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Resisting Heteropatriarchy: Gender Performativity in Instagram Narratives

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Abstract - In heteropatriarchal societies, women are often shaped to internalize normative expectations regarding love and marriage. This article analysis a personal narrative shared through the Instagram account @lovecoach.id, which depicts experiences of trauma, delayed marriage, and concerns about harmful relationships. The study was conducted over a five-month period (April–September 2025). The data source was the Instagram account @lovecoach.id**.** The study aims to examine how this narrative can be understood as a form of gender performativity and resistance to heteropatriarchal norms that position women as passive subjects within the institution of marriage. Employing a qualitative approach and critical discourse analysis grounded in Judith Butler's theoretical framework, this study explores how gender identity is produced and negotiated through language and digital media. The findings reveal that the narrative not only expresses an individual experience but also represents a broader rejection of social constructions surrounding women's obligation to marry. Expressions of trauma, emotional unpreparedness, and aspirations for egalitarian relationships signal subversive gender practices that challenge dominant norms. This research underscores the significance of social media as an articulative space for women to construct gender identities autonomously and reflectively, while simultaneously rejecting hegemonic narratives of love and marriage.

Keywords: Gender performativity; Heteropatriarchy; Judith Butler resistance; Social Media; Women's Narratives.

Introduction

In various cultures, including Indonesia, women often face strong social pressure to marry at a certain age. Marriage is not only regarded as an ideal life stage but also as a measure of a woman's success and maturity (Utami, 2021). This social norm constructs expectations that unmarried women in their late twenties or early thirties are deviating from the idealized life trajectory. Consequently, women frequently experience both internal and external pressure to conform to such expectations, even when they may not yet be psychologically, financially, or socially prepared. These pressures become more complex when linked to traumatic experiences, emotional instability, and the desire for healthy and equitable relationships. Women who choose to delay marriage and are selective in choosing a partner are often labelled as selfish or overly demanding (Hidayati, 2020).

In reality, such decisions are often acts of self-protection and resistance against potentially harmful relationships. Narratives of this kind have increasingly surfaced on social media platforms such as Instagram, particularly through accounts like @lovecoach.id, which serve as a space for women to share personal stories about love, relationships, and trauma. A narrative shared by a 28-year-old woman recounts her experience of losing her mother, navigating a dysfunctional relationship with her father, and fearing marriage—highlighting that gendered experiences are never singular, but rather layered and complex.

Across global cultures, social pressure on women to marry by a certain age is a widespread phenomenon, not limited to Indonesia. In many Asian societies, such as Japan, South Korea, and China, women who remain unmarried in their late twenties or early thirties are often labelled "leftover women" or *sheng nu*, reflecting patriarchal norms that define a woman's value through marital status (Fincher, 2014; To, 2020). Similar pressures are found in parts of Africa and the Middle East, where women who postpone marriage are often perceived as socially deviant, and their families too may suffer social stigma (Al-Khatib, 2021; Djordjevic, 2023). Even in Western societies—typically seen as more liberal—single women continue to face negative stereotypes as overly independent, too selective, or emotionally unstable (Reynolds, 2021).

Marriage is still widely viewed as a symbol of maturity, life success, and emotional stability for women (Nanda, 2022). This norm imposes deep internal and external pressures on women, even when they are not yet prepared psychologically, financially, or socially to enter the institution of marriage (Sharma, 2023). Many women experience inner conflict between societal expectations and their personal histories marked by trauma, emotional instability, and a longing for healthy and egalitarian relationships.

The postponement of marriage and resistance to heteropatriarchal norms should not be hastily judged as egocentric behaviour, but rather seen as a conscious response grounded in the prioritization of mental health and non-harmful relationships. Women who reject early marriage and choose singlehood often do so to protect their emotional well-being and preserve personal autonomy—particularly when they have a history of trauma or family violence (Madsen, 2022). This aligns with the feminist notion of *agency*, defined as the capacity of women to make conscious life choices even when those choices defy social expectations (Mahmood, 2011).

These narratives of resistance are increasingly finding a space in digital social media, especially among urban and educated women. Platforms such as Instagram provide opportunities for women to share experiences, form communities, and generate emotional solidarity around stories often marginalized in dominant public discourse (Abidin, 2021; Tiidenberg, 2020). The Instagram account @lovecoach.id exemplifies such an alternative media space, reflecting the complexities of women's experiences in navigating love, relationships, and trauma. In the case of the 28-year-old woman mentioned earlier, it becomes evident that gendered experience is shaped by childhood trauma, power relations within the family, and fears of unhealthy relationships. This underscores that women's experiences of marriage are the result of interactions among social constructions, psychological conditions, and gendered power dynamics (Butler, 2004; Crenshaw, 1991).

Within this context, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is particularly relevant. (Butler, 1990) argues that gender is not a fixed identity but rather an ongoing performance shaped by social norms. Therefore, resistance to such norms—such as delaying marriage or rejecting traditional female roles—can be read as subversive gender performances. The Instagram account @lovecoach.id, founded by Jose Aditya initially to help his sister find a suitable partner, now aims to help one million women find happiness in love by meeting compatible partners. Significantly, this account is actively used by women to seek romantic partners, presenting a novel phenomenon amid the cultural expectation that men should be the active seekers in romantic relationships.

This study is guided by a central research question: How do women's narratives on the Instagram account @lovecoach.id reflect gender performativity and resistance to heteropatriarchal norms of marriage? The study has three primary objectives: (1) to analysis women's narratives on trauma and unpreparedness for marriage as shared via social media platforms; (2) to examine how these experiences can be interpreted as forms of resistance to hegemonic gender norms; and (3) to explore how social media provides an articulatory space for reflective and alternative constructions of gender identity.

This research is important in that it offers a deeper understanding of how women construct and negotiate their gender identities within personal and social relationships. Furthermore, it contributes to the field of gender and media studies by illustrating the role of social media as a site of resistance to heteropatriarchal norms. Ultimately, this study seeks to expand our understanding of how digital discourse both shapes and challenges dominant narratives about love and marriage.

Theoretical Framework

Judith Butler (1990; 1993) introduced the concept of gender performativity, a groundbreaking contribution to gender studies and feminist theory that challenges foundational assumptions regarding gender identity as essential and fixed. According to Butler, gender is not an innate or biologically inherent identity, but rather the result of stylized repetition of acts—repeated behaviors that are socially constructed and reproduced within dominant cultural norms. In other words, gender identity does not preexist action; instead, it is produced through daily social performances, such as speaking, dressing, and bodily gestures (Butler, 1990).

In *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, Butler takes her argument further by asserting that even the category of "sex" is not free from cultural construction. She challenges the classical dualism of the biological and the social by demonstrating that the body itself can only be understood through discursive frameworks shaped by power and discourse (Butler, 1990, 1993). Thus, "sex" is not neutral but already mediated by heteropatriarchal norms that determine which bodies are considered normal and which are deviant (Butler, 1993). Butler's perspective has received both support and critique. Scholars such as Varghese and Shepherd emphasize that gender performativity allows us to understand the body as a socially produced and interpretable text. This construction gives the impression that gender identity is natural, when in fact it is socially fragile and open to deconstruction. Consequently, any deviation from dominant gender scripts—such as non-binary expressions and queer practices—can generate ruptures, or critical breaks, that open space for resistance to heteronormative hegemony (Shepherd, 2016; Varghese, 2024).

However, critiques of Butler's theory have emerged, particularly from materialist feminists such as Nancy Fraser and Martha Nussbaum, who argue that Butler's emphasis on discourse and symbolism overlooks the material dimensions of gender oppression, such as poverty, domestic violence, and economic exploitation (N. Fraser, 1995; Nussbaum, 1999). Nussbaum (1999) contends that gender performativity theory contains political ambiguity, as it does not directly offer strategies for structural transformation. In addition, postcolonial feminists criticize the universalism of Butler's theory, which is viewed as overly grounded in Western gender experiences and insufficiently attentive to the cultural and historical specificities of women in the Global South(Mohanty, 2003).

Despite these critiques, Butler's contribution remains significant in opening up new theoretical spaces for understanding gender as a field of contestation and performance, rather than as a fixed and stable category. Resistance to heteronormative scripts, in Butler's view, is not only possible but inevitable, since gender identity is always open to re-signification and shifts in meaning. Within this framework, the body, language, and lifestyle become political mediums through which normative dominance can be challenged and gender diversity affirmed (Butler, 1993; Salih, 2002).

In heteropatriarchal societies, the institution of marriage not only structures gender relations between men and women, but also actively constructs social norms regarding women's timing, purpose, and identity within the marital institution. Women are positioned as subjects who must obey, depend upon others, and often sacrifice their personal identity in order to fulfill the expectations of being the "ideal wife" (Hidayati, 2020; Utami, 2021). This indicates that marriage is not merely a private sphere, but a political public space where patriarchal power is reproduced through cultural norms and social pressures.

One of the key pressures experienced by unmarried adult women—particularly those in their late twenties or early thirties—is the stigmatization of being incomplete or even having failed as a woman due to remaining single. As Bandopadhyaya and Kenix observe, media narratives and public discourse continue to be dominated by the belief that marriage constitutes the ultimate achievement in a woman's life (Bandopadhyaya, 2023; Larasati & Fensi, 2023). Control over women's bodies and life choices is subtly exercised through institutions such as family, religion, and media, which promote the ideal image of a woman as obedient, submissive, and married at the "right" time (Deng, 2024).

This form of social pressure may be understood as an expression of gender hegemony—the institutionalization of masculine values as natural and incontestable (Connell, 2015). Within the framework of Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990), women are urged to imitate predefined gender roles—namely, as wives and mothers—even when these roles conflict with their emotional realities, personal aspirations, or financial conditions. When women deviate from these gender scripts, they are perceived as deviant and subjected to social sanctions in the form of stigma, exclusion**,** or moral pressure**.**

Contemporary research indicates that urban, highly educated women face a persistent double bind—on the one hand, they are expected to be independent and accomplished, yet on the other hand, their success is still measured by marital status and domestic roles (Alhazmi, 2023; Kim, 2022). This affirms that female autonomy does not automatically liberate women from heteropatriarchal norms deeply embedded in the culture of marriage. In many Asian contexts, women who choose to delay or reject marriage are often labeled as selfish, overly selective, or even unnatural. This reality reveals the workings of patriarchal power through mechanisms of collective morality and symbolic control (M. , & W. Y. Zhou, 2024).

Moreover, the heteropatriarchal culture of marriage constructs what Ingraham terms normative romance ideology—the belief that legitimate and meaningful love can only exist within heterosexual and formal marital frameworks (Ingraham, 2008). This ideology restricts alternative forms of affection and relationships while undermining the value of personal freedom and the right to define one's own life path. Therefore, resistance to this norm—such as choosing singlehood or engaging in non-conventional relationships—should be understood as subversive acts with political potential.

Social media has evolved into an articulatory space for alternative discourses, allowing women to publicly renegotiate their gender identities. The communication process plays a crucial role in shaping gender construction through language, symbols, and representations that are repeatedly produced and circulated in social life. Through interpersonal communication, media, and social institutions, gender norms and identities are normalized, negotiated, or contested within society. Media play a strategic role in the communication process by shaping and reinforcing the social construction of society. Through representation and narrative, the media significantly influence how societal roles, including the role of women, are understood and interpreted.

Platforms like Instagram and online communities have emerged as symbolic arenas where women can express narratives of trauma, resistance, and identity that disrupt heteronormative standards (Im, 2023; Z., W. Z., & Z. F. Zhou, 2022). Social media enables networked feminism, allowing women to construct alternative narratives of identity and relationality (Bossio, 2021; Z., W. Z., & Z. F. Zhou, 2022). Hashtags such as *#MeToo*, *#NiUnaMenos*, and local initiatives like *@lovecoach.id* foster digital solidarity and reject heteronormative hegemony through narratives of trauma, resistance, and aspirations for just and egalitarian relationships (Mueller, 2020; Z., W. Z., & Z. F. Zhou, 2022). These developments demonstrate the role of social media as a space of resistance, enabling women's narratives to emerge collectively and publicly through networked feminism.

Networked feminism refers to a form of digital solidarity that connects women across geographic and social boundaries through social media (Trott, 2020). This phenomenon has been reinforced by hashtag activism, including *#MeToo*, *#WhyIStayed*, and *#ChallengeAccepted*, which provide platforms for women to articulate experiences of violence, harassment, and domestic trauma. For instance, the *#WhyIStayed* campaign revealed how women collectively resisted victim-blaming narratives in domestic violence (Linabary, 2020). Similarly, *#MeToo* sparked a global consciousness of sexual harassment and brought previously silenced trauma into the realm of legitimate public discourse (Jackson, 2020). A study in China (Z., W. Z., & Z. F. Zhou, 2022) demonstrates how women utilized the anonymity of social media to share personal experiences of toxic relationships and to reject patriarchal marriage expectations.

Previous studies reflect similar phenomena. Hidayati and Kurniawan (2020) highlighted how single women in their late twenties in urban Indonesia often reject early marriage due to emotional trauma and instability, while simultaneously experiencing social pressure for resisting heteropatriarchal norms. Utami (2021) found that urban single women employ selective narrative strategies to justify delaying marriage—thus producing alternative discourses from within the pressure of social norms. (Z., W. Z., & Z. F. Zhou, 2022) illustrated how Chinese women use social media anonymity to discuss personal trauma such as divorce, infidelity, and rejection of traditional marriage.

Im et al. (2023) examined how women globally confront online trauma—including harassment and stalking—demonstrating a desire for narrative control over their relational lives. Meanwhile, Deng et al. (2024) mapped how women in Chinese social media actively resist patriarchal marriage constructs and build alternative identities rooted in gender equality.

Material and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore how narratives of trauma, fear, and resistance to marriage are produced, constructed, and negotiated within social media spaces. CDA is chosen for its ability to uncover hidden power relations embedded in texts and to reveal how language practices reflect, reinforce, or challenge dominant ideologies (Fairclough, 1995; Fensi, 2024; van Dijk, 1998). In this context, language is not viewed as a neutral medium but as a social practice that actively participates in the reproduction of power structures, including those related to gender and heteronormative norms (Machin, 2012).

This approach is enriched by the lens of critical feminist theory**,** particularly in examining how discourses surrounding women, marriage, and trauma are shaped by heteropatriarchal culture, and how women negotiate their subject positions within such discourses (Hooks, 2000; Lazar, 2007). Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA**)** emphasizes that discourse not only represents gender but also produces and sustains gender-based power imbalances, manifested through normative narratives about women's roles within the institutions of marriage and family (Kheirkhah, 2020). Thus, the analysis goes beyond linguistic or discursive structures to encompass ideological dimensions, subjectivity, and female agency within the context of digital culture**.**

Moreover, this research draws on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1990, 2004), which conceptualizes gender identity not as fixed, but as continuously produced through discursive and performative practices**.** Within the narratives analyzed, women do not merely express personal experiences but actively reconstruct their identities beyond normative scripts of the ideal woman as wife and mother (Salter, 2021). Resistance to marriage and the articulation of trauma thus become expressions of agency against the hegemonic gender order**,** which often reduces women's value to their marital status (Ahmed, 2021; R. , & O. S. Gill, 2022).

The primary data for this research consists of narratives shared by users of the Instagram account *@lovecoach.id*, a community-based digital platform aimed at helping women explore healthy relationships and find suitable life partners. The study focuses on narrative posts that detail women's personal experiences of past trauma, anxiety over romantic relationships, and resistance to marriage. One particularly detailed narrative analyzed in this study features a 28-year-old woman who shares her traumatic experience of losing her mother, her emotional unpreparedness for marriage, and her fear of repeating toxic relationship patterns within the institution of marriage. This narrative was selected because it represents a subjective and performative articulation of feminine identity that resists domination by heteropatriarchal norms.

The analysis was conducted through three main stages. *First*, identifying dominant discourses, by mapping social norms embedded within the narrative—such as expectations to marry, perceptions of single women as "incomplete," and the pressure to "heal" from trauma in order to be deemed suitable for romantic relationships (Ringrose, 2020).

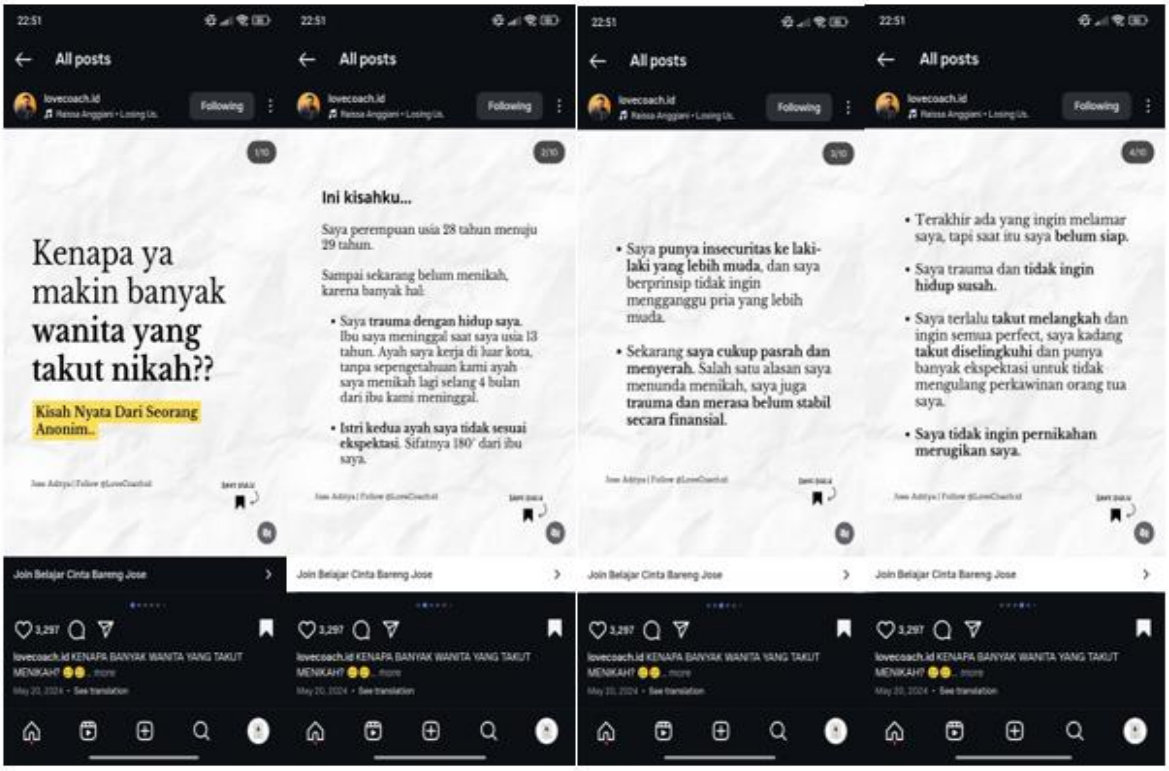
Second, counter-discourse analysis, which examines forms of resistance to dominant narratives, including rejection of the marriage institution, critiques of patriarchal relationships, and the use of social media as a space for articulating trauma and feminine power (Banet-Weiser, 2020; Dobson, 2023).

Third, subject position analysis**,** which investigates how the narrator positions herself within power relations—whether as a victim, a survivor, a change agent, or a subject who reinterprets social norms through discursive and affective practices.

In addition, the study explores how gender identity is performatively enacted (Butler, 1990, 2004) in digital spaces and how narrators reconfigure self-meaning through language, affect, and solidarity with online communities. In this sense, social media narratives are not static representations but rather sites of struggle**,** where negotiations between pain, agency, and hope take place (Papacharissi, 2022).

To ensure validity and credibility, the analysis is conducted contextually to capture how the narratives are received, questioned, or supported by the digital community. This research also adheres to principles of digital research ethics by using only publicly available data and anonymizing the narrators' identities to protect their privacy and personal integrity (Markham, 2021). This study was conducted over a five month period, April–September 2025.

Result and Discussion



Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/C7MOjMbyLuZ/?img_index=8

Text's Transcription

"Why are more and more women afraid of marriage?
Here is my story.
I am a 28-year-old woman, soon turning 29. I am still unmarried for many reasons:
I carry unresolved trauma from my life. My mother passed away when I was 13 years old. My father worked in another city, and without our knowledge, he remarried just four months after my mother's death.

My stepmother did not meet my expectations. Her personality was the complete opposite of my mother's.

I have deep insecurities about men who are younger than me. I hold a personal principle not to interfere with younger men's lives.

At this point, I feel resigned and exhausted. One reason I continue to delay marriage is that I still carry trauma and feel financially unstable.

The last time someone proposed to me, I wasn't ready.

I am traumatized and do not want to suffer in life.

I am extremely afraid to take any steps forward. I want everything to be perfect. I'm afraid of being cheated on and have high expectations, mainly because I do not want to repeat my parents' marriage experience.

I do not want marriage to bring me harm."

Text Context

The narrative above serves as a primary discursive source that represents a woman's traumatic experience within the context of a patriarchal family structure, while also signaling a process of resistance and critical identity reconstruction. Childhood trauma—such as the sudden loss of the mother and the father's remarriage shortly thereafter without transparency—produces deep affective wounds that shape how the woman perceives the institution of marriage. Within the framework of trauma studies, such experiences are not merely individual psychological events, but rather socio-cultural products that emerge from normalized power imbalances within the family system (Caruth, 1996; Herman, 2015).

The institution of marriage, as critiqued in feminist thought, frequently functions as a site for the reproduction of gender inequality and the subordination of women (Hooks, 2000). In this context, the decision to delay or reject marriage should not be read solely as a personal choice but rather as an act of resistance to heteronormative norms that bind women to domestic roles and unequal relationships (Ahmed, 2017; Fensi, 2019). Such refusal can be interpreted as a form of agency—the ability of women to rearticulate their identities outside the framework of traditional, oppressive institutions.

Utilizing Judith Butler's (1990) five dimensions of critical discourse—namely gender performativity, patriarchal heteronormativity, norm resistance/subversion, the body as text, and language as power—this text reflects the dynamic interplay between identity and structure. Butler argues that gender is not a fixed identity but a performative act: it is produced and reproduced through social and linguistic practices supported by institutional power. In this sense, the woman's narrative, which redefines the meaning of marriage, represents a performative subversion that resists heterosexual norms and the domestication of women as the only socially legitimate life path (Butler, 1990, 2004).

The body and trauma in this narrative can also be read as a social text, inscribed with power. From this perspective, the female body is not neutral but a site where social norms and gendered power operate—and can also be contested (Alcoff, 2006; Grosz, 1994). The language used in the narrative is not merely a tool of communication but an arena of power, shaping subjectivity and opening up space for resistance (Butler, 1997; Weedon, 1997). Thus, the text represents a discourse of liberation—a woman disentangling herself from structural wounds of the past and seeking existential safety before entering into the institution of marriage, which historically has often reproduced unequal power relations. This narrative illustrates how women can become critical subjects, capable of interrupting symbolic domination and reimagining the meaning of shared life in more equitable and humane terms.

Gender Performativity, Trauma, and Resistance

Judith Butler (1990, 2004) argues that gender is not a stable identity but rather something that is continuously performed through actions, language, and social representations. Within the context of this narrative, societal expectations placed on women to marry by a certain age and to conform to heteronormative relational scripts illustrate the discursive pressure of patriarchal norms on gender performativity. This personal account demonstrates how a female subject actively disrupts dominant gender performative regimes. The decision to delay marriage, maintain a critical stance toward power dynamics within marital relations, and express anxiety over emotional and financial readiness constitutes a form of resistance to normative femininity, which dictates that women must become wives and mothers within culturally acceptable timelines (Butler, 2021; Salamon, 2022a, 2022b).

"I'm too afraid to take a step forward and want everything to be perfect…". This statement reveals a tension between the socially prescribed performance of the "ideal woman"—compliant, ready for marriage, and accommodating—and the subject's lived reality, shaped by trauma and caution. It disrupts the illusion that gender performativity unfolds seamlessly and without resistance (Butler, 2004).

The emotional wound caused by the loss of the mother and the father's abrupt remarriage has significantly shaped this woman's gendered experience. This trauma becomes part of the production of a destabilized subjectivity in her gender performance. Within a Butlerian discourse framework, psychological wounds are not merely personal but are historically situated outcomes of power

relations and social norms (Butler, 2020). McKenzie (2021) introduces the concept of gendered vulnerability, in which childhood trauma produces fragility in gender performance due to the dissonance between lived experience and normative expectations. In this narrative, trauma informs the resistance to traditional gender scripts and creates a contested space for renegotiating identity, which may not align with dominant social categorizations (McKenzie, 2021).

The subject's critical awareness of not wanting to replicate her parents' marital pattern reflects a reflective stance on the power dynamics embedded in the institution of marriage. Here, the discourse of the "ideal marriage" collides with the lived injustice of emotional and gendered inequalities within family relations. The woman no longer positions herself as a passive object in a relationship but as an agent attempting to reclaim narrative control, despite lingering fears. This reflects how resistance to hegemonic discourse (marriage as a female life imperative) unfolds internally, as discussed by Foucault in relation to subjectivity and resistance (Allen, 2021).

The statement, *"I have a principle not to interfere with younger men,"* highlights the complex interplay of gender discourse and age norms. In patriarchal societies, relationships between women and younger men are often regarded as deviations from normative gender hierarchies. According to Ahmed (2023), women who experience intersecting pressures (trauma, age, and marriage expectations) frequently carry excessive moral and emotional burdens in managing relationships, leading them to defer agency over their own lives. The rejection of potential romantic involvement with a younger man may be seen as an internalization of age and gender norms, and at the same time, a protective measure against the risks of failing in socially prescribed performances (Ahmed, 2023).

This story illustrates that gender performativity is not a linear or conflict-free process. Rather, it is a contested arena where trauma, social expectations, and individual attempts at autonomous self-articulation intersect. From a Butlerian perspective, the decision to delay marriage is not merely a personal choice, but a discursive critique of gender normativity and the institution of marriage itself. In other words, this act of resistance should not be interpreted as weakness, but as a form of subversive agency against oppressive social power structures.

Heteronormativity and Female Subjective Resistance

Judith Butler (1990, 2004) argues that gender and sexual identity are not natural givens but are instead produced and sustained by hegemonic discursive regimes, most notably heteronormativity. This system presumes that there are only two complementary sexes, whose proper union is realized within the socially sanctioned structure of heterosexual marriage. Within this framework, women are deemed successful only when they conform to normative gender scripts—becoming wives, becoming mothers, and living within legally and socially recognized heterosexual relationships.

The narrative analyzed here illustrates how female subjects experience pressure under these heteronormative norms. Statements such as: *"I'm too afraid to take a step forward and want everything to be perfect. I'm afraid of being cheated on and have high expectations not to repeat my parents' marriage"* reflect a tension between the idealization of heteronormativity—in which marriage is treated as inevitable—and the subjective experience of emotional wounds, trauma, and critique of that very institution.

As Butler (2020) notes, the subject is not merely produced by discourse, but also possesses the capacity to disrupt and rearticulate that discourse through actions and life choices. Within a heteronormative framework, unmarried women approaching the age of 30 are often positioned as "abnormal" or "incomplete" (Ahmed, 2023). From a critical discourse perspective, however, the postponement of marriage may be read as a form of epistemic resistance to dominant narratives that render women passive objects within the family structure. Butler (2021) refers to this form of resistance as disidentification—a condition in which the subject neither fully identifies with dominant norms nor possesses a clear alternative framework. This is reflected in the statement: *"I've become resigned and have given up…"*

Here we see what Lauren Berlant (2022) calls cruel optimism—a condition in which one continues to invest hope in an institution (such as marriage) that may ultimately reproduce harm, even when the subject is fully aware of its destructive potential based on personal experience (Berlant, 2022).

Narratives of past trauma, such as *"my mother died"* and *"my father remarried secretly,"* reveal how the family institution may become a site of symbolic violence. In heteronormative societies, marriage is often treated as a naturalized process, one that is uncritically accepted. However, these lived experiences demonstrate the capacity of familial relationships to produce wounds and betrayal, which in turn shape high expectations, fear of infidelity, and a desire for control before entering any formal union. (Demos, 2023; Jordan; Fabianus Fensi, 2024)argue that trauma within heteronormative families may foster a tendency to avoid long-term relationships as a form of psychological self-protection.

The statement: *"I don't want marriage to harm me"* constitutes a rejection of the narrative that marriage is inherently redemptive, and instead affirms a desire to avoid unequal power relations, as previously witnessed within the parental marriage structure.

Another statement: *"I have insecurities toward younger men and I don't want to disturb them"* illustrates the intersectional dynamics of heteronormativity, wherein age, gender, and social status converge to produce specific relational norms. As (Kolehmainen, 2020) notes, heteronormativity not only regulates who is allowed to be with whom, but also how relationships must be structured in order to be seen as legitimate. The fear of "disturbing" a younger man reveals an internalization of gender-age norms, where men are expected to be older, dominant, and the initiators in heterosexual relationships—a classic script within patriarchal marriage constructs (Ingram, 2024).

The narrative shared via Instagram account @lovecoach.id provides compelling evidence that heteronormativity operates not only in public discourse but also within deeply personal realms—memory, trauma, decision-making, and intimacy. Through the lens of delayed marriage, fear, and the reluctance to enter unequal relationships, the female subject demonstrates a form of symbolic resistance to normative narratives shaped by heteronormative discourse. Using Butler's framework, this narrative reveals how women may construct agency not through direct confrontation, but by delaying, doubting, and reconfiguring the meaning of a "good life."

Subversion of Binary Heterosexual Gender Relations

Judith Butler (2004) emphasizes that gender is a culturally regulated social performance, governed by dominant binary and heterosexual norms. Within this system, only two sexes—male and female—are presumed to exist, naturally attracted to one another and socially reproduced primarily through the institution of marriage. However, Butler stresses that gender performance is never fully stable or coherent; it is always susceptible to failure, deviation, or displacement. When such performances fail to align with dominant scripts—for example, when a woman chooses not to marry at the "ideal" age or rejects conventional relational norms—subversive acts emerge, disrupting the foundational logic of binary gender and heterosexuality (Butler, 2004; Salamon, 2022a).

The narrative analyzed here demonstrates tangible forms of resistance that deconstruct core assumptions of the heteronormative gender system. Statements such as: *"I am traumatized and don't want a difficult life... I'm too afraid to take a step and want everything to be perfect..."* should not be dismissed as mere expressions of personal doubt. Rather, they articulate a critique of normative structures that pressure women to marry under any circumstances in order to fulfill idealized gender roles. From (Butler, 2021) perspective, expressions of fear, trauma, and unreadiness are not signs of weakness, but evidence of a subject negotiating alternative modes of living outside the heterosexual binary script.

Likewise, when the narrator states: *"I don't want marriage to harm me"* she effectively challenges the reproductive function of marriage—an institution often assumed to be neutral but in fact structurally reinforces gendered power imbalances. As argued by (N., & J. R. Fraser, 2022), traditional marriage often sustains structural inequality in the emotional and economic distribution of labor.

In binary heterosexual frameworks, women are expected to engage in caregiving, to be compliant, and to complement a dominant, economically stable male partner. This narrative, however, rejects that schema through affirmations of financial and affective independence: *"I am traumatized and feel financially unstable..."*

This expression indicates a refusal to participate in relationships that demand subjugation or compliance. Instead, it reflects a desire to engage in mutual, conscious, and equitable relational dynamics. As (Ahmed, 2023) suggests, in patriarchal societies, women often bear the emotional

burden in relationships, and the decision not to marry—or to delay marriage—can represent a feminist ethic of self-care, a refusal to perpetuate relational injustice.

Furthermore, the statement: *"I have a principle of not wanting to disturb younger men..."* reveals how gender norms intersect with age, dominance, and social expectations. This narrative questioning the logic that men must be older, more prepared, and dominant in heterosexual relationships—an assumption deeply embedded in binary gender regulation (Kolehmainen, 2020). The subject's life trajectory disrupts the linear social script—birth–school–marriage–children—and instead embodies what (Butler, 2020) terms "living otherwise": a way of life that defies prescriptive norms.

When the narrator says: *"I feel resigned and have given up..."* this is not merely an expression of despair, but also a form of disengagement from a system that offers no space for diverse female subjectivities. The woman in this narrative is not a passive victim of past trauma, but a self-aware agent, who refuses submission, avoids frontal confrontation, and instead creates critical distance from an oppressive system.

Through the lens of Judith Butler, this story illustrates that women who do not marry at a certain age, who carry trauma, or who choose non-conventional relationships are not deviant. Rather, they enact subversive resistance against binary gender norms and the hegemonic heterosexual order. The narrative affirms that personal experience is a political site of articulation, and that women can form agency through hesitation, refusal, and withdrawal from unjust relational paradigms.

The Body as Text: Trauma, Disruption, and Discursive Rewriting

Judith Butler, in Bodies That Matter (1993) and Undoing Gender (2004), argues that the body is not a biologically neutral entity, but a product of performative repetition within discursive, cultural, and political frameworks. Especially in the context of heteronormative and patriarchal systems, the female body is not merely material but inscribed with meaning: what is considered normal, desirable, "ready" for marriage, or socially valuable.

Butler rejects the essentialist view of gender and instead emphasizes that the body is continually produced and reproduced through signs, language, norms, and social practices. In this sense, the body is a text—always interpreted, rewritten, and politicized (Butler, 2004; McWhorter, 2020a). *"I am traumatized by my life. My mother died when I was 13… I am traumatized and don't want a difficult life."* From Butler's perspective, trauma is not solely psychological but profoundly corporeal—it shapes the body's disposition, the way one approaches intimacy, vulnerability, or resists relational expectations.

In this narrative, the female body bears the historical imprint of relational pain, shaping how it is seen, how it feels, and how it acts in the social world. The body here is not simply "unmarried"; it is negotiating its wounded history through performative acts of hesitation, refusal, and caution, which are in fact expressions of agency—the body's capacity to read and rewrite itself.

"I feel financially unstable… I want everything to be perfect… I'm afraid of being cheated on…"

In heteronormative discourses, the female body is considered "marriageable" when it meets specific criteria: age, emotional stability, beauty, obedience, and openness to control within relational structures. These standards are not natural, but socially constructed expectations shaped by patriarchal culture. As Foucault argues—further expanded by Butler—the body exists within a regime of truth: a system that renders bodies legible as suitable, unsuitable, or at risk of failure (Butler, 2004; McWhorter, 2020a).

The refusal to marry because of a sense of imperfection is thus a rejection of that legibility. According to (Yılmaz, 2022) and (Ahmed, 2023), the female body in patriarchy becomes a site of emotional, moral, and economic regulation, with marriage functioning as a tool of domestication. By delaying or declining entry into such structures, this narrative defends the autonomy of the body-as-text—still being written on its own terms.

"I feel insecure about younger men… I don't want to disturb younger men…" Gender norms do not only regulate male-female relationships but also age, hierarchy, and dominance. The body here is socially read as transgressive if it enters a relationship with a younger man. This indicates that the body's perceived "deviance" lies not within the body itself but within social readings shaped by normative structures. (Butler, 2021) refers to this as "hegemonic readability"—a condition in which

the body is deemed acceptable only when it can be interpreted through dominant scripts. The subject's resistance to this reading constitutes a form of symbolic defiance.

"I don't want marriage to harm me". This statement is profound within critical discourse. It reframes the body not as a passive object within the institution of marriage, but as an agent acutely aware of its potential exploitation. The body, in this sense, refuses consumption by systems that perpetuate asymmetry. (N. , & J. R. Fraser, 2022) similarly argue that capitalist and patriarchal systems often exploit women's bodies through institutions like marriage, which appear neutral but sustain inequality. Here, the body becomes a site of struggle, where negotiations over value, identity, and personal ethics unfold.

Drawing on Butler's critical discourse framework, this narrative reveal that the female body is not a neutral biological substrate but a social text inscribed with trauma, refusal, fear, and agency. The decision to remain unmarried—or to delay marriage—is not merely a personal preference but a political act, destabilizing normative understandings of femininity, relational readiness, and heterosexual happiness. The body is not "incomplete"; rather, it is rewriting its own story, beyond the patriarchal script.

Language as a Tool of Power: Subjection, Interpellation, and Discursive Resistance

In Judith Butler's discourse theory, language is not neutral; it is a technology of power that constitutes identities, produces norms, and regulates who may be recognized as a subject (Butler, 1997). In Excitable Speech, Butler argues that subjects are formed through interpellation—a social process by which individuals are "called into being" via language that carries normative expectations. Language, therefore, does not merely describe reality—it creates it. Through repetitive invocation of terms such as ready to marry, a good woman, afraid of betrayal, or marriage is harmful, a subject internalizes specific social positions and roles.

"I am traumatized and don't want a difficult life… I am too afraid to move forward… I don't want marriage to harm me". These statements are not just affective expressions; they reveal the power relations between the narrator's experience and the social structures that have shaped her understanding of herself and her future. Phrases such as "difficult life", "afraid of being cheated on", or "want everything to be perfect" echo normative discourses embedded in a heteropatriarchal regime where women are expected to be emotionally stable, attractive, submissive, and prepared to be "chosen" as wives—markers of individual success (Ahmed, 2023; Yılmaz, 2022).

However, according to Butler (1997), language also carries the potential for subversion. When the narrator names her trauma and refuses to enter marriage for the sake of meeting normative expectations, she is strategically using language to resist dominant narratives and generate new meaning for her body and subjectivity (R. Gill, 2022). This is evident in expressions such as: *"I am not ready";*
"I am too afraid"; "I am traumatized".

Such statements can be understood as effects of interpellation, where the subject reflects the internalized expectations of a gendered social order that demands heterosexual marriage as a milestone of adult femininity (Butler, 1997). Yet when the narrator mobilizes these very utterances to reject that order, she interrupts interpellation and creates an autonomous discursive space for herself. Here, language ceases to be a mechanism of subjection and becomes a medium of emancipation.

In this framework, naming trauma is not a sign of weakness, but a linguistic strategy to reclaim agency from the symbolic violence of the past. By declaring*, "I don't want marriage to harm me,"* the narrator contests the romanticized discourse of marriage as a universal remedy or guarantee of fulfillment. This act aligns with Butler's proposition that injurious language may be reappropriated to serve emancipatory ends (Butler, 2004). As (Fensi, 2025; McWhorter, 2020b) suggests, discursive agency arises when subjects refuse to be merely spoken by others and begin to write themselves into being. Ultimately, the narrative illustrates how language functions simultaneously as a site of domination and a tool of resistance.

Through deliberate refusals and affective truth-telling, the subject not only resists heteronormative expectations but also constructs a counter-discursive identity—one that asserts value beyond the confines of marriage, femininity, and social legitimacy.

Table 1. Discourse Analysis Findings Based on Judith Butler's Theoretical Dimensions

Butler's Discourse Dimension	Text Excerpt	Interpretation
Gender Performativity, Trauma, and Resistance	*"I'm too afraid to move forward and I want everything to be perfect…"*	Reflects the tension between socially imposed gender performance and the subject's internal state shaped by trauma and cautiousness.
	"I believe I shouldn't bother a younger man."	Indicates the internalization of age and gender norms as a protective mechanism against potential failure in social performance.
Heteronormativity and Subjective Resistance	*"I'm too afraid to move forward… I'm afraid of being cheated on… I don't want to repeat my parents' marriage."*	Demonstrates a critical awareness of heteronormative ideals and the traumatic personal experiences that challenge institutional expectations.
	"I'm resigned and have given up…"	Illustrates *cruel optimism*—maintaining hope in an institution (marriage) that holds the potential to harm, despite past experiences.
	"I don't want marriage to harm me."	Rejects the normative discourse that frames marriage as inherently redemptive or beneficial.
	"I feel insecure about younger men…"	Highlights the intersectionality of heteronormativity—where age, gender, and social status intersect to shape relational expectations.
Subversion of Binary Heterosexual Gender Norms	*"I'm traumatized and don't want a hard life… I want everything to be perfect…"*	Critiques dominant gender scripts by presenting trauma as a basis for resisting normative relational expectations.
	"*I believe I shouldn't bother a younger man."*	Challenges the dominant assumption that men must be older, more dominant, and the relational lead—deconstructing gendered social roles.
	"I'm resigned and have given up…"	Represents disengagement as an act of agency—refusing to participate in systems that marginalize subjective variations in womanhood.
The Body as Text	*"I'm traumatized by life. My mother died when I was 13… I don't want a hard life."*	Trauma inscribed on the body shapes its relational disposition, intimacy, and resistance to institutional scripts.
	"I don't feel financially stable… I want everything to be perfect…"	Demonstrates resistance to social readings of the body as "ready" or "worthy" for marriage—critiquing the regime of bodily intelligibility.
	"I feel insecure about younger men…"	The body is understood as a text marked by fear of violating social norms—not inherently flawed, but socially misread.
	"I don't want marriage to harm me."	The body is not a passive object in marriage but a conscious agent aware of structural exploitation and asserting its autonomy.

Language as a Tool of Power	*"I'm traumatized and don't want a hard life… I'm too afraid to move forward…"*	Language reflects the power relations that shape the subject's understanding of self and future through internalized social scripts.
	"I'm not ready." / "I'm traumatized." / "I'm too afraid."	Illustrates interpellation—how social discourse positions women within heteronormative expectations—while also showing how language can be used subversively.

Source: Researcher (2025)

Conclusion

This study affirms that language functions not merely as a tool of communication, but as a site of power that produces identities, norms, and subjectivities. The uniqueness of this study in the Indonesian context lies in its analysis of how heteropatriarchal norms are reproduced and contested through gender performativity within Instagram narratives, shaped by local cultural values, religious discourses, and platform algorithms. The narrative of the woman analysis here illustrates the ambivalent operations of language—it simultaneously regulates and liberates. Within Judith Butler's framework, language as a performative practice allows the female subject to renegotiate meanings of readiness, marriage, and value, while also subverting dominant narratives that sustain patriarchal control.

Gender identity, as demonstrated in this case, is not a product of biological determinism, but rather the outcome of repeated social norms. Early childhood trauma and fear of marriage function as entry points to examine how personal experiences are shaped and disciplined by hegemonic discourses, particularly heteronormativity, which prescribes normative roles and expectations for women. In this light, the delay or rejection of marriage is not a deviation, but rather a symbolic resistance to the cultural imperative of heterosexual matrimony.

Furthermore, the female body emerges as a discursive site, where pain, vulnerability, and agency are inscribed. The articulation of trauma and fear, as seen in the narrative, should be read not merely as a psychological confession but as an act of political subjectivation—a refusal to be interpellated within oppressive structures of meaning. Such a gesture opens space for reimagining female subjectivity, not in terms of lack or deficiency, but as an assertion of alternative ways of living and loving.

The implications of this analysis are manifold: it underscores the necessity for a critical approach in communication and gender studies, strengthens the relevance of identity politics within trauma discourse, and positions personal stories as social and political texts that reflect and resist institutionalized relations of power embedded in language and normativity.

This study highlights the need for communication science to critically examine digital platforms as active sites where power, gender norms, and cultural values are continuously performed and negotiated. It also underscores the importance of integrating platform algorithms and local socio-cultural contexts into communication theories to better understand contemporary digital discourse. The uniqueness of Indonesian women communicating through Instagram @lovecoach.id lies in their use of intimate, reflective narratives to negotiate love, marriage, and self-worth within the tensions between heteropatriarchal norms, religious values, and emerging discourses of female agency.

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