

Femininities and Masculinities across Contemporary Discourses

Issues and Perspectives

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1. Introduction

This special issue aims to identify and analyze the linguistic, discursive, and multimodal resources used to represent femininities and masculinities across various genres and domains. Its contributions do not equate femininity with women nor masculinity with men; rather, they consider these notions as “loosely defined, historically variable, and interrelated social ascriptions to persons with certain kinds of bodies – not the natural, necessary, or ideal characteristics of people with similar genitals” (Gardiner 2004, 35). Gender is understood as a social construction and not as a biologically fixed categorization (Gardiner 2004). It is also viewed not as what someone is but as what one does, as a process or activity continuously performed by individuals and that can thus overcome any binary limit (Butler 1990, 2004). The research on femininity and masculinity featured in this special issue draws on the assumption that these constructs are neither opposite poles nor mutually exclusive: the masculine includes the feminine and vice versa (Carrieri et al. 2013, 299). By rejecting an essentialist perspective, the works presented here emphasize that gender configurations are fluid and that everyone – regardless of sex or sexuality – consumes, (re)produces and performs them (Sedgwick 2008). However, current societies attach more value and prestige to masculinity than to femininity; this asymmetrical and unequal organization is generated at the level of power structures and can be either reinforced or challenged by social and discursive practices (Lazar 2005).

The articles included in this Special Issue examine masculine and feminine representations across multiple domains and genres. In particular, papers investigate the way gender is constructed in institutional and public contexts (such as in administrative, medical and political discourse), in popular culture (especially magazines and movies), and on social media platforms (like Reddit and TikTok). An initial section is also devoted to studies which intersectionally explore portrayals of gender and age, highlighting how analyzing masculinity and femininity

requires understanding how these identities are performed and perceived across different life phases.

The following paragraphs provide a brief discussion of the types of discourse – intersectional, institutional, and popular – addressed in this Special Issue. The last section contains a concise overview of the included papers.

2. Intersectionality

Foregrounding the contextual, relational, and evolving nature of identity construction (Bucholtz and Hall 2004), the integration of an intersectional perspective allows researchers to scrutinize the discursive mechanisms through which social inequalities are maintained, normalized, or contested (Esposito, Pérez-Arredondo and Zottola 2024) with awareness and insight. Against this backdrop, intersectionality offers a powerful and necessary lens to interpret the discussion on the role of femininities and masculinities in our society because, as Davis (2008) suggests, it engages directly with the multifaceted nature of social reality. In this sense, intersectionality, rather than simplifying complex lived experiences, engages with the sophisticated and intertwining structures of oppression that contribute to positioning one's identity within a given social hierarchy and enables a nuanced but comprehensive understanding of how power operates across contexts and through multiple social dimensions such as gender, sexuality, race, class, and ability (Lykke 2010).

These various axes are explored in this special issue starting from the variable of gender identity and looking at how this crosses paths with all the other variables. In fact, over the past two decades, scholars of language and discourse have increasingly acknowledged that gender is never experienced in isolation (see Catenaccio; Fruttaldo in this issue). Rather, it intersects with other structures of social stratification – such as ethnicity, class, or national/regional belonging – to produce unique configurations of power, inequality, and vulnerability (Lazar 2014; 2005).

When it was first theorized in the late 1980s by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality was precisely thought of as a conceptual and legal tool that served the purpose of highlighting how antidiscrimination frameworks and feminist/race politics erased the particular experiences of Black women and other marginalized people. Crenshaw did so through intersectionality by arguing that single-axis analyses of race or gender systematically dismissed the discrimination faced by these women and that, in order to observe reality in a way that would put each individual on a level playing field, law and policy cannot dismiss the overlapping of such categories. And it was a league of Black feminist intellectuals who allowed this theoretical lens to flourish and become established within academic environments. Among them we may recall bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Angela Davis, whose work brings intersectional perspectives to

the analysis of literature, media representations, and politics, and who transformed this notion into a lived practice grounded in activism and in creating space for the intersectional bodies they embodied. About three decades later, Patricia Hill Collins (2019) defines intersectionality as both an analytic and critical social theory proposing the so-called matrix of domination, whereby she suggests that features of one's identity, such as race, class and gender, operate together across interpersonal, institutional, and structural levels of power, adding an additional layer of complexity. Viewed this way, intersectionality provides a powerful tool for examining how institutions represent, manage, and regulate identities. It functions both as a critical approach for reading policies and legal change and as a normative framework for guiding institutional reform – reform which should dismantle discrimination but more often than not serves instead to mask the persistence of harmful laws and practices across politics (see Shvanyukova in this issue), institutions and the legal (see Paganoni in this issue) and health systems (see Riboni and Zottola in this issue).

More recently, de Melo Resende and de Freitas Rodrigues Loureiro (2024) have highlighted that an important contribution of intersectionality lies in its challenge to mainstream knowledge production. Rather than adopting the standpoint of the white Western subject as the default reference for theorizing social experience, intersectionality begins from the situated knowledge of marginalized groups – most notably Black women – and from their encounters with the overlapping ideologies of racism, sexism, and classism. This emerging awareness, centered around a postcolonial perspective (Esposito, Pérez-Arredondo and Zottola 2024), is accompanied by an evolving communicative paradigm shaped by social media which materializes in the audiovisual and cultural productions that fill up our screens. With regards to social media, these have become a double-edged sword when it comes to intersectionality. On the one hand, they help to amplify intersectional subjectivities' voices and facilitate coordination of activism across different causes (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo). On the other, they are also spaces which unfortunately reproduce new forms of exclusion, harassment and (tech-related) invisibility (Zottola 2024; see Roldán-García et al.; De Santo; Balirano and Donadio; Zorzi in this issue). At the same time, popular texts and mediatic representations must draw from intersectionality to avoid the commodification of diversity which inevitably leads to the erasure of difference and cultural richness (see Ringrow; Federici in this issue).

It is within this scenario that the intersectional lens becomes central to the discussion and conceptualization of notions such as femininity and masculinity that are so deeply rooted and entrenched in heteronormative and binary thinking.

3. Institutional and public discourse

Public discourse refers to the communication and negotiation of knowledge and ideas involving the various social, political and institutional actors. These interactions contribute to the shaping of collective representations of reality and social norms. The cultural and national contexts in which public discourse occurs significantly influence its nature. At the same time, policies and exchanges can also bring about change in cultural attitudes and national identities. In this special issue, particular attention is devoted to the study of institutional, medical and political discourse and the ways in which hegemonic representations of masculinity and femininity are either reproduced or resisted.

Institutional discourse is a form of specialized communication in which individuals interact with formal organizations in various contexts such as law courts, universities, and public administrations, among others (Diani 2025, 1). Research into this kind of discourse “sheds light on how organizations work [...] and how knowledge and power get constructed and circulate within routines, systems and common-sense practices of work-related settings” (Roberts 2011, 81). In other words, institutions represent public structures in which gender balance is enacted and either reinforced or challenged through discourse. They do not act as passive consumers of socially generated masculine and feminine constructions; they also actively participate in their production (Carrieri et al. 2013, 298). This is observable, for example, in the role institutional discourse plays in creating idealized models of femininity and masculinity, shaping the gender performances deemed acceptable – that is, those sanctioned – within the public sphere. These discourses promote social expectations and restrictions related to gender, often leading to stereotyping and, ultimately, discrimination against women and their subaltern status (Bobbit-Zeher 2011).

Their spread and dominance are so unchallenged that they even influence how men, women, and issues related to their disparities are presented in institutional strategies targeting gender equality. Gender mainstreaming (see Paganoni in this issue), an approach that ensures that the rights, experiences, and needs of both women and men are of pivotal importance in the design of policies through the adoption of positive actions, has been on the global agenda for almost thirty years (Caywood and Darmstadt 2024). However, meaningful change has not been achieved, partly because of the way in which policy proposals are formulated and problems are framed (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016; Bacchi 2000). Power relations deeply affect how injustices are portrayed and problematized, which often leads to the downplaying or concealment of the responsibility of structures generating them and to blaming the victim. Research like that featured in this special issue can help shed light on these dynamics and foster change in both discursive and institutional practices.

Structural gender imbalances are also at the root of medical discourse, which can overlap with and exacerbate the already uneven relationship between physician and patient and between scholar and informant (Sarangi 2004; Sarangi and Roberts 1999). In both past and present contexts, policies governing the delivery of healthcare services have been shaped in accordance with men's superior social standing (Merone et al. 2022; Homan 2019) and have arguably been used as means of controlling women's bodies (Yuill et al. 2022; Jordan 1997).

The processes of pathologization and medicalization (Conrad and Schneider 1980) have been acting as pivotal factors in this regard. Due to gender-based discrimination and marginalization against women, conditions that exclusively affect women are often either under- or over-pathologized and medicalized. Historically, female pain has been either made invisible or discursively depicted as 'natural' and commonly disregarded, misdiagnosed and undertreated (Jaworska and Ryan 2018). Conversely, women's ailments have been excessively pathologized and medicalized when they were considered to result from 'unnatural' behavior, such as rejecting marital life.

Language and discourse are inextricably linked with pathologization and medicalization processes (Heaney and Riboni 2025). Illnesses do not represent objective and static categories, but their pathological status is determined by a collective agreement – that is to say they are socially and discursively constructed. In andronormative medical domains, men are typically granted epistemic authority and their forms of knowledge are those receiving legitimization. As a consequence, a shift in discourse is of vital importance to foreground female voices in medical communication and medical practices, challenge gender biases, and promote fairness in healthcare expertise and delivery. Unfortunately, current research underscores that, in spite of some improvements, women's disempowerment is still the norm as the power structures underlying medical discourse have not significantly evolved (see Riboni and Zottola in this issue).

The last sphere of public communication the special issue focuses on is political discourse. This section primarily investigates the nexus between language use and male and female participation in the political arena. It explores political identities, which can be constructed either by other actors or carefully crafted in self-presentations as gendered *personas* capable of influencing voter perception and behavior. This highlights the complex interplay of gender norms in politics. The main area of scholarly reflection is discursive practices that can either strengthen or resist gender inequalities in representation and visibility, drawing on the assumption that women's sidelining is partially caused by hegemonic and interconnected portrayals of masculinity and femininity. In fact, political narratives tend to depict male leaders as more capable to assert authority and legitimacy because of their gender, while female politicians are considered less powerful and competent.

The reproduction of gender stereotypes in political discourse is often echoed, if not amplified, by the strong and well-established interrelation between leaders, parties and interest groups on the one hand, and mass media corporations on the other. Unsurprisingly, research on (gendered) political discourse has traditionally examined politicians' speeches as well as newspaper articles, expanding over the last two decades to include Internet and social media content. However, the analysis of the representations of femininities and masculinities in the political field has also been conducted in other genres, such as in campaign training (see Shvanyukova in this volume) and mentoring or political leadership courses specifically addressed to women. This widening into various genres stems from an increasing understanding that current political discourse is no longer solely shaped by public speeches and media coverage: other domains can be researched in order to promote female inclusion and legitimization with power structures.

To conclude, the investigation of gendered discourses across institutional, medical, and political contexts in this special issue aims to deepen the understanding of the causes of persistent discrimination and foster change and demarginalization. It is believed that studying the perpetuation and resistance of hegemonic femininities and masculinities in these spheres can contribute to discursive and social evolution towards women's empowerment and gender equality.

4. Popular culture and social media discourse

Popular culture is a key domain for exploring the discursive representations of masculinities and femininities. There are a myriad of ways in which one can define popular culture and, by extension, popular discourse. A general distinction is often drawn between popular ('low') culture, referring to practices, perspectives and products associated with the mainstream public, *versus* 'high' culture, where these items are linked to powerful social elites in a specific societal setting. This distinction is not absolute and can also change in line with political, social, and economic developments. Djonov and Zhao (2013) adopt a broad definition of popular discourse, arguing that there is a reciprocal relationship between popular texts and their socio-cultural context. They suggest examples of "popular culture texts (e.g., hit TV shows, music videos, and women's magazines) and phenomena (e.g., fashion, jazz), [...] texts designed to popularize particular institutional discourses (e.g., science, business, and politics), and [...] ubiquitous semiotic practices and technologies (e.g., the use of office software and social media)" (2013, 24). In this way, researchers can consider how the discourse of popular culture – as a broad umbrella term encompassing media and social media products – has the potential to both represent and change society, and *vice versa*.

Constructions of gender and sexual identity in popular culture (including both fictional and non-fictional texts) contribute to our understanding of femininities and masculinities. Previously, popular culture had sometimes been erroneously dismissed as less ‘worthy’ of academic study, but it is this very ‘everydayness’ combined with a high level of popularity that merits exploration, especially in terms of popular culture’s role in making sense of reality (Bednarek 2010, 7-10). Women’s lifestyle magazines are one such example that has attracted much attention from a discursive perspective, as these cultural texts present ideas of what it means to be a ‘woman’ (in terms of beauty standards and behavior), and may reinforce or challenge dominant gendered discourses through these underlying ideologies (see Federici this issue). Fictional representations in the media and in literature are also important because they provide narratives for how we understand masculinities and femininities, and these narratives then intersect with our non-fictional ways of understanding identities (Bednarek 2010; see Ringrow in this issue). For example, Fought and Eisenhauer’s (2022) linguistic analysis of Disney and Pixar films considers how the characters themselves talk, how they are talked about, what messages these movies convey to children and parents, and how scripted fictional language connects with wider societal stereotypes and assumptions related to masculinities, femininities, and queer identities. In much contemporary media, not least advertising discourse, women’s appearance from childhood through to adulthood has generally been foregrounded and overemphasized compared to that of men’s (Ringrow 2016, 1).

Across age groups and cultural contexts, ideas around gender and identity can be (re)presented, reinforced, and/or challenged through popular communication, and this includes the ever-pervasive domain of social media. When considering social media discourses, there are a plethora of aspects to take into account which might include, *inter alia*, the text(s) themselves (language, visuals, moving image, sound, etc.); their affordances (which may be platform-dependent); reader response; the role of the algorithm; AI-generated content; mis/disinformation; abuse and hate speech; online communities; authenticity; promotional content; and the ethics of researching social media spaces. Recent methodological and theoretical approaches in the field, particularly Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS) have increasingly focused on the multimodal aspects of social media communication and on connecting critical discourse-based work with that of digital media and technology research (KhosraviNik and Esposito 2018, 45). As such, SM-CDS “refers to various ways of understanding the materiality of discourse and data, integrating various types and degrees of social theory, while accounting for the specific mediation technology and its impact in terms of shaping discourses and power” (Esposito and KhosraviNik 2023, 13). This is particularly relevant for gendered identities, which are often inherently connected to patriarchal and heteronormative systems and values.

Scholars, especially in sociolinguistic research, are increasingly moving away from older conceptualizations of the offline sphere as ‘the real world’ (and the virtual as ‘fake’) and instead have developed the umbrella concept of the ‘online-offline nexus’ (Androutsopoulos, forthcoming; see also Blommaert 2019; Barton and Lee 2026, 59-60) as a more nuanced and arguably accurate way to refer to how on- and offline communications are increasingly entangled in a complex manner. Discourses of misogyny, sexism, homophobia and transphobia may have found a particular ‘home’ in certain online communities such as 4chan and Reddit (see Zorzi in this issue), but these discourses are not detached from the social, political, and economic structures of society at large, including the global issue of violence against women. Concepts of traditional masculinity in Western contexts – including that of the cisgender, heterosexual, strong, stoic, and emotionally detached man – may be reinforced and/or challenged via social media narratives (see Balirano and Donadio; De Santo in this issue). Conservative gendered ideals around marriage, work and domestic labor may be recirculated in social media platforms, using digital affordances to their advantage to appeal to their audiences, but this also presents opportunities for challenge and critique (see Roldán-García et al. in this issue).

Overall, popular culture and social media texts are rich sites for investigating how femininities and masculinities are discursively constructed. These gendered discourses also intersect with those found in other contexts addressed earlier in this chapter, including institutional, medical, and political communication.

5. Content of the special issue

The special issue is divided into three sections, each addressing the representation of femininity and masculinity within a different discursive formation, that is to say, intersectional, institutional, and popular culture and discourses. It begins with a section dedicated to the exploration of gender at its intersection with age. Starting from the assumption that both are discursively performed and that their enactment is mostly intertwined, these articles investigate how these identities are constructed and experienced across different contexts, shedding light on their complexities.

Catenaccio’s article explores the quasi-synonymous notions of ‘middle age’ and ‘midlife’ in contemporary discourse. By examining their usage in the enTenTen21 corpus – which includes a wide range of genres and discourses – the study reflects on the meanings of these elusive concepts, the current efforts to provide a positive reframing, and their differing applications to men and women. Although some emerging uses of *midlife* portray it as a time of growth or change, these positive interpretations are not strongly supported by corpus data. Catenaccio contends that, despite cultural efforts to rethink this life stage, language use continues to reflect

stereotypes and inequalities. By identifying these trends, the study deepens understanding of how gender, age, and language intersect in shaping contemporary portrayals of adult life stages.

Fruttaldo's study investigates the ways generational cohorts, especially Baby Boomers and Millennials, are linguistically constructed and framed in British newspaper discourse. It uses a corpus-based approach and combines quantitative and qualitative analyses to examine lexical patterns, metaphors, and evaluative language to reveal how media narratives affect the general perception of age groups and contribute to 'generation panics,' or public anxieties about them. The research applies Critical Discourse Studies and Appraisal Theory to understand how evaluations become newsworthy through aligning with News Values. Additionally, the study explores the intersection of generational identities with masculinity and femininity and underscores how gender differences influence media representations. The paper fills a gap in corpus-based research on generational discourse by adopting both gender and newsworthiness perspectives.

The following section deals with the ways in which public discourse is changing due to more societal awareness and more measures taken to guarantee fairness and equality in representation. Institutional, political and medical discourses are examined with the aim to show how these fields are adapting their narratives and practices in response to calls for greater inclusivity and equity. This includes exploring shifts toward gender mainstreaming and the inclusion of marginalized voices.

Starting from the notion of 'she-cession,' a term coined during the COVID-19 pandemic to highlight the disproportionate economic impact on women compared to men, Paganoni's article analyzes gender mainstreaming in EU policy under Ursula von der Leyen's first European Commission mandate (2019–2024). Relying on corpus-assisted discourse-analytical tools, the article sheds light on the progress made in establishing gender equality as both a moral and economic value, but it also reveals setbacks, such as limited attention to intersectionality. The analysis highlights that political rhetoric and structural measures to address welfare issues are not always aligned, and that women's contributions during the pandemic were not recognized enough. The meaningful inclusion of diverse women's experiences and real, lasting societal change are still a work in progress across the EU.

Riboni and Zottola's paper adds to the nascent existing literature on unexplained vulvar pain and vulvodynia by providing an applied linguistic approach to this under-researched topic. Using a corpus-assisted method, the paper explores the discursive constructions of vulvar pain and vulvodynia within a data set of academic articles (2002-2024), with a specific focus on the terms *pain*, *women*, *sexual* and *treatment*. Although there is a small shift towards centering women's lived experiences, overall, this research found that discursive choices served to further marginalize women and delegitimize their pain. This included an overemphasis on the sexual

dysfunction of vulvodynia. The authors argue that this representation of vulvar pain and vulvodynia cannot be disconnected from the broader societal issue of devaluing women's experiences.

Shvanyukova's paper presents an analysis of visual and verbal resources deployed on the websites of US organizations offering political campaign training for women. These webpages provide information about training programs and feature textual and visual representations of current and aspiring women politicians, who can serve as role models for others. These representations are examined in the study through a combination of Multimodal and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis. Findings indicate that the selected websites present two types of female role models, namely accomplished women leaders who actively shape their fields, and prospective women trainees guided and supported by these experts. Such portrayals highlight the importance of women-led communities.

The third and final section of the special issue revolves around the representation of male and female voices in popular culture as well as in social media discourse. The articles included in this section focus on women's portrayals in media entertainment discourse, such as cinema and magazines, but also on representations of different gender identities in contemporary online spaces, highlighting the positives, challenges, and limitations society imposes on their experiences due to their gender.

In her essay, Federici looks at the crucial role that language and translation play in the discursive representation of female identity across different periodical cultures, focusing specifically on *Vogue US* and its French translation in the decade between 1920 and 1929. She argues that women's magazines can be seen as distinctive cultural objects that provide fertile ground for investigating how gender ideologies and ideals of femininity circulate and are received through translation conceived as cultural adaptation. She concludes that these texts contributed to shaping the identity of modern Western women through their endorsement of consumerism, creating a close connection between fashion, femininity, modernity, and pleasurable consumption, which since then have become a defining feature of the woman's magazine.

Ringrow's paper is one of the (as yet) rare linguistic studies conducted on Greta Gerwig's widely debated and academically dissected 2023 film, *Barbie*. Specifically, her study focuses on the character Gloria's monologue, analyzing it as an instance of telecinematic discourse. The paper examines the speech through Aristotelian rhetoric, emphasizing appeals to *pathos* and *logos*, and explores how these linguistic devices aim to evoke emotional responses from viewers. Drawing on existing scholarship on femininities and feminisms, it pays particular attention to the film's engagement with popular feminism and consumer culture. The results indicate that *Barbie* is, in many ways, uncritical of traditional feminism but acknowledges gendered

oppression, suggesting that fundamental feminist principles still need to be articulated – even, or perhaps especially, within the capitalist context of a mainstream blockbuster film.

Roldán-García et al.'s study focuses on the humorous representation of the tradwives community as presented in the Instagram account the Pleasant Woman, a parody profile which failed at becoming viral. Applying positioning analysis in its adaptation for social media they analyze the role of gender and femininity in the fictional characterization of the Pleasant Woman and her relationship with her audience. In this paper, the authors discuss how, despite its parodic nature, the fictional Pleasant Woman presents most of the linguistic and discursive traits of tradwives, whom the profile talks to in her captions and targets through her hashtags. In addition, they suggest that digital humorous interactions are not only taking place on social media but also mediated by the affordances of the platform on which communication unfolds.

Zorzi's study discusses a novel take on the manosphere looking at this phenomenon in its conspiracy theorizing dimension. Through the lenses of Discourse Analysis, the author highlights how commonalities between the manosphere and Conspiracy discourses have already emerged in the literature and how these aspects are at the basis of this study focusing on the discursive choices within the manosphere subreddit community, the r/MensRights. Zorzi aims to identify and describe potential instances of conspiracist discourse to document whether and how anti-feminism and conspiracy theorizing interact through language use. Results suggest that conspiracy theorizing, however vague and subtle in the dataset, does not constitute a coherent knowledge system or narrative, nonetheless it intertwines with anti-feminist discourse and is particularly useful in reversing victim and oppressor narrative roles.

De Santo explores digital discourses on mental health and well-being, with a particular focus on the representation of male mental health on Reddit. The author adopts a combination of Critical Discourse Studies perspectives and corpus-assisted methods. Her analysis reveals a deep interrelation between masculinity and men's mental health, with hegemonic constructs of masculinity frequently depicted as a key factor contributing to the deterioration of men's psychological wellbeing. The results also display a coexistence of normative, resistant, and transitional discourses on men's psychological well-being which hint at the potential of digital discourse to foster cultural change.

In their paper, Balirano and Donadio explore how discourses on masculinity and mental health on TikTok rearticulate traditionally repressive emotional discourses into therapeutic performances, challenging existing notions of masculinity while simultaneously reinforcing them. They identify three categories of manhood within their dataset, *The Burdened Provider*, *The Silenced Sufferer*, and *The Stoic Brotherhood Member*, and suggest that TikTok is a space where dominant gender norms are reconfigured through emotionally charged language

intertwined with semiotically coherent tropes about masculinity, to the point that these reconstructions rarely disrupt conservative gender hierarchies.

Bionotes

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