

Gender-inclusive language analysis framework (GILAF): an analysis from the perspective of Spanish small and medium-sized enterprises

Marco de análisis de lenguaje inclusivo de género (MALIG): un análisis desde la perspectiva de las pymes españolas

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Abstract

The use of (gender-)inclusive language is steadily gaining attention in all spheres of society, including corporate communication. The main aim of this paper is to present GILAF, an evaluation framework to analyze and describe Spanish (gender-)inclusive language in corporate websites. For this purpose, the elaboration process of the analysis framework is described, quantitatively validated, and applied to a sample of corporate websites from Spanish SMEs. The validation process proved that the GILAF framework is suitable for analyzing and describing (gender-)inclusive language strategies in corporate websites. In addition, the extracted results from the analysis of the sample showed that the application of (gender-)inclusive language is scarce in the analyzed websites, and its use is just present in two areas: graphic and visual language strategies and presence of sexist stereotypes. The GILAF analysis framework has a great potential to be used as a guide for companies willing to apply (gender-)inclusive language strategies to their corporate web content.

Keywords: analysis framework, corporate websites, gender-inclusive language, inclusive language, SMEs

Resumen

El uso del lenguaje inclusivo es cada vez más relevante en todos los ámbitos de la sociedad, incluido el de la comunicación corporativa. El objetivo principal de este trabajo es presentar un marco de análisis para el estudio del lenguaje inclusivo en español en las páginas web corporativas. Para ello, en primer lugar, se describe el

proceso de elaboración del marco de análisis. Posteriormente, se valida cuantitativamente el marco de análisis y se aplica una muestra de sitios web corporativos de pymes españolas. El proceso de validación demostró que el marco de análisis es adecuado para analizar y describir las estrategias de lenguaje inclusivo en los sitios web corporativos. Además, los resultados obtenidos a partir del análisis de la muestra indicaron que hay una presencia escasa de estrategias de lenguaje inclusivo en los sitios web analizados, y su uso tan solo está presente en dos áreas: las estrategias de lenguaje gráfico y visual y en la presencia de estereotipos sexistas. Asimismo, los resultados obtenidos indican que el marco de análisis tiene un gran potencial para ser utilizado como guía para las empresas que deseen aplicar estrategias de lenguaje inclusivo en sus contenidos web corporativos.

Palabras clave: lenguaje inclusivo, lenguaje inclusivo de género, marco de análisis, sitios web corporativos, pymes

INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is defined as “actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law” (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001, p.117). Supporting CSR provides companies with a competitive advantage given that they are perceived as more reliable by consumers and stakeholders, however, the benefits of adopting socially responsible behaviors go beyond the firms as it involves wider communities (Ciliberti et al., 2008; McWilliams & Siegel, 2001).

Traditionally, CSR has been focused on large companies and multinational corporations, but, nowadays, there is a growing attention to Small and Medium-sized (SMEs) when it comes to adopting CSR (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013; Brammer et al., 2012; Ciliberti et al., 2008; Fassin et al., 2010). This rising attention is due to the fact that SMEs play a key role in the global economy, accounting for 99.8% of all the enterprises in the EU non-financial business sector (Muller et al., 2021). In addition, SMEs peculiarities such as being directly managed by owners, being linked to business partners and the local community, being cash-dependent and lacking resources or support or being multi-tasking, among others, have a direct effect on SMEs CSR practices (Brammer et al., 2012; Ciliberti et al., 2008; Perrini et al., 2007).

Environmental issues, which certainly pose significant managerial challenges, have been the primal focus of CSR, although it is worth noting that CSR should also focus on other social concerns (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013; Brammer et al., 2012), such as gender-related issues (Vilk, 2014). Furthermore, in uncertain times such as the socioeconomic conditions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, CSR can be a great ally for companies to overcome these obstacles as the idea of being socially responsible has taken hold in society (Xifra, 2020). Consequently, communication becomes essential for companies when it comes to foster their image and reputation (Gray & Balmer, 1998). Corporate communication can be defined as a tool to harmonize all used forms of internal and external communication as effectively and efficiently as

possible to create a positive basis for relationships between a company and the groups it depends on (Argenti, 1994; Gray & Balmer, 1998; Hooghiemstra, 2000; Van Riel & Blackburn, 1995).

Nowadays, the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has meant an evolution in the strategies of companies, especially small and medium-sized ones, for disseminating their corporate information. In fact, ICTs are a good indicator of the ability of companies to adapt and compete in globalized environments (Peris-Ortiz et al., 2014). As a result, companies worry not only about designing effective strategies for delivering their messages to different audiences, but also about analyzing the quality of the media in which they will appear to preserve their image and reputation (Maestro Espínola et al., 2018). Thus, the availability of a corporate website, in line with the interests of the company, will act as a public relations vehicle not only for promoting and commercializing products and services, but also to transmit the values and attributes of the company (Kotler et al., 2016; Kotler & Armstrong, 2007). In this sense, the use of inclusive language plays an essential role, as it must take into account speakers of any origin, nationality, sexual orientation, identity, race or religion.

The use of (gender-)inclusive language (from now on in this paper, GIL) is increasingly gaining attention, especially in fields such as the healthcare sector, which is often dealing with sensitive information (Cameron & Stinson, 2019; Caughey et al., 2021; Kirubarajan et al., 2021; West-Livingston et al., 2021), particularly when languages which are grammatically gender-marked, like Spanish, are involved. Nonetheless, several studies have accounted for the positive effect of the use of inclusive language in websites dealing with healthcare issues, for example, maternity services (Jennings et al., 2022) and radiology and imaging (Yan et al., 2022). In this line, other researchers have accounted for the benefits in terms of performance of the use of inclusive language for internal communication in multicultural companies (Lauring & Klitmøller, 2017). Although some others argue that the use of inclusive language in corporate websites and communication does not always reflect a conviction in equality, but rather a desire to create a positive image of the company, which does not always correspond to reality (Lange & Wyndham, 2021).

In the light of the previously described scenario, the main aim of this paper is to present the process of elaboration, validation and application of an evaluation framework to analyze and describe GIL: GILAF (Gender-Inclusive Language Analysis Framework). More specifically, this work focuses on the use of GIL in corporate websites from Spanish SMEs belonging to the healthcare sector. This framework can guide companies willing to apply CSR policies to build their image in the process of creating inclusive language-aware corporate communication.

The main objective is divided into three specific objectives: 1) To describe the process of the elaboration of the analysis framework; 2) To quantitatively validate the analysis framework; and 3) To apply the framework to a sample of corporate websites from Spanish SMEs from the healthcare sector and obtain data about their use of GIL. For such a purpose, this paper is structured as follows: first, a theoretical approach to GIL is presented in the following section; second, the process of creating and the application of the GILAF framework itself are described in detail, providing definitions for each evaluation indicator designed; third, the materials and methods of the study are presented; fourth, the results obtained in the study are classified and described; and finally, this paper includes at the end the limitations and conclusions of the work.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1 (Gender-)inclusive language

It has been long discussed the way in which language shapes our reality (Chomsky, 1965; Lakoff, 1987; Sapir, 1949; Schaff, 2016; Whorf & Carroll, 1953). In this sense, GIL can be analyzed based on the assumption that language reflects and (re)produces reality (Sayago, 2019). As a result, using or not certain words to designate certain individuals or collectives contributes to their visibilization –or invisibilization– recognition and identification (Jiménez Rodrigo et al., 2011). One of the main sources of concerns in this regard is the generic use of grammatically or lexically gender-marked nouns and pronouns, which leads to gender-asymmetry, especially in languages with a binary grammar system, which is the case of Spanish (Bonnin & Coronel, 2021; Gabriel et al., 2018). Gender is, therefore, a prevalent feature of the Spanish language, given that the gender of nouns agrees with determinants and adjectives, and, from a grammatical point of view, there are no gender-neutral nouns (Bonnin & Coronel, 2021). In addition, Spanish use masculine forms as unmarked or default status; that is, both to mark male reference, and in a generic way to refer to groups composed of male and female referents, leading to gender-asymmetry (Bonnin & Coronel, 2021; Gabriel et al., 2018).

When it comes to implementing GIL, there are two main strategies to face asymmetry: feminization and neutralization. Feminization strategies aim to foster women's visibility by referring to women and men in an explicit and symmetrical way, whereas neutralization strategies promote the use of unmarked nouns and pronouns to soften gender boundaries (Gabriel et al., 2018).

At this point, it is worth noting that the categories man and women should not be considered exclusively, but in relation to other variables such as sexuality, race, class or ethnicity, to name but a few (Castro, 2013). Consequently, from the late 90s, non-binary morphology emerged, replacing binary morphemes (-a and -o, in Spanish) by symbols such as x, e, or @, among others (Bonnin & Coronel, 2021).

In response to the increasing awareness concerning the use of GIL as a mean for promoting social equality numerous organizations and agencies have developed guidelines and toolkits on its use (Castro, 2013; Guerrero Salazar, 2020; Orgeira-Crespo et al., 2020), such as those proposed by the European Parliament (European Parliament, 2009), available in 22 languages, or the Spanish General Council of the Judiciary (Consejo General del Poder Judicial. Comisión de Igualdad, 2009), among many others. Regarding the use of inclusive language in corporate communication, there are some remarkable examples of guides that analyze this question. One of the most interesting examples is the guide about inclusive communication in the business sphere, produced in Spanish by Fundación Adecco (2021). This guide aims to promote the use of inclusive and non-discriminatory language in business. It proposes alternatives to sexist and stereotypical terms, and suggests more inclusive and respectful ways of expressing gender diversity, sexual orientation, functional diversity, and other dimensions of diversity. The Spanish organization Chrysaliis has also developed a guide on inclusive language on the Internet (Valenzuela Sanz & Alonso Vinués, 2020). This guide focuses on the use of inclusive language in social networks, but is also applicable to websites. It proposes alternatives to sexist and stereotyped terms, and suggests forms of expression that are more inclusive and respectful of gender and other dimensions of diversity. In addition, it is important to note that educational institutions, given their role as socializers and knowledge transferors, represent a true reflection of society and, therefore, the way they use language should be a reference for raising awareness concerning inclusion (Jiménez Rodrigo et al., 2011; Lagneaux, 2017).

1.2 Gender-inclusive language analysis framework

The process of designing a tool to analyze the use of GIL by Spanish SMEs was made following three stages. The starting point to gather reliable information about the use and application of GIL in Spanish was public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). There are several reasons for choosing this kind of guides. Firstly, although a general context inclusive language guide is not specifically focused on business, many of the recommendations and principles presented in such guides may be applicable to business communication and, therefore, to corporate websites. For example, the recommendations for using inclusive and non-discriminatory language based on gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, disability, among other issues, are relevant in any setting, including business. Secondly, in corporate communication it is important to keep in mind that the words and language used can influence the perception of the company, its image, and its commitment to diversity and inclusion. Therefore, the application of inclusive language can help improve the company's image and promote values of diversity and inclusion. Thirdly, an initial assessment revealed that Spanish HEIs generally offered complete resources on this matter. Finally, these institutions are not legally required to develop inclusive language guides.

As such, these texts are not limited by any legal restrictions different from the ones that a company may have. Ultimately, HEIs' guides are useful resources to analyze the use of inclusive language.

Hence, the first step was to review the webpages of all the public Spanish universities in order to check whether they offered or not guides for inclusive language. Secondly, a bibliographical analysis of the available guides of the universities was carried out with the aim of noting all the commonalities among the analyzed guides. To finish with, all the major key points were classified, and the indicators were developed.

According to the Spanish Ministry of Universities there are 50 public universities in Spain (Ministerio de Universidades, 2020). The websites of each of the 50 universities were reviewed in order to check if guides for inclusive language were available. As it can be observed in Table 1, 29 of the analyzed universities developed their own guides for inclusive language, being noteworthy that the University of Vigo had produced a guide for inclusive language in Galician; 4 of them had not developed to the date of compilation (May of 2021) any guide for inclusive language; finally, 16 of the universities referenced guides from other universities, and local or governmental institutions. The 29 guides developed by the universities in Spanish were taken as the basis for the subsequent bibliographical analysis.

Table 1. Spanish HEIs with inclusive language guides

<p>HEIs with own guides in Spanish</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Autonomous University of Barcelona ● Autonomous University of Madrid ● Carlos III University of Madrid ● Complutense University of Madrid ● Jaume I University ● National Distance Education University ● Pablo de Olavide University ● Polytechnic University of Valencia ● Public University of Navarra ● Technical University of Madrid ● University of Alcalá ● University of Alicante ● University of Barcelona ● University of Cádiz ● University of Cantabria ● University of Castilla-La Mancha ● University of Girona ● University of Granada ● University of Jaén ● University of La Rioja ● University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria ● University of Lleida ● University of Málaga ● University of Murcia ● University of Oviedo ● University of Salamanca ● University of Santiago de Compostela ● University of the Basque Country ● University of Valencia 	<p>HEIs referring to other resources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Menéndez Pelayo International University ● Miguel Hernández University of Elche ● Pompeu Fabra University ● Rey Juan Carlos University of Madrid ● Rovira I Virgili University ● Technical University of Cartagena ● Technical University of Catalonia ● University of A Coruña ● University of Burgos ● University of Córdoba ● University of Extremadura ● University of Huelva ● University of La Laguna ● University of Sevilla ● University of the Balearic Islands ● University of Zaragoza
<p>HEIs with own guides in other languages</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● University of Vigo (Galician) 	<p>HEIs with no guides</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● International University of Andalucía ● University of Almería ● University of León ● University of Valladolid

1.2.1 Bibliographical analysis

Content analysis allows for the application of systematic and objective procedures for describing the content of the messages (Bardin, 1996; Mayring, 2000). Therefore, once the 28 Spanish HEIs guides were compiled and defined as the initial study sample, a revision of their major key points was carried out in order to highlight their main strategies and recommendations. These strategies ranged from grammatical and lexical aspects to recommendations on the use of media, balanced representation of genders, and addressing gender and disability. Therefore, as mentioned before, the lack of consensus among the guides was evident and, consequently, it was decided to classify all the recommendations and strategies into broad dimensions containing different categories to cover all the different aspects included in the guides. In this

sense, it is important to mention that whereas most of the inclusive language guides included strategies for verbal communication, they mostly focused on administrative and institutional fields and stereotypical examples, and only a few of them brought attention to gender and the LGBTIQ+ community and graphic and visual language.

1.2.2 Classification of key points and development of indicators

Once the major and common key points on strategies and recommendations from the inclusive language guides of Spanish HEIs were collected, these were later synthesized and classified into categories and subcategories so that they covered all different aspects of verbal, graphic and visual language and communication. This classification into dimensions is taken from some of the guides of Spanish HEIs, which offered a very clear structure. Thus, a synthesis was made from four guides (Universidad de Jaén, 2012; Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 2016; Universidad de Málaga, 2022; Universidad Pablo de Olavide, 2021). Two main dimensions were identified: verbal language and graphic and visual language. The first dimension was divided into six categories: No gender-specific wording, One gender-specific wording, Two gender-specific wording, Inclusive characters wording, Reference to LGBTIQ+, and Other considerations. The second dimension included the categories: Representation of women and Technical treatment of images. Once the categories were defined, the indicators for each of them were established and the final checklist developed. In this final tool, each indicator was evaluated in terms of its presence or absence in a given text. As a result, this sort of checklist would then not measure the extension of application of each criterion, neither would it judge as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ the choice of GIL features used in a text. The purpose of this evaluation tool is to account for the presence of features of GIL in Spanish texts, as they are suggested and proposed by Spanish public universities. Therefore, it should be noted that all the criteria included in the set are conditioned by the nature and characteristics of Spanish language and that they are not mutually exclusive, i.e., several indicators from a single dimension can be present in the same text. A brief illustrative definition of each indicator will be provided in the following sections.

No gender-specific wording. The Spanish language has grammatical gender. Grammatical gender is a category of languages which, theoretically speaking, does not have to be identified with the reference to biological sex (Universidad de Granada, 2009). However, some practices are proposed to avoid androcentrism (“the practice of giving overriding importance to male human beings or to the masculine point of view on the world, its culture and its history”) (Ruiz-Cantero et al., 2007, p. 46) and to promote strategies that demonstrate equal treatment of both genders (Guerrero Salazar, 2020). Some of these practices include:

- a) Omission of determiners: when it is the determiner that marks the gender, with the simple suppression of the determiner it is possible to allude to both genders.
- b) Use of inclusive determiners instead of gender-marked determiners: in Spanish, there is the possibility of using non marked determiners. For example, to avoid the gender marked determiner *todos* or *todas* (every), it is possible to use *cada* (every), which does not have a gender mark.
- c) Use of impersonal sentences: for example, the use of the passive voice to avoid mentioning a gender marked subject.
- d) Use of abstract, epicene or collective nouns: this strategy includes the replacement of gender marked nouns for non-gender marked forms, e.g., using the noun *ciudadanía* (citizenship) instead of *ciudadana* or *ciudadano* (citizen).
- e) No use of apparent duals: this includes the terms and expressions which, while identical in form, take on different meanings when used in the masculine or feminine form (Calero Fernández, 1992; Guerrero Salazar, 2001).
- f) Use of non-gender-marked adjectives: even if the Spanish language is generally a gender-marked one, it is possible to find adjectives with no gender marks, e.g., *inteligente* (intelligent), *elegante* (sophisticated), etc.
- g) Use of a generic noun to make the adjective agree with it: in line with the previous indicator, it is as well possible to replace a gender-marked noun with a generic one, so the adjective can agree with it.

One gender-specific wording. This sub-dimension addresses inclusive strategies in contexts when it is necessary to make reference to a specific grammatical gender, e.g., when using the second or the third person to address or describe a specific person, or when referring to a group of people with different grammatical gender forms.

- a) Use of masculine forms for mixed plurals: using the masculine forms of different parts of speech when addressing a group of people with different or unknown gender forms is the traditional way of dealing with mixed plurals in Spanish.
- b) Use of feminine forms for mixed plurals: conversely, some new trends propose the use of the feminine forms to deal with mixed plurals.
- c) Use of feminine grammatical forms for blue-collar jobs practiced by women: it has been common practice to use masculine forms to refer to women practicing blue-collar jobs. This strategy, then, proposes the use of the feminine forms. For example: **Ella es médico / Ella es médica* (She is a doctor).
- d) Symmetrical use of first and last names: to use the second and the third person in a similar way when addressing or describing both women and men.
- e) Use of *señorita* (miss) as a treatment formula: this includes the use of the Spanish equivalent to ‘miss’, *señorita*, such as in contact forms or other contexts.

Two gender-specific wording. This sub-dimension includes strategies concerning the use of the two grammatical forms of a part of speech (masculine and feminine), whether deliberately or unconsciously.

- a) Use of two gender-marked forms for a term (masculine and feminine): making the rest of accompanying elements agree only with the masculine form.
- b) Use of two gender-marked forms for a term and all its accompanying elements (masculine and feminine): this is, to use two gender-marked forms for every part of speech agreeing with the term.
- c) Use of two gender-marked forms for only the determiner accompanying a term (masculine and feminine): this is, using two gender-marked forms for a determiner (e.g., *el / la*; the), but using the masculine forms for the rest of elements.
- d) Order of gender-marked elements: first masculine: when using the two gender-marked forms of a part of speech.
- e) Order of gender-marked elements: first feminine: when using the two gender-marked forms of a part of speech.
- f) Order of gender-marked elements: alternate order: when using the two gender-marked forms of a part of speech.
- g) Agreement of the adjective with the masculine form: in a list of elements with different gender marks.
- h) Agreement of the adjective with the closest element: in a list of elements with different gender marks.

Inclusive characters wording. This sub-dimension refers to the use of written resources, used in different settings, especially virtual ones, which are employed with the awareness of breaking the masculine/feminine duality and including all types of diversity (Guerrero Salazar, 2020).

- a) Use of 'x': such as in *Todxs nosotrxs* (We all)
- b) Use of '@': such as in *Tod@s nosotr@s* (We all)
- c) Use of 'e': such as in *Todes nosotres* (We all)
- d) Use of '/': such as in *Todos/as nosotros/as* (We all)

Reference to LGBTIQ+. In this sub-dimension are included three indicators dealing with the express mention of people belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community.

- a) Assumption of the heterosexuality of individuals.
- b) Express mention of non-binary people.
- c) Addressing transgender people with the gender forms they identify with.

Other considerations. This comprises one indicator addressing the presence of sexist stereotypes which may be present in journalistic, advertising, political, administrative, legal, and colloquial discourse (Guerrero Salazar, 2020). Given the

general nature of this indicator, it was considered that it should not be included under any of the precedent sub-dimensions.

Graphic and visual language. As the target texts to be analyzed are web texts, which are mainly multimodal, it was deemed appropriate to include a section addressing graphic and visual elements. This dimension was then divided into two sub-dimensions: Representation of women and Technical treatment of images. The first sub-dimension includes:

- a) Balanced presence of men and women: in the overall images of the website.
- b) Interactions in equality: when representing both men and women.
- c) Sexualization of the female body: when representing women.
- d) Presence of stereotypes: while the indicator in the sub-dimension. Other considerations is focused on linguistic stereotypes, this indicator makes reference to visual gender stereotypes.

The second sub-dimension includes four indicators dealing with the technical treatment of images representing women and men individually.

- a) No limitation of women to suggestive and aesthetic functions.
- b) Same spaces, shots and framings for both women and men.
- c) Same lighting and chromatic codes.
- d) Same angles.

The final designed framework is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Gender-Inclusive Language Analysis Framework (GILAF)

INDICATOR	CODE
Dimension: Verbal language	
No gender-specific wording	
Omission of determiners	NGSW1
Use of inclusive determiners instead of gender-marked determiners	NGSW2
Use of impersonal sentences	NGSW3
Use of abstract, epicene or collective nouns	NGSW4
No use of apparent duals	NGSW5
Use of non-gender-marked adjectives	NGSW6
Use of a generic noun to make the adjective agree with it	NGSW7
One gender-specific wording	
Use of masculine forms for mixed plurals	1GSW1_REV
Use of feminine forms for mixed plurals	1GSW2
Use of feminine grammatical forms for blue-collar jobs practiced by women	1GSW3
Symmetrical use of first and last names	1GSW4
Use of <i>señorita</i> (miss) as a treatment formula	1GSW5_REV
Two gender-specific wording	
Use of two gender-marked forms for a term	2GSW1
Use of two gender-marked forms for a term and all its accompanying elements	2GSW2
Use of two gender-marked forms for only the determiner accompanying a term	2GSW3
Order of gender-marked elements: first masculine	2GSW4_REV
Order of gender-marked elements: first feminine	2GSW5
Order of gender-marked elements: alternate order	2GSW6
Agreement of the adjective with the masculine form	2GSW7_REV
Agreement of the adjective with the closest element	2GSW8
Inclusive characters wording	
Use of 'x'	ICW1
Use of '@'	ICW2
Use of 'e'	ICW3
Use of '/'	ICW4
Reference to LGBTIQ+	
Assumption of the heterosexuality of individuals	LGBT1_REV
Express mention of non-binary people	LGBT2
Addressing transgender people with the gender forms they identify with	LGBT3
Other considerations	
Presence of sexist stereotypes	OC1_REV
Dimension: Graphic and visual language	
Representation of women	
Balanced presence of men and women	GVL1
Interactions in equality	GVL2
Sexualization of the female body	GVL3_REV
Presence of stereotypes	GVL4_REV
Technical treatment of images	
No limitation of women to suggestive and aesthetic functions	GVL5
Same spaces, shots and framings for both women and men	GVL6
Same lighting and chromatic codes	GVL7
Same angles	GVL8

2. Methodological framework

2.1 Sample description

The object of study which had already been used in previous works, was composed of Spanish SME's corporate websites. The data were gathered from the Sectorial Ranking of Companies by Turnover offered by the Spanish source *elEconomista.es*. This Company Ranking includes information from the INFORMA D&B S.A.U. (S.M.E.) data-base (which is certified by the AENOR quality certificate and collects data from a number of public and private sources, including the Official Companies Register Gazette, the Official Accounts Records, the Official State, Autonomous Regional and Provincial Gazettes, national and regional press, ad hoc studies and other publications).

The selected companies belonged to Group Q: Healthcare and social services activities according to the Spanish classification of economic activities (CNAE) (*Clasificación Nacional de Actividades Económicas. CNAE, 2018*). In this work the focus has been Spanish SMEs included in the sector 8621.- General medicine activities, which comprised a total of 906 companies.

The sample was calculated for a finite population ($N = 906$) for a confidence level of 99% with margin of error of 5% (Martínez Bencardino, 2019). Therefore, the preliminary sample was formed by 385 companies of Spanish SMEs included in the sector 8621 of: General medicine activities. Of these 385, only 188 had a corporate website. Subsequently, only websites originally developed in Spanish were considered, resulting in 157 websites, of which 4 were not operating. Thus, the final study sample was formed by 153 corporate websites of Spanish SMEs from the healthcare sector. Regarding the size of the companies, 87 (56.9%) were medium-sized companies and 66 (43.1%) were small-sized companies. The geographical distribution was relatively homogenous, although it is remarkable that 53 companies (34.6%) were located in Madrid and Barcelona.

2.2 Coding and data processing

In order for the data collected with the tool to be quantitatively analyzed, each indicator was coded following a scale of 0-2. As stated above, the focus of this tool is to account for the presence or absence of GIL features. For that reason, for most items, in the scale 0 = Not applicable; 1 = Yes; 2 = No. However, given the nature of some of the indicators, in some cases a reverse coding was applied, veiling for the internal coherence of the tool. Thus, for example, for the graphic and visual language indicator 'Balanced presence of men and women' a direct coding was used, whereas for the indicator 'Presence of stereotypes', a reverse coding was applied, where 0 = Not applicable; 1 = No; 2 = Yes. This way, the data obtained after the application of the tool would measure the presence of GIL in a consistent and coherent manner. For

better understanding, those indicators reversely coded were added the label 'REV' at the end of their identifying code.

The data were processed using SPSS statistical package through reliability testing, factor analysis and frequency analysis.

2.3 GILAF application

The tool was applied to the final sample of 153 corporate websites of Spanish SMEs. The data were collected during the months of May and June 2021 by two evaluators with background in linguistics and the use of GIL in Spanish. Evaluators were trained prior to the rating process to make sure they understood what needed to be done and what was required to complete the study correctly. When an item of disagreement occurred, the evaluators met with the researchers and reviewed the website together to determine the final rating after discussion.

2.4 Reliability testing

The internal consistency of the GILAF framework was tested using Cronbach's alpha. The results showed high reliability with a value of $\alpha=.895$, a value above the minimum requirement of .7 (De Vaus, 2014). As such, the tool proved to have a high level of internal consistency.

2.5 Factor analysis

To further analyze the data and assess the unidimensionality of the items proposed for this framework, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted. This technique has been proposed to be effective at early stages of theory to identify a factor structure (Hurley et al., 1997).

As a preliminary step, two different tests were conducted: Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's test of Sphericity. KMO is a test conducted to examine the strength of the partial correlation between the variables. KMO should be at least .50 to make factor analysis suitable (Morgan & Griego, 1998), although some scholars suggest values over .70 (De Vaus, 2014). Results showed a KMO value of .788, a satisfactory value to carry out factor analysis. The significance of the Bartlett's test of Sphericity (Sig.=.000), inferior to the recommended value of 0.05 (Morgan & Griego, 1998), evidenced the rejection of the null hypothesis. Thus, the data collected proved to be appropriate for a factor analysis to commence.

EFA was conducted using a Promax rotation and showed that the indicators loaded on seven factors with loadings all higher than .4, which explained 74.2% of the variance. The factors obtained are included in Table 3.

Table 3. Pattern Matrix

	Component						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ICW4	1,05						
ICW2	0,877						
2GSW2	0,869						
ICW3	0,864						
2GSW3	0,851						
ICW1	0,842						
2GSW1	0,78						
GVL8		0,94					
GVL7		0,932					
GVL6		0,924					
GVL5		0,834					
GVL3_REV		0,828					
GVL4_REV		0,814					
GVL2		0,702					
GVL1		0,537					
NGSW3			0,762				
NGSW7			0,742				
NGSW4			0,698				
NGSW6			0,675				
NGSW1			0,655				
NGSW5			0,641				
NGSW2			0,558				
OC1_REV			0,435				
2GSW4_REV				0,962			
2GSW5				0,921			
2GSW6				0,915			
LGBT3	0,409			0,552			
LGBT1_REV				0,463			
2GSW8					0,96		
2GSW7_REV					0,853		
LGBT2					0,841		
1GSW4						0,918	
1GSW5_REV						0,889	
1GSW3						0,707	
1GSW1_REV							0,857
1GSW2							0,838
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.							
Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization. ^a							
a. Rotation converged in 7 iteration.							

In Factor 1 converge all the indicators referring to inclusive characters wording and three indicators from the Two gender-specific wording sub-dimension that focus on the use of two gender-marked forms in a phrase. Factor 2 includes all indicators from the Graphic and visual language dimension. Factor 3 contains all the indicators referring to No gender-specific wording together with the indicator under the sub-dimension Other considerations. In Factor 4 converge three indicators referring to Two gender-specific wording that focus on the order of gender-marked elements in a phrase together with two indicators on the Reference to LGBTQ+ people. It is

noteworthy that the indicator LGBT3 loaded as well in Factor 1, although with a lower value. Factor 5 includes two indicators referring to Two gender-specific wording on the agreement of the adjective in Spanish in a list of elements with different gender marks and one indicator about LGBTQ+ that mentioned the treatment of non-binary people. Factor 6 contains three indicators on One gender-specific wording which refer to the forms of treatment in both the second and third person. Finally, in Factor 7 converge the other two indicators about One gender-specific wording that make reference to the use of gender-marked forms in mixed plurals.

Based on the factor analysis solution, it seems that not all indicators loaded as predicted by the manual classification. However, the underlying constructs identified by the factor analysis follow logical patterns in terms of the parts of speech targeted by each indicator. Only one sub-dimension did not load as predicted by the manual classification: Reference to LGBTIQ+. The reason for that may be the fact that indicators LGBT1_REV was only evaluated in 5 (3.3%) and LGBT3 in 2 (1.3%) websites, thus not providing enough data to be classified properly by factor analysis. Conversely, as indicator LGBT2 could be evaluated in most of the websites, it was classified along in Factor 5.

In addition, the internal consistency of each factor was tested using Cronbach's alpha and the results showed high reliability with alphas ranging: Factor 1 ($\alpha=.969$), Factor 2 ($\alpha=.930$), Factor 3 ($\alpha=.883$), Factor 4 ($\alpha=.843$), Factor 5 ($\alpha=.904$), Factor 6 ($\alpha=.775$), and Factor 7 ($\alpha=.975$).

The factor analysis contributed to empirically test the reliability of GILAF for analyzing the use of GIL in SME's web corporate communication in Spanish, as well as to assess the relevance of the data gathered from the study sample. For example, data obtained for the sub-dimension Reference to LGBTIQ+ would be cautiously interpreted in further steps of the analysis. Thus, results from factor analysis lend further credence to the GILAF framework.

3. Results

Each website was analyzed on indicators proposed in the GILAF and each of them was measured on a three-point scale. The following results evaluate the use of GIL strategies by Spanish SMEs on each indicator. A frequency analysis and percentage frequency count were used to assess the degree to which Spanish SMEs from the healthcare sector are applying GIL strategies in their corporate websites to make their web content more inclusive.

3.1 Results for verbal language

3.1.1 No gender-specific wording

The overall results for this sub-dimension indicate that Spanish SMEs are not applying this type of GIL strategies as less than 13% of them scored positively in the indicators in this dimension. Only the indicator NGSW4 (Use of abstract, epicene or collective nouns) scored positively in 30.1% of the websites. This is not a high value, but contrasts with the score of other indicators as, e.g., indicator NGSW6 (Use of non-gender-marked adjectives), which was only applied in 1.3% of the websites, i.e., only 1.3% of the analyzed websites included examples of the use of non-gender-marked adjectives.

3.1.2 One gender-specific wording

In a similar way, the results from this sub-dimension indicate that Spanish SMEs are not applying strategies regarding the use of mixed plurals, as not a single one of them presented the use of feminine forms for mixed plurals (indicator 1GSW2). Conversely, the rest of indicators seemed to score more positively, although it should be noted that indicators 1GSW3, 1GSW4, and 1GSW5_REV presented a high percentage of Not Applicable values (51%, 60.8%, and 71.2% respectively). Nevertheless, in the cases where these indicators were evaluated, they pointed out to the application of gender inclusive strategies.

3.1.3 Two gender-specific wording

Regarding this sub-dimension, overall results show that SMEs are not achieving a high degree of GIL strategies, as most of these indicators were applied in 1.3% to 9.2% of the websites. It is noteworthy that the indicators regarding the order of gender-marked elements (2GSW4_REV, 2GSW5, and 2GSW6) were not evaluated in 86.3% of the websites, and did not score positively when evaluated.

3.1.4 Inclusive characters wording

Indicators in this sub-dimension were applied in a very small degree in the websites (0.3-5.9%). Special mention should be made to the Use of ‘e’ (indicator ICW3), which was not applied in a single website.

3.1.5 Reference to LGBTIQ+

As mentioned earlier, indicators LGBT1_REV (Assumption of the heterosexuality of individuals) and LGBT3 (Addressing transgender people with the gender forms they identify with) were not evaluated in 87.6% of the websites. Even so, they did not score positively when evaluated. As for indicator LGBT2 (express mention of non-binary people), it was not applied in a single website, thus indicating that Spanish SMEs are not applying this type of inclusive language strategies.

3.1.6 Other considerations.

Regarding the presence of sexist stereotypes (OC1_REV), this indicator scored a high value, being applied in 127 (83%) of the websites. Sexist stereotypes were only found in 8 (5.2%) and it was not evaluated in 18 (11.8%) websites. This is the only sub-dimension assessing verbal language that scored positively, indicating that SMEs are generally avoiding the presence of sexist stereotypes, even if they are not using other type of strategies.

3.2 Results for graphic and visual language

3.2.1 Representation of women

Indicators in this sub-dimension scored relatively high for SMEs. They were applied in 55.6% to 70.6% of the websites. Although some features of non-inclusive visual language were found, e.g., 19.6% of the websites presented stereotypes and 16.3% contained an unbalanced presence of men and women. More than half of the websites showed features of inclusive language strategies, which imply better levels of inclusivity in the graphic and visual content than in verbal language.

3.2.2 Technical treatment of images

In a similar line, overall results for this sub-dimension indicate that SMEs apply gender inclusion strategies in their visual content, as these indicators were applied in 52.9% to 60.1% of the websites. The results in the dimension show rather high degrees of GIL in comparison to the dimension Verbal language.

4. Limitations and future research lines

The focus of this work has been to develop a framework to analyze the use of GIL in Spanish in corporate websites: GILAF. Nevertheless, research and literature regarding this topic is scarce, and, as far as the authors are concerned, no guides or official recommendations have been published about the use of GIL in Spanish in corporate contexts. For such a reason, the starting point of this study was inclusive language guides published by Spanish Higher Education Institutions which, as mentioned in this paper, have published extensive works on the matter. As such, the selection of GIL indicators may have been influenced by HEIs perspective of inclusive language, so the theoretical foundation of the framework should be interpreted with this in mind.

Furthermore, maintaining the balance between a representative and a manageable sample has led to the application of filtering criteria, for example, the selection of only one market sector: General medicine activities. Although the size of the population is strong enough to carry out the analysis, it is recommendable that future studies test

and cross-validate the proposed tool with samples formed by corporate websites from different sectors.

Finally, the method used to analyze the data extracted is inherently limited by its nature, as it describes the panorama of the use of GIL strategies, but does not explain the reasons behind the presence or absence of these strategies. Therefore, future lines of research can benefit from the application of qualitative methodologies of content analysis to delve deeper in this matter.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper includes the results of applying a quantitatively validated analysis framework for the use of GIL to a sample of corporate websites from Spanish SMEs from the healthcare sector. The GILAF framework may be applied to corporate websites from different sectors as well, opening the door to further analyze the panorama of the use of GIL in Spanish in corporate contexts.

The extracted results show that the application of GIL strategies in these companies is still scarce, with the exception of Graphic and visual language strategies and Presence of sexist stereotypes. The reasons behind this absence of strategies are unknown. It may be due to a lack of awareness by company managers, a lack of information or a desire not to position themselves in a topic which remains controversial in modern societies. However, the presence of inclusive graphic and visual content and the general absence of sexist stereotypes indicate some sort of responsiveness regarding this issue.

Supporting CSR in connection with this social concern (gender inclusion) could have a beneficial impact for SMEs, as it could improve their corporate image and would attract new potential customers, who would perceive them as socially responsible. As such, supporting CSR and applying GIL strategies could eventually lead to wealth creation for SMEs.

The analysis framework proposed in this work, GILAF, could then be used as well as a guide for SMEs willing to apply GIL strategies in their content in Spanish, as it seems that there is still a long way to go in this field.

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