

VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF GENDER IN INDONESIAN'S ENGLISH TEXTBOOK COVER

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ABSTRAK

Mengingat peran penting buku teks dalam membentuk persepsi sosial siswa, penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana gender direpresentasikan secara visual pada sampul buku English for Nusantara jenjang Sekolah Menengah Pertama. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan Analisis Konten Kualitatif dengan menganalisis sampul buku sebagai teks visual yang menyampaikan makna sosial melalui gambar. Data dianalisis menggunakan kerangka Grammar of Visual Design yang dikemukakan oleh Kress dan van Leeuwen, dengan fokus pada makna representasional, interaktif, dan komposisional. Analisis difokuskan pada unsur-unsur visual seperti partisipan, tatapan, posisi, dan saliensi visual untuk mengungkap bagaimana identitas gender dikonstruksi dan dikomunikasikan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sampul buku menampilkan representasi gender melalui komposisi visual yang seimbang dan citra yang inklusif; namun demikian, perbedaan halus dalam postur, aktivitas, dan ekspresi masih merefleksikan peran gender yang dikonstruksi secara sosial. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa sampul buku berfungsi sebagai ruang awal pembentukan makna gender. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya desain visual yang lebih sensitif terhadap isu gender dalam materi pembelajaran guna mendukung persepsi gender yang lebih setara di kalangan siswa.

Kata kunci: Representasi Gender, Analisis Multimodal, Tata Bahasa Desain Visual, Semiotika Sosial Visual, English for Nusantara.

ABSTRACT

Considering the influential role of textbooks in shaping students' social perceptions, this study investigates how gender is visually represented on the covers of English for Nusantara textbooks for junior high school. Using Qualitative Content Analysis, the study analyzes the textbook covers as visual texts that convey social meaning through images. The data were analyzed using Kress and van Leeuwen's Grammar of Visual Design framework, focusing on representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. The analysis examines visual elements such as participants, gaze, positioning, and visual salience to uncover how gender identities are constructed and communicated. The findings indicate that the textbook covers present gender representations through balanced visual compositions and inclusive imagery; however, subtle differences in posture, activities, and expressiveness continue to reflect socially constructed gender roles. These findings suggest that textbook covers function as early sites of gender meaning-making. Therefore, this study implies the need for more gender-sensitive visual design in educational materials to support equitable gender perceptions among students.

Keyword: Gender Representation, Multimodal Analysis, Grammar of Visual Design, Visual Social Semiotics, English for Nusantara.

INTRODUCTION

Textbooks play a crucial role in formal education. This happens because the images in the textbook not only as sources of knowledge but the image also as carriers of social values, cultural ideologies, and identity construction (Damayanti & Febrianti, 2020). In language education, visual elements such as textbook covers serve as powerful semiotic resources that shape students' perceptions of learning, culture, and social roles even before they

interact with the textual content. Visual images are not neutral representations; rather, they actively construct meaning through specific design choices related to participants, actions, gaze, composition, and symbolism (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021).

In the field of multimodal discourse analysis, (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021) visual grammar provides a systematic framework for examining how images generate meaning through representational, interactive, and compositional

metafunctions. (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021) argue that images operate through social semiotic principles comparable to linguistic grammar, enabling researchers to analyze how relations of power, identity, and ideology—including gender—are encoded visually. This framework has been widely applied in educational contexts to examine how textbooks visually represent learners, knowledge, and social norms (Serafini & Reid, 2023).

Damayanti & Febrianti, (2020) emphasize that images in educational materials significantly influence students' meaning-making and conceptual understanding. (Serafini & Reid, 2023) highlights that visual representations in textbooks shape how learners interpret abstract concepts, social identities, and cultural narratives. Similarly, research on visualization in grammar and language education shows that images function not merely as decorative elements but as pedagogical tools that construct particular perspectives on language, learning, and learners (Strandberg & Nygård, 2025).

In the Indonesian context, textbook development under the Independent Curriculum emphasizes local culture, inclusivity, and contextual learning. Studies focusing on cultural representation in Curriculum 13 and subsequent curricula indicate that textbooks are expected to reflect Indonesian (Nusantara) identity, diversity, and social values through verbal and visual modes Muhassin et al. (2022). However, while cultural localization has received academic attention, gender representation—especially as visually constructed through textbook covers—remains relatively underexplored.

Existing research on gender representation in educational materials largely focuses on textual content, character roles in narratives, or the frequency of male and female appearances. (Rizkiyah et al., 2022). Fewer studies examine how gender meanings are visually constructed through posture, gaze, spatial arrangement, attributes, and symbolic arrangements, particularly in English textbooks designed for Indonesian junior high school students. (Noor et al., 2024; Mandarani et al., 2021) have shown that many English textbooks in Indonesia still harbor gender bias, for example, by portraying male characters as more dominant, active, and instrumental in the public sphere, while female characters are often portrayed in domestic

or passive roles. Furthermore, comparative analysis across grade levels within a single textbook series remains limited, leaving a gap in understanding how gender representations evolve as students progress academically.

This study addresses this gap by analyzing the covers of English for Nusantara textbooks for junior high school students in grades VII, VIII, and IX using the visual grammar framework proposed by (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021). The novelty of this study lies in its focus on cover images as primary data and its comparative multimodal analysis across three grade levels, which reveals patterns of continuity and change in gender representation across the national standard textbook series.

The research problem guiding this study is how gender is visually represented on English for Nusantara textbook covers at various junior high school levels and how these representations construct gender roles, identities, and power relations in educational contexts. Therefore, this study aims to (1) analyze the representational, interactive, and compositional meanings of textbook cover images, and (2) examine how gender representations are visually constructed and negotiated in grades VII, VIII, and IX. Through this analysis, this study seeks to contribute to the study of multimodal discourse, gender-sensitive textbook evaluation, and the development of more equitable visual representations in educational materials.

METHOD

This study employed Qualitative Content Analysis to examine how gender is visually represented on the covers of English for Nusantara textbooks for junior high school. The technique comprised three key components: data selection, data collecting, and data analysis.

The data were derived from the covers of English for Nusantara textbooks used at the junior high school level. The unit of analysis in this study was individual textbook covers, which were treated as visual texts containing social meanings conveyed through images, layout, and design.

Data collection was conducted through documentation by identifying, collecting, and organizing the selected textbook covers for analysis. The collected data were then analyzed using the Grammar of Visual Design framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen. The analysis

applied three visual metafunctions, namely representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. Representational analysis focused on the depiction of participants, activities, and settings to identify how gender roles are visually constructed. Interactive analysis examined gaze, angle, and social distance to explore how the images position viewers in relation to the depicted characters. Compositional analysis investigated visual salience, positioning, and layout to understand how gender representation is emphasized and organized within the textbook covers.

Through this analytical framework, the study seeks to uncover patterns of gender representation and the ways visual elements contribute to the construction of gender-related meanings in educational textbook covers.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Data 1: Cover of English for Nusantara Grade VII Textbook

The cover of English for Nusantara for SMP/MTs Grade VII presents three Indonesian student characters positioned in what appears to be a classroom setting. The title of the book is placed prominently at the top center of the cover, immediately signaling the subject matter, while official publication information from the Indonesian Ministry of Education (Kemdikbudristek) and the year 2022 is located at the upper-left corner. Additional information indicating that the textbook is intended for Grade VII students is displayed at the bottom-right corner. This structured placement of textual elements emphasizes the highly informative function of the cover as an educational textbook rather than a purely decorative visual.

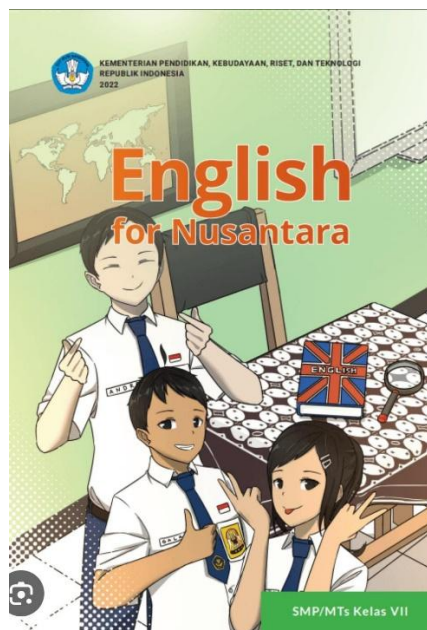


Figure 1: Cover of English for Nusantara Grade VII Textbook

Consistent with the title *English for Nusantara*, the characters depicted are local Indonesian students rather than foreign or Western figures. This is visually reinforced through variations in skin tone—fair, medium, and darker complexions—which reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of Indonesian society. The background includes classroom-related objects such as desks, chairs, a whiteboard, and symbolic cultural and academic elements including a batik tablecloth, a world map, an English book, and a magnifying glass. Together, these elements construct English learning as both globally oriented and locally grounded.

Table 1: Cover of English for Nusantara Grade VII Textbook

Metafunction	Realization	Meaning
Presetational		
Narrative	Conceptual representation; no clear action vectors.	Conceptual representation; no clear action vectors.
Conceptual	Three students are shown: two	Three students are shown: two

	males and one female.	males and one female.
Attributes	English books, magnifying glass, classroom furniture, and global symbols.	English books, magnifying glass, classroom furniture, and global symbols.
Circumstances	Indoor classroom setting with desk, world map, and learning tools.	Indoor classroom setting with desk, world map, and learning tools.
Interactive		
Gaze	Direct gaze toward the viewer.	The direct gaze positions students as assertive subjects, demanding recognition and validating their presence as equal contributors in learning.
Social Distance	Medium close shot.	This distance creates a sense of engagement and seriousness, aligning with the academic maturity of Grade VII students.
Angle	Eye-level angle.	The eye-level angle sustains equality between viewer and participants, reinforcing balanced power

		relations across gender.
Facial Expression	Confident and composed expressions.	Expressions convey self-assurance and independence, challenging stereotypical gendered emotional portrayals.
Gesture & Posture	Upright and composed posture.	Controlled posture reflects responsibility and discipline, attributes equally assigned to male and female students.
Compositional		
Left vs Right	Characters distributed evenly across the frame.	Balanced visual emphasis among participants.
Top vs Bottom	Top: title and institutional information; bottom: grade level.	Separates ideal information from practical details.
Centre vs Margin	Central placement of characters beneath the title.	Students as the main focus of the cover.
Saliency	Bold title text and character figures dominate the image.	Reinforces the importance of learners and subject matter.
Framing	No rigid separation between characters.	Suggests unity and inclusivity.

Representationally the cover employs a conceptual process, portraying the students in static poses that foreground their identities as learners

rather than depicting them in action. The presence of two male students and one female student suggests a recurring gender pattern across the junior high school textbook series, where male figures slightly outnumber female representation. However, the visual depiction of varied skin tones among the characters strongly emphasizes inclusivity and aligns with the notion of *Nusantara*, reinforcing national diversity rather than Western dominance.

Interactively, the direct gaze and eye-level angle construct an equal relationship between the viewers and the represented students, positioning the audience as peers rather than subordinates.

Compositionally, the balanced framing, neutral lighting, and close shot ensure that no gender is visually foregrounded over the others. In terms of gender representation, the female student is portrayed as more expressive through hand gestures and facial expression, while the male students are depicted as calm, relaxed, and confident. Although these differences reflect familiar gendered expressions, they are presented subtly and without exaggeration, resulting in a relatively neutral and non-hierarchical portrayal of gender roles within an educational context.

Data 2: Cover of *English for Nusantara Grade VIII Textbook*

The cover of *English for Nusantara* for Grade VIII presents three student characters—two males and one female—positioned in an outdoor setting. The title of the textbook is centrally placed at the top of the cover, accompanied by institutional information in the upper-left corner indicating that the book was published by the Indonesian Ministry of Education in 2022. Additional information specifying the target grade level (SMP/MTs Grade VIII) is located at the bottom-right corner. This layout emphasizes the informative function of the cover, clearly communicating the book’s identity, institutional authority, and intended audience.

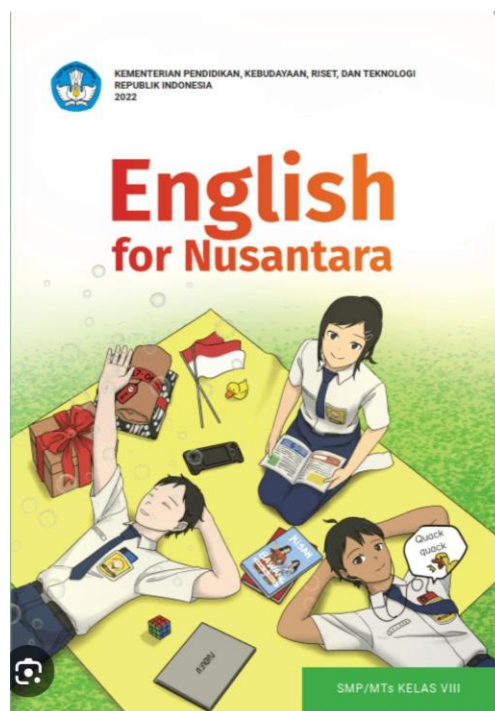


Figure 2: Cover of *English for Nusantara Grade VIII Textbook*

The characters depicted are Indonesian students rather than foreign or Western figures, aligning with the title *English for Nusantara*. This localization is further reinforced through visible diversity in skin tones—light, medium, and darker complexions—which visually represents Indonesia’s ethnic and cultural plurality. Various objects surrounding the students, such as batik fabric, the Indonesian flag, local-themed books, and everyday digital devices, contribute to the construction of a Nusantara-centered learning context.

Table 2: Cover of *English for Nusantara Grade VIII Textbook*

Metafunction	Realization	Meaning
Presetational		
Narative	The image depicts three students engaging in everyday leisure and learning	The image depicts three students engaging in everyday learning activities, such as reading,

	activities, such as reading, listening to audio, and relaxing outdoors.	listening to audio, and relaxing outdoors.
Conceptual	Three students are portrayed: two male students and one female student.	Three Indonesian students are portrayed: two male students and one female student.
Attributes	Objects such as batik fabric, Indonesian flag colors, local-themed books, and everyday digital devices are present.	Objects such as batik fabric, Indonesian flag colors, local-themed books, and everyday digital devices are present.
Circumstances	Indoor classroom setting with desk, world map, and learning tools.	Learning environment associated with formal education.
Interactive		
Gaze	Two of three characters look directly at the viewer.	Creates direct engagement and invitation to interact.
Social Distance	Medium close shot.	Builds familiarity without intimacy.
Angle	Eye-level angle.	Establishes equality between the

		viewer and the represented participants, avoiding power imbalance.
Facial Expression	Smiling and relaxed expressions	Conveys friendliness and confidence.
Gesture & Posture	Relaxed sitting and lying poses	Suggests comfort, confidence, and approachability
Compositional		
Left vs Right	Objects and characters distributed evenly.	Visual balance across the frame.
Top vs Bottom	Top: title and authority; bottom: characters and objects.	Abstract identity above, lived experience below.
Centre vs Margin	Characters clustered at the center.	Learning community as focal point.
Saliency	Bright colors and title contrast with background	Directs attention to students and book title.
Framing	Objects and characters distributed evenly.	Visual balance across the frame.

From a representational perspective, the image employs a narrative process, as the students are shown engaging in everyday leisure and learning activities. The male characters are depicted lying down in relaxed postures—one listening to audio using a headset, and the other raising his hand while gazing upward at floating bubbles—suggesting a playful and carefree engagement with the environment. In contrast, the female character is shown sitting upright while reading a book, indicating focus and attentiveness. These differing actions construct varied roles and

levels of engagement among the participants. The setting is clearly outdoors, indicated by the grassy background and open space, which frames learning as an informal and enjoyable activity rather than a rigid classroom-bound experience.

Interactively, the image predominantly functions as an offer image, as none of the characters directly gaze at the viewer. This positions the viewer as an observer of the scene rather than an active participant. The use of an eye-level angle establishes equality between the viewer and the represented participants, avoiding hierarchical power relations. The social distance is relatively moderate, allowing viewers to observe the characters' activities clearly while still maintaining emotional distance. Lighting and colour distribution are balanced across all characters, indicating no explicit visual prioritization of a particular gender.

Compositionally, the three characters are placed centrally within the frame, creating visual balance. No single participant overwhelmingly dominates the composition in terms of size or colour intensity. This equal placement suggests an intention to represent shared participation rather than individual superiority. However, differences emerge through posture and activity. The female character's upright sitting position contrasts sharply with the relaxed, reclining postures of the male characters. This contrast creates subtle visual salience, not through placement, but through bodily discipline and engagement.

The cover reflects a balanced yet nuanced portrayal of gender. Numerically, male characters outnumber the female character (two males versus one female), yet the female student is portrayed as more focused and academically engaged. Her posture—sitting upright with legs folded neatly—visually communicates self-control, discipline, and attentiveness. In contrast, the male students' relaxed body language, such as lying down and casually interacting with their surroundings, constructs masculinity as more carefree and less restrained. This representation may subtly reflect socially constructed gender norms, where female students are associated with diligence and composure, while male students are linked to leisure and playfulness.

Data 3: Cover of *English for Nusantara Grade IX Textbook*

The cover of *English for Nusantara* for SMP/MTs Grade IX continues the visual

consistency established in the previous junior high school editions by featuring the same three Indonesian student characters. The title is positioned at the top center of the cover, immediately signaling the subject focus, while official publication details from the Indonesian Ministry of Education (Kemdikbudristek) and the year 2022 are placed at the upper-left corner. Information indicating the intended grade level, Grade IX, appears at the bottom-right corner. This structured and strategic placement of textual elements reinforces the highly informative function of the cover as an official educational textbook.

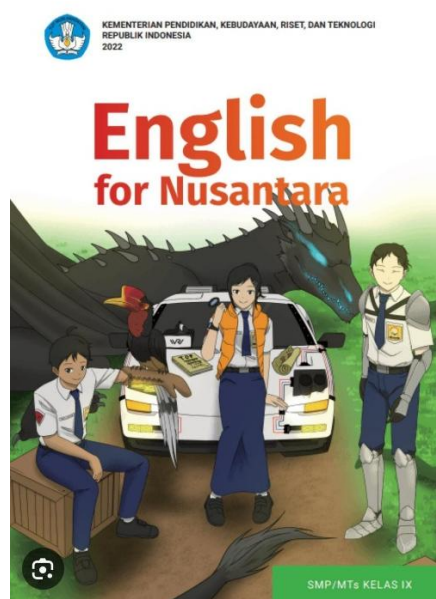


Figure 3: Cover of *English for Nusantara Grade IX Textbook*

In line with the title *English for Nusantara*, the characters are clearly depicted as Indonesian students rather than Western or foreign figures. This is visually supported by the variation in skin tones—fair, medium, and yellow-brown—representing ethnic and racial diversity within Indonesia. Unlike the previous covers, the background of this edition shifts toward a fantasy-themed outdoor setting, aligning with one of the thematic focuses of the Grade IX textbook. Elements such as grass, a dirt pathway, tree roots, and a dragon positioned behind the characters construct a “fantasy world” atmosphere, signaling a narrative and imaginative orientation in the learning material.

Table 3: Cover of *English for Nusantara Grade IX Textbook*

Metafunction	Realization	Meaning
Presetational		
Narative	Characters positioned in a fantasy-like setting with symbolic elements.	Suggests exploration and adventure.
Conceptual	Three students; two male and one female integrated with fantasy objects and environment.	Gender is embedded within a symbolic learning world, suggesting cognitive equality in imagination, creativity, and abstract thinking.
Attributes	Female wears a vest and holds a magnifying glass; male wears protective armor; male interacts with a bird.	Female wears a vest and holds a magnifying glass; male wears protective armor; male interacts with a bird.
Circumstances	Outdoor fantasy landscape with mythical elements.	The setting elevates learning to a conceptual and aspirational space, associating both genders with higher-order thinking and creativity.
Interactive		
Gaze	Characters face the viewer.	Establishes connection and involvement.
Social Distance	Medium shot.	Balanced distance for engagement

		without dominance.
Angle	Eye-level angle.	Positions viewer as equal participant.
Facial Expression	Confident and relaxed expressions.	Communicates readiness and assurance.
Gesture & Posture	Standing and seated poses suggesting readiness and exploration.	Implies active engagement and confidence.
Compositional		
Left vs Right	Characters placed symmetrically across the frame.	Visual stability and balance.
Top vs Bottom	Top: title and authority; bottom: characters and fantasy setting.	Knowledge framed above experiential learning.
Centre vs Margin	Female positioned centrally; males placed on left and right.	Female positioned centrally; males placed on left and right.
Salience	Title text and central character most prominent.	Highlights subject focus and main participant.
Framing	Integrated background without strict borders.	Suggests continuity between reality and imagination.

Representationally, the Grade IX cover combines narrative and conceptual processes to position the characters not only as students but also as participants within a fantasy world. The recurring presence of two male characters and one female character reflects a consistent numerical imbalance across the SMP textbook covers. The female character is portrayed as observative and

analytical, indicated by the use of a magnifying glass, books, and scrolls, which frame her as an intellectual figure. In contrast, the male characters are represented as more explorative and risk-taking: one wears protective armor, suggesting strength and a guardian role, while the other confidently interacts with a bird, symbolizing bravery and curiosity. These visual cues subtly reproduce traditional gender associations between masculinity, physical exploration, and protection, and femininity, observation, and analysis.

Interactively, the absence of direct gaze toward the viewer positions the audience as passive observers of the visual narrative rather than direct participants. The use of an eye-level angle establishes a neutral relationship between viewers and characters, implying equal social status and avoiding visual domination by any gender. This interactional design encourages contemplation of the scene rather than emotional confrontation, reinforcing the informational and narrative tone of the cover.

Compositionally, the central placement of the female character elevates her symbolic importance despite her numerical minority. Balanced framing, equal visual spacing, and neutral lighting ensure that no single character or gender is overtly privileged. While the cover embeds conventional gender roles through posture, activity, and symbolic attributes, these meanings are moderated by an inclusive and visually balanced composition. As a result, the cover presents gender representation in a restrained manner, where stereotypical roles are present but softened within an overall framework of visual equality.

DISCUSSION

Across the three *English for Nusantara* textbook covers for junior high school, consistent visual strategies emerge in the representation of gender, viewer engagement, and compositional organization. Although each cover employs a different setting—classroom, outdoor everyday environment, and fantasy world—the visual grammar used to construct meaning remains largely stable. All covers feature the same configuration of participants, namely two male students and one female student, indicating a recurring numerical imbalance in gender representation across grade levels. This repetition suggests that gender representation on the covers is

not incidental, but follows a patterned design choice within the textbook series.

From a representational perspective, the covers progressively shift from conceptual to more narrative processes. The Grade VII cover foregrounds student identity through static poses that emphasize learners as social actors within an academic space. In Grade VIII, narrative processes become more visible as students are shown engaging in everyday leisure and learning activities, framing learning as relaxed and informal. The Grade IX cover further extends this narrative dimension by embedding the characters within a fantasy setting, associating learning with imagination, exploration, and abstraction. Despite these contextual shifts, gender roles remain relatively consistent. Female characters are repeatedly associated with attentiveness, observation, and cognitive engagement, while male characters are more frequently depicted as relaxed, explorative, or physically active. These visual distinctions subtly reproduce socially constructed gender norms, even within inclusive and culturally localized imagery.

Interactively, the covers largely position viewers as observers rather than direct participants. Eye-level angles are consistently used across all three covers, establishing equal power relations between viewers and the represented students and avoiding visual domination by any gender. Gaze patterns vary slightly—some characters engage the viewer directly, while others do not—but overall, the interactional design maintains a neutral and informational tone. This suggests that the covers aim to normalize gender representation rather than provoke confrontation or critical disruption. Gender meanings are thus conveyed implicitly through posture, activity, and expression rather than through overt visual emphasis.

Compositionally, balance and symmetry play a central role in shaping meaning. Characters are centrally positioned, framed without rigid separation, and supported by neutral lighting and evenly distributed visual salience. Notably, in the Grade IX cover, the female character is placed at the center of the composition, symbolically elevating her importance despite her numerical minority. This compositional choice moderates the gender imbalance and contributes to a perception of visual equality. However, while the overall layout promotes inclusivity, subtle gendered

distinctions persist through bodily discipline, gesture, and assigned roles.

Taken together, the findings indicate that the *English for Nusantara* textbook covers present gender representation in a balanced yet restrained manner. While overt discrimination or hierarchy is absent, traditional gender associations remain embedded within visual narratives and character positioning. These covers function as early sites of gender meaning-making, where students are introduced to socially constructed ideas about gender roles through seemingly neutral educational visuals.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine how gender is visually represented on the covers of *English for Nusantara* textbooks for junior high school using the Grammar of Visual Design framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen. The findings show that gender representation on the textbook covers is generally constructed through balanced visual compositions and inclusive imagery, indicating an effort to present male and female participants in an equitable manner. However, the analysis also reveals subtle differences in posture, activities, and expressiveness, which continue to reflect socially constructed gender roles. These findings suggest that textbook covers function as early sites of gender meaning-making that may influence students' perceptions of gender.

Therefore, this study implies the importance of designing more gender-sensitive visual representations in educational materials. Future research is recommended to analyze gender representation within the internal content of textbooks or to investigate students' interpretations of visual gender representations in learning materials.

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