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Gendered Language in Different Cultural and Media Contexts

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Abstract. This study attempts to explore how language expresses gender in different cultural and media contexts and how these expressions shape and reflect existing gender norms. Through in-depth analyses of the use of gendered language in American television advertisements, Japanese social media and South African textbooks, the paper seeks to demonstrate how language plays a key role in maintaining existing gender norms and challenging them. The study employs symbolic interactionism and critical social theory to analyse the collected data in detail with a view to better understanding the role of language in shaping gendered cognitive and behavioral patterns. In addition, the article explores the social effects of gender expressions in advertising, social media and educational materials, and based on the results of these analyses, a series of suggestions for promoting gender equality and diversity are proposed. By synthesizing cases from these different scenarios, the study aims to highlight the importance of understanding and changing gender expressions in order to promote a more egalitarian and inclusive social environment.

Keywords: Gendered Language; Symbolic Interactionism; Critical Social Theory; Gender Norms and Gender Equality; Media Analysis.

1. Introduction

Language is not just a tool for communicating information; it is also a way of constructing and expressing social identities, of which gender identity is particularly prominent. With the expansion of the field of gender studies, scholars have gradually paid attention to the role of language in shaping gender perception and behaviour. Gender is expressed differently in different linguistic and cultural contexts, reflecting the different expectations and norms of social structures and cultural values regarding gender roles. Gender expression in language is a key element in understanding gender dynamics in society, especially in the age of globalisation and digitisation, where the change and influence of the language of gender has become more pronounced. This study aims to provide insights into how language expresses, reinforces or challenges gender norms in different cultural and communicative contexts. Through specific case studies, the paper will reveal the function and power of language in the construction of gender, and how individuals and collectives affirm or resist traditional gender roles through linguistic behaviour.

This study aims to explore how language is used to express gender differences in different cultures; analyze how language is used to reinforce or challenge gender norms in particular social interactions; and examine how the linguistic forms of gender expression have changed in the digital media environment and how these changes have impacted on societal perceptions and expectations of gender. By exploring these issues, this study hopes to develop a more comprehensive framework for understanding the role of language in the expression of gender in contemporary societies and to provide practical insights to promote social dialogue on gender equality and diversity.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Background: Gender and Language Dynamics

Language continues to be an important means of expressing and shaping gender identity. Recent research continues to analyse its dual role in reflecting and constructing gender norms. Weatherall

builds on the grounded theory presented by Tannen et al. and delves further into how language can both sustain and combat gender inequality [1].

2.2. Contemporary Research Focus: Reinforcing and Challenging Gender Norms through Language

Modern research looks at how language consolidates and questions gender norms. For example, Ringrose and Renold investigated the reinforcement of gender stereotypes by media and advertising, emphasising the continuing role of language in gender bias [2]. In the field of education, recent analyses by Misra and Grabe, among others, suggest that language in textbooks and interactions often inadvertently upholds traditional gender stereotypes [3]. Additionally, Jane examined the impact of social media on gender norms, significantly advancing the exploration of the impact of digital platforms on gender representations [4].

2.3. Expansion into Cross-cultural Perspectives

The scope of gender and language research has expanded to include cross-cultural perspectives, revealing the diversity of gendered linguistic expressions in different cultural frameworks. More recently, authors such as Omoniyi have conducted cross-cultural studies that delve into how linguistic expressions of gender vary across societies, particularly in languages with minimal grammatical gender markers, such as Finnish, reflecting on how these linguistic features influence gender perceptions in these societies [5]. This broader perspective is critical to understanding the diversity of gender expression globally and to understanding the complex role that language plays in these dynamics.

While existing research provides a wealth of information on language and gender expression, most studies continue to focus primarily on Western societies and English-speaking environments. There is still relatively little research on gendered language in non-Western societies, especially in multilingual and multicultural intertwined environments. Furthermore, as technologies, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, evolve in language generation, research on the role and impact of these technologies in gender expression is in its preliminary stages. These areas need to be explored in greater depth in the future in order to more fully understand the dynamics of language gender expression in globally diverse settings.

2.4. Theoretical Frameworks

Symbolic interactionism analyses how language is used as a tool for social interaction to construct and reflect gender identity in everyday communication. Symbolic interactionism argues that individuals create social reality through symbols (including language, images and behaviour) in social interaction. In the field of advertising, these symbols not only convey information about products, but more importantly, they construct and communicate social expectations and norms about gender [6].

The study of how choices and structures in language shape and convey gender ideologies in different texts and communications. Discourse analysis is used as a research tool to deconstruct and analyse the role of language in the construction of social reality. This analytical approach is particularly useful in the context of social media, as it reveals how users express gender identities through text, emojis, images, and videos, and how these expressions are influenced by cultural and social structures. Particularly for Japanese social media, users' post content, language styles and interaction patterns are systematically analysed to understand how gender is constructed and presented in everyday online interactions [7].

Critical social theory explores the role of language in maintaining or challenging gender norms and power structures from a critical perspective. Critical social theory is concerned with how social structures maintain and reinforce inequalities through various mechanisms, including the education system. In the context of gender education, textbooks, as a core resource of education, are not only a medium for knowledge transfer, but also a tool for the transmission of social norms and values. By

analysing the language, images and curriculum content of textbooks, it is possible to reveal how gender norms are shaped and solidified [8].

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

Three cases were carefully selected for this study with the aim of demonstrating how language expresses gender differences in different cultures and social structures. Case selection was guided by the following three main criteria: firstly, to ensure that the selected cases cover a wide range of cultural and linguistic contexts, including both Western and non-Western societies, thus providing a broad cultural perspective; secondly, to select cases that provide rich, varied, and reliable sources of data in order to ensure the quality of the data analysed and the accuracy of the research; and lastly, to include a wide range of social interaction domains, such as media advertisements, educational content, and social media usage, etc., in order to analyse and explore the broader social implications of gender expression in these domains.

3.2. Data Analysis

Text analysis was used to ensure the depth and breadth of the study: Systematically collect and analyse textual data from selected cases, including electronic media publications, online advertisements, social media posts and textbook content. Coding and thematic analyses were conducted using text analysis software such as ATLAS.ti or NVivo, focusing on gender constructions and expressions in the language.

4. Results

4.1. Gender Stereotyping in American Television Advertisements

A case study of adverts aired on the four major US television networks between 2010 and 2020, with a sample of 200 adverts selected covering automobiles, beauty products and household goods. Through a content analysis approach, particular attention was paid to the use of adjectives and behavioural verbs in the advertisements and how these words were associated with gender stereotypes. Word frequency and correlation analyses were conducted using statistical software to quantify language usage patterns. Key findings included the use of common words such as "gentle" and "bright" in adverts featuring female characters, while male adverts favoured words such as "tough", "strong" and "powerful"; in terms of character behaviour, men are often found in scenes showing dominant and adventurous activities such as driving and sports, while women tend to be found in scenes related to housework and shopping. This use of gender-differentiated language reinforces, to some extent, viewers' fixed ideas about gender roles. This study not only reveals the systematic use of gendered language in advertisements, but also reflects the important role of the media in shaping and reinforcing gender roles, further prompting us to reflect on and challenge these widespread gender biases.

American television advertisements often convey gender messages through carefully designed visual and verbal symbols [9]. For example, men are often portrayed as demonstrating strength and adventure in outdoor activities, such as driving high-performance cars or engaging in extreme sports, and these scenes and activities reinforce the social expectations of strength and autonomy associated with masculinity. In contrast, women are often shown in domestic settings or in contexts that focus on personal care and beauty, and these adverts emphasise traditional female roles of gentleness, caring and appearance.

By repeatedly displaying these gendered symbols, advertisements not only reflect societal expectations of gender, but more importantly, they shape and reinforce those expectations. For example, when the advert continuously shows a man taking control of a car drive, demonstrating skill

and power, it sends a clear message that a real man should be decisive and skilled. This message is internalised by viewers as part of gender roles through the wide dissemination of the advertisements, influencing their self-perceptions and behavioural choices.

Advertising is a powerful cultural tool through which consumers' gender identities are invisibly shaped. This is particularly true for children and adolescents, who are exposed to gender stereotypes in advertisements during the critical period of gender identity formation, which can profoundly influence their gender behaviours and expectations. The power of such cultural reproduction demonstrates that advertising is not just a marketing activity, but an important arena for gender socialisation.

Given the impact of advertising on the construction of gender roles, the critique and reform of gender expression in advertising have become particularly important. The advertising industry needs to take proactive measures, such as developing more balanced and pluralistic strategies for gender expression and avoiding monolithic and stereotypical gender symbols. In addition, regulators and consumer groups should continue to push for gender-just advertising standards that promote fairer and more contemporary gender expression.

4.2. Gender Expression in Japanese Social Media

In 2020, 1,000 posts on the Japanese social media platforms Twitter and LINE were analysed, covering topics such as life, work and entertainment. The study used discourse analysis to identify gender-constructed language patterns related to users' gender, including epithets, politeness forms and their relationship to gender. Key findings show that female users tend to use polite language and expressions that express emotion, while male users use authoritative and competitive language more frequently. In terms of topic treatment, men expressed themselves more clearly when discussing their careers as well as science and technology topics, while women were more prominent when discussing family and relationships. While social media provides a platform for expressing individuality and challenging traditions, the study found that traditional gender expression remains deeply entrenched. These findings highlight the dual role of social media in maintaining and challenging gender norms, revealing the continuing influence of gendered language in modern social interactions.

The study found significant differences in language choice between male and female users. For example, female users tended to use more emotional expressions and polite tones, while men used authoritative and direct language more frequently. This difference not only reflects gender expectations in Japanese society, but also reproduces these gender norms in cyberspace. Male and female users also show a clear gender bias in their choice of topics for discussion. Men are more likely to engage in discussions on technical, political or economic topics, while women are more involved in discussions on education, health or relationships [10]. This divergence not only demonstrates gender preferences in topic selection, but also reflects how societal expectations of different gender roles are reflected in social media. Although social media offers opportunities to challenge traditional gender norms, in many cases traditional patterns of gender expression are still reproduced by users. This phenomenon reveals the deep cultural roots of gender norms and their entrenched place in everyday life. However, there are also many examples of users who challenge these norms by advocating for gender equality or displaying non-traditional gender roles.

The findings of the discourse analyses require us to reflect on the deep socio-cultural constructions of gender and to consider how these long-accepted norms can be changed through education and policy. For example, public perceptions of gender roles can be changed by promoting gender equality education in schools and the workplace. Then, Social media platforms should take more proactive measures to regulate and guide the healthy development of gender expression. This includes developing clear guidelines for social media use, prohibiting sexist and harassing behaviour, and promoting content that showcases gender diversity and equality.

4.3. Gender Language in South African Textbooks

In a linguistic content analysis of South African science and social science textbooks from primary to high school level, the researcher applied a critical textual analysis approach. This analysis focussed on the ways in which gender roles were portrayed in the textbooks and how these portrayals conformed to or challenged existing gender norms. The main findings of the study point to the fact that male characters in these textbooks are often portrayed as scientists and explorers, displaying active exploration and technological leadership, while female characters are more frequently associated with the identities of educators and care workers, professions that are often associated with caring and supporting others. However, more recent editions of textbooks have begun to adopt more gender-neutral language and provide more diverse examples of professions, such as female engineers and male teachers, as a way of gradually changing students' traditional perceptions of gender roles. This incremental change not only helps to break down gender stereotypes, but also creates a more egalitarian and diverse conception of career choices in the minds of students, which in turn influences their long-term perceptions and expectations of gender roles.

In South African textbooks, the transmission of gender norms is often achieved through the use of gendered language. For example, achievements in science and technology are often attributed to men, while nursing and education are often associated with women. This choice of language not only demonstrates occupational gender stereotyping, but also implies the misconception that certain occupations are more suited to a particular gender. Images and case studies in textbooks also reinforce specific gender roles. Male roles are often portrayed as leaders and explorers, while females are portrayed in supportive or passive roles. These visual presentations deepen social expectations of gender roles and limit students' awareness and acceptance of gender diversity. Descriptions of history and culture in textbooks often omit women's contributions or marginalise women's roles. This content bias not only affects students' understanding of gender equality, but may also affect their awareness and development of their own potential.

Given the important role of textbooks in gender socialisation, the education sector needs to undertake a gender review of teaching materials to ensure that the content no longer reinforces harmful gender stereotypes [11]. This includes increasing the portrayal of women's contributions in various fields and providing more teaching examples that demonstrate gender equality and diversity. In addition, teachers play a key role in the delivery of content. Therefore, gender sensitivity training for teachers is essential to ensure that they can teach in a way that supports gender equality. At the same time, curriculum design should include modules on gender studies to educate students to recognise and challenge gender bias. Thus, establishing and maintaining a formal mechanism for assessing gender bias in textbooks is necessary [11]. This should include a regular textbook review and updating process, as well as monitoring the implementation of gender equality standards for textbook content.

5. Discussion

5.1. A Comparative Analysis of Three Cases

The three cases, although different in their geographical and cultural contexts, reflect the core idea of symbolic interactionism: that language, as a tool of social interaction, not only reflects existing gender norms, but also plays an active role in constructing and reinforcing those norms. These cases also support the view of critical social theory that education and the media, as part of the social fabric, invisibly transmit and reinforce gender norms through language and content choices. Textbooks, advertisements, and social media are all producers and transmitters of culture, and they play a key role in shaping public perceptions of gender, especially among younger generations.

While these cases share some commonalities in advancing gender norms, they show significant cultural differences in their treatment of gender expression. In the United States, advertising content appeals to specific target groups by significantly reinforcing commercially available gender symbols (e.g., strength is associated with masculinity, and beauty with femininity), whereas in other cultures

there may be a greater focus on the representation of gender in societal functioning and family roles. In terms of social media, in countries such as Japan where technology is rapidly evolving, social media provides new arenas and challenging opportunities for gender expression, whereas in cultures that may be more conservative in their use of technology, no significant changes are seen. In terms of educational resources, changes in gender expression in South African textbooks may have been influenced by broader societal changes and policy impulses, reflecting an increased awareness of the role of education in social change. These differences reveal the diversity of gender expression across cultures and highlight the complexity of understanding and responding to gender issues globally.

The examination of these varied cases across different global contexts underscores the pervasive influence of language and media in shaping and reinforcing gender norms. Whether through textbooks in South Africa, advertisements in the United States, or social media platforms in Japan, each instance reveals how deeply embedded gender constructs are in the fabric of different societies. These cultural artifacts not only mirror existing gender perceptions but also actively participate in their propagation, impacting everything from individual identity formation to societal gender expectations. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing more inclusive educational materials and media content that can challenge and potentially alter entrenched gender norms, paving the way for a more equitable global society.

5.2. How Gendered Language Shapes Female Identities within Various Cultural and Media Contexts

In examining how gendered language shapes female identities within various cultural and media contexts, it's evident that language does more than communicate information—it constructs and perpetuates societal norms and expectations [12]. Gendered language often embeds subtle cues that influence perceptions and behaviors towards women, significantly impacting their portrayal in media and their treatment in society. The choice of words, the tone, and even the context in which women are discussed or depicted can subtly dictate and reinforce the roles deemed acceptable for women. For example, using terms like "bossy" or "emotional" to describe assertive women in professional settings can perpetuate a negative image that undermines their authority and capabilities.

In many cultures, the media perpetuates stereotypes by using diminutive or affectionate terms for women, which can diminish their perceived authority or seriousness. This linguistic framing can confine women to traditional, often subservient roles, while men are more frequently described with words that imply strength, competence, and independence. Such discrepancies in language not only reinforce traditional gender roles but also limit the scope of possibilities for women by shaping public perception [12]. By consistently portraying women in passive or supportive roles, the media not only mirrors societal values but actively participates in their maintenance and propagation. Moreover, the impact of gendered language in media extends beyond the portrayal of women; it actively influences the aspirations and behaviors of real women and girls. By consistently exposing audiences to gendered stereotypes, the media shapes expectations about what behaviors are appropriate and which aspirations are attainable, often discouraging women from pursuing careers or roles traditionally dominated by men. This can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy where women, from a young age, may feel certain careers or ambitions are out of reach simply because they see limited representations in media.

In more progressive contexts, efforts to use gender-neutral language in media are being recognized as a method to combat these stereotypes. Such changes aim to foster an environment where individuals are recognized for their capabilities and characteristics independent of gender, thus promoting gender equality. This includes altering scripts, changing marketing strategies, and even adjusting editorial guidelines to ensure a more balanced and inclusive portrayal of all genders. These efforts are pivotal in slowly dismantling the deeply ingrained biases that traditional media portrayals have upheld.

In summary, the pervasive use of gendered language across various cultural and media contexts significantly influences the perception and treatment of women. It subtly dictates societal roles and perpetuates stereotypes, often limiting women's opportunities and reinforcing traditional gender norms. Efforts to shift towards gender-neutral language are essential in combating these biases, and striving for a more inclusive and equitable society.

5.3. The Necessity of Adopting Neutral Language

It is necessary that adopting neutral language in public discourse, media, and educational materials is paramount in today's increasingly diverse and interconnected world. Neutral language plays a critical role in promoting inclusivity and respect, as it avoids assumptions and generalizations about people based on their gender, race, or other identity markers [13]. By using language that is inclusive and non-discriminatory, communicators can more effectively address a broader audience, ensuring that no group feels excluded or marginalized. Furthermore, neutral language helps to dismantle stereotypes and biases that are often perpetuated unwittingly through traditional forms of expression. It fosters an environment where individuals are valued for their unique attributes and contributions, rather than being confined to predefined roles or characteristics linked to their identity [13]. This shift in language usage is essential for creating equitable spaces in the workplace, schools, and public life, where everyone's rights to identity and expression are respected and upheld. Moreover, as societies strive towards equality and understanding, the use of neutral language becomes a tool for social change, encouraging more thoughtful and conscious communication. It is not merely a linguistic preference but a reflection of societal values that prioritize fairness and equality. Embracing neutral language is thus a fundamental step towards building more just and respectful communities.

In conclusion, the implementation of neutral language across all spheres of public discourse is more than a mere linguistic update – it is a crucial advancement towards a more just and inclusive society. By eliminating language that perpetuates stereotypes and biases, we not only enhance communication inclusivity but also reinforce the societal commitment to diversity and equality. This shift towards neutral language is integral in shaping a world where every individual can engage freely and fully, with their identities respected and their voices heard. Adopting such practices is not only necessary but fundamental to the progress of our global community.

6. Implications

As societal narratives continue to be shaped by traditional and stereotypical portrayals of gender, there is a pressing need for systemic changes in how language is used in media and education. This requires a concerted effort from content creators, educators, and policymakers to consciously adopt gender-neutral language and challenge existing stereotypes, thereby fostering an environment that values individuals based on their merits rather than conforming to outdated gender norms. Secondly, the resistance to adopting gender-neutral language highlights a deeper societal reluctance to embrace change and equality. This resistance serves as a critical point of analysis for sociologists and gender studies scholars, suggesting that more robust educational initiatives are necessary to shift public perceptions and attitudes toward gender inclusivity. Moreover, by redefining how genders are represented, societies can significantly influence the career choices and personal ambitions of future generations. Young people are especially susceptible to the messages conveyed through media and educational materials, making it crucial to provide role models and narratives that embody a range of possibilities beyond traditional gender roles. Finally, these efforts towards linguistic and representational equality in media and education are not just about promoting fairness; they are essential for the holistic development of societies that thrive on diversity and inclusivity. Embracing this change can lead to more innovative, adaptable, and harmonious communities, prepared to face the challenges of an increasingly complex world.

To sum up, the strategic revision of gendered language within cultural and media frameworks is not merely a matter of promoting social justice but is crucial for the development of more dynamic and

inclusive societies. By challenging and updating the linguistic norms that shape gender perceptions, we can pave the way for a world where every individual has the freedom to pursue their aspirations without the constraints of outdated stereotypes. This shift towards gender-neutral language and fair representation is essential for fostering equality, enhancing diversity, and ultimately strengthening the social fabric of communities around the globe.

7.   Conclusion

This study explores how language influences gender norms globally by analysing cases from three different cultures and media. The findings suggest that language is an important tool for communicating gender norms, whether in advertising, social media or educational materials. The findings support the applicability of symbolic interactionism and critical social theory, illustrating how language not only reflects but also shapes gender norms. Policy recommendations from the study include the development of stricter advertisement content standards, the development of suitable gender-sensitive strategies for social media platforms, and the updating and improvement of educational materials with the aim of reducing and eliminating gender stereotypes and promoting a gender-equal social environment. Overall, this study attempts to provide new perspectives on the ways in which language expresses gender in different cultures, as well as to provide theoretical and policy implications for practical actions to promote gender equality globally. Future research may explore the impact of technological advances, such as artificial intelligence, on language expression and how these technologies are changing gender norms.

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