

Intersecting Voices: Gender, Religion, and Language Practices among University Students in Eastern Indonesia

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Abstract

Language functions not merely as a means of communication but as a social arena where gender and religious identities are continuously negotiated and redefined. This study analyzes how language practices among students at Pattimura University reflect and construct social ideologies related to gender and religion within academic and everyday interactions. Using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach within a sociocultural linguistics framework, data were collected through classroom observations, informal conversations in campus public spaces, social media interactions, and in-depth interviews. The analysis followed three stages: textual analysis, discursive practice analysis, and social practice analysis. Findings reveal that address terms and religious expressions, such as “abang/babang” and “bung/bu” for male students, “caca” and “ussy” for female students, and faith-based utterances in daily interactions, serve as linguistic markers of intercommunity identity. These practices demonstrate linguistic accommodation as a strategy for maintaining social harmony while preserving symbolic boundaries between groups. Moreover, gendered positioning emerges as male students often dominate conversational spaces, whereas female students negotiate social positioning through more subtle discursive strategies. The study’s novelty lies in introducing the concept of Interfaith Gendered Discourse, which highlights the simultaneous intersection of gender and religion in linguistic practice. It calls for strengthening critical cross-identity literacy in higher education and expanding sociolinguistic inquiry into multicultural contexts of Eastern Indonesia.

Article Info:

Keywords: Gendered Discourse, Interfaith Communication, Language Ideology, Linguistic Accommodation, Sociocultural Linguistics

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INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a medium of conveying messages but also a tool for negotiating and producing social identity. In multicultural societies, language functions as a space where social boundaries, such as gender, religion, and group membership, are reinforced, stretched, or renegotiated. This phenomenon is particularly visible in the lives of university students in Maluku, especially at Universitas Pattimura, Ambon (Apituley et al., 2022; Hukunala & Angkotasana, 2022). Maluku is widely recognized for its long-standing history of pluralism, yet it has also experienced periods of social conflict that accentuated religious boundaries. In post-conflict daily interactions, linguistic practices serve not only as a medium of communication but also as a marker of solidarity, respect, and strategies for maintaining social harmony. For instance, the use of address terms such as abang/babang for Muslim males and bung/bu for Christian males, or caca for Muslim females and ussy for

Christian females, are not merely lexical variations but represent structured social relations sustained through language (Udiyasa & Madubun, 2023). Similarly, religious expressions such as *bismillah* or *selamat makan* carry not only religious significance but also regulate norms of politeness and intimacy in interpersonal interactions.

This phenomenon indicates that language plays a central role in shaping students' social experiences. Everyday interactions on campus, in classrooms, cafeterias, or social media, become arenas where gender and religious identities are not merely reflected but contested and negotiated through linguistic practices. Thus, examining the relationship between language, gender, and religion in the lives of university students in Maluku is essential, not only to understand contemporary social dynamics in the region but also to contribute to the broader academic discourse on language as social practice in multicultural societies.

Previous studies have emphasized the pivotal role of language in constructing social identity. The tradition of interactional sociolinguistics, for example, explains how speakers use language to mark group membership and social positioning in interaction (Erdocia, 2019; Wilson, 2018). Within the language and identity framework, Fitzsimmons-Doolan (2018) argues that identity is formed through processes of indexicality and performativity embedded in everyday communicative practices. Meanwhile, theories of gender performativity advanced by Bacon and Kim (2018) and Slee (2018) demonstrate that gender is not a static category but one continuously enacted and negotiated through daily actions, including linguistic choices. These perspectives provide the foundation for viewing language as an active instrument in constructing gendered and religious identities, rather than a passive reflection of pre-existing categories.

In the study of language and religion, Gao (2021) and Irvine (2018) highlight that linguistic practices within religious communities are not confined to doctrinal expression but also involve underlying social and political values. Similarly, Chang-Bacon (2022) and Liu (2022) show that even seemingly simple religious expressions are embedded with dimensions of power and moral negotiation. In the Indonesian context, Phyak and Sharma (2021) and Rosen (2023) note that inter-ethnic and interfaith interactions often give rise to distinctive forms of politeness and linguistic accommodation, particularly in urban and educational settings. These studies collectively reveal that religious expression through language serves as both a strategy for reinforcing social cohesion and a means of maintaining group boundaries.

Research on language and gender also reveals the dynamics of power embedded in everyday interactions. Kroskrity (2018) and Sung (2022) describe how certain linguistic forms are associated with masculinity or femininity, not solely based on biological differences but as a result of recurrent social practice. Lindsay (2020) observes that men often employ linguistic forms signaling dominance or solidarity depending on the social context, whereas women tend to use more collaborative rhetorical strategies. In Eastern Indonesia, however, studies that address language and gender remain limited, especially in relation to religious practices. Therefore, it is crucial to explore how these two identities intersect and manifest

linguistically in student interactions within multireligious university settings.

Additionally, several linguistic studies focusing on Maluku have explored how historical intercommunal relations shape everyday communication patterns. Kadir (2023) notes that the relationship between Muslim and Christian communities in Ambon is deeply rooted in history and organized through adat traditions and cultural symbols. Bräuchler (2022) and Gaspersz and Souisa (2023) emphasize that language in Maluku society functions not only as a means of communication but also as a carrier of social values governing who speaks to whom, when, and how. Research by Gaspersz (2023) and Toisuta et al. (2023) on post-conflict social dynamics in Ambon further illustrates that intergroup relations continue to be negotiated in daily life, with language serving as a crucial component in this process.

Nevertheless, most previous studies tend to analyze language and religion separately from language and gender, leaving the intersection between the two underexplored, particularly in the context of student interactions within multicultural universities in Maluku. Moreover, linguistic research in this region has often focused on macro-level issues such as conflict history or identity politics, while the micro-level linguistic practices through which identities are negotiated daily remain underexamined. Yet it is precisely through these everyday linguistic acts that identity is produced, softened, or contested in subtle but significant ways.

This study, therefore, focuses on how language is used to express and negotiate both gender and religious identities simultaneously in student interactions. Such a focus enables a more comprehensive analysis of how solidarity, respect, social distance, and group boundaries are constructed not only through macro social structures but also through seemingly simple linguistic choices in everyday conversation. By examining practices such as address terms, religious expressions in informal interactions, and discursive strategies in conversation, this study proposes that language constitutes a subtle yet significant meeting ground between gendered and religious identities.

The aim of this study is to analyze how university students use language to express, negotiate, or even challenge gendered and religious identities in campus social spaces, and to uncover the underlying linguistic ideologies. Accordingly, the study not only enriches sociolinguistic research in Eastern Indonesia but also contributes theoretically to the global discourse on language as an intersectional domain of identity, and on linguistic practice as a foundation of social harmony in multicultural societies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach, as its primary focus is to understand the meanings and social processes underlying linguistic practices in students' everyday lives. A qualitative design allows for capturing the complexity of interaction, emotion, values, and social logic that cannot be reduced to numerical variables. As Guillen (2019) asserts, this approach provides space for researchers to interpret social phenomena deeply from participants' perspectives, thereby uncovering meanings hidden behind linguistic actions and expressions.

The research was conducted in the Department of Sociology at Universitas Pattimura, Ambon, a multicultural academic environment characterized by intensive interaction among Muslim and Christian, male and female students, making it a rich site for exploring relevant linguistic dynamics. Moreover, the campus serves as an open public space where various identities are fluidly negotiated, allowing for direct observation of these linguistic practices.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, meaning that informants were chosen based on their ability to provide relevant insights (Priya, 2021). The study involved 16 undergraduate students representing diverse gender (male and female) and religious (Muslim and Christian) identities, aged 19–23. Participants were selected for their active engagement in everyday conversations across campus settings, classrooms, cafeterias, and friendship groups, and their willingness to reflect on their linguistic practices. Additionally, two lecturers familiar with campus social dynamics were interviewed as supplementary informants to provide interpretive context. The relatively small number of participants enabled in-depth exploration, consistent with the principles of qualitative inquiry.

Data were collected through three primary techniques: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted openly in various social spaces, such as classrooms, faculty corridors, cafeteria areas, and informal student activities. This technique was chosen because language as social practice cannot always be captured verbally, it must be observed in real-time interaction where speakers respond and adapt to one another (Maxwell & Levitt, 2023). In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore meanings, motivations, and linguistic ideologies that might not be visible through observation. Documentation included social media interactions, classroom notes, and transcripts of informal conversations to complement the primary data.

Data validity was ensured through source and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing interview findings across informants with different religious and gender backgrounds, while methodological triangulation was achieved by cross-verifying observational data with interview and documentation findings. Hence, interpretations of linguistic practices were not based on a single data source but constructed through a layered validation process. Data were analyzed using a critical discourse analysis framework that integrates textual, discursive, and social dimensions to reveal the relationship between language and power structures in students' social lives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Language as a Marker of Social Identity Boundaries

Language as a marker of social identity boundaries among students at Pattimura University is vividly manifested through their choice of address forms, diction, and everyday expressions in both formal and informal interactions. Greetings such as *abang/babang* among Muslim students and *bung/bu* among Christian students illustrate that language serves not only a communicative function but also an indexical one, that is, it signals, calls upon, and reinforces specific forms of social membership. In this sense, identity does not exist as a fixed

category but is continuously reproduced through everyday linguistic practices. As noted by Kroskrity (2018) and Sung (2022), linguistic identity is constructed through the process of indexicality, whereby specific linguistic forms become associated with particular social identities through consistent use in interaction.

Field observations reveal that students do not merely use such address forms out of habit; rather, they deploy them as social markers that communicate both “who I am” and “who my interlocutor is.” For instance, during informal gatherings at the campus cafeteria, a male Muslim student was observed saying, “Bang, tunggu sa dulu, mo ambil air” (“Bro, wait for me, I’m getting water”). The address term Bang was uttered in a relaxed, friendly tone. Nearby, a group of Christian students used Bung similarly: “Bung, ko ikut ka besok?” (“Bro, are you joining tomorrow?”). While both terms serve comparable interpersonal functions, building familiarity and rapport, they simultaneously index membership in distinct social groups. The choice of greeting thus conveys not only intimacy but also religiously inflected masculine identity. Language, therefore, operates as a subtle yet effective boundary marker: social divisions are not explicitly stated but are perceptible through linguistic choice in everyday interaction.

Similar patterns appear in feminine address forms such as caca among Muslim women and ussy among Christian women. A female Muslim informant (AM, 21) noted that she prefers being called caca because it sounds gentle and “more appropriate for the polite image of a Muslim woman.” Conversely, a Christian informant (LH, 20) described ussy as an affectionate form used among Christian women to signal warmth and solidarity. These address forms thus serve not only to express emotional closeness but also to construct symbolic boundaries of group identity. Their continued reproduction over time embeds them within the social structure of everyday interaction.

These address forms exemplify stance-taking practices, that is, how speakers position themselves socially and affectively through language (Phyak & Sharma, 2021; Rosen, 2023). When one chooses abang instead of bung, they enact alignment and affiliation with the Muslim community. Hence, language is not merely a communicative tool but also a performative arena where dynamic identities are articulated, negotiated, and affirmed. The interlocutor simultaneously interprets and responds to this stance, resulting in a co-construction of identity. Thus, identity is not solely internally assigned but also socially negotiated through recognition in interaction.

Participant observation corroborates these findings. During a class break, groups of Muslim and Christian students were observed occupying different corners of a corridor. Muslim students, sitting together in a circle, repeatedly used abang in their jokes and banter, while Christian students across the corridor used bung with similar conviviality. The physical space was shared, yet symbolic boundaries were palpable. Interestingly, these boundaries did not generate tension; rather, they fostered social order, allowing harmony to persist without erasing difference. This reflects the notion of micro-boundary building in everyday interaction (Chang-Bacon, 2022; Liu, 2022), whereby social identity boundaries are maintained through small, often unconscious, routine linguistic acts.

However, these boundaries remain flexible. In cross-group contexts, students occasionally adopt address forms associated with other communities as a gesture of respect or closeness. A male Christian student (RT, 22), for instance, reported using *abang* when speaking to Muslim peers to honor local norms of politeness. He noted that doing so “makes the conversation smoother and avoids unnecessary distance.” This phenomenon illustrates accommodation in linguistic practice, the adjustment of speech style to promote social comfort and preserve harmony in interaction.

Linguistic Accommodation as a Strategy for Social Harmony

Linguistic accommodation across identity boundaries at Pattimura University demonstrates that language functions not merely as a communicative tool but as a social mechanism for cultivating and maintaining harmony within a plural environment. In post-conflict Maluku, this practice carries deep historical significance: language becomes a medium for expressing willingness to coexist despite the lingering memories of religious division. The Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles & Coupland, 1991) provides a foundational lens for understanding how individuals adjust linguistic behavior to foster proximity; yet, in the Maluku context, such accommodation is not merely interpersonal, it is imbued with social, ethical, and historical meaning.

Field data show that students often employ linguistic forms associated with other religious communities when interacting in mixed settings. For instance, Muslim students who typically use *abang* or *babang* for respected male peers sometimes adopt *bung* when conversing with Christian students in organizational contexts. Similarly, Christian students have been observed using *caca* or *ussy*, more common in Muslim circles, when they wish to express familiarity or respect. One respondent (S) explained that these choices are made “to make others feel comfortable” and “keep the atmosphere pleasant,” although not used universally across contexts.

Consistent patterns emerged across campus spaces, cafeterias, student organization offices, and faculty lobbies. One afternoon, in the shade of a large *ketapang* tree, two Christian students addressed a Muslim peer using *Bang* instead of *Bung*. The exchange was casual and humorous, suggesting that the borrowed address term had become normalized in their peer discourse. Conversely, the Muslim student used *caca* to address a Christian female student in the same group. Although seemingly trivial, these choices reflect acute social awareness of identity boundaries, language adjustment here becomes an enactment of harmony.

Such accommodation is not merely spontaneous but constitutes deliberate identity work, a conscious effort to negotiate social position in interaction. According to Giles and Coupland (1991), accommodation can take the form of convergence (adjusting speech to reduce distance) or divergence (maintaining distinctiveness). In this setting, convergence predominates, as students modify linguistic choices to convey mutual respect. However, convergence does not erase difference; rather, difference persists as a symbolic backdrop, managed in ways that sustain social cohesion. Linguistic accommodation thus emerges as a strategy for managing diversity without homogenizing identity.

Recent studies on interfaith youth communication highlight that accommodation in plural contexts is never neutral (Gao, 2021; Irvine, 2018). It embodies a social ethic in which the accommodating party acknowledges the other's identity while reaffirming commitment to coexistence. This dynamic is evident at Pattimura University, where cross-identity address forms are often used to avoid misunderstanding or maintain mutual understanding. As one informant (J) explained, using *bung* with Christian peers helps "avoid misinterpretation" and signals that "we are not just classmates but brothers and sisters." Language here thus functions as a medium of emotional bonding and intergroup solidarity.

Nevertheless, accommodation can also entail latent tension. During formal academic situations, classrooms, seminars, or official meetings, students tend to use neutral or standard Indonesian forms such as *kak*, *teman-teman*, or personal names. This shift suggests that in certain contexts, social identities are deliberately downplayed to maintain equality and professionalism. In other words, linguistic accommodation is situational, shaped by power relations, emotional proximity, and spatial sensitivity.

Linguistic accommodation among Pattimura University students represents more than a communicative adjustment, it is a socially grounded strategy for harmony. It requires situational awareness, historical consciousness, and respect for identity boundaries while keeping dialogue open. Language thus becomes a site of negotiation, enabling students to maintain closeness without erasing difference and to sustain distinct identities without creating division.

Gendered Positioning in Everyday Interaction

Linguistic accommodation among students at Pattimura University illustrates that language functions not merely as a tool for information exchange but as a medium for nurturing social relationships within a multireligious society marked by historical traces of conflict. In everyday interactions, students, consciously or unconsciously, adjust their address terms, intonation, speech styles, and word choices to demonstrate respect, closeness, and sensitivity toward their interlocutors' identities. This finding aligns with the framework of Communication Accommodation Theory, which posits that individuals adapt their linguistic styles to foster intimacy (convergence) or to maintain social distance (divergence). However, in the post-conflict context of Maluku, linguistic accommodation carries deeper social and historical significance, as it directly relates to efforts to preserve harmony and prevent symbolic friction within a collective memory shaped by past identity-based divisions (Bacon & Kim, 2018; Fitzsimmons-Doolan, 2018; Slee, 2018).

Campus observations reveal that students frequently use address terms associated with other social groups as a sign of respect. For instance, Muslim students who commonly address men within their community as *abang* or *babang* may use *bung* when speaking to Christian peers. Conversely, Christian students who typically use *bung* among themselves might address Muslim female peers as *caca* or *ussy*. These linguistic adjustments are not arbitrary; they follow the situational context, the depth of relational ties, and sensitivity to identity cues in interaction. One informant, R (Muslim), explained that he uses *bung* to address Christian peers as a way of showing respect, as he feels that such usage "helps ease

the atmosphere and affirms equality among fellow students.”

This pattern was clearly observed during a late afternoon in the campus garden, where three students from different religious backgrounds sat together in casual conversation. When a Muslim female student approached, one of the Christian male students greeted her with *caca*, continuing the conversation in a soft and friendly tone. This small linguistic act subtly communicated inclusion and mutual recognition without any explicit statement of solidarity or equality. Here, language operates as an emotional organizer of interaction, maintaining social balance while preventing symbolic distance between identities.

However, linguistic accommodation is not only about creating intimacy; it also embodies a social ethic. As noted by Erdocia (2019) and Wilson (2018), studies on interfaith youth communication reveal that accommodation is never entirely neutral, it carries moral and social consequences. When one adjusts their language, they enact an act of recognition toward the interlocutor's identity, and this recognition bears emotional and symbolic significance, especially in societies with a history of identity-based tension. This aligns with the account of informant L (Christian), who explained that he used *babang* when addressing Muslim peers not out of habit but to show appreciation for their social and cultural background.

Linguistic accommodation also reflects sensitivity to social spaces. In formal settings such as classrooms, academic seminars, or organizational meetings, students tend to use standard Indonesian or neutral address forms like *kak*, *teman-teman*, or direct names. This indicates that accommodation is both contextual and strategic, shaped by social hierarchy, academic etiquette, and the implicit expectations of the setting. In such contexts, language functions as a mechanism for maintaining formal equality while avoiding explicit identity signaling that could trigger social sensitivity.

Accommodation likewise serves as a preventive strategy against potential misunderstanding and symbolic tension. One interviewee, S, admitted feeling uneasy using address terms from their own community in interfaith interactions for fear of being perceived as emphasizing group identity too strongly. Consequently, they opted to use the interlocutor's preferred address form as a linguistic compromise, creating an emotionally safe communicative space.

Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that linguistic accommodation is a layered social practice, a bridge, a shield, and a symbolic strategy for managing difference. Language becomes a site where social harmony is maintained not through abstract slogans of tolerance but through small, repeated acts of everyday speech. Within a multireligious and multiethnic campus context, linguistic accommodation embodies a living commitment to coexistence, a form of cultural sensitivity rooted in shared history and collective awareness that social harmony must be continuously nurtured, not merely presumed.

Interfaith Gendered Discourse: The Intersection of Identities

Linguistic interactions within the university are never situated in a social vacuum. Every lexical choice, intonation pattern, and address form used by students carries layered meanings, particularly in relation to gender and religion. In Pattimura University's plural and

post-conflict setting, language serves as a social arena where identities are not merely expressed but also negotiated and sustained. The findings reveal that gender and religious identities do not operate separately; instead, they intersect and mutually shape each other. Thus, linguistic performance is not a mere reflection of self-expression but a manifestation of what can be termed interfaith gendered discourse, a discursive space in which gender and faith identities co-constitute and give meaning to one another.

This approach aligns with the framework of intersectional sociolinguistics, which emphasizes that individual identity is neither singular nor linear but constituted through the interaction of multiple social categories. Among students, gendered identity cannot be understood apart from religious affiliation. For example, the address terms *abang/babang* not only index Muslim masculinity or maturity but also embody relational ethics of warmth, protection, and *ukhuwah* (brotherhood) valued within Muslim culture. Meanwhile, *bung/bu* in Christian communities indexes masculinity characterized by independence and egalitarianism, values central to Christian relational norms. In this sense, gender identity is inseparable from the religious traditions that produce its social meanings.

The use of *caca* and *ussy* among female students reflects similar dynamics. A female informant, D, explained that she felt comfortable being called *caca* by Muslim peers because it sounded soft, warm, and emotionally intimate. However, when interacting with Christian peers, she was addressed as *ussy*, which she described as conveying a different but equally affectionate, more communal, and playful sense of closeness. These preferences show that address terms are not merely about who speaks to whom, but about how one wishes to be socially positioned in a given relationship. Female identity here is performative, constructed through repetitive symbolic acts, including linguistic ones (Hickey-Moody & Willcox, 2019; Sian, 2021).

Field observations confirm these patterns in daily campus life. During lunch breaks in the cafeteria, groups of female students, Muslim and Christian, often converse informally. When a Muslim male student joins and greets a Christian female friend with *ussy*, the conversation becomes noticeably warmer and more relaxed. Later, when a Christian male student greets a Muslim woman with *caca*, a similar pattern of closeness emerges, though with a distinct emotional tone. In such moments, language functions as a meeting ground, a site where identities are woven together through small, repeated acts that generate unnoticed but sustained social cohesion.

Religious identity also surfaces in the use of faith-based expressions. Utterances such as *bismillah*, *alhamdulillah*, and *astaghfirullah* among Muslim students not only express personal piety but also signal one's positioning within a religiously framed social world. Likewise, Christian students frequently use *puji Tuhan* ("praise the Lord") or *Tuhan tahu* ("God knows"). When these expressions appear in interfaith interactions, their meanings may shift, from religious declaration to markers of politeness, acknowledgment, or stance-taking, the linguistic articulation of affective position, identity, and relational alignment (Admirand, 2019; Verma & Sukhramani, 2018). One Muslim student, M, explained that he occasionally uses *puji Tuhan* when talking with Christian peers as a gesture of respect for the faith-based space

being invoked in conversation. Such linguistic flexibility demonstrates both high metapragmatic awareness and the emotional labor required to sustain relational balance.

Here, the notion of interfaith gendered discourse gains its full significance. Language does not merely represent pre-existing identities; it actively constitutes them. When a Muslim woman is addressed as *ussy* in interfaith interaction, she is simultaneously recognized not only as Muslim and as a woman but as an intersectional subject whose identity emerges through the fusion of both categories in social performance. Identity thus becomes fluid, continuously negotiated according to interactional context and interpersonal dynamics. At the same time, such linguistic practices sustain everyday pluralism on campus. There are no formal declarations of tolerance, no rhetorical affirmations of interfaith equality. Rather, social harmony is maintained through small, recurring acts, choosing the right address term, adjusting speech style, or deploying religious expressions with tact and empathy.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the linguistic practices of students at Pattimura University constitute a vital site where gendered and religious identities are both expressed and subtly negotiated through address forms, speech styles, and the use of religious expressions in everyday interaction. Language functions simultaneously as a boundary marker and a bridge, demarcating social identities without intensifying division, while also enabling closeness through ethically grounded, context-sensitive linguistic accommodation. In the multicultural, post-conflict context of Maluku, such practices form what this study conceptualizes as Interfaith Gendered Discourse: a living linguistic practice in which gender and religious identities intersect, co-construct, and remain continuously negotiated. This concept underscores that social harmony is not achieved through formal declarations but through small, repetitive acts of attentiveness, respecting others' identity sensitivities and engaging in mindful accommodation within interaction. Ultimately, language plays a profound social role in sustaining pluralism and nurturing inter-identity relations in higher education, opening new possibilities for research into similar linguistic practices across Indonesia's diverse sociocultural settings.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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