

Gender Deconstruction in Gen Z Social Media: A Study on TikTok Accounts beauty influencer @akunbarukarel

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to analyze the deconstruction of gender identity presented by @akunbarukarel on TikTok and how it challenges conventional understandings of masculinity and femininity in the digital sphere. **Method:** The research applies Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction within a qualitative framework, utilizing observation, interviews, and content analysis to examine gender representation and audience reception. **Results:** The findings indicate that Karel embodies a fluid and inclusive gender identity, disrupting binary categorizations and fostering discourse on gender diversity within social media spaces. The content is largely embraced by Gen Z audiences, although it faces resistance from conservative groups. Moreover, Karel's gender-fluid expression not only generates social influence but also creates economic opportunities through collaborations with beauty brands, highlighting the intersection of identity, culture, and commerce. **Novelty:** This study contributes new insights into how TikTok functions as a cultural arena where deconstructed gender identities are negotiated, normalized, and commercialized, offering a dynamic narrative that redefines gender discourse in contemporary digital society.

INTRODUCTION

Social media is a computer platform that allows users to interact or share content such as text, images, and videos quickly. It is a digital platform that provides tools for every user to engage in social activities. There are various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and others, which are now familiar to people from all walks of life. Social media has become a broad global platform for everyone to promote their products or services, interact with customers, and even build their own personal brands [1]. Meanwhile, the social media platform that is currently widely used is TikTok. As of July 2024, TikTok has 157.6 million users in Indonesia [2] This surpasses the total number of TikTok users in the United States, which stands at 120.5 million users.

One interesting phenomenon that has emerged on TikTok is a shift in the meaning of gender. In the virtual world, gender identity has greater flexibility, allowing individuals to express their gender according to their biological identity, establish their true identity, or even create individuals who are often different. On various digital platforms, such as social media, forums, and the internet, users can choose to use pseudonyms, avatars, or anonymous identities that do not always reveal their true identities. This provides individuals with the opportunity to explore their gender identities more thoroughly, especially for those who are influenced by social norms or the real world [3].

However, even though the virtual world offers various expressive options, discrimination based on gender, courage (online harassment), and identity theft still often

occur. In the cases mentioned above, the flexibility of gender identity in the digital world is used for manipulative purposes, such as in the phenomenon of catfishing, where someone pretends to be someone else of a different gender to deceive others. [4].

In addition, the digital world is also not free from gender bias, which is often influenced by algorithms and automated systems. Challenging advertisements, for example, challenge traditional norms regarding the behavior of women and children by targeting users based on gender stereotypes. Furthermore, it is mentioned that algorithms in AI-based work processes are capable of prioritizing candidates based on gender according to available data, thereby overcoming gender inequality in several fields [5].

The phenomenon of gender in cyberspace is also closely related to gender-specific influencers, who are individuals who provide information about gender identity and their knowledge in the field of beauty. In the internet era, gender norms in the beauty industry have become less rigid, allowing women, children, and non-binary people to participate as influencers in this field. Gender-specific beauty influencers often challenge traditional norms that promote beauty in women and create a more inclusive space for various gender expressions [6].

In addition, gender bias in digital algorithms also affects commercial opportunities for female beauty influencers. Because individuals who want to collaborate with influencers often see women as their primary audience, influencers who are male or non-binary have smaller followings, and as a result, they are more likely to be able to build lasting relationships than their peers. Consequently, even though the virtual industry is more inclusive, there are still systemic issues that hinder access and economic opportunities [7].

Additionally, the emergence of gender-neutral influencers has also had a positive impact on social change. They help challenge rigid beauty standards and demonstrate that beauty is not exclusive to a particular gender. Some beauty influencers, such as James Charles and Bretman Rock, have shown that men can also be symbols of success and beauty in this industry. Furthermore, non-binary and transgender influencers have more followers and provide more inclusive representation in the digital world [8].

Many businesses use TikTok as a promotional medium, especially cosmetic businesses, where people from various backgrounds share short videos about tips, tutorials, and beauty product reviews. With TikTok's algorithm supporting virality, trends such as "clean female aesthetics," "glass skin," or specific makeup issues spread quickly. Additionally, the platform promotes a broader standard of beauty through the presence of beauty influencers of various ages, genders, and cultures. TikTok also has a significant impact on the beauty industry: products often go viral and sales surge simply because of a brief review from a beauty influencer, sparking the phenomenon of "TikTok made me buy that." Influencers can be defined as those who have become celebrities in the social media world. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, an influencer is someone who influences or changes the behavior of others [9].

We must acknowledge that the use of social media has increased rapidly in recent years. Influencers are people who are active on social media, have many followers, and have the power to influence their followers. In the field of mass communication, influencers are also known as idea generators and opinion leaders who exert influence, attract attention, and have independent sources of income [10].

Several academics have conducted research on this topic, for example Mingkase & Rohmaniyah (2022) focused on gender issues and stereotypes, particularly in terms of the construction of social reality that occurs on Instagram social media. Then there is also Dewi, (2018) who focused on gender deconstruction in films. The results show that social media and popular culture, such as Instagram and films, are important places to discuss and analyze the construction and deconstruction of gender. This includes how gender stereotypes are formed and challenged in social reality. Then there is Sutanto (2020), who focuses on the deconstruction of representations of women in Hollywood superhero movie posters, as well as Nurdin (2014), who focuses on the deconstruction of gender from the perspective of Rasyid Ridha.

Deconstruction is a type of subjective action, and its method creates specific objects that originate from several bold destructions that have been analyzed, analyzed, and analyzed during this period. The result is a radical action with strong arguments, and Derrida is considered one of the most famous structuralist and postmodernist writers. Deconstruction in a broad sense is a method for understanding the contradictions and conflicts found in a text, and suggestions for resolving the issues raised in the text. Deconstruction allows readers to understand a text consistently and in accordance with what is said in the text. Deconstruction indicates that a text must have facts and ideas that are true and different from what is said in the text [11].

The purpose of this study is to examine gender deconstruction among men who work as beauty influencers through their TikTok social media accounts, specifically the account @akunbarukarel. The owner of this account is Karel, a high school student in the Sidoarjo area with 15,100 followers. Although biologically male, in the various content he uploads on the TikTok platform, Karel portrays a strong sense of beauty and eroticism in the world of makeup and beauty—a field that is more often discussed in a social context with women.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how the @akunbarukarel account deconstructs gender representations through its TikTok content. The study focuses on the social and symbolic meanings that emerge in specific contexts, without attempting to generalize the results [12].

The data used consists of two main sources, namely primary data in the form of TikTok videos and live streams from the @akunbarukarel account uploaded between December 2024 and May 2025, as well as secondary data including user comments, account profiles, and additional information from interviews or articles discussing the account [13].

Data collection was conducted through bold non-participatory observation, in which the researcher observed video content, interactions, and user responses. In addition, the researcher also documented videos, comments, and statistical data such as the number of likes, views, and shares. To supplement the data, a search was conducted of archives related to relevant interviews and articles.

The object of this study was a cross-gender beauty influencer from the TikTok account @akunbarukarel, whose real name is Carelyus Gusha, a high school student in Sidoarjo. The researcher chose this informant because the account with the username @akunbarukarel showed a phenomenon of gender deconstruction, in which Karel is a boy but often shares makeup tutorials, which are usually done by girls. -content, he often shares makeup tutorials that are usually done by women.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Gender deconstruction is becoming increasingly prevalent in the digital world, with many men changing their appearance to become women in order to gain material benefits as beauty influencers. This phenomenon is considered normal and is not always associated with LGBT issues. However, society has not yet fully accepted it because it is considered a violation of social norms. This is an interesting topic to study further, especially regarding the reasons why the virtual world seems to have a special status as a form of entertainment. Will this cause problems in the future?

One of the findings of this study is that the @akunbarukarel account, as a beauty influencer, also does the same thing. This phenomenon is considered [4] Derrida as gender deconstruction, where gender deconstruction is understood as the rearrangement of social phenomena or facts in a new era or age. Although Derrida did not directly develop a theory of gender, many feminist thinkers and cultural critics have applied Derrida's principles of deconstruction to understand and deconstruct social constructions of gender. The results of this research analysis will be examined by dividing them into four main indicators that can be considered in gender deconstruction according to his perspective, namely binary opposition, difference, social deconstruction and hegemony, intertextuality, ambiguity and imperfection, disclosure of hierarchy, and refuting the concept of authenticity [14].

Through content analysis and user interaction, this study shows that @akunbarukarel not only depicts beauty practices commonly found in the beauty influencer industry, but also highlights trends that challenge traditional gender norms. Gender representation in content highlights expressive flexibility, which contributes to an increased understanding of gender identity among the younger generation. This study also aims to understand how TikTok followers of @akunbarukarel express themselves through their comments and feedback on content that shows more accurate gender expression.

Furthermore, this study examines how visual appeal, communication style, and language use in videos on TikTok @akunbarukarel contribute to a more inclusive

audience perception of gender constructs. Comments and reactions from participants are also analyzed to see how the digital community, especially Gen Z, responds to gender deconstruction on social media.

According to Derrida [14], Many ideas in human thought are based on opposing viewpoints, such as male vs. female, active vs. passive, rational vs. emotional, and so on. This pattern of thinking is known as binary opposition, a concept that clearly distinguishes two things as opposing pairs. There is often a clear difference between “men” and “women” in traditional gender constructs, where one is considered more dominant or superior to the other. Deconstruction shows how this opposition is not natural at all, because it is socially constructed and can be compared or contrasted.

People are classified according to their gender, which allows us to group the world into basic categories from linguistics to metaphysics. The biological basis of gender cognition, gender identity, and sexual preference influences our ability to communicate, understand others, and have various empathetic reactions. The most essential aspect in the power dynamics of society is gender biology, which allows women to be recognized by their bodies and behaviors dictated by the dominant.

One important aspect of deconstruction theory is that opposing ideologies such as femininity and masculinity always contain ambiguity and instability. The findings in this study show that the gender construction displayed by the owner of the TikTok account @akunbarukarel represents a more flexible form of gender expression. This expression is not entirely based on traditional norms, such as feminine or masculine stereotypes, but rather reflects a more fluid and dynamic diversity of gender identities. The following is an excerpt from an interview with a follower of @akunbarukarel:

“I see @akunbarukarel as someone who presents a more flexible expression of gender that is not limited to traditional norms. In my opinion, they transcend specific gender categories because they are not bound by feminine or masculine stereotypes.” (Maldina, owner of the @dinaa account, April 4, 2025)

The above opinion is a form of appreciation for the freedom of gender expression displayed by @akunbarukarel, which is seen as capable of transcending the boundaries of traditional gender constructs. This opinion is reinforced by testimonials from other followers who state that the expression displayed by @akunbarukarel provides space for a more inclusive and unlimited interpretation of gender identity. This can be seen in the following interview excerpt:

“I see @akunbarukarel's gender identity as something unique and different from the norms I usually encounter. At first I was confused, but after seeing some of their content, I began to understand that gender can be more than just male and female.” (Nabila Syasa, owner of the @bila.bong account, April 4, 2025)

This informant's response is in line with what @akunbarukarel wanted when asked how he expresses his gender identity on his TikTok platform.

“I prefer to show my fluid gender side. So, I'm not stuck with traditional gender norms, and I'm more into sharing my journey of how I deal with existing gender expectations.” (Karel)

Then there is the aspect of Difference, one of the most important concepts in deconstruction is difference, which refers to similarities or differences that are not always apparent. In the context of gender, this refers to the belief

that gender identity is never fully defined or fixed. Depending on the situation and social interactions, a person's gender identity can change constantly. It is constantly changing, but that does not mean that gender is something essential or fixed, according to the meaning of this investigation.

According to @akunbarukarel, even on TikTok and in everyday life, I show a changing gender, which is a concept that describes people who show changes or variations in their gender identity over time. They may be one gender at one time, another gender at another time, or even have a gender identity outside of traditional categories.

"The more people are open and supportive of my content, the more courageous I become in expressing my more fluid gender identity." (Karel)

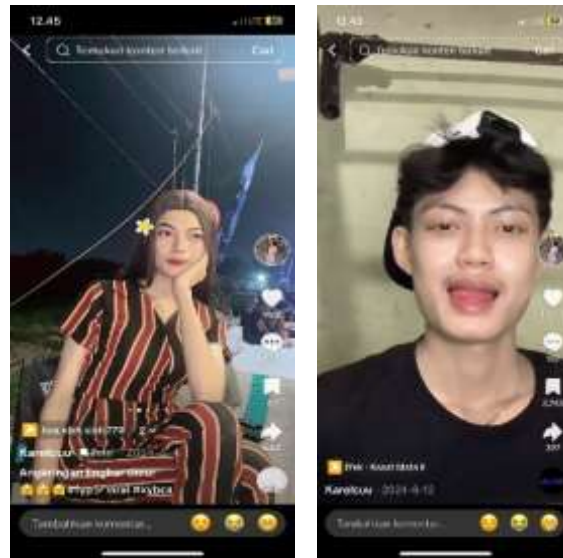
Recognition and respect for individual gender fluid identities are key to positive well-being and support. In a society that understands gender fluidity, everyone can express themselves honestly and feel accepted without being judged or humiliated.

"I see @akunbarukarel as a more inclusive representation of gender; he doesn't fit into a specific gender category, but is more fluid." (Noval Ardiansyah, owner of the @NOVAL.CO account)

"Personally, I still categorize gender as male and female, but I can understand that there are people who transcend these categories." (Nabila Syasa, owner of the @bila.bong account)

Gender as a social and linguistic deconstruction, gender is not something fundamental or fixed, but is determined by language and culture. Gender identity is seen as the result of the play of signs (signifiers) within the language system. In addition to makeup, gender construction can also be seen in visual activities, attributes, and settings. Gestures and expressions can also be linguistic signs that account holders use to convey how they want to be seen and evaluated by their followers on TikTok.

The subject of this study, @akunbarukarel, always shows her feminine side as a beauty vlogger in her content. This can be seen from how she does live makeup tutorials, photoshoots with feminine makeup, and responds to her followers on live TikTok with a coquettish style typical of women. That is how she wants to be seen and judged by people who visit her TikTok account. The gender representation performed by @akunbarukarel creates a new perspective for some of her followers.



“The content helped me understand that gender is not always binary and can be more flexible. The aesthetics are very influential, especially in showing that clothing and gestures do not have to be associated with a particular gender.” (Maldina, owner of the @dinaa account)

“In terms of clothing and gestures, I see it more as a personal style than a symbol of gender deconstruction.” (Nabila Syasa, owner of the @bila.bong account)

“The aesthetics provide an illustration that gender can be expressed in various ways.” (Noval Ardiansyah, owner of the @NOVAL.CO account)

However, in the process, not everyone can accept and see Karel as he presents himself on social media as he would like. Some audiences, especially those who still hold conservative views, consider the content that Karel displays to be very much against existing norms. The opposing view towards men who dress like women is generally based on religious interpretations, social norms, and concerns about the ambiguity of gender identity. Although some people consider this to be a harmless form of self-expression, it violates traditional gender norms and religious prohibitions.

“Men who behave in a feminine manner like this are often considered not in line with social expectations, often leading to rejection and even negative stigma, so they must be strong in the face of social pressure” (Riski, owner of the @kiiirizkii account)

The deconstruction of identity shows that identity is never singular and is open to various interpretations. Karel's self-expression on social media has sparked mixed responses; some conservative members of society consider it contrary to social and religious norms. Deconstruction rejects final truths and binary oppositions such as masculine-feminine, opening up space for more fluid identities. However, such expressions are often met with rejection and negative stigma, as expressed by Riski, owner of the @kiiirizkii account, who said that men with a feminine style are often considered not in line with social expectations.

Derrida rejects the idea that gender categories, such as masculinity and femininity, have a fixed and essential essence in his deconstruction. Instead, he shows that these

categories are constructed through a process of interdependent differentiation, rather than fixed essences.

In this study, @akunbarukarel also admits that it is not easy to maintain his content style amid the conservative views of most people regarding gender fluidity. In an interview with the author, he said .

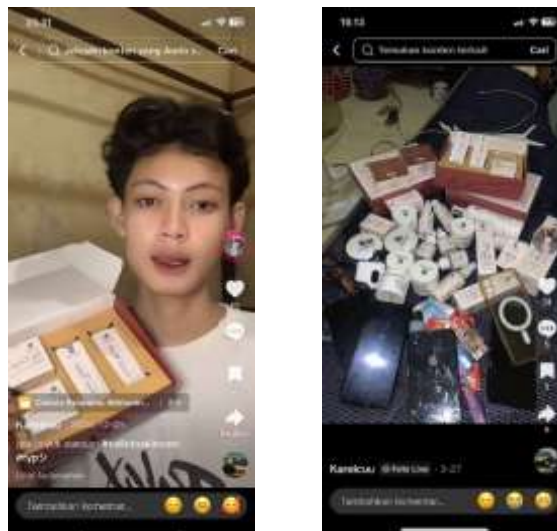
“I often talk to my followers during live streams, explaining that gender identity is fluid and doesn't have to be pigeonholed. I'm always open to discussion, but I'm also firm about my view that gender should be free.” (Karel).

Meanwhile, some of his followers are always open-minded and just consider it all as content that can be enjoyed.

“I feel like I am participating in the gender narrative by interacting in the comments section and sharing content. Occasionally there are differences in responses; usually younger people are more open, while older people tend to be more skeptical” (Rafik Ardiansyah, owner of the @Rav_ account).

“I often view without commenting, but I enjoy the content. I am neutral, neither supporting nor criticizing.” (Nabila Syasa, owner of the @bila.bong account)

Next is Intertextuality and Performativity, a discussion of metrosexuality that connects other findings related to capitalism and modernity. As is well known, metrosexual men are a new form of masculine identity as a result of capitalism, which has begun to target men as a market. Modern civilization is marked by the birth and development of capitalism. Furthermore, the modern world, understood as the world today, has entered a new era that Baudrillard calls the postmodern world. As mentioned in Strinati (2007), postmodernism is characterized by the development of capitalism, particularly in the culture and media industries, which has led to the formation of a social order in which all of these elements shape and regulate all kinds of social relationships.



Currently, men who are venturing into the world of beauty vlogging are not just doing so to satisfy their own fluidity of gender. More than that, they are also doing it as a means of profiting from social media platforms such as TikTok. With @akunbarukarel

having 15,000 followers, it naturally attracts the interest of online business owners to recruit him as a promoter (endorser) for the products or services they offer. This commercial benefit is clearly one of the main reasons why Karel chose to become a beauty influencer, breaking through the binary opposition recognized by most of society. He said that his gender representation also influences endorsement opportunities.

“Yes, there are brands that like to collaborate with me because I am considered to represent diversity. But there are also those that don't suit me because my content is too bold,” she said.

The same goes for the capitalization of gender identity that she does on her TikTok platform, which influences her decision on what kind of content to create.

“Even though I still try to create content that aligns with my values, sometimes there are also brand considerations that come into play,” she said.

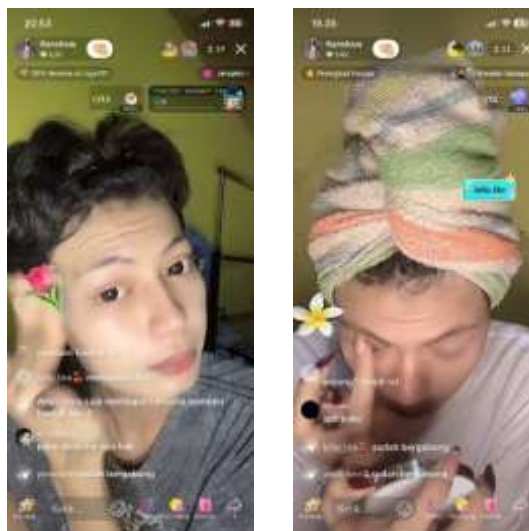
The existence of algorithms on social media affects audience exposure to content on TikTok @akunbarukarel, especially since the issue of gender deconstruction is considered quite sensitive by some people.

“I feel there are limitations in the distribution of gender content on my homepage.” (Noval Ardiansyah, owner of the @NOVAL.CO account)

“TikTok is quite open compared to other platforms, but there are still limitations.” (Rafik Ardiansyah, owner of the @Rav_ account)

“I feel that there is filtering of certain gender content, especially that which is considered controversial.” (Maldina, owner of the @dinaa account)

The use of makeup by men on social media, as done by beauty influencer @akunbarukarel on TikTok, shows that views on gender among Gen Z are beginning to change. Many people still assume that men who wear makeup must be part of the LGBT community or transvestites. However, in many cases, the use of makeup is more related to work, creativity, and how to build one's image as a content creator in the beauty industry. This shows that social media has become a place where young people can express themselves more freely without being bound by rigid gender norms. In other words, men can wear makeup without losing their identity as men. As seen in the following post:



In the photo above, she often shares makeup tutorials live via live streaming on her social media account under the username @akunbarukarel. During the live broadcast, she not only demonstrates makeup techniques, but also explains the products she uses, gives advice on how to apply makeup according to face shape, and interactively answers questions from viewers. This makes her one of the most active creators teaching beauty to her followers, as @akunbarukarel shares content about makeup and the importance of skincare as an essential part of beauty. This demonstrates that beauty trends on social media are no longer limited to makeup but also educate people about the importance of maintaining healthy skin. By combining makeup and skincare content, @akunbarukarel successfully attracts the attention of Gen Z audiences who are increasingly concerned about appearance and self-care without limiting gender.

Discussion

This study found that the TikTok account @akunbarukarel, a high school student who is also an influencer, has become a unique and important space for deconstructing traditional gender identities among Gen Z. Karel chooses to openly express his feminine side through content that includes makeup tutorials, skincare reviews, and live interactions that showcase a distinctly feminine style of communication and aesthetics. This phenomenon not only challenges conventional boundaries between masculinity and femininity but also allows us to gain a deeper understanding of gender fluidity.

This study found that gender representation in social media is a social construct that can be continuously changed. This was discovered through a qualitative approach and Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction. In Karel's activities and content, four indicators of gender deconstruction emerged: binary contrast, difference, social and linguistic deconstruction, and the erasure of the concept of authenticity. He unconsciously transcended the boundaries of masculine and feminine gender, showing that gender identity can be changeable, unimportant, and context-dependent.

The response from the TikTok audience shows acceptance and active engagement in the gender narrative constructed by Karel. Most of his followers like his courage and unique gender-fluid style, but some users are more conservative. In this case, TikTok is not only a platform for entertainment or marketing; it is also a place for ideological and social debates about gender.

In addition to social aspects, this study shows that Karel's actions on TikTok also have an economic impact. Karel has a large number of followers and an inclusive persona, and he has gained commercial opportunities by collaborating with other companies to sell beauty and body care products. This shows that gender expression on social media is now part of branding, positioning, and capitalizing on diversity in addition to identity.

According to this study, social media, especially TikTok, can play an important role in the process of gender deconstruction. Accounts such as @akunbarukarel not only provide interesting content, but they also serve as drivers of change in voicing gender identity diversity in a more accessible, flexible, and unconventional way.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : This study found that @akunbarukarel on TikTok serves as a significant space for the deconstruction of traditional gender identities, where the fluid expression of femininity challenges binary boundaries and illustrates that gender is a flexible and socially constructed identity, reinforced by indicators of Derrida's deconstruction such as binary contrast, difference, and erasure of authenticity.

Implication : These findings underscore the dual role of TikTok as both a cultural arena for negotiating gender narratives and an economic platform where gender-fluid expression can generate branding and commercial opportunities, thereby reshaping how identity and diversity are represented and capitalized in digital society. **Limitation :** However, the study is limited to a single influencer and relies on a qualitative design, which restricts generalizability and does not fully capture broader audience dynamics or the quantitative scope of influence. **Future Research :** Further studies should expand to include comparative analyses of multiple gender-fluid influencers, integrate mixed methods to measure social and economic impacts more comprehensively, and examine long-term cultural implications of gender deconstruction in digital platforms.

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