

Semiotic of Female Masculinity in Videogame *The Last Of Us Part II*

RIZA FAHLEVI GINTING¹, T. THYRHAYA ZEIN², ALEMINA BR. PERANGIN-ANGIN³

¹University of Sumatera Utara, Dr. T. Mansyur Street, Medan, Indonesia
rizafginting@gmail.com

²University of Sumatera Utara, Dr. T. Mansyur Street, Medan, Indonesia
thyrhayasinar@gmail.com

³University of Sumatera Utara, Dr. T. Mansyur Street, Medan, Indonesia
alemina@usu.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to interpret the signs of semiotics in the videogame *The Last of Us Part II (TLOU Part II)* which reflect the values of female masculinity initiated by Judith Halberstam (1998). Through Roland Barthes' (1977) semiotics theory, this study analyzes the denotative and connotative meanings of visual and verbal signs from the characters of the videogame *TLOU Part II*. The source of this research data comes from screenshots of the videogame walkthrough which is then focused into 12 data for qualitative descriptive analysis. The 12 data were analyzed for their denotative and connotative meanings, then followed by description of the female masculinity category initiated by Judith Halberstam. From this study it was found that the 2 characters studied, namely Ellie and Abby, each fulfill several of the 5 categories of female masculinity initiated by Judith Halberstam, namely Butch Realness, Femme Pretender, Male Mimicry, Fag Drag, and Denaturalized Masculinity through visual and verbal signs from video games. They each show the appearance, gesture, nature, culture, and ideology of female masculinity

Keywords: sign, female masculinity, videogame



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Semiotika Maskulinitas Wanita dalam Videogame *The Last of Us Part II*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menginterpretasikan tanda-tanda semiotika dalam videogame *The Last of Us Part II* yang mencerminkan nilai-nilai maskulinitas perempuan yang digagas oleh Judith Halberstam. Melalui teori semiotika Roland Barthes, penelitian ini menganalisis makna denotatif dan konotatif dari tanda visual dan verbal dari karakter videogame *TLOU Part II*. Sumber data penelitian ini berasal dari screenshot panduan videogame yang kemudian difokuskan menjadi 12 data untuk analisis secara deskriptif kualitatif. Ke-12 data tersebut dianalisis makna denotatif dan konotatifnya, kemudian dilanjutkan dengan deskripsi kategori maskulinitas perempuan yang digagas oleh Judith Halberstam. Dari penelitian ini ditemukan bahwa 2 karakter yang diteliti, yaitu Ellie dan Abby, masing-masing memenuhi beberapa dari 5 kategori maskulinitas perempuan yang digagas oleh Judith Halberstam, yaitu Butch Realness, Femme Pretender, Male Mimicry, Fag Drag, dan Denaturalized Maskulinity melalui tanda-tanda visual dan verbal dari gim video. Mereka masing-masing menunjukkan penampilan, gerak tubuh, sifat, budaya, dan ideologi maskulinitas perempuan

Kata kunci: tanda, maskulinitas perempuan, videogame

INTRODUCTION

Video game is a communication medium created with a combination of message delivery and visual technology. At the beginning of its discovery, video games were only intended as entertainment media created by Ralph H. Baer in 1966. As technology develops, the video game industry is also improving its quality in various complexity. Video games are usually used as a communication medium for game developers to incorporate storylines, meanings, and even ideology into them. These values are inserted in a video game which is directly or indirectly conveyed to the players, this is because video games are mass media that can visually shape people's views.

The Last of Us Part II is a most popular third-person action-adventure horror survival game in 2020 that developed by Naughty Dog, LLC and published by Sony Interactive Entertainment for the Playstation game console as a sequel to *The Last of Us*. This series tells the story of Ellie and Joel after they fled from the headquarters of the Firefly organization and refused to make a vaccine against a virus. In the game sequence, players will be shown both explicitly and implicitly about certain signs that have meaning in them by the game developer. These signs

indicate that the game developer is directly or indirectly conveying a communicative message to the player.

With messages inserted through videogames, semiotics plays a role in the interpretation of the messages conveyed both through visual and verbal signs. Semiotics is the study of signs that have certain meanings and how they are conveyed. According to (Seiter, 1992, p. 31), semiotics is the study of everything that can be interpreted into language meaning such as images, traffic signs, words (letters), flower, music, medical symptoms, etc. One of the semiotics experts is Roland Barthes. He is considered a structuralist and post-structuralist who follows the Saussure approach. Roland Barthes' semiotic theory is known as the signification theory. This theory is carried out by two important processes to create denotative and connotative meanings.

Denotation is interpreted as a literal or written meaning. Through denotative visual images people can interpret what they perceive with the senses without relating it to a particular culture or ideology. Roland Barthes states that 'the denoted message bears the analogical properties and it is primary to the connotation in the process of signification' (Bouzida, 2014, p. 1001). While connotation is an interaction that occurs when the sign is associated with the user's feelings or culture. The meaning can be subjective or intersubjective. Therefore, the level of connotation in its meaning is broader than of denotation. Roland Barthes stated that 'connotation being itself as a system that comprises signifier, signified and as the process which unites the former to the latter (Barthes, 1977, p. 91).

This study focused on examining the visual and verbal signs of appearance, gestures, and dialogue of the game characters which are Ellie and Abby that refer to the concept of female masculinity. This concept was created by Judith Halberstam when she identified the distinction in the drag king contests that was popular in America. Female masculinity is the belief that masculine traits do not only exist in the male body, but also exist in women. (Halberstam, 1998, p. 241) stated that masculinity is not only possessed and produced by men, or even properly expresses male heterosexuality but can also be produced by masculine women, gender deviants and lesbians.

Halberstam provides a cautious taxonomy that distinguishes many types of masculine women, including passing women, butches, and the transmenal liminal category, who no longer identify as female. In her research on the Drag King contest which was very popular in America at that time, Halberstam divided into 5

categories of Drag King participants referring to the concept of female masculinity, which are; Butch Realness, Femme Pretender, Male Mimicry, Fag Drag, and Denaturalized Masculinity.

Butch Realness

Butch realness focuses on the idea on realness and it put on the boundary between transgender and butch distinguishing proof. In other words, butch realness could be a natural female who can pass effortlessly as a male. Women who appear with the impression of butch realness have a desire to present themselves as a man.

Femme Pretender

Femme Pretender is performative masculinity intentionally avoiding a natural masculine appearance. It is more inclined towards masculine acts than male appearance.

Male Mimicry

Male mimicry shows that women take an identifiable form of male masculinity and they try to reproduce it. The main characteristic of male mimicry lies in how women train to be able to act like men.

Fag Drag

The fag drag implies the women who fetishizes gay male culture by parodying gay masculine men. They usually mimic the "Castro clone", a group of urban gay men who are popular with masculine dress styles with leather or denim.

Denaturalized Masculinity

Denaturalize masculinity could be a frame of manliness that's more showy than butch realness. However, denaturalized manliness investigates elective masculinities to those embodied by male mimicry.

METHOD

This research used the qualitative descriptive approach to produce explanations and descriptions of the research data. The data source was obtained from the video game walkthrough *The Last of Us Part II* which was downloaded from the Youtube platform. The data analyzed were in the form of visual signs which are the pictures of game scenes and verbal signs which are the characters dialogues. Using the descriptive qualitative analysis method by (Miles et al., 2014, p. 14) which states "Qualitative data are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of human processes". The data analysis was then formulated into

stages, namely: data collection, data condensation, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusion (Miles et al., 2014, pp. 3–4).

The data collected and analyzed through several organized steps. First, downloading research data sources through the Youtube platform media. Second, observing data sources and marking semiotic signs for further analysis. Third, to examine the semiotic signs that have been collected for analysis with related theories, namely Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. Researchers will analyze the gameplay video of *The Last of Us Part II* by categorizing the cutscene footage that shows the concept of female masculinity from Judith Halberstam with semiotic theory by Roland Barthes which is divided into connotation and denotation level. As an analysis, the data is displayed through tables and descriptions of semiotic signs and is followed by an explanation of female masculinity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The researcher analyzes the data using the order of signification theory from Roland Barthes which consists of denotation and connotation levels. The analysis focuses on visual and verbal signs that reflect the significance of the concept of female masculinity which was initiated by Judith Halberstam. The data is taken from sources in the form of video game footage downloaded via YouTube which is then analyzed to find some kind of research conclusion. The analysis and findings still rely on the initial concept and research objectives to answer research problems.

1. Analysis of Butch Realness



Figure 1. visual appearance of Ellie



Figure 2. visual appearance of Abby

Denotation:

Figure 1 focuses on Ellie exiting through an old looking gate with faded paint, stains and rust. Figure 2 shows Abby sitting and staring at something. The same

thing shown by the two characters above that they both use men's clothes with masculine values in it.

Connotation:

Figure 1 shows Ellie as ambitious, courageous, and responsible character for what she will do through her footsteps and expressions. Through her appearance, Ellie seemed very ready to do her job. It was shown by how she prepared her weapon and equipment inside her backpack and started moving towards her goal. This is in accordance with the concept of masculinity (Chafetz, 1978), such as physical image, emotions, and personality of a masculine.

Figure 2 shows Abby's complete posture and body gestures. The way she sits shows that she is very diligent in what she does which is shown by her muscular body. Her body gestures also reflect how confident she is and dominate her surroundings by acting as an authoritative person. The way she sits is not the way a normal woman sits, it is more like she is in control of the situation.

Butch Realness:

The first figure shows Ellie in full body with her physical appearance and body gestures. However, there are few features that show that she looks like a man, it can be seen that in her right hand she has a tattoo covering her hand. Barnard (2009: 141) says that tattoos are symbols of masculinity that are continuously reproduced, and historically identical to the biological condition of men. In the way she dresses, she appears to be wearing a shabby t-shirt, denim shirt, jeans, tracking shoes and a backpack complete with an attached weapon. With the way she looks like this, Ellie looks very masculine without any feminine value she displays at all. In addition, the gesture displayed reflects her confidence and doesn't seem the least bit scared. This makes Ellie fit into the Butch Realness category where she looks masculine without looking the slightest bit feminine.

While on the second figure, it shows Abby's overall appearance both from body posture and clothes. From a physical point of view, Abby appears to be very muscular as a result of her training. This image is in accordance with the category of masculinity (Chafetz, 1978, pp. 38–39), where a masculine person must have a strong and tough impression within themselves and one of these impressions is manifested by a proportional and muscular body. Meanwhile, in terms of clothing, Abby is shown wearing a tank top that is usually worn by men and not what women usually wear. This can be seen from the fabric that is on the shoulders of the male tank top which has a wider construction than the female tank top. While on the pants she is shown wearing tactical pants which are usually used by military

soldiers complete with tracker shoes. This shows that in terms of dress, Abby really applies the concept of masculinity to herself, rather than femininity and is very much in line with the Butch realness category of Judith Halberstam's concept of female masculinity.

2. Analysis of Femme Pretender



Figure 3. Ellie fighting with a man



Figure 4. Abby fighting with Tommy

Denotation:

Figure 3 shows Ellie having a fight with a man by punching him in the face.

Figure 4 shows Abby beating Tommy (Joel's younger brother) until he falls.

Connotation:

Figure 3 shows the scene of Ellie with a very distinctive male performance by being rude and preferring to use physicality. By fighting, a person shows a masculine physical image that reflects strength and courage.

Figure 4 shows Abby with her physical abilities that even better than men in general. With the depiction of a muscular and athletic physique, Abby is very masculine. Abby's fighting skills illustrate that she gets rigorous training to deal with these situations.

Femme Pretender:

Figure 3 shows Ellie's ability to fight. It is shown that she can have more power than her male opponent by pushing him against a wall and restraining her enemy's movements. With a fighting ability that can be compared to a man, Ellie is shown to have masculine qualities in her, coupled with courage and dominance in the situation. The acts of violence and fights that are usually assumed to be masculinity are shown by Ellie in figure 3 so that she can meet the category of femme pretender who prioritizes masculine performance over appearance.

Abby in figure 4, like Ellie, is also shown to have the ability and quality of genuine male performance. Her actions in fighting illustrate that she can master self-defences and control the situation she faces. Through her muscles Abby also

reflects how she is very disciplined in doing exercises and sports in her life. (Pringle, 2005, pp. 267–268) says that there is a special association between masculinity and sport related to gender power relations between different sexual groups which is referred to as 'hegemonic masculinity'. With this ability and action, Abby can be categorized as a woman who meets the requirements of a femme pretender, where she can perform behaviours and performances of men in general.

3. Analysis of Male Mimicry



Figure 5. Ellie threatening her enemy



Figure 6. Abby pointing a gun at Tommy

Denotation:

Figure 5 shows Ellie threatening one of the WLF members who are off guard by placing a knife to her throat, while ordering her to remain silent.

Figure 6 shows Abby pointing a gun at Tommy while ordering him to kneel on the floor.

Connotation:

Figure 5 shows Ellie who be able to control the situation with threats and orders to her target. In the way of the angle that shows Ellie's position higher above the target, showing that she has more power than the person below her. Through her hand holding a knife to the neck of a WLF member, it shows that she is ready to carry out an assassination if her orders are not done by the target. The facial expression shown does not show any doubt or fear, indicating that she can control her emotions well.

Figure 6 shows Abby who has a position of power over Tommy with threats and orders that she can do this is proved by the pointing of a gun and the words "Get on the ground". The use of firearms with an alert posture indicates that Abby has been very trained to use them from the beginning. The distance between Abby and Tommy also indicates that Abby understands all the risks if she approaches Tommy more closely, showing that she is alert to all the actions Tommy can take if

she gets too close. Apart from herself, Abby is also shown to have help from Lev which indicates she can lead others.

Male Mimicry:

In figure 5 it is shown that Ellie is threatening and interrogating a WLF member to find out the whereabouts of Abby and other WLF members who killed Joel. This suggests that Ellie has a cold-blooded nature to others, with controlled emotions and great ambition in her, this is reflected in her actions and expressions. In accordance with the characteristics carried by (Chafetz, 1978) someone who can be said to be masculine is someone who can control emotions, is ambitious, competitive and can control the situation. With the violent things she does, it can be said that Ellie is used to violence and murder before which makes her have the nature of a masculine man who relies more on physical abilities and violence against certain things. With these traits, Ellie has met the requirements in the male mimicry category where one must have male traits to be said to be masculine.

Figure 6 interprets how Abby in acting takes a higher role than others around her. In this situation, Abby is shown threatening Tommy with a pointed gun and orders to kneel on the floor. This action shows the nature of Abby who can control other people around her. This also indicates that women can also have masculine male traits that usually control women or better known as patriarchal. Patriarchy is the domination or control of men over women (Darwin, 2001). Her actions also signify her assertive and aggressive nature towards others, thus showing her inner masculinity. Therefore, Abby can also meet the male mimicry criteria by having male traits and habits.

4. Analysis of Fag Drag



Figure 7. Ellie and Dina Kissing



Figure 8. Ellie stitching her wound



Figure 9. Abby and Owen kissing



Figure 10. Abby sitting on the couch

Denotation:

Figure 7 visualize Ellie kisses Dina and shows that they have abnormal sex orientation by falling in love with the same sex.

Figure 8 shows Ellie stitching her wound while sitting on a chair.

Figure 9 shows Abby and Owen kissing and have the consensual relationship.

Figure 10 shows Abby sitting on a couch waiting for Owen.

Connotation:

Figure 7 indicates the relationship between Ellie and Dina as a pair of cases symbolized by a kiss between them. It also signifies the affection between the two. It also shows that Ellie and Dina have an abnormal sexual orientation by liking the same sex.

Figure 8 shows Ellie who is sewing her own wound. This symbolizes that Ellie is an independent person. This is in accordance with masculine characteristics according to (Chafetz, 1978) where someone who has masculine traits has responsibility for himself and others, independent and has leadership qualities. In addition, her expression which shows that she is not in pain also shows that she is used to getting similar wounds and treating them.

Figure 9 shows a kiss scene between Abby and Owen which interprets that there is a consensual relationship between them. Unlike Ellie, Abby has a normal sexual orientation by liking the opposite sex.

Figure 10 shows Abby sitting with her hands on her thighs which according to (Pease, 1984, p. 72) the position of her hands on the thighs indicates that someone has leadership, courage, and confidence to show it to others. It also signifies a complete focus of attention and responsibility for oneself and others. In addition, the position of the face that faces to the right, signifies concern for others.

Fag Drag:

Figure 7 shows that Ellie is kissing her partner Dina on the lips. This shows that Ellie and Dina have feelings of affection for each other. In addition, this figure also indicates that Ellie and Dina are a lesbian couple so, they directly share the same ideology as the Castro Clone group by liking the same sex.

Furthermore, figure 8 shows the image of Ellie in full body sitting on a chair. Through this figure, it can be seen how Ellie dresses with jeans and denim shirts. Jeans are one of the signatures of the Castro Clone culture where they generally use clothes made of this material for their pants. So that Ellie can qualify to dress in jeans like the group. However, it is not shown during the gameplay that Ellie has ever used a leather shirt or jacket. At this point Ellie doesn't conform to one of the Castro Clone cultures that used to wear leather biker jackets on them.

For figure 9 it is shown a kiss scene by Abby and Owen in a giant aquarium exhibition. This indicates that they have feelings of love for each other which is symbolized through a kiss. In the category of phage drag, a woman must imitate the culture of Castro Clone which is gay. So, at this point Abby does not fulfil it because she is a straight woman with a liking for the opposite sex, namely Owen.

Figure 10 shows Abby's overall appearance with body gestures sitting on the sofa. The choice of clothes she uses does not reflect the culture of jeans and leather jackets from Castro Clone at all. During the game process, Abby's clothes are dominated by tank tops and military cargo pants, but occasionally she also uses a bomber jacket. With all these points, Abby doesn't imitate the Castro Clone culture in her at all so she can't be categorized as a Fag Drag from Judith Halberstam's Female masculinity.

5. Analysis of Denaturalized Masculinity

Figure 11. Ellie standing up



Figure 12. Abby standing by

Denotation:

Figure 11 shows Ellie full appearance with her clothes and weapons who trying to stand up after murder her opponent.

Figure 12 visualize Abby in a house standbying for her opponent and also shows her torso with weapons.

Connotation:

Figure 11 shows the position between sitting to standing by Ellie which implies the completion of a job she is doing. In addition, it is clearly shown the clothes and equipment she carries. She wears a kind of outdoor tracker outfit with a backpack, axe, bow and a long gun. The axe indicates that Ellie can do close combat with sharp weapons, the bow shows that she has masculinity because in fact the bow was a weapon used by men for hunting in ancient times (Frayer, 1981, p. 57). While firearms indicate death and accidents and also violence related to gender roles and masculinity (Bridges & Tober, 2017, p. 1).

Figure 12 shows the appearance of Abby's torso with an angled image from the side. The weapons she carried were shown, namely a firearm, a bow and arrows. With the many weapons that Abby carried, it indicated that she could master these weapons. Much like Ellie's weaponry, Abby also uses a long-barreled gun and a crossbow demonstrating masculine skill and performance. Her sideways glance indicated that she was focusing on a point, in this case the door of the room she was sheltering in with Lev and Yara. It also interprets alertness and readiness for something.

Denaturalized Masculinity:

Figure 11 shows how Ellie looks starting from the top, bottom, and the equipment she uses. She is shown wearing a waterproof outdoor jacket, cargo pants, and a backpack tucked into weapons. This figure interprets clothing that is more modern with advanced equipment, with the firearms she carries. If theatrical attire was more of an old-fashioned outfit, like armour, Ellie had none of that. In addition, modern weapons are also not in accordance with the requirements of Denaturalized Masculinity because they do not reflect the weapons carried in theatrical performances such as swords and shields. This interprets the progress and modernity of the characters and the game *The Last of Us Part II* so that Ellie's character cannot meet the requirements of the Denaturalized Masculinity category.

In Figure 12, Abby's top outfit is shown, complete with the weapons she brought in her backpack. Just like figure 11, Abby's character doesn't show any theatrical elements on her with symbols from ancient accessories. The use of

bomber jackets, backpacks, and firearms reflects the progress of the times that are used as time settings in this game. However, the presence of equipment and weapons on Abby interprets her ability and strength to be able to use these weapons so that it means she is trained to do such things. However, the terms of this category are not found in figure 12 so that Abby's character does not have the concept of Denaturalized Masculinity in her.

Related with the findings above, the following table shows the number of semiotic signs in the *TLOU Part II* video game:

Table 4.6 Representative of visual and verbal sign in video game *The Last of Us Part II* based on Roland Barthes' (1977) theory.

No	Female Masculinity	Visual Sign	Verbal Sign	Semiotics Meaning	
				Denotation	Connotation
1.	Butch Realness	2 images	-	√	√
2.	Femme Pretender	2 images	-	√	√
3.	Male Mimicry	2 images	2 dialogues	√	√
4.	Fag Drag	4 images	-	√	√
5.	Denaturalized Masculinity	2 images	1 dialogue	√	√

The following table shows the female masculinity category from Judith Halberstam with the comparison between two characters, Ellie and Abby.

Table 4.7 Comparison of female masculinity categories in video game *The Last of Us Part II* characters based on Judith Halberstam's (1998) female masculinity categories.

No	Female Masculinity Categories	Ellie	Abby
1.	Butch Realness	√	√
2.	Femme Pretender	√	√
3.	Male Mimicry	√	√
4.	Fag Drag	√	-
5.	Denaturalized Masculinity	-	-

Discussion

In the data analyzed by the researcher, there are two characters; Ellie and Abby, author found visual and verbal signs. These signs are interpreted by connotative meanings that support denotative signs. The signs analyzed show how visualization and verbalization explain the concept of female masculinity in character. The depiction of appearance and mental character that shows masculinity makes the concept of female masculinity intense in each character.

Halberstam divides female masculinity into 5 categories, namely butch realness, femme pretender, male mimicry, fag drag, and denaturalized masculinity. Every data collected must meet at least one condition in order to be categorized as female masculinity. In the butch realness category where a woman must appear male, Ellie and Abby's characters meet these requirements. Through the choice of clothing, physical image, and gesture, each of them reflects the category of butch reality. In the femme pretender category, the video game characters are required to act like real men. Ellie and Abby's characters meet these requirements with male physical performance through dominant acts of violence. The ability to carry out fights reflects the female character having the physical performance of a male who uses strength to act. Furthermore, in the male mimicry category, the data must meet the requirements by carrying out the traits of a real man. Both characters can fulfill it by reflecting the traits of mastery, courage, independence, leadership, dominance, ambition and violence. Through the data displayed, it can be seen that Ellie and Abby's traits are very masculine through the actions and mastery of male skills, such as fighting and using weapons. For the Fag Drag category, a woman must imitate the urban gay culture of men who are synonymous with leather jackets, jeans, and same-sex sexual orientation. In this category, Ellie's character has several requirements, such as wearing jeans and liking the same sex. She is shown wearing jeans and has a lover's relationship with Dina. While Abby doesn't qualify in this category, she is shown as a normal woman by liking a man. She is also not shown wearing clothes made of jeans or leather in the game, she predominantly uses men's tracker clothes such as tank tops and military-style cargo pants. Finally, the category of denaturalized masculinity is that a woman must look theatrical in theater clothes which are generally not used in everyday life. Both characters, Ellie and Abby do not qualify from this category. Both seem to always wear the common clothes that people use today instead of wearing theatrical clothes that are identical to the clothes of the past.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing and describing the videogame, researcher finds the signs and After analyzing and describing the videogame, researcher finds *The Last of Us Part II* is a videogame that features a striking masculine female figure in the game. These masculine traits are shown visually and verbally in the main characters, namely Ellie and Abby. To analyse the signs displayed in the game, it is necessary to understand beforehand about Roland Barthes' (1977) theory called the order of

signification, namely the denotation level and the connotation level. The denotation level can be interpreted as the main sign and connotation as a secondary sign.

In semiotics it is found that the denotation meaning of *TLOU Part II* characters displays very masculine clothes, dialogues, and actions. We can see from the type of clothing they are generally worn by men. The use of the words they speak also looks rude and unlike other women. While the actions they take are generally violence and threats, both physically and mentally.

Then, the connotation meaning found in the game is about the reflection of appearance, dialog, and gesture of the character. The way how the female characters in *TLOU Part II* dress reflects their masculinity. The choice of clothing for the characters who are seen wearing men's clothing embodies the concept of female masculinity. In terms of dialogue, the words spoken by Ellie and Abby reflect the aggressiveness and self-dominance of the environment and the surrounding situation that are commonly found in men. The gestures displayed by the two characters are also very manly by displaying their physical appearance and actions. Starting from threatening, dominating the situation, fighting and overcoming problems. The things they do are unusual and not done by other feminine women so that they can be categorized as masculine women initiated by Judith Halberstam (1998).

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