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Exploring the Role of Gen Z Women: A Case Study of Aqeela in the Television Drama *Asmara Gen Z*

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Abstract

This study investigates the representation of Gen Z women in Indonesian television drama through a case study of Aqeela in *Asmara Gen Z*. The research addresses the growing importance of media in shaping perceptions of gender and youth identity, particularly among female Gen Z who negotiate between traditional expectations and modern aspirations. Using a qualitative research design, the study applied content analysis and Barthes' semiotic approach to ten purposively selected episodes that highlight Aqeela's character development. The analysis revealed a clear transformation in Aqeela's portrayal: from an empathetic and caring figure in the early episodes, to a reflective and assertive individual in relational contexts, a socially engaged leader in collective settings, and ultimately an empowered character capable of confronting injustice. These findings demonstrate that Indonesian *sinetron* can function not only as a medium of entertainment but also as a cultural text that negotiates gender roles and articulates hybrid identities of young women. The study contributes to media and gender scholarship by offering evidence of how television narratives can construct multidimensional female characters, and it provides practical implications for educators and media practitioners to use popular culture as a platform for discussing gender equality and youth empowerment.

Keywords: Cultural Identity; Gender Studies; Gen Z Women; Indonesian Television Drama; Media Representation.

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INTRODUCTION

Media plays a central role in shaping social perceptions of gender, particularly for younger generations who are continuously negotiating their identities within the dynamics of a rapidly changing global society. As both a mirror and a constructor of social reality, media operates as a powerful site where gender norms are produced, reproduced, and contested. Generation Z broadly defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012 represents the first cohort to grow up entirely within the digital ecosystem and is therefore recognized as the archetypal “digital native” generation [1], [2], [3]. Members of this generation actively participate in both the production and consumption of diverse media content, ranging from short-form social media videos to long-form streaming narratives and interactive digital platforms [4], [5], [6]. In this sense, their relationship with media is not merely consumptive but dialogic; they simultaneously shape and are shaped by mediated representations. Within this evolving landscape, the representation of Gen Z women assumes particular importance, as media not only reflects existing social realities but also actively constructs and negotiates public expectations regarding femininity, agency, and gendered behavior [7], [8], [9]. Historically, female portrayals in film and television have oscillated between conventional stereotypes such as passivity, domesticity, and emotional dependence and more progressive depictions emphasizing autonomy, leadership, and empowerment [10], [11], [12]. This ongoing tension between traditional and transformative narratives highlights the media’s dual function: as a vehicle of cultural continuity that preserves patriarchal values, and as a potential catalyst for social change that challenges and redefines women’s roles in contemporary society.

In Indonesia, television dramas (*sinetron*) remain a dominant form of entertainment with significant influence on public perceptions of femininity and youth identity [13], [14], [15]. Previous research has demonstrated that despite shifts toward more independent and multidimensional portrayals of women, stereotypical narratives continue to dominate structurally. For example, Putri [10] found that while female characters in contemporary Indonesian films occasionally appear as agents of change, romantic stereotypes remain prevalent [10]. Similarly, Hasan [12] argued that although female representation in Indonesian cinema has evolved, narrative control is often still constrained by patriarchal norms. These findings illustrate that while some progress has been made, Indonesian media still tends to reproduce gendered expectations, limiting the extent to which female characters are depicted as fully autonomous.

Meanwhile, research on Gen Z women highlights their dual negotiation between online self-presentation and offline expectations. For instance, a study on Indonesian female Gen Z TikTok users showed that their identity performances often revealed contradictions between societal expectations and authentic self-expression [16], [17], [18]. This resonates with broader discussions about gender representation across platforms, which suggest that constructions of gender are not static but adapt depending on the medium television versus digital spaces [5], [19]. Consequently, it is crucial to examine how female Gen Z characters in Indonesian television dramas are represented, particularly in long-form narratives that allow for character development across episodes.

Although previous studies have addressed women’s representation in Indonesian films and digital media, there is still a lack of focused analysis on Gen Z female characters in *sinetron*

and their episodic character trajectories. Much of the existing scholarship remains descriptive and overlooks the dynamic transformation of characters across serial arcs. Moreover, integration of content analysis with semiotic interpretation in this specific context remains rare. To address this gap, the present study explores the case of Aqeela in *Asmara Gen Z*, tracing her character evolution across multiple episodes. The objectives are: (1) to describe how Aqeela's traits develop narratively; (2) to interpret the symbolic meanings embedded in her representation; and (3) to identify the broader implications of such portrayals for contemporary gender discourse in Indonesian media.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design combining content analysis and Barthes' semiotic approach to examine both the narrative and symbolic representation of the character Aqeela [20], [21], [22]. The integration of these two analytical frameworks allows for a holistic understanding of the ways in which gender identity and agency are constructed through textual and visual storytelling. Content analysis was used to identify recurring narrative themes, while semiotic analysis provided interpretative depth regarding the embedded cultural and ideological meanings in each scene.

Instrument

A purposive sampling technique was used to select ten key episodes of the television drama *Asmara Gen Z* (Episodes 6, 62, 131, 163, 191, 218, 230, 269, 282, 297, 301, and 312). These episodes were chosen based on the narrative prominence and character development of Aqeela, representing critical points of emotional, relational, and moral transformation. Each episode was systematically viewed, and all scenes involving Aqeela were transcribed, coded, and annotated for both verbal dialogue and visual elements, such as gestures, camera framing, and interactions. This process ensured that data captured not only linguistic aspects but also multimodal indicators of meaning [23], [24].

Data Analysis Procedure

The qualitative content analysis proceeded through four systematic stages to ensure both depth and consistency of interpretation. Each stage involved specific activities and objectives, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Stages of Data Analysis in the Study

Stage	Description of Analytical Focus	Main Activities	Output / Purpose
Decontextualization	Identification of key analytical units in each episode (utterances, actions, and significant scenes).	Viewing and segmenting episodes; initial open coding of verbal and visual data.	Creation of raw code list representing primary actions and dialogues involving Aqeela.
Recontextualization	Revisiting coded data within the full	Cross-checking codes with	Context-validated dataset ready for

Stage	Description of Analytical Focus	Main Activities	Output / Purpose
	narrative to maintain contextual meaning.	surrounding plotlines; verifying relevance of each unit.	thematic grouping.
Categorization	Development of inductive and deductive themes around recurring traits.	Grouping codes under five thematic dimensions: empathy, assertiveness, leadership, reflection, and confrontation.	Thematic framework capturing Aqeela's character evolution.
Compilation	Integration of manifest and latent meanings into an interpretive synthesis.	Merging textual and visual findings; writing analytic memos; triangulating with expert review.	Final set of themes and sub-themes representing denotative and connotative meanings.

This structured process ensured analytic transparency and methodological reliability. Inter-coder agreement was maintained through peer review sessions, while triangulation with expert consultation enhanced interpretive validity. The resulting thematic and semiotic synthesis provided the empirical basis for the findings discussed in the next section.

Semiotic Interpretation Framework

The semiotic approach developed by Roland Barthes was employed to explore two levels of meaning: the denotative and connotative [25]. Denotative analysis focused on identifying literal actions and observable behaviors for instance, Aqeela carrying Zara when ill while connotative analysis examined the symbolic implications of those actions, such as empathy as a representation of Gen Z femininity [26], [27]. This dual-level examination facilitated a comprehensive interpretation of how Aqeela's character embodies evolving discourses of gender and generational identity in Indonesian media. Through this framework, the study situates *Asmara Gen Z* not merely as a narrative text but as a socio-cultural artifact reflecting broader shifts in the portrayal of young women in popular culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The qualitative content and semiotic analysis of ten selected episodes of *Asmara Gen Z* revealed significant patterns in Aqeela's character development. Her portrayal evolved through five key dimensions: empathy, relational assertiveness, social leadership, reflective self-awareness, and empowered confrontation. Early episodes depict Aqeela as a compassionate and caring individual who helps others, while later episodes present her as assertive, strategic, and courageous. The overall findings highlight a transformative trajectory from individual

empathy to collective agency, aligning with the evolving representation of Gen Z women in Indonesian media.

Table 2. Character Traits of Aqeela Across Selected Episodes in *Asmara Gen Z*

Episode	Key Scene	Aqeela's Traits (Thematic)	Denotative Meaning	Connotative / Symbolic Meaning
6	Aqeela carries Zara who is sick	Empathy, caring	Aqeela physically helps Zara during illness	Symbol of nurturance; initial portrayal of a Gen Z woman as compassionate and supportive
62	(limited information; appears in social interactions)	Solidarity, group engagement	Aqeela participates actively in peer interactions	Indicates her role as a significant group member; Gen Z women depicted as socially participative
131	Harry recalls Aqeela helping Haruna	Kindness, moral reputation	Secondary narrative highlights Aqeela's helpfulness	Social recognition of empathy; moral capital strengthening her identity
163	(limited information; relational conflict narrative)	Persistence, adaptability	Aqeela faces romantic or interpersonal conflicts	Symbol of emotional resilience; Gen Z women depicted as adaptive under social pressure
191	Aqeela forgives Cantika for creating a hate book	Forgiving, patient	Aqeela accepts Cantika's apology despite harm	Symbol of moral wisdom; Gen Z women depicted as peacekeepers maintaining social harmony
218	Family conflict: Lidya reveals Aqeela's secret	Resilience, endurance	Aqeela confronts truth about family identity	Symbol of identity crisis; Gen Z women negotiate between tradition and social expectations
230	Aqeela distances herself from Harry after finding a woman's photo in his wallet	Assertiveness, self-respect	Aqeela withdraws from a dishonest relationship	Representation of relational assertiveness; Gen Z women demand integrity and equality
269	(limited information; interpersonal conflict)	Reflective, adaptive	Aqeela manages tension in social interactions	Symbol of maturity; Gen Z women learn through complex social experiences

Episode	Key Scene	Aqeela's Traits (Thematic)	Denotative Meaning	Connotative / Symbolic Meaning
282	Zara reveals truth about the photo; Aqeela admits her mistake about Harry	Humility, self-reflection	Aqeela acknowledges her misjudgment	Symbol of emotional maturity; Gen Z women able to self-correct and grow
297	Aqeela invites the "9 Ilmu" group to gather at the basecamp	Initiative, social leadership	Aqeela organizes a group activity	Symbol of collective agency; Gen Z women portrayed as social leaders
301	Aqeela confronts Cantika at her house over the sabotaged case	Confrontational, courageous	Aqeela, with Vio and Zara, demands justice	Representation of empowerment; Gen Z women boldly challenge injustice
312	Aqeela mobilizes the elite group to create a strategy	Strategic, visionary	Aqeela initiates a collective plan	Symbol of transformational leadership; Gen Z women depicted as change-makers

From the denotative layer, Aqeela's recurring actions helping a sick friend, organizing peers, and confronting conflict illustrate behavioral consistency rooted in empathy and initiative. At the connotative level, these actions symbolically construct Aqeela as a Gen Z woman negotiating moral integrity, autonomy, and social responsibility within a hybrid cultural setting. The dual coding of denotation and connotation in her character thus provides a textured understanding of how female identity is articulated in television narratives. The findings also reveal a pattern of moral evolution: Aqeela's initial moral capital (expressed through kindness and forgiveness) transitions into assertive moral reasoning (seen in her leadership and confrontations). This transformation underscores the narrative intent to depict a multidimensional young woman capable of both emotional sensitivity and agency.

Discussion

The results indicate that *Asmara Gen Z* presents a more progressive portrayal of Gen Z women compared to earlier Indonesian television dramas. Aqeela's evolution from empathy to empowerment reflects a hybridized identity model that merges traditional virtues with modern autonomy. This pattern resonates with Putri's [10] analysis of Indonesian films that begin to portray women as multidimensional but still constrained by residual stereotypes. However, unlike those findings, Aqeela's trajectory demonstrates a clear shift toward agency and reflexivity, suggesting a more emancipatory narrative intent. Aqeela's role as a social leader aligns with Rinjani and Pertiwi [28] argument that media increasingly constructs women's leadership as legitimate and influential in the digital era. Nevertheless, while their study focused on digital media contexts, this research shows that traditional television remains a powerful site for the articulation of female leadership. Aqeela's character bridges both domains, embodying leadership qualities that resonate with online youth culture yet remain grounded in local values.

Her relational assertiveness particularly her decision to distance herself from Harry in Episode 230 reflects the rise of female characters who negotiate power within relationships, echoing Ajjawi et al. [29], who argue that authenticity and moral integrity are central to young women's identity construction. Similarly, her forgiveness in Episode 191 exemplifies emotional intelligence and self-regulation, traits consistent with Seemiller and Grace's [30] descriptions of Gen Z's value-driven identity. The culmination of Aqeela's transformation in Episode 301, where she confronts injustice directly, mirrors the form of "popular feminism" discussed by Banet-Weiser [31], which emphasizes visibility and empowerment in popular culture. However, Aqeela's representation differs from Western postfeminist archetypes by integrating Indonesian cultural norms such as patience and moral restraint into her assertion of agency, forming a culturally specific model of empowered femininity.

Furthermore, this study supports Sonni et al. [5], who found that gender representations in Indonesian media are increasingly flexible and context-dependent. Aqeela's portrayal demonstrates how gendered agency in *sinetron* is mediated by narrative, cultural, and generational factors, reinforcing that Indonesian media serves as a dialogic space for negotiating modern womanhood. The novelty of this research lies in its episodic and semiotic tracing of character evolution an approach rarely applied in Indonesian television studies. By integrating content analysis with Barthes' semiotic framework, this study demonstrates how symbolic and narrative structures jointly shape the representation of Gen Z women. Theoretically, this study contributes to gender and media studies by elucidating how *sinetron* function as arenas for gender discourse and leadership representation. Practically, it highlights the potential of television dramas to be used as educational and cultural tools for promoting gender equality and youth empowerment in Indonesia. The main limitation of this study lies in its single-case focus, which restricts generalization. Future studies should examine multiple *sinetron* or media genres and include audience reception analysis to understand how viewers interpret these representations across contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Aqeela's character in *Asmara Gen Z* represents a shift in Gen Z women's portrayal in Indonesian TV dramas. Her transformation from caregiving to assertiveness highlights how *sinetron* can challenge gender stereotypes and present hybrid identities blending traditional and modern values. These findings contribute to media and gender studies, suggesting that TV narratives can shape multidimensional female characters. The study also calls for future research on multiple characters and audience reception to provide a broader perspective.

LIMITATIONS


This study has several limitations: focusing on a single character (Aqeela) in one drama limits generalizability; purposive episode selection and qualitative analysis may introduce subjectivity; the lack of inter-coder reliability testing and audience reception analysis limits understanding of viewer interpretation; the cultural context and episode themes may affect transferability; and the short observation window leaves long-term dynamics and cross-

platform effects unexplored. AI tools were used only for language polishing, not for data analysis or conclusions. All content, decisions, and interpretations remain the authors' responsibility and were reviewed for originality.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

F.N.B. conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, conducted interviews, analyzed data, and drafted the manuscript. C.P. supervised the research design, refined the analytical framework, and revised the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

"The authors declare no conflict of interest."

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The author used OpenAI's ChatGPT to support language refinement. All content was carefully reviewed and revised by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the final manuscript

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