The Aesthetics of *Kueer*(ed) Muslimness: Gender Ambiguity, Affect, and Digital Negotiation Among *Ahkak* Malays

[1]Nur Atirah Kamaruzaman* and [2]Muhammad Faizul Abd Hamid

[1]Department of Communication, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.

[2]Department of Malay Language, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.

***Corresponding Author**

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.91100172

Received: 18 November 2025; Accepted: 27 November 2025; Published: 03 December 2025

ABSTRACT

Islamic masculinity in Malaysia is frequently framed as fixed, uniform, and anchored in heteronormative moral expectations. Yet the everyday practices of non-normative Malay Muslim men reveal a more complex picture—one shaped by aesthetic experimentation, vernacular humour, religious expression, and digital self-fashioning. This study examines how non-heteronormative Malay Muslim men articulate identity on Instagram, analysing how they perform, negotiate, and reinterpret Malay-Muslim masculinity in a context where religion, culture, and moral surveillance intersect. Building upon intersectional analyses of queer Muslim identities and local Malaysian scholarship on layered identity negotiations, the study introduces *kueer*—a researcher-coined analytic concept inspired by Malay cultural idioms and designed to theorise layered, culturally embedded forms of non-normativity that are not fully encompassed by Western LGBTQ frameworks. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of approximately 300 Instagram posts from twelve public accounts, the study examines visual and linguistic practices, including gestures, captions, religious idioms, humour, and vernacular labels. The findings demonstrate that *ahkak* Malays reframe Muslimness through ethical virtues such as sincerity, humility, and inner devotion, challenging claims that non-normative expressions inherently conflict with Islamic teachings. Instagram functions as a digital Third Space where these negotiations unfold, enabling selective visibility and the articulation of hybrid identities that balance self-expression and cultural constraints. Overall, the study shows that Malay-Muslim masculinity is being reimagined from within, reflecting layered and culturally situated forms of *kueer*(ed) subjectivity that resist rigid categorisation and expand the possibilities of Muslim gender expression in contemporary Malaysia.

Keywords: Malay Muslim, Instagram, identity, masculinity, gender performance

INTRODUCTION

Public discussions of gender and sexuality in Malaysia often present Islamic masculinity as fixed, uniform, and rooted in divinely ordained norms. Such narratives obscure the complex ways Malay Muslim men actually live out and negotiate their identities, particularly those who do not fit heteronormative ideals. While institutional and cultural discourses tend to emphasise masculine propriety, piety, and heteronormativity as the pillars of Malay-Muslim identity, everyday practices reveal a more fluid and contingent reality. Digital media, especially visually oriented platforms such as Instagram, have amplified these dynamics by providing semi-public spaces where identity can be curated, fragmented, and reassembled outside the constraints of familial, religious, or state surveillance (Campbell, 2012; Evolvi, 2022; Latour, 1990).

This study examines how non-heteronormative Malay Muslim men articulate their gendered and religious subjectivities through Instagram. These individuals, referred to here as *ahkak Malays*, a vernacular label

describing effeminate Malay men use humour, aesthetic experimentation, cultural idioms, and mediated self-presentation to construct forms of masculinity that diverge from normative expectations. Their practices challenge the dominant assumption that Islamic masculinity is inherently heteronormative, hierarchical, and impermeable to variation (Duderija, 2010; Ouzgane, 2006). Instead, they reveal that Muslimness and gender expression are lived, embodied, and constantly negotiated. To analyse these practices, this article introduces *kueer,* a conceptual term deliberately coined by the authors to theorise culturally specific forms of non-normative Malay Muslim gender expression. The term draws inspiration from Malay linguistic and cultural repertoires including *kakak* and the layered dessert *kuih lapis* to signify the layered, processual, and context-dependent nature of these identities. Unlike "queer," which carries Euro-American historical trajectories linked to sexuality, politics, and identity movements (Kadlec, 2017; Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 2015; Ahmed, 2006), *kueer* does not map neatly onto sexual categories. It instead captures aesthetic, affective, and embodied styles of selfhood rooted in local cultural sensibilities and vernacular performance. The distinction is analytically important; while *ahkak* is an existing emic descriptor, *kueer* is an interpretive lens crafted to theorise how Malay-Muslim non-normativity emerges and circulates, especially in digital contexts.

The study is situated within scholarship that foregrounds the intersectional nature of queer Muslim identities (Rahman, 2010, 2014; Rahman & Valliani, 2016; Yip, 2005). These works demonstrate that the perceived incompatibility between Islam and queer identity is a socially constructed opposition rather than a theological inevitability. They show how queer Muslims inhabit positions that disrupt both Western LGBTQ frameworks and normative Islamic discourses. This article extends these insights to the Malaysian context, where the negotiation of gender and religious identity is further shaped by state institutions, Malay cultural norms, and digital visibility. At the same time, transnational queer debates raise important cautionary questions about universalising Western LGBTQ categories. Massad's (2007) critique of the "Gay International" highlights the limits of imposing Euro-American identity frameworks on non-Western contexts, while Puar's (2007) account of homonationalism illustrates how queer modernity has been co-opted into geopolitical projects that position Muslim societies as sexually "backward." Although these critiques are valuable, they do not adequately capture the emergence of non-normative gender expressions from within Muslim-majority contexts such as Malaysia. The practices examined in this study are neither derivative of Western queer politics nor purely responses to Islamic orthodoxy; they reflect a vernacular, situated, and culturally resonant form of self-making that requires new analytic language.

Finally, digital media scholarship provides a background frame for understanding how Instagram functions as a space of identity negotiation. Bhabha's (1994) notion of the Third Space, while not developed for digital contexts offers a useful metaphor for analysing how hybrid identities arise in liminal cultural environments. Instagram becomes such a space; a site where Malay Muslim men can articulate selves that might be disciplined offline, yet are not entirely detached from cultural and religious expectations. In this mediated environment, identity becomes layered, negotiated, and visually curated. Guided by these theoretical considerations, this article addresses the following questions: How do non-heteronormative Malay Muslim men perform and negotiate identity on Instagram? How does the analytic term *kueer* illuminate forms of gendered and religious expression that fall outside both Western queer frameworks and normative Islamic masculinities? And how do these practices complicate the boundaries of Muslimness in contemporary Malaysia? Through a qualitative analysis of Instagram posts, captions, and digital vernaculars, this study argues that Malay-Muslim masculinity is being reimagined from within—not through rejection of religion but through culturally embedded practices of reinterpretation, humour, aesthetics, and affective self-making.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on queer Muslim identities demonstrates that gendered and sexual subjectivities in Muslim societies cannot be reduced to fixed doctrinal positions or universalised Western frameworks. Intersectionality has been central to this argument, emphasising how religion, gender, culture, and sexuality intersect to shape lived experience in complex and shifting ways. Rahman's work (2010, 2014) is foundational in this regard. He asserts that queer Muslims occupy a "disruptively queer" intersectional position that destabilises the normative coherence of both Western LGBTQ taxonomies and Islamic heteronormative frameworks. Instead of treating

Islam and queerness as mutually exclusive identity categories, Rahman shows that queer Muslims construct meaningful subjectivities by negotiating overlapping social, cultural, and ethical demands. His argument aligns with Yip's (2005) findings that queer Muslims frequently reinterpret religious teachings through personal ethical commitments rather than doctrinal literalism, articulating forms of spirituality that accommodate non-normative identities. These insights are essential for the Malaysian context, where the entanglement of religion, ethnicity, and citizenship is tied closely to Malay identity and state regulation (Ouzgane, 2006; Duderija, 2010), and where non-normative Malays often must navigate intensified scrutiny within family, community, and institutional settings.

At the same time, queer theory contributes important conceptual tools for understanding gender as performative, relational, and embedded in discursive structures. Butler's (1990) formulation of gender performativity clarifies that gender does not arise from inherent essence but from the iterative enactment of cultural scripts, a notion that resonates strongly with the embodied performances of *ahkak* Malays on digital platforms. Sedgwick's (2015) exploration of homosociality further highlights how masculinity is regulated through social practices of distinction, desire, and policing. Ahmed's (2006) work on queer phenomenology emphasises how non-normative subjects reorient themselves within normative spaces, often reconfiguring bodily comportment and spatial relations in subtle yet meaningful ways. These theoretical contributions are valuable but cannot fully account for the distinctive intersections of Islamic moralities, Malay cultural repertoires, and digital mediation that shape identity formation in Malaysia. As Marcus (2005) notes, queer theory, while conceptually generative, must be adapted carefully when applied to contexts outside its Western epistemological origins.

Transnational queer studies have raised important critiques about the universalisation of Western LGBTQ identity categories. Massad's (2007) critique of the "Gay International" argues that the global diffusion of Western sexual identities risks erasing local sexual cultures by imposing foreign taxonomies. Yet Massad's framework underestimates local agency and the creative ways in which communities appropriate, resist, or transform global categories. Puar's (2007) analysis of homonationalism provides another critical lens by demonstrating how some Western states mobilise LGBTQ rights discourses to reinforce civilisational hierarchies that position the Muslim world as sexually repressive. While these critiques illuminate the geopolitical dimensions of queer modernity, they do not account for queer subjectivities emerging organically within Muslim-majority societies. As Arondekar (2006) argues, race, sexuality, and globalisation intersect differently outside the United States, requiring conceptual approaches grounded in local histories and cultural logics.

The Malaysian context demands precisely such an approach. Local scholars have highlighted the layered and often conflictual nature of identity among Malay-Muslims. Guo and Kamaruzaman (2025) conceptualise identity as a multi-layered, dynamic, and contested field shaped by multiple and sometimes competing cultural, religious, and political expectations. Their argument provides a crucial backdrop for understanding how non-normative Malay Muslim men negotiate selfhood, belonging, and legitimacy in environments that often resist or pathologise difference. Building on this, Kamaruzaman's empirical research (2024) demonstrates how non-conforming Malaysian Muslims use Instagram to articulate hybrid identities that encompass gender performance, religious belonging, and cultural expression. She shows that digital platforms serve as spaces where these individuals explore and negotiate identity boundaries in ways that may not be possible offline. Her earlier work (2023) introduced a conceptual vocabulary for analysing gender performance and expression among Malaysian Muslims, laying the groundwork for the present study's extension of this intellectual project.

Against this scholarly background, the present article introduces *kueer* as an analytic term designed to theorise Malay-Muslim non-normativity without relying on Western LGBTQ categories. Unlike *ahkak*, which is an existing vernacular label used playfully to describe effeminate Malay men, *kueer* is deliberately coined by the authors to theorise layered, processual identity practices rooted in Malay cultural idioms. Its inspiration from *kakak* and the layered dessert *kuih lapis* symbolises multiplicity and embodied layering. *Kueer* therefore captures a form of non-normativity that is not necessarily tied to sexual identity but encompasses affective, aesthetic, linguistic, and embodied practices shaped by Malay-Muslim cultural repertoires. Such a concept is necessary because Western queer terminology, when uncritically applied to the Malaysian context, risks erasing vernacular expressions, affective nuances, and culturally embedded identity negotiations documented in local scholarship (Kamaruzaman, 2023, 2024).

Finally, understanding how these identity practices unfold on Instagram benefits from postcolonial theories of hybridity, particularly Bhabha's (1994) notion of the Third Space. Although Bhabha was not theorising digital platforms, his concept offers a useful metaphor for describing the liminal cultural terrain in which *ahkak* Malays operate. Instagram becomes a mediated arena where identity is negotiated between competing norms, where visibility must be carefully curated, and where new meanings can be articulated outside the rigid binary of normative masculinity versus deviance. This digital Third Space echoes hooks's (1990) description of "spaces of radical openness," where marginalised subjects experiment with new ways of being. Situated within this conceptual landscape, the present study extends existing scholarship by theorising *kueer* as a culturally grounded analytic lens and by examining how Malay-Muslim non-normative masculinities are performed and negotiated on social media in ways that complicate dominant discourses of religion, gender, and identity.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative interpretivist research design to investigate how non-heteronormative Malay Muslim men articulate gendered and religious identities on Instagram. An interpretivist approach is well suited to this inquiry because it prioritises meaning-making, embodied practice, and situated interpretation rather than generalisability or categorical classification (Krippendorff, 2004). The research builds directly on earlier Malaysian scholarship that foregrounds the negotiated and layered nature of identity (Guo & Kamaruzaman, 2025; Kamaruzaman, 2024), extending these insights to the digital domain.

Purposive sampling was used to identify public Instagram accounts belonging to Malay Muslim men who engage in non-normative gender expression. The sampling did not require explicit LGBTQ identification; instead, selection centred on vernacular expressions, aesthetic cues, linguistic play, and stylistic performances commonly associated with *ahkak* identity. This approach follows local scholarship demonstrating that many non-conforming Malays do not adopt Western LGBTQ labels but instead engage in culturally rooted practices of gendered self-articulation (Kamaruzaman, 2023). Twelve public accounts (see Appendix A) were observed over a six-month period, generating approximately 300 posts comprising images, captions, hashtags, story highlights, and visible comment interactions. No private profiles were accessed, and no identifying details are reproduced, consistent with ethical guidelines for digital research involving marginalised communities (Pratt, 1991). The dataset was analysed through a combination of visual discourse analysis (Rose, 2016) and reflexive thematic analysis. Visual analysis focused on gestures, poses, clothing, aesthetic curation, spatial framing, and embodied cues that signify gender performance. Linguistic analysis examined caption humour, Malay-English code-switching, reclaimed labels such as *ahkak*, *pondan, she, nyah*, religious idioms, and other expressions of affect and identity. Coding proceeded iteratively, beginning with descriptive coding, moving to interpretive coding informed by queer phenomenology (Ahmed, 2006) and intersectionality (Rahman, 2010), and culminating in conceptual coding that linked patterns to the analytic framework of *kueer*. Reflexivity was central to the process, especially given the researchers' positionalities as a Malaysian Muslim woman and a Malaysian Muslim man, whose lived experiences inform their interpretive sensibilities (Hendricks, 2010).

Ethical considerations were prioritised throughout. Although the data came from public accounts, the vulnerability of non-normative Malays in a context of moral policing necessitates heightened caution. Identifying details were removed, interpretations were anonymised, and no direct images are reproduced. The goal was not to categorise individuals but to understand how expressions of *kueer*(ing) masculinity emerge in digital spaces that simultaneously enable visibility and require strategic navigation. The methodological design therefore balances empirical richness with ethical sensitivity, grounding the analysis within established research traditions in digital religion (Campbell, 2012; Campbell & Connelly, 2020), local queer Muslim scholarship (Rahman, 2014; Kamaruzaman, 2024), and identity negotiation in multicultural contexts (Guo & Kamaruzaman, 2025).

FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal the complexity and fluidity of *kueer*(ed) identity among non-normative Malay Muslim men on Instagram. Through an analysis of approximately 300 posts from twelve public accounts, it became evident that the users engage in multilayered practices of self-presentation that draw from Malay

vernacular culture, Islamic ethical sensibilities, humour, and digital aesthetics. These identity practices were not incidental or sporadic; rather, they formed patterned behaviours that reflected a coherent, though highly flexible, cultural logic. As Rahman (2010, 2014) and Yip (2005) argue, queer Muslim subjectivity must be understood through frameworks that recognise the intersection of religious, cultural, and affective dimensions. The findings of this study as shown in Table 1 support and extend this insight by showing how Malay Muslim men negotiate identity in a digital environment shaped by both moral surveillance and the affordances of social media.

Table 1: Thematic Summary

Theme	Core Idea	Key Practices	Cultural/Religious Dimensions
Aesthetic Softness	Embodied gender ambiguity	Selfies, poses, make-up, pastel filters	Softness reframed as ethical Muslim value
Vernacular Piety	Flexible, affective Muslimness	Quranic captions, prayer reminders	Piety expressed through humour & gentleness
Linguistic Creativity	Vernacular identity-making	*Ahkak* terms, reclaimed slurs	Language as affirmation & resistance
Instagram as Third Space	Negotiation of visibility	Close Friends, ephemeral posts	Hybrid identity performed under surveillance

THEME 1: AESTHETIC SOFTNESS AND EMBODIED GENDER PERFORMANCE

Across profiles, participants enacted what can be described as a "soft aesthetic"—a visual and embodied grammar marked by delicacy, gentle gestures, pastel filters, curated lighting, and stylised facial expressions. While Butler's (1990) gender performativity explains how such gestures constitute gender, the *way* these expressions are embedded in Malay cultural humour, beauty sensibilities, and religious aesthetics demonstrates the culturally specific nature of *kueer*(ing).

Example 1: "Ramadhan Glow" Post

One participant uploaded a selfie wearing a light purple baju Melayu with a glossy lip tint. The caption read, "Sis nak cari malam-malam ganjil, sis pun nak glowing." The soft aesthetic—combined with the Ramadhan reference—shows how femininity and piety coexist playfully without being framed as contradictory.

Example 2: Floral Mirror Selfie

Another user posted a mirror selfie surrounded by artificial flowers taped around the mirror frame. He posed with one leg slightly bent inward—a gentle stance associated with feminine-coded poses. The caption, "Petals and prayers," blended aesthetic beauty with religious sentiment.

Example 3: Post-Shower Towel Styling

A user filmed a short reel adjusting a towel wrapped like a hijab after showering. The caption, "*Ahkak* nak pergi terawih, jangan kacau," simultaneously referenced femininity, humour, and religious devotion (Taraweeh Prayer). Religious practice becomes part of a playful aesthetic, not a policing structure.

Example 4: "Soft Boy Raya" Series

A participant posted *Raya* photos wearing pastel-coloured baju Melayu, soft make-up, and a flower tucked behind his ear. The comments included supportive responses: "Sis cantik," "Ya Allah lembut dia," demonstrating communal affirmation of gendered ambiguity. These aesthetic practices reveal a vernacular softness that

challenges rigid Malay-Muslim masculine norms. Rather than opposing Islamic values, participants reframed gentleness, beauty, and self-care as compatible with Muslim ethics.

THEME 2: VERNACULAR PIETY AND EMOTIONAL MUSLIMNESS

Religion was integrated into posts not as strict doctrinal adherence but as a moral and affective framework that coexisted with *kueer*(ed) expression. Religious identity appeared through captions, prayer-related images, Quranic references, and everyday moral reminders—reflecting what Yip (2005) calls personal hermeneutics of faith.

Example 1: Mosque Corridor Contemplation

One participant took a contemplative selfie in a mosque hallway. The caption read, "Lembut bukan dosa, judgement tu yang berdosa." This framed softness as a spiritual virtue and reframed the religious gaze.

Example 2: "Dhuha Routine" Story

A user posted a story with him making coffee while playing soft nasheed music with the caption, "Dhuha dulu, sis nak mula kerja dengan hati tenang." Here, work ethic, femininity, and religiosity blend seamlessly.

Example 3: Quranic Verse with Filtered Selfie

Another user applied a "soft blur" filter to a selfie and added the verse "Innallaha ma'assobirin" (God is with the patient). His gesture of placing a hand gently under his chin feminized the devotional expression.

Example 4: "Istighfar with Lip Tint"

One participant posted a short video applying tinted lip balm while joking, "Astaghfirullah dulu baru lawa." The humour positions religious utterance as part of everyday life, not as a domain requiring masculine austerity. These examples illustrate that *kueer*(ed) identity is not constructed in opposition to Islam. Participants articulated a Muslimness grounded in emotional sincerity, gentleness, and everyday ethical reminders—challenging assumptions that religious devotion requires heteromasculine performance.

THEME 3: LINGUISTIC CREATIVITY, RECLAIMED LABELS, AND *AHKAK* VERNACULARS

Language was a critical site where identity was performed, negotiated, and defended. Participants frequently used Malay-English code-switching, playful insults, culturally rooted gender terms, and reclaimed slurs to articulate belonging and humour.

Example 1: Reclaiming "Pondan"

When a commenter wrote "pondan alert," the user publicly replied, "Pondan pun solat okay sayang. Awak dah solat?" This inverted the moral hierarchy and reframed religious piety as inclusive.

Example 2: "Sis" as Ethic of Care

A participant posted a tired selfie with the caption, "Sis penat tapi sis tetap baik." Followers responded with supportive "sis"-coded comments, turning femininity into a relational identity rather than a stigma.

Example 3: Bapok Banter

A user jokingly described himself as "bapok fever dream" under a pastel-toned selfie. He reframed a slur as aesthetic fantasy, detaching it from shame.

Example 4: Mak Cik Persona

One participant adopted the persona of a Malay auntie, writing captions like, "Mak nak tegur sikit: jangan lupa minum air." The adoption of an older female persona demonstrates linguistic performance as identity play. These examples show that linguistic reappropriation is central to *kueer*(ed) expression, allowing participants to transform derogatory terms into tools of self-affirmation, irony, and community care.

THEME 4: INSTAGRAM AS A DIGITAL THIRD SPACE

Instagram was used as a liminal environment where identity was negotiated at the intersection of cultural surveillance and self-expression. The platform enabled affective, aesthetic, and ethical experimentation through features that structured visibility.

Example 1: Close Friends "Make-up Experimentation"

Participants often posted make-up trials exclusively for their Close Friends lists. One user wrote, "Don't screenshot tau," signalling vulnerability and trust in selected audiences.

Example 2: Ephemeral "Softness" Posts

One user uploaded a reel showing a feminine-coded dance gesture with the caption "post kejap," deleting it thirty minutes later. The momentary visibility functioned as a controlled release of identity.

Example 3: Dual Persona Management

A different participant managed two accounts: a public one with neutral aesthetic posts, and a secondary account with visibly *kueer*(ed) content, including humorous impersonations of Malay aunties and lip-sync performances.

Example 4: Policed Interactions

Some users limited comments to followers only, reflecting fears of harassment. Yet within their safe circles, the engagement was vibrant, supportive, and identity-affirming. Instagram, therefore, enabled complex negotiations between desire for expression and fear of judgement—functioning as Bhabha's (1994) Third Space where hybrid identity formations emerge.

Across the dataset, it shows that non-normative Malay Muslim men perform identities that reinterpret both gender and religion in ways that challenge dominant assumptions about Islamic masculinity. Their posts foreground aesthetic practices characterised by softness, playfulness, and ambiguity. These performances are expressed through gestures such as delicate hand poses, intentionally stylised facial expressions, and fashion choices that blend feminine-coded elements with traditional Malay or Islamic attire. Such embodied practices resonate with Butler's (1990) argument that gender is enacted through iterative stylised acts, but they also reflect local cultural scripts tied to Malay humour, social interaction, and bodily comportment. These performances constitute a visual vocabulary of *kueer(ing)*—a layered and vernacular mode of non-normative expression rooted in Malay-Muslim lifeworlds.

Religion appears prominently within these posts, not as an external disciplinary force but as an ethical resource woven into everyday self-presentation. Many posts integrate Quranic phrases, Islamic reminders, and expressions of gratitude (Alhamdulillah) alongside playful captions and soft aesthetics. This coexistence underscores Yip's (2005) observation that queer Muslims frequently construct personal hermeneutics of faith grounded in lived ethics rather than doctrinal conformity. The *ahkak* Malays in this study do not present themselves as transgressing religion; rather, they articulate forms of Muslimness marked by sincerity, humility, and ethical self-awareness. Such vernacular piety challenges the assumption that non-normativity inherently violates Islamic principles (Kugle, 2010; Hendricks, 2010), instead foregrounding religion as part of the

kueer(ed) self. Linguistic creativity is central to these identity performances. Captions employ humour, irony, and code-switching between Malay and English, invoking labels such as *ahkak*, *sis*, and *pondan* in reclaimed, self-affirming ways. Wodak and Reisigl's (2001) work on discriminatory language illustrates how terms used as markers of exclusion can be resignified through strategic reappropriation. In the Malaysian context, these vernaculars carry layered meanings tied to gender expression, social belonging, and cultural play. Their digital deployment demonstrates what Kamaruzaman (2024) describes as the hybrid negotiation of selfhood through linguistic and aesthetic choices that draw simultaneously from global pop culture and Malay-Muslim sensibilities.

Instagram functions as a digital Third Space in which these practices unfold. While Bhabha's (1994) concept was not formulated for digital media, the hybrid and liminal qualities of Instagram parallel the conditions he describes. Users manoeuvre between visibility and discretion, leveraging platform affordances such as stories, Close Friends lists, and ephemeral posts to manage multiple audiences and potential risks. A similar pattern is evident on other platform ecologies. Kamaruzaman and Zhang (2025) demonstrate that Douyin creators—particularly full-time mothers—must also manage emotionally demanding visibility, algorithmic pressures, and audience expectations, showing that digital platforms systematically shape identity work as both opportunity and constraint. The dynamic aligns with hooks's (1990) notion of radical spaces where marginalised identities can articulate themselves in ways foreclosed in normative environments. Yet, as Latour (1990) argues, technology is always entangled with social dynamics; Instagram does not erase vulnerability but instead reframes it within a context of selective self-curation. These digital negotiations mirror the multilayered identity conflicts described by Guo and Kamaruzaman (2025), where individuals navigate contradictory cultural and religious expectations. Collectively, the findings demonstrate that Malay Muslim non-normative masculinities are neither derivative of Western LGBTQ frameworks nor reducible to transgression of Islamic norms. Instead, they emerge from a culturally situated interplay of embodiment, humour, religious ethics, and mediated self-presentation. The analytic concept of *kueer* captures this interplay, offering a vocabulary to describe how *ahkak* Malays perform layered identities that resist rigid categorisation. Their expressions reframe Muslim masculinity as a dynamic, negotiated, and affectively rich field of meaning, shaped by everyday practices and mediated through digital spaces.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that Malay Muslim masculinity is undergoing subtle yet significant rearticulation through digital practices that draw on local cultural repertoires, Islamic ethical vocabularies, and vernacular humour. These practices challenge the assumption, common in public discourse, that Islamic masculinity is fixed and impermeable to variation (De Sondy, 2015; Duderija, 2013). Instead, they demonstrate that Malay Muslim men who do not conform to heteronormative expectations are actively reshaping the boundaries of what counts as morally legitimate masculinity. Their expressions are not framed as oppositional to Islam; rather, they are articulated through ethical sensibilities rooted in Malay-Muslim cultural norms and religious concepts such as sincerity, gentleness, humility, and self-restraint. Such everyday moral vocabularies complicate claims that non-normative gender expression is inherently incompatible with Islam—a point long emphasised in queer Muslim scholarship (Rahman, 2010, 2014; Yip, 2005).

The analysis also contributes to critical discussions of queer theory's applicability outside Euro-American contexts. Foundational frameworks by Butler (1990), Sedgwick (2015), and Ahmed (2006) help illuminate how gender norms are reproduced and challenged; however, they cannot fully account for the specific cultural and religious dimensions that shape Malay Muslim subjectivities. While their conceptual insights clarify mechanisms of normativity, they do not address how Islamic ethical discourses, Malay linguistic repertoires, or localised forms of piety inform identity work. As such, the present study affirms existing critiques that global queer theory often lacks the conceptual vocabulary to explain Muslim-majority contexts (Arondekar, 2006; Massad, 2007). This limitation becomes especially evident in the case of Puar's (2007) homonationalism. Although her analysis cogently explains how Western states use queer tolerance as a marker of civilisation in opposition to Muslims, it presumes that queer subjectivity is intrinsically tied to Western liberal modernity. This presumption renders the experiences of non-normative Malay Muslims marginal or unintelligible. The forms of expression

documented here—gentle poses, playful femininity, scripted modesty, humorous captions invoking Islamic values—do not emerge from the geopolitical dynamics Puar describes. They arise from local negotiations of culture, religion, and digital visibility within a Muslim-majority nation.

In response to these theoretical gaps, this study employed the analytic term *kueer* to conceptualise the layered, culturally specific, and vernacular forms of non-normative Malay Muslim gender expression. *Kueer* is intentionally distinct from "queer": it does not carry the same genealogies of Western activism, sexual identity politics, or LGBTQ mobilisation (Crimp, 2002; Marcus, 2005). Instead, it captures an ensemble of embodied practices, aesthetic gestures, linguistic creativity, and digital performances that are rooted in Malay-Muslim cultural contexts. The term's layered metaphor—drawn from *kuih lapis*—and its linguistic resonance with *kakak* foreground the multiplicity and fluidity of these identities. In everyday usage, *ahkak* Malays do not frame their expressions in terms of sexual orientation; rather, they situate themselves within a local idiom of softness, humour, flamboyance, and ethical self-fashioning. *Kueer* thus provides a conceptually grounded vocabulary for describing these patterns without forcing them into Western identity categories or Islamic doctrinal binaries. The study's findings also highlight the significance of Instagram as a space of negotiated identity. While not a neutral or liberatory domain, Instagram offers a mediated environment where Malay Muslim men can explore embodied forms of selfhood that may be constrained offline. This aligns with Bhabha's (1994) account of hybrid cultural spaces, although the platform's technological affordances introduce new forms of curation, audience segmentation, and selective disclosure. The use of filters, "Close Friends" lists, ephemeral stories, and stylised captions reflects a strategic navigation of visibility and vulnerability. Such strategies illustrate what hooks (1990) termed "spaces of radical openness," where marginalised subjects create alternative discursive terrains. Yet these spaces are always precarious: the threat of social or religious sanction remains ever-present, shaping what can be expressed, how, and to whom.

Instagram's role as a Third Space also illuminates how digital religion operates in contemporary Muslim life (Campbell, 2012; Campbell & Connelly, 2020). The posts analysed here show that Islamic piety is not abandoned but reinterpreted. Quranic verses, religious reminders, and expressions of gratitude appear alongside playful femininity and aesthetic experimentation. This coexistence suggests that religion is not experienced as an externally imposed norm but as a fluid, vernacular, and deeply personal moral framework. It aligns with scholars who argue that Islamic masculinity is historically contingent and shaped by shifting social, political, and economic forces rather than theological absolutes (Ouzgane, 2006; De Sondy, 2015). Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Malay-Muslim non-normative expressions cannot be understood through the dichotomies that dominate both Western queer theory and Islamic orthodoxy. They neither replicate Western LGBTQ identity frameworks nor reject Islamic values; instead, they reconfigure both through layered, situated practices of self-making that are mediated by humour, aesthetics, and digital creativity. The everyday expressions of *ahkak* Malays show how identity is actively negotiated and continuously reinterpreted within complex cultural and religious terrains. By theorising these practices through *kueer* rather than queer, this study foregrounds the need for locally grounded concepts capable of capturing the nuances of non-normative Muslim subjectivities in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how non-normative Malay Muslim men articulate gendered and religious identities on Instagram, revealing that Islamic masculinity in Malaysia is neither monolithic nor static. Through their aesthetic practices, linguistic creativity, religious expressions, and careful management of digital visibility, *ahkak* Malays demonstrate that Muslim masculinity can be expansive, layered, and ethically grounded in ways that depart from dominant heteronormative ideals. These findings reinforce arguments in local scholarship that identity in Malaysia is fundamentally multi-layered, relational, and contested (Guo & Kamaruzaman, 2025), shaped through everyday negotiations rather than rigid adherence to predefined norms.

The introduction of *kueer* as an analytic concept captures this complexity by theorising localised forms of non-normativity that are neither fully encompassed by Western queer categories nor adequately described by Islamic orthodox discourse. Drawing on Malay cultural idioms and vernacular gendered practices, *kueer* offers a

conceptual vocabulary that centres the lived experiences of non-conforming Malaysian Muslims. It extends earlier work by Kamaruzaman (2023, 2024) by providing a framework for analysing how such identities are performed, mediated, and negotiated within the unique socio-cultural and religious landscape of Malaysia. Instagram emerged in this study as a meaningful digital Third Space where these negotiations unfold. Rather than serving as a site of pure freedom, the platform functions as a mediated environment where visibility is both enabling and risky. *Ahkak* Malays curate their identities through performances that balance self-expression with careful navigation of potential judgement from family, community, and religious authorities. Their strategies reflect broader patterns of identity negotiation in hybrid cultural environments described by Bhabha (1994) and resonate with the dynamics of digital religion outlined by Campbell (2012) and Campbell and Connelly (2020).

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that Muslimness and non-normative gender expression are not mutually exclusive in the lived experiences of Malay Muslim men. Instead, individuals forge meaningful identities through vernacular ethics, aesthetic performance, and digital creativity, illustrating how religious and cultural norms can be reinterpreted from within. Islamic masculinity, therefore, is not a rigid doctrinal construct but an evolving field shaped by everyday practices, social contexts, and personal moral reasoning. This recognition invites a rethinking of how gender, sexuality, and religion intersect in Muslim-majority societies, encouraging future research to further explore the nuances of *kueer*(ed) subjectivities and the digital spaces through which they are articulated.

Acknowledgements

This study is conducted under the author's faculty-driven initiative in the Development Communication research programme.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

ORCID iDs

Nur Atirah Kamaruzaman https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2569-0162

Muhammad Faizul Abd Hamid https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9997-1963

Biographies

Nur Atirah Kamaruzaman is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. She is actively engaged in a faculty-led research initiative within the Development Communication research programme. Her scholarly interests cover a broad spectrum, including media and cultural studies, intersectionality, gender identity, social media research, and participatory culture.

Muhammad Faizul Abd Hamid is a Senior Lecturer in Malay Language at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. His work focuses on discourse studies, Malay grammar, and

rhetorical analysis, with current research interests in critical discourse, Islamic identity, and gender issues within Southeast Asian contexts.

REFERENCES

1. Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822388074
2. Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203820551
3. Burroughs, W. S. (1985). *Queer*. Viking.
4. Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203824979
5. Campbell, H. A. (Ed.). (2012). *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203084861
6. Campbell, H. A., & Connelly, L. (2020). Religion and digital media. In V. Narayana (Ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell companion to religion and materiality* (pp. 471–486). Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118660072.ch25
7. Chilton, P. (2004). *Analysing political discourse: Theory and practice*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203561218
8. Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039
9. Crimp, D. (2002). *Melancholia and moralism: Essays on AIDS and queer politics*. MIT Press.
10. De Sondy, A. (2015). *The crisis of Islamic masculinities*. Bloomsbury.
11. Duderija, A. (2010) *Constructing the religious self and the other: Neo-traditional salafi manhaj*. Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations, 21 (1). pp. 75-93. https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410903481879.
12. Duderija, A. (2013). *Constructing Muslim masculinities: Discourse, subjectivity, and lived identities.* Routledge.
13. Evolvi, G. (2022). Religion and the Internet: Digital religion. *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik, 6*, 9–25. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41682-021-00087-9
14. Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and power* (2nd ed.). Longman.
15. Foucault, M. (1980). Truth and power. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/knowledge* (pp. 109–133). Pantheon.
16. Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality. Vol. 1*. Vintage. (Originally published 1976).
17. Guo, Z., & Kamaruzaman, N. A. (2025). Identity conflict: Theoretical framework and review. *Asian Journal of Applied Communication, 14*(1), 19–35. https://doi.org/10.47836/ajac.14.01.02
18. Hendricks, M. (2010). Islamic texts: A source for acceptance of queer individuals into mainstream Muslim society. *The Equal Rights Review*, *5*, 31-51. www.equalrightstrust.org/ertdocumentbank/muhsin.pdf
19. hooks, b. (1990). *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics*. South End Press.
20. Kadlec, J. (2017). Where does the word "queer" come from? *Nylon Magazine*.
21. Kamaruzaman, N. A., & Zhang, Y. (2025). Affective visibility: Monetizing care work and emotional labor among full-time mothers on Douyin. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, 9*(10), 2476–2490. https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.91100198
22. Kamaruzaman, N. A. (2024). Negotiating non-normative identities: Gender nonconforming Malaysian Muslims on Instagram. *Journal of Men's Studies, 32*(2), 276–299. https://doi.org/10.1177/10608265231212551
23. Kamaruzaman, N. A. (2023). *Kueer(ing) the queer: Gender performance and expression among Malaysian Muslims* [Doctoral thesis, University of Sussex]. https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uos.23634573.v1
24. Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content analysis* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
25. Kugle, S. S. (2010). *Homosexuality in Islam*. Oneworld.
26. Latour, B. (1990). Technology is society made durable. *The Sociological Review, 38*(1), 103–131. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.1990.tb03350.x
27. Livia, A., & Hall, K. (1997). *Queerly phrased*. Oxford University Press.
28. Marcus, S. (2005). Queer theory for everyone. *Signs, 31*(1), 191–218. https://doi.org/10.1086/432743
29. Massad, J. A. (2007). *Desiring Arabs*. University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226509600.001.0001

30. Monterescu, D. (2006). Stranger masculinities. In L. Ouzgane (Ed.), *Islamic masculinities* (pp. 123–142). Zed Books.
31. Ouzgane, L. (Ed.). (2006). *Islamic masculinities*. Zed Books.
32. Pratt, M. L. (1991). Arts of the contact zone. *Profession*, 33-40. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25595469
33. Puar, J. K. (2007). *Terrorist assemblages*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822390442
34. Rahman, M. (2010). Queer as intersectionality. *Sociology, 44*(5), 944–961. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038510375733
35. Rahman, M. (2014). *Homosexualities, Muslim cultures and modernity*. Palgrave Macmillan.
36. Rahman, M., & Valliani, A. (2016). Challenging the opposition of LGBT identities and Muslim cultures. *Theology & Sexuality, 22*(1–2), 73–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/13558358.2017.1296689
37. Rose, G. (2016). *Visual methodologies* (4th ed.). SAGE.
38. Sedgwick, E. K. (2015). *Between men* (30th anniv. ed.). Columbia University Press.
39. Soja, E. (2009). Thirdspace. In K. Ikas & G. Wagner (Eds.), *Communicating in the third space* (pp. 49–61). Routledge.
40. Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
41. Sullivan, N. (2003). *A critical introduction to queer theory*. Edinburgh University Press.
42. Wodak, R., & Reisigl, M. (2001). Discourse and racism. In T. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse and racism* (pp. 372–403). Cambridge University Press.
43. Yip, A. K. T. (2005). Queering religious texts. *Sociology, 39*(1), 47–65. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038505049000

APPENDIX A

Participant ID	Approx. Age Range *(Anonymised)*	General Background Category *(Anonymised)*	Posting Style / Notable *Kueer*(ed) Practices
P1	18–24	Higher education student	Soft aesthetics, pastel filters, Ramadhan (Muslim fasting month) humour
P2	25–30	Early-career service/retail	Make-up experimentation, hair styling reels
P3	18–24	Undergraduate	Floral motifs, gentle poses, "sis"-coded captions
P4	25–30	Creative freelance/online work	Reclaimed slurs, Quranic references, witty captions
P5	30–35	Public-sector trainee	Mosque selfies, ethical reminders, feminised piety
P6	18–24	Part-time worker/student	Lip-sync videos, comedic impersonations
P7	25–30	Hospitality/service	Bold make-up looks, dramatic poses
P8	18–24	University residential student	Daily selfies, soft-boy aesthetics
P9	25–30	Administrative/office work	Quranic caption blending with gentle gestures
P10	30–35	Corporate junior executive	*Raya* (Muslim festive-season) fashion styling, soft menswear
P11	18–24	Polytechnic/college student	Humorous reels, *ahkak* banter, "mak cik"(aunty) persona
P12	25–30	Freelance digital creator	High-aesthetic portraits, emotional captions