

Affective Communication in Feminism: The Lived Experience of Highly-Educated Generation Z Women in Hulu Sungai Tengah Regency, Indonesia

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Abstract.

This study examines how highly educated Generation Z women in Hulu Sungai Tengah Regency, South Kalimantan, Indonesia, use affective communication as a form of everyday feminist practice. Drawing on a qualitative phenomenological design informed by feminist methodology, in-depth interviews were conducted with five key informants and four supporting informants selected purposively. Data were analyzed thematically through transcription, reduction, coding, textural description, interpretation, and researcher reflexivity, and validated through method and source triangulation. The findings show that within a strongly patriarchal and Banjar cultural context that values politeness, religiosity, and social harmony, educated women rarely resist gender inequality through open confrontation. Instead, they rely on empathetic, warm, and relationally sensitive communication to voice disagreement, negotiate identity, and claim recognition without threatening social harmony. Six major patterns emerged: persistent gender stereotyping of educated women, negotiation between traditional and modern values, strategies for voicing the self, the critical function of higher education, symbolic power relations in communication, and ambivalent societal perceptions of educated women. These patterns are explained through Feminist Standpoint Theory, which frames women's lived experience as a legitimate epistemic standpoint, and Affection Exchange Theory, which frames affection as an adaptive relational strategy. The study concludes that affective communication functions as a subtle but meaningful form of everyday feminism, allowing women to defend their dignity and pursue equality while remaining embedded in local cultural norms.

Keywords: Affective communication, feminism, Generation Z women, higher education and Feminist Standpoint Theory.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender equality discourse has increasingly shifted from formal political struggle toward the everyday, personal, and emotional dimensions of women's lives. In many non-metropolitan regions of Indonesia, however, traditional gender constructions continue to shape women's social space, life choices, and modes of expression. This is particularly visible in Hulu Sungai Tengah Regency, South Kalimantan, where strong Banjar cultural values—religiosity, collectivism, and social politeness—continue to position women primarily within the domestic sphere and treat higher education for women as a secondary rather than essential pursuit [1].

According to the 2022 national census, Hulu Sungai Tengah has approximately 263,061 inhabitants with a relatively balanced gender composition. Yet, based on Population and Civil Registry (Dukcapil) data as of December 2024, only around 4.0% of the population has completed a bachelor's degree, with most residents having

attained senior-high-school education or below. This indicates that access to higher education, especially for women, remains a scarce social asset in this locality. Within such a context, women who pursue higher education and professional careers often face social pressure to simultaneously fulfill traditional expectations of being obedient, gentle, and family-oriented.

Facing this social reality, Generation Z women in the regency have developed distinctive communicative strategies to negotiate their identity and social position. One prominent strategy is affective communication—a form of communication that emphasizes emotional expression, empathy, warmth, and relational closeness. Rather than confronting disagreement directly, women in this context tend to communicate discomfort, disapproval, or aspiration through emotionally attuned and non-confrontational language, thereby preserving social harmony while still asserting their position. As one informant, Yusari, recounted regarding her plan to continue her studies, her family was supportive, yet the wider community in Hulu Sungai Tengah "still did not fully understand the importance of higher education and career for women," which pushed her to more openly voice her stance even though public understanding remained limited.

This pattern resonates with broader scholarship suggesting that emotion functions as an important lens through which individuals interpret, respond to, and negotiate social structures [2], and that contemporary feminism, especially among younger cohorts, is increasingly expressed through personal narrative, emotional reflection, and everyday practice rather than formal political action [3], [4]. Affective communication can thus be read as a subtle but significant form of feminist practice—what several scholars describe as "everyday feminism," in which the personal and emotional become sites of resistance and negotiation.

Building on these premises, this study addresses two research questions: (1) how do highly educated Generation Z women in Hulu Sungai Tengah practice affective communication strategies in daily life, and (2) how do they use affective communication as a strategy for negotiating feminist positions in their everyday interactions? The study aims to describe these women's lived communicative experience and to analyze affective communication as an everyday feminist practice, framed through Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) and Affection Exchange Theory (AET). Theoretically, the study seeks to enrich understanding of affective communication within feminist practice and to offer a new perspective on emotion as a form of resistance within traditional social structures. Practically, the findings are intended to benefit young women navigating patriarchal environments, inform gender-sensitive policy in educational and workplace institutions, and contribute to more inclusive local social understanding regarding women's education.

Several prior studies have examined related themes. Research on affective feminism in workplace culture found that emotional expressions such as anger and disappointment function politically as resistance to gender injustice rather than as

merely personal reactions [1]. Studies on Generation Z women's identity negotiation in modern organizations similarly found this cohort to be vocal, empathetic, and highly aware of gender-equality issues [5]. Other work on affective communication within domestic gender relations found that empathy and emotional support can reduce inherited gender bias in family life [6], while research on digital communication among Gen Z women found that empathetic, emotionally attuned communication constitutes a contemporary and subtle form of feminism practiced in online spaces [7]. Studies on gender communication dynamics among career women in urban Indonesia similarly identified affective communication as a central tool for balancing domestic and professional roles [8], and research in West African technology workplaces found that emotional communication strengthens perceptions of gender justice and collaborative work relations [9]. A study of Generation Z male collegians' lived experience emphasized the role of affective experience in emotional well-being and communicative effectiveness, though without addressing feminist or gender-inequality dimensions [10]. Research on affective branding strategies among Gen Z women social-media influencers found that softness, empathy, and affirmation function as professional communication strategies [11], while broader discourse analysis of contemporary feminism identified a shift "from anger to empathy" in how younger generations articulate feminist positions [3]. Finally, studies of professional women's adaptive affective strategies found that emotional expression helps maintain social relations while asserting personal boundaries at work [12].

While these studies converge on the importance of affect within feminist communication, most focus on urban, corporate, or digital settings. This study addresses a gap by examining the lived, face-to-face communicative experience of highly educated Generation Z women in a non-metropolitan, culturally traditional regency, using a phenomenological approach to capture the depth of subjective experience within a specific local cultural framework.

II. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach combined with feminist methodology. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of women's subjective experience in interpreting and practicing affective communication in social and professional life, while the feminist method positioned women as central knowledge-producing subjects with authority over their own lived experience.

Table I. Comparison with Selected Prior Studies

Study (Author, Year)	Focus / Method	Key Similarity to This Study	Key Difference
Ahmed [1], 2021	Affective resistance in workplace culture;	Affective communication as political feminist practice	No in-depth individual lived experience

Study (Author, Year)	Focus / Method	Key Similarity to This Study	Key Difference
	discourse analysis		
Robert & Chan [5], 2022	Gen Z identity negotiation; phenomenology	Gen Z women subject; phenomenological approach	Urban digital-company context
Rahmawati [6], 2021	Affective communication in domestic gender relations; qualitative	Affect as identity-negotiation tool	Domestic sphere vs. this study's public/career sphere
Lee [7], 2021	Digital affective expression; mixed methods	Affective communication as feminist articulation	Digital rather than face-to-face interaction
Susilawati [8], 2024	Career-women communication dynamics; qualitative	Affect balances domestic/professional roles	Urban Indonesian context
Diouf [9], 2022	Workplace emotional communication; mixed methods	Affect strengthens gender-justice perception	West African tech-corporate setting
Gill & Orgad [3], 2022	Youth feminism discourse shift	Affect as everyday feminist practice	Conceptual, not empirical/local

The research subjects were Generation Z women (born 1997–2012) with a minimum bachelor's degree, residing and working in Hulu Sungai Tengah Regency. Informants were selected purposively based on the following criteria: (1) female, aged 18–28; (2) minimum educational attainment of a bachelor's degree; (3) employed in a professional field (education, health, government, business, or another formal sector); and (4) willing to be interviewed openly about personal experience. Recruitment proceeded through academic and professional networks, followed by personal approach and snowball sampling to identify additional informants sharing similar characteristics. In total, nine informants participated: five key informants (Yusari, Nadia, Shelin, Khorry, and Lisna) and four supporting informants (Nanditha, Arini, a community religious figure, and a community leader) (Table II).

Table II. Research Informants

No.	Name	Role
1	Yusari	Key informant
2	Nadia	Key informant
3	Shelin	Key informant
4	Khorry	Key informant
5	Lisna	Key informant
6	Nanditha	Supporting informant
7	Arini	Supporting informant
8	Community religious figure (Bapak Yudi)	Supporting informant
9	Community leader (Ibu Laili)	Supporting informant

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observation of informants' social interactions, and documentation of supporting materials such as personal notes and social-media content. Data analysis followed a qualitative thematic procedure comprising six stages: (1) verbatim transcription to preserve the integrity of informants' narratives [13]; (2) data reduction to focus on themes of affective expression, empathy, and gender-identity negotiation [14]; (3) coding to label meaningful data segments such as forms of affective expression, communication strategies, resistance experiences, and identity-negotiation processes [15]; (4) textural description of recurring thematic patterns [16]; (5) interpretation linking empirical findings to the theoretical framework of Affection Exchange Theory [17] and Feminist Standpoint Theory, producing a "thick description" of women's social action [18]; and (6) researcher reflexivity to remain critical of the researcher's own positionality and avoid dominating participants' voices. Data trustworthiness was strengthened through method triangulation (interviews, observation, documentation) and source triangulation (key informants, supporting informants, and community figures). The research was conducted in Hulu Sungai Tengah Regency, chosen for its notable, yet uneven, development in women's access to higher education. Research ethics followed principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and relational responsibility toward participants, consistent with feminist research ethics that regard the researcher–participant relationship as fundamentally reciprocal rather than merely procedural.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

General Overview

Hulu Sungai Tengah, whose capital is Barabai, covers approximately 1,472 km² and is characterized by strong religious values, agrarian and trade-based livelihoods, and close-knit kinship relations. While education and digital connectivity are gradually shifting younger generations' outlook—reflected in growing family support for women's university education and expanding online discourse on gender equality—broader societal acceptance of women's expanded roles has not shifted at the same pace. Generation Z women in this setting are thus caught between two simultaneous forces: openness to gender-equality discourse gained through education and digital exposure, and the continuing strength of local norms that assign roles by gender. Affective communication emerges as the primary strategy through which women manage this tension—expressing opinions, disagreement, and aspiration through empathy, careful word choice, and emotionally calibrated language rather than direct confrontation.

Persistent Gender Stereotyping of Educated Women

Findings show that although some families increasingly support women's pursuit of higher education—perceiving it as broadening perspective and fostering independence—the wider community frequently maintains conservative expectations.

Educated women were often perceived as "too independent," "hard to manage," or as having "overly high standards for a partner," accompanied by assumptions that pursuing education excessively risks neglecting domestic responsibility. Yusari described being told directly upon returning to her hometown: her continued pursuit of education would make it "harder to find a spouse" and would ultimately lead her back to domestic duties regardless.

Informant Shelin similarly reported being steered toward domestic roles and discouraged from speaking assertively, noting that firm opinions from women were "sometimes considered inappropriate." These experiences illustrate patriarchal culture as theorized by Fakihi [19], in which men occupy a dominant social position while women are relegated to a subordinate one, producing stereotyping, marginalization, and restriction of women's participation in public space. Despite expanded educational access, patriarchal cultural framing continues to shape how communities interpret women's assertiveness and ambition, compelling many women to adjust their communicative style—moderating tone, softening disagreement, and choosing less direct phrasing—to remain socially accepted.

Negotiation between Traditional and Modern Values

A recurring pattern across informants was the continuous negotiation between inherited cultural values—politeness, respect for elders, careful speech—and the more critical, egalitarian outlook cultivated through higher education. Rather than rejecting local norms outright, informants described a process of balancing both worlds. Yusari explained that she tries to "balance cultural values with the principles I believe in," maintaining politeness and gentle speech while still expressing her views clearly and firmly, describing this as continual self-adjustment rather than either full compliance or outright refusal. Nadia expressed a similar stance, stating she still respects existing cultural values but does not compromise her principles, delivering opinions "politely but firmly" so they remain both acceptable and true to her convictions.

This negotiation reflects the performative and continuously re-enacted nature of gender identity within cultural practice, whereby women actively shape subtle forms of resistance through interpersonal communication and language adjustment rather than open cultural rejection. It also mirrors the broader dilemma facing modern women who are expected to preserve a feminine cultural image while simultaneously being encouraged toward independence and critical thought. Education, in this light, functions not to sever women from local culture but to build the capacity for critical, adaptive engagement with it—preserving relational harmony while still securing space for voice and principle.

Strategies for Voicing the Self

Beyond general negotiation, informants described specific communicative techniques for asserting themselves without provoking open conflict. Nadia explained that rather than expressing disagreement frontally, she first explains her feelings—for instance, stating that she feels undervalued when her educational and career choices are

questioned—so that the listener can understand her position emotionally rather than simply as a difference of opinion. This reflects a deliberate strategy of foregrounding emotional framing to increase the likelihood that a message will be received without triggering defensiveness or social backlash.

Such strategies reveal an underlying ambiguity in how affective expression is socially received: while empathy and warmth are often coded as positive feminine qualities, emotional expression can simultaneously be read as a sign of weakness or irrationality, potentially undermining a woman's professional credibility. This tension demonstrates that the affective dimension of women's communication carries broader social and symbolic implications within gender relations, situating affective communication as a strategically deployed, socially attuned practice rather than a purely spontaneous emotional response.

The Critical Function of Higher Education

Higher education emerged consistently as a catalyst for critical consciousness rather than merely academic achievement. Informant Arini explained that access to knowledge, critical discourse, and global perspectives allowed her to move beyond passively accepting social norms toward questioning who benefits, who is constrained, and how women's position is constructed within existing structures. Informant Khorry similarly reflected that pursuing higher education exposed her to the perception that women who study too far are "too ambitious" or will inevitably return to domestic life, illustrating how educational attainment is frequently reframed by the community as incompatible with idealized femininity rather than as a legitimate form of self-development.

These accounts align with Feminist Standpoint Theory's core claim that women's lived experience constitutes a distinct and epistemically valid vantage point on social reality, shaped through encounters with unequal power relations [20], [21]. Rather than simply absorbing dominant social narratives, the women in this study demonstrated reflective capacity—recognizing patterns of subordination, symbolic inequality, and gendered expectation, and using that recognition to reinforce, rather than abandon, their commitment to education and self-development.

Symbolic Power Relations in Communication

Several informants described a specific form of inequity in how their opinions were received relative to men's. Nadia recounted that ideas she raised initially received little attention, yet when the same idea was later voiced by a male colleague, it was received with greater appreciation. This reflects what may be understood, following Bourdieu, as symbolic domination—a subtle form of power operating through internalized social norms that grant men greater discursive authority even absent explicit exclusion [22].

This dynamic extended into family and community structures as well. A community religious figure among the supporting informants observed that women with higher levels of education tend to be more analytical and autonomous in decision-

making, which can "shift conventional role arrangements," and further suggested that women's education "should be directed so as not to disrupt the ideal authority structure"—framed as husbands leading and wives supporting within the family. Such statements illustrate that, even where women's intellectual capacity is acknowledged, it is frequently viewed through a lens of managed accommodation rather than genuine structural equality, with education permitted only insofar as it does not challenge existing hierarchies of authority.

Collectively, these experiences indicate that gender-based power asymmetry operates less through overt restriction and more through symbolic mechanisms—differential credibility, requirements for women to substantiate competence more extensively than men, and consistent positioning of women in supportive rather than decision-making roles. Even so, informants demonstrated active resistance: rather than accepting subordinate positioning, they persisted in voicing perspectives, cultivating more open communicative practices, and drawing on educational and social experience to reinforce their claim to be heard as equals.

Ambivalent Societal Perceptions of Educated Women

Societal views of highly educated women in this setting were notably ambivalent. On one hand, education was increasingly recognized as beneficial, broadening perspective and supporting independent decision-making. On the other, community members continued to question whether ambition and professional success were compatible with idealized femininity. Nadia's account of being discouraged from taking on roles demanding "great responsibility" reflects continued cultural pressure for women to moderate ambition, while Shelin's experience of being redirected toward domestic responsibilities illustrates the persistence of gendered role allocation even among educated professional women. These tensions demonstrate that structural acceptance of women's educational advancement has not been matched by equivalent acceptance of women's enlarged social and professional authority.

Theoretical Synthesis: FST and AET

Read through Feminist Standpoint Theory, the women's accounts affirm that lived experience of marginalization generates a distinctive and valid epistemic position: informants did not merely endure gendered constraint but actively reflected upon it, recognizing patterns of stereotyping, symbolic domination, and unequal legitimacy that might otherwise remain invisible to those in dominant positions. This reflective capacity also fostered a sense of collective identification—an emergent solidarity in which women increasingly recognize shared experiences of discrimination among peers, with empathy functioning as connective tissue for a nascent collective consciousness regarding patriarchal pressure.

Read through Affection Exchange Theory, affection functions here not merely as emotional expression but as an adaptive relational strategy [17]: by communicating disagreement, discomfort, or aspiration through empathetic and relationally sensitive framing, women sustain social bonds, secure a degree of social support, and reduce the

risk of being perceived as confrontational, all while still advancing their underlying claims. In this sense, affective communication operates simultaneously as psychological self-regulation and as strategic social navigation—allowing women to remain embedded within valued relationships and cultural norms while still pursuing personal and collective aims tied to equality.

IV. Discussion in Relation to Prior Research

These findings extend and complicate several strands of prior scholarship. Consistent with research on affective resistance in workplace culture [1] and on discourse shifts within contemporary feminism from anger toward empathy [3], this study confirms that affect functions as a legitimate mode of feminist practice rather than a merely personal or apolitical reaction. However, unlike studies situated in urban or digital contexts [5], [7], [8], the present findings show that in a non-metropolitan, culturally conservative setting, affective strategies must additionally negotiate more entrenched patriarchal expectations rooted in religiosity and communal norms, intensifying the stakes of maintaining relational harmony while asserting personal conviction.

Compared with research on emotional communication in workplace gender equity [9] and adaptive affective strategies among professional women [12], this study similarly finds that affect strengthens interpersonal relations and helps women maintain professional standing. Yet the specific cultural weight of Banjar social norms—prioritizing kinship harmony and religiously grounded gender roles—produces a more pronounced tension between women's critical consciousness and the social cost of open assertiveness than reported in prior urban or corporate settings. This positions the present study's contribution as demonstrating how affective feminist practice is locally inflected: shaped not only by gender structures in the abstract but by specific configurations of religiosity, kinship, and regional custom that determine which forms of emotional expression are socially permissible.

V. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that highly educated Generation Z women in Hulu Sungai Tengah Regency practice affective communication as a deliberate, empathetic, and relationally attuned strategy for voicing opinion, discomfort, and aspiration while preserving social harmony within a strongly patriarchal and culturally traditional environment. Rather than confronting gender inequality through open resistance, these women negotiate identity and social position through subtler communicative means: reframing disagreement in emotional terms, balancing cultural respect with personal conviction, and drawing on the critical consciousness fostered by higher education to question, without wholly rejecting, inherited social norms. Read through Feminist Standpoint Theory, their reflective engagement with lived experience constitutes a legitimate epistemic standpoint on gender inequality; read through Affection Exchange

Theory, their affective strategies function as adaptive mechanisms that sustain social bonds while still advancing personal and collective claims to equality. Affection, empathy, and gentleness thus emerge not as weakness but as communicative strength, enabling women to express critique, hope, and resistance meaningfully within their local socio-cultural context. Future research might extend this inquiry by comparing affective communication practices across different regions, examining longitudinal shifts in community reception of women's assertiveness, or exploring how digital platforms reshape these dynamics in similarly non-metropolitan settings.

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