

A critical reflection on masculine language in Coates' theory: A case study of female leaders' speech in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study conducts a critical examination of masculine language features used by female leaders in the public sphere in Indonesia. Based on Coates' (2015) theory of masculinity, this research aims to analyze three main features of masculine language: swearing and taboo language, commands and directives, and questions. The method employed is a qualitative approach based on narrative and content analysis, with secondary data derived from speeches found on relevant YouTube channels. The use of swearing and taboo language serves to assert their dominance in certain situations, while the use of commands and directives demonstrates control and authority. Additionally, rhetorical questions, often associated with masculinity, are used to challenge rigid gender norms. This study shows that masculine language features are not exclusive to men but can also be utilized by women. This research opens new space for discussions about dynamic linguistic identities in social life, particularly in the context of female leadership.

Keywords

language, masculine, norm, gender, authority, leadership

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Introduction

We are about to begin an in-depth discussion on how gender perspectives are constructed through linguistic approaches, including efforts to differentiate language features used by men and women. This framework is what we refer to as a process of creating representations that have the potential to be incomplete in depicting language use in society, and ultimately tend to exaggerate or even oversimplify these differences to the point of appearing essentialist (Baker & Brookes, 2025). To sharpen this initial concept, let us look at two illustrations below:

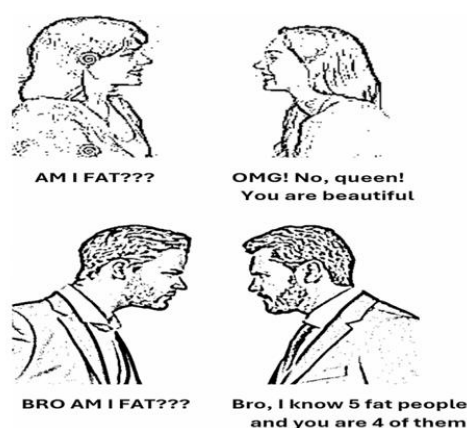


Figure 1. Bro, Am I Fat? Adapted from a meme in the book *Language and Masculinities*.

The results of the researcher's interview with one female respondent revealed, "Sometimes people feel more offended when asked by older women, for example during Eid celebrations. Questions like 'When are you getting married?' or 'When are you graduating?' tend to be more sensitive when asked by women, as if they are being spiteful. However, the same utterances feel more neutral when asked by an older man" (Interview, Vo, April 13, 2025).

Based on the first illustration above, we can draw an initial understanding that when women speak about something related to their emotional vulnerability, they are more likely to be heard — "OMG! No, queen! You are beautiful" — supported, and given space. Meanwhile, when men do the same, there tends to be a greater likelihood of dismissal. This shapes our perception of how to understand the concept of masculinity through language, by observing how men speak or even how we speak about men (Baker & Brookes, 2025). On the other hand, the second illustration shows a different reality experienced by women, where language tends to be non-neutral and often conveys negative views toward women. Ultimately, language shapes habits that then influence patterns of thinking and values (Takeuchi et al., 1994).

However, the illustration above is not an absolute truth, as both women and men have the same opportunity to question the constructions believed to be truths (Sulistyati, 2024). What needs to be noted, however, is that each gender in its social life is equally susceptible to experiencing discriminatory treatment, whether it be women or men.

One scholar who has attempted to define masculinity is Jennifer Coates, who developed concepts of masculinity that can sometimes be harmful to a specific gender. For example, in her 2003 monograph *Men Talk: Stories in the Making of Masculinities*, she depicts men as figures who enjoy showing off and almost never treat women as equals (Baker & Brookes, 2025). On the other hand, Baker & Brookes (2025) argue that in masculinity studies, men are often defined by what they are not. Masculinity studies are a critical examination of men and various forms of masculinity (Gottzén, L., Bjørnholt, M., and Boonzaier, 2020; Gottzén, L., Mellström, U., Shefer,

T. and Grimbeek, 2020). In the framework of masculinity, there are many attempts to assign uniform attributes to men's characteristics and behavior. For example, they are often associated with physical violence, negativity (Alsyounf, 2018; Clark, 2004), or are not allowed to show feminist characteristics (Brannon & David, 1976). This is how men are expected to behave by society or culture, which is institutionalized in social structures such as schools, families, peer groups, and the media, to socialize the creation of the ideal man (Ismail, 2014). Therefore, we often get trapped in attempts to understand masculinity studies solely as a binary opposition (women vs. men). However, gender studies cannot be separated from the social and cultural context of society (Baker & Brookes, 2025; Meyra et al., 2018; Rahmat et al., 2023). This sometimes leads to men losing their true identity by denying aspects of themselves (Edwards & Jones, 2009). One of the cultural discourses aimed at shaping masculine identity is through linguistic features (Kiesling, 2007).

Over time, various functions of language have been used to shape the social identity of speakers, their references, and their conversational partners (Ochs, 1993). Men are generally considered more direct, assertive, and to-the-point in everyday interactions (Kerns & Stevens, 1996). One theory that can be explored further regarding features of masculine language is the theory proposed by Coates (2015). This theory divides several forms of masculine language features, particularly focusing on swearing and taboo language, commands and directives, as well as questions, which serve as powerful linguistic tools in reflecting and shaping gender dynamics (Rahmat et al., 2023). However, the critical question is, when language features that are considered to signify masculinity are used by women, are they still considered masculine? Or conversely, when these features are not used by men, is their masculinity questioned? Or is it possible that linguistic markers are something that remains dynamic and negotiable? Given that a person may exhibit traits that are both highly masculine and highly feminine, so some traits may not be associated with any specific gender (Baker & Brookes, 2025).

Meanwhile, attention to masculine language features in Indonesia remains very limited and has not yet received serious consideration. Among academics and activists in Indonesia, there is still an overwhelming focus on women. Male language is often considered a deficient form of language (Jespersen, 1922), with men viewed as using language to dominate women and reinforce their position as men (Lakoff, 1975; Rahmat et al., 2023), as well as raising awareness about women's oppression through language systems (Spender, 1980). Gender itself is often treated as synonymous with women, while the construction of masculinity in men is rarely discussed, let alone questioned (Clark, 2004). Thus far, some studies have specifically highlighted linguistic features, such as those proposed by Coates (2015). For instance, Rahmat et al., (2023) examined "How do the ethnicity Minangkabau male express their masculinity in language: A identity point of view." This study revealed that characters in Wisran Hadi's novel *Tamu* exhibit three linguistic features reflecting masculinity as a new conceptualization of Minangkabau culture in psychology: the use of vulgar and taboo words, commands and directives, and rhetorical questions. Furthermore, Artika et al., (2024) conducted research using Coates' and Lakoff's theories, concluding that Coates' theory demonstrates inconsistencies, as some features of male language appear in women's speech and vice versa. Meanwhile, Dwijayani et al., (2023) found in their study that women use more taboo words than men in same-gender conversations, whereas in mixed-gender conversations, men are perceived to use taboo words more frequently.

To discuss masculine language features, we cannot separate them from the concept of masculinity itself. Masculinity is a study that cannot be detached from the socio-cultural context of society (Baker & Brookes, 2025; Meyra et al., 2018; Rahmat et al., 2023) and the body/body image (Dawson & Hammer, 2020; Jones, 2015; Liao et al., 2020). The biological concept of maleness is closely related to the social concept of masculinity, while femaleness is associated with femininity (Butler & Trouble, 1990). Traditionally, men are expected to behave and think in

ways described as masculine, while women are expected to act according to their feminine labels (Baker & Brookes, 2025). The social construction of gender often places masculinity and femininity in an unequal position, understanding them as expressive attributes of men and women (Butler & Trouble, 1990). If someone possesses many masculine traits, they are perceived as lacking feminine traits, and vice versa (Baker & Brookes, 2025). However, a more accurate model considers masculinity and femininity as two separate continua, meaning that a person can possess both traits alternately, which cannot be tied to any singular form of gender expression (Baker & Brookes, 2025). This perspective also includes reconsidering the use of specific language perceived as maintaining power relations, challenging harmful social structures, and exploring the possibility of promoting healthier forms of masculinity (Baker & Brookes, 2025). In the concept of intersectionality, there is no single way to be a man or a woman (Levon, 2015) because every identity interacts and produces particular linguistic practices (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).

Language practices associated with men or masculinity must be approached with great care and caution to avoid excessive generalizations (Baker & Brookes, 2025), which can lead to the attribution of certain traits while rejecting others (Logan, 2017). For instance, men are often assumed to speak in a lower pitch compared to women (Cruttenden, 1997). Such linguistic practices can be viewed as cultural traits inherently linked to men (West & Fenstermaker, 2002). Similarly, women are generally considered to be more polite than men (Beeching & Woodfield, 2015; Rahmat et al., 2022; Revita, 2021). However, in reality, linguistic identities are not always fixed and can be negotiated within specific cultural or social contexts. For example, women may engage in practices that demonstrate the use of masculine linguistic features. Therefore, the concept adopted in this research is based on Coates' framework (2015), which includes the choice of diction or words typically associated with masculine language. These features include the use of swearing and taboo language, commands and directives, as well as rhetorical questions (Rahmat et al., 2023).

Based on the above explanation, the researchers identified a gap to further explore the use of masculine language by women in public domains. This is intended to re-examine the masculine language features associated with men, as proposed by Coates (2015), by presenting data from social realities. The goal is to create a broader and more contextual understanding of how masculine language features can be influenced by other factors, such as social status, culture, profession, and ethics, which continuously shape the dynamics of communication in language use by both men and women.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research methodology focusing on narratives, texts, and communicative experiences for interpretative meaning-making (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), with descriptive-analytical procedures that present empirical facts as recorded (Ratna, 2010; Sudaryanto, 2015). The data were collected from two publicly available YouTube videos featuring prominent Indonesian female public figures: Tri Rismaharani (former Mayor of Surabaya, 2010–2020) from the Kompas TV video “Berita Kompas TV: Risma Marah Sidak E-KTP” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jtj2TQ6Fud8>) and Anita Jacoba Gah (Member of the Indonesian House of Representatives since 2004) from the video “GEBRAK MEJA! NadiemMakarim Terdiam ‘Ditelanjangi’ Anggota DPR” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDI3BNS5kqg>);

Both videos were accessed and downloaded on April 17, 2025, and specific segments were selected for analysis (Risma: 00:45–03:12; Anita: 01:12–05:10) based on interactionally rich speech, producing a corpus of nine clips comprising 192 utterances (approximately 2,660

words). All selected speech segments were transcribed into textual form through a two-stage process: YouTube auto-captions were used only as an initial reference, followed by full manual transcription by the researcher, using consistent conventions for punctuation, overlaps, and nonverbal cues (e.g., [shouting], [laughs], [hits table]); reporter narration and irrelevant background talk were trimmed while preserving all utterances by the target speakers.

The analysis applied Krippendorff's (2004) content analysis supported by Miles & Huberman (1994) interactive model (data collection, reduction, display, and verification), with masculine language features coded using Coates' theory (2015) framework and refined through repeated viewing and corpus-based comparison. To ensure reliability and validity, 30% of transcript excerpts were peer-checked by a second coder, disagreements were resolved through consensus by returning to the original recordings, and cross-referencing between video, transcript, and coding notes was conducted as triangulation. Researcher positionality was addressed through reflexive memoing and theory-driven coding to reduce interpretive bias. Ethically, the study uses only public speech of public figures with transparent citation of URLs; however, limitations remain due to possible video editing, varying audio quality, and the restricted scope of two speakers in specific institutional contexts, which limits generalizability beyond the analyzed events.

Results

This study uses speech data from two prominent female public figures in Indonesia: Tri Rismaharani, the former Mayor of Surabaya, and Anita Jacoba Gah, a member of the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI). The focus is on the dimensions of masculinity present in their speech. Three main features of masculine language, based on Coates' theory (2015), can be observed: swearing and taboo language, commands and directives, and questions. These linguistic features relate to word choice (Rahmat et al., 2023).

Table 1. Inventory of Masculine Language Features Coates (2015)

No	Figures	Category	Speech (Indonesian)	Speech (English)
1	Risma	Swearing and Taboo	" <i>Jadi ini boblok sekali!</i> " (Data 1) " <i>Konyol bener ini, kalau elektronik kayak gitu. Konyol pol.</i> " (Data 2) " <i>Jangan sok pinter, sok ngerti, sok kuasa.</i> " (Data 3)	"This is so stupid!" (Data 1) "Really stupid, if the electronics are like that. Totally ridiculous." (Data 2) "Don't act smart, don't pretend to understand, don't act powerful." (Data 3)
2	Anita	Swearing and Taboo	" <i>Omong kosong semua ini.</i> " (Data 4) " <i>Bikin proses memalukan.</i> " (Data 5) " <i>Siapa yang bobrok, siapa yang mencintai negeri ini?</i> " (Data 6) " <i>Anda jangan senyum, Anda membuat persepsion tidak berpikir.</i> " (Data 7)	"This is all nonsense." (Data 4) "Making this process embarrassing." (Data 5) "Who is corrupt, who truly loves this country?" (Data 6) "Don't smile, you're creating a perception that you're not thinking." (Data 7)

No	Figures	Category	Speech (Indonesian)	Speech (English)
3	Risma	Command and Directives	"Aku mau hari ini dibetulkan." (Data 8) "Aku lihat besok, kalau masih ada kayak gini, semua ini tak pindah di kelurahan." (Data 9) "Kamu tunjukkan sidangmu dulu." (Data 10)	"I want this to be fixed today." (Data 8) "I'll see tomorrow, if it's still like this, I'll move all of this to the sub-district." (Data 9) "Show me your trial first." (Data 10)
4	Anita	Command and Directives	"Periksa APBN yang ada di Kemendikbud." (Data 11) "Saya minta pimpinan kita berikan rekomendasi kepada KPK." (Data 12) "Jangan aneh-aneh lah." (Data 13) "Stop dan bertobat." (Data 14)	"Check the state budget at the Ministry of Education and Culture." (Data 11) "I ask the leadership to give recommendations to the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK)." (Data 12) "Don't do anything strange." (Data 13) "Stop and repent." (Data 14)
5	Risma	Questions	"Sekarang aku nanya. Di setuju itu dari mana? Ngapain begitu?" (Data 15) "Kenapa harus nunggu empat hari?" (Data 16) "Ngerti nggak?" (Data 17)	"Now I'm asking. Where does that approval come from? Why do that?" (Data 15) "Why do we have to wait for four days?" (Data 16) "Do you understand?" (Data 17)
6	Anita	Questions	"Anda sebagai kementerian mau enggak diverifikasi?" (Data 18) "Apa Anda pikir semua kepala dinas bersih?" (Data 19) "Bagaimana kepala dinas bisa memverifikasi data yang kita berikan?" (Data 20) "Mana keadilan sosial bagi seluruh rakyat Indonesia?" (Data 21)	"Do you, as a ministry, want to be verified?" (Data 18) "Do you think all department heads are clean?" (Data 19) "How can the department heads verify the data we provide?" (Data 20) "Where is social justice for all the people of Indonesia?" (Data 21)

Swearing and Taboo Language

The type of taboo language and curses aims to create an impression of words that tend to be harsh, impolite, and forbidden (Horan, 2013). Some data that illustrate how female figures use these linguistic features are as follows:

"Jadi ini boblok sekali!", "Konyol bener ini," dan "Jangan sok pinter, sok ngerti, sok kuasa." (Ibu Risma).

"This is so stupid!" "This is really ridiculous," and "Don't act smart, pretend to understand, pretend to have power." (Risma).

In this excerpt, it is clear that Risma is very angry with male employees of the Surabaya City Population and Civil Registration Office (Disdukcapil) during an inspection of the E-ID card

service in Surabaya. Risma shows verbal attacks through words like *"boblok"* (stupid) and *"konyol"* (ridiculous), which are intended to assert her authority and express her impatience with the slow bureaucratic process in the Surabaya City Government, particularly in the E-ID card service. Meanwhile, the use of the repetition *"sok pinter, sok ngerti, sok kuasa"* (pretend to be smart, pretend to understand, pretend to have power) shows Risma's strong position as a female leader, reinforcing her authority in the public space. This is then interpreted as a power play traditionally associated with men (Blackwood, 2001), but in this context, it is a woman who plays the role of exercising power in the public sphere. As Blackledge (2005) states, "language is a site of struggle, where social actors negotiate power and authority in interaction." Through the use of harsh, taboo language, and insults, Risma not only emphasizes the slow bureaucratic system but also demonstrates that women can use the same linguistic features as men to assert their dominant position in the social structure. Meanwhile, Baxter (2009) states that female leaders often adopt masculine discourse styles to navigate male-dominated power structures while negotiating their identities.

Next, the data showing the use of linguistic features categorized as swearing and taboo language can be seen in the following data:

"Omong kosong semua ini."

"Bikin proses memalukan." (Anita)

"All of this is nonsense."

"Making this process embarrassing." (Anita)

This excerpt shows how Anita appears very angry with her conversation partner, Nadiem Makarim, the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia (2019-2024), during a working meeting of Commission X with the Minister. She accuses him of being dishonest, and the phrase *"Omong kosong semua ini"* (All of this is nonsense) is used to attack and question the work done by the Minister, while also expressing disappointment and disagreement with the policies and actions that have been carried out. This expression can be considered impolite when used to curse or insult someone (Damayanti et al., 2021). The phrase *"Bikin proses memalukan"* (Making this process embarrassing) is meant to openly correct the rules and policies that have been implemented so far. This statement is a clear protest, but it can also result in a loss of dignity and insult someone in a harsh manner (Wincana et al., 2022). Meanwhile, Mills (2003) states that women in leadership positions may use confrontational language to assert their authority and challenge institutional norms. In this case, Mrs. Anita is speaking in a confrontational manner as a way to affirm her position as a leader who dares to defend the truth and the interests of the people, even though this has the potential to violate norms of politeness.

Command and Directives

The form of command and instruction language used by female leaders includes giving orders or directions in a polite manner or even in a harsh manner. Commands and instructions can be understood as an imperative form (Aikhenvald, 2016) or instructions used by the speaker to achieve an outcome or action in accordance with the speaker's wishes (Lush, 2002). These commands can be delivered in a gentle (negative) or harsh (positive) manner (Rahmat et al., 2022). In its concept, this feature is typically used by men, as they often use antagonistic questions more than women (Robeyns, 2003). Below are the forms of data obtained from female speech:

"Aku mau hari ini dibetulkan." (Risma).

"I want this to be fixed today." (Risma)

The statement above was made by Risma to instruct that improvements be made to the E-ID Card administration system within the Surabaya City Government. According to Foucault (1980), power is not only repressive, but it also creates norms and rules to regulate individual actions. Risma's statement above not only functions as a direction, but it also serves as a mechanism of control that reaffirms her position as the superior and the subordinates who act as policy implementers. The emphasis on the phrase "*Aku mau hari ini*" (I want this today) underscores that the command is an imperative that must be carried out, strengthening Risma's role as the key decision-maker at the level of the Surabaya City Government.

Furthermore, Fairclough (1989) states that language is used as the primary tool in articulating power in social relationships. The speech used by Risma utilizes command language as a medium to construct her authority. The phrase "*Aku mau*" (I want) demonstrates the personalization of the power she holds, which is interpreted as meaning that every wish of the leader becomes a mandate that must be fulfilled by her subordinates.

"*Periksa APBN yang ada di Kemendikbud.*" (Anita).

"Check the state budget at the Ministry of Education and Culture." (Anita).

This statement is intended to ask the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) to firmly review the State Budget (APBN) allocated to the interlocutor, Nadiem Makarim, the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. With the sentence "*Periksa APBN yang ada di Kemendikbud*" (Check the state budget at the Ministry of Education and Culture), Anita conveys her request firmly, directly, and without hesitation. This demonstrates full control over the ongoing conversation, utilizing the command and directive language feature. Anita employs a communication style often associated with male authority but uses it to reinforce her position as a female leader. From the perspective of power relations theory, this is a tool for asserting discursive power. According to Foucault (1980), power is not only possessed but also enacted in specific practices, one of which is through language. By explicitly commanding the review of the APBN, Mrs. Anita firmly asserts her authority to evaluate and direct existing policies. In doing so, she establishes institutional authority as a member of the Indonesian Parliament (DPR), overseeing the performance of the Minister of Education and Culture, thus positioning her as an important actor in the political power relations.

Question

According to Coates (2015)), one of the characteristics of masculine language is the use of questions. Coates also distinguishes between the types of questions used by men and women, based on the nature of the questions they ask. Men tend to use more antagonistic questions compared to women (Cooley, 2017; Robeyns, 2003). Below is an example of data that shows how women use question features in the public sphere:

"*Ngerti nggak?*" (Risma)

"Do you understand?" (Risma)

This question was addressed by Risma to the Head of the Surabaya City Population and Civil Registration Office (Disdukcapil) and its staff after she finished explaining her critique regarding the performance of the Disdukcapil in issuing E-ID Card, which she considered burdensome to the public. In the sentence "*Ngerti nggak?*" (Do you understand?), this question was not intended to open a dialogue but to serve as a control tool, emphasizing and testing the understanding of her interlocutor. Such language is commonly found in male speech due to its direct, confrontational, threatening nature, and its use to reinforce the speaker's authority (Rahmat et al., 2022). However, in this case, Risma used the question not to seek information but to ensure

compliance and reaffirm her authority as a leader. Additionally, Risma's position as a leader is reinforced by the use of a rhetorical question, which strengthens the authority of female leaders in work relationships. Women in the public domain tend to communicate with masculine elements (Mills, 2003). This also challenges the notion that men are more associated with using antagonistic questions that are forceful, prohibitive, and threatening, compared to women (Cooley, 2017; Robeyns, 2003).

"Apa Anda pikir semua kepala dinas bersih?" (Anita)

"Do you think all department heads are clean?" (Anita)

In this context, Anita addresses her question to her counterpart, Nadim Makarim, the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, criticizing policies that are perceived to weaken the position of the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI) when oversight is relegated to Department Heads. By employing a challenging rhetorical question, she positions herself as an authoritative figure capable of evaluating and questioning the work ethics of others. This aligns with Fairclough's (1989) assertion that language serves as a tool for asserting or maintaining power in social domains. The phrase "Do you think" reflects Anita's expression of distrust and serves as an effort to create pressure, compelling her counterpart to justify their policies. This reinforces her dominant role as a public representative tasked with critiquing public policy. Such a strategy also challenges gender norms often associated with women, as women are generally perceived to use more polite language compared to men (Beeching & Woodfield, 2015; Rahmat et al., 2022; Revita, 2021). However, in this instance, Anita uses a form of questioning that is straightforward and unapologetic, which, when directed at someone in a public communication setting, might be perceived as impolite.

Conclusion

This research is a case study examining the speech of female leaders to critically reflect on the use of masculine language features by two prominent female figures, Tri Rismaharani and Anita Jacoba Gah. Based on Coates's (2015) theory, masculine language encompasses the use of taboo and swearing, directives and commands, as well as questions. This study critically reveals how these two female leaders employ masculine language features to assert and reinforce their authority in the public domain.

This research also critiques the perspective that associates certain linguistic features exclusively with a specific gender. Women, too, can utilize masculine language features based on socio-cultural needs. Therefore, researchers should adopt a more critical perspective that neither privileges one gender nor marginalizes the other in studies of language, gender, and sexuality (Bucholtz, 2014) such an approach ensures that linguistic practices do not structurally reproduce gender inequality (Cameron, 2020). This understanding also impacts how masculinity is perceived (Baker & Brookes, 2025) and how it serves as an essential indicator for achieving the ideal concept of masculinity (Hermawan, 2017). The findings reveal that the use of masculine language by women demonstrates that linguistic patterns are flexible and reflect not only gender but also one's position in the social hierarchy and the functional needs of communication.

Moreover, this study illustrates how female leaders communicate using masculine language to challenge the notion that power structures are inherently male-dominated. This perspective highlights that such structures are negotiable rather than absolute truths. Consequently, language associated with gender, as a cultural construct, transforms the role of gender into something performed rather than inherently possessed. In other words, gender is a "performance" (Butler & Trouble, 1990). This research provides a perspective that the

relationship between language and gender is dynamic, influenced by various factors, including social, cultural, and communicative needs.

In conclusion, the researcher acknowledges that this study is limited to secondary data obtained from YouTube channels. Future research could delve deeper using primary data, exploring everyday communication among women in their social lives.

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