bagaimana presentasi diri, pencarian validasi, dan perilaku mencari pasangan terbentuk sebagai disposisi yang tertanam dan berulang, bukan sekadar pilihan individu yang acak. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif deskriptif, menggabungkan dokumentasi observasional atas unggahan, gambar, dan utas balasan yang dapat diakses publik dengan wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap minimal tiga pengguna gay yang aktif menggunakan platform tersebut. Data dianalisis secara tematik menggunakan struktur Topic–

Evidence–Explanation–Link (TEEL), berpijak pada konsep habitus, ranah (field), dan modal (capital) dari Bourdieu. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa habitus digital berfungsi sebagai struktur penghubung antara presentasi tubuh dengan validasi sosial dan koneksi relasional: unggahan yang berfokus pada tubuh dan bersifat ambigu secara konsisten memicu pola respons yang terkategori ke dalam tiga kategori yang saling tumpang tindih—Flirtasi dan Hasrat Seksual, Ranah Keintiman, serta Validasi. Rasio yang timpang antara jumlah like dan komentar tertulis turut menunjukkan bahwa menyukai (like) berfungsi sebagai bentuk transfer modal simbolik yang berisiko rendah, memungkinkan pengguna berpartisipasi dalam ekonomi pengakuan komunitas sembari meminimalkan risiko sorotan moral. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa interaksi digital sehari-hari yang tampak sepele sesungguhnya merupakan praktik terstruktur yang dibentuk oleh konteks sosiokultural heteronormatif dan religius di Indonesia. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi berupa pemahaman berbasis habitus mengenai presentasi diri queer digital dan merekomendasikan penelitian komparatif lintas platform pada masa mendatang.

Kata kunci: *habitus digital; presentasi diri; modal simbolik; pengguna gay; media sosial*

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1. Introduction

Social media platforms have evolved beyond simple communication tools into cultural spaces where social norms, values, and power relations are produced and contested (Bourdieu, 1977). Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) function as digital fields in which users negotiate visibility, recognition, and legitimacy through everyday practices of posting, interacting, and self-presenting. For marginalized communities, particularly gay men, these platforms simultaneously offer possibilities for expression and expose users to intensified scrutiny, regulation, and symbolic judgment. Within Indonesia, this tension is especially pronounced: the country's dominant cultural values are shaped by collectivism, religious morality, and heteronormative expectations regarding gender and sexuality, which frame non-heterosexual identities as deviant or morally problematic (Manik et al., 2021; Setiawan & Sukmadewi, 2017). This entrenched heteronormativity does not

remain confined to offline life; it actively conditions how gay individuals present themselves, seek connection, and manage visibility within digital environments as well.

Despite the apparent freedom that online spaces seem to offer, digital platforms do not exist outside cultural regulation. Instead, they reproduce and reconfigure offline power relations in new forms, positioning users within structured social fields rather than neutral, open arenas (Green, 2008). For gay users on X, everyday habits such as choosing to reveal or conceal the face and body, engaging in flirtatious replies, or repeatedly liking and commenting on particular kinds of content are not random or purely individual choices. Following Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus, these habits can be understood as durable, internalized dispositions formed through prior social experience that guide perception and behavior largely below the level of conscious calculation (McNay, 1999). Previous research demonstrates that such dispositions are classed and gendered, shaping what is considered desirable, respectable, or appropriate within gay communities (Ural & Beşpınar, 2017), and that intimacy itself is structured through habitus and capital rather than emerging spontaneously (Loa & Choi, 2023; Arwansyah & Suharyanto, 2025).

The problem this study addresses is that, despite growing academic attention to digital queer identities, relatively little research has examined how the everyday, repeated online habits of gay users are culturally produced within specific national contexts such as Indonesia. Much of the existing literature is situated in Western settings or treats online self-presentation as an individual strategic choice rather than a habitus-driven, culturally embedded practice (Dhoest & Szulc, 2016; Gras-Velázquez & Maestre-Brotons, 2021). Studies that explicitly connect habitus, digital self-presentation, and Indonesia's heteronormative moral-cultural framework remain limited, particularly with respect to the routine, seemingly minor forms of engagement, such as likes, comments, and replies, that sustain digital gay communities (Noviani et al., 2024). This gap is significant because it leaves unexamined the very mechanisms through which visibility, validation, and belonging are negotiated by a group that is simultaneously drawn to digital platforms for

connection and constrained by the same moral surveillance that regulates their offline lives (Hanum et al., 2022).

Addressing this gap, the present study contributes a culturally grounded, habitus-based analysis of gay users' online conduct on X in Indonesia. By narrowing the focus to habitual, recurring practices rather than the broader landscape of digital queer visibility, this research offers a more analytically precise account of how digital habitus operates in everyday platform use. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How does the concept of digital habitus explain the relationship between self-presentation, social validation, and partner-seeking behavior among gay users on X? (2) In what ways do gay users' habitual interactions, such as likes, comments, and replies, reflect shared norms and values within the digital gay community?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concepts of habitus, field, and capital, which together provide a framework for understanding how social practices are formed, reproduced, and negotiated through everyday action. Habitus refers to a system of durable, transposable dispositions that individuals acquire through long-term socialization within particular social conditions (Bourdieu, 1977). It operates largely beneath conscious awareness, shaping perception, taste, bodily expression, and modes of action that feel natural to social actors even though they are, in fact, products of accumulated social history (Costa & Murphy, 2015). McNay (1999) extends this notion by emphasizing its embodied and gendered dimensions, arguing that social norms are inscribed onto the body through repeated practice, an insight particularly relevant for analyzing gendered and sexualized self-presentation in digital contexts.

Habitus always operates within a field, a structured social space governed by specific rules, hierarchies, and struggles over legitimacy, in which actors compete for various forms of capital

(Bourdieu, 1977). In this study, X is conceptualized as a digital field in which visibility, desirability, and recognition are unevenly distributed among users. Capital, in Bourdieu's framework, extends beyond economic resources to include cultural, social, and symbolic forms; symbolic capital in particular, referring to recognition, prestige, or legitimacy, is central to understanding how digital visibility operates, since metrics such as likes, replies, and followers function as indicators of accumulated symbolic value (Costa & Murphy, 2015). Complementing this framework, Green's (2008) concept of the sexual field explains how desire itself is socially organized, with certain bodies and performances accumulating more erotic and symbolic capital than others, while Loa and Choi (2023) extend Bourdieu's sociology into the domain of intimacy, proposing an intimacy field in which class, habitus, and capital jointly shape relational and romantic practices. Together, these frameworks position online self-presentation, validation-seeking, and interaction not as spontaneous or purely individual behavior, but as socially structured practices embedded within specific cultural and moral conditions.

2.2 Previous Studies

A growing body of research has examined digital queer identity, self-presentation, and intimacy, though from varied theoretical and geographical vantage points. Gras-Velázquez and Maestre-Brotons (2021) investigated the visual self-presentation of Spanish gay men on Instagram, demonstrating that bodily display functions to construct subjectivity, affect, and emotional connection, and that certain body types are aesthetically privileged within the platform's visual economy. While their study offers valuable insight into visual self-presentation, it largely treats online practices as expressive or performative acts rather than examining how such behaviors become habitual and socially reproduced over time, and it does not engage with the more restrictive moral and religious conditions found in contexts such as Indonesia.

Within Indonesia specifically, Noviani et al. (2024) examined the formation of social capital and digital intimacy among users of dating applications, finding that digital intimacy is strongly shaped

by moral discourses and heteronormative norms that compel users to carefully manage visibility and self-disclosure. Although this study offers important insight into the Indonesian moral-cultural landscape, it does not address gay male visual self-presentation specifically, nor does it conceptualize habitus as an embodied disposition shaping recurring digital behavior. Similarly, Dhoest and Szulc (2016) showed that diasporic gay men's online self-presentation is strategically managed in response to offline realities such as family expectations and legal conditions, implicitly suggesting a role for habitus in shaping online behavior, though the concept itself is not directly applied.

Other studies extend Bourdieu's framework to relational and identity-based contexts without addressing digital platforms. Ural and Beşpınar (2017) demonstrated that gay men's identities and masculinities in Turkey are strongly shaped by classed forms of habitus, influencing what is considered respectable or desirable within gay communities, while Arwansyah and Suharyanto (2025) applied Bourdieu's concepts to romantic relationships lacking parental approval, showing that emotional and relational decisions are structured by symbolic power and cultural expectation rather than by personal feeling alone. Neither study, however, engages with digital self-presentation or online interactional practices.

2.3 Research Gap

Taken together, this literature reveals several limitations. First, studies that examine digital platforms tend to treat online behavior as an expressive or strategic choice rather than as a habitual practice shaped by embodied social history, leaving the concept of habitus underutilized in explaining recurring digital actions (Gras-Velázquez & Maestre-Brotons, 2021; Dhoest & Szulc, 2016). Second, studies that apply Bourdieu's framework more directly tend to focus on offline domains such as relationships or class identity, without extending the analysis to digital platforms as social fields characterized by visibility and algorithmic visibility (Ural & Beşpınar, 2017; Arwansyah & Suharyanto, 2025; Loa & Choi, 2023). Third, while Indonesian research highlights moral regulation and digital intimacy (Noviani et al., 2024), it rarely examines gay men's visual self-presentation or

the routine interactional practices, such as liking, commenting, and replying, that sustain digital gay communities. This study addresses these gaps by applying Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus to analyze gay users' online behavior on X, combining visual documentation and interactional analysis within Indonesia's specific religious and heteronormative sociocultural context (Manik et al., 2021; Setiawan & Sukmadewi, 2017).

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design to examine how gay users on X (formerly Twitter) develop and demonstrate their online habits, and how these practices can be understood through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of meanings, dispositions, and culturally embedded practices that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, this research aims to provide a contextualized and interpretive understanding of digital self-presentation and interaction as socially structured practices. The study adopts an interpretive, culturally oriented perspective that positions X as a digital social field in which visibility, recognition, and interaction operate as forms of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Green, 2008), so that online behaviors are analyzed as manifestations of internalized dispositions rather than isolated individual choices.

3.2 Data and Data Source

The primary data of this research consist of visual and textual materials obtained from gay users' publicly accessible accounts on X, including profile pictures, uploaded images, tweets, replies, and visible interactional elements such as likes and comments that reflect patterns of visibility, engagement, and self-presentation. These materials were selected because they constitute naturally occurring, unsolicited traces of everyday platform use, making them well suited to an analysis of

habitual rather than deliberately constructed behavior. In addition to this observational data, the study incorporates semi-structured interviews with a minimum of three gay users in Indonesia who actively use X and meet predetermined criteria related to online activity and self-presentation practices. Interview data were included to capture participants' subjective interpretations of their own online behaviors, motivations, and considerations in negotiating visibility and validation, complementing the interpretive analysis of visual and interactional data with first-person accounts. Secondary data, drawn from academic books, journal articles, and prior studies on Bourdieu's theory of habitus, digital culture, and queer studies (e.g., McNay, 1999; Ural & Beşpınar, 2017; Loa & Choi, 2023), were used to support theoretical analysis.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through an observational and documentation-based approach. Visual and interactional data were systematically documented through screenshots of posts, comments, and visual content relevant to the research focus, with all materials anonymized to protect users' identities. Observational techniques were employed to identify recurring patterns of digital self-presentation and interaction, such as bodily display, visual aesthetics, and engagement practices, across multiple, unrelated accounts, so that patterns could be assessed for consistency rather than treated as isolated instances. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to complement this observational data by allowing participants to articulate how they perceive and rationalize their own online practices in relation to recognition, intimacy, and belonging. Ethical considerations were addressed throughout data collection, particularly regarding anonymity, informed consent, and the use of only publicly accessible content, in accordance with standard protocols for digital and human-subjects research.

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by Bourdieu's theoretical framework of habitus, field, and capital. The analytical process began with data familiarization

through repeated reading and examination of visual and textual materials to identify meaningful patterns. This was followed by coding, in which specific behaviors, expressions, and interactional practices were labeled according to emerging themes related to online habits, such as bodily display strategies, coded replies, and validation-seeking language. These codes were then organized into broader thematic categories concerning visibility, validation, and digital embodiment. Finally, the themes were interpreted through Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of habitus, field, and capital, as elaborated by McNay (1999) and Costa and Murphy (2015), and connected to Green's (2008) sexual field and Loa and Choi's (2023) intimacy field frameworks, to explain how gay users' online practices are shaped by social structures and how these practices may reproduce or negotiate existing heteronormative norms. Through this analytical process, the study moved from descriptive observation to sociological interpretation, connecting everyday digital actions to broader social and cultural dynamics within the Indonesian context.

4. Results

(1) digital habitus as a mediating structure linking self-presentation, social validation, and partner-seeking behavior, and (2) habitual interactions, specifically likes, comments, and replies, as reflections of shared norms within the digital gay community on X. Findings are organized thematically and supported by a sample of coded user comments (Table 1), analyzed using a Topic–Evidence–Explanation–Link (TEEL) structure to connect empirical data with Bourdieu's theoretical framework.

4.1 Self-Presentation, Validation, and Partner-Seeking as Habitual Practice

Data collected from gay users' posts and reply threads on X show a consistent pattern: a single act of visual self-presentation, typically a body-focused photograph accompanied by a suggestive caption, reliably generates a cluster of socially patterned responses. These responses were coded

into three overlapping categories: *Flirtation & Sexual Desire*, *Intimacy Field*, and *Validation*, as summarized in Table 1.

Sample Post Illustrating Bodily Self-Presentation on X

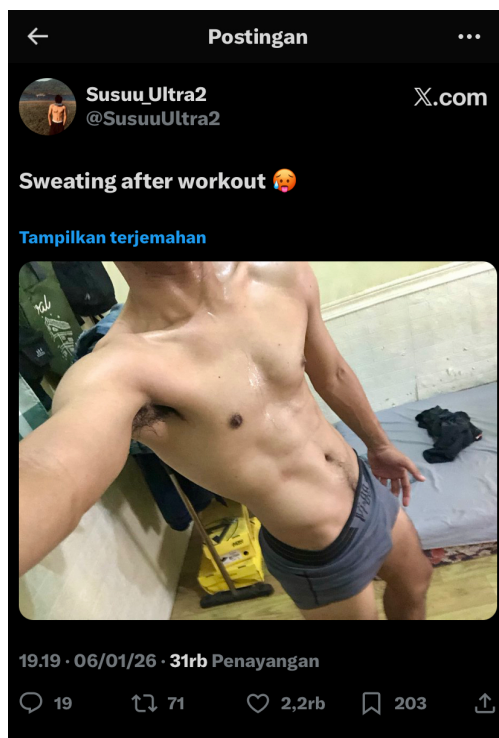


Figure 1

Note. The screenshot shows a post from a gay user's account on X, displaying an uncovered upper body accompanied by the caption "Sweating after workout 🥵." The post received 2,200 likes, 71 reposts, 19 replies, and 31,000 views. All identifying information has been anonymized in accordance with the study's ethical protocol.

Figure 1 illustrates the type of visual self-presentation that most frequently prompts the patterned reply behavior examined in this study. The post foregrounds the torso and abdominal muscles while the face remains angled out of clear view, and the caption ("Sweating after workout") frames the image around physical exertion rather than explicit sexual content, allowing the bodily display to be read as either incidental or deliberately suggestive. This ambiguity itself is a habitual strategy: by

framing bodily exposure through an ostensibly mundane activity, the poster secures plausible deniability while still inviting the kind of attention that generates high engagement, consistent with Gras-Velázquez and Maestre-Brotons's (2021) observation that the body functions as a central, semiotic resource for constructing subjectivity and affect in gay digital self-presentation.

The volume of engagement on this single post, 2,200 likes against only 19 written replies, mirrors the broader pattern discussed in Section 4.2 below, in which liking functions as a low-risk, silent form of validation while written replies remain comparatively rare and more socially exposed. The four comments analyzed in Table 1 are drawn from this and similarly patterned posts.

Data collected from gay users' posts and reply threads on X show a consistent pattern: a single act of visual self-presentation, typically a body-focused photograph accompanied by a suggestive or ambiguous caption such as the one in Figure 1, reliably generates a cluster of socially patterned responses. These responses were coded into three overlapping categories: Flirtation & Sexual Desire, Intimacy Field, and Validation, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Categorization of User Comments by Habitual Practice

Comment	Flirtation & Sexual Desire	Intimacy Field	Validation
"Mw ku bantu lap ga nih?"	✓	✓	-
OMG so hot	✓	-	✓
Gym?	-	✓	✓
Eh jdi mau ikutan basah juga deh	✓	✓	✓

Note. Comments were drawn from publicly accessible reply threads responding to posts such as the one shown in Figure 1, and were anonymized prior to analysis. A checkmark (✓) indicates that the comment was coded as exhibiting the corresponding category; a dash (–) indicates that the category was not present in that comment.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study offer a direct answer to the first research question by demonstrating that digital habitus functions as a mediating structure linking self-presentation, social validation, and partner-seeking behavior among gay users on X. Rather than treating a shirtless photograph and its accompanying replies as isolated, one-off events, the data show a consistent, repeatable sequence: an ambiguous, body-focused post generates a patterned cluster of desire-laden, relationally probing, and validating comments, which in turn function as the mechanism through which visibility is converted into recognition, and recognition into the possibility of relational connection. This supports Bourdieu's (1977) foundational claim that practices which feel spontaneous or purely personal are, in fact, products of internalized social conditioning, and it extends McNay's (1999) argument that habitus operates through the body specifically by showing how bodily display and its uptake by others form a single, coordinated habitus rather than two separate processes. Where prior digital-queer research (e.g., Gras-Velázquez & Maestre-Brotons, 2021) has treated bodily display primarily as an act of subjective or affective self-construction on the part of the poster, the present findings shift attention to the reply as an equally constitutive part of the same habitus: the comment does not simply react to a pre-existing erotic value, it actively produces and confirms that value through repetition, an interpretation more consistent with Green's (2008) sexual-fields approach, in which desirability is continuously negotiated rather than fixed.

The four comment categories identified in the results also extend Loa and Choi's (2023) intimacy field framework into a specifically Indonesian digital setting. Loa and Choi developed their framework primarily around offline or app-mediated romantic relationships, where intimacy unfolds through more sustained interaction. The present findings show that the same underlying logic, intimacy as something structured through positioning and capital exchange rather than spontaneous feeling, operates even within a single, brief public reply such as "Mw ku bantu lap ga nih?" This suggests that the intimacy field is not confined to dyadic, private courtship but can be enacted in

compressed, public, and semi-anonymous form on a fast-paced platform like X. In this sense, the study confirms the general applicability of Loa and Choi's (2023) framework while extending it to a communicative register, brief, publicly visible, humor-laden exchange, that their original study did not directly examine.

With respect to the second research question, the disproportionate ratio of likes to written comments observed in the data (e.g., 2,200 likes against 19 replies in the sampled post) confirms Berger et al.'s (2022) observation that LGBTQ+ users often favor low-risk forms of digital engagement, but it also extends this finding by demonstrating why this preference matters sociologically rather than merely behaviorally. Within Bourdieu's framework, a "like" is not simply a lower-effort action; it is a form of symbolic capital transfer that requires no public linguistic performance, allowing users to participate in the community's economy of recognition while remaining largely undetectable to outside, potentially hostile observers. This reading brings Berger et al.'s (2022) risk-based explanation into direct conversation with Bourdieu's (1977) and Costa and Murphy's (2015) capital-based explanation, suggesting that low-risk engagement and capital accumulation are not competing explanations but two dimensions of the same habitual practice, one that is especially pronounced in a heteronormative context such as Indonesia (Manik et al., 2021; Setiawan & Sukmadewi, 2017), where visibility itself carries social cost.

The clustering of written comments around a narrow set of recurring themes, physique admiration, flirtatious teasing, and brief validation, also lends support to Ural and Beşpınar's (2017) argument that gay masculinities are shaped by classed, disciplined forms of embodiment. However, the present findings complicate this picture slightly: whereas Ural and Beşpınar's Turkish participants negotiated respectability primarily through restraint and careful self-management, the Indonesian data examined here show that respectability and desirability are negotiated simultaneously through both restraint (e.g., cropped or partially obscured faces) and calculated bodily exposure (e.g., visible, toned torsos), suggesting that the same classed habitus can produce divergent visibility strategies depending on the specific moral and platform conditions users are navigating. This nuance is

consistent with McNay's (1999) point that habitus, while durable, is not monolithic or identically expressed across all members of a field.

Finally, the reciprocal like–comment–reply cycle identified in the results, culminating in brief acknowledgments such as "makasii", supports and extends Noviani et al.'s (2024) finding that digital intimacy in Indonesia is built through continuous, micro-level exchange rather than singular disclosure. Noviani et al. examined this dynamic primarily in the context of dating-app intimacy between prospective partners; the present study shows that a structurally similar micro-exchange economy also governs community-level, non-dyadic interaction among gay users on X, indicating that this reciprocal pattern may be a broader feature of digitally mediated queer intimacy in Indonesia rather than one confined to explicitly romantic platforms.

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. First, the study's reliance on a small, purposively identified sample of publicly visible posts and comments means the findings illustrate a recurring pattern rather than establish its statistical prevalence across the broader population of gay users on X. Second, because data collection was restricted to publicly accessible content for ethical reasons, the analysis cannot capture private-message negotiations, which may carry a substantial portion of partner-seeking activity and could reveal habitus operating differently under conditions of greater privacy. Third, the coding of comments into the three categories in Table 1 involved interpretive judgment; while grounded in Bourdieu's theoretical framework, alternative coders applying the same categories to ambiguous, slang-heavy Indonesian expressions might reach somewhat different classifications. Finally, as a study of a single platform, these findings should not be generalized to gay men's digital habitus on other platforms with different affordances, audience compositions, or algorithmic logics, a limitation that, as noted in the recommendations of the original thesis, points toward comparative platform research as a valuable direction for future study.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how digital habitus explains the relationship between self-presentation, social validation, and partner-seeking behavior among gay users on X in Indonesia, and how their habitual interactions reflect shared norms within the digital gay community. The findings demonstrate that a single act of bodily self-presentation reliably generates a patterned cycle of flirtatious, intimacy-oriented, and validating responses, confirming that these practices are not spontaneous or purely individual but are products of an internalized, socially conditioned habitus. The marked disparity between likes and written comments further reveals that low-risk engagement functions simultaneously as a risk-avoidance strategy and a form of symbolic capital accumulation, particularly significant within Indonesia's heteronormative and religiously conservative cultural context. Taken together, these results extend Bourdieu's theoretical framework, as well as related work on sexual fields and intimacy fields, into a specifically Indonesian digital setting that has so far received limited scholarly attention.

These findings carry practical implications for understanding how marginalized communities negotiate visibility and belonging under conditions of moral surveillance, and they underscore the need for digital platforms and policymakers to be attentive to the ways platform design can either constrain or accommodate such negotiated forms of self-expression. Given the limitations of this study—namely its small, purposive sample and its restriction to publicly accessible content on a single platform—future research is recommended to pursue comparative studies across other social media platforms with different affordances and audience compositions, as well as to incorporate private-message data where ethically feasible, in order to build a more comprehensive understanding of digital queer habitus in Indonesia.

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