

Gendered Identity in Indonesia: Discursive (Re)positioning of
Perempuan and *Wanita*
(Identiti Gender di Indonesia: Penempatan Semula Wacana terhadap
Perempuan dan *Wanita*)

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Received: 19 February 2025 / Accepted: 15 April 2026

ABSTRACT

This study explores the linguistic preferences between the terms perempuan and wanita in reference to women in contemporary Indonesian society, highlighting how language reflects and shapes gendered identities and social positioning. While prior research has examined these terms in formal texts and news media, little attention has focused on their use in mediated spaces, where social media enables rapid circulation, negotiation, and reinterpretation of meaning. Employing a qualitatively driven mixed methods approach, this study combines an online survey of 271 social media users recruited through convenience sampling with a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of Instagram posts. The study reveals that perempuan is often preferred for its association with empowerment and activism, while wanita continues to be used in formal or professional contexts. Survey results further indicate that some participants strategically alternate between the two terms to navigate complex social and professional landscapes through evolving linguistic practices. Using SketchEngine software, corpus data of 516,633 tokens from Instagram posts support these patterns, demonstrating that perempuan appears more frequently than wanita in the social media discourse of this study's sample. The study also identifies a growing disconnect between the KBBI (The Official Indonesian Dictionary) definitions and societal usage, suggesting that official lexical norms may lag behind lived linguistic practices. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how linguistic choices shape and reflect women's agency and identity in Indonesian society and underscores the evolving discourse of women's empowerment in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: gender identity; linguistic choices; perempuan; positioning; wanita

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneliti keutamaan linguistik antara istilah perempuan dan wanita dalam merujuk kepada wanita dalam masyarakat Indonesia kontemporari, dengan menonjolkan bagaimana bahasa mencerminkan dan membentuk identiti gender serta kedudukan sosial. Walaupun kajian terdahulu telah meneliti penggunaan istilah ini dalam teks formal dan media berita, masih kurang perhatian diberikan kepada penggunaannya dalam ruang bermedia, di mana media sosial membolehkan penyebaran, perundingan, dan pentafsiran semula makna berlaku dengan pantas. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kaedah campuran yang dipacu secara kualitatif, kajian ini menggabungkan tinjauan dalam talian terhadap 271 pengguna media sosial yang direkrut melalui pensampelan kemudahan bersama analisis wacana berbantuan korpus terhadap hantaran Instagram. Kajian ini mendapati bahawa perempuan sering dipilih kerana kaitannya dengan pemerdayaan dan aktivisme, manakala wanita masih digunakan dalam konteks formal atau profesional. Hasil tinjauan turut menunjukkan bahawa sebahagian peserta secara strategik bertukar antara kedua-dua istilah tersebut bagi menavigasi landskap sosial dan profesional yang kompleks melalui amalan linguistik yang sentiasa berkembang. Dengan menggunakan perisian SketchEngine, data korpus sebanyak 516,633 token daripada hantaran Instagram menyokong pola ini, menunjukkan bahawa perempuan muncul dengan lebih kerap berbanding wanita dalam wacana media sosial sampel kajian ini. Kajian ini juga mengenal pasti jurang yang semakin ketara

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antara definisi KBBI (*Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*) dan penggunaan masyarakat, yang mencadangkan bahawa norma leksikal rasmi mungkin ketinggalan berbanding amalan linguistik dalam kehidupan seharian. Penyelidikan ini menyumbang kepada pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang bagaimana pilihan linguistik membentuk dan mencerminkan agensi serta identiti wanita dalam masyarakat Indonesia, di samping menekankan perkembangan wacana pemeraksanaan wanita dalam konteks kontemporari.

Kata kunci: identiti gender; pilihan linguistik; perempuan; penempatan sosial; wanita

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital age, social media has evolved from a mere platform for communication to a space where social meanings and identities are continuously negotiated (Page, 2011). Through posts, comments, and reactions, media users not only share personal experiences but also engage with and reinterpret societal norms, values, and expectations (Dennen, 2024). Longstanding debates surrounding the Indonesian terms *perempuan* and *wanita*¹, both commonly used to refer to women, gained renewed public attention in 2021 following controversy over the definition of *perempuan* in the official Indonesian dictionary, *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (KBBI). In February that year, *Komnas Perempuan*², the National Commission on Violence Against Women, issued a public statement challenging the definition entry, arguing that its emphasis on biological and marital characteristics risks reducing women's identities to reproductive and domestic roles, implicitly reinforcing patriarchal norms and limiting women's social and professional agency (*Komnas Perempuan*, 2021). The criticism targeted *Badan Bahasa*, the state institution responsible for maintaining KBBI entries, and quickly attracted wider attention as major news outlets, including CNN Indonesia, The Jakarta Post, and Reuters (CNN Indonesia, 2021; Lamb, 2021; Swaragita, 2021; Pratiwi, 2021).

The digital media environment amplified the controversy, allowing discussions to circulate rapidly across social media platforms and inviting responses from activists, artists, influencers, and media users (Mardiasih, 2021; Maverick Indonesia, 2021; Vantiani, 2021). Algorithmic curation further shapes such interactions by prioritising content that users are more likely to engage with, subtly influencing which perspectives gain prominence in online spaces (Swart, 2021). Through hashtags, reposts, and threaded discussions, what began as a lexicographic dispute evolved into a wider public debate about gender politics, linguistic authority, and the power of state institutions to define womanhood. This demonstrates how social media can transform linguistic debates into highly visible, participatory public issues.

The 2021 controversy over the definition entry of *perempuan* exemplifies the complex relationship involving language, societal values, and gender perceptions in Indonesia, particularly

¹ At the time of the 2021 controversy, the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (KBBI) defined *perempuan* as: (1) orang (manusia) yang mempunyai puki, dapat menstruasi, hamil, melahirkan anak, dan menyusui; wanita; (2) istri; bini: -- nya sedang hamil; (3) betina (khusus untuk hewan) | Translation: (1) a human being who has female genitalia, capable of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding; a woman, (2) wife; e.g., "-- is pregnant.", (3) female (specifically for animals). *Wanita*, in contrast, derived from Sanskrit वनिता (vanitā) as described in KBBI: 'perempuan, kekasih, istri', n perempuan dewasa: kaum -- kaum putri (dewasa) | Translation: woman, lover, wife, n an adult woman; e.g., kaum wanita ("women"), kaum putri ("adult girls"). As of 2026, these definitions remain largely unchanged, highlighting the ongoing tension between biological and social interpretations of womanhood.

² *Komnas Perempuan* is an independent national human rights institution in Indonesia established by Presidential Decree No. 181/1998 following the 1998 reform movement. Although state-established and publicly funded, it operates independently from the government and conducts monitoring, research, and advocacy on violence against women and women's rights, providing recommendations for state policy. Further details: <https://en.komnasperempuan.go.id/about-profile-komnas-perempuan>

in digitally mediated interactions. Both *perempuan* and *wanita* carry significant historical and cultural meanings, influencing how women are understood and represented (Alnizar, 2021; Sari, 2020). Scholars emphasise that words and phrases often carry multiple layers of meaning (Clapton, 2018) and that even seemingly neutral terms carry ideological weight that informs how identities are constructed within institutionalised norms (Lazar, 2017) due to dominant structures persisting in society (Cameron, 2020). In a society where women continue to navigate complex gendered expectations, the way they are labelled, both in media and in everyday language, can either reinforce or liberate pathways for autonomy, agency, and redefinition of self within societal structures.

This study approaches women's everyday linguistic choices through the lens of agency, drawing on Mahmood's (2005) reconceptualisation of *agency* as ethical self-formation within normative structures. Within this framework, identity is understood as discursively constructed and negotiated in interaction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). To analyse how such identities are performed and negotiated in discourse, positioning theory (Davies and Harré, 1990) is applied, highlighting how individuals take up and are assigned subject positions within mediated interactions. Together, these perspectives inform this study by framing language use as a key site where gendered identities and agency are enacted, negotiated, and made visible, particularly within the participatory, highly reflexive space of social media. Therefore, this paper examines how the terms *perempuan* and *wanita* are negotiated, the implications of their usage, and how they align with evolving gender perceptions in contemporary Indonesian society. It explores how women are reclaiming their gender identity, and perhaps their voices, through these terms. Here, we argue that in online domains, women are discursively repositioning themselves through the terms *perempuan* and *wanita* and, in doing so, are contesting gender identities they perceive as imposed.

EVOLVING DISCOURSES OF *PEREMPUAN* AND *WANITA* in Indonesia

While Indonesia is home to hundreds of dialects and ethnic languages, the development of *Bahasa Indonesia* (Indonesian) as a national language has provided a medium for political, educational, and social discourse. Sneddon (2003) describes the Second Indonesian Youth Congress on 28 October 1928 as a pivotal moment, when delegates declared Indonesian the language of national unity across diverse communities, creating a shared space for national identity and public dialogue. Within this linguistic framework, debates over terms such as *perempuan* and *wanita* can therefore be understood as part of broader efforts to negotiate gendered identities and social roles at the national level.

Historically, the semantic trajectories of these terms reflect layered and shifting social meanings. *Perempuan*, derived from the Old Javanese word *empu* or *ampu*, conveys respect, capability, and agency (Galenter, 1991, as cited in Muchtar, 1999; Sudarwati & Jupriono, 1997), whereas *wanita*, from the Sanskrit word *vanita* ("the desired one"), historically framed women relationally, though over time it acquired connotations of refinement and honour (Parhani, 2021). Both terms coexisted in early nationalist women's organisations: the first women's congress in Yogyakarta (1928) was named *Kongres Perempuan*, while one of its organising groups was *Wanita Oetomo* (Asiyah, 2019; Locher-Scholten, 2000). Similarly, the use of *wanita* in naming

organisations such as *Gerwani*³ (*Gerakan Wanita Indonesia*, or Indonesian Women's Movement) during Sukarno's Old Order (1945-1965) was functional rather than ideological. This coexistence suggests that lexical distinctions were not yet rigidly ideological, but instead reflected overlapping reformist, nationalist, and socio-political orientations.

A more pronounced ideological distinction emerged during the New Order regime⁴ (1966–1998). Following the suppression of independent women's movements, including the banning of *Gerwani*, the state promoted a gender ideology emphasising women's domestic roles and loyalty to family and nation (Blackburn, 2004; Wieringa, 1995). Within this framework, the term *wanita* became institutionalised through state-sponsored organisations such as *Dharma Wanita* (civil service wives' association) and *Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga* (Family Welfare Movement), reinforcing ideals of *kodrat wanita* (women's inherent nature) and the doctrine of *Panca Dharma Wanita*⁵ (Curnow, 2007; Suryakusuma, 2004). As critics of the regime increasingly favoured the term *perempuan*, lexical choice itself became an ideological marker, with *wanita* associated with state-defined femininity and *perempuan* with more reformist orientations (Muchtar, 1999). This historical trajectory illustrates how the meanings of these two terms have been shaped not only by linguistic change but also by shifting political and societal contexts.

Previous research highlights how the terms *perempuan* and *wanita* reflect societal values and vary across discursive texts. Yuliawati (2018) examines these terms *perempuan* and *wanita* in two corpora—IndonesianWac from SketchEngline and Ind-mixed_2013 from the Leipzig Corpora Collection (LCC). Her findings reveal that *wanita* is more frequently used than *perempuan* to denote women. Distinctions emerged in context where *perempuan* is often associated with discussions of gender equality and organisational roles, suggesting an empowering focus on women in the public sphere, whereas *wanita* tends to emphasise women's sexual relationships and roles within domestic contexts. Sari (2020) extends this inquiry through an analysis of online news headlines, showing that both terms, regardless of frequency, are mobilised to portray women as victims, reflecting persistent patriarchal framing.

A comparable lexical distinction is observed in the Malaysian context. Rahim (2005) shows that *wanita* and *perempuan* serve distinct functions in formal newspaper discourse: *wanita* predominates in institutional domains such as politics, economics, and professional life, inheriting generally positive connotations and avoiding pejorative collocations, whereas *perempuan* functions more neutrally as a gender-specifying term, allowing co-occurrence with negative expressions. Diachronically, Aziz (2019) employs a culturomics approach to analyse over 157 million words from Malaysian parliamentary debates (1959-2018), examining frequency patterns and collocational behaviour of *wanita* and *perempuan*. His findings indicate that *wanita* predominates in formal parliamentary discourse and is associated with institutional framing, whereas *perempuan* appears less frequently, reflecting a more neutral or context-dependent usage.

³ *Gerwani* was one of the largest women's organisations during Sukarno's Old Order, advocating women's political participation, education, and labour rights. Following the political upheaval of 1965, the organisation was banned and later portrayed negatively in New Order state narratives (Blackburn, 2004; Wieringa 1995).

⁴ The New Order regime in Indonesia began after the political turmoil of 1965, which paved the way for General Suharto to assume power as president. The regime also significantly suppressed civil society and political engagement. The post-New Order era, or *Reformasi*, commenced immediately after Suharto stepped down. Since the beginning of Reformasi, tens of thousands of new organisations have been established, including women's groups, community associations, and mass-based membership groups. This vibrant and diverse civil society actively engages in social and political activities, contributing to Indonesia's democratisation process (Annie Pohlman in her Research Report on Indonesia No. 1 Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2010).

⁵ *Panca Dharma Wanita* refers to a set of five duties for women that defined them as loyal companions, procreators, caregivers, household managers, and contributors to society.

While previous research has illuminated how *perempuan* and *wanita* function in formal, written, and news media texts in Indonesia and Malaysia, less is known about how everyday speakers interpret and navigate these terms in their own language, including how women themselves use these terms to exercise agency and express identity. In particular, the influence of social media, where debates and such information circulate rapidly, on individual preferences remains underexplored. Moreover, prior studies have paid limited attention to how speakers exercise agency and negotiate gendered identities through their choice of terms. This study, therefore, extends existing scholarship by examining participatory, mediated environments where language is actively performed and negotiated. Unlike previous corpus- or media-based studies, it considers both the frequency of term usage and the strategic motivations of social media users, capturing how Indonesian women actively redefine the meanings of *perempuan* and *wanita* in contemporary discourse. This approach highlights the performative and socially constructed nature of gender, demonstrating how digital platforms facilitate evolving practices of empowerment and identity negotiation. From this perspective, addressing gender ideologies is inherently tied to power dynamics (Ochs & Taylor, 1995), and language can be reimagined as a tool to challenge entrenched social norms (Fairclough, 1992).

GENDER ISSUES IN MEDIATED SPACES

Ideas about gender in the 20th century in Indonesia were shaped by notable contradictions and inconsistencies, driven by the intersection of diverse cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and ethnic identities (Blackburn, 2004). Blackburn points out the importance of examining the role of the state, noting that its various segments often pursue conflicting agendas on gender issues. Although the state possesses a certain degree of homogeneity and autonomy in policymaking, questions remain about whose interests are truly represented in its gender policies (Hegarty, 2019). These complexities suggest that gender categories are not fixed or universally agreed upon but are shaped within broader relations of power and ideology, requiring critical inquiry to see what's politically at stake (Fairclough, 1992). This suggests that language policies may not always align with society's perspectives on interpreting the world (Johnson & Johnson, 2015). While it is evident that gender is constructed and reproduced through language within numerous discourse practices, such as education, media, everyday conversations (Cook-Gumperz, 1995), and community practices (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992), defining gender views within Indonesian society remains challenging due to its diversity. However, with advancements in technology, digital discourses have become increasingly influential in shaping and reflecting societal perspectives.

Social media has offered a space where both institutional debates and individual expressions intersect, allowing even minor actions to serve as forms of democratic participation (Margetts, 2019). It empowers ordinary individuals to engage more actively, fostering grassroots self-organisation where people, rather than institutions, take on the role of spreading information and influencing others (Yuce et al., 2014). Leong et al. (2018) note that social media movements enable individuals to mobilise and participate in collective action by sharing personalised content and communicating on their own terms.

A prominent example of this is the 2021 viral controversy over the *KBBI* definition of *perempuan*, initiated by artist Ika Vantiani. Ika's journey to change the definition of *perempuan* in the dictionary began in 2015, when she attended a networking event in Melbourne, Australia called

‘WANITA’ (Women’s Art Network Indonesia to Australia). The name piqued her interest in exploring the various terms used to denote women, such as *perempuan*, *wanita*, *cewek*, and *betina*. She investigated the evolving definition of *perempuan* from the first to the fifth editions of the *KBBI* and was inspired to organise a workshop titled “Kata untuk Perempuan” (“Words for Women”) and to create an art installation called *Perempuan dalam Kamus Bahasa Indonesia* (“Women in the Indonesian Dictionary”) at the National Gallery in Jakarta, Indonesia. While these efforts initially operated within artistic and activist spaces, their meanings were subsequently amplified through social media, where discussions and influencer engagement enabled wider public participation (Maverick Indonesia, 2021). Through this process, what began as a critique of lexical definitions evolved into a broader discursive movement, illustrating how identities articulated in digital spaces can extend into offline practices and institutional debates.

This ongoing debate, now spanning over a decade, highlights the slow, contested process of how language involving gender norms is a site of continual negotiation. The most recent *KBBI* entries for *perempuan* and *wanita*, as previously mentioned, which have changed little since the 2021 controversy, highlight a persistent tension between formal institutional definitions and social understandings of gender. The entry for *perempuan*, for example, reduces women’s identities to biological functions, overlooking the complexity of gender and essentialising women as possessing a static set of biological traits. Hegarty (2019) argues that such definitions reinforce rigid gender boundaries and societal views on what is ‘natural’, despite gender being a social construct. Similarly, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) caution that treating social identities as fixed ignores the dynamic ways in which people engage with identity practices over time and across contexts. Meanwhile, *wanita*, institutionally defined as *perempuan dewasa* (adult woman), is positioned as a subordinate lexical category under *perempuan*, lacking semantic autonomy and inheriting reductive normative connotations. This enduring disconnect between prescriptive definitions and lived experiences has fuelled debates and activism, particularly on social media, where artists, influencers, and everyday users challenge, negotiate, and seek to redefine these terms through discourse.

METHOD

RESEARCH DESIGN AND INSTRUMENTS

This study adopts a qualitatively driven mixed method approach (Neuman, 2014), combining non-probability convenience sampling in an online survey with corpus-assisted discourse analysis of social media posts. The survey examined participants’ perceptions and preferences regarding the terms *perempuan* and *wanita*, while the corpus analysis explores how these terms are used in digitally mediated discourse. This combination enables the study to link participants’ reflexive interpretations of language use to observable linguistic patterns in social media content.

The survey design was theoretically informed by Bauman’s (2000) concept of language as performance, which conceptualises verbal acts as reflexive social practices through which individuals negotiate meaning, relationships, and identity. From this perspective, participants’ reflections on their language choices offer insight into how speakers actively navigate social meanings and construct identity in digitally mediated environments. Together, these perspectives enable the analysis of survey responses not only as expressions of individual views but as discursive acts through which participants position themselves in relation to broader social norms and expectations.

SURVEY DATA COLLECTION

The survey employed non-probability convenience sampling, with participants recruited through social media platforms and personal networks. This approach aligns with exploratory social research, where the aim is to gain contextual insight rather than statistical representativeness (Neuman, 2014). The survey remained open for voluntary participation between October and November 2024, yielding 271 valid responses. The questionnaire was administered in Indonesian, reflecting the shared linguistic background of participants and enabling them to articulate their perspectives more naturally in open-ended responses. For the purposes of this article, relevant excerpts have been translated into English by the authors, who are experts in Indonesian language and sociolinguistics.

The survey employed both closed and open-ended questions (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). Closed-ended questions collected basic demographic information, such as age, gender, education level, and region of residence - none of which compromised participant anonymity. For the purposes of this paper, only one open-ended question was analysed. The open-ended question asked participants to reflect on the use of *perempuan* and *wanita* in their daily lives, inviting them to provide more nuanced insights into their personal interpretations, preferences, and attitudes toward these terms. This question aimed to capture participants' reflexive considerations of their linguistic choices, revealing how they negotiate meanings, social norms, and self-agency.

This survey is part of a larger research project focusing on Muslim women influencers and how they curate their content, with ethical approval from Deakin University (Project ID: HAE-24-067). The survey was conducted anonymously using Qualtrics, an online survey platform that collects no identifiable information, and participants could skip any questions they were uncomfortable answering. This approach ensured ethical transparency, protected privacy, and encouraged honest, candid responses. While the sample is not intended to represent the Indonesian population, it provides insight into how socially connected speakers reflect on language use within digitally mediated contexts.

CORPUS-ASSISTED DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

To complement the survey data, a corpus of Instagram posts from two Muslim women influencers was compiled to examine how the terms *perempuan* and *wanita* are used in their social media posts. These influencers were purposively selected as information-rich cases due to their sustained engagement with gender-related themes and their consistent articulation of such content despite prevailing societal expectations. The dataset, spanning posts from January 2020 to June 2024, a period of heightened social media use and discourse transformation, during which influencers' voices became more visible and widely circulated, contained 516,633 tokens derived from their reels and feed captions.

Using SketchEngine, a text analysis tool designed for linguistic research, textual corpora from reels and feed posts were compiled, allowing a comparative exploration of the collocations of the terms *perempuan* and *wanita* and how these influencers employed them in crafting their content. These corpus-based patterns provide a complementary perspective to participants' self-reported reflections, highlighting how language is performed in mediated discourse. Keyword analysis identified the most frequently used terms, particularly *perempuan* and *wanita*, and Key Word in Context (KWIC) analysis examined the immediate linguistic environments of these terms. By analysing these concordance lines, the study traced how each term was embedded within

particular actions, evaluations, and institutional references, providing insight into how meanings, agency, and gendered positioning were constructed within the influencers’ discourse.

Positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) provides a useful framework to understand these interactions. It asserts that individuals construct and negotiate their identities through discourse by positioning themselves and others in social interactions and attributing rights, duties, and roles in particular contexts. The theory differentiates between interactive positioning - how people are positioned by others, and reflexive positioning - how individuals position themselves to communicate agency and identity. In digitally mediated spaces, positioning can be seen both in private and public discourse, as users adopt and adapt linguistic choices to align with, resist, or redefine social norms (Dennen, 2024). Applying this framework allows us to analyse how the use of *perempuan* and *wanita* reflects ongoing negotiations of agency, identity, and gendered expectations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To explore the societal nuanced perceptions of gendered language in Indonesian society, we began by posing an open-ended question to participants: *What word do you use to refer to women-perempuan or wanita-and can you explain why?* This question aimed to uncover not only participants’ preferred term but also the reasoning behind their choice, reflecting their personal and societal understanding of these words. While the survey included other open-ended questions, this study focuses on the responses to this particular question, highlighting key themes relevant to the study objectives. The following is the results of the survey:

TABLE 1. Survey Results on Preferred Terms for Referring to Women in Indonesia

Term preferred	Percentage*
perempuan	71.94%
wanita	14.38%
both	12.94%

* The total percentages do not represent all participants, as some chose to skip the question.

The survey results in Table 1 reveal a clear preference for the term *perempuan* over *wanita*, with 195 participants (71.94%) choosing *perempuan* as their preferred term, suggesting it aligns more closely with their daily usage and perceptions of gender. In contrast, 39 participants (14.38%) favoured *wanita*, indicating a relatively lower preference. Additionally, 35 participants (12.94%) indicated that both terms were equally acceptable, suggesting some flexibility or indifference toward the distinction between the two.

Table 2 presents the reasons behind these preferences. Participants who favoured *perempuan* highlighted its broader, equal, dynamic, and empowering connotations. Those who preferred *wanita* described it as sounding more formal, mature, elegant, respectful, and polite. The 35 participants who used both terms tended to adjust their choice based on context, though they did not provide detailed explanations for this reasoning.

TABLE 2. Survey Results on Reasons for Preferred Terms

No	Term	Context
1	perempuan	more general, more equal, more dynamic, more authority to her own body
2	wanita	more formal, more mature, more elegant, more respectful, more polite
3	both	depending on connotations and contexts

We now turn to the results of influencers' postings. The analysis of corpus data allows us to explore how *perempuan* and *wanita* are used in influencers' posts, revealing patterns that align with the perceptions of survey participants. A total of 516,633 tokens were processed, focusing on keyword frequencies, collocations, and semantic contexts examined via Keyword-in-Context (KWIC) concordance lines. The findings in Figure 1 show that *perempuan* was mentioned significantly more frequently than *wanita*, appearing 6,570 times compared with 82 occurrences of *wanita*. Collocation analysis highlighted that *perempuan* co-occurred with verbs reflecting action and attributes that align with positive and conscious behaviour. Key descriptors accompanying *perempuan* included *baik* (good), *sadar* (aware), *penuh* (full), and *positif* (positive), emphasising qualities that resonate with agency, mindfulness, and optimism.

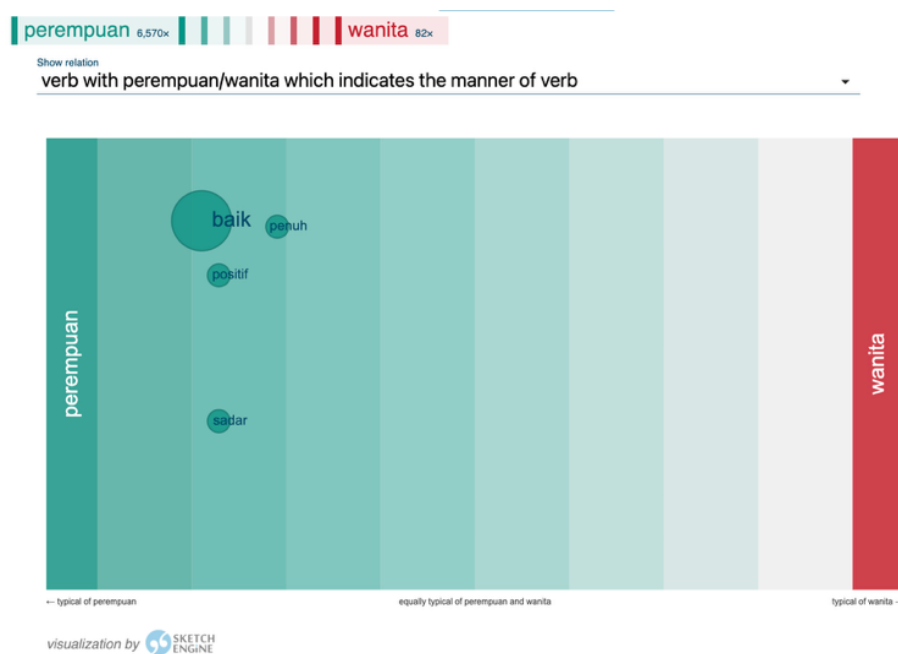


FIGURE 1. Comparison of Collocations in *Perempuan* and *Wanita* through Action-Oriented Verbs

Examination of KWIC concordance lines confirms these patterns in context. Table 3 presents representative KWIC samples showing the immediate left- and right-hand contexts of *perempuan* and *wanita*, alongside their English translations. The KWIC lines for *perempuan* consistently situate the term within discursive frames of empowerment and ethical engagement. In the first sample, *perempuan* is directly linked to the verb *memberdayakan* ('to empower') and to relational dimensions - specifically gender relations. Similarly, self-positioning in the second sample of *perempuan* operates as a site of subject formation from the standpoint of womanhood. In contrast, the KWIC lines for *wanita* place the term in institutional and policy-oriented contexts. References such as "*Kementerian Urusan Wanita*" in samples No. 3 and 4 ('the Ministry of Women's Affairs') position *wanita* within state naming practices associated with earlier political regimes. The right context in sample No 4 further links the term to governance, regulation, and normative expectations surrounding reproduction and family planning.

TABLE 3. Sample KWIC Concordance Lines for *perempuan* and *wanita* in Influencer Posts

No.	Left context	Keyword	Right context	English Translation
1	Islam mesti dipahami dalam semangat memberdayakan	perempuan	dalam relasi gender	<i>Islam must be understood in the spirit of empowering women in gender relations</i>
2	...membangun kesadaran pertama kali sebagai	perempuan	muslim tentang kosmos islam dan keperempuanan	<i>Building awareness for the first time as a Muslim woman about the cosmos of Islam and womanhood</i>
3	Gus Dur mengganti nama Kementerian Urusan	Wanita	Menjadi Kementerian Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Perlindungan Anak	<i>Gus Dur changed the name of the Ministry of Women's Affairs to the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection</i>
4	Saat itu Kementerian Urusan	Wanita	hanya fokus pada peran reproduksi seperti mendorong program Keluarga Berencana	<i>At that time, the Ministry of Women's Affairs focused solely on reproductive roles, such as promoting the Family Planning programme</i>

Taken together, the KWIC analysis provides a concrete explanation of how the observed lexical patterns in the corpus are produced and sustained in practice. By examining the immediate co-text of *perempuan* and *wanita* in influencers' posts, the choice of lexical items is meaningfully negotiated: *perempuan* supports discursive positioning and ethical engagement within gendered norms, while *wanita* signals institutional roles, often prescriptive. Such distinctions illustrate how agency can be enacted through lexical and contextual choices, with speakers navigating empowerment, formality, and social expectations accordingly. The more detailed KWIC analysis complements broader corpus results by revealing how influencers' lexical choices function as acts of discursive positioning, reproducing or reworking gendered subjectivities through everyday social media communication.

PEREMPUAN AS A WAY TO RECLAIM SELF-AGENCY

Based on these findings, the dichotomy of perspectives associated with the terms *perempuan* and *wanita* provides valuable insight into how language serves as a medium for negotiating identity and societal roles in Indonesian society. It also raises critical questions about the evolving significance of these terms, particularly in the context of how they are represented in official dictionaries like *KBBI*, media, and public discourse.

From the survey results, 127 participants who identify as female are frequent social media users. Their preference for *perempuan* may indicate a shift away from the traditional, formal gender representations that *wanita* often conveys. Below are excerpts from the survey results, in response to participants' preferences for *perempuan* or *wanita*:

Perempuan, because the term *wanita* is sometimes seen as being second-class, as it is derived from the phrase *wani ditata* (Javanese: being governed by someone/something).
 I choose *perempuan* because this word sounds more dynamic and equal.

Perempuan. I once read that the meaning of *perempuan* has a positive connotation related to "empu" (in Sanskrit language) signifying that a woman has authority over her own body.

We argue that participants' awareness of these terms' meanings suggests they are not passively accepting linguistic traditions but actively engaging with them, reflecting or reshaping their own identities through the choices they make. Drawing on Positioning Theory (Davies &

Harré, 1990), these lexical choices can be seen as acts of negotiating subject positions, where participants reconfigure social and cultural expectations. In this sense, language can be viewed as performative (Bauman, 2000): speakers enact particular identities and stances through the words they choose. Individuals, therefore, interpret the meaning of words with underlying interests embedded in everyday communication. Johnston and Johnston (2015) also highlight a growing discord between the evolving dynamics of social media and static institutional frameworks. Social media users likely place a greater emphasis on the dynamic, lived meanings of words shaped by their experiences and discussions in digital spaces (Margetts, 2019), rather than relying on the static and sometimes outdated definitions offered by official institutions such as the *KBBI*. This process serves as a powerful tool for expressing personal views on identity and social life, allowing people to express their own experiences instead of merely adopting the narratives produced by dominant groups; in this case, the state.

A significant number of participants chose the term *perempuan*, explaining that they associate *wanita* with the Javanese phrase '*wani ditata*', meaning 'willing to be governed'. This phrase is perceived as carrying patriarchal connotations and reinforcing hierarchical structures in the family. For participants of Javanese ethnicity—who made up 75.3% of the survey participants - their preference for *perempuan* reflects a desire to assert equality, including within familial relationships. These findings highlight that speakers' interpretations of words are shaped not only by formal definitions but also by culturally circulating meanings.

Participants' understandings contrast with how *perempuan* is institutionally defined in the *KBBI*, particularly in the second entries that link to the term to traditional roles like *istri* (wife) or *bini* (spouse). This framing as *istri* or *bini* risks perpetuating the notion that a woman's identity and value are rooted primarily in her familial relationships, particularly her roles as a wife or mother. It reduces women's identities to a limited, traditional perspective of gender roles, suggesting that their societal recognition is fixed and tied exclusively to family and kinship structures. This does not suggest that the *KBBI* intends to prescribe women's roles, but rather that institutional definitions may be read or taken up in ways that do not fully resonate with how women in contemporary contexts seek to define themselves.

As argued by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992), gender is often produced through social community practice, with language playing a central role in the ongoing construction of gendered norms in everyday interaction. Consequently, dominant meanings may become naturalised and resistant to change, even in the presence of alternative or emerging practices (Fairclough, 1992). Furthermore, claims of linguistic neutrality often mask underlying ideological assumptions, which can limit how gendered subjectivities are represented (Cameron, 2020; Lazar, 2017). In this light, participants' responses suggest that *KBBI*'s definition entries, while descriptively motivated, may not capture the complexity and fluidity of women's identities and lived experiences articulated in everyday discourse. In this context, the preference of *perempuan* in the present findings should not therefore be understood as a rejection of institutional definitions, but rather as a discursive repositioning that foregrounds alternative meanings that participants find more compatible with contemporary understandings of gender.

In essence, the preference for *perempuan* over *wanita* in the survey also illustrates how language can be reclaimed to challenge institutional or patriarchal constraints in online domains. This is a key finding of our study, as participants are consciously defining their social identity through language that reflects their personal agency. In line with Bucholtz and Hall (2005), identity is understood as emergent and discursively constructed, where linguistic forms function as indexical resources through which speakers align with particular values, meanings, and social

positions. From this perspective, the selection of *perempuan* can be seen as a form of identity work, through which participants align themselves with meanings they identify with.

Notably, participants identified themselves as frequent social media users, indicating that their linguistic choices are likely influenced by the content they encounter online. The 2021 controversy over the definition of *perempuan*, where viral posts and hashtags empowered individuals to challenge institutional linguistic definitions, is a clear example of social identity formation. Social media enables public participation in shaping meanings and democratising language (Leong et al., 2018; Margetts, 2019). This participatory process enacted by participants in making linguistic choices between these two terms reciprocates the values of younger, more digitally literate populations who view language as a tool for empowerment rather than as a rigid structure imposed from above (Leong et al., 2018; Swart, 2021).

While the *KBBI* associates *perempuan* with biological functions and traditional roles, participants' rejection of this framing highlights their desire for agency. It also reflects Johnson and Johnson's (2015) assertion of a growing disconnect between institutional language authorities and actual language use. These participants are using *perempuan* not only to reject traditional roles but also to claim it as a term for empowerment and self-expression in public discourse, influenced by the participatory dynamics of social media. This aligns with Dennen's (2024) finding that even at the individual level, people are capable of engaging in collective action, challenging and redefining institutional narratives through their everyday language choices. Dennen further states that social media, in this sense, fosters a form of democracy where change emerges from individual expressions rather than institutional initiatives. In the context of a society increasingly reliant on digital spaces, our study highlights the agency of individuals in redefining language within their own contexts, shaped by their engagement with digital media.

WANITA AS A WAY TO MAINTAIN SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS

While the term *perempuan* is often associated with empowerment and resistance to traditional gender norms, it is equally important to consider the choice of *wanita* in the survey results. For these participants, choosing *wanita* reflects a tendency to align with societal expectations of gender roles. Additionally, they often associate the term with a sense of maturity and formality, expressing that being referred to as *wanita* evokes a positive feeling of being recognised as an adult woman. The following excerpts from the survey results highlight how participants define the term *wanita*.

I prefer to use *wanita* when expressing an opinion or comment that aims to make an elegant assertion.
I choose the term *wanita* to convey a sense of gracefulness and authority, sounds like an adult woman.
Wanita feels more polite/respectful and sounds formal, making it suitable for formal events.

In its most recent revision in 2026, the *KBBI* defines *wanita* succinctly as *perempuan dewasa* [adult woman], with illustrative usages such as *wanita karier* [career woman] and *wanita tunasusila* [prostitute]. While this streamlined definition appears neutral and descriptive, its discursive implications of this entry become more apparent when examined in relation to actual language use and social positioning. Defining *wanita* primarily through age (*dewasa* [adult]) and exemplification situates the term within socially regulated categories—professional respectability on the one hand (*wanita karier*), and moral deviance on the other (*wanita tunasusila*). This framing implicitly ties *wanita* to normative evaluation and institutional classification rather than to action or self-determined agency.

Cameron's (2020) reflections highlight that patriarchal social relations remain deeply embedded across societies, shaping women's lived experiences even as theoretical and academic perspectives evolve. In the context of Indonesian society, the choice to use *wanita*, despite its seemingly neutral dictionary definition, can be understood through this lens. While some participants may not fully recognise the historical and cultural connotations of the term and may accept it without reflection, this demonstrates that language itself serves as a medium through which enduring structures of patriarchy influence everyday practices. The ongoing preference for *wanita* among certain participants underscores the persistence of patriarchal frameworks in shaping linguistic and social choices, showing that agency operates within, rather than outside, these constraints, consistent with the insights of positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990). Importantly, in digitally mediated spaces, lexical choices are part of broader democratic participation, where users negotiate identity and social norms through discourse. As Dennen (2024) and Margetts (2019) argue, social media allows individuals to engage in collective and personal expression. This digital engagement has become normalised and capable of producing outcomes that reflect new forms of agentic empowerment or reinforcement of existing societal frameworks. In this case, participants' use of *wanita* illustrates how language practices are shaped by both enduring structures and the participatory dynamics of online discourse.

POSITIONING BOTH TERMS AS A FORM OF PRACTICALITY AND DUAL IDENTITY

We also offer an alternative view of the survey results, where participants do not consistently privilege either *perempuan* or *wanita*, but instead alternate between the two depending on context. This pattern suggests that the use of *wanita* should not be seen simply as passivity or a lack of awareness. Rather, for them, *wanita* could serve as a strategic tool for navigating social or professional contexts that value formality and politeness.

Survey data indicate that this pattern is visible among participants who identified themselves as government employees (27.3%) or professionals in various fields (12.6%), roles that are often associated with their contexts where *wanita* is considered the more 'appropriate' term, aligning with institutional norms and emphasising values such as formality and politeness. As Harré et al. (2009) note, identity emerges through interaction, with language acting as a means to negotiate and express identity. In this sense, the choice of *wanita* reflects an alignment with institutional norms rather than an uncritical acceptance of traditional gender roles.

More broadly, participants' language choices appear to be influenced by factors such as convenience, context, and linguistic habits, as well as by strategic, ideological, or cultural decisions. Participants who used both terms noted that their choice between the two terms often depends on the formality of the situation: *wanita* is preferred in formal or official contexts, while *perempuan* is used in casual settings. Additionally, some participants used both terms interchangeably without any specific reasoning, reflecting a segment of the population for whom the distinctions between these terms hold minimal personal or social significance. For others, the preference for *wanita* over *perempuan* is based on practical considerations: they find *wanita* easier to say in everyday conversation, whereas *perempuan* is perceived as too long.

Considering these participants' survey responses, these two terms were not viewed through a lens of rigid ideological or cultural frameworks. Instead, their choice was shaped by situational appropriateness and ease of communication. From this perspective, such flexibility can be understood as a form of agency, in which speakers actively negotiate social meanings rather than

passively adopt predefined norms. As Bauman (2000) argues, language functions as a performative tool, enabling individuals to enact particular identities and stances through their lexical choices.

At the same time, this process is not fixed or linear. As Harré et al. (2009) emphasise, positioning involves continuous adaptation and negotiation. The fluidity of usage by those who use both terms challenges the static gender identities presented in the *KBBI*, suggesting that individuals are not passively conforming to societal norms but exercising agency in constructing and presenting their identities. By choosing when and where to use *perempuan* or *wanita*, they engage in identity negotiation, crafting multifaceted personas that align with the dynamic, often conflicting demands of Indonesian society. Their choices highlight how language can be a tool for navigating complex societal expectations rather than merely reflecting them.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A CATALYST IN GENDER IDENTITY POSITIONING

The survey results in this study suggest that social media is increasingly shaping perceptions of gender identity. Social media has become a space where institutional debates and individual expressions intersect, allowing even minor actions to serve as forms of democratic participation (Margetts, 2019). Advocacy for redefining *perempuan* in the *KBBI* serves as a powerful example of how social media functions as a space for activism and self-expression, where non-dominant narratives can intersect with public discourse (Dennen, 2024). As individuals tend to engage with influencers whose values resonate with their own, it is increasingly likely that influencers play a pivotal role in shaping public discourse. Influencers, in particular, embody this phenomenon as highly visible figures who garner followers by advocating for specific causes or ideas. Their visibility and influence not only shape individual perspectives but also contribute to broader cultural narratives on identity and representation.

Given that the survey participants identified themselves as frequent social media users, with Instagram being the platform they accessed most often, the frequent use of *perempuan* by Instagram influencers marks a shift in how gendered identity is framed and communicated within mediated spaces. In line with the sociocultural linguistic perspective of Bucholtz and Hall (2005), identity is not fixed but emerges through recurrent discursive practices, in which linguistic forms become associated with specific social meanings. Regular exposure to influencers favouring *perempuan* likely normalises the term, shaping how audiences construct it in their own language production. From a discourse perspective, this process of repeatedly using particular terms may enact and/or reinforce gendered identities by disseminating trends and shaping collective attitudes. The high frequency and quantity of social media interactions enable digital interaction to be transformed into sites where gendered selves are continually performed.

Moreover, evidence from the corpus of two influencers' posts highlights a framing of *perempuan* as progressive, inclusive, and representative of modern gender identities, aligning with evolving cultural values. The association of *perempuan* with action-oriented verbs and its use as exemplified in the influencers' posts further highlight how the term has become a symbol of empowerment and self-expression in public discourse. The frequent use of *perempuan* by influencers enhances its visibility and desirability, influencing participants' preferences and perceptions through mediated interactions. This underscores how language use in digital spaces not only reflects but also drives evolving cultural positionings around identity and agency.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the importance of examining how institutional dictionary definitions, such as those provided by the *KBBI*, interact with contemporary perspectives on gender and identity. Rather than viewing dictionary entries as prescriptive representations, the findings suggest that meanings are continually negotiated through everyday and mediated language practices. In this light, approaches that move beyond strictly essentialist formulations may better capture the diversity of social roles and lived experiences associated with gendered terms, particularly in educational and social contexts where lexical meanings often carry normative weight.

As a reflection of society, language and the terms people use convey layered meanings shaped by history, culture, and social dynamics. This study shows that social media serves as a key platform where individuals negotiate, contest, and reconfigure understandings of terms, such as *perempuan*, often in dialogue with institutional definitions. The differential use of *perempuan* and *wanita* illustrates how women engage in discursive positioning to navigate gendered expectations, institutional norms, and personal identities within digitally mediated spaces. The growing role of social media in reshaping language use and understanding of cultural norms is further evidence that language is emergent and collaboratively constructed. Engaging with online discourses and incorporating insights from linguistic and sociological studies of digital culture can help ensure that dictionary entries reflect contemporary usage while remaining sensitive to the nuances of gendered identities in society.

Theoretically, this study contributes to discourse-based approaches to identity by demonstrating how gendered identities are constructed and negotiated through recurring lexical choices that circulate publicly and iteratively in mediated environments. Terms such as *perempuan* and *wanita* operate as positioning resources through which speakers claim, resist, or accommodate particular subject positions over time. The findings, therefore, further extend feminist linguistic scholarship by foregrounding how agency may be expressed not only through explicit resistance but also through strategic, context-sensitive language use that operates within, and responds to, enduring patriarchal structures.

These findings have implications for educators, linguists, and language institutions. For educators, they underscore the importance of teaching gendered language as socially situated and ideologically inflected rather than neutral or fixed. For linguists and lexicographers, the study suggests the value of engaging with digitally mediated discourse to better understand how meanings evolve beyond institutional definitions. For policymakers and institutions that rely on official lexical categories, the findings caution against treating dictionary definitions as value-neutral, as such terms may carry implicit normative and evaluative meanings in everyday use.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research was supported by the Commonwealth through an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

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