Representations of March 8 and feminine identities.
A pilot study on communication in the Italian press
(2000-2009)

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Abstract

Under the hypothesis that media communication plays a key role in the production of meanings linked to the broader value and belief system, the present pilot study explores the evolution of representations of the international women's day in the daily press. Drawing on the database of the Camera dei Deputati, the analysis of news about March 8 was undertaken. Through the identification of the following keywords: "woman/women's feast", "March 8" and "mimosa/e", a total of 129 articles was selected from 24 newspapers, diversified by ideological-cultural orientation. Privileging a triangulation model, textual data related to the headlines words and content variables, and extratextual data related to typographic variables (such as sex of the author, newspaper, year) were analysed. With reference to the content analysis, a table was constructed on the basis of the *Linguistic Category Model* (Semin, 2007). This was applied to identify the presence of abstract and concrete verbs as well as adjectives referring to women, men and feminist movement with their positive and negative connotation, with the hypothesis that the choice of verbs favours contextual vs. dispositional psychological attributions. These variables and their frequencies in a lexicographic format were transcribed in a lexical file containing also the headlines. Through Spad-t applications, these data were processed to identify the latent dimensions and the related factor plans showing the spatial proximity between lemmas and typographic variables. This allowed shedding light on the social-psychological dynamics underlying the media negotiation of the event and related gender dynamics, with respect to the political context and the characterisation of the source.

Keywords: social representations, lexicographic and content analysis, gender identity, triangulation model

1. Introduction

Under the perspective of social representations theory (Moscovici, 1961/1976), the present study aims to contribute to the analysis of gender dynamics in the field of media communication. Previous research, based on a diachronic media analysis over 26 years of the international women's day, has shown how the representational field of the international women's day ranges emphasis from its celebrative features to institutional action aimed at improving the female condition (Sensales and Pisilli, 2006). Results also show the presence of an androcentric bias (Riger, 2002), with male-signed articles stressing the biological connotations of feminine identities portrayed through their reproductive functions (Sensales and Pisilli, 2006). On this basis, the present study aims to unravel the main issues emerging over the last decade in the debate prompted by March 8 anniversary as well as the gender dynamics involved in the representational field.

The present study is based on the analysis of press articles, drawing on a range of 24 newspapers differentiated by ideological and cultural orientation. In accordance with the

approach illustrated by Denzin (1978), this study adopts a triangulation model integrating diverse data, methodologies and theories (Sensales et al., 2005; 2008). The full articles were analysed by classifying extratextual variables, including the typographic characteristics, and textual variables including the content variables of the full text and the headlines words. While the extratextual data (typographic variables) were imported into a 'numeric file', the lexical data (content variables treated as lemmas and headlines words) were imported into a 'lexical file'. Both files were treated with the support of the programme SPAD-T, as its different steps account for the complexity of socio-psychological dynamics. With regards to the theoretical framework, the present study articulates and combines two different approaches to media communication, namely Social Representations Theory (SRT) and the Linguistic Category Model (LCM).

The theory of social representations originated by Moscovici (1961/76) conceptualises communication as a primary site for generating and reproducing social meanings. According to this perspective, media constitute one of the major social actors participating in the public sphere as producers and products of existing knowledge. On the one hand, media communication actively contributes to the generation and modification of meanings while, on the other, it reflects and reproduces common sense circulating in societies (Sensales, 1994; Jovchelovitch, 2001).

In line with a social psychological approach to communication, the Linguistic Category Model (LCM) by Semin and Fiedler (1988) views language as a social product to be analysed in terms of its psychological properties (Semin, 1998). Language is regarded as a social device shaped by specific communicative functions and intended to promote particular goals. In psychological terms, as the specific composition of a message is linked to the functions it holds and the transmitter's objectives over the receiver, the analysis of the linguistic tools allows for comprehending how the message affects and moulds receiver's representations of the object as well as the reasons shaping that communication (Maass et al., 1989).

In order to undertake a systematic analysis of language, LCM distinguishes *verbs* used to represent *actions* or *states* referred to the subjects – constituting the object of a speech act – and *adjectives* designating their specific characteristics or enduring traits (Semin, 2007). The main theoretical assumption is that the level of abstraction (*state verbs and adjectives*) vs. descriptiveness (*action verbs*) of the linguistic tools used varies in function of how the transmitter intends to shape the message and, therefore, focus the recipient's attention, either on the stable and permanent characteristics of the subjects (high level of abstraction) or on the temporary and contextual features (low level of abstraction). Further developments of LCM have pointed attention to group dynamics ingrained in communication. Under the framework of intergroup relations, Maass et al. (1989) have tested the hypothesis that the degree of language abstraction varies in accordance with social desirability of group's membership aiming to maintain ingroup positive identity and outgroup negative identity. More precisely, high levels of abstraction (*state verbs and adjectives*) are used for ingroup's desirable behaviours and outgroup's undesirable behaviours; conversely, low levels of abstraction (*action verbs*) are used for ingroup's negative behaviours and outgroup's positive behaviours.

On these premises, this investigation aims to analyse how the international women's days is represented and how gender dynamics are articulated. To this scope, the methodological plan entails the use of the program SPAD-T, as this software is suitable to exploring the theoretical hypotheses.

2. Methodology

2.1. Objectives

The main objective of the present study is to explore the representational structure of the international women's day. In operational terms, this was articulated as follows: 1) exploring the vocabulary used to build these representations; 2) exploring the representational field through the analysis of the latent dimensions based on the intersection of extratextual data (typographic variables) and lexicographic data (content variables and headlines words); 3) exploring the role of the author's sex with regards to gender relations and representations.

2.2. Research material

Drawing on the press clippings of the Camera dei Deputati, a total of 129 articles were collected by sampling the period from 2000 to 2009 and by selecting the following keywords: "woman/women's feast", "March 8/Eight" and "mimosa/e". The articles belong to 24 different newspapers including: *La Padania, Il Giornale, Secolo d'Italia, Il Tempo, Il Foglio, Libero, Il Messaggero, Il Mattino, La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno, Europa, Il Riformista, L'Unità, Liberazione, Il Manifesto, Rinascita, La Repubblica, Il Corriere della Sera, La Stampa, Il Secolo XIX, Avvenire, Il Giorno, Il Popolo, Il Sole24ore, ItaliaOggi*.

2.3. Operational pathway and statistical procedure

A 'lexical file' was constructed containing the headlines, including half-title and subtitles, and the content variables while, in parallel, a 'numeric file' was built on the basis of 6 extratextual variables. The latter (typographic variables) and related modalities are shown below in Tab. 1, including: type of the newspaper; type of page; presence of photos; presence of signature and sex of the author; date of publication; period of publication. In particular, the original distinction of 24 newspapers was regrouped into 8 modalities according to political, geographic and relevance criteria. These were distinguished by political orientation (Centre-right, centre-left, Left), geographic distribution (South), while the three major newspapers (*La Repubblica, Il Corriere della Sera, La Stampa*) remain as an individual modality given their national dissemination; and finally the modality others. The period of publication also was regrouped on a biannual criteria related to the political orientation of the government (centre-right, centre-left). These variables formed the 'numeric file'.

On the basis of LCM, a grid for content analysis was constructed in order to analyse the full text of the articles selected. Based on the concept that the level of abstraction vs. descriptiveness varies in relation to the scope of the message, the grid distinguishes: a) action verbs, b) state verbs, and also c) adjectives, with polar connotations, d) positive adjectives and e) negative adjectives.

These are identified in relation to four agents: women and men, feminist and machos subjects. Tab. 2 below shows the modalities for each variable. In order to ensure reliability, the content analysis was undertaken by two independent judges and supervised by a third judge in case of discrepancy.

Variable	Modality	Freq	Variable	Modality	Freq
V1- Type of newspaper	Centre-Right	34	**V4- Signature and sex author**	No Signature	22
	South	10		Female Journalist	59
	Centre-Left	17		Male Journalist	36
	Left	14		Signed Initials	9
	La Repubblica	14	**V5- Date of publication**	Before 7 March	27
	Corriere della Sera	11		7 March	18
	La Stampa	14		8 March	45
	Others	15		9 March or after	39
V2- Type of page	First page	34	**V6- Period of publication and related government orientation**	2000-01 Centre-Left	13
	News	16		2002-03 Centre-Right	16
	Current News	21		2004-05 Centre-Right	36
	Politics	28		2006-07 Centre-Left	18
	Other	30			
V3- Photo	Photo Yes	41		2008-09 Centre-Right	48
	Photo No	88			

Table 1: Table for typographic variables

Reference to female figure	FF action verb	FFav	**Reference to male figure**	MM action verb	MMav
	FF state verb	FFsv		MM state verb	MMsv
	FF positive adjective	FFagp		MM positive adjective	MMagp
	FF negative adjective	FFagn		MM negative adjective	MMagn
	FF neutral adjective	FFag		MM neutral adjective	MMag
Reference to femminist subject	FEM action verb	FEMav	**Reference to macho subject**	MAS action verb	MASav
	FEM state verb	FEMsv		MAS state verb	MASsv
	FEM positive adjective	FEMagp		MAS positive adjective	MASagp
	FEM negative adjective	FEMagn		MAS negative adjective	MASagn
	FEM neutral adjective	FEMag		MAS neutral adjective	MASag

Table 2: Table for content variables

The final 'lexical file' is formed by 1) the words of the headline, the half-title and subtitle of each article, and 2) the content variables, reported in lexical forms as lemmas (according to what described in Tab. 2), repeated as many times as they appear in each article. From now onwards, the headline words and the content variables will be named as 'graphic forms'. Both 'numeric file' and 'lexical file' were simultaneously imported into the SPAD-T programme for Windows, version 5.0, for the statistical procedures and analysis, implying different steps:

- the step MOTS to obtain the whole vocabulary related to the graphic forms;
- the "equivalence" step allowed for the lemmatisation of the headlines words, aiming to a) eliminate irrelevant words, such as adverbs, articles, etc; b) assemble lexical forms so as to avoid data dispersion applied to contiguous forms such as singular/plural, male/female, declination of verbs, etc.;
- the step TALEX crossing the graphic forms (in rows) with the modalities of the numeric variables (in columns) selected to the scope of the following analysis, precisely including the type of newspapers, the signature and sex of the author, the period of publication and the type of page;
- the binary correspondence analysis for textual data (Lebart and Salem, 1988), namely CORBIT, allows for exploring the latent dimensions. In this analysis, all graphic forms and extratextual variables were considered as active variables. This procedure corresponds to the step APLUM of the version SPAD-T Intégré (version 1.5 PC CISIA 1993) that realises the analysis generated by Talex. The correspondence analysis allowed for identifying the main factors; on the basis of the scree-test, factors were extracted and crossed to the scope of building the factor plan illustrating the results in a more comprehensive way.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive analysis for typographic variables

Newspaper	%	Authorship	%	Period of publication	%
Centre-right	26,4	No signature	17,5	2000-01 Centre-left	10,1
Centre-left	13,2	Female Journalist	46,8	2002-03 Centre-right	12,4
Left	10,9	Male Journalist	28,6	2004-05 Centre-right	27,9
Centre-South	7,8	Signed Initials	7,1	2006-07 Centre-left	14,0
La Repubblica	10,9			2008-09 Centre-right	35,7
Corriere della Sera	8,5				
La Stampa	10,9				
Others	11,6				

Table 3: Distribution of frequencies by newspaper, authorship and period of publication

3.2. Descriptive analysis for the lexicographic variables

The initial vocabulary consists of 4782 words, of which 1478 being different, equal to 31% of the total. Subsequently to the "equivalence" step and the application of a threshold frequency ≥ 9, the final vocabulary consists of 1976 words, 199 being different equal to 10% of the total.

Tab. 4 below shows the lemmas, headlines words and content variables, with highest frequency appearing in the articles. Some of the descriptive words with the highest frequency include the keywords used to identify sample, such as <March 8>, <mimose>, <woman/women's feast>. Some terms refer to celebrative and disengaging aspects, leaving aside the political nature of the event, as for <feast>. Others imply political commitment, through both institutional and movement evocations, as for <politics>. The female protagonists of the event are referred in descriptive terms, such as <women> and <woman>, with a higher presence of the collective noun. On the other side, male actors appear solely in a collective definition as <men>.

Words	Freq	Words	Freq
Female Figure adjective	373	Women's feast	20
Female Figure action verb	267	Female Figure positive adj	19
Female Figure state verb	206	Feminist Subject state verb	18
March 8	113	Feminist Subject adjective	17
Women	53	Celebration/feast	12
Male Figure action verb	52	Day	12
Male Figure state verb	43	Italy	11
Male Figure adjective	38	Woman	10
Female Figure negative adj	35	Men	10
Feminist Subject action verb	25	Violence	10
Mimose	25	Feminine	9

Table 4: Vocabulary of lemmas with frequency ≥ 9

The identities of the protagonists also emerge through the lemmas identified in the text of the articles. In particular, the majority refer to female actors, reported primarily in abstract terms, as the highest frequency refers to women through the use of adjectives (FFag). This is followed by action verbs (FFav) and state verb (FFsv). Some abstract terms refer to women with a negative polarity (FFagn) and others, with a lower frequency, with a positive one (FFagp).

Lower frequencies appear for men, described primarily in concrete terms (MMav) but also in abstract terms (MMsv, MMag). Differently from the prevalence of stable and dispositional characteristics used for women in the development of the text (mainly described through the use of adjectives), in the case of men contextual elements prevail (mainly described through action verbs). Some references appear also for feminist subjects, mainly in concrete terms (FEMav) but also in abstract ones (FEMsv, FEMag).

With regards to the main thematic issues, the words represent <politics> and <violence>, the latter evidencing the presence of conflictive elements and possibly referring to the violation of women's bodies. Finally, the international nature of the event is dismissed, in favour of a national characterisation as in <Italy>.

3.3. Correspondence analysis

On the basis of a scree-test, the first four factors explaining 48,9% of the total inertia were extracted and, for each of them, the modalities with major contributions identified. These were then represented on the factor plan. Two factor plans were generated by intersecting factors I and II for the first factor plan, and III and IV for the second factor plan.

In order to interpret each factor, the modalities of the typographic variables and the lemmas were selected on the basis of the relevance of their absolute contributions on each factor. On this basis, the first four factors are identified and discussed as follows.

Factor	(% of inertia)	Interpretation
I Factor	18,22	Emphasis on the Female Figure: Central vs. Peripheral Role of Women
II Factor	12,47	Female Worlds and Normative Actions: the Valorisation of Female Characterisations vs. Normative Instruments
III Factor	9,94	Celebrative Anniversary and Politics: Movement vs. Institutional Politics
IV Factor	8,28	Women and Forms of Action: the Public and Private Sphere vs. Women's Bodies.

In order to provide a more exhaustive picture of the results attained, the following discussion focuses on the two factor plans obtained through the intersection of: the first and the second factor concerning the role of women and normative instruments with political figures from both political coalitions; and the third and the fourth factor concerning the celebrative characterisation of the event and the political arena with public and private issues.

The first factor plan, generated by the intersection of Factor I and II (Graph. 1), is characterised by the presence of female and male journalists as well as unsigned articles, by the type of pages being it either the first page or news and politics, by the presence of centre-left newspapers. In this plan, two main distinctive areas are identified. On the right side, the international women's day is represented as raising issues addressed by institutional and governmental forms of politics through figurative references, indicated by the presence of male and female political representatives belonging to both left and right wing parties (<Centre Right Male-CRM>, <Centre Right Female-CRF>, <Centre Left Female-CLM>, <Centre Left Female-CLF>, <Alemanno>, <Giachetti>, <Concia>, <Partito Democratico-PD>, <Partito della Libertà-PdL>, <Lega>) and instrumental elements, indicated by <quotas> and <politics>. The main social concern emerging is violence manifested against women's bodies, as in <rapes> and <violated>. It is to be noted the crosscutting nature of institutional action, regarding both left and right political parties and actors, and its gender neutrality, including both male and female representatives. Additionally, no references to the articulation of gender identities appear as the

categories from the text of articles are missing. Moreover, this is associated to male journalists writing the articles, appearing in political and news pages during the period of 2002-03 with centre-right government.
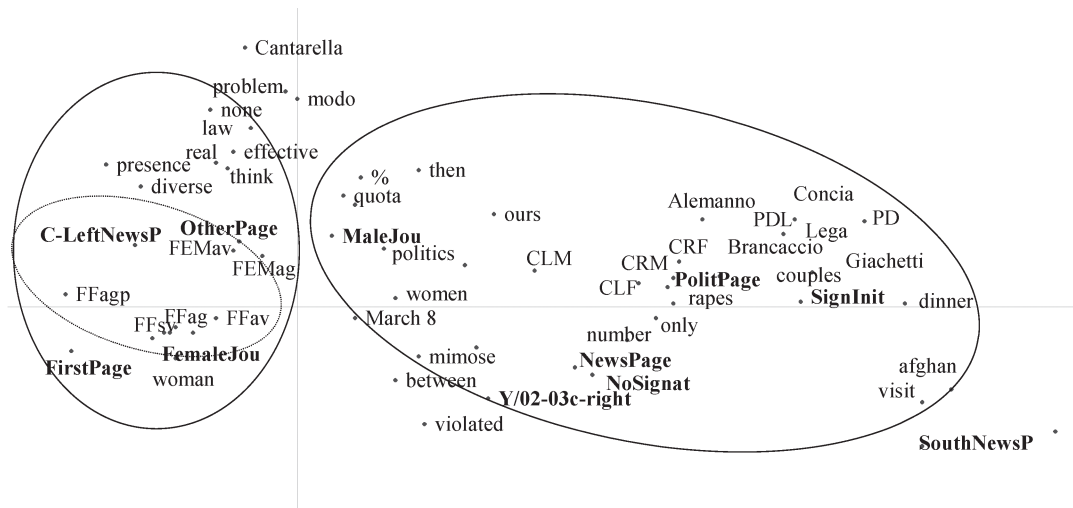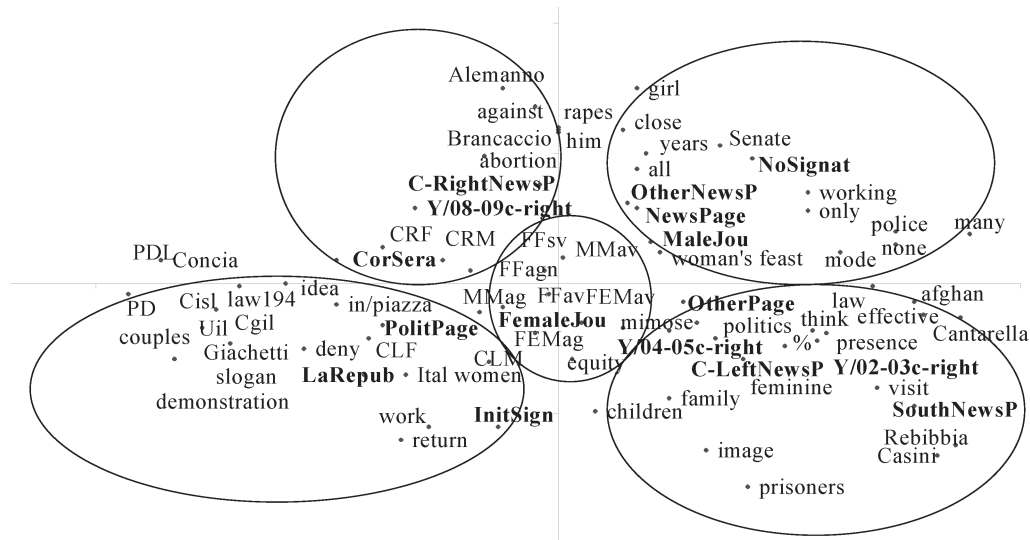

Graphic 1: Factor plan: Factors I and II

Differently, on the left side of the plan, the international women's day is articulated in terms of gender dynamics and the main focus is on women's identity and feminist subjects. In particular, female figures are articulated both in terms of their dispositional and enduring traits (FFsv, FFag) with positive connotations (FFagp) and their contextual characteristics (FFav); similarly, feminist subjects are articulated in their permanent characteristics (FEMag) and contextual features (FEMav). Women journalists sign these articles appearing in the first page of centre-left newspapers. While some headlines words possibly refer to institutional issues, such as <law>, <effective> and <presence>, the main focus of this representational area consists of the definition of women's identity, which seems to be under negotiation due to the proximity of action verbs with state verbs and adjectives. Contrarily to the right side of the plan, where male-signed articles dismiss gender differences and identity dynamics in favour of a crosscutting approach, focusing on both political and gender representatives, the left cluster shows an interest in gender dynamics focused on women's identity and distinctive characterisations.

The second factor plan is generated by the intersection of factor III and IV (Graph 2) and characterised by the presence of female and male journalists, by the presence of the major newspapers *La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera* and newspapers from the both the left and right wings, by the type of pages being it either the news or politics, by different periods, mainly those with a centre-right government. In this plan, five main areas are identified, two of them as polar opposites and the fifth one as a central one. First, there is an antithetic representation between two approaches: one in line with the government opposed to one based on mass-movement, both of them with no signature contribution. The former appears on the upper-left side and is mainly characterised by a right wing political orientation. It is associated with the major Italian newspaper Il Corriere and other newspapers with a right-wing political orientation over the period 2008-09 governed by the centre-right coalition. Female and male political representatives from the centre-right coalition appear (<Centre Right Male-CRM>, <Centre Right Female-CRF>) together with social issues concerning women's bodies like <abortion>, which have been the object of heated debate as shown by the presence of the word <against>. On the bottom-left part, politics emerges with its mobilisation forms, as in <slogan>,

<demonstration>, <in piazza> and the presence of the most important workers' unions like <UIL>, <CGIL>, <Cisl>. Consistently, the main issue emerging is <work>. Also evidence of a leftist political connotation is clear with <Centre Left Female-CLF> and <Centre Left Male-CLM>, showing a prevalence of centre-left wing representatives. Coherently, these articles belong to the second national newspaper *La Repubblica*, having a left wing political orientation, and appear in the political page of the newspapers.

Graphic 2: Factor plan: Factors III and IV

On the other side of the plan, the opposition concerns a representation of the event as a public matter of security as in <police> and governmental politics as in <Senate> represented in the news page of various newspapers with no specific political orientation. On the bottom-right side, the event is represented as a wide issue concerning the female gender reported in its traditional roles, as in <children>, <family> mainly appearing in right wing oriented newspapers and during the periods of the centre-right coalitions, over 2002-03 and 2004-05. Finally, the last cluster appears in the centre of the factor plan with women journalists signing the articles and content variables showing a focus on gender dynamics. The variables refer mainly to female figures through contextual definitions and stable traits, sometimes negatively connoted (FFav, FFsv, FFagn), but also to male figures in their dispositional features (MMag) and to feminist subjects through permanent and temporary characterisations (FEMav, FEMag). This proves that women journalists pay significant attention to the articulation of gendered identity, equally using dispositional and contextual characterisations for both genders.

4. Conclusions

Overall, this pilot study shows that the representational field of the international women's day is linked to issues concerning women's bodies, expressed through violent actions like abortion and rape, as well as to women's rights, like work, family and equity. Moreover, in both cases, there are significant references to politics playing a key role, either in the form of its male and female institutional representatives and governmental instruments, such as law and quota, or in the form of movement demonstrations, as proved by the relevant presence of all workers unions.

The analysis demonstrate that representations of March 8 and gender identities are mainly organised on the basis of both the sex of the author and the ideological orientation of the

newspapers, differentiating the thematic focus of the news and the articulation of gender identities in the textual development. With regards to the first factor plan (Graph 1), the differentiation is primarily organised around the sex of the authors of the articles polarising the focus of communication on divergent aspects. On the one side, women journalists, associated with centre-left newspapers, focus their attention on multifaceted aspects of women's identity articulated throughout the full development of the news text. When women write the articles, female and feminist subjects constitute the main object of reflection and objective of communication against the background of headlines captions, missing their primary role. In particular, female figures are reported through both dispositional and contextual features, especially with their positive connotations. On the other side, men journalists are highly associated with super-partes politics, which emerges as gender-neutral and cutting across opposite coalitions. Male and female political representatives as well as institutional instruments constitute the focus of headlines, whereby no attention is paid to the articulation of gender identities. With regards to the second factor plan (Graph 2), the organisation of the representational field accounts for the sex of the journalists and the two major newspapers. In this case, *Il Corriere della Sera*, associated with right wing newspapers and the two-years of right wing government, shows a governmental politics concerned with conflictive elements regarding women's bodies, while *La Repubblica* shows a movement-based approach to politics, appealing to demonstrative actions supported by unions and focused on the issue of work. On the other side, male journalists refer to bi-lateral institutional instruments emphasising the aspect of security while centre-left newspapers appeal to politics and law with a more traditional femininity supported by references to family and children. While all the clusters identified are associated only with the headlines words, none of the newspapers proves interest in the articulation of women's identity in the text development. Again, a distinct area is differentiated from the others and fully organised around the communication of gendered identities. These articles are signed by women journalists and reflect the reasoning on male and female identities as well as on feminist subjects. All of them are reported in contextual and dispositional features, though negative connotations emerge in this case.

Overall, the analysis shows that only women journalists focus their attention on gender identity throughout the development of press articles. In particular, female figures are reported with both high (state verbs and adjectives) and low (action verbs) levels of abstraction, showing that both dispositional traits and contextual features contribute to the definition of their identities. This may indicate that the definitional process of feminine identity is under construction. These results show that media reports of March 8 produce and reflect the presence of negotiation dynamics concerning gender identities.

To conclude, the methodological choices adopted in this exploratory study, and supported by the application of the SPAD-T programme, allowed for analysing complex social psychological dynamics giving evidence of diverse representational repertoires of the international women's day. Under the theoretical framework of social representations and LCM, this pilot contribution has shown the role of gender identities and ideological orientations in the representational processes prompted by March 8. Future research developments include enlarging the sample of this study in order to give more stability to the statistic analysis testing the consistency of the results here attained. This may further contribute to understand the role of gender membership and ideological positions in articulating gender relations and identity representations.

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