

“Authentic othering”: strategy and tactics of “viscursive privileging” in sustainable higher education institutions

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Eva Bulgrin

*Department of Education, Philipps-Universität Marburg, Marburg, Germany and
School of Education, University of Sussex, Falmer, UK, and*

Heli Mahkonen and Susanne Maria Weber

Department of Education, Philipps-Universität Marburg, Marburg, Germany

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Abstract

Purpose – Despite numerous institutionalised gender-inclusion measures, the gender imbalance in technical and engineering study programmes remains very high in Germany. Some universities have developed strategies for integrating sustainability at the institutional and study programme level to address women students, especially in technical study programmes. This article examines the question of how viscursive privilege manifests itself in strategies and tactics relating to gender and sustainability in higher education, especially in the field of Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM) study programmes.

Design/methodology/approach – Informed by Foucault’s discourse-analytical methodology and Knorr-Cetina’s (1999) approach of “viscourse”, we focus on the emergent, performative, and intentional institutional discourses and viscourses in higher education. Specifically, we analyse the viscursive practices of privileging gendered (and racialised) positionings in the institutional strategies of sustainability, drawing on reconstructive image interpretation in website analysis, complemented with excerpts of interview data with higher education professionals.

Findings – Overall, we identify two discursive “tactics” (as Foucault refers to them) within the discursive institutional strategies of “authentic othering” in higher education, namely the tactic of authenticity as performative visibility and the tactic of tokenised visualising in marking racial diversity and gender differences. In the contested terrain of discursive organising, we nevertheless observe practices of resistance and find spaces of partial openings in different study programmes.

Originality/value – This research is original because it applies a Foucauldian perspective to explore privilege as a discursive practice in higher education. It uniquely examines how sustainable study programmes are linked to gendered discursive strategies. Methodologically, it innovates by applying a viscourse analysis inspired by Knorr-Cetina (1999). The study highlights discursive tactics from a Foucauldian perspective.

Keywords Higher education, Discursive organising, Subject positions, Gender, Equality, Sustainability, Viscourse

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Traditionally, the prevailing image of an engineer in the German context has been male, middle-class and white. The engineering career path remains normative, albeit to a lesser degree, thereby perpetuating hierarchies of power and privilege. As shown by Paulitz *et al.* (2015) and Paulitz and Prietl (2017), however, a combination of technology and sustainability has led to a gendered shift in the discursive and epistemological norms of the technological

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engineering field. At the epistemological level, this shift presents a challenge to the norm of the implicitly masculine engineer and scientist (Elven, 2022; Wolfram *et al.*, 2009), as well as the self-image of technology and engineering as “objective”, “rational” and “structured/hard” sciences (Prietl, 2017, 2018). In the context of this shift, sustainability presents a new epistemological approach that is traditionally perceived as feminine, such as “soft”, “alternative” and “political/societal” (Prietl, 2017, 2018). Thus, our focus is on the performative discursive practice of producing privileged or marginalised subject-positions in the field of Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM) and particularly engineering sciences in higher education institutions (HEIs).

Our publication is part of a BMFTR [1]-funded project on the potential of HEIs to attract and retain female “non-traditional students” (Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011) by integrating sustainability and gender-equality measures into the engineering sciences. In this article, we focus, as an example, on the *viscursive* strategies of one HEI that follows a market rationality and, by doing so, privileges and deprivileges accordingly. We use the term “viscursive”, as the specific ways of representing people on the website will position them discursively and visually. The concept helps not only to shed light on the discursive and viscursive positioning, but also on the ways and orders of looking at women, international students and other non-traditional student groups (Knorr-Cetina, 1999). From this viscursive perspective, we examine the question of how *viscursive* privilege manifests itself in strategies and tactics related to gender and sustainability in higher education, especially in STEM study programmes.

To do so, we use discursive and documentary website-analysis in HEIs (Schünzel and Traue, 2014). Moreover, we refer to image-based interviews with higher education leaders, academics, professionals and students. Analysing the relational patterns between the visual and text (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014), we explore the HEI website analysis and relate this to relevant interview excerpts. In this way, we intend to identify patterns in the institutional practice of “discursive privileging”, as seen from a Foucauldian discourse-analytical perspective (Foucault, 1972). Analysing institutional discourse, we identify the discursive strategy of “authentic othering”. As we will show in the following, this strategy builds on different “tactics”, as Foucault (1976) refers to them. “Tactics” are concrete methods by which power and knowledge operate. They are local and specific, but nevertheless flexible and adaptable. While tactics actualise discourses at the local level, discursive strategies are the ways in which discourses are organised and structured. Both discursive tactics and strategies bring about subjectivation in specific power and knowledge constellations.

For this publication, we understand gender and race as discursively produced positionings, shaped by intersecting power relations (Foucault, 1978a), rather than fixed attributes or identities. The concept of “privilege” has no single, established definition in social sciences, but it does have roots in the critical examination of white and male privilege and was later expanded to include class, gender and sexual orientation (Lo, 2023). Therefore, we intend to draw upon intersectional and Foucauldian approaches to privilege (Lo, 2023; Deveaux, 1994). Intersectional approaches to privilege consider the combined effects and positionings of individual subjects at the intersections of discrimination and systemic oppression, as shown in the works of Crenshaw (1989), Hill Collins (2000). Recent Foucauldian approaches to privilege, especially within the feminist academic context, have drawn upon the term “power knowledge” to point towards the prevailing – and shifting – discursive power regimes which produce specific gendered and/or racialised subject-positions and gaze orders (Deveaux, 1994). With this in mind, we also want to refer to the concept of “market of privilege”, as defined by Meschitti *et al.* (forthcoming). Meschitti *et al.* argue that gender-equality initiatives in academia risk reinforcing a “market of privilege” in neoliberal contexts, which defines access to and success in academia through male-centred, middle-class and racialised norms of excellence and career paths. This leads to conditional inclusion, rather than genuine equality, while privileging specific categories of women and marginalising others based on discursive positionings such as class, ethnicity and sexuality. Moreover, such discursive positionings hinder epistemic diversity by rewarding conformity to dominant knowledge regimes. Seen

from a Foucauldian perspective, privilege is not a static given, but a permanent production of power and knowledge relations – the discursive doing of privilege.

Our article is structured as follows: in the following section, we introduce and discuss the state of the art on gender, race, and sustainability in technical sciences within academia. The second section presents the methodology of this study, explaining how we approached the analyses of websites and interviews. In [Section 3](#), we identify the discursive strategy of “authentic othering”, which implies the tactic of authenticity applied in the PR strategies and the tactic of tokenised visualising in marking the racialised and gendered differences. The tactics above, as our research shows, are resisted by the women’s representatives, who follow a politically motivated tactic by advocating for women to be visible on the website, which contrasts with the university’s strategy of following a market logic regarding gender equality and diversity. As we will see in [Section 4](#), partial openings may occur at the level of study programmes, overcoming the symbolic order of the institutional discourse and creating specific subspaces for disciplines and gender- and sustainability-symbolic orders. In the conclusions, we summarise our findings and further reflect on how scientific and academic institutions can avoid (re-)producing these patterns of “discursive privileging” through their equality measures, aiming to effect cultural change within organisations, disciplines and study programmes. Thus, our article contributes a Foucauldian perspective to the ongoing debate about how academic cultures and practices shape new patterns of privilege and power hierarchies in a neoliberal higher education context, also known as the “market of privilege”, as indicated in the call ([Meschitti et al., forthcoming](#)).

In the next section, we introduce the institutional strategies and discuss how gender and race manifest within these strategies in the context of HEI and STEM.

2. Gender and race in the context of green higher education institutions

The number of women in engineering and technical study programmes in Germany is very low, with women accounting for between 5% and 20% of the total ([Destatis, 2023](#)). Generally, the number of women is significantly lower at the higher academic levels. This is despite gender-equality measures having been implemented in German HEIs by national and state equality laws in recent decades. These measures include the appointment of women and equality representatives, as well as national campaigns by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research to promote gender inclusion in STEM. At the institutional level, HEIs address gender equality through mission statements and policy papers, as well as mentoring programmes for women and other marginalised students. In the last decade, there has been a shift from a focus on women and gender equality towards diversity management in German HEIs, which has broadened the approach to equality ([Blome, 2013](#)). In addition, some HEIs promote women role models – for example, by representing the institution towards an external audience ([Löther and Schmiedehausen, 2002](#); [Ittel and Driesen, 2018](#)).

Despite numerous measures aimed at gender inclusion and diversity, especially in the core fields of technical and engineering degrees, the overall trend of student enrolment, particularly women’s enrolment, continues to decline ([Schuster et al., 2004](#); [Jeanrenaud, 2020](#)). The dropout rates for women students in STEM also remain higher ([Quente, 2020](#); [Wolffram et al., 2009](#)), which suggests not only structural but also habitual and symbolic exclusion of women from STEM culture ([Jenkins et al., 2022](#); [Elven, 2022](#)). Research indicates that gender equality measures frequently overlook gendered patterns of exclusion rooted in cultural codes within engineering and technical fields ([Bereswill et al., 2020](#); [Quente, 2020](#); [Silander et al., 2022](#)). For example, gender-sensitivity training, knowledge about gender and race, and gender-inclusive practices in STEM appear to have only a limited impact on teaching staff ([Bütow et al., 2016](#)).

Moreover, representations of women as role models also positively affect young women in schools and HEIs ([Martin and Fisher-Ari, 2021](#)). Yet, representations of gender and diversity in STEM risk reproducing stereotypes ([Bläsing and Draude, 2020](#)) and tokenism ([Quente,](#)

2020). According to [Mendick and Moreau \(2013\)](#), web authors often operate within scientific and journalistic rationalities that marginalize discourses on gender and race. Their choices over visual and textual representations prioritise values such as “objectivity” or “relevance” over equality, diversity and inclusion. This is why images representing women or people of colour are often perceived as inauthentic by web authors, since their editorial decisions are informed by normative depictions of “authenticity” and “empirical realness”, rather than a desire to reinforce diversity, for example. These decisions, shaped by normative, androcentric and white ideas of “authenticity”, contribute to the exclusion of women and people of colour in STEM, as audiences interpret these portrayals as accurate reflections of the field, regardless of actual diversity ([Mendick and Moreau, 2013](#)).

Furthermore, efforts to achieve more diverse representation of students in STEM simultaneously reveal and (re)produce gendered and white norms regarding the image of an engineer, as shown in the Swedish context by [Berge et al. \(2019\)](#) through website analysis. The latter identified three dominant discourses around engineering – namely, “sustainability”, “technological progression”, and “neoliberal ideals”. These discourses produced four engineering identities: the “traditional”, “contemporary”, “self-made” and “responsible” engineer. The “self-made engineer”, in the context of the neoliberal discourse, as the dominant narrative, obscures structural inequalities tied to gender, race and class, ultimately leading to exclusion, despite diversity efforts. It seems that these neoliberal discourses around engineering and HEIs produce a “market of privilege” ([Meschitti et al., forthcoming](#)), which creates difficulties for critical examination and different representations of gender and race.

Most of the academic literature on the experiences of black, indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) students in STEM seems to focus on the US context. According to these studies, BIPOC students in STEM – and in sustainability studies – report experiences of isolation, a lack of social and institutional support, unequal access to resources (e.g. laboratory work, research groups, academic networks), and discrimination and systemic racism within HEIs ([Blake-Beard et al., 2011](#); [Burt et al., 2023](#); [Schusler et al., 2021](#); [Blake et al., 2021](#); [Coley and Thomas, 2023](#)). According to [Preuß et al. \(2025\)](#), social and academic background appear to be key influences on experiences of belonging in German universities ([Preuß et al., 2025](#)). Common to all these studies is an emphasis on the cultural aspects of generating openings and belonging to the still predominantly white spaces of academia. These cultural aspects include inclusivity of language ([Preuß et al., 2025](#)), diversity-oriented and race-aware concepts of diversity programmes, management and mentoring ([Burt et al., 2023](#); [Blake-Beard et al., 2011](#)), peer groups and peer-support programmes ([Coley and Thomas, 2023](#)), and the integration of the topics of race and diversity into the curricula ([Schusler et al., 2021](#)). This also holds true for the labour market, as the emergence of ecologically sustainable, new branches seems to marginalise BIPOC and the educationally underprivileged workforce, as shown in the US and UK contexts ([Students organising for Sustainability United Kingdom, 2022](#); [Kuersteiner and Ordal, 2023](#)).

Furthermore, targeted measures such as mentoring programmes ignore the gendered and racialised norms in behaviour-shaping career paths and division of labour. Thus, mentees are often marked as “deficient subjects”, which need to be “fixed” and supported to be successful in STEM ([Silander et al., 2022](#)). In a similar vein, most women of colour and white women in engineering professions tend to deny any evidence of gendered or racialised discrimination within their workplace. Yet, women of colour report more feelings of standing out, whereas white women report a sense of “family” and belonging ([Doerr et al., 2021](#)). This observation indicates differences in experiences, as well as structural and cultural differences in the engineering field. The Foucauldian term “unspeakabilities” ([Foucault, 1978b](#)) applies here, with gender, race and discrimination becoming *unspeakable*. Even though white and black women in engineering are still an exception, gendered exclusion as a structural and cultural problem is not addressed explicitly, thus complicating gender inclusion ([Priest et al., 2020](#)).

These social, institutional and epistemological shifts present a discursive power struggle in the field of engineering and sustainability, influencing the possibilities of gender inclusion and diversity measures in HEIs. On the one hand, the epistemic changes through sustainability might present opportunities for gendered openings for women in STEM. On the other hand, the scientific self-image of STEM, as well as deficiency-oriented gender equality and diversity measures, might lead to new “unspeakabilities” about gender. In this article, we want to examine how a specific university for applied sciences with a sustainability focus addresses (new, potential) students via its website and how it privileges and marginalises certain subject positions regarding gender and race through *viscursive* institutional strategies. To do so, we introduce our methodological approach in the following section, after which we present our empirical findings.

3. Our methodology

Informed by a Foucauldian discourse-analytical approach and applying the [Knorr-Cetina \(1999\)](#) approach of “viscourse”, we analyse the emergent, performative and intentional discursive institutional strategies in higher education.

3.1 From discourse to viscourse

We use a discourse-analytical approach in the context of organisational education ([Göhlich et al., 2014](#)) to take a power/knowledge analytical research perspective ([Weber and Wieners, 2018](#); [Fegter et al., 2021](#); [Foucault, 1972](#)). Informed by Foucault’s understanding of discourse as the “orders of what is thinkable and sayable” within specific material fields of analysis and of power/knowledge, as productive in the relationship between subjects, knowledge, practices and things ([Foucault, 1972](#) in [Bulgrin and Weber, 2023](#)), a Foucauldian discourse analysis is interested in the “discursive practices through which bodies of knowledge are constituted, truth claims are legitimised, and orders of thought, saying, and truth are established” ([Weber et al., 2019b](#), p. 85, own translation).

As [Figure 1](#) shows, Foucault takes a micrological and methodological approach to viewing how power/knowledge and discourse operate at the level of practices, the institutionalised gaze and discursively institutionalised subject-positions. Based on a Foucauldian analysis,

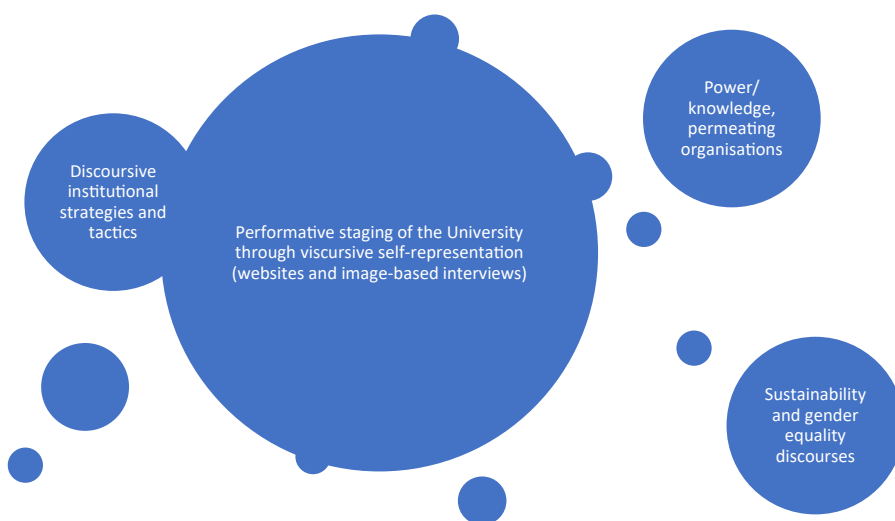


Figure 1. Our methodological and conceptual framework

Knorr-Cetina provides a specific empirical analysis of how epistemic objects, practices and subjects are constituted in the field of science laboratory research. To strengthen the relevance of the visual in our research, we use viscourse as a methodological lens, examining how objects move, how subjects engage, how power/knowledge and discourse shape that movement, and how strategies/tactics bring about subject positions and discursive organising in HEI.

Seen from the epistemological position of [Knorr-Cetina \(1999\)](#), knowledge emerges in and through discourse. In the collective discourse, epistemic (knowing) subjects emerge. As Knorr-Cetina puts it, the collective consciousness is anchored in discursive spaces and opportunities for conversations ([Knorr-Cetina, 1999](#), p. 248). Extending the term “discourse” to become “viscourse” – and stressing the visual power/knowledge of and in discourses – she describes the process, exemplified in physics laboratories, as threefold. [Knorr-Cetina \(1999\)](#) shows that the gaze of the researchers itself constitutes the empirical finding under the microscope. In this sense, the term “viscourse” helps us to analyse the constitution of the gaze in discursive settings. It focuses on the visual power/knowledge, which is understood as the jointly produced, sequentially circulating and laterally linked representations of technical objects that shape collective consciousness in discourse spaces. In the same way that empirical findings are shaped by the gaze of the scientists in their laboratories, in our research context, the websites produce a space of visual representation – a gaze order with epistemic significance – through their rhetorical evidential character ([Knorr-Cetina, 1999](#)).

In Knorr-Cetina’s analysis, visual representations “run” through an experiment, through meetings or to any collaborative process. And we see this as true in the HEI setting, too. Therefore, we explicitly analyse this in relation to the websites as the viscursive production of representation. Equally, our image-based interview settings convey this viscursive quality. This is where the second aspect of Knorr-Cetina’s perspective on viscourse applies. Viscourses indicate lateral references and links between representations. In Knorr-Cetina’s analysis, viscourses unfold technical objects and have an internal connection to scientific research. As such, illustrations have a rhetorical evidential character. Knorr-Cetina highlights the visual dimension of discourses by emphasising how the researcher’s way of seeing brings about the researched object and its visualisations. In our case, we analyse the HEIs’ ways of bringing about the guiding images, the institutional gaze and the viscursive subject-positions in a micropolitical discursive institutional space.

Our methodology employs a triangulating approach, integrating reconstructive image-interpretation for the website analysis. This method complements the approach discussed above and enables a more in-depth analysis of the constructional principles, the observer’s perspective and specific analytical dimensions. It also supports an analysis of the constitution of social meaning ([Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014](#); [Bohnsack et al., 2015](#)). By integrating this method into an organisational viscourse analysis, we can analyse the visibilities linked to the speakabilities in HEI – understood as power-knowledge regimes shaped by the gaze. In such institutionalised settings, we see particular subject positions emerging from the performative staging of images, as well as the text-image relationship on HEIs websites ([Knorr-Cetina, 1999](#)). As the method of reconstructive image-interpretation is less well-known outside of German academia, we will provide a detailed description of the method in the following section.

3.2 Reconstructive image interpretation as part of an institutional viscourse analysis

Whereas anglophone approaches use visual studies to analyse and interpret images in the social sciences, the German-speaking field uses art history for this purpose ([Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014](#)). As shown in [Figure 2](#), the documentary method consists of a formulating, a reflecting and an iconic interpretation. The formulating interpretation is a first, spontaneous reading of what the image shows (“What do I see?”), analysing the immediate meaning of the image. The reflecting interpretation considers *how* the image shows what it shows: composition, perspective, symbolic elements, staging and so on, in order to reconstruct

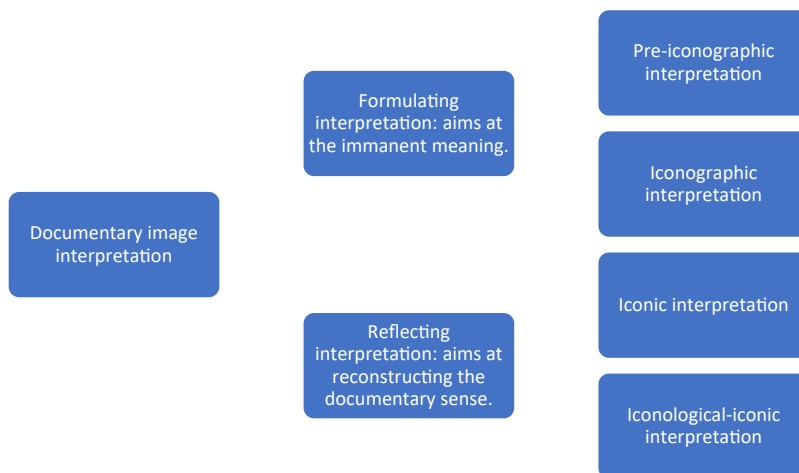


Figure 2. Documentary image interpretation, own visualisation based on Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr (2014).

the documentary sense or cultural meaning, which can only be decoded in a collective common sense. The iconic interpretation reconstructs the *underlying orientation or meaning structure* that the image documents – such as social attitudes, collective values or aesthetic codes that are *embodied* rather than spoken. After this, the iconological-iconic interpretation integrates the different analytical steps into a synthesising interpretation of the image as a cultural expression and of the cultural meaning involved and transported here. This analytical approach is not related to the viewer or spectator but remains focused on the document as such.

The Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr (2014) method of reconstructive image-interpretation informed by Foucault and Knorr-Cetina treats images as knowledge objects with their own formal structure, social orientation, and embedded “seeing” logic. The Foucauldian concepts of power/knowledge, discourse and strategies/tactics, together with Knorr-Cetina’s object-centred epistemic culture and (interpreted) viscourse, provide a methodical and methodological scaffolding for understanding what the method is actually doing: uncovering how images enact knowledge, structure subject–object relations, circulate in orders of the gaze and travel through epistemic organisational cultures. The framework invites one to treat images not only as aesthetic objects but as knowledge objects, as sites of seeing and being seen, and as parts of the discursive and institutional orders of the gaze and of visual representation and enactment.

Having introduced reconstructive image-interpretation, we introduce two data methods, Website analysis and image-based interviews, starting with the former. From a methodological perspective, we consider HEI websites to be “surfaces of emergence” of organisational discourse (Bulgrin and Weber, 2023; Weber and Wieners, 2018; Weber *et al.*, 2019b), which allows us to examine the discourse lines within organisations, making visible their underlying rationalities and the dynamics of how dominant and marginalised knowledge and subject positions emerge and are produced (cf. Foucault, 1977).

3.3 Website analysis, documents and image-based interviews

Our research project uses discourse-analytical organisational case-study analysis. Comparing universities with either a whole-institution sustainability approach or an especially successful degree programme in sustainability engineering, we analyse the discursive innovation dynamics and paths of “gendered greening” of two universities in Germany. For this article, we

draw on one of the case studies, a dedicated sustainable University of Applied Sciences with various STEM study programmes located in a rural part of southern Germany.

For our case study, we used website, documentary analysis and image-based interviews. Website analysis is especially valuable, as visually rich web-based communications are becoming critical for universities (Metcalf and Blanco, 2019). Bulgrin and Weber (2023, p. 583) see “organisational websites as publicly effective stage and organisational platforms for strategically selected content and self-portrayals” (cf. also Weber *et al.*, 2019a). According to Lažetić (2020), there are particular challenges for the analysis of websites, such as their multimodal character, the co-creative nature resulting from the multiple authors and their dynamic nature, as well as the lack of adequate archiving practices – although the latter can be somewhat alleviated by the use of the platform <http://archive.org>. As also pointed out by Bulgrin and Weber (2023), we factor in that websites are most often created by professional agencies, influencing the way that universities present themselves to the world.

For our case study, we identified sections of the website relevant to gender equality and inclusion (24 screenshots and documents in total) and two selected bachelor’s degrees (20 screenshots and documents in total) [2]. In addition, we used excerpts from 14 semi-structured image-based interviews with relevant institutional stakeholders of the above-mentioned HEI, including students, administration, researchers, professors, deans and (vice-) presidents. The details can be found in a table in the annex. In seven categories, we explored the participants’ roles and functions within the institution; the governance of the HEI; the topics of sustainability, gender and diversity; the role of study programmes and their development; the types and roles of students within their institution; and the future possibilities for the institution, notably its future strategies and ways of addressing women in sustainable STEM study programmes. MAXQDA software was used to document, manage and analyse our data. In a first step, we coded the data according to our substantive – namely, gender and race in the context of sustainable study programmes. In the second step, we considered the following discourse-analytical items and questions:

- (1) Who speaks? From where?
- (2) Which positions are formulated in the nexus of gender, technology and sustainability?
- (3) What is the spectrum of positions? Which positions take a dominant role in the HEI discourse? Which positions are marginalised?
- (4) In what ways do websites and interviews play out as surfaces of “visibilities and speakabilities”?
- (5) How do they shape institutionalised subject-positions?

The following graphic (cf. Figure 3) consolidates the various methodological approaches and concepts.

For this publication, we draw on Foucault (1976) differentiation of strategies and tactics. “Tactics” refer to the specific discursive actions and manoeuvres used in situations, the institutional practices (micro-relations of power, everyday practices), while “strategies” are the overarching discursive patterns. In line with Foucault’s micrological approach to power/knowledge, strategies build on tactics. Any institutional setting – be it the clinic (Foucault, 1973) or the prison (Foucault, 2020) – could be analysed by Foucault in terms of its discursive practices and the institutionalised gaze. The institutionalised gaze, in this sense, is shaped by the strategy of the discourse playing out. Nevertheless, any strategy needs to be actualised by the tactics, which bring it into existence on a daily basis. Analysis of discursive “tactics” is, therefore, essential for analysis of discursive strategies because any discourse and any hegemonic effects need to persist and reproduce themselves, and since every reigning order must permanently (re)produce itself, it is of interest how and in which way this happens (Foucault, 1976).

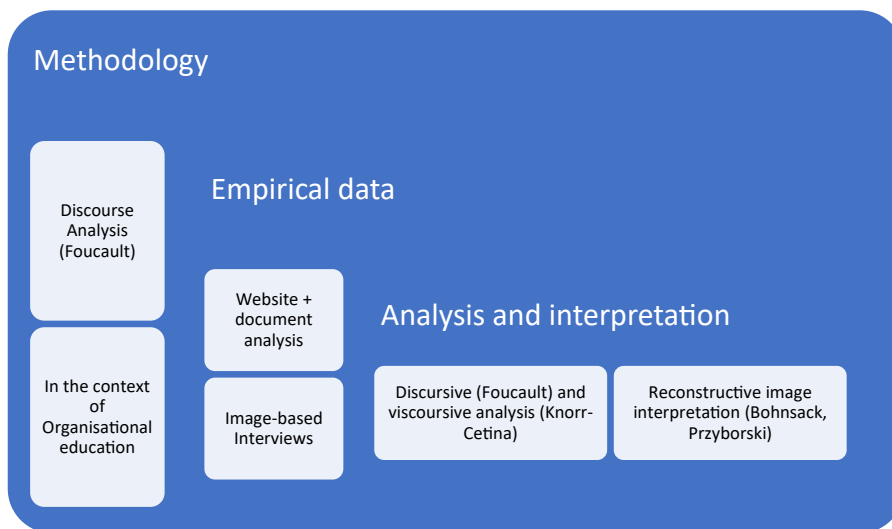


Figure 3. Our methodological and analytical framework, including the empirical corpus

4. Data analysis: tactics of a viscursive strategy of “authentic othering”

In this section, we introduce two discursive tactics found in the strategy of “authentic othering”, based on an analysis of the relationship between the images and text on the website and the image-based interview material. As we will show, these “tactics” occur in the strategy of “authentic othering”, found within the economic rationale of the HEI. To attract students, the university addresses students via its website – and responding to the critique of the gender-mainstreaming officer, it seeks to expand representation by including visual representation of women. Nevertheless, the cultural order maintains its exclusionary nature by privileging some and marginalising “others”. The imaginaries involved will be analysed in relation to how HEIs use competitive strategies to attract students. Overall, we show how particular discursive “tactics” – such as “authenticity” and “tokenised visualising” in the context of a predominantly white, male, and homogeneous cultural space – contribute to the discursive strategy of “authentic othering”.

4.1 The tactic of authenticity

As mentioned above, the first discursive tactic is to establish “authenticity” as the dominant concern, with selectable, presentable and showable images chosen for the website. In the following, we will see how the institutional PR strategies are employed to represent “real” students and professors on the websites. We will show that this leads to the portrayal of a predominantly white, male and homogeneous cultural space. We exemplify our argument through the analysis of the landing page. The landing page of the HEI consists of two alternating pictures, one depicting two people who appear to be men and the other three people who appear to be women. An algorithm determines which picture is displayed at random. We focus our analysis on the image of the men, as it was selected first by the expert responsible for the HEI images. The second one was only added after the women’s representatives intervened, arguing that the representation was too male-dominated. Other difference categories, such as socio-economic and migration backgrounds, are not visible.

In [Figure 4](#), two students who appear to be men are depicted sitting at a table. One student, slightly more foregrounded than the other, looks into the camera and the second, somewhat more in the background, looks down towards something (*scenic choreography*). The green plant on the left adds further depth to the picture (*perspective projection*). Overall, green colours and white



Figure 4. Landing page

skin tones dominate the image, implying concepts such as nature, environment and sustainability. For the formal composition, one can observe various diagonals structuring the landing page, such as one line linking the eyes of both students, going from the left slightly upwards to the right. Another diagonal extends from the bottom right to the top, connecting the mouth and eyes of the right student, and a third line aligns in parallel with the bottom line, highlighting the text field in the centre (*planimetric composition*). Interestingly, the image plays with sharpness (the student to the right and, to a lesser degree, the student to the left) and blurriness – for example, in the plant and the background. The sharpness conveys a stronger object character. In this case, the students are in the forefront, and the observer’s gaze is directed towards them. The blurriness to the left is further enhanced, presumably by a thumb in the camera, which suggests an amateur photograph, and a cuboid in transparent green – a recurring pattern in many images.

The image of the two young, white, blond, male students wearing hoodies connects to a globalised image of the young, energetic, dynamic student, rooted in their neighbourhood. Whether this representation is typical or marks a change in the typical image of the engineer may depend on the cultural or regional sphere (Elven, 2022; Wolfram *et al.*, 2009). On the one hand, it connects to a global style of student self-representation; on the other, it reflects regional embedding, as the university wishes to authentically represent what is there – real students, real sons of farmers, real atmospheres and sparkles in their eyes. A second person is also visible in this image, and their presentation reflects a global trend of self-representation. The individual is wearing their hair in a trendy bun and using a smartphone, a universal and iconic symbol of connectedness. A slight undefinedness regarding the gender might be analysed here. As the cuboid covers the other student’s mouth and beard, their gender becomes somewhat visually ambiguous. In terms of clothing and hairstyle, both students seem to represent a universal student culture, characterised by a leisurely and sporty style.

As the university views itself as strongly committed to a market strategy, it utilises “authenticity” to connect with its regional clientele, while also engaging with the global cultural homogenisation in youth culture. The discursive “tactic” of authenticity privileges the young, white, globalised man – a regionally rooted, attractive student – leading to the marginalising of other subject positions, such as women and non-white students, or the tokening of them as others, as discussed later.

4.2 The Tactic of “tokened visibility”

The “tactic” in this discursive strategy is the individualising representation of difference markers, which can be understood as tokened visualisations. On the diversity page of the

website, we see an illustration of a black man and a person who is presumably a white female student (cf. Figure 5). In this image, a person of colour is in the middle of the picture, facing the camera. On the right is the back of the other person's head, with only blonde hair visible. The black man looks at the white woman in front of him (*scenic choreography*). Neither looks directly into the camera; instead, they seem to look at each other and perhaps interact (*perspective projection*). Regarding the formal composition, two diagonals intersect in the middle of the image, converging towards the vanishing point, where two streets appear to merge into one. A second line goes from the eyes of the black man towards the eyes of the white woman, showing us her back (*planimetric composition*).

As in the previous images, green and, in this case, also brown dominate the image, which may imply similar ideas around sustainability. Equally, the image plays with *sharpness* (the black student in the middle of the picture) and *blurriness* of the white student opposite him and even more so, of a third and entirely indecipherable person to the left, as well as the blurred surroundings towards the extremities of the image. Again, the sharpness signifies the object's character. The blurriness of the blonde person, whose face is not shown, means that she is left as an "empty signifier" so that the person looking at this picture can "take her place" as the person looking at the black person.

This image puts the black person in the centre. It is a situation of meeting and greeting – which promises a vivid relationship between international [3] and local students. The black person is being seen, while the blonde woman takes the position of the viewer, looking at the person in the centre. The promise of a peer relationship between local and international students aligns with the university's entrepreneurial and economic positioning, which aims to attract international students. The title of the text, in a green box, slightly overlapping the image, closely aligns with the image: "Living openness and promoting diversity". Interestingly, despite its many dimensions, the viscursive presentation of diversity speaks only to gender and race. This observation correlates with the interview data, in which most respondents defined diversity in terms of these two dimensions, as the following quote shows.

If you take diversity in terms of *gender or gender orientation*, we have actually tried to make it independent of that. [...] What is clear to us that we have to diversify in terms of what I said and attract *people from other cultures and backgrounds*. (Leader, 23 11 28, Pos. 89, following).

In the website text below the image, one sentence catches our eye: "Equal rights and diversity are a reality at [our] University of Applied Sciences". This also resonates with the interview data on lived reality.

I also think that the topic of external representation and also [pause] within – if this is really lived, i.e. the topic of diversity, then it also spills over to the students, and they also live it. (Woman professor, 23 12 06, pos. 236 following)

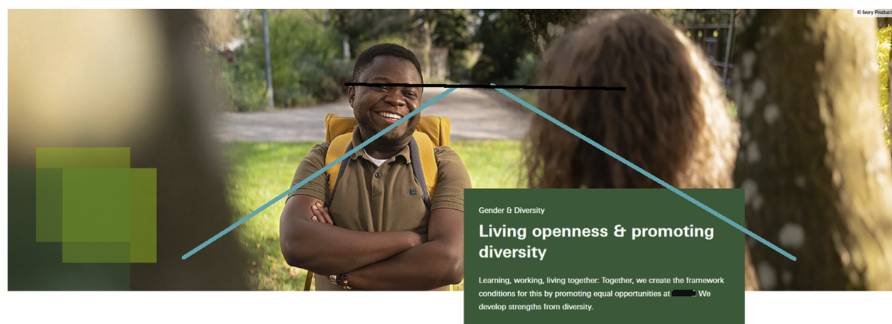


Figure 5. Gender and diversity page

Overall, we state that the representation of the HEI's website compared to the lived reality of gender and diversity remains highly controversial. The formal requirement of gender equality is evident on the HEI's website, where difference markers are employed as tokenised visualisations. By that, we mean that students differing from the homogenous, white, male student group are only strategically represented in terms of gender and diversity, but they are not visible throughout the website representation. Even when gender and diversity are represented, the emergent homogeneity and devaluation of diversity in daily life works by deprivileging and excluding and positioning diverse subjects at the margin, segregating those visualisations as privileged authentic "othering". This is noted by [Amiri \(2020\)](#), who states that scholars of colour, for instance, may become hypervisible on the HEI's surface, whilst being structurally invisible in terms of authorship, citation and career progression ([Amiri, 2020](#); [Said, 1978](#)).

4.3 Individual resistance of institutional policies

In the discursive tactics identified above, women's representatives [4] are positioned as counter-actors. Against a market-driven representational strategy supported by institutional decision-makers, they advocate for women's visibility on the website. We see how discursive tactics imply micropolitical situations within dominant and marginal knowledge-sets. As noted, the intervention of women's representatives was required to ensure the representation of women on the website. Supported by the state political gender-mainstreaming programme, the gender representation on the website changed, while the cultural homogeneity and cultural segregation of "others" remained stable. The gender-mainstreaming team works to promote female representation and is often marginalised in this endeavour. The woman professor, who is also the women's representative explained:

I then wrote an email to Corporate Design and said, "Guys, it's not possible [to represent only male students], yes? Get rid of that, will you?" Then I got the email back: "Ah, Mrs [. . .], yes, thank you very much for the feedback. Yes, but we looked at all the pictures and had quite a few with very different students. But it was only with these two *that the spark was really ignited*. [. . .]" We simply found these two young white men. There's just more of a spark there. (Woman professor, 23 11 29, pos. 262–263; italics added)

When we asked the communications officer in another interview about the selection of images for the website, he replied,

So, we had a relaunch of the homepage [. . .] [The photo shoot was] done with an external agency, where we ended up with 30 pictures and were involved in selecting the models. It was important to us that they were the only people who actually worked for us, i.e. they were local students. [. . .] So there were always two, three, four people in the 30 pictures, in different constellations. And if you went through them, honestly, then in the end, there were only five potential landing page pictures. [. . .] there wasn't enough emotion, it wasn't inviting enough, it was too- something was missing somehow. [. . .] And then we started with just the one picture where the student smiling into the camera was practically- Well, that was our starting motif. It took precisely 30 min until the first email inquired about how we could present ourselves on the homepage, just with men or something like that. [. . .] I tried to moderate it somehow and say that "you must see it in an overall context and not just look at one picture" [. . .] In any case, after a few weeks back and forth, we then decided to add a second photo, and since then, the shitstorm has died down. (Male communication officer, 23 12 12, Pos. 142 following)

As we would expect, the rationales for presenting different genders on websites differ between the gender representatives and the PR department. While the woman professor expected the landing page to be more diverse in terms of gender, the communication officer emphasised the importance of emotion and authenticity. This is in line with [Mendick and Moreau \(2013\)](#), who note that web authors often follow scientific and journalistic norms that sideline gender and equality issues, prioritising objectivity and relevance over diversity and inclusion. As a result, representations of women and other difference markers are perceived as inauthentic, since

decisions are often guided by conventional notions of authenticity and empirical truth, rather than a genuine commitment to diversity.

Having introduced the response to the institutional discursive tactics, we have come closer to the “manoeuvres”, or how the strategy of “authentic othering” brings itself into existence in an HEI. As our analysis has shown, the website representations reflect tokenism and othering, leading to “authentic othering”. Taking a closer look at various study programmes, we analyse visual strategies and programmatic positions to explore whether sustainable study programmes fulfil the promise of diversifying a homogeneous traditional setting and cultural homogeneity. Is this a story of potential openings and closings, or just the reproduction of disciplinary and interdisciplinary academic cultures?

5. Between openings and reproduction in *viscursive* organisational orders

We examined the two bachelor’s degrees, one in environmental engineering and the other in agricultural engineering. The former combines technology, engineering and science with sustainability, while the latter follows a more traditional engineering profile. These programmes were chosen due to their contrasting profiles and different student demographics in terms of proportion of women and other non-traditional students. The analysis demonstrates how the *viscursive* representation of the environmental engineering programme tentatively presents an opening for women and other non-traditional student groups, whereas the agricultural engineering programme presents a closed subject culture [5].

5.1 Environmental engineering: towards openings of subject positions?

Environmental engineering’s general imagery (pictures and video material) features outdoor and laboratory settings on the campus, with white male and women student students. All images have been treated with filters to enhance the lighting. Warm filters highlight nature, while cool filters emphasise scientific settings, creating a dual image of “green” sustainability and “scientific” professionals. This breaks with traditional representations of engineering programmes and aligns with current sustainability and professionalism discourses in this field (Prietl, 2018; Berge *et al.*, 2019).

We chose the second picture on the website because it is the first one to present a person who appears to be a woman (cf. Figure 6). It shows three people, who appear to be two men and one woman, in a field (*pre-iconic level*). A gendered representation is evident in the image composition, with the woman positioned lower than the two men and out of focus. This could be interpreted as a reproduction of not just the lower positioning of women within a male-dominated hierarchy but also a blurring of the woman subject into the background. Yet, this

Study contents in the field of Environmental Engineering & Environmental Engineering

The Bachelor’s degree programme in Environmental Engineering is a practice-oriented programme with a broad range of basic knowledge combined with a specialisation in key areas. The content of this environmental studies programme at [REDACTED] aims to train specialists who can make a major contribution to solving environmental problems. To this end, you will acquire broad expertise in environmental technology and other environmentally relevant fields during your studies:

- scientific & mathematical basics



Figure 6. Environmental engineering, second picture on the website

woman is also presented in an active way: rather than just engaging with the surroundings through her gaze, she engages with her surroundings haptically.

The text with this image refers to the contents of this bachelor's degree. It announces that this "practical" study programme encompasses a broad range of "basic knowledge" designed to educate professionals in solving environmental problems. It ends with, "With your knowledge, you take care of the sins of the past, e.g. by cleaning up contaminated sites and developing the economy of the future". Notably, the phrases such as "taking care of" and "cleaning up" used in this section are reminiscent of tasks traditionally perceived as feminine. Considering the woman's bent body positioning, her fading into the background and her haptic engagement with the environment, as well as the gendered notions of care-work as less valuable and invisible, this text-image alignment (re)produces rather than breaks with traditional gender representations.

The next photo (Figure 7) is presented further down on the website. It is the first seemingly woman-centred image on the environmental engineering website. Both students wear white lab coats and helmets. Their background appears to be a laboratory environment (*pre-iconic level*). The first student is presented in an active manner. The upward movement of her hand and determined expressions create a different gendered representation, linked to discourses of scientific expertise.

The aligned text emphasises career opportunities and positions graduates as "specialists" who solve environmental problems, linking sustainability to professionalisation: "After completing your Environmental Engineering degree programme [...] you will be a specialist who knows all about solving environmental problems". Since this image contains mostly female representation in a professional and scientific setting – represented by clothing (helmets and lab coats), for example – the text-image relationship suggests an attempt to produce a "female" image of the future professional in this field. This may be a deliberate strategy to portray the HEI as modern and progressive.

Overall, this degree presents itself as progressive by using imagery of women in "professional" and "scientific" settings, positioning itself within the current discourses around sustainability (Berge *et al.*, 2019), which speaks more to women and other "non-traditional" target audiences (Lojewski, 2011; Prietl, 2018; Quente, 2020). However, traditional gendered subjectivation persists in the text-image alignments for the other images of this study programme, limiting truly subversive openings.

5.2 Agricultural engineering: reproducing homogeneity and a privileged subject position?

While the general imagery of environmental engineering features outdoor campus and laboratory scenes, with white male and women students/women students, the imagery of

Career prospects with combined knowledge of the environment and technology

After completing your Environmental Engineering degree programme at the Environmental Engineering department, you will be a specialist who knows all about solving environmental problems.

The labour market in the environmental sector currently offers excellent prospects, both for Bachelor's graduates equipped with good cross-sectional knowledge and specialist knowledge. Surveys of former students confirm that they find suitable jobs in the field of Environmental Engineering and Environmental Protection within a short period of time. Job opportunities are available in all environmentally relevant sectors of the economy and the public sector.



Figure 7. Environmental engineering, third picture on the website

agricultural engineering represents men in technical indoor settings. For this section, we chose the second image (Figure 8) on the website, as its composition and style exemplify the androcentric and classical engineering-culture.

This image consists of five men standing around a table with technical devices. Three are standing on the right side, one on the left and one in the middle (*planimetric composition and pre-iconic level*). The centrality of the person in the middle is enhanced through a circular gap between him and the others, produced in the image composition (visualised by the ellipse). His separateness from the others is also produced through his clothing: he is wearing a men's shirt, and the seemingly younger men are all wearing work jackets by a German brand known for high-quality work clothing – popular among students on this study programme, our interview data suggests (*scenic choreography*). This leads to the *iconographic interpretation* that the central figure in the image is a professor who is explaining something to his male students. The professor is presented as an expert figure who is given space, and the students merely listen to him.

This section, titled “Study content Agricultural engineering: from combine harvesters to precision farming”, emphasises “competencies”, “training” and “professional support”. The framing of this study programme thus revolves closely around technology and professionalisation discourses – rather than, say, environmental or scientific discourses. Given the male students wearing a recognisable brand of working clothes, the image–text relationship seems to reproduce a classic image of a male professor lecturing on his ideas to his disciples, rather than engaging with them in conversation on an equal basis, thus creating a hierarchical and androcentric image of this degree. This suggests not only a male-dominated study programme culture, but also a traditional, hierarchical method of knowledge production and didactic settings (Prietl, 2018). This male-dominated and hierarchical image of the programme is echoed by the HEIs internal data from 2023, showing a student body that is 94.7% male and 5.3% female. Thus, the programme stands in stark contrast to environmental engineering – not only in its visual and textual self-presentation, but also in its content and demographics.

Study programmes and faculty are still primarily male-dominated, especially at the professorial level, and student groups are relatively homogenous. In this *viscursive* organisational order, we see subcultural differences and boundaries between “male” and “female” study objects and study programmes. While environmental-engineering study programmes – with their interdisciplinary fit – seem to allow women as a legitimate position to be officially represented at the website, in agricultural engineering, closings still refer to a traditional white, male, and regionally bound student appearance.

Study content Agricultural engineering: from combine harvesters to precision farming

The Agricultural Engineering program provides competencies in the areas of mechanical engineering and electronic systems in an agricultural context. In addition, the training covers all areas of agricultural production, from agricultural engineering, soil science and crop production to production economics and business planning. Two professorships in agricultural machinery technology and agricultural systems technology are dedicated to the program. These are professionally supported by the course offerings of the [agricultural science majors](#). The study program benefits from:

- Practical relevance through agricultural engineering cooperations.



Figure 8. Agricultural engineering

6. Conclusion and discussion

Informed by Foucault (1977) and Knorr-Cetina (1999), as well as the methodology of Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr (2014), we approached our research question of how *viscursive* privilege manifests itself in strategies and tactics relating to gender and sustainability in higher education, especially in the field of STEM. We identified discursive privileging in a strategy of “authentic othering”, which involves a) prioritising authenticity in PR strategies and seeking to represent actual students and professors on the website, leading to a predominantly white, male and homogeneous cultural space and b) the tactic of tokenised visualising in marking gender difference and diversity, where women and international students are placed into a gendered and racialised subject-positions as “others”.

In this sense, this is more than gender imbalance in the visual representation (Bührmann, 1995), which was also found by Bläsing and Draude (2020) and Quente (2020). The study programmes and faculty are still primarily male-dominated, especially at the professorial level; student groups are relatively homogenous and female representation is insufficient (Martin and Fisher-Ari, 2021). Moreover, the authenticity strategy leads to “authentic othering” in visual representations on the website – as well as in institutional practices – producing a way of being addressed and ways of being and feeling that indicate non-belonging or tokenisation as an exception. The tactics above are resisted by the women’s representatives, who follow a politically motivated tactic of advocating for women’s visibility on the website, considering the university’s strategy of following market logic regarding gender equality and diversity.

In the contested terrain of study programmes with and without a sustainability focus, we find spaces of partial openings and closings for women and non-traditional students, which reproduce a disciplinary, gendered, institutional and academic symbolic order. Study programmes such as that of “Agricultural Engineering” employ imagery that lacks diverse representation of women and students of colour and presents a hierarchical view of (male) professors and their (male) students, reinforcing an androcentric and traditional engineering image. Here, a privileged subject position of a homogeneous, white, male group is symbolised and visually performed. In the context of this patriarchal order, women and non-white students are systematically and viscursively marginalised. Such representations not only often fail to appeal to women (Lojewski, 2011; Quente, 2020), but they also enact visual extinction in a systematic and exclusionary way.

The higher proportion of women in the “Environmental Engineering” study programme explains the explicit representation of women in the website images. Simultaneously, more female imagery attracts more women to the programme. These images suggest a partial opening of the subject positions implied through a more diverse gender representation. Nevertheless, marginalisation and gendered norms are implicitly reproduced through image–text alignments, which seem to either imply female subjectivity through notions of care and nature, typically perceived as feminine tasks or represent women as “professionals of tomorrow” without breaking with the traditional symbolic representation of professionalism and science in engineering and technology, which remain marked as white and epistemically homogenous spaces.

As our *viscursive* analysis has shown, though equal representation in the text and images on the HEI’s website could be a starting point, the subject- and degree-programme cultures need to be changed to avoid (re-)producing these gendered orders and patterns of privilege. Our findings indicate that sustainability imagery alone is insufficient to foster genuine inclusivity. Furthermore, reinforcing gender and diversity awareness among the staff responsible for online representation – rather than relying on notions of “authenticity”, reproducing homogeneity and tokened visibilities – could offer a productive opportunity to reach new target audiences and challenge exclusionary imagery in technology and engineering (Mendick and Moreau, 2013).

This article makes a theoretical, methodological and empirical contribution to the questions of how academic cultures and practices shape new patterns of privilege and power hierarchies

in the context of sustainable-engineering study programmes and how tactics and strategies of “viscursive privileging” play out and systematically produce subject positions. Our approach is methodologically innovative in that it focuses on a viscource analytical perspective. We show from a Foucauldian perspective the tactics of a discursive strategy of authentication, leading to cultural homogeneity, on the one hand, and marginalisation of “othered others” as performative, tokened visibility, on the other. This has been substantiated empirically through an analysis of a sample of websites serving as performative surfaces of discursive organisation. The viscursive privileging of some subject positions (male and white) against others (female or non-white) functions through actualised discourses at the local level, bringing about subjectivation in specific power/knowledge constellations.

About the authors

Eva Bulgrin is a postdoctoral researcher at the Philipps-University of Marburg (Germany) and an honorary research fellow in the Centre for International Education at the University of Sussex (CIE). Her research interests range from primary to higher education and include postcolonial and discourse-analytical approaches with a view to socio-ecological transformation processes. She is particularly interested in the relationship of sustainability in the intersection of different categories of difference, such as class/race/gender, but also power/ knowledge perspectives on social issues and, last but not least, comparative approaches to global and regional phenomena.

Heli Mahkonen has been working on the research project “Re-Imagining GenderFuture in MINT” as a researcher at the Department of Education at Philipps-University Marburg. She has a Master’s degree in Sociology from the Goethe-University in Frankfurt am Main and an interdisciplinary Bachelor’s degree in Social Sciences from Tampere University, Finland. The topics of gender and feminist studies, critical theory and methodologies, as well as intersectional approaches to qualitative social research, have been at the centre of her interests throughout her academic path. Her research focal points lie in aspects of gender in-/exclusion, organisational studies and gendered organisational cultures.

Susanne Maria Weber Since 2009, Susanne Maria Weber has held the professorship “Social, political and cultural framework conditions of education and upbringing with special consideration of international aspects” at the Philipps University of Marburg, Department of Educational Sciences (Germany). Her research group “Innovation - Organisation – Networks” is concerned with research into the enabling contexts, conditions and design modes of organisational and social change. Sustainability and innovation are explored, focusing on their relationship and interplay as discourse, science and practice. Susanne Weber’s research and publications focus on methodological approaches to organisational and network development and network consulting from a practice and discourse theory perspective.

Annex

Table A1. Table overview of interviewees

Number	Pseudonym	Gender	Role
1	NE	Man	Academic
2	DM	Man	Academic and Leadership
3	QLS	Woman	Academic
4	KO	Man	Student
5	QC	Man	Student
6	IS	Woman	Academic
7	CL	Woman	Administrator
8	TwS	Woman	Administrator
9	NT	Man	Academic
10	NH	Woman	Academic
11	TI	Woman	Administrator
12	FX	Man	Leadership
13	KH	Man	Administrator
14	MT	Woman	Student

1. The abbreviation stands for “Bundesministerium für Forschung, Technologie und Raumfahrt”, translated as follows: Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space.
2. Relevant guidelines (e.g. the university development plan, mission statement, sustainability guidelines, sustainability programme, sustainability report 2022, gender-equality concept and policy against discrimination) were equally taken into account in the analysis. Full analyses would be beyond the scope of this article.
3. We cannot infer from the website whether this person is an international student or a student with a migration history. However, we know from the data that the percentage of students with migration history at this HEI is insignificant.
4. Women’s representatives and equal-opportunities officers assist university governance in promoting gender equality across all levels. While women’s representatives support women researchers, staff and students in achieving their professional goals, equal-opportunities officers address equality concerns for all non-academic employees, regardless of gender.
5. According to the HEI statistics for 2023, agricultural engineering is 94.7% male students and 5.3% female, while environmental engineering is 50.9% male and 49.1% female.

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Corresponding author

Eva Bulgrin can be contacted at: eva.bulgrin@uni-marburg.de