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# Cross-dressing between gender identity and recreation: Gender performativity and managed visibility in an Indonesian Facebook community

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**Abstract:**

The rise of social media has expanded spaces for gender expression while generating debate about the relationships among clothing, self-expression, and gender identity. This study examines the meanings of cross-dressing and the management of visibility within the Indonesian CrossDressers (IMC) digital community. It used a descriptive qualitative approach and qualitative content analysis of interviews and Facebook content. Data were collected through unstructured interviews with two participants and digital observation and documentation of the IMC group profile, features, rules, and one member's post. The data were organized, reduced, categorized, and interpreted using Judith Butler's perspective on gender performativity. Credibility was established through source and methodological triangulation. Two findings emerged. (1) Cross-dressing was understood either as a means of articulating and affirming gender identity, potentially leading to gender transition, or as a recreational and situational activity without changes to everyday gender identity. (2) IMC constituted a digital space characterized by managed visibility: the group was publicly discoverable, but its membership and posts were accessible only to members. A post requesting advice on makeup illustrated the exchange of practical knowledge about gendered appearance, while the prohibition of pornographic content demonstrated internal regulation. From a Butlerian perspective, digital gender expression is shaped through interactions among individual agency, repeated practices, peer learning, social norms, and community rules. This study extends discussions of gender performativity into digital contexts. However, its findings remain context-specific because they are based on two participants and a limited observation of a single Facebook community.

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## INTRODUCTION

In Muslim societies, understandings of gender are shaped through the interaction of religious interpretations, social norms, and cultural contexts (Syed, 2010; Bakhshizadeh, 2023). In Indonesia, religious norms influence public acceptance of gender identities and expressions that do not conform to dominant masculine and feminine categories (Afif, 2019). One such form of expression is *cross-dressing*, defined as wearing clothing socially associated with a different gender. The development of social media has enabled this practice to be displayed, learned, and communicated through personal accounts and digital communities (Fazry, 2023). From Butler's (1990, 1993) perspective, clothing constitutes part of the repeated acts through which gender is constructed and negotiated within existing social norms. Accordingly, *cross-dressing* may serve as a medium of self-expression or an articulation of identity; however, it does not necessarily indicate a transgender identity or an intention to transition (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2020). This diversity highlights the importance of examining both individual meaning-making and the management of gender expression within digital communities.

Previous studies on *cross-dressing* can be classified into three major strands. First, *cross-dressing* is not invariably associated with transgender identity, as some individuals engage in the practice as a hobby or a means of self-expression, including through social media (Scheibner, 2007; Syafuddin, 2020; Lau, 2018). Second, media representations and religious, cultural, and political narratives in Indonesia may reinforce stigma toward non-normative gender expressions and LGBT communities (Boellstorff, 2004; García Rodríguez & Murtagh, 2022; Hamidah et al., 2023; Wijayanto et al., 2023). Third, studies in Islamic law, human rights, and psychology reveal tensions among moral norms, the protection of rights, and understandings of gender diversity (Henningsen, 2017; Hafni et al., 2023; Sipahutar et al., 2023; Thajib, 2022). Although previous research has addressed identity, stigma, and social norms, limited attention has been paid to how outwardly similar *cross-dressing* practices may acquire different meanings at the individual level. Existing studies have also insufficiently explained how digital *cross-dresser* communities manage public visibility, restrict access to members' identities, facilitate the learning of gender presentation, and implement internal regulations.

This study aims to analyze the diversity of meanings attributed to *cross-dressing* at the individual level and the management of visibility within the *Indonesian CrossDressers* (IMC) digital community. In accordance with this objective, the study addresses two research questions: (1) How do the two respondents interpret their initial experiences and orientations toward *cross-dressing* practices? and (2) How does the IMC Facebook group manage visibility, the exchange of knowledge concerning gender presentation, and its internal regulations? Theoretically, this study extends the application of Butler's theory of gender performativity to digital spaces by demonstrating the relationships among individual agency, the repetition of gender-presentation practices, social norms, peer learning, and community rules. Empirically, it offers a contextualized understanding of the distinction between *cross-dressing* as an articulation of identity and as a recreational activity. Practically, the study may help reduce generalizations that equate all *cross-dressing* practices with transgender identity.

The central argument of this study is that *cross-dressing* cannot be reduced to a single, uniform category of meaning. At the individual level, the practice may serve to articulate and affirm a gender identity that may lead to transition. However, it may also be maintained as a recreational and situational activity separate from an individual's everyday gender identity. At the community level, the IMC Facebook group provides a digital space with managed visibility: although the group can be discovered by the public, access to members' identities and posts

is restricted by membership. The exchange of knowledge concerning makeup demonstrates a process of learning gender-presentation practices, while the prohibition of pornographic content illustrates the operation of internal regulation. These dynamics demonstrate that digital gender expression is shaped through negotiations among agency, repeated practices, restricted visibility, social norms, and community rules. Because this study involves only two respondents and limited digital observation, its argument is contextual and is not intended to represent the experiences of all *cross-dressers* in Indonesia.

## METHOD

### *Research Approach*

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, using qualitative content analysis of interview data and Facebook content (Franz et al., 2019; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This approach was used to understand the subjective meanings attributed to *cross-dressing* practices and how gender expression is learned, negotiated, and regulated within a digital community. The analysis focused on the experiences of two respondents and the activities of the *Indonesian CrossDressers* (IMC) Facebook group. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity was employed as an interpretative framework to explain the relationships among clothing, repeated acts, gender expression, individual agency, and social norms.

### *Data Sources*

This study used both primary and secondary data. The first source of primary data consisted of unstructured interviews with two respondents who had experience with *cross-dressing*. The interview data covered their interpretations of *cross-dressing*, backgrounds and initial experiences, and orientations toward subsequent actions. The second source of primary data comprised digital observations and documentation of the *Indonesian CrossDressers* (IMC) Facebook group, including the group's name and status, number of members, access restrictions, available features, community rules, and one member's post requesting advice on makeup application. Secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, and internet sources relevant to *cross-dressing*, gender, social media, and gender performativity (Fazry, 2023).

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected through interviews, digital observation, and documentation. Unstructured interviews were conducted via private messages or conversations, allowing respondents to openly describe their experiences and the meanings they attributed to them (Fanasca, 2019). Digital observation was conducted to examine the characteristics and activities of the IMC Facebook group, while the documentation included the group profile, community rules, features, images, videos, and posts relevant to the research focus. The observation of a post concerning makeup was used to identify forms of knowledge exchange related to gender-presentation practices. The interview and observational data were subsequently selected according to their relevance to the research focus.

### *Data Analysis*

The data were analyzed in four stages: organization, reduction, categorization, and interpretation (Bengtsson, 2016; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). First, the interview data and digital documentation were organized by source. Second, data that were not directly relevant to the research focus were reduced. Third, the interview data were categorized into three dimensions: meanings attributed to *cross-dressing*, backgrounds and initial experiences, and orientations toward subsequent actions. The digital data were categorized by group visibility, content access, member activities, knowledge exchange, and community regulation. Fourth,

similarities and differences across the data were interpreted using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990, 1993, 2015). The interpretation focused on how gender expression was shaped through repeated practices, subjective experiences, social norms, and the regulation of private and digital spaces.

*Trustworthiness of the Data*

The trustworthiness of the data was assessed through source and methodological triangulation (Carter et al., 2014). Source triangulation involved comparing the two respondents' experiences to identify similarities and differences in meaning, without requiring uniformity in their responses. Methodological triangulation involved comparing the findings from digital observation with documentation of the group's profile, features, posts, and rules. This cross-checking process strengthened the credibility of the interpretations concerning the meanings attributed to *cross-dressing*, the learning of gender presentation, group visibility, and community regulation. Findings derived from only one respondent or a single post were treated as contextual findings and were not generalized.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

### Diverse meanings of cross-dressing through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity

The findings reveal that the two respondents attributed different meanings to *cross-dressing*. The first respondent understood it as part of the process of recognizing and affirming their gender identity, whereas the second regarded it as a recreational activity through which they could express their creativity and another side of themselves without intending to change their everyday gender identity. This distinction demonstrates that clothing may serve either as a medium for articulating identity or as a form of situational gender expression.

From the perspective of Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990, 1993), clothing constitutes part of the repeated acts through which gender is both performed and negotiated within the framework of social norms. Therefore, *cross-dressing* cannot automatically be regarded as an indicator of a particular gender identity. Based on these two cases, the practice acquires meaning through subjective experiences, individual purposes, and the social contexts in which it occurs. These findings represent a contextual interpretation and are not intended to represent the experiences of all *cross-dressers*.

**Table 1**

*Meanings, Initial Experiences, and Future Orientations toward Cross-Dressing*

| No. | Dimension of Findings | Respondent 1 | Respondent 2 | Preliminary Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Meaning attributed to *cross-dressing* | "For me, *cross-dressing* initially served as a way to express my authentic self. Over time, I realized that it was not merely about clothing but was also related to my gender identity." | "For me, *cross-dressing* is an enjoyable and creative form of self-expression. It gives me the freedom to explore another aspect of my personality without having to change my gender identity in everyday life." | Respondent 1 understands *cross-dressing* as a medium for articulating gender identity, whereas Respondent 2 views it as a recreational form of self-expression. |
| 2 | Background and initial experience | "I began experimenting with clothing conventionally associated with another gender because I felt uncomfortable with the | "I first tried *cross-dressing* when attending a costume party and found that I thoroughly enjoyed it. | Respondent 1's experience originated in discomfort with socially imposed gender expectations, whereas Respondent 2's |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | gender expectations imposed on me. At first, I only did it at home, but over time, I began to feel more like my authentic self when doing so." | Since then, I have occasionally done it at home as a way to relax and express another side of myself." | experience began in the situational context of recreational activity. For both respondents, the private sphere initially offered a perceived safer space. |
| 3 | Future course of action | "I plan to begin living full-time as the gender with which I identify. This may involve hormone therapy and permanent changes to my appearance. I also intend to consult a mental health professional to discuss the available transition options." | "I would like to continue *cross-dressing* as an enjoyable hobby. I may join a *cross-dressing* community to share experiences and practical advice. However, I do not intend to change my gender identity in everyday life." | Respondent 1 views the experience as leading toward gender affirmation and a possible gender transition. In contrast, Respondent 2 intends to maintain *cross-dressing* as a temporary or occasional activity without changing their gender identity. |

Source: Interview data processed by the researchers (2024).

Table 1 presents two distinct interpretations of *cross-dressing*. The first respondent began practicing due to discomfort with the gender expectations imposed on them. Clothing subsequently became a medium for negotiating the tension between the identity expected by the social environment and the identity experienced by the respondent. The feeling of "being more like oneself" and the intention to live according to the gender with which the respondent identified, including considering hormone therapy and changes in physical appearance, indicate that *cross-dressing* developed from an experiment with appearance into part of a process of articulating and affirming gender identity. In contrast, the second respondent interpreted *cross-dressing* as an enjoyable, creative, and relaxing recreational activity. The practice, which began at a costume party and was occasionally continued at home, provided a space to explore another aspect of the self without any intention of changing one's gender identity in everyday life.

From Butler's (1990, 1993) perspective, these differences affirm that gender is constructed and recognized through the repetition of acts shaped by social norms, including ways of dressing and presenting the body. The *cross-dressing* practices of both respondents demonstrate that the relationship among the body, clothing, and gender identity is neither natural nor automatic but is shaped by conventions that categorize clothing as masculine or feminine. The choice of the home as the initial setting for the practice also indicates that gender performativity occurs within particular social boundaries. Private spaces provide relatively safe opportunities to explore gender expression, whereas public spaces may expose individuals to social judgment. However, because the interviews did not directly explore experiences of stigma or discrimination, the relationship between the choice of private space and social pressure should be understood as a preliminary interpretation. These findings further affirm that performativity is not an entirely unrestricted performance but rather an intersection between individual agency in self-presentation and the social regulations that determine which gender expressions are considered acceptable.

Based on these two cases, two meaning orientations were identified: *cross-dressing* as an articulative-transformative practice for the first respondent and as a recreational-situational practice for the second respondent. The first orientation was associated with the process of recognizing and affirming gender identity, whereas the second was related to creativity, relaxation, and the temporary exploration of self-expression. Nevertheless, *cross-*

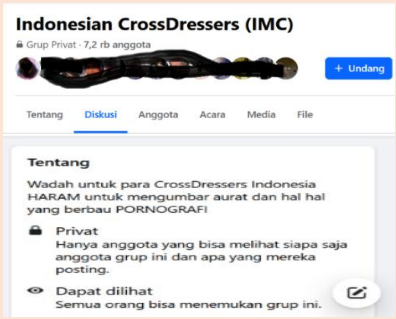
*dressing* must be distinguished from gender transition, as clothing practices do not necessarily indicate a change in gender identity, as the second respondent demonstrated. The transition plan described by the first respondent represents an individual experience and cannot be regarded as a general consequence of *cross-dressing*. Thus, outwardly similar practices may serve different functions and carry different meanings depending on subjective experiences, individual purposes, and social contexts. These two orientations represent contextual interpretations of the two cases and are not intended as a universal typology applicable to all *cross-dressers*.

**Limited visibility of a Facebook cross-dresser community from Judith Butler's perspective**

Social media facilitates the formation of communities based on shared experiences and identity-expression practices. For *cross-dresser* communities, digital spaces enable communication, knowledge exchange, and the learning of gender-presentation practices. However, these interactions occur within access restrictions and community rules. From Butler's (1990, 1993) perspective on gender performativity, gender is not an identity naturally inherent in individuals but is constructed through repeated acts, performances, and social practices governed by particular norms. Accordingly, the *Indonesian CrossDressers* (IMC) Facebook group can be understood as a digital space in which members learn, repeat, and negotiate gender-expression practices. Its private yet publicly searchable status demonstrates the management of community visibility while restricting access to members' identities and activities.

**Table 2**

*Characteristics and Activities of the Indonesian CrossDressers Facebook Group*

| Visual Documentation | Aspect | Findings |
|---|---|---|
| **Figure 1. Facebook profile page of the Indonesian**   | Group name | *Indonesian CrossDressers* (IMC) |
| | Group status | Private, but discoverable through public searches |
| | Number of members | Approximately 7,200 members |
| | Access to content | Only group members can view the membership list and posts |
| | Available features | Discussions, events, media, and files |
| **Figure 2. An example of a member's activity within the group**   | Observed activity | An anonymized member, identified as Member A, posted a request for advice on learning how to apply makeup |
| | Community rules | Members are prohibited from posting content that exposes intimate body parts or contains pornographic material |
| | Group function | A communication forum in which Indonesian crossdressers can interact and share experiences |
| | Potential social functions | Information exchange, learning about gendered appearance practices, interpersonal communication, and peer support |

Source: Digital observation and documentation processed by the researchers (2024).

Table 2 indicates that the *Indonesian CrossDressers* (IMC) Facebook group has limited visibility. The group, which has approximately 7,200 members, can be found through public searches; however, its membership list and posts are accessible only to members. Member A's post requesting advice on makeup application provides preliminary evidence that the group serves not only as a space for self-expression but also as a platform for exchanging practical knowledge on constructing gendered appearances. However, because this finding is based on a single observed post, the group's functions in facilitating peer support and solidarity remain potential and require broader interactional data.

From Butler's (1990, 1993) perspective, the request for advice on makeup demonstrates that gender expression is not entirely natural but is learned through the repetition of social practices. The exchange of knowledge about makeup, appearance, and bodily representation makes the group a space where members learn and negotiate gender practices. Members exercise agency in exploring gender expression; nevertheless, that agency operates through socially recognized symbols and standards of appearance deemed feminine or masculine. Thus, these practices may simultaneously challenge dominant gender boundaries and reproduce established norms of femininity.

The group's private status and its rules prohibiting the exposure of intimate body parts and pornographic material demonstrate the operation of internal regulatory mechanisms. Access restrictions protect members' identities and activities, while the visibility of the group's name maintains its presence in the digital public sphere. The group, therefore, constitutes an arena for negotiating gender expression and regulation: members are provided with a space to learn and perform gender expressions, yet these activities remain subject to norms of propriety and community rules. Within Butler's theoretical framework, digital gender performativity operates through the interplay among members' agency, the repetition of gender norms, limited visibility, and social regulation.

**Discussion**

This study produced two main findings. First, *cross-dressing* was interpreted differently by the two respondents. For Respondent 1, the practice developed from experimentation with appearance into a means of articulating and affirming gender identity, including the possibility of transition. In contrast, Respondent 2 interpreted it as a recreational and situational activity through which creativity could be expressed without changing their everyday gender identity. Second, the *Indonesian CrossDressers* (IMC) Facebook group serves as a digitally managed space with limited visibility. Although the group can be found publicly, access to members' identities and posts is restricted through membership. A post concerning makeup demonstrates the exchange of knowledge about gender presentation, whereas the prohibition of pornographic content indicates the operation of internal regulation. From Butler's perspective, these findings demonstrate that gender expression is constructed through interactions among agency, repeated practices, social norms, and community regulation in private and digital spaces. Because the study involved only two respondents and relied on limited digital observation, its findings are context-specific and do not represent all *cross-dressers* in Indonesia.

These two findings are relevant to social issues in Indonesia, where non-normative gender expressions continue to encounter resistance. The first finding demonstrates that *cross-dressing* may be interpreted either as an articulation of gender identity or as a recreational activity, whereas the second shows that digital communities manage visibility through access restrictions and internal regulation. The *Crosshijaber* case in 2019 provides a social context illustrating strong public reactions to gender expressions perceived as violating

religious norms and the boundaries of public space (Hidayat, 2020). Dominant gender norms may also reinforce stereotypes against *cross-dressers* (Butler, 1993; Hao & Zi, 2019; Canbul, 2022). Despite the increasing public discourse on gender diversity, society continues to experience difficulty distinguishing *cross-dressing* as a form of expression or a hobby from transgender identity (Higgs et al., 2021; Ho & Blackwood, 2022). Consequently, *cross-dressers* are frequently associated with LGBTQ+, which remains taboo among some segments of Indonesian society (Suherry & Mandala, 2016; Fadhilaatika & Muthoifin, 2022). Studies of *outing* practices also demonstrate how gender-minority groups negotiate self-expression amid pressures from conservative public spaces (Sihombing, 2020; Daniel et al., 2023). However, because this study did not directly observe *outing* practices, this issue is presented in the context of the literature rather than as a research finding.

Theoretically, Butler's (2004) theory of gender performativity provides the principal framework for explaining that *cross-dressing* constitutes a repeated practice through which gender is performed and negotiated, although it does not necessarily lead to transition. The differences between the two respondents confirm that the relationship among clothing, expression, and gender identity depends on individual experiences and purposes. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Jost & Sidanius, 2006) may offer a useful perspective on categorization, identification, and the construction of membership boundaries within digital communities. However, the data obtained in this study are insufficient to establish how the community differentiates its identity from that of particular groups. Social Exchange Theory explains that the management of self-expression may be influenced by considerations of social acceptance and the risk of rejection (Veale et al., 2010; Blau, 2017), while Collins (2022) demonstrates that dominant norms may constrain the expressive spaces available to non-normative groups. These frameworks help explain the managed visibility of the IMC group, but are not positioned as direct findings. Accordingly, *cross-dressing* is not a single, uniform phenomenon but rather a spectrum encompassing hobbies, self-expression, and the articulation of identity, depending on individual experiences and social contexts (Primo et al., 2000; Sansfaçon et al., 2020; Schmidthorst, 2022).

The variation in respondents' experiences demonstrates that the relationship between gender expression and identity is contextual and should be understood with respect for human dignity. From an Islamic perspective, the concept of *fitrah* explains that every individual possesses innate tendencies, although interpretations of this concept may vary (al-Ġazālī, 2007; Hafez, 2011; Grech, 2014). Badran (2013) demonstrates that understandings of gender in Islamic cultures encompass a spectrum ranging from traditional to inclusive perspectives. Morrow (2009) and Soesanto (2022) emphasize the importance of an ethical approach that respects diversity and avoids discrimination. These perspectives are not presented as empirical findings but as an ethical foundation for proportionately understanding the subjective experiences of *cross-dressers* (Valentine & Kulick, 2001; Franklin & Herek, 2008; Kurup & Underwood, 2021). Gender-expression practices should therefore be understood in their contexts and effects, without disregarding the complexity of human experience (Abrams & Hogg, 1998; Nawawy & Ahmad, 2021; Razali et al., 2021; Rahmah et al., 2023).

The findings of this study are partially consistent with Sedinger (1997), Chess (2016), and Erhardt (2007), who found that some *cross-dressers* regard the practice as a hobby rather than a transgender identity. In contrast, Respondent 1's experience closely corresponds with Peletz (2006), who associates *cross-dressing* with gender exploration that may lead to transition. The differences between the two respondents support Bouman et al.'s (2017) view regarding the uniqueness of each individual's experience. Compared with Morgenroth and Ryan (2020), who

focus on psychological motivations, this study adds a social-digital dimension through its findings concerning access restrictions, the exchange of knowledge about gender presentation, and content regulation within the IMC group. The academic position of this study, therefore, lies at the intersection of social psychology and gender studies, particularly in explaining the diverse meanings attributed to *cross-dressing* and the management of digital-community visibility in Indonesia.

Based on these findings, this study recommends that social media platforms provide privacy and moderation features that protect community members' identities and activities without restricting expression that does not harm others. Psychology and mental health institutions should provide counseling services that are sensitive to gender-related experiences without encouraging individuals to make immediate decisions regarding transition. Religious and community leaders may develop ethical dialogues that respect human dignity while considering religious and social norms. Future research should involve larger numbers of respondents, posts, and digital interactions from diverse regions and socioeconomic backgrounds. These recommendations should be interpreted proportionately because this study involved only two respondents and limited digital observation; consequently, its findings are contextual and do not represent all *cross-dressers* in Indonesia.

## CONCLUSION

This study draws two main conclusions. First, *cross-dressing* carries different meanings for each individual. Respondent 1 interpreted it as a means of articulating and affirming a gender identity that could potentially lead to transition, whereas Respondent 2 viewed it as a recreational and situational activity without any intentionдением to change their everyday gender identity. Second, the *Indonesian CrossDressers* (IMC) Facebook group constitutes a digital space with managed visibility. Although the group can be found by the public, access to members' identities and posts is restricted through membership. The exchange of knowledge about makeup demonstrates the learning of gender-presentation practices, whereas the prohibition of pornographic content indicates the operation of internal regulation. These findings confirm that *cross-dressing* does not have a single meaning but is shaped by the interplay among subjective experiences, individual agency, social norms, and community regulation in both private and digital spaces.

Theoretically, this study contributes to Butler's theory of gender performativity by demonstrating that similar practices of gender presentation may produce different meanings and identity orientations. It also extends the discussion of performativity into digital spaces by showing that gender expression is shaped not only through repeated acts but also through peer learning, visibility management, access restrictions, and community rules. Social Identity Theory and Social Exchange Theory serve as supporting perspectives for understanding membership categorization and for considering social acceptance and risk, rather than as the principal findings. In practice, social media platforms should provide adequate privacy protections and moderation. Psychology and mental health institutions should also provide counseling services that are sensitive to gender-related experiences without encouraging individuals to make immediate decisions regarding transition. Religious and community leaders may develop ethical dialogues that respect human dignity while considering religious and social norms.

This study is limited by the inclusion of only two interview respondents, restricted digital observation, and its focus on a single Facebook community. Consequently, the findings do not represent the diverse experiences of all *cross-dressers* in Indonesia. The data, which were predominantly obtained through online interactions, also do not provide an in-depth account

of the community's offline dynamics. Future research should involve larger numbers of participants, posts, and digital interactions from diverse regions and socioeconomic backgrounds. Further studies could also examine the relationships among religion, social media, mental health, and gender identity formation. Digital ethnography and longitudinal studies are recommended to provide a deeper understanding of identity development, changes in individual experiences, and the management of community visibility over time.

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The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest with any individual or institution regarding the preparation and publication of this article.

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**Lalu Pradipta Jaya Bahari**: Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Resources; Visualization; Writing Original Draft; Writing Review & Editing. **Joseph Lere Omiwole**: Formal Analysis; Supervision; Visualization; Writing Review & Editing.

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