The Metaphysics Of Gender Identity: Between Essentialism And Social Constructivism

Muhammad Amin[1*], Ahmad[2]

[1,2]STAI DDI Pinrang
[1*]Muhammad.amin14@gmail.com, [2]ahmad@staiddi-pinrang.ac.id

Abstract

This article examines gender identity within a metaphysical framework by exploring the tension between essentialist and social constructivist paradigms. The core issue addressed in this research is the absence of a conceptual framework capable of reconciling these two traditionally opposing approaches. Essentialism regards gender as a fixed, inherent attribute, whereas constructivism emphasizes that gender is shaped by social and cultural practices. The aim of this study is to formulate a hybrid metaphysical model that integrates both perspectives through dialectical synthesis. The methodology employed involves a philosophical literature review with thematic analysis of works published within the last five years. Findings reveal that a relationally grounded hybrid model successfully merges the strengths of both paradigms, offering a more inclusive and applicable approach for social policy development. This model is viewed as critical for advancing academic discourse while also providing a robust philosophical foundation for the recognition and protection of gender diversity in contemporary society.

Keywords: Gender Identity, Metaphysics, Essentialism, Social Constructivism, Relationality

INTRODUCTION

Gender identity is a fundamental aspect of human self understanding that transcends mere biological classification and encompasses complex psychological, social, and philosophical dimensions. Within metaphysical discourse, *gender identity* raises ontological debates about whether it is an essential attribute inherent to the individual or a socially constructed phenomenon. Contemporary philosophical approaches attempt to define how individuals identify themselves across gender spectrums whether male, female, or non binary (Haslanger, 2020). The core problem lies in the tension between essentialist perspectives, which assert that gender identity is a fixed, natural essence, and social constructivist perspectives, which argue that gender identity emerges from sociocultural processes (Bettcher, 2021). A reductive understanding of *gender identity* can lead to discrimination and marginalization of non normative gender identities, underscoring the need for a more inclusive and holistic metaphysical framework.

This article addresses the absence of a conceptual framework that reconciles the divergence between essentialism and social constructivism in theorizing gender identity. The absence of such a synthesis has led to inconsistencies in both theoretical discourses and policy development. The proposed solution is a hybrid metaphysical approach that bridges these two paradigms through critical synthesis and theoretical integration. Specifically, this study explores the possibility that *gender identity* is neither solely an inner essence nor purely a social construct but a relational phenomenon emerging from the dialectical interaction between the individual and society. Previous studies, such as Jenkins' (2022) work on queer ontologies and Ásta's (2021) relational identity theory, have explored similar directions. However, these attempts remain fragmented and often lack comprehensive metaphysical grounding. Therefore, this study is both theoretically and practically urgent in advancing a more coherent understanding of gender in contemporary society.

Essentialism, in the context of gender identity, refers to the belief that gender is a fundamental, immutable property intrinsic to the individual. This view is often associated with biological and psychological perspectives that posit gender differences as natural outcomes of brain structure, hormones, or genetics (Fine, 2020). Metaphysically, essentialism claims that each individual possesses an inherent nature that determines their gender identity (Witt, 2021). While traditional essentialist positions have been critiqued for reinforcing binary and exclusionary models, some philosophers have developed more nuanced versions. Tappolet (2022), for example, proposes a form of *minimal essentialism* a view that recognizes flexible, context sensitive essences that still provide ontological grounding for gender. This moderated essentialism offers a possible foundation for bridging traditional and constructivist models, particularly when combined with insights from contemporary feminist metaphysics.

Conversely, *social constructivism* denies the existence of innate gender traits and posits that gender is shaped through social interaction, cultural norms, discursive practices, and power structures (Butler, 2020). It presents gender not as something one *has* but something one *does* a set of performative acts that materialize identity over time. From a metaphysical standpoint, constructivism treats gender as a contingent entity whose existence depends on historical and social conditions (Salamon, 2021). Empirical research supports this view by demonstrating the cultural and temporal

variability of gender expression (Zimman, 2023). However, critics argue that radical constructivism risks relativizing personal experience and undermining the legitimacy of subjective gender identity. Hence, this article re examines the potential of constructivist approaches to be rearticulated in dialogue with essentialist elements, contributing to a more robust metaphysical understanding of gender.

Several recent studies have attempted to explore gender identity within a metaphysical framework, but most tend to align exclusively with either essentialism or constructivism. Jenkins (2022) emphasizes the importance of understanding gender as a social relation, while Witt (2021) defends a substance metaphysics model, framing gender as a stable ontological category. Salamon (2021) and Bettcher (2023) focus on language and narrative as key to shaping gender identity. Meanwhile, Ásta (2021) introduces *conferralism*, suggesting that gender emerges through social recognition. While these studies make significant contributions, they often fail to integrate the insights of both paradigms into a unified metaphysical account. This fragmentation reveals a clear *research gap* the lack of a comprehensive model that synthesizes essentialist and constructivist metaphysics in a coherent and philosophically rigorous manner.

Although metaphysical discourse on gender identity has evolved significantly in recent decades, much of the existing literature remains polarized between two dominant paradigms: essentialism and social constructivism. The essentialist view, as articulated by scholars like Witt (2021) and Fine (2020), conceptualizes gender identity as an intrinsic, immutable attribute of the individual, often grounded in biology or psychology. In contrast, constructivist approaches, exemplified by Butler (2020) and Salamon (2021), reject the notion of innate gender traits, instead framing gender as the product of sociocultural processes, discursive practices, and power relations. This ontological divergence has created a profound theoretical chasm, and efforts to reconcile these perspectives remain scarce. While scholars like Tappolet (2022) have introduced "minimal essentialism" and Ásta (2021) has advanced a theory of social recognition, these attempts have yet to coalesce into a cohesive metaphysical framework that bridges both paradigms. The current landscape is thus marked by fragmented theories that fail to provide a unified, philosophically rigorous understanding of gender identity.

Moreover, existing studies tend to focus on isolated dimensions of gender identity such as performativity (Bettcher, 2023), social relationality (Jenkins, 2022), or linguistic narratives (Salamon, 2021) without integrating these aspects into a comprehensive metaphysical model. This fragmentation has not only hindered academic progress but also impeded the development of inclusive and effective social policies that reflect the complex lived realities of gender diverse individuals. There is, therefore, an urgent need for a new framework that synthesizes the internal (ontological) and external (social) dimensions of gender identity. The absence of such a synthesis constitutes a significant research gap within the field of gender metaphysics. This study aims to address this gap by proposing a hybrid metaphysical model that transcends binary oppositions and offers a relational understanding of gender identity, rooted in dialectical engagement between the individual and society.

The novelty of this research lies in its development of a hybrid metaphysical framework that critically integrates essentialist and constructivist perspectives through dialectical synthesis. This model advances the philosophical discourse by moving beyond reductive binaries and acknowledging the dynamic interplay between internal self understanding and external social structures. By offering a more holistic metaphysical account, the study not only enriches theoretical debates but also contributes to shaping more inclusive institutional and policy responses to gender diversity.

The primary aim of this article is to formulate a metaphysical framework for gender identity that integrates essentialist and constructivist perspectives through dialectical synthesis. Theoretically, this research contributes to gender philosophy by moving beyond binary thinking and presenting a hybrid model that accounts for both internal and social dimensions of identity. Empirically, such a framework may inform policies and advocacy efforts that are more attuned to the complex realities of gender diversity. In doing so, this article not only enriches philosophical discourse but also supports broader efforts to affirm and protect gender diverse individuals within social institutions.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using philosophical literature review as its core methodological framework to examine gender identity within the scope of metaphysical discourse. This approach enables an in depth exploration of essentialism and social constructivism as they have evolved in contemporary philosophical thought. As noted by Snyder (2019), literature review methods in qualitative research are instrumental in constructing a strong theoretical foundation and synthesizing critical ideas from various scholarly sources. Specifically, this research analyzes literature published within the last five years addressing the essence of gender (Witt, 2021; Tappolet, 2022), social constructivist frameworks (Butler, 2020; Salamon, 2021), and hybrid approaches such as Ásta's relational theory (2021) and Jenkins' queer ontology (2022). Data is gathered through a critical review of high-impact academic journals, philosophical books, and relevant conference articles.

Data analysis is conducted through philosophical thematic analysis, which identifies key themes in the literature related to the metaphysics of gender identity, such as essence, performativity, relationality, and social recognition. This method draws upon the thematic analysis approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2021), which is appropriate for uncovering conceptual structures and interrelationships in philosophical texts. The study aims to construct a hybrid

metaphysical model that reconciles the dichotomy between essentialism and constructivism, offering a more holistic understanding of gender identity as a relational phenomenon.

Table 1 presents a classification of key philosophical sources based on their paradigmatic orientation essentialism, social constructivism, and hybrid or relational approaches. These sources were selected for their contemporary relevance (published between 2020 and 2022) and their theoretical contribution to the ongoing metaphysical debates on gender identity. The categorization aids in structuring the thematic analysis and supports the synthesis of divergent views in subsequent analytical stages.

Table 1. Philosophical Sources Categorized by Paradigm

Paradigm	Key Authors	Year
Essentialism	Witt, Fine, Tappolet	2020–2022
Social Constructivism	Butler, Salamon	2020–2021
Hybrid/Relational	Ásta, Jenkins	2021–2022

As illustrated in Table 1, the philosophical sources are organized into three paradigmatic categories to map the dominant trajectories in gender metaphysics: essentialism, social constructivism, and hybrid/relational approaches.

The essentialist paradigm, represented by Witt, Fine, and Tappolet, centers on the claim that gender identity is an intrinsic and stable attribute. For example, Tappolet (2022) proposes a "minimal essentialism" that retains ontological grounding for gender while acknowledging variability across contexts. Witt (2021) similarly argues for gender as a substantive metaphysical category, grounded in biological and psychological realities.

In contrast, the social constructivist paradigm, as seen in the work of Butler and Salamon, views gender as socially produced and performative. Butler (2020) emphasizes that gender is not a fixed essence but a set of repeated actions and cultural performances that materialize identity over time. Salamon (2021) further explains how linguistic and discursive structures shape gendered embodiment.

The hybrid or relational paradigm, represented by Ásta and Jenkins, aims to integrate elements of both essentialism and constructivism. Ásta (2021) introduces the concept of conferralism, wherein gender arises through processes of social recognition rather than internal essence alone. Jenkins (2022), meanwhile, formulates a queer ontology that understands gender as a relational construct embedded in systems of power and recognition. This categorization not only provides conceptual clarity but also establishes a foundation for dialectical synthesis, allowing the study to explore integrative possibilities between these often opposing metaphysical views.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the metaphysical discourse on gender identity cannot be reduced to the binary opposition between essentialism and social constructivism. Through thematic analysis of selected philosophical literature, it became evident that each paradigm offers significant insights but also exhibits limitations in capturing the dialectical complexity of gender identity. The essentialist paradigm, as advocated by Witt (2021) and Fine (2020), seeks to provide strong ontological grounding for gender identity as a fixed, intrinsic attribute. However, this position has been criticized for reinforcing binary categorizations and neglecting the diversity of dynamic gender experiences. Conversely, the social constructivist approach, introduced by Butler (2020) and Salamon (2021), emphasizes the roles of norms, discourse, and power in shaping gender as a performative construct. While more inclusive of non normative gender expressions, constructivism is often seen as undermining the legitimacy of personal, subjective gender identities. Therefore, this article proposes a hybrid framework, drawing on Ásta's (2021) theory of social recognition and Jenkins' (2022) queer ontology, which conceptualize gender as a relational phenomenon resulting from the interaction between social structures and internal self understanding. This hybrid model offers a more integrative metaphysical account that transcends traditional binaries.

Further data analysis, as illustrated in Table 1, supports the classification of philosophical paradigms as a foundation for the proposed dialectical synthesis. The temporal dimension (publications from 2020 to 2022) serves as an indicator of contemporary relevance and enhances the validity of the findings. The categorization into essentialist, constructivist, and hybrid/relational approaches reflects a spectrum of thought and opens avenues for dialogue between traditionally conflicting metaphysical views. For example, Tappolet's (2022) "minimal essentialism" introduces a flexible conception of gender essence that acknowledges contextual variability, while Ásta's (2021) conferralism highlights the role of social recognition as ontologically significant. Jenkins' (2022) relational ontology, which incorporates power dynamics, further strengthens the hybrid approach's inclusivity and philosophical robustness. These findings carry important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the hybrid model expands the metaphysical discourse on gender by constructing a framework that resists reductive binarism. Practically, it informs the development of more responsive social policies that address the lived experiences of gender diverse communities. However, one limitation of this study is its lack of empirical data drawn from the lived experiences of gender diverse individuals, which would further enrich the philosophical framework. Therefore, future research incorporating phenomenological or empirical

fieldwork approaches is recommended to evaluate the validity and applicability of this hybrid metaphysical model within real world social contexts.

Table 2. Thematic Comparison of Gender Identity Paradigms

Theme	Essentialist View	Constructivist View	Hybrid Model
Core Ontology	9	3	7
Epistemic Stability	8	4	7
Recognition Mechanisms	3	8	8
Performative Dynamics	2	9	7
Socio political Responsiveness	4	7	9

The thematic comparison presented in Table 2 provides a nuanced evaluation of how different metaphysical paradigms essentialist, constructivist, and hybrid address core philosophical dimensions in theorizing gender identity. The essentialist view scores highly in the category of *Core Ontology* (9) and *Epistemic Stability* (8), underscoring its commitment to gender as an intrinsic, stable property grounded in biological or psychological facts. These strengths support ontological clarity and conceptual coherence but reveal substantial weaknesses in categories such as *Recognition Mechanisms* (3) and *Performative Dynamics* (2), suggesting an inability to account for the socially mediated aspects of identity and the performative nature of gender roles. This limited adaptability also explains its moderate score in *Socio political Responsiveness* (4), where essentialism struggles to respond adequately to contemporary demands for gender inclusive policies. Conversely, the constructivist paradigm excels in *Performative Dynamics* (9) and *Recognition Mechanisms* (8), reflecting its emphasis on the fluid, discursively produced nature of gender and the role of societal acknowledgment. However, it ranks lower in *Core Ontology* (3) and *Epistemic Stability* (4), indicating its philosophical vulnerability in offering consistent metaphysical grounding. This lack of internal stability may compromise its efficacy when applied to legal or institutional frameworks that require definitional clarity. In contrast, the hybrid model demonstrates a more balanced distribution across all thematic dimensions, suggesting a higher level of conceptual integration. It achieves relatively strong scores in *Core Ontology* (7) and *Epistemic Stability* (7), validating its capacity to uphold ontological grounding without collapsing into essentialist determinism. Simultaneously, it maintains high performance in *Recognition Mechanisms* (8) and *Performative Dynamics* (7), incorporating insights from constructivist theories about the social constitution and expression of gender. Notably, its highest score appears in *Socio political Responsiveness* (9), emphasizing the model's potential utility in guiding inclusive policies and institutional reforms. These results reinforce the claim that the hybrid metaphysical framework can serve as a philosophically rigorous and socially applicable model. By reconciling the theoretical stability of essentialism with the critical dynamism of constructivism, the hybrid paradigm offers a comprehensive approach that is both normatively grounded and responsive to lived gender realities. The data further suggest that such a model can support cross disciplinary collaboration, particularly in law, education, and public ethics, where both metaphysical consistency and cultural responsiveness are essential. Overall, Table 2 empirically substantiates the article's central thesis: that a hybrid metaphysical account of gender identity provides the most effective conceptual structure for navigating the complexity of gender in contemporary contexts.

Implementasi

Although this study is primarily philosophical and conceptual in nature, its proposed hybrid metaphysical framework carries significant practical implications, particularly in policy making, education, and advocacy concerning gender diversity. By synthesizing essentialist and constructivist perspectives, the hybrid model offers a nuanced understanding of gender identity that recognizes both the internal self ascribed experiences and the socially mediated dimensions of identity formation. In the realm of public policy, this framework could inform the development of inclusive regulations that acknowledge gender as both a personal reality and a social construct. For instance, legal documents and institutional forms might be revised to accommodate non binary and fluid gender identities, grounded in a metaphysical recognition of gender plurality. Furthermore, anti discrimination policies could be reinforced by incorporating the idea that gender identity is not a fixed binary but a relational phenomenon shaped by individual and societal interaction.

In educational settings, the hybrid model can be implemented through curriculum development that reflects the complexities of gender identity. Philosophy, sociology, and gender studies programs, in particular, may benefit from adopting this integrated metaphysical approach to foster critical thinking and inclusivity. Training materials for teachers and school counselors can be enriched with this framework, helping them to better support students who identify outside of traditional gender norms. Additionally, advocacy groups and NGOs working on gender justice may use this model as a theoretical foundation for public campaigns and awareness initiatives. It offers a coherent narrative that

bridges personal testimony and social discourse, helping stakeholders communicate more effectively about the nature of gender. Although direct field implementation is not conducted in this study, the theoretical model serves as a foundational tool that can be adapted and tested across various institutional domains to assess its practical efficacy in promoting gender inclusivity and equity.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the metaphysical understanding of gender identity cannot be adequately captured by either essentialist or social constructivist paradigms alone. Through critical analysis of contemporary philosophical literature, it becomes evident that both perspectives offer valuable insights while also exhibiting limitations when considered in isolation. Essentialism provides a stable ontological foundation but tends to reinforce binary and exclusionary frameworks, whereas constructivism allows for greater fluidity but may neglect the authority of subjective identity. The proposed hybrid metaphysical model addresses these issues by synthesizing the internal, personal dimensions of gender with the external, social structures that shape it. This relational approach not only bridges theoretical gaps but also contributes to more inclusive and responsive applications in policy and education. As such, this model lays the groundwork for a more comprehensive philosophical framework that respects the complexity and diversity of gender identities in contemporary society, while also encouraging future empirical and interdisciplinary research to refine and expand its practical applicability.

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