Multimodal voices, noises, and silences of gender equality in corporate social media

Micaela Stierncreutz & Anna Maaranen, Hanken School of Economics

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Why study equality discourse on social media?

- Social media as a new and newly vast digital public sphere

    - Define how equality discourse is constructed, contested, and circulated in society

- Equality discourse on social media (re)produces meanings of what equality is and should be

- Consequences for how equality is acted upon by organizations online, offline and in their intersections

Corporate equality discourse on social media

- Organizations use social media to construct themselves as caring and inclusive places to work

- What organizations do on social media reaches beyond the (physical) boundaries of organizations

- Meanings are produced multimodally through e.g. captions, hashtags, emojis, images, videos, memes, and reels

- Multimodality may both voice *and* silence equality concerns

Gender (in)equality in professional services industry

- Historically homogenous field by and for white middle-class men

- Discursive move towards embracing diversity and inclusion

  - Emphasis on the business case for equality

- Gendered, racialized and heteronormative discrimination persists

Research aim and contribution

- Multimodality plays a key role in constructing meaning yet is rarely considered in analyses of equality discourse

- We explore

  i) how organizations multimodally (re)produce meanings of equality on social media

  ii) what these meanings imply for what equality discourse can do (or not) and for whom

Research design

- We studied 659 Instagram posts by the Finnish Big Four firms

- We made use of qualitative data management software Nvivo for multiple rounds of data coding

- We considered social media research ethics throughout the data collection, management, and analysis process

- We adopted a hybrid method we call Feminist Multimodal Critical Discourse analysis (FCDA)

Feminist multimodal critical discourse analysis

- Builds on CDA (e.g. Fairclough, 2001), FCDA (e.g. Lazar, 2007) and MCDA (e.g. Jancsary, Höllerer & Meyer, 2016)

- Critically explores the reflective and productive role of verbal and visual discourse in shaping meanings of equality and related questions of inclusion and exclusion

- Suggests a methodological lens on studying equality discourse and engagement in digital spaces where means, tools, and dynamics for interaction are new

- Steers both theoretical and methodological focus towards the digital spaces that have become central in our social being

Preliminary findings

- Contemporary meanings and discourses of gender equality are produced multimodally in corporate social media

- Organizations make use of multimodality to shape them in a way which lets noises to cover silences and silences to convey meanings in implicit and subtle ways

- Both use and non-use of voice can become strategic

- Multimodal mechanisms of equality engagement emerge

Preliminary findings

Multimodal mechanism	Definition	Implication	Empirical illustration
Proclaiming	Visual and verbal signalling of gender equality that constitutes the building blocks of a 'loud' equality discourse	Delegitimizes inequality as a problem in the organization	*Portrayal of CEO being replaced by a teenage girl for a day under the hashtag #girlstakeover*
Muting	Visual and verbal silences and subtle meanings that emerge from the cracks and crevices of equality discourse	Reinforces the status-quo in the organization	*Portrayal of a group of female-coded employees picking trash outside the office under the hashtag #cleaningday*
Outvoicing	Visual and verbal distractions that complement equality discourse by constructing the organization as a fun place to work	Obscures inequality by filling in the equality gaps in the organization	*Portrayal of employees working out together, conveying messages of team spirit and inclusion under the hashtag #weare[company name]*

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Conclusions

- Multimodal online equality discourses reflect contemporary and emerging feminism(s) at play in organizational and wider societal contexts

- Corporate equality engagement on social media tends to produce depoliticized and individualized meanings of equality

- Online multimodality allows for expressing meanings in a multilayered and sometimes contradictory way which can promote equality and maintain inequality at the same time

  What can online equality engagement do (or not), and for whom?

Thank you!

The Finnish Work Environment Fund has contributed to the participation in this conference.