

Review Article

A Critical Approach to Voice Acting for the Creative and Interpretive Processes of Non-Binary Characters

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ABSTRACT

Audiovisual productions are spaces where common sense, cultural representations, and social imaginaries are constructed and contested. Voice acting, as a central component of these productions, is not a neutral practice—it carries sociopolitical and cultural implications and impacts various social dimensions, including collective understandings of gender. However, most of the literature on voice acting has focused almost exclusively on its technical aspects. This article critically reflects on the implications of vocal construction and interpretation in the portrayal of non-binary characters in audiovisual productions. To this end, it reviews a range of studies on social representations of non-binarism in animated audiovisual media, as well as research on the voices of non-binary people. Finally, the article proposes a critical approach to voice acting that can guide the development of sensitive performances. This approach involves acknowledging the social implications of the voice in audiovisual media and its role in power distribution, the rejection of stereotypes, rethinking casting and categorization systems, the pursuit of critical representation, and the importance of training and positive contact.

Keywords:

Voice Acting; Gender;
Non-Binarism;
Audiovisual Media;
Animation

Una aproximación crítica a la actuación de voz para los procesos creativos e interpretativos de personajes de género no binario

RESUMEN

Las producciones audiovisuales son prácticas de construcción y disputa del sentido común, de representaciones culturales y de imaginarios posibles. La actuación vocal, en tanto componente de éstas, no es una práctica neutra, sino que tiene implicancias sociopolíticas y culturales, e impacta en diversas dimensiones sociales, como la noción colectiva del género. Sin embargo, la mayoría de la literatura sobre actuación vocal se ha enfocado casi exclusivamente en sus aspectos técnicos. Ante esto, el propósito de este trabajo es reflexionar críticamente sobre las implicancias de los procesos de construcción e interpretación vocal de personajes de género no binario en producciones audiovisuales. Para esto, en este trabajo se revisan diversos estudios sobre representaciones sociales del no binarismo en producciones audiovisuales animadas, así como investigaciones acerca de la voz de personas de género no binario. Finalmente se propone una aproximación crítica a la actuación vocal que oriente el desarrollo de un trabajo creativo e interpretativo sensible. Ésta incluye la comprensión de las implicancias sociales de la voz como componente de lo audiovisual, su impacto en la distribución de poder, la superación de los estereotipos como base de trabajo, el repensar los sistemas de categorización y selección del reparto, la representatividad crítica y la relevancia de la formación y el contacto positivo.

Palabras clave:

Actuación de Voz;
Género; No Binarismo;
Audiovisual; Animación

Uma abordagem crítica da atuação vocal nos processos criativos e interpretativos de personagens de gênero não binário

RESUMO

As produções audiovisuais são práticas de construção e disputa do senso comum, das representações culturais e dos imaginários possíveis. A atuação vocal, enquanto componente dessas produções, não é uma prática neutra, mas sim carregada de implicações sociopolíticas e culturais, com impacto em diversas dimensões sociais, como a noção coletiva do gênero. No entanto, a maior parte da literatura sobre atuação vocal tem se concentrado quase exclusivamente em seus aspectos técnicos. Diante disso, o objetivo deste trabalho é refletir criticamente sobre as implicações dos processos de construção e interpretação vocal de personagens de gênero não binário em produções audiovisuais. Para tanto, este estudo revisa diferentes pesquisas sobre representações sociais do não binarismo em produções audiovisuais animadas, bem como investigações acerca da voz de pessoas de gênero não binário. Por fim, propõe-se uma abordagem crítica da atuação vocal que oriente o desenvolvimento de um trabalho criativo e interpretativo sensível. Essa abordagem inclui a compreensão das implicações sociais da voz como componente do audiovisual, seu impacto na distribuição do poder, a superação dos estereótipos como base de trabalho, o repensar os sistemas de categorização e seleção de elenco, a representatividade crítica e a importância da formação e do contato positivo.

Palavras-chave:

Atuação Vocal; Gênero; Não Binarismo; Audiovisual; Animação

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INTRODUCTION

The literature has extensively explored the technical aspects of voice acting. However, relatively little attention has been paid to its sociopolitical and cultural implications, as well as its impact on social dimensions such as the collective construction of gender. Voice acting plays a crucial role in the development of common sense, as a core element of the audible and audiovisual media that permeate everyday life. According to Florencia Saintout (2013), what is often referred to as common sense—or even culture—should be understood as a historically situated social construct. Consequently, what society regards as accurate or legitimate at a given historical moment may later become subject to dispute. Within these processes of negotiation, audiovisual media have an essential role as producers of meaning.

From political communication studies, Manuel Trenzado Romero (2000) argues that audiovisual media are a sociopolitical phenomenon of mass culture. As a form of public discursive practice, they participate in the construction and contestation of cultural representations and social imaginaries, ultimately shaping the texture of everyday reality. Similarly, Lorena Antezana Barrios et al. (2018) emphasize that images are sources of multiple meanings embedded within complex cultural networks. Thus, audiovisual content becomes a site for social identity, a locus of reference, and a space for imagining possible modes of being.

In *Technologies of Gender*, Teresa de Lauretis (1987) proposes that the construction and representation of gender emerge from diverse social technologies. This concept refers to structures, practices, and discourses stemming from institutions, society, culture, and epistemological frameworks, among which film occupies a privileged position. Building on this perspective, Antezana Barrios et al. (2018) suggest that audiovisual productions operate as gender technologies that regulate social contexts by producing culture and shaping everyday behaviors.

From a technical standpoint, audiovisual work is a complex and varied process resulting from interdisciplinary collaboration (Marzal Felici & López Cantos, 2008). Such work entails integrating image and sound—whether in analog or digital format—for public exhibition, across three stages: pre-production, production, and post-production (Bestard Luciano, 2011). Among the many processes that compose this production chain are scriptwriting, casting, costume design, cinematography, set design, image and sound recording, animation, musical scoring, sound design, translation, and voice acting (Carpio, 2015; Marzal Felici & López Cantos, 2008).

Roberto Coloma Díaz (2017) defines voice acting as the actor's interpretive work to represent a text in a believable and engaging manner. Similarly, Alburger (2011) conceives it as any recorded or performed voice produced off-screen or without visual accompaniment, intended to communicate a message.

At times, the concepts of voice acting or vocal performance are used interchangeably with dubbing, voice-over, and announcing, while in other cases they are distinguished from one another. This article adopts a broad definition of voice acting that encompasses the terms voice acting, dubbing, and voice-over. Ebru Çavuşoğlu (2023) defines voice acting as the act of lending one's voice to a character in a given medium. Additionally, Zoé Sales Rolando (2023) calls it the art of narrating a story or performing a character without being on screen. In contrast, Sofia Sánchez Mompeán (2015) describes it as the art of voicing animated characters to create the illusion of speech.

According to Jennifer Martínez Vásquez (2023), human voice may integrate audiovisual sound design through dialogue, ambient sounds, music, and effects. As Susana Díaz (2011) states, “voice is at the center of the audiovisual experience,” since it serves as a medium for the text that drives the narrative while also conveying emotion through speech and song. Likewise, voice is fundamental in character construction, as it provides information about traits, circumstances, and emotional states, among other characteristics.

The relationship between voice acting and gender has been scarcely explored. Most studies on dubbing focus on audiovisual translation and its role in reproducing gender stereotypes. In this regard, Daniela Angulo Nalvarte and Kathia Martínez Nolasco (2021) note that stereotypical representations of LGBTQIA+ characters are common in audiovisual translation, and that few studies address non-binary characters. Thus, it is crucial to explore this issue within the field of voice acting.

This article critically reflects on the implications of vocal design and performance for non-binary characters in audiovisual productions. To this end, it reviews studies on the social representations of non-binarism in animated productions and on the voices of non-binary people. Finally, this work proposes a critical approach to voice acting that can inform the development of a creative and interpretive practice grounded in sensitivity.

DEVELOPMENT

Representations of Non-Binarism in Audiovisual Productions Through Their Characters

In recent years, there has been an increasing presence of LGBTQIA+ characters in audiovisual productions (Angulo Nalvarte & Martínez Nolasco, 2021), particularly non-binary (Twist et al., 2020).

As Valeria Flores (2014) argues, gender functions as a historically situated mechanism for regulating bodies. In this sense, gender is a coding matrix that organizes their cultural intelligibility, producing and distributing gendered bodies according to a binary ideal of femininity and masculinity. Non-binarism emerges as a critique that challenges, disrupts, and reconfigures this matrix. Although, as Raúl Cruz (2023) notes, each non-binary person's process of self-discovery and recognition is unique, there are some points of convergence. In this regard, Alex Argüelles (2023) posits that being non-binary entails rejecting the cis-tem's impositions. This means inhabiting dissident and fluid identities that do not conform to the normative system of sex–gender–expression correspondence, thereby resisting the need for fixed definitions. Drawing on Halberstam's (2018) proposal of the *trans* signifier as a strategy for semantic and political openness, each person can author their own ways of naming processes of disidentification, expansion of difference, uncertainty, and creation. “Non-binarism” thus refers to positioning oneself outside of the man/woman binary, encompassing expressions such as genderqueer, genderfluid, gender-nonconforming, demi, neutral, agender, and dissident identities, among many others (Pérez Flores, 2022; Twist et al., 2020). This perspective offers a more expansive understanding of gender (Orellana Mendoza, 2022).

Animation, in particular, has broadened the possibilities for destabilizing normative boundaries in gender representation. Deirdre Clyde (2021) asserts that many people find in Japanese animation (*anime*) a framework for resisting Western hegemonic binarism. This is because anime normalizes gender flexibility and fluidity, enabling greater exploration and self-expression. Similarly, Victoria Lemmons (2019), in her study on anime conventions, concludes that *cosplay*—dressing as and embodying an animated character—constitutes a space for gender exploration that benefits queer, trans, and non-binary people. Moreover, Hortência Silva Nepomuceno dos Santos et al. (2008) highlight the impact of anime on gender identity during childhood, as it can both challenge and reproduce gender stereotypes.

Therefore, it is important to examine the representations of non-binarism in animated productions. Recent animation has featured multiple portrayals of non-binary characters, prompting growing scholarly interest in the subject.

To explore the cultural imaginaries surrounding LGBTQIA+ characters in anime, Prieto Cardozo (2021) examines Charlotte Chuhlhourne, a character introduced in episode 216 of *Bleach* (aired in 2009). Charlotte, a subordinate officer serving under one of the series' main antagonists, is designed with a combination of

physical traits, wardrobe, movement, and vocal cues that imply a gender-nonconforming performance. The character blends traditionally gendered features, merging masculine and feminine signifiers. Physically, Charlotte is portrayed as tall and muscular, with tan skin, angular facial features, thick, glossy lips, long, wavy hair, and pronounced eyelashes. The clothes include a low-cut shirt and V-shaped pants with side slits. Charlotte's stylized performance evokes the magical girl warrior archetype, and the character frequently refers to herself as "princess" and "beautiful."

Prieto Cardozo argues that rather than challenging binary gender norms, Charlotte's design functions as a site of ridicule and stigmatization through exaggerated, absurd performativity. The character's narrative arc, interpreted through the intersection of gender and race, ultimately reinforces the heteronormative system and white beauty standards, thereby suppressing dissident representation.

In a different context, Michaela Bakker (2017) analyzes non-binary representations in *Hunter X Hunter*, focusing on Neferpitou, a chimera ant with both human and animal traits. First appearing in episode 87 (2013), Neferpitou is referred to with gender-neutral language in Japanese and uses the pronoun *boku*, a masculine form that women can also use as an alternative to the hyper-feminine *atashi*. While the character's design may appear feminine from a binary perspective, it is intentionally ambiguous in terms of gender. Bakker suggests that "attempting to determine a character's gender based on appearance in *Hunter X Hunter* is largely futile," as the series frequently subverts traditional gender norms through its characters' aesthetics.

Similarly, Roger Andre Søråa (2019) examines Izana from *Knights of Sidonia* (2014), a posthumanist science fiction anime. Izana is biologically sexless and can adopt a normative gender expression based on the romantic relationship they form. Søråa argues that this representation opens up possibilities for rethinking gender beyond binary frameworks, particularly in speculative future contexts. However, the author also notes that the narrative ultimately reinforces heteronormative structures: Izana takes a woman's form upon falling in love with a male character, thereby reinstating traditional gender roles.

Another recurring feature in animated productions is the inclusion of characters built from objects, yet still scripted through a binary lens. The most widely discussed case is BMO, the living handheld console in *Adventure Time*. Emma Jane (2015), Sanna Partanen (2016), and Emily Tinder (2020) all note that the series never assigns BMO a fixed gender: the console is addressed with

masculine pronouns in one scene and feminine ones in the next, while oscillating between hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine performances. Tinder, therefore, reads BMO as agender by default, whereas Jane frames the constant shifts as a textbook illustration of the gender-fluid, non-binary experience. Jane links this representation to transnormativity, arguing BMO's capacity to form romantic bonds with other ambiguous figures without ever ascribing to fixed gender categories. Partanen concludes that BMO offers a refreshing representation in audiovisual productions that breaches binarism.

Kennedy (2021) highlights the series "Steven Universe" for its significance for the LGBTQIA+ community. Kennedy foregrounds Stevonnie as an innovative and empathetic representation of queer identities. Although Stevonnie's gender identity is never stated, some audience members recognize them as non-binary, a status officially recognized in Cartoon Network's 2019 Dove Self-Esteem Project short. In this short, Stevonnie's in-universe social-media profile lists them as "intersex, non-binary, they/them."

"Steven Universe" introduces other queer representations beyond Stevonnie. Carolina Delamorclaz Ruiz (2018) mentions the Crystal Gems, a fictional non-binary species. Although the Gems present as femme and are linguistically tagged "she," they do not identify within binary categories and exist outside the cis-tem.

Furthermore, the 2019 epilogue miniseries "Steven Universe Future" introduces Shep, the only human in the franchise who uses nonbinary pronouns exclusively (Vogt, 2022). Shep is designed as a calm, mature, tanned, softly muscular teenager (Minervini, 2024; Vogt, 2022) and the partner of Sadie, a secondary character. They receive only a few minutes of screen time, thus a superficial narrative development (Vogt, 2022). However, Simona Minervini (2024) argues that their un-expository introduction—their gender is never revealed—normalises non-binary personhood, without reducing Shep to their gender identity. Likewise, Olivia Vogt (2022) concludes that Shep exemplifies how to integrate human non-binary figures into animated productions. This reference has already influenced character design in video games (Fernández Cebrián, 2021).

The cases surveyed confirm that audiovisual media are pivotal in shaping social understandings of non-binary identities. They can either recycle stigma or disarm binary logic by staging diverse lives with empathy and sensitivity. However, most of the reviewed non-binary figures are non-human, keeping the possibility of non-binary personhood removed from the material world. When human bodies do appear, portrayals range from the

stereotypical and ridiculed, and the search for heteronormativity, to the empathetic and what could be called “casual representation”.

Casual representation reflects everyday life: characters in simple, common scenarios, characterized by their naturalness and spontaneity rather than by exaggeration or overacting. According to Mariana Fried and Suzanna Oprea (2023), this type of representation is more credible and relatable to the LGBTQIA+ community. Casual does not mean narratively shallow or reductive. Instead, it refers to everyday representation that does not resort to the exoticization, medicalization, or commodification of diversity (Israel & Delucio, 2017). In this context, *Adventure Time* and *Steven Universe* excel in their non-stereotypical, empathetic, sensitive, and casual representations of nonbinarism, helping to shape new narratives.

Although there is growing academic interest in this subject, no studies have yet analyzed the vocal processes involved in nonbinary representation. Therefore, the following is a review of voice research on non-binarism and its relevance to audiovisual projects through voice acting.

The Non-Binary Experience in Speech and Voice Research Findings

The human voice is a conduit for personal identity and social bonding (Blanco Fuente, 2020; González Natal et al., 2024; Mills et al., 2017). Across cultural contexts, its acoustic features are socially interpreted and mapped onto categories of identity, including gender (González Natal et al., 2024). As a performative tool, voice is central to the construction of gender identity (Jørgensen et al., 2018), a salient issue wherever binary norms prevail.

Voice often becomes a site of concern for non-binary speakers. Shefcik & Tsai (2023) document the worry that non-binary people experience in contexts such as phone calls, encounters with strangers, work, and public spaces. Their main fears include being misgendered, having their opinions dismissed, and repeating past negative experiences. Similarly, Kupper (2021) links voice to physical safety, noting that using their voice in public is perceived as a risk of aggression.

Traditional voice research has left non-binary experiences unseen, focusing instead on the alignment between voice and gender assigned at birth. Physiological studies have described hormone-driven differentiation of vocal structures (Smith, 1989), furnishing the basis for work that predicts perceived “masculinity” or “femininity” from acoustic profiles. This literature identifies

parameters—fundamental frequency, vowel formants, sound-pressure level, vocal-tract resonance—as markers that distinguish female from male voices (Dahl & Mahler, 2020; Hardy et al., 2020; Van Borsel et al., 2009) and underpin clinical programmes aimed at voice feminization or masculinization.

Most of this literature still conflates sex with gender, operationalising them both as a female/male or woman/man dichotomy. Recent work has begun to correct that bias by treating gender as a performative act and asking how non-binary speakers themselves manipulate acoustic cues to craft voices that depart from hegemonic scripts.

According to Merritt (2023), non-binary speakers strategically utilize features that distinguish them from both cis and binary-trans people, thereby conveying their identity. Corwin (2009) reached a similar conclusion when working with genderqueer respondents who blended “masculine” and “feminine” cues—most often a low-pitched voice (normatively male) coupled with clause-final rising intonation (normatively female)—to create a recognisably non-binary signature.

Merritt (2023) reports that non-binary fundamental and formant frequencies (F1, F2, F3) sit above those of cis men, trans men, and trans women, but below those of cis women, producing a spectral “middle ground” that does not align with the binary. Moreover, their vowel-space area (VSA)—an index of articulatory precision—falls between the averages of cis men and women, larger than that of trans men and smaller than that of trans women.

LeAnn Brown and Claire Pillot-Loiseau (2025) focused on AFAB (assigned-female-at-birth) non-binary speakers. They found (1) a fundamental frequency higher than cis men yet lower than cis women; (2) smoothed cepstral peak prominence values exceeding both cis groups; and (3) a flatter spectral slope, representing a brighter, more resonant timbre.

Regarding intonation, Schmid and Bradley (2019) found different patterns in non-binary people than in cisgender people, observing contours that dipped at sentence end but rose mid-phrase. In contrast, Papeleu et al. (2023) failed to reach statistical significance on any single intonation measure. However, in fifty percent of utterances, non-binary speakers clustered between cis/trans women and cis/trans men, again suggesting either a blending or a novel, extra-binary pattern. Both studies suggest that non-binary people combine intonation patterns traditionally considered feminine and masculine, or build patterns of their own that reject binary categories.

However, as Anna Jørgensen (2016) warns, focusing solely on how non-binary people produce voice and speech is insufficient; listeners' perceptions are equally crucial. In a society structured by deeply binary thought, voices are rarely heard outside that logic, even when stylistic variation is present (Jørgensen, 2016). Therefore, the following section reviews research focused on perception.

Susanna Whitling et al. (2023) examined how breathiness—created by glottal width during phonation—affects gender perception. A narrower glottis was linked to a masculine sound, while a wider, breathier glottis was heard as more feminine. The authors suggest these findings could guide those seeking androgynous or gender-fluid vocal qualities. Nevertheless, their study included neither non-binary raters nor non-binary response options, highlighting the need for more inclusive designs.

Christine Brennan et al. (2022) analyzed how people within and out of the LGBTQIA+ community perceive gender through voice. They asked a gender- and sexuality-diverse panel to label recorded voices. Cis-heterosexual listeners almost exclusively used binary terms (feminine, masculine), whereas LGBTQIA+ listeners avoided them, instead choosing labels such as man, woman, cis or trans man, cis or trans woman, cis masc, cis femme, masc-of-center, femme-of-center, androgynous, or non-binary, among others.

Andreea Danielescu et al. (2023) expose the exclusion of non-cis voices in conversational text-to-speech systems. Working with trans and non-binary communities, they created "Sam," a voice evaluated alongside masculine and feminine versions in a large-scale listening study. Non-binary participants preferred the non-binary voice, while cis listeners rated the masculine voice highest in authenticity, reliability, intelligence, and likability, followed by the feminine voice, and gave the lowest scores to the non-binary voice—evidence of the social biases confronting voices that depart from binary norms.

Another strand of research targets the vocal taxonomies themselves. Working at the intersection of human-computer interaction and feminist/queer theory, Stina Hasse Jørgensen et al. (2018) show that synthetic-voice systems reproduce normative binary categories. Their counter-proposal, the multi-vocal project, crowdsources speech recordings at public events without logging age, gender, or accent.

Alexander Pullinger (2020) and Daniel González Campo (2022) voice similar misgivings regarding choral practice. In the standard choral layout, low registers equal "men" and high registers equal "women," while the overlapping middle ground is still sliced into

binary labels—counter-tenor for male bodies, contralto for female ones—despite shared range and timbre (González Campo, 2022). Pullinger describes choirs as "highly cisgendered" spaces with a rigid sex/gender logic that links vocal traits to a specific sex and conflates sex with gender, dividing choirs into men and women. González Campo, therefore, calls for a vocal characterization that avoids gender as a criterion, recognizing voice in its versatility and malleability. Anna Topolova (2021) levels a similar critique at video game development, where voice selection in character customization is tied to gender or pronouns, hard-wiring a reductive, static model of gender.

The reviewed literature yields three core ideas. Firstly, non-binary people craft dissident performativities by broadly manipulating acoustic speech and voice qualities to defy the gender binary. Secondly, cisnormative listening biases remain in vocal perception, yet non-binary people expand these possibilities. Thirdly, voice classification systems are built on a rigid binary bias, turning them into oppressive and homogenising machines.

Integrating Elements into a Critical Approach to Voice Acting for Gender-Sensitive Creative Work

1. Starting point: understanding the social stakes of voice as an element in audiovisual productions

Audiovisual productions are battlegrounds where common sense is forged and contested. They facilitate the establishment of narratives, discourses, and social representations. Voice acting is embedded in these productions, influencing the construction of possible imaginaries. Far from a neutral practice, voice acting involves choices that influence the social representations presented to audiences.

Gender is the flashpoint where this process becomes visible. Research shows that production practices and choices can result in stereotyped and stigmatizing representations. Marcella De Marco (2012) reminds us that translation has a social and ideological impact on the audience's worldview. These processes can stem from ideological production strategies that decide which content will be translated for determined audiences. They can also result from the translator's moral and ideological concerns. Therefore, translation can reinforce stereotypes, prejudices, and inequity, favorably representing some groups while stigmatizing others (De Marco, 2012).

Turning specifically to voice acting and drawing on Michel Chion's *The Voice in Cinema* (1999), De Marco (2006) argues that a character's voice choice is central to gender representation. In dubbing, where the original track is replaced, new vocal

interpretations can either honour or betray the source. De Marco (2006) documents how dubbed gay characters are routinely re-voiced with stereotypical, caricature-like inflection. Fabio Fasoli et al. (2017) corroborate this point: dubbing can reinforce stereotypes, associating specific vocal qualities with particular sexualities.

According to Sara El-Sayed (2023), dubbing plays a significant role in perpetuating or challenging gender stereotypes. Kaifia Ancer Laskar (2021) adds that balanced gender representation in dubbed cartoons can positively influence cognitive development and gender role perception in preschoolers.

Several practices that foster a respectful non-binary representation have been identified. Within translation studies, Angulo Nalvarte and Martínez Nolasco (2021) highlight inclusive language as a means of making non-binary identities visible and respected. Sarah Herendeen (2023) underscores the importance of gender-neutral pronouns in both translation and dubbing for the same purpose. A still-unresolved controversy is the dubbing of the Steven Universe Future episode introducing Shep. In the English original, characters address Shep with the neutral pronoun *them*; the Spanish and Italian versions avoid gendered pronouns and gender agreement morphemes altogether, while the Portuguese track masculinises Shep's pronouns, erasing the character's identity (Minervini, 2024; Rodrigues Rosa & Pereira, 2021). Thus, the vocal construction of non-binary characters demands particular considerations, which we will outline below.

2. The symbolic load of vocal representation: impact on power dynamics

A critical approach to vocal creation must recognise that the sound assigned to a character carries symbolic weight. As Irene Blanco Fuente (2020) argues, voice operates as a mechanism that creates social hierarchies, evidenced by the unequal representation and recognition of voice diversity. The rigid association between gender and a specific vocal profile functions as a power-regulating device, determining which voices are granted agency and which are not. This relationship relegates certain voices to the margins, exposes them to constant surveillance, sanction, or aggression, and restricts access to resources for specific collectives (Blanco Fuente, 2020; González Natal et al., 2024).

Selina Jeanne Sutton (2020) critiques voice-assistant applications for being uniformly named and voiced as women, programmed to tolerate verbal abuse and sexual harassment, and designed with normatively feminine sound dynamics that subordinate voices perceived as feminine. Danieleescu et al. (2023) found that cis listeners rated a voice labelled "masculine" higher on desirability,

intelligence, and reliability than voices tagged "feminine" or "non-binary." Blanco Fuente (2020) similarly notes that low-pitched, masculine-associated voices are labeled as authoritative, whereas high-pitched, feminine-associated voices are dismissed as lacking legitimacy.

It is therefore crucial to reflect critically on the symbolism of attributing specific vocal features to particular characters. Relying on vocal stereotypes in vocal design reproduces social representations that position particular voices as subordinate or marginal, perpetuating exclusionary dynamics.

3. Vocal design: from stereotypical clichés to acoustic diversity

A substantial body of work has shown that vocal design for LGBTQIA+ characters is routinely based on stereotypes and stigmas. Although some studies have explored the vocal features of non-binary people, there is no set of acoustic patterns defining what a non-binary voice is. Finding one would merely reinstate the reductionist logic of the binary system that attributes one timbre to one identity. Instead, studies reveal that non-binary speakers draw on a wide range of acoustic traits to build performativities of their own, challenging and fracturing the binary taxonomy. Danieleescu et al (2023) argue that making this sonic variety audible is a prerequisite for broader and fairer representation.

Consequently, vocal design and character development processes should avoid stereotypical and caricature-like molds. Instead, voicing a non-binary character should entail exploring a broad spectrum of acoustic characteristics to find a vocalicity that dismantles stereotypes. Research can provide elements that guide this exploration, such as intonation, articulatory precision, fundamental frequency, formants, resonance, and breathiness, among other vocal qualities.

4. Binary casting: rethinking taxonomies

One of the first stages in character voice design in a production is casting. This process usually follows a binary structure: women play women, men play men, high-pitched voices are assigned to women, girls, and boys, and lower voices to men. As Pullinger (2020) and González Campo (2022) note in the context of vocal distribution in choirs, this binary categorization recurs across disciplines. Similarly, Irene Blanco Fuente (2020) warns that in casting for dubbing, the same binary and biased structures are reproduced.

The introduction of non-binary characters ruptures this casting routine and offers new possibilities. Blanco Fuente (2020) argues

that non-human characters whose designs lack binary gender cues defy the traditional selection logic. Abandoning the binary gender scheme allows voice selection to focus on each character's qualities, thus opening the role to more people. Alexander Pullinger (2020) proposes that both auditions and vocal classification should be based on the characteristics of each voice and not on gender. Likewise, Joshua Palkki (2019) warns that restricting auditions to a specific gender is a discriminatory practice towards non-binary performers.

5. Critical representation and sensitive interpretation: the relevance of non-binary performers in voice acting

Critical representation does not entail restricting the acting profession. Acting—stage or voice—rests on the actor's capacity to embody a myriad of life experiences. As Stanislavsky (2009) indicates in "An Actor's Work on Himself," acting is the transmission of a character's inner world through experiencing and embodiment. "Experiencing" is an internal process in which the actor authentically feels the spirit or essence of their character—its feelings, emotions, and states. Embodiment, on the other hand, is the external manifestation of the first experience through physical characterization, gestures, body language, and vocal expression.

Alburger (2011) asserts that voice actors must create believable characters in equally credible situations that emotionally engage the audience. Even in the context of animation, where characters exist in fictional worlds, those who voice them can carry the suspension of disbelief by creating a truthful emotional experience. This experience should be coherent with each narrative universe's internal rules. From this perspective, it is expected that voice actors can embody a wide variety of characters, whether they identify as men, women, or are non-binary. Consequently, non-binary characters are not restricted to non-binary actors, since, as Nana Timonen (2020) points out, the interpreter's gender identity should not be an absolute determinant of the character's gender identity.

However, as Nana Timonen (2020) argues, when the character is non-binary, the performer's own gender history adds weight to representation and performance. It is crucial to expand the presence of non-binary people in the field, both in script and in voice acting. As non-binary participants in Kupper (2021) express, "existence is resistance." However, this representation must be critical, avoiding tangential or superficial participation, and especially performances that reinforce stereotypes and discrimination. Critical representation entails real participation in the plot, alongside visual and sound designs that foreground

positive referents. These referents should break stereotypes and stigma, offering agency and self-realization.

Critical representation must run through every stage of audiovisual productions; each decision can either reproduce or challenge normative gender structures. Non-binary participation in decision-making is therefore essential because lived experience can pressure the binary logic from within. A paradigmatic case is Rebecca Sugar, creator and showrunner of *Steven Universe*, who identifies as a non-binary woman (Sugar, 2018). Drawing on that experience, Sugar produced a series with global, cross-generational impact, celebrated for its music, humour, ethic of kindness, interpersonal care, community life, and innovative exploration of gender diversity (Kennedy, 2021).

A concrete example of critical vocal representation is the non-binary character Raine Whispers in the original version of *The Owl House*. The adult Raine is voiced by Avi Roque and the younger version by Blu del Barrio—both non-binary actors (Salazar García, 2024). Another case is Shep in *Steven Universe Future*, voiced in the original version by Indya Moore, a non-binary actor, model, and activist who uses feminine and neutral pronouns (Minervini, 2024). As Nana Timonen (2020) notes, such casting diversifies a cis-normative soundscape, offers visibility and reference points to non-binary audiences, and enables an empathetic, respectful performance grounded in first-hand experience.

This empathy is anchored in Stanislavski's "experiencing" (2009) and in Uta Hagen and Haskel Frankel's notion of "circumstances" (2008). When it comes to experiencing, a non-binary performer can draw on personal history to access the non-binary character's inner life with heightened authenticity. The resulting situated experience forges a uniquely sensitive connection between actor and role, enriching the performance and producing complex critical representations that—because they are free from superficiality and stereotype—question the audience's normative frames.

"Circumstances," on the other hand, are the conditions that surround and affect a person, shaping the nature of their actions. Hagen argues that the more subjective identification an actor finds with those circumstances, the more they will believe they are living in the character's here-and-now, and the more intuitive their responses will be. For non-binary actors, this alignment between lived experience and fictional situation facilitates a genuine integration of inner familiarity and outward embodiment—what Stanislavski calls authenticity. Nonetheless, authenticity in this context is not merely technical; it is also political. It confronts the

cis-tem and its molds, contesting pre-set notions of what certain voices or bodies (which ultimately compose animated characters) are allowed to represent within fiction.

Creating and foregrounding representations such as those described above is especially urgent in light of Amy Green et al. (2021), who identify positive role models as a protective factor against psychological distress and suicidal ideation among LGBTQIA+ adolescents. These models are not merely the repetition of trauma narratives; they furnish traits and attitudes that invite subjective identification and make imaginable a life endowed with agency, resilience, and self-realisation (Gomillion, 2011).

6. Knowledge, awareness, sensitivity: why gender-literacy training matters for performance

Research in audiovisual translation has documented how translators' unexamined assumptions shape the representations that reach the screen (Angulo & Martínez, 2021). Voice acting processes can also be intertwined with stereotypes, prejudice, and stigma. Gender-literacy education for writers, character designers, voice directors, and performers is therefore a prerequisite for avoiding discriminatory practices.

The performing-arts cooperative NUS defines gender perspective as a lens that reveals how the social value assigned to different identities creates power and inequality. It exposes a patriarchal norm that privileges heterosexual men, subordinates women, and marginalises gender-diverse people. Ignoring this structure perpetuates inequality and violence (Permanyer de Swert et al., 2021). Thus, training, awareness, and sensitivity are non-negotiable.

The payoff of gender-literacy training has been quantified across fields. In healthcare, programs aimed at reducing LGBTQIA+ bias have increased knowledge, comfort, and affirmative attitudes (Morris et al., 2019). Similarly, an affirmative mental health curriculum improved competencies and reduced prejudice in high-stigma settings (Lelutiu-Weinberger et al., 2023). In schools, comprehensive and inclusive sex education significantly reduced homophobic and transphobic beliefs linked to bullying and victimization (Kesler et al., 2023). Moreover, workplace strategies for diverse, inclusive, and safe environments have enhanced organisations' capacity to confront discrimination (Mara et al., 2021).

Several studies show that positive contact with trans and gender-non-conforming people reduces prejudice and bias (Cramwinckel et al., 2021; Rani & Samuel, 2019; Rodrigues, 2025). While a

single affirmative interaction can reduce prejudice (Cramwinckel et al., 2021), frequent, high-quality contact yields the strongest and most durable attitudinal change (Cheso et al., 2024; Rodrigues, 2025).

Gender bias and stereotypes persist in the creative and performing arts sector, both in directing and staging. It is therefore imperative that professionals involved in the field incorporate a gender perspective to craft stories and reference points that dismantle clichés and imagine fairer, more diverse worlds (Permanyer de Swert et al., 2021). Dana Blackstone (2020) proposes reflective actor training that critically interrogates representation in scripts, scenes, characters, and casting calls, thereby contributing to social change. Likewise, Conrad Alexandrowicz (2017) argues for pedagogies that equip students and performers to challenge the industry's heteronormativity, counter discriminatory patterns, and re-stage theatrical narratives with roles and plots that unsettle gender norms.

Finally, in the vocal realm, and in line with William Sauerland (2018), anyone dedicated to voice acting must cultivate cultural competency and awareness about non-normative vocalities. Performers, teachers, and directors need to recognise that social and cultural expectations condition their perspectives, and that their practices can either affirm and respect non-binary identities or reproduce aggression and marginalisation.

CONCLUSIONS

Voice acting is a core component of audiovisual media, carrying sociopolitical and cultural weight: it helps shape social representations and the very imaginaries of gender. In recent years, non-binary characters have become more visible, especially in animated productions. The studies reviewed in this article show representations that range from reinforced stereotypes, stigma, and ridicule to empathetic, kind, sensitive, and simple performances that fracture those patterns.

Because no studies have yet unpacked how non-binary characters are vocally built and performed, we turned to research on non-binary speakers. The literature shows that positing a "non-binary voice type" merely replicates the binary system's reductionist logic. Instead, non-binary people craft dissident performances by manipulating the acoustic spectrum of speech and voice to subvert binary norms. On the perceptual side, while listeners mostly hear through a cis-normative lens, non-binary people expand the descriptive possibilities of the voice. Classification systems,

forged under rigid binary assumptions, homogenize and therefore oppress non-binary people.

A critical approach to voice acting makes sensitive performance possible by giving sonic life to non-binary characters. This approach entails acknowledging that voice acting is not neutral and carries symbolic weight. Every decision in the process of voice design shapes the social representations offered to audiences and, hence, the distribution of power. Such an approach abandons stereotypical molds and explores the entire speech-voice palette to compose vocalities that dismantle stereotypes.

This approach also demands that we question and reconfigure binary casting processes; for this, vocal features should be privileged over gender. It also vindicates critical representation, emphasizing the relevance of non-binary performers in voice acting and of characters whose aesthetic and sound designs create positive references. In addition, a critical perspective acknowledges that stereotypes, judgments, and stigmas operate in vocal design. It is essential that people working in audiovisual productions — from script and character design to directing and voice acting — undergo gender-literacy training and have positive contact with non-binary people, as these factors have been shown to reduce biases, stigma, and discrimination.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The authors of this article declare they are cisgender and have developed this work from a professional perspective, as speech-language therapists and voice actors.

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