

Gendered COVID-19 discussions on Twitter: A Norwegian Case

Abstract

Purpose

The COVID-19 pandemic has resurfaced challenges to gender equality and gender relations both worldwide and in Norway. There have been massive public discussions on social media platforms, highlighting the potential of analysing public discourses in a non-reactive manner (Rauchfleisch, Vogler, & Eisenegger, 2021). Further, discourses from social media may affect cultural representations and broad discourses in society (Rambukkana, 2015), such as that related to gender. In this article, by studying the Norwegian Twitter users' discussion on gender as related to COVID-19 pandemic, we will examine the everyday gendered discourses.

Design/methodology/approach

Data for this project was collected from the social media platform Twitter. We conducted the search on 16th November 2020, and it resulted in total of 485 results inclusive of both original tweets and replies. The data was analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis.

Findings

The thematic analysis of the tweets revealed three main categories which were mirrored in recognizable and widespread discourses about gender: 1) Stereotypical gendered behaviours 2) Construction of masculinities, and 3) Othering. We argue that the stereotypes on gendered behaviour, traits and ideology together attribute to the maintenance of unequal gender structures.

Originality

This article explored discourses on gender on twitter, the networked public sphere of Norway during COVID-19 pandemic. Given that discourses both reflect and shape social configurations, they have the power to shape gender realities. With the transcendence of social media across geographic boundaries, our findings are relevant both for Norway and globally.

Keywords: gender, masculinities, discourse, Twitter, COVID-19, Norway.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the multifaceted ways in which a crisis affects men and women differently, surfacing challenges to gender relations (Rivera, Hsu, Esbry, & Dugarova, 2020). There have been concerns about more women than men experiencing job redundancies, an increase in care burden within families, and reduced access to intimate partner violence resources, among others (Connor et al., 2020; de Paz, Muller, Munoz Boudet, & Gaddis, 2020; Power, 2020). Similar impacts on women in Norway are noticeable (Kilden, 2020a) despite it being a front runner in gender equality and at the top of the Gender Equality Indexes of both the United Nations Development Program and the European Union. Feminist scholars like Walby (2009) view Norway – along with other Nordic countries – as having achieved gender balance, and Hernes Hernes (1987) as being “women-friendly”. In this article, by studying the Norwegian Twitter users’ discussion on gender as related to COVID-19 pandemic, we will examine the everyday gendered discourses.

The pandemic and discourses in social media

Discourses are diverse representations of social life. They represent various aspects of the material and mental world such as processes, relations, thoughts, beliefs, among others (Fairclough, 2003). According to Fairclough, discourse can be considered as having an 'active relation to reality' (Fairclough, 1992, p. 41) i.e., discourses both shape and are informed by wider processes within society. Power is “implicit within everyday social practices” and is predominant “at every level in all domains of life” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 50). Understanding discourses on social media can help understand the ways in which power is enacted, maintained, and perpetuated. In today’s world, social media functions as part of networked public sphere, a platform to distribute beliefs and views and where public is interconnected (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Rauchfleisch et al., 2021). The recent COVID-19 crisis has witnessed massive public discussions on social media platforms such as Facebook,

Twitter, and Reddit, among others, highlighting the potential of analysing public discourses in a non-reactive manner (Rauchfleisch et al., 2021). Further, discourses from social media may affect cultural representations and broad discourses in society (Rambukkana, 2015), such as that related to gender. In this regard, examining the discourses that COVID-19 pandemic has spurred about gender in Norway will shed light on the shifting gender realities.

Gender and the pandemic

Public health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, seem to be “inherently gendered phenomena” (Ramo, 2020). Such crises affect men and women differently, leading to different social, economic and health outcomes. Globally, confirmed COVID-19 cases are evenly distributed between men and women. However, men comprise a higher proportion of hospitalisations (54%), ICU admissions (68%) and deaths (58%) (Global Health 5050, 2020). Scholars have noted that a range of biological and social factors may be at play in this disparity, but they remain unclear (Womersley, Ripullone, Peters, & Woodward, 2020). For example, men are more susceptible to infectious diseases in general because women tend to have a stronger immune response (Capuano, Rossi, & Paolisso, 2020). Many chronic health problems that appear to worsen the effects of COVID-19 are more common in men, such as high blood pressure, cardiovascular diseases, lung diseases, and diabetes (Ruxton & Burrell, 2020). At the same time, research has shown that women are more likely to bear the brunt of the indirect social, health and economic consequences of the pandemic (Burki, 2020). For example, due to their predominant representation as caregivers in families and frontline healthcare workers (Boniol et al., 2019), their reduced access to reproductive and healthcare services and increase in exposure to domestic violence and economic precarity, the existing inequalities among men and women are at risk of being amplified due to the pandemic (Burki, 2020). By affecting men and women differently in such ways, COVID-19 pandemic has gendered consequences.

In this article we take critical gender theory perspective and describe gender as composed of characteristics, norms and behaviour of men and women that are socially constructed and endure

structured inequalities (Acker, 1990; Connell, 1987). The binary view of gender has consequences as they inculcate a set of beliefs concerning attributes that are supposed to differentiate women and men (Tartaglia & Rollero, 2015). Further, binaries always involve a hierarchy subordinating women and femininity (Connell, 2005; Derrida, 1982; Irigaray, 1980). Connell highlights how through hegemonic masculinity i.e., the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, results in power that maintains these boundaries. This is done through “cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and the marginalization and de-legitimation of alternatives” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 846).

COVID-19 pandemic in Norway

COVID-19 was first detected in Norway on February 26, 2020. As of January 19, 2021, a total of 3,201,633 people tested in Norway with 59,033 reported cases of COVID-19 and 525 deaths. In total, more men than women have died, and there have been more female than male deaths among those 90+ (NIPH, 2021). In the attempt to reduce the spread of the virus, the authorities have been implementing many infection-control measures, including advice on keeping distance, washing hands and good cough hygiene (Helsenorge, 2021a; Helsingen et al., 2020). The measures have also consisted of periodically closing schools, recommendations for home offices and refraining from using public transport to combat the spread of the virus (Regjeringen, 2021). As of the 23rd of January 2021, the Norwegian government has introduced stricter measures in ten municipalities over concerns of an outbreak of the mutated version of the coronavirus. These measures include strong recommendations to avoid travel, private gatherings and the prohibition of organised events, sports and activities (Helsenorge, 2021b).

The Nordic model of extensive welfare services, economic measures, a strong healthcare system with goals of equity and a high trust society, ensured a strong shield against the impact of the COVID19 pandemic (Arora and Koval, 2022). However, research has pointed out the uneven consequences on some social groups. For example, unemployment has been found to be especially

high among those with low education and/or in low-income professions, as well as among immigrants (The Corona Commission, 2022). Children and elderly have also been left more socially and psychologically vulnerable (Christensen, 2021). In addition, the measures posed risks to gender equality in Norway. For example, a report by Kilden (2020b) finds that the lockdown may have caused women who are victims of domestic violence to avoid contact with women's shelters and other support services such as the police. Moreover, due to the gender-segregated nature of the labour market in Norway, the industries that have been hit the hardest, such as the service industry, are typically female-dominated, as opposed to those male-dominated, such as the transport industry (Kilden, 2020a) . A study based on the job redundancies in the beginning of the pandemic period in Norway found that women have been more affected than men (Bratsberg et al., 2020). Even at home, women have been found to have a greater responsibility for following up children's schoolwork (Nergaard, 2020) and experienced having the main responsibility for several tasks in the home after the lockdown on 12 March (Kolberg, 2020).

Method

Data for this project was collected from the social media platform Twitter. In Norway, as of 2016, twenty two percent of people reported using Twitter with men using it slightly more than women (Werliin & Kokholm, 2016). The proportion of Twitter users in Norway vis-à-vis other social media platform is lower, for example, 84% use Facebook (Werliin & Kokholm, 2016). However, unlike Facebook where posts are often limited to viewing by those who are connected as friends, tweets are available to the public unless the account is set to private, and tweeting is based on the concept of users wanting their tweets to be read widely and shared by members of the public (Flores, 2017). Thus, Twitter functions as the social media channel for broadcasting ideas and collaborating to negotiate social, political and cultural understandings (Rosenbaum, 2017).

Data extraction

The data analysed here were drawn by conducting manual searches using keywords through an advanced Twitter Search. Six searches were performed with the following search terms in Norwegian language: *Korona Menn* [Corona men], *Covid Menn* [Covid men], *Korona Kvinner* [Corona women], *Covid Kvinner* [Covid women], *Korona Kjønn* [Corona gender], *Covid Kjønn* [Covid gender]. The search terms were selected and found relevant after performing preliminary searches. The tweets were filtered by using the Norwegian language option. We performed the search for both original tweets as well as replies containing the search terms to expand our search results. We conducted the search on 16th November 2020, and it resulted in total 485 results inclusive of both original tweets and replies. The first and the last tweets in our sample were made between the period of 5th March 2020 to 13th November 2020, respectively. Table I shows the number of results from each of the search categories. Later, we manually copied and pasted search results into a database and began coding the data. Research has shown that the accuracy of results from manual coding of tweets compared to automated content analysis is higher (Kim et al., 2013). Manual extraction and coding methods thus reduce both cost and quality concerns. However, manually collecting tweets was time consuming and also resulted in tweets related to other views about COVID-19 than gender. It should be noted that while we did not specifically search tweets with the term “immigrant”, we did come up with tweets that referred to “immigrant men” and “immigrant women” in relation to COVID-19 and gender related tweets. These tweets were thus also included in our analysis

Table I. Number of tweets from each search category

Analysis

To analyse the tweets, the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo12 – was used. Examining the gendered expressions collected under the COVID-women/men/gender search words, we grouped the dominant discourses that appeared from Twitter users in Norway. The coding of the tweets was done

as follows: In the first step, we carried out a line-by-line coding of tweets that related to gender and COVID-19. We then organised these codes into key descriptive themes and categories, which were close to the original tweets. Initially, each team member coded several tweets on their own and then cooperated with others to develop common codes. Herein we also noted the tone conveyed (e.g., positive, irony, criticism, humour). Manual coding of the data, allowed us to go beyond the analysis of the type of tone (Kim et al., 2013) and analyse the data thematically. We then generated patterns of meaning and interpretive constructs. The tweets that were first coded as 'questioning gendered differences in infection rates' and 'gendered roles and behaviour' were later brought together under the theme of gender stereotypes. This was an iterative process, and the authors consulted each other to reach consensus during the process of coding and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Once the coding was done, the tweets were translated from Norwegian to English, and the personal identifiers were removed to protect the anonymity of the users. The thematic analysis of the tweets revealed three main categories which were mirrored in recognizable and widespread discourses about gender: 1) Stereotypical gendered behaviours 2) Construction of masculinities, and 3) Othering (see Table II for all categories that emerged from the captured tweets).

Table II. Illustrating the formulation of themes from the categories captured in tweets

Discourses on gender during the pandemic on Twitter

Based on our three themes, the findings highlight the discourses on gender during the pandemic in the context of gender behaviours, traits, and ideology. In this section we discuss the ways in which such discourses were perpetuated: stereotypical gendered behaviours, construction of masculinities and othering.

1. Stereotypical Gendered behaviours

Hand hygiene emerged as the prominent issue related to the gendered differences in preventative behaviour during COVID-19. We found several tweets where users attributed differences in COVID-19 infection rates among men and women to the lack of hand hygiene behaviour among men. Considering that the social/behavioural components of physical distancing and hygiene strategies have been the most frequently recommended measures in the context of COVID-19, it explains why users resorted to gender stereotypes of hand hygiene behaviour as an explanation for men's (perceived) higher infection rates. For example:

*“NRK reports that twice as many men as women die of corona. Mysterious? No.
Twice as many women as men wash their hands, you ask me. #vaskdehenda
[#wasthosehands] #koronaNorge”*

The tweets also show how users draw on behavioural measures such as hand washing recommended by the government and health authorities and compare the adherence of the same between men and women, albeit through their anecdotal experience. In doing so, they attribute men's poor hand hygiene practices as the reason for their high infection rates. Gendered differences in hand hygiene behaviour reflect the manifestation of differences in risk perception by men and women, the belief in the efficacy of handwashing or with women's evolutionary role in protecting the next generation (Curtis, Anger, & Rabie, 2004; Fung & Cairncross, 2007). Thus, the differences in hand washing practices of men and women also reflect the mediating role of gender ideology i.e., gender roles, attitudes, and values as well as gender practices referring to how men and women perform different activities in daily lives (Gustafson, 1998) in addition to how they might perceive risk of COVID-19. By using simplified explanations of difference in hand washing practices among men and women, such tweets contribute in maintaining stereotypical gendered behavioural discourses.

Stereotyped beliefs frequently come to mind easily, inadvertently, and without one's awareness (Devine, 1989; Dovidio, Evans, & Tyler, 1986), and yet they can have direct effects on

perceptions of and responses to others (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Kawakami, Young, & Dovidio, 2002). For example, a user who shared an online article about men not following COVID-19 regulations such as face masks and physical distancing, as the reason for higher mortality than women, quoted the following:

"I present evidence no. 2450 that men are stupider than women"

(Link to article shared: <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/viden/kroppen/slaekker-du-paa-mundbind-og-afstand-maend-tager-corona-mindre-serioest-end>)

Another user tweeted on similar lines and commented on the recommendations given by the then prime minister, Erna Solberg:

"Is the main reason why@erna_solberg continues with strict measures really to get men not to stop hand washing after they have been to the bathroom? # COVID__19 #conspiracy theory"

In the above examples we see that the use of stereotypical gendered behaviours such as men's handwashing practices to make sense of the different mortality rates between men and women or as the reason which necessitates the need for continuation of stricter COVID-19 regulatory measures. In doing so, they normalise gender behaviours and dichotomise two polarities i.e., men/women and masculine/feminine behaviour. It also shows how masculinity and femininity acquire meaning through such essentialist discourses and contribute to the normalisation of essentialism in its most normative form: the treatment of certain characteristics as the defining ones for anyone in the category, as characteristics that cannot be questioned or modified without thereby undermining one's claim to belong to the group (Phillips, 2010). Essentialising discourses thus uphold boundaries between identity and behaviour among different genders and ethnic groups. In doing so, they become part of our social reality while naturalising the differences (Phillips, 2010). Gender binary discourses thus hinder multiple ways of doing gender (Knights & Kerfoot, 2004).

2. *Constructing masculinities*

Our analysis also revealed that differing masculinities were conceptualised. Firstly, the discourses on men's lack of hand washing behaviour conflated it with traditional masculine ideals. Indeed some scholars have also argued that men's behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic reflects attempts to conform to masculine ideals that valorise bravery, confidence, and strength (Ewig, 2020; Glick, 2020; Willingham, 2020). We found similar perception shared by some Twitter users. For example, in a Twitter thread discussing the reasons behind men's higher infection rates as compared to women, a user commented:

Hand hygiene, rougher skin, does not take direction? Do not know

The above users refer to traditional masculine traits of being strong and rough to explain why men do not follow proper hand hygiene and also shows how masculinity is conceptualised and constructed on social media. Such discourse is problematic because it not only perpetuates the traditional masculinity but also disassociates from the wider understanding of causes and motivators of behaviour in the case of pandemic as pointed earlier. However, we also found a few tweets which challenged such conceptions of masculinity. For example,

"Hand hygiene? The myth that "I'm strong, I always manage"?"

Secondly, in contrast to such discourse on masculinity associated with traditional trait of strength, we also found discourse which re-conceptualised masculinity as vulnerable to COVID-19.

For example:

"There are men who die of corona. Socialist left party only: "the corona crisis hits women extra hard" and demands "crisis measures for gender equality"

"The reality is, on the contrary, that it hits men extra hard"

"So, men die and lose their jobs. It hits women extra hard"

In the above tweets we see that users, while utilising sarcasm, question the vulnerability of women vis-a-vis men due to the COVID-19 crisis. As previously argued, COVID-19 pandemic has been a gendered crisis that affects men and women differently. However, coupled with the existing gendered differences and inequality in social, economic, and political status and power between men and women, women are at a greater risk of both short-term and long-term social and economic consequences due to it. Thus, while there is indeed evidence of differential short term and long-term gendered consequences of the pandemic, we found that Twitter users engaged in re-conceptualising men as being more vulnerable due to the pandemic, citing their higher mortality rates. Moreover, the use of sarcasm also reflects attempts to attract higher attention and create deeper influence than other negative responses (Peng, Adikari, Alahakoon, & Gero, 2019).

Thirdly, our analysis of the Tweets revealed that some users utilised misogynistic humorous tropes to discuss their everyday lives during the pandemic, contributing to hegemonic masculinity. For example, a user quoted:

*“Women invented corona as it disfavours men- 1. just men die, 2. no football,
3. no pubs and 4. you must stay home with the wife”*

In the above tweet, the user insinuates that the consequences of the pandemic are burdensome particularly for men as it compels them to “stay home with the wife”. While wrapped as a joke, such tweet nevertheless highlights the inherent gender stereotypes and an ideology that perceives women as inferior to men. Similarly, another user utilised the stereotype of gendered roles and quoted:

*“Women do not get Corona if they stay in the kitchen properly... #
Coronavid19”*

We also found tweets where users constructed idealised masculinity, for example:

“Too much! Corona will make Norway's men a bunch of cake-bakers and cleaners!”

The above tweets reflect the pervasive online misogyny that has become entrenched in social media. By using denigrating language in relation to gendered roles, relations and identity, online misogyny has

become a way to uphold and perpetuate unequal gender relations and patriarchy (Mantilla, 2013). Moreover, the role of humour in constructing hegemonic masculinity has previously been examined (Plester, 2015) and goes to show how humour can legitimise such discourse on social media (Sturges, 2015). They thus reflect the construction of hegemonic masculinity, which seeks to legitimise gendered roles and relations by subordinating feminine roles and alternative masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This is also in line with Dupuis-Déri (2012) who argued that the rhetoric about the crisis of masculinity carries a critique of feminism and a rejection of gender equality.. Discourse of hegemonic masculinity can further have consequences for legitimation of unequal gender relations, as they go on to reproduce, reinforce and normalise such traits (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This is in line with the existing literature (Eslen-Ziya, Okman Fişek, & Bolak Boratav, 2021, p. 4) where COVID-19 pandemic, while enforcing “alternative masculinities (at home) where they can perform what is seen as traditionally feminine virtues, (they do this) without failing in their hegemonic masculine identities”. In other words, masculinity is talked about without challenging the hegemonic gender order or patterns of power relations between men and women (p.4). Hence a new way of talking about masculinity is created within the private sphere.

3. Othering

Further, we also found tweets that reflected the ‘othering’ of immigrant men and women; for example, a user who quoted an article published in NRK reporting on the work of ‘Bydelsmødre’ in informing immigrant communities, tweeted:

“She says that they see a number of stay-at-home and isolated women [immigrants] who do not take the authorities' advice about the corona seriously. Part of this is due to bad language, but also a lack of trust in Norwegian society Should be expelled when they do not trust us!# dax18” [#daynews18]

(Link to article shared: https://www.nrk.no/norge/_bydelsmodre_-banker-pa-dorer-for-a-informere-om-korona-1.14964040?fbclid=IwAR0rmyJa2Lv%20-MITqU1al4WFSB3y0sXqeYQorhZr5UnF60VM4V-SHuD3V5pl)

The example above clearly depicts how belongingness is constructed and communicated through everyday discourse in public sphere. Norway is viewed as an egalitarian society as exemplified by the presence of a generous welfare state. Despite this, migration continues to be a topic of contention in the public and political sphere (Eriksen, 2013, 2016). Furthermore, historically, pandemics have also led to stigmatisation, othering and induced blame on certain social and minority ethnic groups (Banerjee, Kallivayalil, & Rao, 2020). We found that narratives of blame as well as of being a burden were extended to immigrant men, as highlighted by the tweet below:

“The rail to Flesland was a Covid parody in itself. The only people I saw without face masks were young men or men who spoke Polish”

In the above tweet, the user associates younger age and being an immigrant man as those who do not follow protective measures against COVID-19. Such tweets highlight the intersectionality of social identities such as ethnicity, gender, and age in influencing prejudice. An intersectionality perspective thus shows how aspects of one’s identity are layered, multifaceted and they together influence the construction of essentialist and stereotypical discourses on one’s identity (Crenshaw, 1992). Further, the production of such everyday discourse has the power to shape knowledge, transform perceptions, define who belongs and rationalise the status loss of those deemed deviant (Grove & Zwi, 2006). Thus, while such discourse on gender and other intersecting identities may seem innocuous, they may also incite narratives of blame in attempts to cope with the uncertainty during the pandemic.

Conclusion

In this article, we explored discourses on gender on twitter, the networked public sphere of Norway during COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the general conceptions of gender equality (Lister, 2009), this study shows how discourses stereotyping gendered behaviours, constructions of hegemonic and

alternate masculinities and, othering of immigrants proliferate on social media. Given the power of discourses in shaping social configurations (Fairclough, 1992) coupled with the transcendence of social media across geographic boundaries, our findings are relevant both for Norway and globally. Though it should be noted that twitter data is based on demographically distinct user base and tweets may only represent opinions of a small sub-set of people repeated over (Wojcik and Hughes, 2019, Statista, 2023).

In this regard, we have shown the ways in which discourses on gender become reified and reproduced on Twitter. The perpetuation of stereotypical gendered behaviours such as handwashing takes traditional masculine traits and behaviour as a simple explanation for differences in infection rates among men and women. Such essentialised difference allude to the dichotomous binary among men/women and masculine/feminine. It shows the ways in which gender dualism discourses operate on social media. Such discourses highlight the importance of problematising and dismantling essentialist gender behaviours and ideology (Hamilton & Roberts, 2017). Our findings on the construction of alternative and hegemonic masculinities, are in line with Connell's work which analysed how a hierarchy of masculinities can operate in different contexts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and can legitimise unequal gender relations through perpetuation of such discourses on social media. The intersection of gender with other social identities of age and ethnicity, further creates complex relationships which influences narratives of blame and othering of particular identities. More importantly, blaming distracts us from the structural problems and therefore acts as a barrier to taking effective solutions.

We also highlighted the ways in which users utilise sarcasm, which has the potential to stimulate the virality of social media content (Peng et al., 2019), question women's higher vulnerability than men and re-conceptualise men as being more impacted due to the COVID-19 crisis. On the other hand, we also see that humour is used to conform to hegemonic masculine tropes, such as through alluding to women's role in the kitchen. While the intention of the user may be to simply convey humour in a harmless fashion, they nevertheless affirm to the ideology of hegemonic masculinity and

thereby reject gender equality. As hegemonic masculinity is created and used not just by men but also by others in the process of doing gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987), it continues to operate in public spheres through perpetuation of such gendered stereotypes (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Stereotypes about such gendered ideology, together with stereotypes on gendered behaviour and traits are thus problematic as they attribute to maintenance and justification of an unequal gender structure.

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