

Social Exchange Among Effeminate Male Students in Senior High Schools in Padang City

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of social exchange among male students with feminine gender expression in senior high schools in Padang City, West Sumatra, within a socio-cultural context strongly influenced by Minangkabau values. In this study, the term *male students with feminine gender expression* refers to participants who identify themselves as male while expressing behaviors, communication styles, or aesthetic preferences commonly associated with femininity. The study focuses on gender expression rather than gender identity or sexual orientation, recognizing these as distinct concepts. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory, this research aims to analyze the forms, influencing factors, and impacts of social exchange within school environments. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, with data collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation across five selected schools. Informants included male students with feminine gender expression, peers, and teachers selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The findings reveal three forms of social exchange: symbolic, emotional, and instrumental. Symbolic exchange involves communication styles, identity recognition, and expressive language; emotional exchange includes empathy, trust, and peer support; while instrumental exchange is reflected in the use of skills and talents to gain acceptance and social recognition. Internal factors, including self-concept, confidence, competencies, and impression management, together with external factors such as peer acceptance, school climate, cultural norms, and social media influence, shape these interactions. The findings indicate that participants actively negotiate their gender expression and build reciprocal social relationships, contributing to their academic engagement, psychological well-being, and social integration within the school community.

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Introduction

The diversity of gender expression among adolescents has become an increasingly important topic in sociological research, particularly in relation to social interaction within educational settings. This study focuses on male students with feminine gender expression, referring to participants who described or displayed forms of gender expression that are socially associated with femininity. The analysis concerns gender expression rather than gender identity or sexual orientation, recognizing these as distinct concepts. The research was conducted in senior high schools in Padang City, West Sumatra, where interactions occur within social environments influenced by local cultural and religious values. Rather than assuming these values operate uniformly, this study examines how participants, peers, and teachers described and negotiated gender expression in their everyday school experiences. By situating the analysis within participants' accounts and observed interactions,

the study explores how social exchange is shaped through reciprocal relationships, school contexts, and locally negotiated norms.

From a sociological perspective, the interactions of male students with feminine gender expression within school environments involve ongoing processes of negotiation, adaptation, and reciprocal exchange that are shaped by both individual agency and institutional contexts. This study draws on Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1961) to examine how participants develop and sustain social relationships by considering the perceived rewards and costs of everyday interactions. While this perspective provides a useful framework for understanding reciprocity and relationship-building, it does not fully account for the influence of power relations, institutional norms, vulnerability, or stigma that may constrain individual choices. Therefore, the theory is applied as an analytical lens rather than as a comprehensive explanation of participants' experiences. The analysis also considers how school practices, peer relationships, and local socio-cultural expectations shape opportunities for social exchange and influence how participants negotiate acceptance and belonging within their school communities (Blau, 1964).

Preliminary engagement with the participating schools indicated that some students expressed gender characteristics that differed from locally dominant expectations of masculinity, making this topic relevant for sociological inquiry. Following institutional approval and research ethics procedures, participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling based on their voluntary willingness to participate and self-reported experiences, rather than through researcher-imposed categorization. Adolescence is widely recognized as a developmental period marked by identity exploration and self-concept formation (Santrock, 2019). Participants described developing social networks, distinctive communication styles influenced by digital platforms such as TikTok, and diverse forms of participation in school life. These experiences provided the basis for examining how social exchange processes were negotiated within everyday school interactions.

Despite facing instances of stigma, ridicule, and even vulnerability to harassment, effeminate male students demonstrate agency in constructing reciprocal social relationships. Findings from field research reveal that their interactions are structured through three primary forms of social exchange: symbolic exchange (e.g., communication, identity recognition), emotional exchange (e.g., support, empathy, friendship), and instrumental exchange (e.g., skills, services, practical assistance). These forms of exchange illustrate that effeminate male students are not merely marginalized actors, but active participants who contribute value within their social environments and strategically negotiate their social positions (Homans, 1961; Bourdieu, 2018).

Digital media was considered as one of several contextual factors that could influence participants' everyday social interactions and forms of self-expression. During the interviews, participants were invited to describe whether and how social media, including platforms such as TikTok, shaped their communication practices, peer relationships, and experiences of gender expression. The study did not involve observation or analysis of participants' personal social media accounts or online content. Instead, the analysis relied solely on participants' self-reported experiences, with appropriate measures taken to protect privacy and confidentiality. Any influence of digital media discussed in this study is therefore derived from participants' accounts rather than assumed as a general characteristic of the research context.

Previous studies have examined issues related to adolescents' social relationships in digital environments (Haryanto, 2022), the role of school contexts in identity development (Umar, 2024),

and stereotypes surrounding feminine gender expression in educational settings (Fitri, 2023). More recent scholarship has further emphasized the importance of examining gender expression alongside experiences of stigma, minority stress, school belonging, and youth agency, particularly within socio-cultural contexts where gender norms are strongly negotiated. Research in Indonesia and Southeast Asia also highlights that adolescents' experiences are shaped by the interaction of cultural expectations, institutional practices, peer relationships, and opportunities for self-expression, rather than by individual characteristics alone. Despite these contributions, limited attention has been given to the relational mechanisms through which male students with feminine gender expression establish, maintain, and negotiate reciprocal social relationships in everyday school life. In particular, few studies have examined these interactions through the perspective of Social Exchange Theory while simultaneously acknowledging the influence of institutional norms, power relations, and socio-cultural contexts. This study addresses that gap by exploring how social exchange processes are negotiated within participants' everyday experiences in senior high schools in Padang City.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the social exchange processes of male students with feminine gender expression in senior high schools in Padang City, focusing on three main aspects: (1) the forms of social exchange in which they engage, (2) the individual and contextual factors that shape these exchanges, and (3) the implications of these interactions for their academic participation, psychological well-being, and social relationships. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory while recognizing the influence of institutional, cultural, and interpersonal contexts, this study seeks to contribute to scholarship on gender expression, youth sociology, school climate, and social inclusion by providing a contextual understanding of how reciprocal social relationships are negotiated within Indonesian secondary schools.

The novelty of this research lies in its effort to reinterpret effeminate male students not solely as subjects of marginalization, but as active social agents who strategically construct reciprocal relationships within culturally structured environments. In doing so, this study offers a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of gender expression, social interaction, and cultural negotiation in contemporary Indonesian educational settings.

Method

This study adopted an interpretivist qualitative case study design to examine the dynamics of social exchange among male students who described their gender expression as feminine in public senior high schools in Padang City, Indonesia. A qualitative case study is appropriate when researchers seek to examine a socially situated phenomenon within its real-life institutional and cultural context, while an interpretivist orientation enables attention to the meanings participants attribute to their experiences and everyday interactions (Busetto et al., 2020; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The study's attention to gender expression and inclusive educational interactions is also consistent with recent Indonesian scholarship emphasizing the importance of gender-responsive and inclusive learning environments (Erlina et al., 2025).

The unit of analysis was the social exchange processes described and enacted by participants in their interactions with peers and teachers. Social Exchange Theory was employed as a sensitizing theoretical lens because it provides a framework for interpreting reciprocity, relational responses, perceived benefits and costs, socio-emotional resources, and the development of interpersonal relationships (Ahmad et al., 2023). However, the theory was not used as a deductive template for imposing predefined coding categories. Instead, theoretically relevant concepts were introduced

during the interpretive stage after themes had been developed inductively from participants' accounts.

Consistent with an interpretivist epistemological position, the analysis foregrounded participants' perspectives while recognizing that research meanings are co-constructed through interactions among participants, researchers, and the broader institutional and sociocultural context. The researchers therefore maintained a reflexive position throughout the research process by documenting their assumptions, emotional responses, positionality, and emerging interpretations in reflexive field notes and analytical memos (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

Research Setting

The study was conducted in five public senior high schools in Padang City, West Sumatra, from January to May 2026. The schools were purposively selected to represent different educational settings within the city after institutional permission had been obtained from the respective school authorities.

To minimize the possibility of deductive disclosure, the identities of the participating schools are not reported. School-level characteristics that could enable readers or community members to identify particular institutions or participants have also been omitted. The study did not seek to compare the five schools. Instead, the schools were treated collectively as the broader institutional and sociocultural context within which participants' everyday interactions and social exchanges occurred.

Participants and Recruitment

The study involved 18 informants, comprising 10 male students with feminine gender expression as the primary participants, five male peer students without feminine gender expression, and three teachers consisting of guidance counsellors and homeroom teachers. These participant numbers and categories were recorded in the original methodological account of the study.

The primary student participants identified themselves as male but reported or displayed communication styles, behaviours, gestures, or aesthetic preferences that were socially associated with femininity. The study focused specifically on gender expression and did not classify participants according to sexual orientation or gender identity. Peer participants were included because they interacted regularly with the primary participants and could provide complementary perspectives on acceptance, friendship, communication, assistance, and everyday social relationships. Guidance counsellors and homeroom teachers were recruited because they possessed direct knowledge of students' interactions and the broader school climate.

Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals who possessed direct experience of the phenomenon and could provide information relevant to the research questions. Snowball sampling was subsequently employed through participant-controlled referrals to reach other potential participants within existing social networks. This combination was appropriate for accessing an information-rich population associated with a socially sensitive phenomenon (Busetto et al., 2020).

Recruitment was voluntary and did not rely on teachers publicly identifying or labelling individual students. Prospective participants received information sheets outlining the study's objectives, procedures, confidentiality arrangements, possible discomfort, voluntary nature, and right to withdraw. For participants under 18 years of age, written informed consent was obtained from a parent or legal guardian, while written assent was obtained separately from the students.

Adult peer participants, where applicable, and teacher participants provided their own written informed consent.

Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. Names, school identities, class identifiers, positions, locations, and other potentially identifying information were removed or generalized during transcription and reporting. Participant characteristics were reported only in aggregated form to reduce the risk of direct and deductive identification.

Data Generation

Data were generated through semi-structured in-depth interviews, school-based non-participant observation, and document review. The use of multiple data sources enabled the researchers to compare narrated experiences with naturally occurring interactional patterns and institutional information, thereby strengthening the contextual interpretation of the findings (Busetto et al., 2020).

In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 18 informants. Interviews with the 10 primary student participants explored their experiences of everyday interaction, reciprocal relationships, communication practices, friendship, peer acceptance and rejection, emotional support, practical assistance, school participation, perceived stigma, teacher responses, and the influence of social media on their communication and self-expression.

Interviews with the five peer students examined their everyday relationships with the primary participants, including friendship formation, communication, mutual assistance, emotional support, acceptance, and participation in classroom and school activities. Interviews with the three teachers focused on observed interaction patterns, institutional responses, school climate, student participation, guidance practices, and forms of support provided to students.

The interview guide consisted primarily of open-ended and non-judgmental questions. Follow-up probes were used to request clarification, examples, and descriptions of particular interactional experiences. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian or Minangkabau according to each participant's linguistic preference. Each interview lasted approximately 45–90 minutes and was audio-recorded after participants had granted permission. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim.

During the interviews, the researcher periodically summarized participants' statements and asked them to clarify or confirm the intended meaning. Participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any question, request a pause, terminate the interview, or withdraw their interview data before formal analysis without penalty. These procedures were particularly important because the interviews addressed socially sensitive experiences involving gender expression, stigma, acceptance, and possible harassment (Ellis et al., 2023; Westland et al., 2025).

Observation

Observation was conducted in authorized school environments in which everyday peer and teacher–student interactions occurred. Although the broader study initially referred to participant observation, the researcher primarily adopted a non-participant observer role, meaning that the researcher observed naturally occurring interactions without becoming involved in students' activities or evaluating individual behaviour.

Observation focused on group-level patterns of social exchange, including communication, humour, expressive language, friendship, emotional support, reciprocal assistance, involvement in school activities, and responses from peers and teachers. Attention was also given to instances in

which participants used aesthetic, artistic, decorative, performance, or interpersonal skills to assist peers or contribute to school activities. These observed exchanges were relevant because the study's findings identified symbolic, emotional, and instrumental exchange as the principal forms of reciprocity.

Field notes documented the interactional context, participants involved through pseudonymous codes, observable exchanges, relevant verbal or nonverbal responses, and the researcher's preliminary interpretations. Observation did not focus on participants' bodies or personal characteristics, and no photographs, videos, or recordings of students were collected.

Document Review

Documentary materials were reviewed to provide contextual information about the participating schools and their institutional environments. Documents included publicly available school profiles, student-activity programmes, school regulations, and institutional information concerning school culture and student participation.

The document review did not involve counselling records, disciplinary files, health records, academic records, personal social-media accounts, or other confidential student documents. Social-media influence, particularly the role of TikTok, was examined only through participants' accounts of how digital content affected communication styles, expressive language, confidence, and peer interaction. The researchers did not access or analyse participants' personal online profiles or digital content.

Ethical Considerations and Participant Welfare

Institutional permission was obtained from the relevant school authorities before recruitment, interviewing, observation, and document review commenced. Because the participants included minors and the research topic involved potentially stigmatizing experiences, ethical safeguards were implemented throughout the study.

Interviews were conducted in private and safe locations agreed upon by participants. The selected locations prevented conversations from being overheard while remaining consistent with school safeguarding procedures. Participants retained control over the information they disclosed and were not pressured to declare a particular gender identity, sexual orientation, or personal experience that they had not voluntarily introduced.

Digital recordings, transcripts, observation notes, consent documents, and analytic files were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. Documents linking participant identities to pseudonyms were stored separately from interview and observation data. Identifying information was removed during transcription, and potentially recognizable narratives were generalized during publication without altering their analytical meaning.

When a participant showed discomfort or disclosed an experience of ridicule, bullying, harassment, or exclusion, the interview could be paused or terminated immediately. Participants were not required to elaborate on distressing experiences. Information about appropriate school support services was made available where necessary. Confidentiality would be limited only where a disclosure indicated an immediate and serious risk of harm, consistent with safeguarding principles communicated during the consent process (Ellis et al., 2023; Westland et al., 2025).

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Credibility was supported through engagement in the field over five months, triangulation across interviews,

observations, and documentary evidence, and real-time clarification of participants' meanings during interviews. Rather than claiming full member checking, which would require participants to review transcripts or final themes, the study employed participant clarification and summary checks during the interviews.

Dependability was strengthened by maintaining systematic documentation of recruitment decisions, changes to the interview guide, fieldwork procedures, coding decisions, theme development, and theoretical interpretations. Confirmability was supported through reflexive field notes, analytic memos, negative-case analysis, and regular peer debriefing among members of the research team. Peer debriefing focused particularly on examining assumptions concerning masculinity, femininity, student behaviour, and culturally normative forms of gender expression.

Reflexivity was treated as an ongoing methodological practice rather than a single statement about researcher positionality. Researchers documented how their social positions, disciplinary backgrounds, expectations, and interactions with participants could have shaped data generation and interpretation (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Transferability was enhanced through a rich description of the research context, participant groups, recruitment procedures, and interactional settings, while details that could compromise participant confidentiality were carefully omitted. Together, these strategies provided a transparent basis for assessing the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and contextual applicability of the findings (Busetto et al., 2020).

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using the interactive qualitative data-analysis model of Miles et al. (2020), which comprises data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. These activities were conducted concurrently and iteratively throughout data collection and after fieldwork had been completed.

Analysis began with repeated reading of interview transcripts and observation notes to develop familiarity with participants' experiences and the contexts in which social exchanges occurred. Initial inductive codes were assigned to statements, episodes, actions, and interactional descriptions. The early coding process prioritized participants' own words and explanations to avoid imposing Social Exchange Theory prematurely on the dataset.

A codebook was subsequently developed containing code names, working definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and illustrative data excerpts. Codes were compared across the 10 primary participants, five peers, three teachers, observational records, and documentary sources. The codebook was revised iteratively when overlapping codes were combined, broad codes were divided, or new patterns emerged. Coding decisions and revisions were recorded in analytical memos to preserve transparency (Saldaña, 2021).

Related codes were grouped into categories through constant comparison. Candidate themes were then developed by examining recurring interactional patterns, differences among participant groups, and relationships among individual, interpersonal, institutional, cultural, and digital factors. Three principal forms of social exchange emerged from the empirical data:

- 1) **Symbolic exchange**, involving communication styles, humour, expressive language, gestures, recognition, and the negotiation of gender expression;
- 2) **Emotional exchange**, involving empathy, trust, friendship, advice, emotional security, peer support, and protection from exclusion; and

- 3) **Instrumental exchange**, involving practical assistance and the use of aesthetic, artistic, decorative, performance, and interpersonal skills in exchange for appreciation, participation, acceptance, and social recognition.

The analysis also identified internal factors—including self-concept, confidence, competencies, and impression management—and external factors—including peer acceptance, teacher support, school climate, cultural expectations, and social-media influence. These factors were examined in relation to participants' academic engagement, psychological well-being, and social integration. The final article reports these three exchange forms and the associated internal and external factors as the principal findings.

Social Exchange Theory was introduced during the interpretive stage rather than used to define the initial codes. The empirically derived themes were interpreted in relation to reciprocity, relational rewards and costs, recognition, dependence, emotional resources, and practical exchange (Ahmad et al., 2023). This procedure ensured that the theoretical explanation remained grounded in participants' experiences.

Alternative interpretations and negative cases were examined before the final themes were confirmed. Accounts that differed from the dominant patterns for example, interactions characterized by rejection rather than reciprocity or situations in which skills did not result in greater acceptance were used to refine the boundaries and explanatory scope of the themes.

An audit trail was maintained to connect interview excerpts and observational evidence with initial codes, revised categories, final themes, and theoretical interpretations. The research team also used thematic matrices to compare evidence across primary students, peers, teachers, and data-collection methods. These procedures enhanced the transparency, credibility, and confirmability of the analytical process.

Result and Discussion

Result

The findings indicate that the social exchange experiences of male students with feminine gender expression in senior high schools in Padang City are shaped by interactions among individual agency, peer relationships, school environments, and broader socio-cultural contexts. Rather than representing a single or uniform pattern, participants described diverse ways of establishing and maintaining reciprocal relationships in their everyday school lives. The analysis identified three interrelated forms of social exchange symbolic, emotional, and instrumental—which emerged through iterative coding of interview and observational data. These categories are analytical constructs developed from participants' accounts and are not mutually exclusive; a single interaction could involve more than one form of exchange.

Symbolic exchange refers to interactions in which participants used communication styles, language, humor, or other socially meaningful expressions to initiate or sustain relationships with peers. This category was distinguished from ordinary communication because participants explicitly described these practices as facilitating social connection, recognition, or mutual understanding. While several participants referred to influences from social media, including TikTok, these accounts reflected their own perceptions rather than evidence of a direct causal relationship. Participants varied in the extent to which they considered digital platforms relevant to their social interactions, indicating that online influences were context-dependent rather than universal.

The findings also suggest that symbolic exchange was associated with processes of negotiating acceptance within peer groups. Participants described adapting aspects of their communication in different social situations while simultaneously seeking authentic social relationships. Rather than assuming particular motives or expectations, the analysis focuses on participants' own descriptions of how reciprocal interactions developed over time within specific school contexts.

Emotional exchange emerged through participants' accounts of trust, empathy, mutual support, and friendship. Several participants described receiving emotional support from peers and teachers during challenging situations, while also providing support to others. These relationships contributed to participants' sense of belonging within the school community. However, the findings do not suggest that informal peer or teacher support replaces institutional responsibilities. Schools remain responsible for providing safe learning environments through appropriate safeguarding, anti-bullying, and student welfare policies. Participants' experiences therefore reflect interactions between interpersonal relationships and institutional contexts rather than individual relationships alone.

Instrumental exchange refers to reciprocal interactions involving participants' knowledge, abilities, or practical contributions to school activities. Participants described contributing to classroom tasks, extracurricular activities, creative projects, or other collaborative responsibilities in ways that strengthened relationships with peers and teachers. The analysis does not assume that these contributions followed any single pattern, and participants demonstrated diverse forms of participation that extended beyond stereotypical gendered activities. These reciprocal exchanges illustrate how practical contributions may become one of several resources through which social relationships are developed within school communities.

The analysis further indicates that participants' experiences were influenced by both individual and contextual factors. Participants described differences in self-confidence, previous social experiences, peer acceptance, and perceptions of school climate as shaping their opportunities for social interaction. These findings are presented as participants' own accounts rather than as comparative psychological claims, and variation across cases suggests that no single factor adequately explains social exchange processes.

School context also emerged as an important consideration. Across participating schools, participants described differing experiences of peer relationships and teacher support, suggesting that opportunities for reciprocal social interaction were influenced by local institutional practices and interpersonal climates. Although common themes were identified, the study also documented variation across participants and school settings, indicating that social exchange processes are shaped by specific contextual conditions rather than occurring uniformly.

Overall, the findings suggest that male students with feminine gender expression actively participate in constructing reciprocal social relationships within their school environments. The three forms of social exchange identified in this study should be understood as context-specific analytical themes derived from participants' experiences rather than universal categories. Interpreted through Social Exchange Theory, these findings highlight how reciprocal relationships are negotiated within institutional, cultural, and interpersonal contexts while acknowledging that power relations, school policies, and broader social norms also influence participants' everyday experiences

Discussion

The study identified three interrelated forms of social exchange—symbolic, emotional, and instrumental through which male students with feminine gender expression negotiated acceptance, belonging, and participation in five senior high schools in Padang City. Symbolic exchange involved expressive language, humor, communication styles, and recognition; emotional exchange comprised trust, empathy, and reciprocal support; and instrumental exchange involved practical, creative, or academic contributions. These exchanges were shaped by self-confidence and competencies, but also by peer responses, teacher support, school climate, Minangkabau cultural expectations, and participants' accounts of digital-media influence. Collectively, the findings answer the research objectives by demonstrating that participants were not merely recipients of stigma. They exercised situated agency, although the rewards and costs available to them remained constrained by institutional authority and locally dominant gender norms.

The symbolic findings converge with international evidence showing that gender expression is socially read, evaluated, and sometimes disciplined in school settings. Gender-nonconforming expression has been associated with peer victimization and internalizing difficulties, although a supportive school climate can attenuate these relationships (Chan, 2022). Large-scale studies similarly report elevated bullying risk for adolescents whose expression does not conform to conventional expectations (Lian et al., 2022; Mason et al., 2025). Mittleman (2023) interprets homophobic bullying as a form of gender policing, while Valido et al. (2022) show that bias-based name-calling is produced across individual, peer, family, school, and community systems. The Padang findings extend this risk-oriented literature: expressive practices were not only markers that could invite regulation, but resources that participants deliberately used to initiate interaction, generate shared humor, and secure recognition. This contrast may reflect the qualitative focus on micro-level reciprocity, which reveals adaptive practices that population surveys cannot readily capture.

Participants' references to TikTok and other digital content further suggest that symbolic resources circulate across online and offline settings. Research in China has linked nonconforming gender expression with problematic smartphone and internet use, but such associations do not establish that digital media uniformly harms gender-nonconforming adolescents (Zheng et al., 2023). More broadly, adolescent media effects depend on the type of use, existing vulnerability, and offline environment, making simple causal claims methodologically precarious (Keyes, 2023). In the present study, digital platforms appeared to supply vocabulary, styles, and representational cues that could be recontextualized in school interactions; personal accounts and digital traces were not analyzed. This interpretation is compatible with evidence that media representation and peer connection can support positive identity experiences and joy (Flynn et al., 2026). It also resonates with Indonesian work showing that culturally grounded digital media can strengthen communication and engagement when local meanings are incorporated into educational design (Koderi et al., 2023).

Emotional exchange was especially consequential because trust and peer support created interpersonal protection within environments where participants sometimes anticipated ridicule or misrecognition. Daily-diary evidence indicates that concealment is associated with negative affect among sexual and gender minority adolescents and that social support can buffer this burden (Kiekens & Mereish, 2022). Teacher, peer, and informational support are also closely related to school belonging among gender-diverse students (Gilbertson, 2025), whereas perceptions of school safety are associated with healthier psychological and behavioral adjustment (Lessard et al., 2021).

Although these studies concern broader identity groups and cannot be directly equated with feminine gender expression, they illuminate why reciprocal empathy and reliable adult support mattered in Padang. The findings also support strengths-based scholarship that calls for attention to coping, empowerment, and resilience rather than documenting disparities alone (Fish, 2020). This is important because gender-nonconforming and gender-diverse young people can experience substantial psychological distress when services and social environments are not affirming (Pattison et al., 2021).

Instrumental exchange demonstrates how competencies became socially convertible resources. Participants' academic assistance, creative skills, event contributions, and communicative abilities generated value for peers and teachers, which could be reciprocated through inclusion and recognition. Nevertheless, this pattern should not be romanticized as requiring marginalized students to "earn" safety by being useful. Institutional research shows that school personnel may underestimate gender and sexual diversity and individualize problems that require structural responses (Kuhlemeier et al., 2021). Efforts to improve equity are also shaped by leadership, resource scarcity, community opposition, and the distribution of power within school systems (Shattuck et al., 2022). Cross-national evidence indicates that inclusive curricula, teacher practices, and institutional representation reduce minority stressors and improve mental-health outcomes (Ioverno et al., 2025), while longitudinal research suggests that explicit policies and school-based alliances can improve perceived safety (Real et al., 2024). The ambivalent experiences reported in Padang therefore reflect both interpersonal exchange and the enabling or constraining conditions established by institutions.

The Indonesian and Southeast Asian evidence reinforces the need for contextual interpretation. Qualitative research across Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam has documented harassment, social exclusion, fragmented support, and uneven teacher intervention, while also emphasizing the importance of peer networks and youth-friendly services (Newman et al., 2021). Nationally representative findings from Indonesia and Vietnam show elevated risks of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among sexually and gender-diverse adolescents, underscoring the need for culturally safe support (Fine et al., 2025). At the same time, Vietnamese scholarship demonstrates that resilience and identity negotiation are shaped by collectivist obligations, family relationships, and locally specific moral frameworks (Lam-Nguyen, 2025), and regional analysis confirms substantial variation in the visibility and recognition of gender diversity across Southeast Asia (Sanders, 2020). In Padang, Minangkabau and Islamic norms did not operate as a single deterministic force; they were interpreted differently by students and teachers. Indonesian educational studies further suggest that religious values can be taught through contextual, integrated approaches that promote participation rather than exclusion (Al Khansa et al., 2024), while affective support remains central to students' engagement and achievement (Sufian et al., 2024).

Theoretically, the findings support Social Exchange Theory's emphasis on reciprocity while requiring a more contextualized account of what counts as a resource, reward, or cost. Recognition, humor, emotional safety, and opportunities for authentic expression functioned as valued returns alongside practical assistance. However, exchange options were not equally distributed: students negotiated within a field structured by gender expectations, institutional authority, and the risk of stigma. The study therefore extends classical exchange reasoning by conceptualizing reciprocal

agency as culturally situated and power-laden. Symbolic, emotional, and instrumental exchanges should be understood as overlapping relational mechanisms rather than discrete transactions, and a beneficial exchange at the interpersonal level does not necessarily indicate institutional inclusion.

Pedagogically, schools should cultivate climates in which dignity and participation are unconditional rather than contingent on conformity or exceptional performance. Teachers and counselors need development in non-stigmatizing communication, confidential referral, bias-based bullying response, and the distinction between gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Classroom activities can strengthen media literacy by helping students critically examine stereotypes, algorithmic visibility, humor, and identity representation without surveilling personal accounts or compelling disclosure. Policy should complement these practices through explicit anti-bullying provisions covering gender expression, confidential reporting pathways, trained counseling personnel, safeguarding protocols, and accessible mental-health referral networks. Because imported terminology may provoke resistance or fail to reflect local meanings, implementation should involve students, families, educators, cultural leaders, and mental-health professionals in context-sensitive dialogue. Such policies should protect every student's safety and educational access while avoiding diagnostic labeling or assumptions about identity and sexuality.

The principal contribution of this study lies in shifting the analytical emphasis from deficit and victimization to relational agency without denying structural vulnerability. It offers an empirically grounded tripartite account of symbolic, emotional, and instrumental exchange and shows how these forms intersect with cultural norms, school organization, and self-reported digital influence. Methodologically, triangulating interviews, observations, and institutional documents enabled the analysis to distinguish participants' interpretations from directly observed interactional patterns. The study also contributes Global South evidence to a field still dominated by Western identity categories and demonstrates why gender expression must not be treated as a proxy for gender identity or sexual orientation. Its novelty is therefore both conceptual and contextual: social inclusion emerged as an ongoing, negotiated process rather than a stable individual attribute or a simple outcome of conformity.

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The study was confined to five public senior high schools in one Indonesian city, and purposive and snowball recruitment may have favored participants with stronger social networks or greater willingness to discuss sensitive experiences. The absence of a quantified participant profile in the current manuscript limits assessment of sample diversity, while observations in authorized shared spaces may not capture private exclusion, cyberbullying, or interactions outside school. Digital-media findings were based exclusively on self-report and should not be interpreted causally. Researcher presence and interpretation may also have influenced the data despite reflexive procedures. Future studies should report complete aggregated participant characteristics, compare school types and regions, incorporate longitudinal designs, and examine how gender expression intersects with socioeconomic position, religion, disability, ethnicity, and rurality. Carefully consented digital ethnography, participatory research with adolescents, and evaluation of school-level interventions could further test how reciprocal support and institutional protection jointly shape belonging, engagement, and well-being.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the social exchange processes among *effeminate male students* in senior high schools in Padang operate through complex, dynamic, and reciprocal interactions shaped by

symbolic, emotional, and instrumental exchanges. These students actively construct their social positions by offering communicative value, emotional support, and practical skills, which are reciprocated through acceptance, recognition, and social protection within the school environment. The findings confirm that they are not passive actors but strategic social agents who continuously negotiate rewards and costs in line with Social Exchange Theory.

Furthermore, internal factors such as self-concept, confidence, and individual competencies significantly influence the success of these exchanges, while external factors particularly cultural norms of Minangkabau society, school climate, and the influence of social media (e.g., TikTok) shape the boundaries and opportunities of interaction. Despite existing stigma and normative pressures, many effeminate male students are able to gain social acceptance by converting symbolic and cultural capital into social value. Overall, social exchange becomes a key mechanism through which identity, belonging, and social resilience are constructed in the school context.

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