

INDEPENDENT WOMEN IN THE DIGITAL ARENA: NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND POWER IN CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC COMMUNICATION

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Receive : 23 Sept 2025
Accepted : 08 Oct 2025
Published: 10 Nov 2025
DOI : 10.30829/jipi.v10i2.26070

Abstract

This study examines the negotiation of independent women's identity within Indonesia's digital sphere through the lens of Islamic communication. Amid growing female participation in the workforce and intensifying gendered debates online, the research integrates Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Manuel Castells' concept of the network society to analyse how meanings of independence, power, and legitimacy are constructed and contested. Using a qualitative virtual ethnography combined with Klaus Krippendorff's content analysis, the study explores textual representations, symbolic interpretations of Islamic values, and socio-religious discourses across digital media. Data were collected from social media conversations (Twitter/X, TikTok, and online news), validated through source triangulation involving public discussions, media framing, and scholarly references. The findings reveal three dominant discursive formations: (1) affirmation of women's agency and economic autonomy; (2) resistance emphasising traditional domestic and patriarchal norms; and (3) negotiation that reconciles independence with sharia principles. A word cloud analysis highlights recurring concepts such as "strong-independent-woman-love" juxtaposed with "man," "family," and "relationship," reflecting the dynamic interplay between self-assertion and social expectations. Although AI-based sentiment analysis indicates largely positive responses, qualitative interpretation reveals underlying ideological tensions and religious contestations. Theoretically, this research strengthens Butler's notion of gender as performative and Castells' idea of the digital space as a site of networked power struggles, while contextualising both within Islamic communicative ethics. The study contributes to expanding Islamic communication scholarship by demonstrating that women's independence in digital Indonesia represents not merely gender equality but a continuous symbolic struggle over moral legitimacy, social recognition, and religious authority.

Keywords: Independent Women, Digital Sphere, Gender Performativity, Power Negotiation, Islamic Communication

INTRODUCTION

The trend of career women and those actively engaging in the public sphere has increasingly become a subject of public debate. Data show that women's labour force participation in Indonesia reached 54.52% in August 2023, compared with 84.26% for men (Annur, 2024). These figures indicate a rising female presence in the public sector, yet structural

and cultural inequalities continue to overshadow their trajectories. This shift demonstrates that women are entering the economic and social arenas more extensively, while still contending with patriarchal constraints.

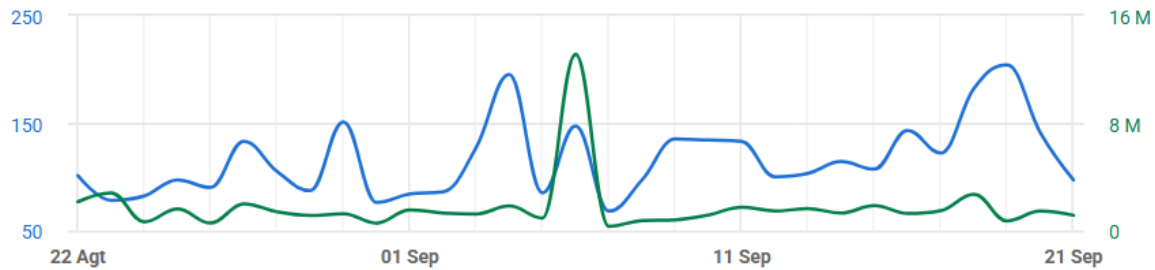


Figure 1. Reach and Mentions of “Independent Women” in Media (Source: Brand24, 2025)

The graph illustrates the high intensity of public discussion surrounding independent women in digital spaces between August and September, with significant spikes marked by hundreds of posts and millions of audience reach. This phenomenon confirms that the discourse of women’s independence extends beyond academic debate, becoming a lived, highly visible issue within Indonesian society. In other words, the graph underscores the urgency of this research by evidencing a dynamic, massive, and continuously evolving digital conversation.

The growing visibility of independent women in Indonesia’s digital landscape has transformed gender discourse from private negotiation into a public, networked performance. Across platforms such as Twitter/X, TikTok, and Instagram, expressions of women’s independence whether professional, financial, or ideological have become sites of both celebration and contestation. While this reflects broader global movements toward gender equality, in Indonesia it unfolds within a sociocultural and religious context where Islam functions as a dominant moral reference and interpretive framework. The question of what it means to be an independent woman therefore transcends economics or career choice; it becomes a symbolic struggle over authority, legitimacy, and identity in the digital age.

Recent data show that women’s labour force participation in Indonesia reached 54.52% in August 2023, compared to 84.26% among men (Annur, 2024). This rise signifies progress in women’s access to public roles, yet structural and cultural barriers persist. Patriarchal norms continue to define “appropriate” female behaviour, while digital media amplify gendered expectations. Viral debates such as the controversy triggered by actress Prilly Latuconsina’s remark that “there are many independent women but few established men” (Tempo, 2024) illustrate how online spaces become arenas of moral judgement and ideological tension. Supporters interpret such statements as affirmations of women’s agency and self-sufficiency, whereas critics view them as challenges to masculine authority and religious norms. The digital sphere thus acts as a stage where competing moral systems modern feminism, Islamic ethics, and patriarchal conservatism intersect and collide.

Historically, Indonesian women were confined to domestic values summarised in the popular idiom “sumur, kasur, dapur” symbolising the well, the bed, and the kitchen (Lamphere, 2024). This traditional construct positioned men as breadwinners and decision-makers, relegating women to subordinate, home-bound roles. However, the influx of global feminist thought and the spread of higher education among women have disrupted this binary. Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity reframed gender not as a biological essence but as a

social performance constantly enacted, repeated, and open to redefinition (Butler, 2020). Within digital contexts, this performativity becomes visible in online self-presentation, hashtags, and visual storytelling, where women continuously negotiate what “independence” signifies for them.

Nevertheless, Indonesia’s case differs from Western feminist trajectories. The negotiation of independence among Indonesian women occurs not in a secular public sphere but within a moral and religious framework governed by Islamic norms. Here, communication becomes the key mediating process through which women articulate, defend, and justify their positions. As Ginting (2024) argues, Islamic theology can both empower and restrict women, depending on interpretive authority. While verses such as QS. An-Nisa:32 affirm women’s right to economic agency, conservative readings of QS. Al-Ahzab:33 often reinforce domestic confinement. Thus, Islamic communication operates as a double-edged discourse: one that legitimises independence through the ethics of *izzah* (dignity) and *amanah* (responsibility), yet simultaneously regulates it through moral prescriptions of modesty and obedience.

The intersection of gender, digital media, and Islamic discourse produces a distinct field of tension that remains underexplored in current scholarship. Previous studies have examined women’s participation in public spheres (Gessler, 2022; Guha, 2022) or their professional independence within Western psychoanalytic traditions (Wolf, 2023), but few have addressed how digital networks mediate women’s religiously informed identity negotiation. Moreover, existing Islamic communication studies tend to focus on *da’wah* or media ethics rather than on gendered subjectivity within digital interactions. Consequently, there exists a theoretical and empirical gap concerning how Muslim women construct and perform independence under the simultaneous pressures of digital visibility and religious authority.

This research addresses that gap by analysing how the identity of independent women is negotiated within Indonesia’s digital arena through the perspective of Islamic communication. The study integrates Butler’s gender performativity theory with Castells’ concept of the network society to explore how women’s agency is enacted, contested, and symbolically regulated in online spaces. Methodologically, it employs qualitative virtual ethnography and digital discourse analysis to trace how support, resistance, and compromise emerge in social media narratives. Beyond documenting these debates, the research aims to uncover how power operates discursively how religion, culture, and technology collectively shape what counts as legitimate female independence.

Theoretically, this study contributes to expanding the field of Islamic communication by situating it within the global dialogue of feminist and media theories. It demonstrates that women’s independence is not a static achievement but an ongoing communicative process negotiated through digital symbols, religious language, and social expectations. Practically, it highlights the need for inclusive digital literacy and gender-sensitive religious communication that acknowledge women’s autonomy while preserving ethical values rooted in Islam. In this sense, Indonesia’s digital sphere becomes more than a space of expression it is a laboratory where contemporary Muslim women reimagine what it means to be independent, faithful, and empowered.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using a virtual ethnography approach to examine how the identity of independent women is constructed, contested, and negotiated in

Indonesia's digital sphere. The choice of a qualitative paradigm is based on the need to capture the depth, meaning, and symbolic processes underlying online gender discourse, rather than to quantify its occurrence. Virtual ethnography enables the researcher to observe naturally occurring communication practices and patterns of meaning-making in social media environments where boundaries between the public and private spheres are increasingly blurred (Wallis, 2023). Within this framework, the digital space is understood not merely as a medium of communication but as a site of cultural production and identity performance, consistent with Castells' concept of the network society that positions digital networks as dynamic arenas of power and meaning exchange (Castells, 2023).

The study integrates Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity with Castells' theory of the network society to frame the analysis. Butler (2020) asserts that gender identity is performative, constituted through repetitive acts that are socially and discursively maintained. This perspective allows the researcher to interpret expressions of independence on social media as performative acts that both reinforce and resist dominant gender norms. Meanwhile, Castells' (2023) framework provides a lens to interpret digital interactions as part of broader networked power relations, wherein Islamic values, social expectations, and feminist narratives intersect and shape discourses of women's autonomy. The combination of these two theoretical lenses allows for a multidimensional analysis that situates the phenomenon of independent women within the interrelation of religion, technology, and gendered communication.

Data collection was conducted through systematic documentation of digital content, focusing on social media platforms such as Twitter/X and TikTok, along with relevant online news articles and Islamic media coverage. Posts, comments, and responses related to the discourse of "independent women" were compiled to identify recurring themes, linguistic patterns, and symbolic representations. The temporal scope August to December 2024 was selected because of the viral debates surrounding Indonesian public figures, which amplified discussions on women's independence. These digital traces were treated as ethnographic artefacts representing collective attitudes and communicative strategies within Indonesia's online gender discourse. Secondary data, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and media reports, were used to contextualize findings and strengthen the interpretive framework (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Data analysis employed the qualitative content analysis model developed by Klaus Krippendorff (2022), which emphasises interpretive rigor in uncovering latent meanings within communicative texts. The analytical process was carried out in three stages. First, textual description was conducted to identify what public figures expressed, how digital media narrated those expressions, and how users responded through comments and reposts. Second, symbolic interpretation was applied to reveal underlying Islamic values, gender ideologies, and representations of independence within the content. Third, social explanation was used to connect these symbolic meanings to broader issues of religious authority, gendered power, and socio-cultural negotiation. This analytical triad ensures a coherent linkage between textual, contextual, and theoretical interpretation.

To enhance the validity and reliability of findings, this study implemented source triangulation by comparing data from different types of sources netizen conversations, media narratives, and academic literature. Triangulation enables the researcher to cross-verify interpretations, reduce bias, and ensure analytical consistency (Flick, 2022). Additionally, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process, as the researcher continually

reflected on their positionality in interpreting gendered discourses within Islamic contexts. Ethical considerations were also observed by anonymising online users' identities and limiting analysis to publicly available data, in accordance with digital research ethics.

In summary, this methodological design combines virtual ethnography and qualitative content analysis within the theoretical scaffolding of gender performativity and network society. The integration of these elements allows the study to reveal how Indonesian women perform independence in digital spaces shaped by religious norms, technological affordances, and social contestations. This methodological synthesis provides not only a descriptive account of online discourse but also an interpretive understanding of how communication, power, and faith intertwine in shaping the dynamic identity of independent women in contemporary Indonesia.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Independent Women: Constructing Women's Position in the Digital Sphere

The phenomenon of independent women in digital spaces is not merely a theoretical discourse but a reality practised and debated by the public. Social media has become the most dynamic arena where women's positions are tested and negotiated, as evident from the abundance of posts, comments, and debates that emerge whenever the issue of independent women surfaces. Netizens' tweets on Twitter/X, for instance, reflect how society divides itself into camps of support, criticism, or negotiation regarding women's independence. Thus, these tweets not only document spontaneous reactions but also mirror the broader social and cultural dynamics surrounding women's position in the digital era.

Table 1. Independent Women in the Digital Sphere

No.	Theme	Tweet	Account	Media
1	Fatigue of being an independent woman	"Tired of being the 'STRONG INDEPENDENT WOMAN'"	reddit.com user	Reddit
2	Celebrating women's independence	"Even though you have been an independent woman all your life, now you truly feel like you can let go..."	sienfaulkerson	TikTok
3	Stereotypes of independent women	"Independent Woman Quotes for Looking Beyond Stereotypes"	liputan6.com	Liputan6
4	Social resistance to independent women	"Why is it that independent women are treated like trash yet they only want your time and commitment..."	wakariowa	X (Twitter)
5	Global comparison contextual	"Women in Northern European countries receive on average 69 weeks of maternity leave... Indonesian women are like single senders"	malovy_ta	X (Twitter)
6	Threats to men	"He is threatened by strong independent"	Prachi_shah5	X (Twitter)

		women and is only friendly with girls who listen to him blindly.”		
7	Independence as freedom	“A strong, empowered and independent woman needs no man! Unless he is a plumber. Or a mechanic...”	realstalin	X (Twitter)
8	Independence and finance	“Nothing is more attractive than a smart, independent woman. Financial freedom isn’t just about money...”	FOT41397 2729630	X (Twitter)
9	Ambivalence of women’s independence	“As a strong, independent WOMEN... I AGREE I AGREE. We need a man!! Or at the very least, A CAPABLE PERSON...”	Lula03288 002	X (Twitter)

Source: Brand24, 2025

The issue of independent women in digital spaces demonstrates a variety of expressions ranging from fatigue to celebration. Statements such as “Tired of being the ‘STRONG INDEPENDENT WOMAN’” on Reddit highlight a paradoxical dimension: on the one hand, independence is regarded as a significant achievement, yet on the other hand it becomes burdensome due to the expectation of constant strength. This reflects the ambivalence of gender performativity as theorised by Butler, in which the continual reproduction of the “strong” role may itself constitute a new burden for women (Castelin, 2022).

At the same time, social media also serves as a space for celebrating independent identity. TikTok content proclaiming “Even though you have been an independent woman all your life, now you truly feel like you can let go...” reflects an affirmative dimension in which independence enables women to manage feminine energy more freely. Similar narratives appear in mainstream media such as Liputan6, which stresses how independent women’s quotes transcend stereotypes. These examples underscore that the digital sphere is not only an arena of resistance but also a channel of positive representation that affirms women’s independence (Burke, 2022).

Nevertheless, resistance against independent women’s identities remains strong. Tweets such as “independent women are treated like trash yet they only want your time and commitment...” or contextual comparisons by user malovy_tacriticising the condition of Indonesian women in contrast to those in Northern Europe illustrate how independence is often perceived as disproportionate. Such critiques highlight discursive struggles in which women’s independence is viewed as a threat to social norms and traditional roles. In Castells’ perspective, this reflects the digital sphere as a networked space of conflict, where modern values and traditions confront each other head-on.

Furthermore, some tweets frame women’s independence as a direct threat to men. The statement “He is threatened by strong independent women...” demonstrates how independent female identity can disrupt gender power relations. Conversely, the claim “A strong, empowered and independent woman needs no man!” stresses a radical freedom rejecting male dependence. These two positions reveal an epistemic tension: should women’s independence be read as

The word cloud shows that the terms “strong,” “woman,” “love,” and “independent” dominate the digital discourse surrounding independent women. These four words form the main nodes that indicate how modern women’s identities are constructed in the public sphere. “Strong” and “independent” highlight agency and resilience, while “woman” marks the subject, and “love” reflects women’s embeddedness in emotional and social relationships. The dominance of these words underscores that the discourse on women’s independence is not limited to economic autonomy but also encompasses interpersonal relations and social recognition (Kholiq, 2023).

Furthermore, the prominence of the word “man” signals that women’s independence is always articulated in relation to men. This can be read as a representation of resistance or negotiation, in which independent women are assessed not only by their own capacity but also by their relationship with men. From Butler’s perspective, this illustrates that gender performativity is never value-free, since women’s identities are continuously produced through power relations with the masculine.

Words such as “family,” “relationship,” and “life” demonstrate that women’s independence is not purely individualistic but remains tied to social and domestic dimensions. Independence does not mean severing ties with family or relationships; rather, it entails renegotiating women’s positions within binding structures. The prominence of “family” reflects the double burden of this issue: how to be independent while still fulfilling familial and societal expectations.

Interestingly, words such as “struggle,” “story,” “single,” and “want” capture the emotional dimension of independent women’s experiences. Independence does not emerge in a vacuum but through long struggles, personal narratives, and unfulfilled desires. This demonstrates that independence is an ongoing process of negotiation, not merely a celebrated identity. In Castells’ framework, the digital sphere enables women to articulate their struggles publicly, making them part of networked narratives that connect individual experiences with collective discourses.

The diversity of terms in the word cloud from “career,” suggested by words such as “nurse” and “designer,” to “support” and “lead” illustrates that the construction of independent women encompasses professional, social, and symbolic dimensions. The digital arena presents women as agents not only fighting for personal autonomy but also striving to emerge as leaders and role models (Guha, 2022). Thus, the word cloud reinforces that the identity of independent women is a complex construction that constantly shifts between personal agency, gender relations, social demands, and digital representation.

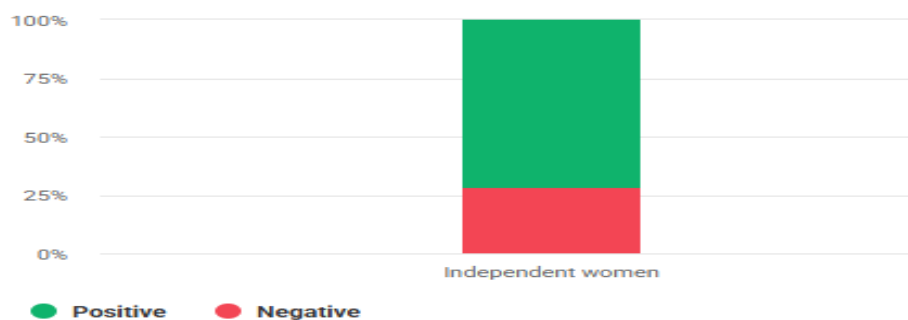


Figure 3. Sentiment Analysis (Source: Brand24, 2025)

The sentiment analysis chart indicates that the majority of conversations about independent women are categorised as positive, while a smaller proportion are labelled negative. However, it is crucial to note that these results stem from AI-driven emotion analysis, which often oversimplifies the complexity of digital discourse. AI tends to classify affirming words as positive and critical words as negative, whereas the reality of social media conversations is far more ambivalent.

Although positive sentiment appears dominant, the dynamics of conversations reveal that tensions between two camps supporters of women's independence and its critics are highly intense. The criticisms raised are not merely emotional rejections but layered with social, cultural, and religious arguments. At the same time, supportive expressions often categorised as positive also carry a resistive tone against patriarchal norms. Thus, while the chart suggests an optimistic trend, in reality the debate on independent women in digital spaces remains a sharp and ongoing arena of discursive conflict.

By integrating tweet analysis, word cloud mapping, and sentiment analysis, it can be concluded that the phenomenon of independent women in the digital sphere is a complex issue under constant contestation. The identity of independent women is not only positioned as a symbol of emancipation but also as an arena of resistance and social negotiation involving actors with diverse ideological, cultural, and religious backgrounds. The digital sphere demonstrates how support, criticism, and ambivalence intertwine, positioning independent women as figures continuously tested within contemporary gendered power relations. This underscores the urgency of re-examining the construction of women's positions in Indonesia's digital society, where agency, resistance, and compromise compete to shape new meanings of women's independence.

Negotiating Women's Independence and Islamic Values

The discourse on women's independence in digital spaces becomes increasingly complex when intersecting with Islamic values. Many netizens employ religious references as the basis of their arguments, both in supporting and rejecting the idea of independent women. On one side, Islam is viewed as legitimising women's rights to work, be educated, and be empowered (Islam, 2024). On the other, religious texts are also interpreted as restricting women's mobility by emphasising domestic roles. This condition produces layered negotiations in which the identity of independent women is continually renegotiated through religious interpretation. To map these dynamics, the following table summarises the digital discourse positions regarding the relationship between women's independence and Islamic values.

Table 2. Negotiating Women's Independence and Islamic Values in the Perspective of Islamic Communication

No.	Theme	Explanation	Position in Islamic Communication	Reference
1	Women working	Islam permits women to work and be active in the public sphere provided they observe ethics, morals, and do not violate sharia.	Supports financial independence within sharia boundaries	QS. An-Nisa: 32

2	Women's leadership	Classical interpretations tend to restrict, but contemporary scholars open space for female leadership if capacity and public interest are ensured.	Negotiation: partially recognised, partially rejected	Prophet's Hadith; Tafsir al-Qurthubi
3	Financial independence	Islam grants women rights to dowry, inheritance, and personal property without male interference.	Strong support for women's economic agency	Inheritance jurisprudence ; QS. An-Nisa: 7
4	Domestic roles	The Qur'an emphasises women's domestic roles, particularly as wives and mothers safeguarding the family.	Resistance: prioritising domestic roles over public engagement	QS. Al-Ahzab: 33
5	Spiritual equality	Men and women are equal in worship, reward, and sin, without gender discrimination.	Egalitarian foundation affirming women's independence	QS. Al-Hujurat: 13; QS. Al-Ahzab: 35

Source: Researcher's Analysis (2025)

Islam has, from the outset, recognised women's work as part of righteous deeds, as stated in QS. An-Nisa:32 which affirms the right of each individual over their own efforts. Within the framework of Islamic communication, this message can be read as normative legitimacy for women's financial independence. Work is understood not only as an economic necessity but also as an expression of personal responsibility that can be considered an act of worship. However, this legitimacy is always framed by ethics and sharia, meaning that women's independence is simultaneously recognised and regulated by religious norms.

At a more contested point, women's leadership becomes a site of interpretive struggle. Classical traditions emphasise women's limited space in public domains, while contemporary scholars begin to open space by stressing competence and social benefit. This negotiation affirms that Islamic communication is not static but dialogical, engaging texts and contexts. In this sense, women's independence becomes a symbol of how religious interpretations are renegotiated to respond to contemporary challenges without losing their grounding in sharia principles.

Meanwhile, women's financial rights in Islam provide a strong foundation for narratives of independence. Dowries, inheritance, and personal property rights highlight women as full economic subjects, not merely recipients of male provision (Susilo & Safitri, 2022). From the perspective of Islamic communication, this represents an emancipatory message embedded

within Islamic teachings themselves. Financial independence, therefore, is not solely the product of modern feminist adoption but part of the normative structure long inherent in Islam.

Yet, these affirmative narratives are continually juxtaposed with Qur'anic emphasis on domestic roles. QS. Al-Ahzab:33, for example, stresses the importance of women in maintaining households and families. This verse is frequently invoked as religious justification for resisting women's independence, positioning domestic roles as irreplaceable priorities. From the lens of Islamic communication, this ambiguity reveals that religious messages can simultaneously reinforce family cohesion while also being instrumentalised to reduce women's agency in public life (Alomair et al., 2023).

This tension becomes more visible when spiritual equality is highlighted as an egalitarian foundation. QS. Al-Hujurat:13 and QS. Al-Ahzab:35 affirm the equality of men and women in piety, deeds, and accountability before God. This spiritual equality provides theological legitimacy that women's independence does not contradict Islam, since individual worth before God is not determined by gender. Within communication, this egalitarian principle serves as a tool of da'wah that emphasises Islam's inclusive dimensions while opening interpretive space for women's social roles (Ahmed et al., 2022; Handayani, 2021).

Accordingly, discourse on women's independence in Islam is never black and white. Some verses and interpretations support it, while others restrict it, and both continuously interact in communicative processes. The result is a layered negotiation in which independent women are recognised as empowered subjects but remain in tension with domestic norms and leadership interpretations. The digital sphere accelerates this process, exposing how interpretive authority is contested in the public domain.

This construction demonstrates that Islamic communication functions not only as a channel of normative da'wah but also as a symbolic battlefield that defines the limits of women's independence. The identity of independent women cannot be separated from the framework of Islamic values, which act both as a foundation of legitimacy and as an instrument of control. In other words, Islam constitutes a complex site of negotiation, where women's independence can be understood as a legitimate form of emancipation, yet always within the orbit of religious discourse that continually renegotiates the meaning of autonomy itself.

The phenomenon of women's independence in Indonesia is not an isolated case but part of a global trend. In Western countries, the issue of independent women has long been a central narrative of second- and third-wave feminism, emphasising equal labour rights, access to education, and recognition of bodily autonomy. However, the digital context has expanded this struggle, making women's independence no longer confined to state policies but produced and debated in real time on social media. Thus, the debates in Indonesia evident in both the viral case of Prilly and digital conversation data align with global currents that situate cyberspace as the primary arena for articulating gender identity (Alichie, 2023; Sevgür, 2023; Stavely, 2022).

Compared with East Asia, Indonesia reveals a unique pattern. In Japan and South Korea, for example, career-oriented women are often stigmatised as "leftover women" or accused of neglecting domestic roles (Murti, 2019; Yu, 2021). Such social resistance mirrors criticisms in Indonesia that independent women are demeaning men. Yet, unlike East Asia where stigma is rooted in cultural norms, in Indonesia resistance is more frequently framed through religious references. This indicates how Islam functions as a framework of social legitimacy regulating gender debates, a local context not entirely present in more secular East Asian societies.

The Northern European context shows a stark contrast. Countries such as Sweden and Norway promote concrete gender equality policies, such as 69 weeks of maternity leave or state

subsidies for childcare. Indonesian netizens' tweets comparing local realities with Northern Europe highlight a global gap: while welfare states provide infrastructure for equality, Indonesian women continue to struggle for social recognition of their independence (Graña, 2023; Painter, 2024). This comparison demonstrates how global discourses serve as both benchmarks and symbolic pressures for Indonesian society to reassess its prevailing patriarchal structures.

In other Muslim-majority societies, such as Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, women's independence often directly intersects with state regulations based on sharia (Almutarie, 2022; Foroutan, 2021; Movaffaq, 2024). Women there have only recently gained access to public life, such as driving or formal employment. Compared with these contexts, Indonesia's digital sphere provides women broader opportunities to express agency, though still bounded by religious interpretation. In other words, Indonesia occupies a middle position on the spectrum: more progressive than conservative Muslim states, yet more restrictive than secular progressive nations.

Connections with previous studies further clarify this research's position. Gessler (2022) found ambivalence among women in postwar U.S. college radio, where public access was granted but narratives remained controlled by patriarchy. This parallels Indonesia's digital context, where women may present themselves as independent, yet their narratives are continually questioned through conservative Islamic interpretation. The main difference is that this study positions the digital sphere as a site of simultaneous and algorithmic conflict more fluid yet more intense than traditional media.

Guha (2022) study showed how Indian street vendors blurred private and public boundaries during the Covid-19 crisis. Its relevance here lies in women's strategies to negotiate their living spaces, yet it differs from the Indonesian context because this research emphasises digital discourse dynamics rather than economic survival strategies. Thus, the contribution of this study is to show that independence is not merely a survival strategy but a symbolic identity produced and contested discursively.

Theoretical connections further underscore this contribution. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity highlights that women's independence in digital spaces is not innate but a social performance constantly reproduced through comments, posts, and public responses. Debates about whether women should work, lead, or return to domestic roles illustrate that gender identity is always negotiated, never final. Independence here functions as a performance that both reinforces and disrupts social order.

Manuel Castells' theory of the network society provides another layer: the digital sphere serves as an arena of meaning production where women's independent identities are contested both globally and locally. The polarisation of support and resistance appearing on Twitter/X, TikTok, and mainstream media illustrates that digital networks are not merely channels of communication but spaces of flows reshaping gender power relations. Within this context, Islamic communication emerges as a key node, as religious interpretation is mobilised both to affirm and to restrict women's independence.

The novelty of this research lies in its integration of digital discourse analysis, Islamic communication frameworks, and global theories of gender and networks. Previous studies have largely focused on women in physical public spaces or specific sectors, but have not highlighted the digital sphere as an arena of simultaneous negotiation between women's independence, religious interpretation, and patriarchal resistance. By combining digital content analysis (tweets, word clouds, sentiment) with the theoretical frameworks of Butler and Castells, this

study offers a new perspective: women's independence in Indonesia is not only a question of gender equality but also a matter of interpretive authority, symbolic control, and the reproduction of power in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the discourse on independent women in Indonesia's digital sphere represents an ongoing process of identity negotiation shaped by intersecting dimensions of gender, religion, and power. The findings indicate that independence is not a static or universally accepted status, but a performative identity continuously reproduced and contested through social media interactions, media narratives, and Islamic interpretations. The digital space functions simultaneously as an arena of empowerment and a site of resistance where women's autonomy is both celebrated as a form of self-realisation and constrained by patriarchal and theological boundaries. Within this communicative tension, women are not passive subjects but active agents who strategically reconcile personal freedom with religious devotion, demonstrating that digital platforms have become the new public sphere where Islamic values and feminist aspirations converge and redefine each other.

Theoretically, this research enriches the study of Islamic communication by integrating Butler's theory of gender performativity and Castells' concept of the network society into the analysis of contemporary gender discourse. It reveals that women's independence in Indonesia is a communicative act that embodies both symbolic power and moral negotiation, illustrating how faith-based contexts reframe feminist expression in culturally specific ways. Practically, the study emphasises the urgency of promoting inclusive religious communication and digital literacy that encourage balanced interpretations of women's roles in modern Islamic societies. Independence, in this sense, should be recognised not as opposition to religious values but as a dynamic expression of piety, dignity, and equality within the moral and technological realities of the twenty-first century.

SUGGESTION

Based on the findings, it is suggested that future research and policy development focus on strengthening gender-inclusive digital literacy and interpretive openness within Islamic communication frameworks. Religious leaders, educators, and media practitioners should collaborate to create dialogical platforms that allow women to express independence without being stigmatised as violating moral norms. Integrating feminist perspectives with Islamic ethical principles can foster a more balanced understanding of women's autonomy as both spiritual and social responsibility. Moreover, comparative studies across Muslim-majority societies are recommended to explore how cultural and theological diversity shapes digital gender discourse, thereby contributing to more contextually grounded and equitable strategies for empowering women in the digital age.

THANK YOU-NOTE

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the lecturers, reviewers, and colleagues from the Department of Islamic Communication and Broadcasting, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, for their valuable guidance, insightful feedback, and continuous support throughout the research and publication process. Special appreciation is also extended to all participants and digital communities whose

discussions and perspectives provided meaningful data for this study. Their contributions have been instrumental in enriching the analysis and ensuring the academic quality of this article.

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