

SONJA WÜRTEMBERGER & FLORIAN PERST

GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE PRACTICES

AMONG STUDENTS IN GERMAN DISTANCE EDUCATION

QMUL online, 28 March 2026

„Backlash? Gender-Inclusive
Language in a Time of
Resistance”



01

STARTING POINT

GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE PRACTICES

STARTING POINT: SUPERVISION PRACTICE OF FINAL THESES

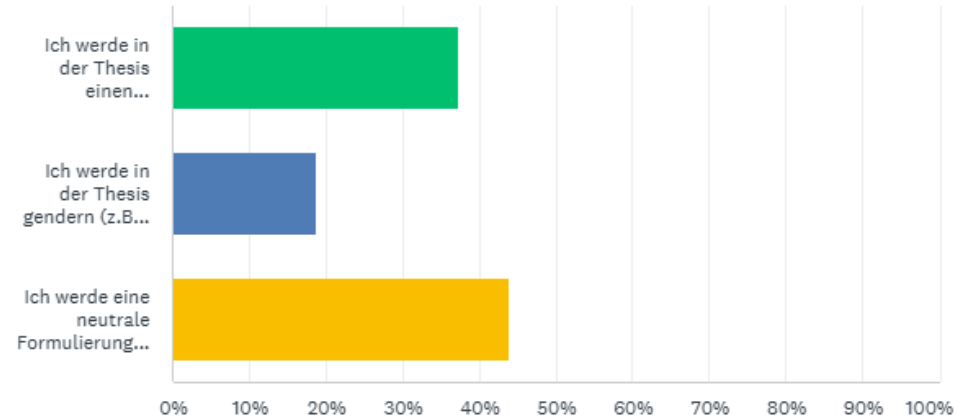
- **2.4 million students** are enrolled at state universities, and around 384,000 at private universities (as of the 2024/25 winter semester, Federal Statistical Office/CHE, 2026)
- **130,000 students at IU** International University alone, 83% of whom are studying online or via blended learning; focus on social sciences; 63% female; 70% first-generation students (IU, 2024)
- High proportion of **teaching staff supervising** final theses
- We are from the fields of **Human Resource Management and Marketing**

INITIAL IDEAS – GENERATED FROM PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE

- Survey by Florian Perst at IU on thesis writing in Nov/Dec 2024
- Our assumption based on **anecdotal evidence**: the Generic Masculine form is still predominant
- However: Over 60% want to avoid the Generic Masculine
- Over 40% want to use gender-neutral phrasing

Gendern in der Thesis

Beantwortet: 614 Übersprungen: 0



ANTWORTOPTIONEN	BEANTWORTUNGEN
“I will include a disclaimer in my thesis”	37,30 % 229
“I will use gender-inclusive language in my thesis (e.g. staff)”	18,73 % 115
“I will choose a neutral formulation (e.g. staff)”	43,97 % 270
GESAMT	614

WHAT THIS STUDY (IS NOT)

- **Not a** further contribution to the linguistic analysis of guidelines (e.g. Klein, 2024; Neef, 2024; Siegenthaler, 2022; Schneider, 2022)
- **Not a** further contribution to research on gender-inclusive language from a linguistic perspective (including Kotthoff & Nübling, 2024; Trutkowski & Meinunger, 2024)
- **But an** exploratory study on the understanding and use of gender-inclusive language by students as well as the influence of personal values on its use in the context of organizational authorities such as guidelines and managers
- **a** starting point for recommendations for organisations and employers (applied sciences)

AGENDA

- Brief overview of **values within the context of corporate culture** and the
- **Role of language guidelines** in setting values
- **Methodology** of the quantitative survey
- **Results:** Extract focusing on the values question
- **Recommendations** for a values-inclusive practice
- **Conclusion**

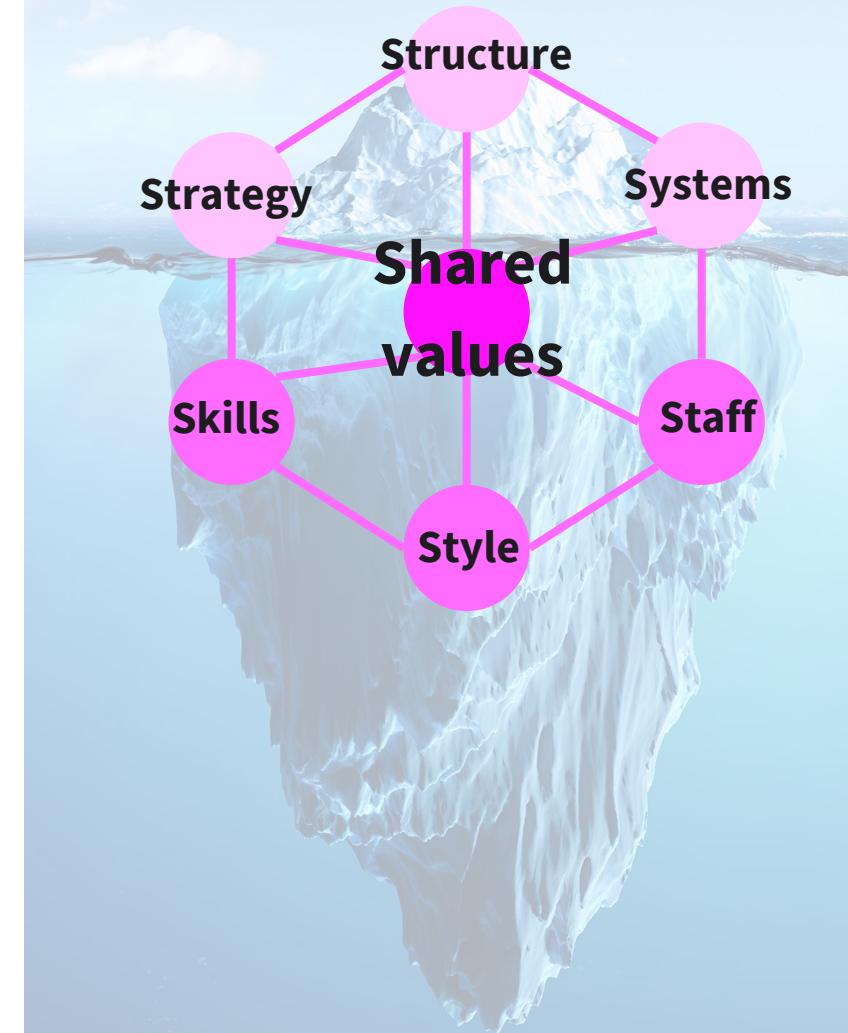
02

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE CHANGE

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE: SHARED VALUES AT THE HEART

- **Shared Values:** “a set of values and aspirations, often unwritten, that goes beyond the conventional formal statement of corporate objectives.” (Waterman & Philipps, 1980)
- **McKinsey’s 7-S model**, like other models of organisational research used for change processes (Channon & Caldart, 2015; Alvesson & Svennson, 2025; Schein, 2010; Hatch, 1993; Hall, 1976), can be cited here by way of example
- **Central to this is the agreement on shared values, which are the result of many organisational socialisation processes.**
- This also includes a distinct language: the jargon of the industry or the company.
- **Prescribing language change** through decree, without anchoring it in collectively developed values, creates a values gap including reactance.
- That is typically the case with **corporate language guides**, including those **promoting gender-inclusive language** (Schach, 2023).



LANGUAGE GUIDELINES AS AN AMBITION WITHOUT A SHARED VALUE BASE?

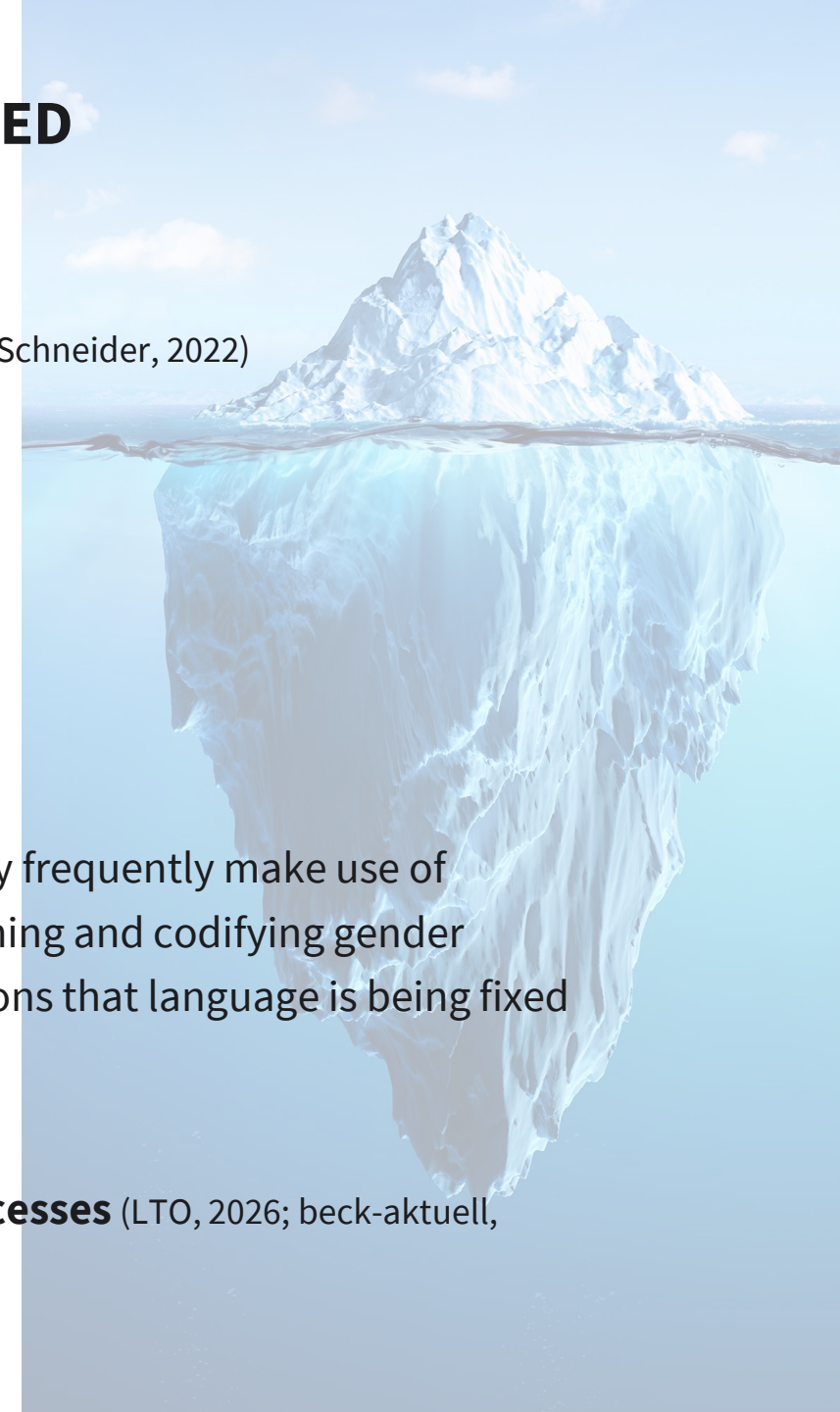
Criticism of language guides from the field of linguistics (Klein, 2024; Siegenthaler, 2022; Schneider, 2022)

- a lack of a (genuine) and neutral linguistic basis
- with a mixture of descriptive and prescriptive elements
- with high moral standards („ambitioned“ Klein, 2024)
- furthermore, authors often remain obscure, hidden behind institutional titles

Criticism from the business and consultancy sectors confirms this and adds:

- “What is striking in terms of content when analysing language guidelines is that they frequently make use of strategic vagueness – the aim is to give expression to corporate identity by establishing and codifying gender diversity as a positive value; at the same time, the intention is to pre-empt accusations that language is being fixed in a prescriptive manner” (Burel et al. 2024)

→ **Problem: A top-down approach leads to reactance in value-driven change processes** (LTO, 2026; beck-aktuell, 2023)



RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND FOCUS AREAS

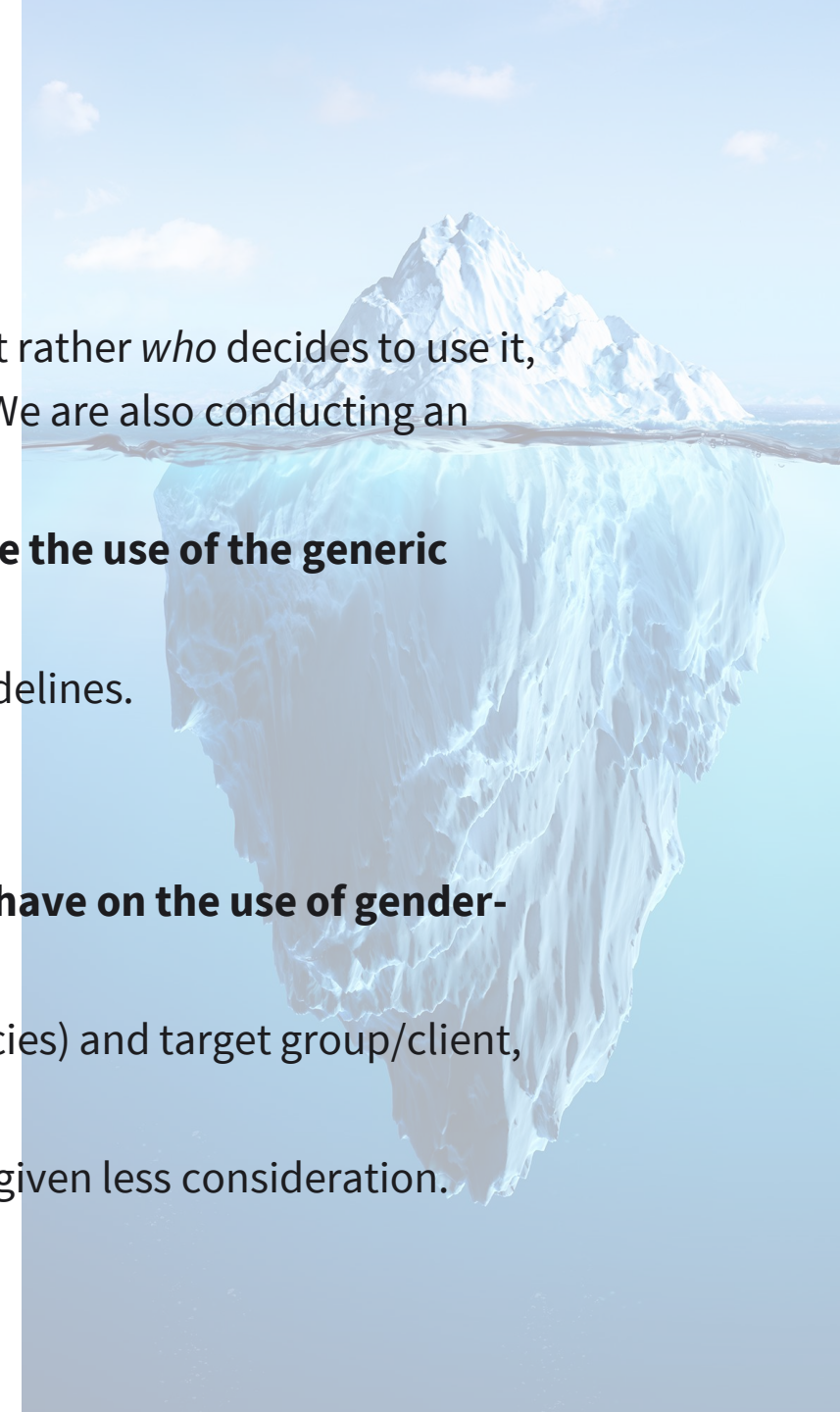
- Our study does not examine whether and how gender-inclusive language *works*, but rather *who* decides to use it, *how they do so*, and *under what conditions* it can be implemented in organisations. We are also conducting an exploratory investigation into whether the degree programme plays a role.

RQ1: To what extent do gender, values and choice of degree programme influence the use of the generic masculine (GM)?

- H1) Men prefer the GM over women/diverse groups and are more likely to reject guidelines.
- H2) STEM students prefer the GM compared to other students.

RQ2: What influence do organizations, supervisors, managers and target groups have on the use of gender-inclusive language?

- H3) In the triangle of authority (supervisor/manager), organization (guidelines/policies) and target group/client, authority/(direct) dependence is stronger than the other two.
- H4) When usage is value-driven, authorities, institutions and also target groups are given less consideration.



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Focus today

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METHODOLOGY

GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE PRACTICES

METHODOLOGY: QUESTIONNAIRE 1/2

- To collect the data, an **online survey** was conducted using a standardised questionnaire.
- It consisted of **46 items**, with the first item on enrolment status serving purely as a filter question.
- The other question groups were:
 - **demographics**: type of degree programme, intended qualification, subject of study, gender identity, age
 - on **attitudes towards gender-inclusive language**, including the use of various linguistic forms
 - on the **importance of language guidelines** in everyday student life
 - on the **pros and cons of guidelines**
 - on **use in a work context** and dealing with target groups

METHODOLOGY: QUESTIONNAIRE 2/2

- For ordinal items, a **Likert scale of 1–7** was used.
- To ensure quality criteria were met, a **pre-test** was conducted from 19 September 2025 to 22 September 2025 with six testers. This primarily led to adjustments to the clarity and user-friendliness of the questionnaire.
- Data collection took place from **18 September 2025 to 31 December 2025** via Tivian/Unipark.
- Participants were **recruited** via internal **IU networks (Teams channels), LinkedIn and WhatsApp**. The sample comprises N = 432 individuals, with **N = 419 valid data records** remaining after the exclusion of missing values.
- The proportion of participants from state universities in **face-to-face programmes is 15%**. These were included in the overall sample as they are also students, but the number is too small to allow for a meaningful direct comparison between online and face-to-face learning.
- **Bias in favour of IU students** is likely and limits the representativeness of the sample.
- Nevertheless, the results provide us with a good insight into students' current attitudes.
- The analysis was carried out using SPSS.

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RESULTS

GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE PRACTICES

PERCEPTION AND USE OF GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

	Generic masculine (e.g. only „Mitarbeiter“)	Generic feminine (e.g. only „Mitarbeiterinnen“)	Neutral forms (e.g. “Fachkraft”, “Belegschaft”, “Mitarbeitenden”)	Dual forms (e.g. “Mitarbeiterinnen und Mitarbeiter”)	Neologisms with special characters (e.g. „Mitarbeiter*innen“, „Mitarbeiter:innen“)	don't know
Perception of “gender-inclusive language”: “What comes to mind when you think of gender-inclusive language („Gendersprache“), e.g. in TV?”	15.50%	12.40%	61.60%	51.80%	79.50%	2.90%
Personal use in general: “Which of the forms listed below do you use when referring to a group of people of different genders (e.g. in a presentation)?”	42.50%	2.10%	68.50%	34.40%	27.70%	0%
Direct address: “Which of the forms listed below do you mainly use when you want to address a group of people of different genders directly (e.g. in a talk or in a post)?”	24.30%	2.90%	58.50%	52.70%	22.20%	0.50%

More than one answer could be selected

REASONS FOR PREFERRED USE

v_35 (Main_reason_description - What is the main reason for this?)	Simplicity (because it is the simplest way)	116	27.7%
	Accuracy (because it is the most accurate way)	29	6.9%
	Comprehensibility (because this is the most comprehensible)	113	27.0%
	Values (because it is in line with my values)	131	31.3%
	Expectation (because it is expected of me)	27	6.4%
	Don't know	3	0.7%
v_82 (Main_reason_address - What is the main reason for this?)	Simplicity (because it's the easiest way)	104	24.8%
	Accuracy (because that is the most accurate way)	46	11.0%
	Clarity (because this is the clearest way)	103	24.6%
	Values (because it is in line with my values)	124	29.6%
	Expectation (because it is expected of me)	36	8.6%
	Don't know	6	1.4%

GUIDELINES VS. SUPERVISOR

v_20 (Are you aware of any guidelines on gender-inclusive language at your university?)	yes	248	59,2%
	no	171	40,8%
v_38 (When it comes to written exams or your thesis, you usually discuss many details with your supervisor. Do you ask your supervisor about their preferences regarding gendered language?)	yes	160	38,2%
	no	189	45,1%
	don't know	70	16,7%
v_39 (Do your supervisor's preferences influence whether and how you use gendered language?)	yes	239	57,0%
	no	112	26,7%
	don't know	68	16,2%
v_86 (When you write academic work (essays, seminar papers, subject presentations, etc.), what do you mainly base your work on?)	Supervisor	106	25,3%
	University guidelines	172	41,1%
	Other guidelines	12	2,9%
	Habit	127	30,3%
	don't know	2	0,5%

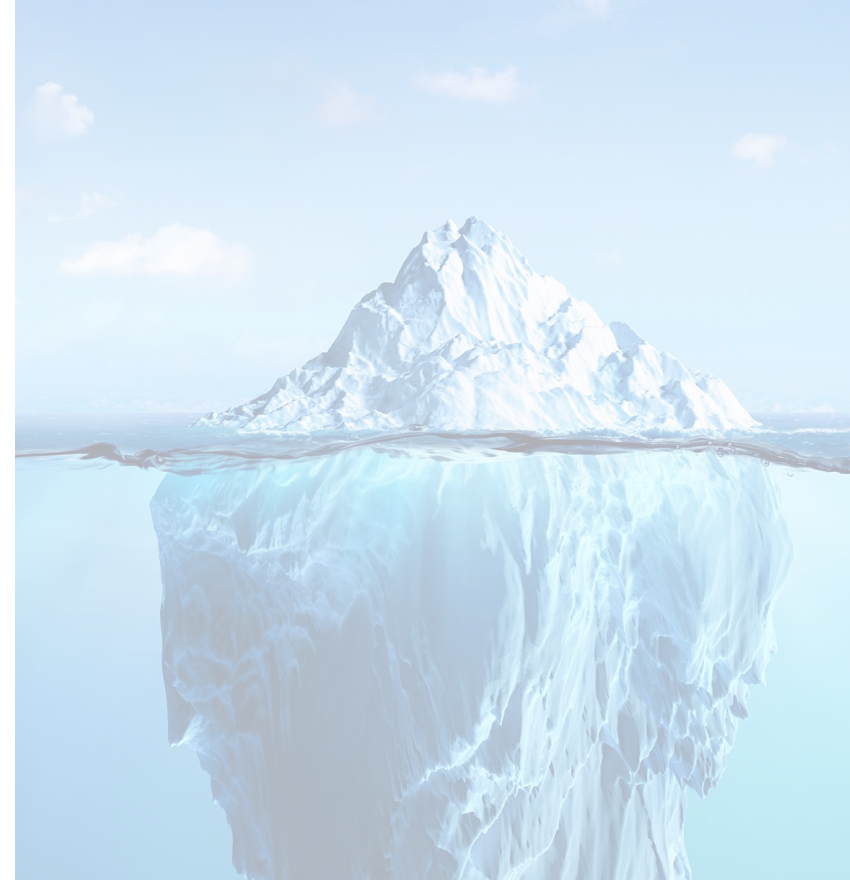
GUIDELINE VS. MANAGER

<p>v_68 (Deviation_LF – If your manager explicitly asked you to use gendered language / not to use gendered language in the same way they do, what would your reaction be?)</p>	Manager (I follow my manager’s lead, even if I would personally do it differently)	70	16.7%
	Employer (I follow the employer’s guidelines; that is the only binding requirement)	143	34.1
	Discuss (I would discuss it with my manager to convince them that I can do it the way I want to)	77	18.4%
	My own values (I would follow my own values and do it the way I want to)	114	27.2%
	Don’t know	15	3.6
<p>v_70 (External communication – Imagine you are responsible for your employer’s external communication with specific target groups, e.g. in marketing to recruit new staff or when liaising with customers and business partners. How would you use (non-)gendered language here?)</p>	Target group (I focus on my target group.)	134	32.0%
	Employer (I follow the employer’s guidelines)	167	39.9%
	Team members (I follow the lead of my team members)	3	0.7%
	My own figures (I speak and write as I see fit)	102	24.3%
	Don’t know	13	3.1%

GUIDE – PROS AND CONS

Variable	N	Mean	Median	Standard deviation	Min	Max
v_46 (Rating – How would you feel if there were generally binding guidelines for academic work regarding gender-inclusive language at the university?)	419	4.21	4.00	2.27	1	7
v_53 (Consistency – A guideline creates consistency in expression.)	419	5.47	6.00	1.65	1	7
v_54 (Ideology – A guideline is ideological. (Ideological here: guided by principles.))	419	4.47	5.00	1.83	1	7
v_83 (Guide_Importance - How important is the availability of a language guide to you?)	419	3.89	4.00	2.10	1	7
v_47 (Importance_LF - How would you feel if the university/supervisor made NO guidelines, and each person decided for themselves whether and how to use gender-neutral language (consistently throughout the work, of course)?)	419	4.97	6.00	2.09	1	7

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND FOCUS AREAS



RQ2: What influence do organizations, supervisors, managers and target groups have on the use of gender-inclusive language?

- H3) In the triangle of authority (supervisor/manager), organization (guidelines/policies) and target group/client, authority/(direct) dependence is stronger than the other two.
- H4) When usage is value-driven, authorities, institutions and also target groups are given less consideration.

Focus today

H3) IN THE TRIANGLE OF AUTHORITY (SUPERVISOR/MANAGER), ORGANIZATION (GUIDE) AND TARGET GROUP/CLIENT, AUTHORITY/(DIRECT) DEPENDENCE IS STRONGER THAN THE OTHER TWO.

- The relevant variables (v_86, v_68, v_70) do not have a uniform scale. Three binary variables were therefore constructed to indicate whether the respective person has chosen the corresponding dimension (authority, organization, target group) as their primary orientation. The variables were operationalised as follows:
- Authority: v_86 = 1 (supervisor) or v_68 = 1 (manager) becomes 1, otherwise 0
- Organization: v_86 = 2 (university guide) or v_68 = 2 (employer) becomes 1, otherwise 0
- Target group: v_70 = 1 (target group) becomes 1, otherwise 0

Cochran's Q test

Dimension	Operationalisation	N	Proportion	Cochran's Q	df	p
Authority	v_86 = 1 v_68 = 1	148	35.3%	75,599	2	0.000
Organization	v_86 = 2 v_68 = 2	251	59.9%			
Target group	v_70 = 1	134	32.0%			

Pairwise comparison of dimensions (McNemar test, Bonferroni correction: p = 0.017)

Couple	chi2	p	Interpretation
Authority vs. Organization	40,482	0.000	Organization > Authority
Authority vs. Target Audience	1.006	0.316	no difference
Organization vs. target group	60.341	0.000	Organization > Target group

The difference between the dimensions of authority and target audience is marginal, whilst the dimension of organization dominates by a wide margin. Overall, **hypothesis H3 is clearly refuted. It is not authority, but organizational requirements that constitute the strongest factor.**

H4) IF USAGE IS VALUE-DRIVEN, AUTHORITIES, INSTITUTIONS AND TARGET GROUPS ARE GIVEN LESS CONSIDERATION.

- The variable ‘value-driven’ is constructed from the main reason for language use in ‘designation’ (v_35) and ‘address’ (v_82). Individuals who indicated a primary orientation in at least one of the two contexts (v_35 = 4 or v_82 = 4) were classified as value-driven. The recoding was carried out in SPSS. Subsequently, the relationship with the three dimensions (authority, organization, target group) was tested using chi-square tests.

Language use as a function of value orientation

Dimension	not value-driven	value-driven	chi2	df	p	Cramer's V
Authority	39.0%	29.4%	4,007	1	0.045	0.098
Organization	62.2%	56.3%	1.439	1	0.230	0.059
Target group	38.6%	21.3%	13,702	1	0.000	0.181

It follows that Hypothesis H4 is partially confirmed. A robust effect is evident exclusively for the target audience dimension, from which it can be concluded that individuals who base their language use primarily on their own values are less likely to take the expectations of the target audience into account. No correlation can be demonstrated for organizational guidelines.

05

RECOMMENDATIONS

IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS

SHARED VALUES THROUGH PARTICIPATION, EVEN IN THE CONTEXT OF ORGANIZATIONAL LANGUAGE CHANGE

- Majority wants consistency and neutral language alternatives
- High polarisation regarding mandatory requirements, but a strong desire for standards
- Value-driven attitudes have a stronger impact than organizational requirements
- **Guidelines** that are *linguistically sound* and at the same time *practically accepted* should be developed as follows:

1. Participatory rather than top-down

- Involve employees in the creation of guidelines
- Guidelines become part of one's own values → reduces reactance

2. Evidence-based creation

- Studies on comprehensibility and accessibility
- Empirical tests with own target group
- Linguistic support for the discussions

3. Flexible by default

- Maximum flexibility where possible
- Transparent justifications for standards

06

CONCLUSION

GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE PRACTICES

CONCLUSION

- **Demographic factors are superimposed:** gender and degree programme influence the choice of language form; however, these are clearly dominated by organizational guidelines and value systems; effects are smaller than expected
- **Organizational authority trumps personal authority:** H3 refuted: it is not supervisors/managers who provide the main guidance, but guidelines
- **Values have a selective influence:** value-driven people tend to ignore target group expectations, but usually follow organizational guidelines
- **Pragmatic majority:** accepts guidelines if they are sensible and well-founded, and desires consistency ('shared values') → this should be taken into account when creating guidelines
- **Limitations:** non-representative, only students
- **Outlook:** "Guide to the guide" including insights from linguistics and research on organisational change; further surveys in organisations



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THANK YOU

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*Please reach out to
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